

**Yaniv Fox, *The Merovingians in Historiographical Tradition. From the Sixth to the Sixteenth Centuries*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 2023, 325 p., ISBN 978-1-009-28501-8, DOI [10.1017/9781009285025](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009285025), GBP 85,00.**

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The premise on which this book is written is simple: that later historical writers deliberately recast episodes from the history of the Merovingian dynasty (c. 481–751) for reasons to do with their own contemporary circumstances or ideas they wished to promote. The execution of its investigation is, however, both subtle and complex, creating a study that is full of interesting suggestions and well-presented arguments, backed by the author's wide-ranging expertise and an impressive bibliography.

The title might lead the reader to expect a strictly chronological overview of the ways in which the history of the Merovingian period had been presented by successive generations of historians over the course of an entire millennium, but that would be a massive undertaking and possibly not a very rewarding one. The sheer scale of the task and the very varied degree of later interest in Merovingian history would make it both unwieldy and repetitive.

Instead, Yaniv Fox has identified a number of particularly striking or significant episodes from the way this period was presented in the most important of its contemporary sources, the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours († 594), the so-called *Chronicle of Fredegar* of c. 660, together with the recast and expanded version of it known as the *Historia vel Gesta Francorum* of late eighth-century date, and the anonymous work now entitled *Liber Historiae Francorum* from the first half of that century. In each case he chooses a later retelling of the same story, examining both how it derived its information from the earlier sources and what changes the author made to the information he received. This relationship between what each of them read and what they subsequently wrote based on it is at the heart of this enquiry.

Again, selection is essential. Some of the historical writers of later centuries transmitted the chosen stories with little or no change to what they read in their sources. So, those included here are the ones who seem to have made deliberate alterations to the narratives they inherited. Obviously, too, the later their date of writing, the greater the chance that they may not be acquiring their information directly from their Merovingian period predecessors. So, Y. Fox is obliged to investigate all possible intermediary stages in the transmission, to guarantee, as he does successfully, that the transformations of the original tales are deliberately made by



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his chosen authors and not just the product of corruption in their tradition.

While some of those authors selected will be well-known to many readers and unsurprising, some, especially those from the later centuries, will be unfamiliar. Not least in this respect is Yosef Ha-Kohen, a mid-sixteenth-century author of two large-scale chronicles in Hebrew, who was of Spanish origin and who lived mainly in Genoa. The number of individual authors, including the original Merovingian and early Carolingian ones chosen for inclusion and the variety of their contexts and careers means there is little space that can be afforded to describing them here. As just suggested, some of them might deserve fuller descriptions, but the danger of digression is resisted, and recourse needs be made to the bibliography to find out more about those who might pique the reader's particular interest.

The book is divided into three sections, deriving from the story of the vision of Basina, mother of Clovis (c. 481–c. 511), the effective founder of the Merovingian kingdom, in which she saw successive generations of descendants in the character of animals of declining power, from lions to bears and wolves to dogs »and lesser beasts«. This appears in a late thirteenth-century vernacular chronicle from Saint-Denis and was there intended to reflect what by then were thought to be the successive stages of Merovingian decline across the whole span of the dynasty's existence, but here it is a useful way of dividing the material from early, middle, and late phases. There are two chapters in both the first two sections and just one in the third, each centred on a key episode or story from the early sources accompanied by discussion of how and why it was transformed by one or sometimes two later authors.

Because the book is structured around tales presented in strict chronological order, from the career of Childeric, the father of Clovis, to the last kings of the dynasty, the later authors who retell them cannot appear in a similar direct timeline. Thus, one chapter ends with discussion of the *De rebus gestis Francorum* of Paolo Emilio († 1529), while its immediate successor starts with the twelve book *Histories* of the mid-ninth century Freulf of Lisieux. This can be a bit intellectually vertiginous but is dictated by the logic of the chosen structure.

Each of the interpretations offered here with enormous erudition as to why all these post-Merovingian authors demonstrably altered the narratives that they had acquired from their predecessors is worthy of consideration. The problem lies in proving what must remain interesting suggestions. The process starts with the very historians whose works are the sources for the later authors who transform them. Thus, Gregory of Tours in the opening chapter is seen as being influenced by his own reading of history, particularly the careers of Constantine I (306–337), the first Christian emperor, and of St. Martin of Tours († 397), patron saint of Gregory's own diocese. Professor Fox suggests that Gregory, who presented Clovis as a »new Constantine«, was led to depict the Frankish



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king's father and predecessor in a very unfavourable way because Diocletian (284–305), who preceded Constantine, had a similarly negative role in the Christian historiographical tradition. This is suggestive but is it likely? In this and all the other cases argued here, the reader must make up their own mind.

Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

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