

Airs of empire

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The Frankish kingdom that emerged between the sixth and eighth centuries promoted political and religious diversity, before the Carolingians brought this pragmatism to an end.

Did an empire exist in Europe between Rome and Charlemagne?

Reviewed: Bruno Dumézil, *L'Empire mérovingien, Ve-VIIIe siècle* (The Merovingian Empire: From the Fifth to the Eighth Centuries), Paris, Passés composés, 2023, 352 p., 23 €.

What is an empire? While the latest book by Bruno Dumézil, a professor at Sorbonne-Université and a well-known specialist in the early Middle Ages, does not provide an answer, it enriches our understanding of this question.

An historical interpretation

"The Merovingian Empire": the choice of this title is deliberately paradoxical. Everyone knows that the Merovingian kingdom emerged following the demise of the Roman Empire in the west in 476. Henceforth, until Charlemagne's coronation in 800, there existed only one recognized empire: the Eastern Roman Empire.

The history of this part of the world between the sixth and the eighth centuries is traditionally a story of "barbarian" kingdoms, which were Romanized and politically

organized in varying degrees. Amidst this fragmentation, there is little doubt that the Kingdom of the Franks, led by kings who always hailed from the Merovingian family, was for years the most powerful of these kingdoms, eventually extending across Gaul and even to Germany's outer limits. Yet did the territorial breadth of Frankish power make it an actual empire?

Dumézil's goal is not so much to defend the imperial character of the Frankish kingdom as to show why and how the Merovingians succeeded in building a powerful and lasting political entity over three centuries. The key to their success lay, according to the author, neither in Rome's legacy (though it was broadly acknowledged), nor in the new and distinctly German additions, but in the ability of Frankish elites to innovate and devise new political practices.

This interpretation is the heart of Dumézil's narrative, which follows the traditional outline, from the Franks' first appearance within the political machinations of the Roman Empire in the third century until Pepin the Brief's seizure of power in 751.

The art of dividing power

The Frankish kingdom's success was founded on the existence of a royal dynasty that was never challenged until the mid-eighth century, accompanied by a system of dividing up power, allowing several Frankish kings, none of whom were preeminent, to govern different parts of the territory simultaneously.

Generation after generation, the division of power continued in ways that were rarely the same, resulting in a wide range of divisions and reconfigurations arising primarily from the need to negotiate with different groups of followers: dividing power limited internal disorder, facilitated expansionary policies, and ensured the preservation of political life within each of these areas, in the form of various palaces. Gradually, Merovingian "sub-kingdoms" crystallized around three perpetual nexuses: Austrasia in the east, Neustria in the west, and Burgundy in the southeast, which corresponded less to an emerging of a sense of identity than to groups of aristocrats defending their own interests.

The kingdom's persistence was thus ensured less by the dynastic principle per se than through negotiation between different actors. Even so, the fact that kings could

only be chosen from among Clovis' descendants prevented bloody rivalry between aristocratic groups seeking to seize the throne, as occurred in Visigothic Spain. Because they belonged to another family, Merovingian kings could act as arbiters between nobles.

While the crises that struck the kingdom between 586 and 613 and again between 639 and 681 became civil wars, they never led to the political implosion of the Merovingian world, either in its central territories or in the initial ring of Frankish domination, though they did hasten the emancipation of its peripheries. Dumézil notes that while these crises were serious, one cannot speak of a "break-up" of the Frankish world over three centuries, as occurred in many other empires.

The general political context, which evolved over three centuries, compelled the Merovingians to "cobble together" (p. 25) new systems with each transformation. Until the end of the sixth century, opportunities for expansion were significant. However, internal peace implied the existence of an external warzone, as the only way to ensure prosperity was through conquest, pillage, and the redistribution of booty.

Civil Wars

From this perspective, the civil war that broke out in 573 was also the result of the stabilization of the western part of the old Roman Empire, where competition would henceforth be managed within kingdoms. The seventh century inaugurated a new world, in which the main change was the disappearance of the Byzantine Empire as the kingdom's primary trade partner and the shift of Frankish interests from the Mediterranean to the North Sea.

The first half of the seventh century is considered the apogee of the Merovingian kingdom, which grew in coherence as it organized itself around kings who increasingly claimed to be divinely inspired as they enhanced their collaboration with the great sanctuaries near the royal palace, such as Saint-Denis. The same period witnessed the emergence of family units that were increasingly well structured, gradually coalescing into an authentic nobility based on service to the king as well as inherited property and the foundation of monasteries.

Dumézil shows that during these years, a gradual shift took place: while Merovingian power was firmly established at the center of this system--that is,

primarily the Paris region--the peripheral areas tended to free themselves. By the 640s, the king had lost control of Germany as well as Burgundy. By the end of the next round of civil wars in the 670s, the balance between king and nobles "had changed once and for all and the area controlled by the Frankish Palace diminished considerably" (p. 211). The epilogue of this ultimate crisis was the gradual takeover by a family of Austrasian aristocrats, the Pippinids, the Carolingians' ancestors, who governed the palace beginning in 687 and fought to keep the Kingdom of the Franks from becoming a mosaic of local potentates.

In the final chapter, entitled "The Renaissance of an Empire," Dumézil emphasizes the novelties introduced by the Pippinids in the first half of the eighth century, even before they seized the throne, though he also calls attention to the biases in the sources. We only know this history through later documents written to glorify the Carolingians.

Towards the Carolingian Empire

The most eminent Pippinid, Charles Martel, presented himself above all as a military leader. The geopolitical shifts that resulted in renewed foreign threats in the 720s incentivized nobles to place themselves in the service of one who could not only preserve the kingdom but also--and perhaps most importantly--redistribute booty.

Unlike the Merovingians, Charles relied above all on his family network and "professional" warriors who were directly tied to him. Though he did not invent heavy cavalry, he reassured these warriors by providing them with the material resources they needed for training by granting them land. The Pippinids promoted a new vision of the Church, conceived as the spearhead of new conquests, and created new episcopal seats in Germany--whereas no Merovingian king had ever fiddled with the ancient network of dioceses. "The populations in the peripheral zones were henceforth expected to be fully faithful both to Christian dogma and the Christian prince's orders" (p. 269).

The premises of Carolingian order thus became apparent: a desire for unified norms, from the center to the margins. "The *regnum Francorum* did not die. It gave birth the empire of steel and faith that was the Carolingian Empire." (p. 282).

No one doubts that the Carolingians were a pure product of the history of the Frankish kingdom. But is the continuity so great? In his conclusion, Dumézil reconsiders the question of the Merovingian empire, which he calls a "de facto" empire, emphasizing that the Franks benefited from the fact that they never claimed imperial status: "The Frankish world contented itself with assuming an imperial air, playing with words and symbols ... but without becoming their prisoner" (p. 287).

In contrast to the rigidity of Carolingian ideology, the Merovingian empire may not have promoted, but at least "tolerated political, religious, and spiritual diversity" (p. 289), and survived thanks to its "pragmatism" and willingness to "cobble" things together.

But what is an empire without an ideology? Does not every empire produce an ideology that justifies its domination? What is an empire whose leader almost never uses imperialist and universalist rhetoric? Beyond the question of the Merovingians' debatable imperial status, Dumézil has written a vast and excellent synthesis of what we currently know about the Merovingian world.

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