Outsiders in the Community: Franks and non-Franks in the Late Merovingian Period

Introduction

In the previous papers in this session we have heard about the networks that emerged and developed within the Merovingian kingdoms. I would now like to explore the external networks developed by the Franks, particularly with regard to their rule over non-Frankish peoples and the roles these peoples could play within the community of the regnum Francorum. As I have argued elsewhere, by the beginning of the eighth century the idea of the existence of a Frankish community was reasonably well established, although the precise details about this community differed from one author to another.¹ The Frankish community was imagined as both political and ethnic; it consisted of those who acted in the day-to-day politics of the Frankish kingdom, but these men were largely Franks, or at least were presented as Franks in the sources, and probably considered themselves Franks regardless of their actual ethnic lineage. It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between this purely Frankish community and a wider community that existed concurrently, which I will call the community of the regnum Francorum.

Unlike the Frankish community, the community of the regnum Francorum was not based on ethnicity, although ethnic labels were important in its conception and practice. This community consisted of the Franks at the top of the heap and was ruled by their Merovingian kings, but it was built on the interactions between the Franks and the peoples on the peripheries of the Frankish heartland, over whom they exerted greater or lesser control at different times.² What I would like to examine in this paper is how two authors who wrote about Frankish history in the late-seventh and early-eighth centuries – the compiler of the Chronicle of Fredegar and the author of Liber Historiae Francorum – combined these two

¹ Broome, ‘Approaches to the Frankish Community’.
² For this use of the term regnum Francorum, see Lewis, ‘Dukes’, p. 381, n. 1.
conceptions of community in their texts. I will begin by outlining very briefly the conception of the purely Frankish community as displayed by the two authors, noting some of the similarities and differences in their presentations. I will then make some general observations about the presentation of non-Frankish peripheral peoples in these texts before finishing with some more detailed analysis of what each author has to say about these peoples: first Fredegar’s narrative of the breakdown of Frankish authority east of the Rhine in the late-630s and early-640s; then the roles of Radbod of Frisia and Eudo of Aquitaine in the \textit{LHF}-author’s narrative of the civil war of the 710s. It will not be possible to address the way these authors depicted all the peripheral peoples and leaders in their works, but hopefully by focussing on a few examples I can highlight wider trends in the historiography of the later Merovingian period.

\textbf{The Frankish Community}

By the beginning of the eighth century the idea that there existed in central and northern Gaul a Frankish community seems to have become well-established. We can see this most clearly in \textit{Liber Historiae Francorum}, a text written in the Frankish sub-kingdom of Neustria in 727.\footnote{\textit{LHF}, 53. See Gerberding, \textit{Rise}; Dörler, ‘\textit{Liber Historiae Francorum}’}. \textit{LHF}, as its name suggests, is more than any other contemporary source about the Franks. It narrates the history of the Franks from their origin in the aftermath of the Fall of Troy through their migration to the Rhine,\footnote{\textit{LHF}, 1-4.} the establishment of their kingdom,\footnote{\textit{LHF}, 5-19.} conversion to Christianity,\footnote{\textit{LHF}, 15.} and various crises down to the author’s own time.\footnote{The ‘original’ section (i.e. that part not based on Gregory of Tours) is \textit{LHF}, 35-53.} But there is a well-known twist to this narrative; the group the author refers to throughout as ‘\textit{Franci}’ are in fact only one of the Frankish sub-groups, his own Neustrians.\footnote{For similar usage, see \textit{Vita Balthildis}, 4, 5, 10.} Nevertheless, other Frankish groups

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{a} Gerberding, \textit{Rise}; Dörler, ‘\textit{Liber Historiae Francorum}’.
\bibitem{b} \textit{LHF}, 1-4.
\bibitem{c} \textit{LHF}, 5-19.
\bibitem{d} \textit{LHF}, 15.
\bibitem{e} The ‘original’ section (i.e. that part not based on Gregory of Tours) is \textit{LHF}, 35-53.
\bibitem{f} For similar usage, see \textit{Vita Balthildis}, 4, 5, 10.
\end{thebibliography}
appear in the text, most notably the Austrasians and Burgundians – although the Burgundians as Franks are somewhat problematic. It is wrong to assume the author’s Neustrian focus gave him a Neustrian bias in all aspects of Frankish history, though: he was particularly well-disposed towards the Austrasian leaders Grimoald II and Charles Martel.\(^9\)

The basic traces of this Frankish community can also be found in the earlier *Chronicle of Fredegar*, which was most probably compiled in the form it has come down to us sometime around the year 660.\(^10\) Unlike *LHF*, the *Chronicle* is not a text about the Franks. Nevertheless, it contains information about the Franks throughout, albeit from a somewhat different perspective to that found in *LHF*. The *Chronicle* contains a version of the Trojan origin story and the migration to the Rhine, along with the establishment of the Frankish kingdom there.\(^11\) Although other peoples and powers feature in the *Chronicle* right to the end, in Book Four the Franks take up a central position in the narrative. Unlike the *LHF*-author, though, Fredegar did not use the unqualified term ‘*Franci*’ to refer to a specific group of Franks. Instead, he seems to have conceived of all three groups as equally Frankish and as equal members of the Frankish community, even if he paid more attention to the Burgundians and Austrasians than to the Neustrians. Certainly all three groups had an equal say in the political process he calls the *iudicium Francorum*, which was convened to deal with particularly problematic crises of the community.\(^12\) While the details of the history of the Franks differ in each text, then, these divergent narratives still share certain perspectives and ways of looking at the world. Of these one of the most important is the desire on the part of both authors for consensus in the community and between its different groups. Discussion of this aspect of the narratives lies beyond the scope of this paper, however, so I shall now turn to consider the place these authors give to the peripheral non-Frankish peoples.

\(^9\) *LHF*, 50-3.
\(^10\) Goffart, ‘Fredegar Problem’.
\(^11\) Fredegar, *Chronicon*, II, 4-6, III, 2.
\(^12\) Fredegar, *Chronicon*, IV, 37, 40; the process is also hinted at, though not named at Fredegar, *Chronicon*, IV, 53. See Reimitz *Writing*. 

3
Franks and non-Franks

It perhaps goes without saying that the Frankish community was made up of Franks, however one defined ‘Franks’ or defined oneself as a Frank. Yet the Franks were far from isolated in the early medieval period. More than any other of the peoples that established kingdoms in the aftermath of Roman power in the West, the Franks spread their rule over other peoples and areas, and at its height the *regnum Francorum* stretched from the Pyrenees in the south-west to Saxony in the north and Bavaria in the east. How the Franks interacted with the peripheral peoples, then, was just as crucial to the contemporary conception of community as were the interactions between different Frankish groups.

With this in mind, it is worth making some general observations before turning to the specifics of what each author has to say about the peripheral peoples. The first point to make is that neither author was overtly hostile to the peripheral peoples on a general level. Unlike Carolingian authors, who presented peripheral peoples as rebels and pagans excluded from their community, our Merovingian authors’ presentations of these peoples included no inherent sense of exclusion. Now, this statement must be tempered. Both Fredegar and the *LHF*-author showed themselves to be well-aware of and more than willing to use ethnic terms to label the peripheral peoples; the Franks and their kings fight against a variety of ethnic groups: Saxons; Lombards; Visigoths; Thuringians etc. and such peoples could obviously never be part of the ethnically-based Frankish community. At the same time, though, they were not inherently excluded from the wider community of the *regnum Francorum*, of which they were clearly a part because they were ruled – at least nominally – by Frankish kings and interacted with the Frankish nobility. While the authors of the late-eighth and early-ninth centuries would portray the wars of the Carolingians – and especially of Charlemagne – in

---

13 Broome, ‘Pagans, Rebels and Merovingians’.
stark, moralistic tones, the wars of the Merovingians are presented generally as morally neutral, more often simply wars to obtain booty and tribute than reactions to rebels. In the seventh century, war was not something that happened by God’s will, it was just a part of the politics of the *regnum Francorum*.

But whatever the moralistic presentation of such wars, or the realities of Frankish rule that ensued, it remains the case that non-Franks were ruled by Franks in this period. This meant the Merovingians could extract tribute from their peripheral subjects, as, for example, the annual tribute of five hundred cattle paid by the Saxons from the time of Chlothar I.\(^\text{14}\) They could also expect to be able to call upon their peripheral subjects in times of war, whether fighting against other peripheral peoples or against other Merovingians. This was particularly the case for the kings of Austrasia, who were most troubled by wars with peoples across the Rhine, but equally could summon armies containing Saxons, Thuringians and Alamanni. For example, the *LHF*-author relates how in reaction to hostility from his half-brother Chilperic I, Sigibert I assembled an army of peoples from across the Rhine to fight for him,\(^\text{15}\) while Fredegar tells of Theudebert II’s recruitment of Saxons, Thuringians and other peoples from across the Rhine to fight against his brother Theuderic II,\(^\text{16}\) and of Dagobert I’s use of Alamanni and Lombards against the Slavs.\(^\text{17}\) Such fighting together against common enemies, whoever they were, would have done much to encourage a communal spirit, at least among the soldiers from the peripheral regions, and it is not difficult to imagine that decades of such interactions could lead to a feeling of having a vested interest in the *regnum Francorum*. Such communal spirit and vested interest would be further encouraged by the most direct involvement the Merovingians took in the peripheries; the appointment of *duces* in peripheral regions. The relationship could work both ways, though,

\(^{15}\) *LHF*, 32.  
\(^{16}\) Fredegar, *Chronicon*, IV, 38.  
\(^{17}\) Fredegar, *Chronicon*, IV, 68.
as hinted at in a section of *LHF* borrowed from Gregory of Tours.\(^{18}\) When reporting the accession of Childebert II, the author states ‘and with the peoples over which his father had ruled assembled, they set him up as king’.\(^{19}\) From an author who put so much stock in the proto-constitutional role of the Franks as king-makers, this seems like an admission that, at least in Austrasia, non-Franks could be involved in the raising of Frankish kings.

Despite such non-hostile interactions, though, mentioning the peripheral peoples could often be an opportunity to stress Frankish unity, or at least to overlook divisions between the Frankish sub-groups. Thus, in Fredegar’s account of Chlothar II excusing the Lombards from their annual tribute, we learn the latter had originally promised the tribute to Guntram and Childebert II. But the tribute was not owed to these kings personally, nor had the Lombards placed themselves under the overlordship of Guntram or Childebert. Rather, at least as Fredegar presents it, the tribute was owed to the Franks as a whole, and the Lombards were under Frankish overlordship. As the sole king of the Franks at the time, then, Chlothar II was within his rights to excuse the Lombards from their tribute, even he did so on bad advice.\(^{20}\) This passage tells us a lot about the conception of the relationship between the Franks and their kings and the Franks and the peripheral peoples. The kings were the personal representatives of the community, but it was the Franks as a collective group who exerted control over peripheral peoples, explaining why ethnic labels continued to be important. The wide, multi-ethnic community of the *regnum Francorum* may have existed, but it remained necessary to distinguish between this and the narrower, purely Frankish community.

**Developments East of the Rhine**

Despite their involvement in the community, the peripheral peoples could also be a threat to its stability, as Fredegar shows. Now, it is worth stressing before continuing that Franks too –

---

\(^{19}\) *LHF*, 32.  
\(^{20}\) Fredegar, *Chronicon*, IV, 45.
whether weak kings or over-mighty nobles – could be a threat to the stability of the community, so this was not a criticism levelled solely at peripheral peoples. Nevertheless, it is worth considering Fredegar’s presentation of events east of the Rhine in the late-630s and early-640s. On the accession of Chlothar II as sole king of the Franks in 613, Fredegar tells us that among his many qualities he was able to keep the peace with the neighbouring peoples.21 This is important not just because it shows this was considered an important part of Frankish kingship; it also sets the standard for what follows. Fredegar goes on to say that when Chlothar’s son Dagobert succeeded his father as king of the Franks, at which point he had already been king of Austrasia for seven years, he inspired such fear east of the Rhine that even those peoples living on the border of the Slavs and Avars wished to submit to his rule.22 Things began to go wrong shortly after, though, not least because Dagobert chose to move his court to Neustria; this was particularly poorly timed because it coincided with the rising power of a Frankish merchant, Samo, who had recently been made king of the Slavs.23 Even if Fredegar’s claims of Dagobert’s descent into debauchery are over-statement,24 the king’s move west clearly weakened what had been a significant level of Frankish influence.

The remaining Austrasian chapters of the Chronicle narrate the collapse of Frankish authority east of the Rhine, beginning with increasing Slavic raids on Frankish merchants, which escalated to raids into Thuringia and the borders of Francia, and Samo’s refusal to submit to Dagobert’s authority.25 At this time Dagobert was still able to call upon aid from the Alamanni and Lombards, although he had to negotiate with the Saxons, leading him to excuse them from their annual tribute.26 Dagobert also made two crucial appointments; his son Sigibert as king of Austrasia and Radulf as dux of Thuringia. Initially this shored up the

21 Fredegar, Chronicon, IV, 42.
22 Fredegar, Chronicon, IV, 58.
23 Fredegar, Chronicon, IV, 48, 59-60.
24 Compare Fredegar, Chronicon, IV, 60 with LHF, 42.
25 Fredegar, Chronicon, IV, 68.
26 Fredegar, Chronicon, IV, 68, 74.
eastern frontier, with the Austrasians fighting more determinedly now they had their own king.\textsuperscript{27} The appointment of Radulf, however, proved disastrous, as he rebelled, ignored Sigibert’s authority, named himself king of the Thuringians and even allied with Samo’s Slavs. Despite his youth, Sigibert led the Austrasians against Radulf, but was defeated and forced to negotiate a retreat back across the Rhine. Thus, at the close of Fredegar’s \textit{Chronicle} the eastern frontier of the \textit{regnum Francorum} is in tatters. It seems unlikely this is where Fredegar meant to end the narrative, but unfortunately we do not know to what conclusion he was building, nor can much be said for certain about either Thuringia or the eastern frontier more generally in the late-seventh century, since the \textit{LHF}-author says nothing about these events or their aftermath.

Nevertheless, we can still see something of Fredegar’s purpose here. He makes it clear throughout that although having a king in Austrasia was important, even more important was the need for consensus among the Franks, and for them to provide their kings with good advice, especially if the king in question was a minor. Dagobert moved from Austrasia to Neustria despite the advice of his Austrasian nobles and then fell into decadence because of bad advice from the Neustrians. Sigibert, meanwhile, was welcomed by the Austrasians, but they in turn failed to provide a united base of support and advice, causing him to act rashly because of his youth. In other words, while the activities of peripheral peoples could be a threat to the stability of the \textit{regnum}, this could only happen when the Frankish community was not united in purpose. The peace east of the Rhine was kept by Chlothar II and was initially maintained by Dagobert, but when the latter ‘abandoned’ Austrasia things started to go wrong to a degree that even the appointment of an Austrasian king could not prevent.

\textbf{Radbod and Eudo: two non-Frankish \textit{duces} in \textit{LHF}}

\textsuperscript{27} Fredegar, \textit{Chronicon}, IV, 74-5.
The *LHF*-author has nothing to say about these or any later non-Frankish matters, but at the end of his text two non-Franks – Radbod of Frisia and Eudo of Aquitaine – become central to the narrative of the war that had erupted between the Neustrians and Austrasians. It must be said, this author has less to say about these men than Carolingian authors would, although what he does say shows how the peripheral peoples were not just a threat to the stability of the frontiers; their leaders were deeply involved in the politics of the *regnum Francorum*.

Radbod’s first appearance in *LHF* is hardly auspicious. The author says that after Pippin II had established his son Grimoald as mayor of the palace in Neustria, he ‘conducted many wars against the pagan Radbod and other leaders, and against the Suevi and many other peoples.’ So Radbod was just one of several targets against whom Pippin went to war in this period, albeit he is the only leader worth naming. Radbod’s importance is clarified when we learn of the marriage of his daughter Theudesinda to Grimoald. Despite this marriage alliance, Radbod sided with the Neustrians in the subsequent war. In fact, Radbod and the Frisians inflicted on Charles Martel the only defeat he ever suffered. Due to the brevity of the account, it is difficult to determine how the author of *LHF* felt about either Radbod or the idea of Franks allying with Frisians. He certainly disliked the idea of Franks fighting each other, and attributed the civil war to the instigation of the Devil. Given his positive attitude towards Charles Martel, it is easy to imagine that he would have been hostile to Radbod, and it is probably indicative that he specifically refers to Radbod as a pagan in all but one instance of mentioning him. At the very least we can say Radbod occupied an incredibly ambiguous position in the *LHF*-author’s conception of community.

---

28 *LHF*, 42-8.
29 On Radbod, see Broome, ‘Rebel Duke and Pagan King’.
30 *LHF*, 49.
31 *LHF*, 50.
32 *LHF*, 51.
33 *LHF*, 52.
34 *LHF*, 51.
Even less is said about Eudo, who only appears in the final chapter of the text, but who proves just as important. Initially he joins the war on the side of the Neustrians and is swiftly defeated by Charles Martel, after which he flees across the Loire with King Chilperic II and the royal treasure.\textsuperscript{35} The following year, after the death of his puppet-king Chlothar IV, Charles makes peace with Eudo, who returns Chilperic. It is important to stress that at no point in this brief account are Aquitane, Aquitanians or Vascones mentioned in relation to Eudo. In fact, his flight across the Loire is the only hint we get that he was not an inhabitant of the Frankish heartland. The author’s contemporaries, of course, would have been in no doubt who Eudo was, and Carolingian authors made his outsider-status much clearer.\textsuperscript{36} Like Radbod, Eudo was deeply involved in Frankish politics, even to the point that he was able to take the Frankish king into Aquitaine and keep him there for a year.

Radbod and Eudo were traditionally seen as symptomatic – even emblematic – of the supposed fragmentation of Frankish hegemony that took place in the second half of the seventh century. This is certainly how these figures appear in the Carolingian sources: rebel leaders who opposed the authority of Charles Martel. But \textit{LHF}’s account shows us something rather different. These men were not rebels; they were allies and supporters of the Frankish king. In this sense they fit with the wider picture that has been revealed by Patrick Geary and others of resistance across the \textit{regnum Francorum} to the growth of Pippinid power.\textsuperscript{37} Admittedly, neither Radbod nor Eudo was a member of the Neustrian-based kin-group that formed the heart of this resistance,\textsuperscript{38} but this clearly did not preclude them from sharing the group’s feelings with regard to the Pippinids. Given the strength of this group in southern Gaul, particularly in Burgundy and Provence, Eudo’s flight across the Loire with Chilperic actually makes even more sense: he was taking the king to an area where there were still

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{LHF}, 53.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Continuations}, 10, 13, 15; \textit{AMP}, s.a. 718, 726-7, 735.
\textsuperscript{37} Geary, \textit{Aristocracy}, pp. 126-48.
\textsuperscript{38} Geary, \textit{Aristocracy}, pp. 138-43.
loyal Merovingian subjects. Radbod and Eudo, then, were typical of peripheral leadership in the early-eighth century not because they were rebels against Frankish authority but precisely because they owed allegiance to the Merovingian king in defiance of the Pippinids and of Charles Martel in particular.

Conclusion

In the late Merovingian period the concept of a Frankish community was clearly part of the discourse of historiography, but authors had to balance this ethnic conception of community against a wider political community that included peoples of various ethnic groups who were nevertheless part of the *regnum Francorum*. We thus find in the sources examined here an ambiguity regarding the place of non-Franks in the community. Non-Franks were ruled by the same kings and fought in the same armies as Franks, in the latter case sometimes as allies of one Frankish group against another. At the same time, though, and as Fredegar shows so clearly, the peripheral peoples could prove a threat to the Frankish community, although even Fredegar shows this was most likely to occur when the community was already weakened by internal problems. Given the accounts provided by Fredegar and the *LHF*-author it is easy to see where Carolingian authors got their negative assessment of the control wielded by the later Merovingians over the peripheries. It is conceivable – even likely – that peripheral leaders at the turn of the eighth century had more autonomy than their predecessors, but as the *LHF*-author shows, this did not mean they were any less connected or loyal to the Merovingian kings and their court, and such leaders remained a fundamental part of the community of the *regnum Francorum*. It was only in the Carolingian period that the ambiguity of their position in the community came to be dealt with through a discourse of otherness that portrayed them as rebels against Frankish authority.39

---

39 Broome, ‘Pagans, Rebels and Merovingians’.
Select Bibliography

Primary Sources
Fredegar, Chonicon, ed. B. Krusch, MGH SRM 2 (Hanover, 1888).
Gregory of Tours, Decem libri historiarum, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, MGH SRM 1, 1 (Hanover, 1937).
Liber Historiae Francorum, ed. B. Krusch, MGH SRM 2 (Hanover, 1888).
Vita Balthildis, ed. B. Krusch, MGH SRM 2 (Hanover, 1888).

Secondary Sources

* Papers of mine referenced here can be found at https://leeds.academia.edu/RickyBroome