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After Rome's Fall

Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History
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Post vocantur Merohingii: Fredegar, Merovech, and 'Sacral Kingship'

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Lord! said my mother, what is all this story about?
– A Cock and a Bull, said Yorick.

Tristram Shandy, IX , ch. 33

To judge from surveys of Frankish history, modern scholarship has embraced the idea that the Merovingian kings believed themselves to be descended from the gods, specifically a divine sea creature.[1] As scholarly notions go, this idea is not a trifle; nor is it new, having been around since the mid-nineteenth century. In its modern form, it tends to be associated with a particular understanding of the Frankish state; religion, in this view, is the true foundation of primitive social and political organization, and divine descent, as an essential component in the

I am very grateful to Edward James, Roger Collins, and the dedicatee of this volume for advice on a variety of points. A version of the piece was presented to the conference 'Culture and the Creation of Identity in the Early Medieval West,' Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, 2 November 1996.

1 Herwig Wolfram, *Das Reich und die Germanen: zwischen Antike und Mittelalter* (Berlin, 1990), 298 f.; now translated by Thomas Dunlap, *The Roman Empire and Its Germanic Peoples* (Berkley and Los Angeles, 1997), 208 f. Eugen Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Frankenreich* (Stuttgart, 1988), 77 f. Hans K. Schulze, *Vom Reich der Franken zum Land der Deutschen: Merowinger und Karolinger* (Berlin,1987), 76–80. E. Zöllner, *Geschichte der Franken bis zum Mitte des sechsten Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1970), 5, 178. As the following notes will show, the idea has particularly strong roots in German scholarship. In English-language scholarship, see Patrick J. Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (New York and Oxford, 1988), 85, 89, and cf. 94 ('almost magical force of Merovingian blood'); and Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, 450–751 (London and New York, 1994), 37 f., 40, 44; cf. his 'Gregory of Tours and Clovis,' *Revue Belge de philologie et d'histoire* 63 (1985): 267 n. Wood's views may better be associated with older approaches rather than the recent perspective of German scholarship. The latter seems influential in a sur-

'charisma' of Merovingian kings, shows that Frankish kingship rested to a significant degree upon the 'sacral' roots of an archaic type of Germanic kingship.[2]

Primitive religious beliefs are commonly thought to be expressed through myth. The divine descent of the Merovingian kings, too, is said to be accompanied by a myth, propagated by the royal house itself; the myth is supposed to appear in the *Chronicle* of Fredegar, written about 660, where it is associated with the conception and birth of Merovech, a mid-fifth-century king, and founder of the Merovingian house.[3] In epitomizing Gregory of Tours' account of the reign of Chlodio, Fredegar adds a story about a strange encounter on the seashore between Chlodio's wife and a creature from the sea.

Fertur, super litore maris aestatis tempore Chlodeo cum uxore resedens, meridiae uxor ad mare labandum vadens, bistea Neptuni quinotauri [= Minotauri] similis eam adpetisset. Cumque in continuo aut a bistea aut a viro fuisset concepta, peperit filium nomen Meroveum, per co regis Francorum post vocantur Merohingii.[4]

It is said that, when Chlodio was staying with his wife on the seashore in the summer, his wife went to the sea around noon to bathe and a beast of Neptune resembling the *quinotaur* [= Minotaur] sought her out. Right away she conceived by either the beast or her husband and afterwards gave birth to a son called Merovech, after whom the kings of the Franks were later called Merovingians.

The modern account of Merovech's conception as an expression of Germanic myth begins with Karl Hauck.[5] Hauck was the creator of an exegetical framework designed to detect and explain fragments of Germanic myth and religious practice embedded in the sources of antiquity and the early Middle

vey of a different kind: Michael Richter, *The Formation of the Medieval West: Studies in the Oral Culture of the Barbarians* (New York, 1994), 20. Edward James, *The Franks* (Oxford, 1988), 163, on the other hand, explicitly rejects Germanic myth as the origin of the Merovech tale.

2 For the intellectual foundations of sacral kingship theory see Eve Picard, *Germanisches Sakralkönigtum: Quellenkritische Studien zur Germania des Tacitus and zur altnordischen Überlieferung* (Heidelberg, 1991). For comments and literature on some of the broader problems, of which sacral kingship is only a part, see Walter Goffart, 'Two Notes on Germanic Antiquity Today,' *Traditio* 50 (1995): 9–30.

3 Since Walter Goffart, 'The Fredegar Problem Reconsidered,' *Speculum* 38 (1963): 206–41 (repr. in his *Rome's Fall and After* [London, 1989], 319–54), and A. Erikson, 'The Problem of Authorship in the Chronicle of Fredegar,' *Eranos* 63 (1965): 47–76, theories of multiple authorship of the *Chronicle* have largely been abandoned. See also Andreas Kusternig, trans., 'Die vier Bücher der Chroniken des sogennanten Fredegar,' in *Quellen zur Geschichte des 7. und 8. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Herwig Wolfram (Darmstadt, 1982), 9–13; and now Roger Collins, *Fredegar*, Authors of the Middle Ages 13 (Aldershot, Hunts., and Brookfield, Vermont, 1997).

4 Fred. *Chron.* III 9.

5 'Lebensnormen und Kultmythen in germanischen Stammes- und Herrschergenealogien,' *Saeculum* 6 (1955): 186–223.

Ages. Hauck's conceptual models depended heavily on products of the comparative study of religion; he expanded the scope for applying this material by using terminology that he derived from the Latin sources by wrenching terms from their original contexts, redefining them, and generalizing them into genres, types, and models of mythic discourse and cultic practice. In Hauck's scheme, the circumstances surrounding Merovech's birth constitute an *origo*, an old cult myth of the Franks explaining the origin of the people and their royal house. The *origo* describes the begetting of the royal lineage by the chief god of the Franks through the *primus rex*, their first king. The god in question, Hauck believes, was the OHG Frô, the equivalent of Freyr of Scandinavian sources, a representative of the Vanic powers of fertility; the myth alludes to a process of temporary divinization by which Chlodio became the god, who took the form of a divine sea creature, half man and half bull. This theriomorphic divinization is demonstrated by the fact that Merovech's conception is said to be effected 'aut a bistea aut a viro,' a phrase Hauck reads to mean 'by both the beast and the husband.' The *origo* myth, Hauck argues, is also linked to *usus*, cult practice, repeatable acts celebrated as part of the state cult of the Franks. Here he discovered one of the cherished motifs of comparative religion, the holy marriage between representatives of divine powers. Details of the cult can also be detected in the bathing, which represents the purificatory preparation of the bride; in the season, the time of a midsummer festival; and in the location, the beach as the meeting zone of the elements. In Hauck's reconstruction, the myth and the cult practice associated with it represent the beginnings of the lineage (*primus rex*) and the people it leads. To meet the objection that such *primordia* should lie in the dim past and can hardly be applied to a fifth-century king such as Chlodio, Hauck argues that primordial myths could be transferred to heroes of more recent vintage, who were glorified as representatives of the original divine ancestor (*Stammvater*); Fredegar's text, in calling the dynasty *Merohingii*, presupposes such an ancestor with the name *Mero*. Despite its association with Chlodio, the Merovingian *origo* is, in Hauck's view, one of the true old cult myths of the pre-Christian state religion of the Germanic peoples.

Hauck's reading can be traced in many recent accounts of the Fredegar passage.[6] It is now generally claimed, for example, that the eponymous hero of the Merovingian dynasty was not Merovech, the historical king, but a mythical Mero; Merovech appears in Fredegar's version as a result of contamination.

6 O. Höfler, 'Abstammungstraditionen,' § 15, RGA 1: 26 f.; R. Wenskus, 'Bemerkungen zum Thunginus der Lex Salica,' in *Festschrift Ernst Percy Schramm zu seinem siebzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. P. Classen and P. Scheibert (Wiesbaden, 1964), 1: 234–6; and 'Chlodio,' RGA 4: 477; H.H. Anton, svv. 'Merowech' and 'Merowinger,' *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, vol. 6 (Munich, 1993), 542 f.; H. Moisl, 'Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies and Germanic Oral Tradition,' *Journal of Medieval History* 7 (1981): 223–6; and cf. his 'Kingship and Orally Trans-

The divine progenitor of the Merovingians is supposed to be Frô, in the form of a bull deity. Even the legendary and real sexual practices of the Merovingians are interpreted as an extension of their role as agents of Vanic fertility. The Merovingians of historical times are said to have continued to hedge their kingship with ideology, symbols, and ritual derived from pagan times, prime exhibits from the early Middle Ages of an ancient form of sacral kingship.

Those who champion these ideas also claim to find support for them outside Fredegar. In particular, two interesting, but rather minor, objects in the archaeological record of the Franks have taken on a disproportionate role in substantiating the association of the Merovingians with a bull deity.[7]

The first of these is a small bull head found among the grave goods of Clovis' father, Childeric, discovered in Tournai in 1653, subsequently stolen, and for the most part lost in 1831.[8] Moderns have been rather quick to impute symbolic significance to the various objects in the grave, though with varying perceptions. Almost immediately the large number of insect-shaped fittings, the so-called *apes*, bees, were interpreted as marks of rulership, and their imputed connection to the later lilies of France became a minor point of dispute in the Bourbon-Habsburg rivalry of the period. Napoleon, too, passed over the significance of the bull's head, but had the cloak he wore at his imperial coronation decorated with 'bees' like those found in the grave, believing them to be an

mitted *Stammestradition* among the Lombards and Franks,' in *Die Bayern und ihre Nachbarn*, ed. Herwig Wolfram and Andreas Schwarcz (Vienna, 1985), 111–19; Georg Scheibelreiter, 'Vom Mythos zur Geschichte: Überlegungen zu den Formen der Bewahrung von Vergangenheit im Frühmittelalter,' *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. A. Scharer and G. Scheibelreiter, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung 32 (Vienna and Munich, 1994), 33–6. Shorn of details, Hauck seems influential in J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford, 1971), 16–20; cf. his earlier *The Long-Haired Kings and Other Studies in Frankish History* (London, 1962), 84, 220.

7 On representations of bulls in the Merovingian period, Edouard Salin commented: 'il semble bien que cette figuration animale, fort en honneur auprès de civilisations antérieures, n'ait pas été pratiquement retenue par la civilisation mérovingienne.' He gives two examples with confidence, both fifth century – the bull head from Childeric's grave and another from a Gallo-Roman fibula: *La civilisation mérovingienne*, part 4 (Paris, 1959), 166–9.

8 We depend on J.-J. Chiflet's *Anastasis Childerici I. Francorum regis, sive thesaurus sepulchralis Tornaci Nerviorum effosus et commentario illustratus* (Anvers, 1655) not only for the circumstances of the find, but also for illustrations of some of the furnishings, including the bull head. His illustrations can be found in the citations that follow but have also been reproduced innumerable times in other modern works. The furnishings are discussed in detail by K. Böhner, 'Childerich von Tournai,' sec. III, RGA 4: 441 f., 457; and Michel Kazanski and Patrick Périn, 'Le mobilier funéraire de la tombe de Childeric Ier: État de la question et perspectves,' *Revue archéologique de Picardie* 3/4 (1988): 13–38. For the results of the most recent excavation in the area of the original find, and especially the horse interments near Childeric's burial, see Raymond Brulet et al., *Les fouilles du quartier Saint-Brice à Tournai*, Collection d'archéologie Joseph Mertens 3 (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1990–1), 2 vols.

ancient symbol of French royalty.[9] Modern scholars, looking for the religious foundation of Germanic kingship, have taken a different tack: not only do they detect the god Frô behind the bull head, but they also claim to find Wodan in the spear included among the grave furnishings.[10] However, only those disposed to find a bull god in the past of the Merovingians will find the significance of the bull head in Childeric's grave impressive, for bull figures, with or without religious associations, are a common-enough motif in ancient art. Chiflet, who described the find in 1655, called the bull head the *idolum regis*, and Hauck and others have been quick to seize on this term.[11] But it is a small item, belonging, along with the 'bees,' to the harness of the king's horse, the bull head ornamenting the animal's brow.[12] Though well made, like everything else in the grave, the bull head may not be of Frankish manufacture, and forms only a minor part of impressive furnishings that have broad geographical associations. Harness with bull-head- and insect-shaped ornaments seems to have had a long history in the lower Danube and Black Sea region, and fittings of this kind have associations in much earlier Greek art.[13] The bull head of Childeric's grave tells us about art and fashion, not religion.

The significance of the second piece is even less impressive. Two bull heads have been detected on a belt buckle found in a well-furnished female grave uncovered at St Denis in 1959. Because a ring found on the body is inscribed with the name Arnegund, the woman has commonly been identified as Aregund, Chilperic's mother, and her death placed at around 570 on the basis of the skeletal remains; serious questions nevertheless remain unanswered about the attribution and date of the furnishings.[14] The report describing the restoration

9 K. Böhner, 'Childerich von Tournai,' 441 f., 457.

10 And in the characteristic long hair of Merovingian kings: Ewig, *Die Merowinger*, 78, is an example.

11 'Lebensnormen und Kultmythen,' 198; Ewig, *Die Merowinger*, 78. Hauck, nevertheless, accepts that the bull head belongs to the horse harness (199 n.). Modern notions of the proper location for religious significance seem to determine the common view that the bull head was the personal amulet of the king and stems from Abbé Cochet in 1859, despite the clear evidence that it was 'e capistro' and 'ex equi regii fronte'; cf. J. Werner in Brulet, *Les fouilles*, 2: 15.

12 The identification of the insect-shaped fittings as bees has been conventional since Chiflet, though they are sometimes identified as cicadas, probably on the basis of Eastern examples. Inasmuch as the specimens from Childeric's grave resemble any insects in particular, the resemblance is to flies. Perhaps such an identification is never made because the thought of the king's horse (or, as some would have it, the king himself) covered in flies is not quite the image we think appropriate.

13 K. Böhner, 'Childerich von Tournai,' 457.

14 James, *Franks*, 155–7; the most recent consideration of the question by Patrick Périn ('Pour une révision de la datation de la tombe d'Arégonde, épouse de Clotaire I, découverte en 1959 dans la basilique de Saint-Denis,' *Archéologie médiévale* 21 [1991]: 21–50) retains identifica-

of the objects detected within the pattern of the cast frames of the buckle plates two 'strongly stylized' bull heads, sympathetically facing each other, one on each plate.[15] Lineally arranged niello points decorate the frame, and the identification of a bull image within the frames seems to owe much to interpreting two of these niello inserts on one of the plates as the eyes of the animal; the other plate, at least in the condition we possess it, lacks the two corresponding inserts, and indeed any clear shape that suggests a bull head at all. In fact, the bull heads – if such they are – are less 'strongly stylized' than weakly suggested. For the frames of the buckle plates do contain genuine highly stylized animal figures – snake- or dragon-like animal heads, confidently presented to the viewer, unmistakable in their form, with clearly delineated eyes and features. The 'bull heads,' on the other hand, are small, flat featureless planes with indefinite outlines, intended to help tie together the abstract framework of the buckle plates. It seems to me unlikely that they were meant to be construed as bulls at all.

The effort to place a bull divinity at the centre of Germanic paganism extends well beyond the Frankish material. Cattle in general, and bulls in particular, were certainly objects of sacrifice among the Germanic peoples, but the hypothesis that the bull was an important subject of cult – that tauromorphic divinities were prominent among the denizens of Germanic paganism – has yet to be demonstrated. Jacob Grimm, who may have been the first to interpret the conceiving of Merovech as a reflection of Germanic myth, thought, like modern scholars, that he saw the Vanic powers of Freyr behind Fredegar's sea beast, but his understanding of Germanic philology, history, and folklore led him to suppose the beast must have taken the form of a sea pig, because of the important role of the boar in the cult of the Vanir.[16] More recent scholarship has

tion of the body as 'Aregund' on the basis of the ring. As the grave furnishings suggest a seventh-century date, however, he places her death at the earliest possible point consonant with the furnishings – in the last decade of the sixth century, when the queen would have been in her seventies or eighties – and suggests that a re-examination of the bones is needed.

15 A. France-Lanord and M. Fleury, 'Das Grab der Arnegundis,' *Germania* 40 (1962): 357, which includes photographs. A good colour photograph can also be found in Jean Hubert et al., *Europe of the Invasions* (New York, 1969), 234. Those who like 'Where's Waldo' may prefer to find the bulls themselves, but, if in need of guidance, look to the spandrels between the half-circles of the fields formed like kite-shaped shields. Only the spandrels on the ends of the belt plates farthest from the buckle clasp are thought to contain bull heads, and only one of these is suggestive. Their mates in the spandrels next to the clasp are clearly not intended to be bull heads.

16 *Teutonic Mythology*, trans. (from the 4th ed.) by James Steven Stallybrass (New York, 1966), 1: 391. This interpretation, Grimm believes, explains the Byzantine reference to the 'crested' Merovingians: Theophanes (d. *ca* 818), claims the Merovingians were called *kristatai*, 'which means "those with hair down their backs," for they had hair growing along their backs like swine' (s.a. 6216 [723–4], trans. Harry Turtledove, *The Chronicle of Theophanes* [Philadel-

enrolled philology and the archaeological record from the Bronze Age to the early Middle Ages to demonstrate Germanic bull cults analogous to those of the Near East. Even with so wide a net, the catch should not be seen as encouraging. A charitable interpretation of the claims made for philology suggests that they are unlikely to prove convincing on the subject; and, as for archaeology, the standard interpretation of so many bull objects as products of foreign importation, especially from the Celtic world, seems in itself to defeat the argument of a highly developed autochthonous bull cult.[17] The Celtic cast to much of this evidence points to a curious lapse on the part of those who see the effect of myth and religion on Fredegar. For, as a product of Gaul, with a Gallic setting, the story – if it is myth – is arguably a reflection of the Gallic milieu in which the evidence for divine bulls, not just the occasional bull image, is not hard to come by.[18]

Perhaps those sticking to Germanic tracks in tracing the mythic origins of Fredegar's tale feel justified in doing so because of their reliance on two other texts that are supposed to demonstrate the notion of sacral kingship among the Franks; if it could be demonstrated that the Merovingians and their followers believed in a divine or supernatural origin for the royal house, would this not justify us in supposing a Germanic, pagan mythic background to Fredegar's account of Merovech's conception? It would help, but reliance on these two texts is misplaced. Like the Fredegar text itself, neither is an unequivocal statement of divine descent or sacral ideology, nor is there anything particularly puzzling about their meaning or context.

In his letter to Clovis on the occasion of his baptism, Avitus refers to the king as 'de toto priscae originis stemmate sola nobilitate contentus.' This phrase has

phia, 1982]). The comment is commonly understood to be related to the long hair of the Merovingians as a mark of kingship. William A. Chaney finds theriomorphic divinization here, taking Theophanes' reference as a 'reminiscence of the primitive ritual battle in which the king slew his predecessor, impersonating the god during the struggle in the guise of the deity's sacred animal' – in this case, the boar (*The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England* [Berkeley–Los Angeles, 1970],126).

17 Gert Esterle, *Die Boviden in der Germania*, Wiener Arbeiten zur germanischen Altertumskunde und Philologie 2 (Vienna, 1974), is a very interesting compendium of these efforts. My conclusions are not the ones the author draws.

18 This is also the context for the brazen bull of the Cimbri (Plutarch, *Marius* XXIII), no matter what one makes of the ethnicity of the Cimbri themselves. For the most recent discussion of the Cimbri, assuming a Danish origin, see Dieter Timpe, 'Kimberntradition und Kimbernmythos,' in *Germani in Italia*, ed. Barbara and Piergiuseppe Scardigli (Rome, 1994), 23–60, esp. 50 f. for 'Celtic' characteristcs; these are also stressed by, among others, Jan De Vries, 'Kimbern und Teutonen: ein Kapitel aus den Beziehungen zwischen Kelten und Germanen,' *Zur germanischen Stammeskunde: Aufsätze zum neuen Forschungsstand*, ed. Ernst Schwarz, Wege der Forschung 249 (Darmstadt, 1972), 104–22.

commonly been interpreted to mean that Clovis was now satisfied to derive only noble birth from his ancestors and had, therefore, given up any claim to divine descent with his conversion to Christianity.[19] Avitus' letter is renowned for its obscurities, but at least as far as it concerns our problem the meaning seems sufficiently clear, when the context of the phrase is looked at as a whole.

> In this same issue [of conversion], a great many people – if by the exhortation of priests or at the prompting of associates they are moved to seek out the sanity of believing – are accustomed to adduce [as an impediment] the customs [they inherit with] birth and ancestral practices; thus harmfully preferring reverence to salvation, they reveal that they do not know how to choose anything, while preserving, as prisoners of unbelief, useless veneration for their parents. Let harmful shame give up this pretext after the miracle of such a deed. From the entire garland of ancient descent, you are content simply with nobility and have tried to draw from yourself whatever can adorn in its entirety the summit of nobility of your own descendants. You have authors of good deeds [in your descent]; you have wished to be the author of better ones. You answer to your ancestors by reigning in the world; for the sake of posterity, you make provision to reign in heaven.[20]

The theme of the passage is a cliché of conversion: the duty due to one's ancestors versus the rejection of tradition required by genuine Christian conversion. This is not an issue unique to Clovis, according to Avitus, who begins by classing the dilemma as a problem faced by many converts ('Solent plerique ... consuetudinem generis et ritum paternae observantiae obponere'). The traditions that hold back converts are *consuetudo generis, ritus paternae observantiae*, and *parentibus reverentia.* These broadly imply the pious obligation to follow the religion of one's ancestors, the faith of one's fathers, but also, more specifically, the religious duty to venerate one's ancestors. Clovis as a genuine con-

19 W. Junghans, *Histoire critique des règnes de Childeric et de Clovis*, trans. Gabriel Monod, Bibliotheque de l'École des Hautes Études 37 (Paris, 1879; first published, Göttingen, 1856), 63 n, 123, seems to have been the first to make this point.

20 Epist. 46, *Opera quae supersunt,* ed. R. Peiper, MGH AA 6/2: 'Solent plerique in hac eadem causa, si pro expetenda sanitate credendi aut sacerdotum hortatu aut quorumcumque sodalium ad suggestionem moveantur, consuetudinem generis et ritum paternae observationis obponere; ita saluti nocenter verecundiam praeferentes, dum parentibus in incredulitatis custodia futilem reverentiam servant, confitentur, se quodammodo nescire, quid eligant. Discedat igitur ab hac excusatione post talis facti miraculum noxius pudor. Vos de toto priscae originis stemmate sola nobilitate contentus, quicquid omne potest fastigium generositatis ornare prosapiae vestrae a vobis voluistis exurgere. Habetis bonorum auctores, voluistis esse meliorum. Respondetis proavis, quod regnatis in saeculo; instituistis posteris, ut regnetis in caelo.' I have removed the editor's comma after 'ornare'; even if 'prosapiae vestrae' are datives, the meaning of the sentence is not substantially changed. The *miraculum* referred to is the conversion itself.

vert, says Avitus, has recognized the need to reject traditional religious obligations of his past. Thus from the various elements constituting ancestral observance ('de toto ... stemmate'), he retains only nobility.[21] Clovis knows, according to Avitus, that by his conversion his own great deeds as a Christian king will discharge the obligation to achieve wordly renown owed his noble ancestors, while the same accomplishments will adorn the Christian lineage that will now stem from him, bringing to it the promise of salvation.

Avitus' terms have nothing to do with divine descent.[22] Clovis' dilemma is a general phenomenon, and his rejection of the past follows the pattern of all genuine conversion. It may be even more surprising to note, as well, that the terms Avitus uses to describe the past really have nothing much to do with Germanic paganism at all. The language alludes to the hindrance caused by the moral imperatives of Roman paganism, resting originally on a foundation of public and domestic cult; the image evoked is that of the ancestral portraits of the senatorial nobility, hung with garlands.[23] The point of the cliché depends on the duty that ancient religion laid upon its adherents, especially the aristocracy, to venerate their ancestors and to continue the practices of traditional religion. The relevance such a sentiment had for Clovis' particular situation may be doubted. Avitus has used the motif to depict the passage of a great aristocrat from paganism to Christianity; he was not clothing some special knowledge about Clovis in antique garb.

The second text is Einhard's famous description of the last Merovingians, eclipsed by the mayors of the palace and travelling about placidly by ox-drawn wagon in their empty role as kings:

The wealth and power of the kingdom was held by the palace prefects, called mayors of the palace, to whom ultimate authority belonged. Nothing was left to the king but to sit on the throne, with his flowing hair and long beard, and pretend to rule, satisfied only

21 *Stemma* means garland, and, in particular, a garland hung on an ancestral image, hence genealogy, pedigree, nobility (Lewis and Short, s.v.). There seems to be a play on words with 'fastigium generositatis ornare prosapiae vestrae.'

22 Cf. the doubts by Marc Reydellet, *La royauté dans la littérature latine de Sidoine Apollinaire à Isidore de Séville*, Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 243. (Rome, 1981), 106–7. Nikolaus Staubach, 'Germanisches Königtum und lateinisches Literatur vom fünften bis zum siebten Jahrhundert,' *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 17 (1983): 29–31, draws a comparison with the language in Leo the Great's Christmas sermon, but his interpretation owes more to the terminological invention of Karl Hauck than to the Latin of Avitus. His reading of Avitus *and* Leo through Tacitus and Hauck seems rather odd.

23 The *imagines* of ancestors were still a common sight in the late fifth century, to judge from Sidonius Apollinaris' letter to Eutropius ("qui cotidie trabeatis proavorum imaginibus ingeritur"), usually dated to around 467: Ep. 1.6, ed. W.B. Anderson, *Poems and Letters*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., 1936) 1: 362.

with the royal name: he would receive ambassadors who came from all over and, when they departed, provide them as if on his own authority with replies that he had been directed or even commanded to give. And except for the empty title of king and the precarious living-allowance that the prefect of the palace at his discretion provided for him, he possessed nothing of his own but one estate – and even that produced a very small income. He obtained lodging there along with a small number of servants to tend to his needs and to provide him with service. Wherever he had to travel, he went by wagon, drawn by yoked oxen and driven by a teamster in country fashion. In this way he used to go to the palace, or to the public assembly of his people that convened every year for the sake of the well-being of the kingdom, and in this way he used to return home. The prefect of the palace took care of the administration of the kingdom and provided for the execution and planning of everything that had to be done inside the palace or out.[24]

One would have thought that Henri Pirenne's discussion almost seventy years ago would have laid to rest this relic of nineteenth-century *Germanistik*.[25] But we are still solemnly assured that the ox cart of the Merovingians was no simple mode of transport, but a *Kultwagen*, re-enacting a ritual reminiscent of the yearly circuit of Nerthus, 'terra mater,' as described by Tacitus, and linked to fertility cults of the Vanir.[26] A few obvious observations show just how distant such an interpretation lies from the sense of Einhard's words.

Einhard does not tell us that the ox cart was traditional to the Merovingians, as is frequently alleged, but restricts his remarks to the last representatives of the house. In all of the sources of Merovingian history prior to Einhard, there is no reference to kings being conveyed in this manner. Nor does Einhard include the ox cart among the marks of Merovingian kingship – these he identifies with

24 *VK* I: 'Nam et opes et potentia regni penes palatii praefectos, qui majores domus dicebantur, et ad quos summa imperii pertinebat, tenebantur. Neque regi aliud relinquebatur, quam ut regio tantum nomine contentus crine profuso, barba summissa, solio resideret ac speciem dominantis effingeret, legatos undecumque venientes audiret eisque abeuntibus responsa, quae erat edoctus vel etiam jussus, ex sua velut potestate redderet; cum praeter inutile regis nomen et praecarium vitae stipendium, quod ei praefectus aulae prout videbatur exhibebat, nihil alius proprii possideret quam unam et eam praeparvi reditus villam, in qua domum et ex qua famulos sibi necessaria ministrantes atque obsequium exhibentes paucae numerositatis habebat. Quocumque eundum erat, carpento ibat, quod bubus junctis et bubulco rustico more agente trahebatur. Sic ad palatium, sic ad publicum populi sui conventum, qui annuatim ob regni utilitatm celebrabatur, ire, sic domum redire solebat. Ad regni administrationem et omnia quae vel domi vel foris agenda ac disponenda erant praefectus aulae procurabat.'

25 'Le Char à boeufs des derniers Mérovingiens: note sur un passage d'Eginhard,' *Mélanges Paul Thomas* (Bruges, 1930), 555–60: 'La méprise est comparable à celle que commettra peut-être un érudit de l'avenir si, étudiant une caricature de Louis-Philippe, il s'avise de connaître le sceptre des Capétiens dans le parapluie du roi.'

26 Ewig, *Die Merowinger*, 78. Translators of Einhard rarely fail to comment on a connection with paganism.

the Merovingian name, long hair, beard, and public role. He introduces travel by wagon to exemplify the reduced circumstances of the last Merovingians and their ludicrous position in the state; far from having ritual or kingly significance, travel by ox cart is associated with rusticity and poverty. The penury of the late Merovingians is, of course, completely relative, and Einhard's account, obviously tendentious, is unlikely to be free of exaggeration or misrepresentation. But it is difficult to see what purpose would be served in disguising pagan associations, and difficult to imagine who indeed in the ninth century would be in a position to recognize such a peculiar form of irony.[27]

Wallace-Hadrill saw in Einhard's description a connection with late imperial governors doing their rounds using *angariae*, the heavy ox wagons of the imperial slow post, the *cursus clabularis*.[28] It is true that such wagons were used by the imperial post for conveying not only all kinds of freight, but occasionally personnel.[29] The problem with the evidence of the Roman post is that it does not establish that high-ranking officials normally rode in ox carts, though it does show that such wagons accompanied their peregrinations, no doubt conveying baggage, and possibly providing comfort and shelter. The suggestion, nevertheless, does have the merit of stressing the point that ox-drawn vehicles *were* standard modes of transport – Einhard does not limit their use by the Merovingians to state occasions, as is often implied.[30] Despite his tone, ox wagons were not really a mode of transport to be despised; they moved at the rate an army could march, were no doubt the most spacious and comfortable vehicle available, and were particularly useful where the roads were bad.[31]

And, of course, references to ox-drawn vehicles in the *cursus publicus* are only a faint reflection of their widespread use in society as a whole. A good Merovingian example of the ox cart's role as a general mode of travel for the

27 'Einhard ironisiert offenbar ein Ritual, das zum heidnischen Königsmythos gehörte'(Ewig, *Die Merowinger*, 78). Many commentators seem to imagine that Einhard was unaware of the ritual significance of the ox transport; this hardly saves the situation and is an acknowledgment that there is no direct evidence of paganism in the passage at all.

28 J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Gregory of Tours and Bede: Their Views on the Personal Qualities of Kings,' *Early Medieval History* (Oxford, 1975), 98. Despite adopting notions of sacral kingship in *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford, 1971), Wallace-Hadrill treated the principal sources for it with circumspection.

29 The best example is *Novella Majoriani* 7.1.13, a. 458 (in *Codex Theodosianus*, ed. Th. Mommsen = CT) where Majorian tried to limit governors to requisitioning only one heavy ox-wagon for themselves and one for their *officia*, along with four riding horses, as they moved from one *civitas* to another. Cf. also Ammianus Marcellinus 20. 4. 11 (heavy wagons put at the disposal of *familiae* of soldiers being reassigned); CT 8. 5. 11 (military units alloted two wagons for the sick); CT 8. 5. 66 (wagons accompanying *duces* and their *officia*). See A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1964), 2: 830–4 and nn.

30 'Quocumque eundum erat, carpento ibat.'

31 K.D. White, *Greek and Roman Technology* (London, 1984), 127–40.

well-to-do is recorded in a famous sixth- or seventh-century donation in which a certain Erminthrude bequeathed 'the wagon in which I customarily ride, with oxen (*boves*) and furnishings (*lectaria*), along with all its harness (*stratura*).'[32] Moderns might be less inclined to allege archaic, religious significance to explain their own puzzlement with Einhard's description, if, along with evidence like this, they remembered that even in quite recent times continents have been traversed expeditiously by the steady pull of ox teams. Still, despite its relative comfort and utility, the ox cart could hardly project the vigour or splendour expected of a Carolingian king. Though we have not yet reached the absurdity of *Le chevalier à la charette*, Einhard has seized on the ox cart as a symbol of ignoble weakness demonstrating his contention that the Merovingians had ended up as do-nothing kings turned minor gentry, peacefully navigating the tracks of country life.

II

Neither Avitus nor Einhard gives us grounds for believing in sacral kingship among the Merovingians; nor does either source substantiate the existence of alleged bull deities among the Franks. Interpretations of Merovech's conception cannot begin with dubious theories about archaic kingship or Germanic paganism. If notions of divine descent and bull cults are to be considered pertinent, they have to be sustained by the context of the story itself and, most importantly, must be shown to be the best categories available for interpreting the peculiarities of the tale. Closer examination shows there are other categories that better account for the distinctive features of Fredegar's portrayal of the encounter on the beach between Chlodio's wife and the beast from the sea.

The description of the conceiving of Merovech in Fredegar's *Chronicle* occurs in Book III, a condensation of Gregory of Tours' *Histories* into which Fredegar has inserted material of his own, much of it concerning the Trojan origin of the Franks. The passage in the *Histories* relevant to Fredegar's Merovech interpolation concerns Chlodio, the first king of the Franks, about whom Gregory knows very little; it ends with Gregory's comments regarding the uncertain relationship between Chlodio and Merovech. Then, calling attention to the paganism of the Franks at the time, Gregory enters into a long-winded refutation of pagan belief. In the corresponding passage, Fredegar follows Gregory's

32 *Chartae Latinae Antiquiores XIV: France*, ed. Hartmut Atsma and Jean Vezin (Dietikon-Zurich, 1982), no. 592: 'basilicae s(an)c(t)i Sinfuriani ... carruca in qua sedere consueui, cum boues et lectaria, cum omni stratura sua, pro deuocione mea ... dari praecipio ...' A second cart with oxen and harness goes to another church. Cf. also the death of Deuteria's daughter in Gregory, *Hist.* III 26.

account of Chlodio, interpolating his own material on the connections among the early kings of the Franks; he retains Gregory's allusion to the paganism of the Franks, but leaves out the refutation of paganism and inserts his story of Merovech's birth.[33] In a process that often seems to reverse the relation of the epitomizer to his subject, many interpreters have been quick to suggest that Gregory must have known the Merovech story, suppressed it, and replaced it with a sermon on the falseness of paganism.[34] This view may be correct; it cannot be demonstrated or refuted. It is worth stressing that reading Gregory in this way does not require that the Merovech tale be associated with Germanic, pagan myth. As will be discussed below, Fredegar's story may be related to the revival of the name under Chilperic and succeeding kings. Gregory was a contemporary of this revival, and his comments on Merovech can better be read as commentary on current speculation about the founder of the dynasty than as a critique of oral tradition. Moreover, the distinction between Roman and Germanic paganism, though important to moderns, is not one he would have recognized as significant at all; if antique rhetorical motifs with pagan associations accompanied the revival of the name, he is not likely to have been pleased and would have regarded them as no less pagan and no less objectionable than any tale that might have descended from the salty shores of the Rhine mouth. In any case, there are no clear signs that Gregory was suppressing an indecent tale of sexual misadventure: his refutation of paganism cannot be tied to specific items of Frankish belief that he might have decided to challenge by means of a homily rather than include in his narrative; nor is there a clear connection in the refutation to material Fredegar associates with Merovech's birth. Gregory's refutation is composed of commonplaces from the Bible and general Christian

33 In the phrase Gregory uses to introduce his homily, 'haec generatio fanaticis semper cultibus visa est obsequium praebuisse' *(Hist.* II 10), *generatio* is best taken to mean the Franks. The phrase is rendered in Fredegar's epitome as 'haec generacio fanaticis usibus culta est.' Ignoring Gregory's model, Wolfram (n. 1 above, Engl. trans., 209) translates Fredegar as follows: 'This race [the Merovingians] was celebrated in pagan feasts.' This translation will not withstand examination. Fredegar's words, as the assignment of fonts in Krusch's edition has long made clear, are an epitome of Gregory's not an independent interpolation. The *Mittellateinisches Wörterbuch* glosses *cultus* in the Fredegarian passage with *deditus-ergeben*, giving the verb an active meaning. In a Fredegarian context, there is no peculiarity here. A reversal of standard active and passive usage happens to be one of the occasional quirks of Fredegar's style. For example, immediately following 'culta est' with an active sense ('were devoted to'), Fredegar uses the passive form of the verb *concipio* ('fuisset concepta,' above p. 122) to mean the king's wife 'conceived,' though standard usage would require an active form of the verb here as well. In this case, Wolfram translates the passive form in the active voice. Incidentally, had Fredegar taken *generatio* to mean family, the family in question would have been the *genus Priami*.

34 Godefroid Kurth, *Histoire poétique des Mérovingiens* (Paris, 1893), 151–3; most recently Wood, *Frankish Kingdoms*, 37.

critiques of paganism. We should proceed on the assumption that Fredegar is the epitomizer, adding fresh information, not restoring some original narrative that Gregory has deceptively distorted.

Nevertheless, the positioning of Fredegar's story next to Gregory's comment on the paganism of the period could be considered suggestive, and as such is the only real evidence that Fredegar thought he might be dealing in pagan myth. It is hardly conclusive. If Fredegar did associate the story with paganism, it is more likely to be the paganism of Greek and Roman history, fitting not only the internal references of his story, but also the Trojan origin of the Franks and their leading dynasty, descended, in Fredegar's view, from Priam. But whether Fredegar expected his story to be associated with paganism is, given his way of working, questionable. In Gregory's *Histories*, the reference to paganism is found following his discussion of the times of Chlodio and Merovech, and introduces a homily against paganism. In condensing his model, Fredegar may simply have included the reference, relevant enough to an early history of the Franks, while rejecting the homily, which was not. Having finished excerpting Gregory's section on Chlodio and Merovech, he then added his own story about Merovech's birth, without intending this to be read as a gloss on Frankish paganism. No doubt, if he had included Gregory's reference to paganism in the times of Chlodio and Merovech only after his addition of Merovech's conception, moderns, given their interests, would still be inclined to read the two together. In condensing Gregory's text just as it lay to hand – which is Fredegar's method – the juxtaposition of Gregory's comment on paganism with the interpolation on the birth of Merovech was unavoidable.

Fredegar introduces his story about the conceiving of Merovech with the expression *fertur*, 'it is said.' This has often been taken as an unequivocal sign of a source in Germanic, oral tradition, and an argument for its subject-matter being pagan and mythical. This view of *fertur*, unfortunately, fails to take into consideration Fredegar's use of the expression. He uses it some thirteen other times.[35] Eight of the thirteen times are in Book IV, in reference to relatively recent events of Frankish, Gothic, or Byzantine provenance.[36] Of the five other references from the earlier books, one is to a geographical feature, that is, a current reference, though the setting is fifth century;[37] one pertains to the early Lombards in a context that many believe derives from ancient Lombard legend, though extracted by Fredegar from a written source;[38] and one other concerns a

35 Analogous expressions, *ferunt*, *traditur* and the like, are not used.
36 Bk IV 38, 66, 67, 81, 82 (2X), 85, 87.
37 Bk II 60.
38 Bk III 65.

reported vision drawn from the dialogues of Gregory the Great.[39] The two remaining instances concern the Trojan legend of Frankish origins and pertain to Francio, Aeneas, and Frigas, ancestors of the Franks and Romans.[40] None of the usages conforms to the modern understanding of Frankish or Germanic oral tradition. *Fertur* cannot be tied exclusively to oral or written sources, and the common presumption that the phrase tags Germanic oral tradition is clearly wrong.

Fredegar tells us that from Merovech – Meroveus is simply the Latin contraction of the name – the Frankish kings derive their dynastic name of Merovingians (*Merohingii*). Godefroid Kurth some time ago clearly confronted the implications of Merovingian genealogy for theories of divine descent. Kurth held to the view that belief in the divine descent of kings was characteristic of primitive peoples, and that the Merovech story attested to such a belief among the Franks, but he also recognized the historical character of Merovech, the father of Childeric, and the shallow depth of the Merovingian genealogy above Clovis. He proposed, simply enough, that Merovingian kingship was of relatively recent vintage; the tale told by Fredegar was a late mythological tradition, fixed at an early stage in its development by the victory of Christianity.[41]

One of the peculiar features of recent arguments for divine descent is to spot in the Merovech story an unattested, mythical ancestor of the Merovingians, called Mero. This notion is not new, but goes back to the mid-nineteenth century and the views of Karl Müllenhoff, who hoped thereby to connect the dynastic name of the Merovingians with the Merwe, a river at the mouth of the Rhine.[42] As the survival of this view cannot have anything to do with the merits of his argument, which has long been shown to be inadequate,[43] it is instructive to clarify the function the invention of Mero serves in modern sacral theory. Recent scholarship would find views like those of Kurth insufficient for establishing Frankish kingship as an archaic model of early rulership; the

39 Bk II 59.

40 Bk II 5, 8. Hauck used *fertur*, his mark of Germanic oral tradition, to exclude any connection with Trojan tales (supposedly learned) and written sources ('Lebensnormen und Kultmythen,' 22). An express appeal to oral tradition is one of his four criteria for detecting Germanic myth, in the case of Merovech's birth hinging completely on *fertur*. According to Moisl, 'Kingship,' oral *Stammestradition* is 'certified' by *fertur*.

41 Kurth, *Histoire poétique*, 147–59.

42 Karl Müllenhof, 'Die Merovingische Stammesage,' *Zeitschrift für deutsches Alterthum* 6 (1848): 431.

43 On the linguistic side, see below, n. 81. The derivation from the Merwe had already been suggested by Leo, but Müllenhoff provided linguistic arguments. The claim that, if Merovingian was derived from Merovech, we should expect *Merovechingi* was dealt with by Kurth in *Histoire poétique*, 155.

Merovingians, if they are to be portrayed as sacral kings, must trace their dynastic roots into the distant past of Frankish political and religious history. The complete lack of evidence for such an interpretation is an inconvenience that the putative Mero is designed to overcome. The antiquity of the Merovingian house, for example, cannot otherwise be demonstrated from the names of Frankish leaders of the late Empire, despite the inclination to make the evidence carry burdens it cannot possibly bear.[44] Even Hauck's far-fetched theory of the (recurrent) *primus rex* and theriomorphic divination pertains to Chlodio, not Merovech, and reduces Merovech to an historical and mythological irrelevancy.[45] Whence came the Merovingian name and its distant, archaic sacral associations, then, if there was only Merovech and no Mero?

There is no Mero, of course, nor is there the slightest reason to suppose contamination in Fredegar's reference to Merovech and the descent of the Frankish kings. Gregory of Tours is the first source to mention Merovech.[46] He identifies him as a king and as the father of Childeric, but is uncertain of his relation to Chlodio; Clovis' victories seem to him, nevertheless, to confirm the lineage's connection to the first family of the Franks from which they chose their kings – an argument that clearly shows Gregory was not loath to connect Merovech to Chlodio, and would have done so if any evidence of kinship had been available. Gregory does not apply the term 'Merovingian' to the Frankish kings. It may seem surprising that the *gens Merovingorum* appears rather late in Frankish sources and is a rare occurrence, but there are few occasions in the sources we have that might call for a reference to the family name of the Frankish kings. Rarity does not call into question the term Merovingian or the descent of the Frankish kings from Merovech; it does make it difficult to determine when the dynastic name was adopted. Though Gregory does not use it, he was surely aware of the term, because he derives the descent of the present royal family from Merovech and is uncertain of the nature of the connections beyond him. The currency of the term is also suggested by the circumstance that, about the same time Gregory was writing, the name Merovech had been revived as a king's name in a fashion that speaks for its connection with the dynastic name of the royal house.[47]

The first source we have that uses the term 'Merovingian' is not Fredegar, but Jonas of Bobbio, writing about 640: he uses it in the singular (*Mervengus*)

44 Eugen Ewig, 'Die Namegebung bei den ältesten Frankenkönigen und im merovingischen Königshaus,' *Francia* 18. 1 (1991): 21–69. Germanic name-giving practices do not permit the reconstruction of lineage structures.

45 See above, pp. 122–4.

46 *Hist.* II 9

47 See below, p. 145.

and in a context that shows it was a term commonly understood for Frankish kings.[48] Next Fredegar uses it *(Merohingii)* around 660, and only once, in the story under consideration. Thereafter, we have to wait for eighth-century sources, especially the *Liber historiae Francorum*, where we are again told that the Frankish kings are called Merovingians *(Merovingi)*, after Merovech.[49] Typically enough for the period, the orthography of the name is erratic, but then it is equally erratic for the name Merovech itself, Fredegar alone, with the help of sundry scribes, giving us the variants Meroveus, Meroheus, Meroeus, Maeroeus, Maeroveus, and Merveus.[50] There is no reason to reject the testimony of the sources since they are consistent with a patronymic form derived from Merovechus/Meroveus. The Merovingians derived their name from Merovech, an historical king of the mid-fifth century, not a distant, mythical ancestor.

The most striking feature of Fredegar's account is his description of the encounter of Chlodio's wife with a sea beast and the conception of Merovech by either the beast or Chlodio. Fredegar connects the beast to Neptune and compares it with the Minotaur, *quinotaur* universally being taken to be an error on the part of a copyist or Fredegar. As we have seen, the Minotaur reference (along with the bull in Childeric's grave) has frequently led modern commentators to imagine a figure half man and half bull, representing a bull divinity, though no such creature from Frankish, or even Germanic, paganism appears to have any bearing on the story. As Neptune and the Minotaur are derived from classical traditions, Latin literature and Latin learning are areas that at least promise some help in defining Fredegar's frame of reference.

Latin literature had absorbed from Greek a series of tales, conceptualized as myths in modern scholarship, concerning the Cretan king Minos and his difficult relations with the god Neptune.[51] In the common version of the story, Minos, himself the product of a union between Jupiter in the form of a bull and Europa in the form of a cow, prays to Neptune for a bull to sacrifice and is rewarded with a dazzlingly white bull that appears from the sea. But Minos fails to sacrifice the bull, offending Neptune, who causes Minos' wife, Pasiphaë, to fall in love with the bull. She has Daedalus construct a hollow form

48 *Vita Columbani*, I 28, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH SRM 4 (1904): 'Quod et regi et omnibus circumadstantibus ridiculum excitat, aientes, se numquam audisse, Mervengum, in regno sublimatum, voluntarium clericum fuisse.'

49 *Liber Historiae Francorum* 5, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH SRM 2 (1888): 'Ab ipso Merovecho rege utile reges Francorum Merovingi sunt appellati.'

50 Fred. *Chron.* III 9, 11, 60, 74, 78.

51 For the early sources: Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Baltimore and London, 1993), 259–70; for the late antique and early medieval tradition, nn. 56–63, below.

in the shape of a cow, inserts herself into it, and successfully mates with the bull. The union results in the birth of the Minotaur, Minos' bull, half man and half beast, which the king shuts up in the labyrinth. The story became a commonplace of Latin culture: Virgil alludes to it several times; Ovid treats it, along with other stories of river gods capable of metamorphosing into bulls; and Apuleius explores its pornographic possibilities in a contemporary setting.[52] These literary appearances were just signs of a much wider popular currency for the story: minotaurs were among the images decorating the standards of Republican legions, and Nero had the mating of Pasiphaë and Neptune's bull re-enacted in the amphitheatre.[53] Characters in the story were also appropriated for genealogical speculation: Galba, when he became emperor, claimed descent from Jupiter on the paternal side and Pasiphaë on the maternal.[54] It is difficult to say if the popularity of the story ever really faded. Among historians, Orosius in the early fifth century accepted the Minotaur as a real character in the history of early Greece.[55] In the late fifth century, Sidonius Apollinaris regarded minotaurs as a type of beast that symbolized voraciousness, and the tale was obviously still current in the early sixth century, when Ennodius of Pavia, inspired by images on the tableware of an acquaintance, took up the subject in his epigrams.[56] In the early Middle Ages, its elements in one form or another continued to be an adjunct to the study of the literary and pseudo-historical monuments of antiquity. Their association with Virgil's *Aeneid*, if nothing else, guaranteed their survival, as did their inclusion in the mythographic tradition, which also dealt with the Trojan War and its aftermath.[57] The story of the Minotaur was, as a consequence, a small part of pseudo-historical material that someone interested in the Trojan background to European history was likely to

52 Virgil, *Aeneid*, esp. VI 24–6; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VIII (Minos); VIII 1090, IX (Achelous, the river god); Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* X 19–35.

53 Pliny, *Natural History* X 5 (16) (Minotaur standards). Suetonius, *Nero* XII; though the re-enactment was part of a *munus gladiatorium*, Suetonius introduces the section with the comment 'neminem occidit, ne noxiorum quidem.' There was a temple of Pasiphaë in Sparta.

54 Suetonius, *Galba* II. Minos is identified only as Pasiphaë's husband, not as progenitor. Who, then, was thought to be her mate?

55 *Historiae* I 13.2, ed. Marie-Pierre Arnaud-Lindet (Paris, 1990), 1: 61.

56 Sidonius: Ep. 5.7.4, ed. W.B. Anderson, *Poems and Letters*, 2: 190. Ennodius: *Magni Felicis Ennodi Opera*, nos. 133, 136, ed. Fridericus Vogel, MGH AA 7 (1885); the subject appears again (no. 232) alongside other epigrams (nos. 232, 232a) concerned with the sexual exploits of Jove pictured, once more, on dishes.

57 *Servii grammatici qui feruntur in Virgilii carmina commentarii*, VI 14, 24–6, ed. G. Thilo and H. Hagen (Hildesheim, 1961), vol. 2. Hyginus, *Fabulae*, xl, xli, xlii, i.a., ed. H.I. Rose, 2d ed. (Leiden, 1963). Mythographus Vaticanus, I 43, 47, 120, 121, 126, and III 11.7; and cf. I 94, 148: *Scriptores rerum mythicarum latini tres Romae nuper reperti*, Georg Heinrich Bode (Hildesheim, 1968; reprint of 1834 ed.).

meet with in some form. Latin literary tradition is, therefore, suggestive for understanding Fredegar's story, but the fit is rather imperfect: Neptune's bull is the bull that came from the sea, as presumably does Fredegar's beast; but, according to its name, the Minotaur is Minos' bull, the product of the union between the queen and the bull of Neptune, and it is kept in the labyrinth. Fredegar, though, is not recounting the Minotaur story as such – we can never be sure exactly how he understood it – but only drawing upon some of its elements by way of comparison: the association with Neptune and the resemblance to a bull-like creature.

Latin learning of the age casts a slightly different light on the Merovech story.[58] Two aspects seem particularly important. The first is the interest in strange beasts and monstrous births, natural phenomena often interpreted as portentous indicators of the future. A section on portents in the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville (d. 636), for instance, considers the Minotaur twice: the first instance includes it among the serious categories of portentous creations as a special type with human and animal parts;[59] the second instance appears to be an attempt to rationalize the Minotaur story itself, on the basis of a false etymology from *homo* and *taurus*.[60] The Minotaur appears as a real creature not only in Orosius, but also in the *Enigmata* of Aldhelm (d. 709), a collection of riddles about the natural world.[61] The author of the *Liber monstrorum*, celebrated because he depicts the bones of Higlacus (the Hygelac of *Beowulf*) attracting tourists on an island at the mouth of the Rhine, includes among his human monsters the Minotaur, though with a certain hostility towards the veracity of the Greek tales with which it was associated.[62] In the fabulous account of Aethicus Ister, minotaurs were depicted as a race of creatures, independent of the accidents of birth or Greek fables; near the Caspian gates, in a

58 Of the works cited below, only those of Isidore and Aldhelm can be dated with any precision.

59 *Etymologiae* XI iii 9, *Isidori Hispalensis episcopi etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. W.M. Lindsay (Oxford, 1911), 1: 'Alia [portenta], quae in parte transfigurantur, sicut qui leonis habent vultum vel canis, vel taurinum caput aut corpus, ut ex Pasiphaë memorant genitum Minotaurum; quod Graeci *heteromorphîan* vocant.'

60 Ibid., 38: 'Minotaurum nomen sumpsisse ex tauro et homine, qualem bestiam fabulose in Labyryntho inclusam fuisse.' Only the inclusion of the creature in the labyrinth is being doubted here.

61 Orosius, as in n. 55. Aldhelm, *Engimata* XVIII, dependent, at least in part, on Isidore. *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. R. Ehwald, MGH AA XV; English translation by Michael Lapidge and James L. Rosier: Aldhelm, *The Poetic Works* (Cambridge, 1985), 75.

62 Bk. I 2 (Higlacus); I 50 (Minotaurus): *Liber Monstrorum: Introduzione, edizione, versione e commento*, ed. Franco Porsia (Bari, 1976). An English translation can now be found in Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the* Beowulf-*Manuscript* (Cambridge, 1995).

region associated with the exploits of Alexander, the author claims, young minotaurs were to be found that could be trained to war.[63]

Although Fredegar made use of Isidore and Orosius, there is no question of any of the works mentioned above being linked directly to his account of Merovech's birth.[64] Yet they do tell us something about the Minotaur in the imagination of the early Middle Ages. The Minotaur remained an exotic beast through its connection with the world of the Greek gods, though these could be interpreted through Euhemerism, a process that brought them and their associations within the realm of historical speculation. In addition, the Minotaur could be conceptualized as a type of creature and an element in the category of the monstrous and portentous creations of nature. The Minotaur, or rather, we should say, creatures of that ilk, were potentially imaginable attendants on past events.

A second aspect of Latin learning fundamental to the Merovech story is etymology. Sometimes a playful or scurrilous source of amusement, etymology was also a serious category of explanation, with roots in biblical, classical, and patristic tradition.[65] The character of individuals, peoples or, indeed, almost any subject, could be explained through the name (*causa nominis*); for matters dealing with *origines, causa nominis* was an interpretative tool of the first order. *Origo* in fact came to mean not only 'origin' in its usual senses of beginning, birth, or descent, but also 'etymology' itself.

The most influential early medieval proponent of etymology as a road to understanding was Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologiae.* By no means all Isidore's etymologies are negligible, but the desire to provide a *causa nominis* at any cost is particularly noticeable in his treatment of the names of peoples in Book IX, which also conveys something of the method of seventh-century etymological explanation.[66] Some names are derived rather unexcitingly from topographical features, especially rivers. Many are derived from royal or princely founders, occasionally recognized as the offspring of gods.[67] The method here typically proceeds in a direction completely opposite to that of the

63 *Cosmographia* VII 68: *Die Kosmographie des Aethicus*, ed. Otto Prinz (Munich, 1993).

64 There is a faint echo in an addition to Servius' commentary on the *Aeneid* VI 14 ('vaccam ligneam ... quam maxime taurus adpetebat'), but not enough to preclude coincidence.

65 Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages,* trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1953), Appendix XIV, 495–500. Separating the playful and the serious is difficult: Matthew 16:18 is good case in point. See also Isidore's own description of etymology, *Etymologiae* I xxix: 'Omnis enim rei inspectio etymologia cognita planior est.'

66 For a French translation and commentary, *Étymologies: Livre IX*, ed. Marc Reydellet (Paris, 1984).

67 E.g. the Dorians, from Dorus son of Neptune and Ellepsis: *Etymologiae* IX ii 80, but cf. Reydellet, *Étymologies*, 83.

explanation, the founder's name in reality being fashioned in retrospect from the name of the people; for example, Isidore tells us that the Franks were named after a *dux* of theirs, obviously the Francio of Fredegar's *Chronicle*.[68] Many other explanations attempt to link names to cultural characteristics. Some people suspect, we are told, that the Britons are called that in Latin because they are stupid (*bruti*); the Gepids (*Gipedes*) derive their name from their preference for foot combat (*pedestre proelium*), the Sarmatians (*Sarmatae*) from their enthusiasm for war (*studium armorum*).[69] Physical characteristics are invoked as well: the *Germani* are so called because of their hugeness – in the size of their bodies and in the numbers making up the various peoples (*inmania corpora inmanesque nationes*); the Gauls get their name from the whiteness of their bodies, for milk, in Greek, is called *gála*.[70] Isidore recognizes the role of languages other than Latin and Greek, though he was rarely in a position to make use of them.[71] In his etymology of the Britons, for instance, he seems to recognize the existence of a non-Latin derivation, and he mistakenly believes that the name of the Scotti in their own language is derived from the practice of tattooing;[72] one of his etymologies for the name Franks may be based on a Frankish word.[73]

Ancient and early medieval etymological speculation, needless to say, was not based upon scientific linguistics. Casual and even remote resemblances between words and word elements were sufficient to establish explanatory connections. Derivations could come from Latin, Greek, and other languages, though sometimes without much discrimination. As far as the present subject is concerned, this kind of etymology is important because, when its presuppositions and methodology are taken into account, the prospect that the Merovech story was tied to contemporary etymological theory becomes an attractive possibility. The tale seems designed to clarify the derivation of the name Merovingian from Merovech ('per co regis Francorum post vocantur Merohingii').

68 'Franci a quodam proprio duce vocari putantur.' *Etymologiae* IX ii 101.

69 Ibid., 102, 92, 93

70 Ibid., 97, 104

71 Except for Hebrew in biblically based etymologies; cf. ibid., I xix: 'Multa [vocabula] etiam e diversarum gentium sermone vocantur. Unde et origo eorum vix cernitur. Sunt enim pleraque barbara nomina et incognita Latinis et Graecis.'

72 Ibid., IX ii 103. There is a confusion here with the Picti, but whether as a result of a false etymology yet again is another story.

73 Or not. 'Alii [cf. n. 68] eos a feritate morum nuncupatos existimant' (ibid., 101). *Feritas* is often taken in modern scholarship as referring to a Frankish word related to ON *frekkr*. Isidore's readership, at any rate, is likely to have been satisfied with the Latin etymology from *feritas*; it is no worse than many others. Cf. the derivation of the Thracians from *trux* (ibid, 82). Isidore is not alone, incidentally, in giving more than one explanation. Readers could pick what pleased them: 'Hic quoque mensis habet dubias in nomine causas, / quae placeant, positis omnibus, ipse leges' (Ovid, *Fasti* VI 1–2).

Viewed in this light, the conceiving of Merovech would be an *origo* – not in Hauck's sense, as a type of authentic myth of primitive origins, but in the contemporary sense of a *causa nominis*, an explanatory tale cast in the mode of sixth- or seventh-century etymological speculation. How is the story related to the etymology of Merovech?

For some time modern philology has pursued the etymology of Merovech in its own way. Though it is armed with the achievements of scientific linguistics, its goals have often been very similar to those of its ancient and medieval predecessors: to explain origins by etymology, to find in the name a key to original circumstances and conditions. Thus, Müllenhoff some time ago proposed that behind Merovech stood a god, Merwe, the name for an arm of the sea at the mouth of the Scheldt. More recent philology, starting with a completely different etymology for Merovech, has been enlisted, not very successfully, to aid the current claims for bull-worshipping Franks.[74] These modern efforts have been hampered, however, by the nineteenth-century association of philology, mythology, and history of religion, and by the conviction that the correct etymology of Merovech, if only it could be determined, would unlock some of the religious secrets of Frankish paganism.

Earlier generations, untutored by modern philology and unfamiliar with the concerns of comparative religion, saw more clearly the role of unscientific, contemporary etymology in the story of Merovech's conception. Johannes Georg von Eckhart, in the early eighteenth century, for example, proposed simply that the story derived from Meroveus' name. *Mer* signified *mare*, sea; *veus*, the equivalent of a German *veh* or *vieh,* meant beast (*bestia*). The elements of the name Meroveus together were thus the equivalents of *animal marinum* or *bestia Neptuni.*[75]

Such an interpretation still needed to be seriously addressed by nineteenth-century scholarship. Waitz considered an etymologizing explanation a possibility.[76] Müllenhoff argued, to the contrary, that the Frankish word for 'sea' was

74 Franz Rolf Schröder, 'Merowech,' *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 96 (1974): 241–5, deriving the first element, Mero, from a word meaning 'ruminant.' In Gregory's story of Ragnachar and Farro (*Hist.* II 42), Wenskus ('Bemerkungen zum Thunginus,' 236) claims to find the meaning 'bull' in the latter's name, and confirmation of sexual rituals connected with Frankish kingship. The story actually depends on a pun between Farro and *fara*, Ragnachar's retinue: A.C. Murray, *Germanic Kinship Structure: Studies in Law and Society in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* [Toronto, 1983], 93–4.

75 *Commentarii de rebus Franciae Orientalis* (Würzburg, 1729), I: 29; quoted in Kurth, *Histoire poétique*, 153 n, and cf. p. 9. His interpretation of the story as an allegory, with Meroveus as Chlodio's stepson by a previous marriage, is not likely to find a sympathetic modern reading.

76 Georg Waitz, *Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte* (Kiel, 1847), 2: 37. Scheibelreiter (as in n. 6) accepts the likelihood that the '(Burgondo-) Roman' Fredegar saw the etymology 'sea' in Merovech's name, but in doing so confounded genuine Frankish tradition.

mari, and that a vowel change of the 'a' to 'e' was improbable in the fifth and sixth centuries.[77] But this kind of argument is to miss the point that the only linguistic criterion for association was similitude.[78] The first element of Merovech could readily be interpreted as Frankish for 'sea' by Frankish, Latin, Burgundian, or even Gothic speakers; sound and appearance were close enough to satisfy the not very exacting standards of sixth- or seventh-century etymologizers. We have already seen the variations that orthography could produce.[79] The same considerations apply to the second element, *vechus/veus*, which readily suggests common Germanic words for cattle (from a Germanic **fehu*). Kurth acknowledged, but rejected, an etymologizing interpretation because, he argued, fifth-century Franks would not have had a scholar capable of undertaking the task.[80] Again, this poorly represents the implications of an etymologizing interpretation. An etymological fable built upon Merovech's name would hardly have been a product of the fifth century in the first place; the sixth and seventh, on the other hand, would have been rife with scholars, and possibly wags, of varying ethnicities, happy to apply the etymological arts to a distant, poorly attested, king of the Franks.

The possibility of an etymologizing tale was increasingly passed over as scholarship vainly pursued its goal of determining the true etymology and its connection to primitive myth.[81] While nineteenth-century scholarship grudgingly acknowledged a contemporary etymologizing interpretation, we should recognize that the rejection of it was largely due to commitment in the scholarly discourse of the day to thoroughly different modes of explanation, focused on mythology and the oral transmission of primitive religious notions.[82] These modes are still very much in evidence in recent scholarship, where, adapted to

77 'Die Merovingische Stammesage,' 431. Müllenhoff's argument is made again by Otto Höfler (as in n. 6). But cf. Ewig's argument ('Die Namengbung,' 29) that the name of Maroveus, bishop of Poitiers, is actually the royal name Meroveus, and presupposes kinship with the royal house. One awaits explanation for the wool-worker's daughter Merofled.

78 See Isidore on the Goths: 'Goti a Magog filio Iafeth nominati putantur de similitudine ultimae sillibae' (*Etymologiae* IX ii 89). Similitude served etymologizers well for the next millennium.

79 Above, at n. 50.

80 *Histoire poétique*, 154: the next argument, one suspects, is the real reason for his rejection: 'et la légende a un caractère trop archaïque pour cela.'

81 The failure is clear from the handbooks and the reviews of literature: M. Schönfeld, *Wörterbuch der Altgermanischen Personen- und Völkernamen nach der Überlieferung des klassischen Altertums*, 2d ed. (Heidelberg, 1965; first published 1911), s. vv. Chlodavichus, Merobaudes, Meroveus; Franz Jostes, *Sonnenwende: Forschungen zur germanischen Religions- und Sagengeschichte* (Munster, 1926), 1: 199–200; Franz Rolf Schröder, 'Merowech,' 242 f.

82 Not endorsed everywhere, of course; see, for example, Henry Bosley Woolf, *The Old Germanic Principles of Name-Giving* (Baltimore, 1939), 179–80, who in passing explains the story of Merovech's birth as 'the result, doubtless, of an attempt to explain the meaning of the name.'

current theories about the social and political constructs of Germanic society, they have acquired a new lease on life.

Etymologizing is common in Fredegar's *Chronicle*. We are told, for example, that the Franks were called after Francio, the Turks after Torquatus or Turcoth, the Latins after Latinus, and that Friga ruled over Phrygia.[83] Etymologizing can also involve brief narrative explanations. Following Orosius, Fredegar derives the name of the Burgundians, for example, from their establishment of fortresses (*burgi*) on the Rhine.[84] The town of Daras is built on the spot where the Emperor Justinian supposedly told the Persian emperor, 'You shall give back' the towns and provinces of the Roman Empire.[85] The account of the relation between the Avar and Slav battlelines is based on a false explanation of the term *befulci*.[86] The early Franks are said to have built a city named after Troy (Xanten, that is, Colonia Traiana?);[87] indeed, the legend of the Trojan origin of the Franks probably depended on a series of false linguistic associations. A good example of etymologizing word play is a fable of the stag and lion: the emperor Leo is represented by, naturally, the lion.[88] To this list should be added Fredegar's account of the conception of Merovech and the derivation of the Merovingian name.

III

The argument presented here is that Merovech's name, Mero-vechus, would have easily lent itself to being interpreted as *Neptuni bestia*, Neptune's beast, or, more specifically, Neptune's bull. The story connected with the name was thus intended to answer the common query *cur et unde*: How did this name first arise?[89] If a typical line of reasoning was followed closely connected with explaining the name elements (*causa nominis*), the name Merovech would have

83 Fred. *Chron.* II 5; II 6; III 2; II 9.

84 Ibid., II 46.

85 Ibid., II 62, and see notes by Krusch in his edition of Fredegar; Kusternig, 'Fredegar' (as in note 3); and comments by Wallace-Hadrill, *Long-Haired Kings*, 91.

86 Fred. *Chron.* IV 48, and see the notes by Krusch, Kusternig, and Wallace-Hadrill. Krusch suggested *vexilla* for *vestila* in the phrase 'vestila priliae facientes.' *Tela* seems to me more likely; cf. 'telam priliae ... preparatam' (IV 64) and 'tela priliae construens' (IV 90).

87 Fred. *Chron.* III 2.

88 Ibid., II 57.

89 A good example appears in Suetonius' report of etymological speculation surrounding the name Galba: 'Qui primus Sulpiciorum cognomen Galbae tulit cur aut unde traxerit, ambigitur. Quidam putant, quod oppidum Hispaniae frustra diu oppugnatum inlitis demum galbano facibus succenderit; alii, quod in diuturna valitudine galbeo, id est remediis lana involutis, assidue uteretur; nonulli, quod praepinguis fuerit visus, quem galbam Galli vocent; vel contra, quod tam exilis, quam sunt animalia quae in aesculis nascuntur appellanturque galbae.' (It is

suggested that the first king bearing it must have been the product of a brutish coupling of his mother with a bull of Neptune. The best-known creatures of this kind were the beasts associated with Neptune in stories concerning Pasiphaë and the Minotaur, which has accordingly been invoked by way of analogy. We ourselves also need to ask *cur et unde* with respect to the etymology itself and the character of the tale accompanying it. The following discussion considers whether it is possible to locate the circumstances behind the etymological invention. If the investigation reveals a veritable *embarras de richesse*, and thus a definite context remains elusive, the effort to find it shows how readily an etymologizing explanation fits the content of the tale and conditions of the sixth- and seventh-century Merovingian kingdom.

The frequency of the name Merovech in the Merovingian house could suggest a context for the origin of the story. Scholars have long noted that the name was revived for the first time under Chilperic and enjoyed a short-lived popularity as a king's name until the early seventh century. To his children by Audovera, Chilperic gave names meant to recall the founders of the dynasty: Merovech and Clovis, to two of his sons; and Basina, the name of Childeric's queen, to a daughter. The Merovech in question failed to outlive his father, being killed in 577 after an ill-considered marriage to Sigibert's widow, Brunhild.[90] Clothar II, another son of Chilperic, and his successor, used 'Merovech' again for his own first-born son, who died in some way as a result of his defeat and subsequent captivity at the hands of Theuderic II in 604.[91] A short time later, the Austrasian and Burgundian houses adopted the name: first, Theuderic II in 607 named his fourth-born son Merovech, and arranged for the child to have Clothar II as his godfather;[92] and Theudebert II had a son Merovech who was still a child in 613.[93] Both Merovechs fell victim to the troubles of that year: according to Fredegar, Theudebert's son was picked up by the foot and his head smashed against a rock at the command of his victorious uncle; Theuderic's son had his life spared by his godfather, Clothar II, after the latter's vic-

uncertain why the first of the Sulpicii who bore the surname Galba assumed the name, and whence it was derived. Some think that it was because after having for a long time unsuccessfully besieged a town in Spain, he at last set fire to it by torches smeared with *galbanum*; others because during a long illness he made constant use of *galbeum*, that is to say remedies wrapped in wool; still others, because he was a very fat man, such as the Gauls term *galba*, or because he was, on the contrary, as slender as the insects called *galbae*, which breed in oak trees): *Galba* III, trans. J.C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1914).

90 Gregory, *Hist.* IV 28; V 2; 18.

91 Fred. *Chron.* IV 25, 26.

92 An arrangement surely meant to offset the death of Clothar's Merovech.

93 Fred. *Chron.* IV 29, 38.

tory, and was removed from political life, though he lived for many years after.[94] The name was never used again in the Merovingian house. If the revival of the name Merovech by Chilperic after four generations suggests an occasion for the etymologizing story, still more fundamental – no matter when the tale might have arisen – is the question of the purpose of the story. This inquiry takes us in two main directions.

In the first, the story might be understood to be favourable to the Merovingians and a product of the court or its supporters. Eugen Ewig has argued that in Chilperic's name-giving there is an initiative on the king's part to emphasize the mythic implications of the dynasty's origins, such implications being, in Ewig's view, the pagan, Germanic, and sacral traditions associated with the Merovingian house.[95] Chilperic *is* the best candidate for the type of ruler who may have been inclined to associate remarkable circumstances with the foundation of his dynasty, but the character of his antiquarianism points to the contemporary world of Latin letters grounded in ecclesiastical and secular models of antiquity. Poet, reformer of the alphabet, composer of hymns, and dabbler in theological questions, Chilperic is the one Merovingian with a claim to learning; his efforts to refurbish the amphitheatres in Paris and Soissons in order to provide their citizens with shows (*spectaculum*) is a testament to the depth of his desire to imitate the ancient secular traditions of Roman rulership.[96] The 'mythic' and 'sacral' elements we know to have been available to him or any other Merovingian ruler of Gaul in the sixth century were not Germanic, but antique, and pagan only in the unreal and conventionalized form of late Roman rhetoric. Viewed from this perspective, the type of antiquarian associations that could be expected can be seen in the panegyric for the emperor Anthemius delivered by Sidonius Apollinaris in 468, about a year before he became bishop of Clermont. Sidonius, whose name evoked respect in the sixth century, develops the antique theme of the sympathetic fecundity of nature that accompanies the hero's birth (in this instance, Anthemius), but also the miraculous intervention of the gods; in the latter case, Sidonius not surprisingly reserves his more remarkable illustrations for long-dead heroes. Thus, he invokes the cases of Alexander the Great and Augustus, the mother of each of whom was considered to have conceived by a serpent god, representing Apollo and Jove, respectively.[97] As Merovech's name suggests a related, remote fic-

94 Ibid., IV 38, 40, 42.

95 Ewig, 'Die Namengebung bei den ältesten Frankenkönigen,' 33, 43.

96 Gregory, *Hist.* V 17, V 44, VI 46, and James, *Franks*, 165–8.

97 *Carmina* 2. 94–133, ed. W.B. Anderson, 2: 15–19, esp. 'venisse beatos / sic loquitur natura deos ... / magnus Alexander nec non Augustus habentur / concepti serpente deo Phoebumque Iovemque / divisere sibi ...' The stories are told more fully in Plutarch, *Alexander* 2, 3, and Suetonius, *Augustus* 94.

tion, Fredegar's story could originally have been presented in a similar setting, and found a sympathetic Merovingian audience pleased to hear that the founding of its own house was comparable to the allegedly wondrous conceptions of the great historical figures Alexander and Augustus.[98]

Especially if the Merovech story is a relatively late invention, then a slightly different perspective on this imaginary setting is possible. By Fredegar's time at least, the Macedonians, Romans, and Franks were all deemed to be descendants of the Trojans.[99] To someone learned in the rhetorical and pseudo-historical tradition of antiquity, a pleasing fiction, according to which the founder of the Merovingian house was conceived by a creature of Neptune, might be thought to complete a series of triads: the three great peoples of Trojan descent (Macedonians, Romans, and Franks); the wondrous conception of three, distant heroes (Alexander, Augustus, and Merovech); and their descent from the three principal gods of antiquity (Apollo, Jove, and Neptune). Such a simulated antique fantasy might have been a pleasing diversion, but to maintain that one like it was ever created and left its mark on Fredegar's *Chronicle* exceeds the evidence available to us.

In more general terms, the antique portrayal of the births of Alexander and Augustus has a bearing on the ambiguous description of Merovech's conception. In Fredegar's story the king is said to have been conceived 'aut a bistea aut a viro.' Hauck saw temporary divinization in this phrase, interpreting it in a possible, if unusual, manner ('by both the beast and the husband'). The standard meaning ('by either the beast or the husband') has, with somewhat more reason, suggested to others the effect of a bowdlerizing Christian interpretation of a real animistic Germanic myth in which, originally, only a divine beast was believed to have engendered the king. It might have been noticed above that, in Sidonius' reference to the births of Alexander and Augustus, the soon-to-be bishop chooses his words with care: their conceptions, he says, are regarded as supernatural, but he does not affirm that they were. We should avoid the temptation simply to see Christian sensibilities at work here: neither Fredegar nor Sidonius was altering traditional material owing to his Christian beliefs. Ancient historiography shows the same reticence. Though the births of Alexander and Augustus are surrounded with portents and omens, conception is not presented unequivocally as divine. Plutarch on Alexander and Suetonius on Augustus present the supernatural origins of their subjects as versions for readers to consider; while detailing the mysterious and intimate relations between the mothers and creatures sacred to the gods, as recounted by other sources, they avoid committing themselves to the view that such relations demonstrate

98 Cf. Fred. *Chron.* II 4, 8, 27, 28, 33.
99 Ibid., II 4, 6, 8.

sexual intercourse and divine impregnation, though readers were free to draw more definite conclusions.[100] Ambiguity is a motif in the conception stories of classical heroes. The account of Merovech's conception follows the same pattern even in its very restricted compass, presenting the possibility that either the beast or Chlodio engendered the king. The motif, it seems likely, was present in Fredegar's source.

The model of the antique hero presents its subject in a laudatory fashion. Another line of inquiry takes a different direction, starting from the premise that Fredegar's story is unfavourable to the Merovingians.[101] Byzantine parallels are helpful in showing how hatred generated by contemporary political life could be expressed in defamatory tales that might seem suggestive for understanding the treatment of Merovech as founder of the Merovingian house. In the *Secret History*, a catalogue of seething invective against Justinian and Theodora (among others), Procopius attributes the emperor's conception – by the admission of Justinian's own mother – to intercourse with a demon. Anxious to prove that Justinian himself, as a consequence, was a demon, he alleges eyewitness accounts of the emperor's appearance undergoing grotesque, supernatural changes late at night in the palace. Theodora, too, Procopius tells us, was a consort of demons even before her union with Justinian; former lovers were sure they had been driven from her presence by a demon desiring to spend the night with her.[102] A society that readily saw the divine at work in the fortunate outcome of human affairs was also inclined to perceive the demonic behind life's reverses and failures. In the *Secret History*, the natural marriage of the demonic and the pornographic, prevalent in contemporary thought, found a congenial home in invective. Though it would hardly be surprising if those suffering at the hands of the Merovingians or critical of their rule were tempted to find in the name of the dynasty's founder demonstration of the fiendish, unnatural origins of the regime, Fredegar's account, as brief as it is, on balance weighs against reading its elements as pornographic and demonic. The ambivalent treatment of the impregnation of Merovech's mother, as discussed above, points rather to a heroic model for the tale.[103] Invective, as Procopius' unconstrained remarks show, does not equivocate.

100 Plutarch, *Alexander* II, III and Suetonius, *Augustus* XCIV.

101 Cf. Kusternig, 'Fredegar,' 12, 89, who regards the Merovech and Basina stories (III 12, and below, p. 150) as anti-Merovingian, but is reluctant to reject interpretation of the former as myth.

102 *SH* 12; and see Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985), 49–66

103 Anti-Merovingians familiar with Fredegar's story might have found confirmation of their views in Aulus Gellius' comment: 'poetae ... ferocissimos et inmanes et alienos ab omni humanitate, tamquam e mari genitos, Neptuni filios dixerunt.' The comparison is with the *praestantissimi virtute filii Iovis*. *NA* XV xxi.

The insertion of the story in Fredegar's *Chronicle* itself also requires another approach to interpreting the story's contents: does the point of view of Fredegar's work as a whole imply a purpose for the interpolation? We have to consider the possibility of two contexts for the Merovech story, each one distinct from the other: the original context for which the tale was first invented, and a later adaptation of the tale by Fredegar and his use of it in the *Chronicle*. Since the recognition of the *Chronicle* as the work of one author, conventionally called Fredegar, we are in a better position to consider the second context, but our understanding of Fredegar as an author is still undeveloped. In particular, his approach to sources and his method of condensing, paraphrasing, and interpolating in the first three books are in need of more consideration from the perspective of the work as a whole than they have received to date. What are offered here are brief and tentative observations.

To begin with, the elements of the Merovech story, it should be observed, echo other interests of Fredegar. For instance, references to animals abound in the *Chronicle*, almost always used as fables, prodigies, and didactic analogies.[104] The portentous character of some of these references is part of a broader category of Fredegarian interests concerned with monitory and prophetic signs. He employs the standard litany of these topoi, derived from classical and biblical traditions and part of the intellectual climate of the day: dreams, prophecies – Sybilline, supposedly, and contemporary – and portents drawn from the celestial, natural, and animal worlds.[105] It is worth considering, therefore, whether the Minotaur-like sea beast in the Merovech story was supposed to be seen as part of this category of interpretation.[106] Isidore had classified creatures resembling the Minotaur among portents established for future significations, just like the dreams and oracles by which God forewarned individuals and peoples of future misfortune (*clades*).[107]

The *Neptuni bestia* of the Merovech story also recalls the most famous oracular presentation of Fredegar's *Chronicle*: the visions (*visiones*) of Merovech's

104 Fred. *Chron.* II 57 (horses in the false dream of Lilia; fable of the lion and the stag); II 60 (wild-animal guide and the invasion of Africa); II 62 (eagle and Justinian); III 12 (various *bestiae* in Childeric's visions); IV 38 (fable of the wolf and its cubs); IV 68 (Wends as the dogs of God).

105 Dreams (II 57, III 12); prophecies and signs (II 56, 60, 62; III 58, 59, 71; IV 11, 13, 15, 18, 20, 32, 36, 56, 65).

106 That the animal (*fera*) that Fredegar very self-consciously has accompany the Vandal crossing to Africa (*Chron.* II 60) was supposed to be a sea beast is doubtful.

107 *Etymologiae* XI iii 4: 'Quaedam autem portentorum creationes in significationibus futuris constituta videntur. Vult enim deus interdum ventura significare per aliqua nascentium noxia, sicut et per somnos et per oracula, qua praemoneat et significet quibusdam vel gentibus hominibus futuram cladem.'

son, Childeric.[108] On his wedding night, Childeric is instructed by his bride, Basina, to go outside the palace and report to her what he sees. He does so three times, and each time sees beasts in the likeness of various kinds of animals. The first time, the creatures appear as lions, unicorns, and leopards; the second time, they appear in the likeness of bears and wolves; the third time, they appear as dogs and lesser creatures, dragging one another down and tumbling about.[109] Basina explains the significance of each vision by relating it to the history of the Merovingian house: the lion stands for the son soon to be born (Clovis), the unicorns and leopards for his sons; the bears and wolves represent the kings that come after; the dogs stand for those who will rule when the kingdom falls apart; and the lesser creatures, the people at the time who will rend one another without the fear of princes. It has long been recognized that this story rests on knowledge of the four beasts (*bestiae*) in the Book of Daniel (c. 7) – the lioness, bear, leopard, and the final *bestia terribilis* with ten horns – representing the four *regna*, the great empires of antiquity. In Fredegar, the elements of Daniel's *visio* are handled very freely, however, and harmonized with the particular conditions of the Merovingian kingdom.[110] The freedom with which the biblical material is recycled – it serves less as a model than as a stimulus for a good, and pointed, story – should warn us against assuming that the original perspective of a source was transferred when its elements were adapted to new conditions or inserted in the *Chronicle*. Moreover, how much, if any, of the story should be attributed to Fredegar himself is a question, for the sequence of generations, as usually interpreted, seems to point to a period of composition early in the seventh century or before. Yet, Childeric's visions give us reason to wonder if Fredegar should be regarded as a particular friend of the Merovingians.[111]

The relation of Childeric's dream to the Book of Daniel draws us back again to the etymological interpretation of the name Merovech. Daniel's vision brings the beasts from the sea: 'Et quattuor bestiae grandes ascendebant de mari.' Fredegar elsewhere displays interest in the prophecies of Daniel.[112] It is therefore difficult to imagine that the author who inserted both the visions of Childeric and the Merovech story in his *Chronicle* almost side by side did so without noticing reminiscence of Daniel's beasts, but, if so, how he understood the conjunction is quite another question. Did Fredegar harbour the notion that the

108 Fred. *Chron.* III 12.

109 The concept here seems to be related to the 'bestias ... nocturnas, et non tam bestias quam dira prodigia, quod nequequam in luce sed in umbris cernuntur nocturnis,' of the *Liber Monstrorum*, II 20, though the fit is not quite perfect.

110 See Krusch's note to Fred. *Chron.* III 12.

111 Cf. n. 108, above.

112 Chron. II 27: the context is the capture of Jerusalem (Dan. 9).

Merovingian dynasty may have had its origins in an unwholesome event of portentous significance, denoting the temporary success of dynasties? There must surely have been those in Gaul who viewed the Merovingians by the mid-seventh century as a dismal interlude in the long history of the Franks going back to the days of Priam. Or did the sea beast of the Merovingians simply signify the new kingdom arising in Gaul under the hegemony of the Franks and their royal family? By identifying the fourth *regnum* of Daniel as Rome, Orosius, an author known to Fredegar, had already altered the original assignment of the kingdoms and rendered innocuous the apocalyptic significance.[113] A *bestia Neptuni* may have seemed a suitable sign marking the rise of the kingdom of the Franks, like that of the Macedonians and the Romans, the creation of Trojan exiles.

To sum up: Sacral kingship among the Franks is a hypothetical construct of modern historiography founded on the exegesis of nineteenth-century *Germanistik* as adapted to recent theories about the nature of early Germanic society. No source gives unequivocal testimony to the existence of such an institution. The centre-piece of the evidence, the story of Merovech's conception in the seventh-century *Chronicle* of Fredegar, has commonly been interpreted as an archaic myth underpinning the sacral ideology of Merovingian kingship. The common assumption that only archaic myth could produce the peculiar features of the Merovech story is clearly mistaken, if the historical setting and the literary and intellectual context of the tale are examined. The story is better understood as an etymologizing fable conforming to sixth- and seventh-century interest in *origines*. By the mid-sixth century, the figure of the ancestral Merovech, about whom nothing very definite was known, was distant enough to lend his name to speculation on the origins of the royal house. Etymological examination, a primary tool in investigating the origins of the past, readily suggested a derivation from terms meaning 'sea' and 'beast,' or, more specifically, 'bull,' giving the meaning *Neptuni bestia.* To match this etymology, a tale in which a sea creature might have copulated with Merovech's mother seemed an appropriate explanation for the name; events of this kind had analogues in pseudo-historical tales of Alexander and Augustus, and especially in stories associated with Minos and the bull of Neptune.

It is hard to determine with precision the circumstances in which such a tale may have arisen. The revival of the name Merovech in the half-century or so after Chilperic reintroduced it into the dynasty is a likely moment for an ety-

113 *Hist.* II 1. On Orosius' treatment of the *regna*, see edition by Marie-Pierre Arnaud-Lindet, XLV–LXVI.

mologizing account of origins to be devised, but other contexts, about which we are uninformed, could have occasioned the tale. The brevity of the passage in the *Chronicle* makes it difficult to establish with certainty the original perspective of the story on the basis simply of the contents before us, which can be construed *in bono* or *in malo*, as favourable or unfavourable to the Merovingians. The ambivalent treatment of the queen's impregnation, however, speaks in favour of the former perspective, and points to the tale being modelled on the ambiguous tales told about the conception of antique heroes. Such a reading fits the tale having its origins among those close to the court and being intended to model the origins of the Merovingian house upon ancient heroes, especially those of the Macedonians and the Romans, who by the mid-seventh century at least were understood to be related to the Franks through common Trojan origins. It is also conceivable that the tale was developed by someone with a neutral outlook on Merovingian politics, but curious about the reappearance of the name Merovech as a principal name of the Frankish house in the late sixth and early seventh centuries.

The inclusion of the tale in Fredegar's *Chronicle* presents a slightly different set of problems. The tale certainly fits Fredegar's interest in animal tales and portentous events. It is unlikely this conjunction makes Fredegar the author, but it does help explain his selection of an existing story, and possibly his adaptation of it to his own understanding of Frankish history. He may also have been attracted by the resemblance between the beast from the sea and the beasts in the Book of Daniel, which helped inspire the neighbouring tale of the visions of Childeric, Merovech's son. Difficulty arises in determining the meaning he attributed to these correspondences. Whether Fredegar's reflections on the course of Merovingian politics prompted him to consider the origin of the present dynasty with a certain degree of dismay or whether he simply saw the *bestia Neptuni* as marking the debut of Frankish hegemony, the Book of Daniel was surely no source of rigorous, and learned, apocalyptic, but inspiration for entertaining and prophetic tales.