Approaches to community in the Frankish kingdoms c.660-800: Continuity and change

Introduction

Notions of community are crucial to how we as individuals understand our place in society and our role in the world around us. Of course, very few people consider themselves to belong to just one community, and the interactions between the different communities to which we belong are intrinsic in forming our self-identities. Yet the precise meanings of communal identities can change based on the perceptions of those who identify as part of a community, even when the label used remains the same. A person living in the British Isles today may identify as British, English, Scottish etc., but these labels do not necessarily mean the same thing as they did in the first half of the twentieth century or in the nineteenth century. In this paper, then, I would like to briefly consider how the narratives composed by seventh and eighth century authors reflect conceptions of one of the communities of which the authors were a part; the community of the regnum Francorum. I will focus on five historical authors who particularly embody the developments which took place in these centuries: the compiler of the so-called Chronicle of Fredegar, who worked around the year 660; the author of Liber Historiae Francorum, composed in 727; the continuator of Fredegar’s Chronicle, writing around 768; and the first contributors to Annales Regni Francorum and Annales Mettenses Prioress, who wrote in the two decades either side of 800.

The community these authors envisioned was Frankish and was composed of Franks, although while this represents an important point of continuity, what it actually meant changed over time. In order to assess this change I shall attempt to answer three questions: what were the most important features of the community of the regnum Francorum?; what was the role of the rulers of this community?; and what was the nature of the relationship between Franks and non-Franks?
The community of the Frankish kingdoms

The first major historical work to feature the Franks in anything like a leading role was Gregory of Tours’ *Decem Libri Historiarum*, composed at the end of the sixth century, although the only Franks who actually feature heavily in this text are the kings and occasionally other notable figures, while there is very little active role for the Franks themselves. The idea of a Frankish community, then, either did not occur to Gregory, or was not of particular concern to him. This should not surprise us since he was writing a universal Church history which culminated with a narrative of the Gallic Church and its saints and the struggle between Catholicism and Arianism during the author’s own time; the Franks feature largely in relation to these weightier issues. Yet Gregory’s *Histories* formed the foundation for those who followed him in writing about the Frankish kingdoms via a six book version of his text which dropped the last four books entirely and excised much of the ecclesiastical material which had been so important to Gregory’s purpose, although as Helmut Reimitz pointed out earlier this week, this should not be seen as an attempt to make the *Histories* more ‘Frankish’. The six book version appears to have begun circulating shortly after Gregory’s death and was used by the seventh-century compiler of the so-called *Chronicle of Fredegar*.

Like Gregory’s *Histories*, Fredegar’s *Chronicle* has a universal scope in which the Franks are just one of the many peoples to feature. Nevertheless, Books III and IV of the chronicle show a much greater concern for the history of the Frankish community than Gregory had done. For example, while Book III is based almost entirely on the six book version of Gregory’s *Histories*, a story about the Trojan origin of the Franks has been added to the narrative and information about the early Frankish kings – which Gregory claimed to be unable to discover – has been provided. With Fredegar’s *Chronicle*, then, we can see the
growing importance of the Frankish community as a relevant and tangible idea through which to discuss past events. In fact, this change is actually visible in Book IV of the *Chronicle*. The early chapters of this section resemble Gregory’s approach to writing about the Franks in that they focus primarily on the actions of kings and present the Frankish kingdoms as possessions of the different kings. When we come to the culmination of the wars between Theuderic II, Theudebert II and Chlothar II in the first two decades of the seventh century, though, the Franks emerge as a group entity which participates in the history of the kingdoms. Not just this, but the territorial divisions of the three kingdoms Neustria, Burgundy and Austrasia replace the idea of personal kingdoms, and their inhabitants – now identified with the geographic indicators ‘Neustrian’, ‘Burgundian’ and ‘Austrasian’ – remain the focus for the rest of the narrative, their actions and interactions forming the basis of the history of a distinct Frankish community. As we shall see, rulers retained an important role, but by the middle of the seventh century the Franks had emerged from the shadows of their kings.

This focus on the Franks reached its peak with *LHF*, which represents the first attempt to write a history of the Franks specifically, rather than fitting them into a wider historical narrative. *LHF* begins with the Trojan origin of the Franks and their kings and ends with the reunification of the Frankish kingdoms under Theuderic IV and Charles Martel after a period of civil war; the narrative is thus bookended by matters central to the conception of a Frankish community. Nevertheless, there is one crucial difference between *LHF* and Fredegar’s *Chronicle*. In *LHF*, the Neustrians take centre-stage and simply are *Franci*, so while it is true that the text focusses on the Franks, this needs to be qualified by adding that the Neustrian Franks are the historical protagonists of the work, and the author may even by suggesting that they are in some sense the ‘true Franks’. Nevertheless, the *LHF*-author allows that the Burgundians and Austrasians are types of Franks. The Austrasians are called *Franci*...
superiores in several passages,\(^1\) a term which may be based in Roman geographical terminology, while another chapter states that the ‘Burgundians and Austrasians made peace with the rest of the Franks’.\(^2\) Similarly, Austrasia is referred to as a ‘Frankish kingdom’.\(^3\)

While the idea of a Frankish community is presented more explicitly in \textit{LHF} than in Fredegar’s \textit{Chronicle}, both show an awareness of the idea in their narratives. Times of crisis end with the determined action of the Frankish sub-groups acting in concert under a single leader. Thus, the aforementioned wars between the brothers Theudebert II and Theuderic II and their cousin Chlothar II that dominated the early years of the seventh century were brought to an end when the Burgundians and Austrasians sided with Chlothar and turned against Theuderic’s son Sigibert II and his great-grandmother and regent Brunhild.\(^4\) Such wars may sometimes appear to be the activities of kings, but it is clear that the important decisive factor was the will of the Franks. Likewise, in \textit{LHF} times of particular crisis are those when peaceful interaction breaks down: the author laments, for example, wars which saw Franks fight against fellow Franks, such as that which followed the death of the mayor Pippin II in 714 and King Dagobert III a year later.\(^5\) Such a concern for the unity of the kingdoms and the community can also be seen in those individuals praised by the authors. Thus, despite clearly writing from a Neustrian perspective, the \textit{LHF}-author openly praises the Austrasians Pippin II and his sons Grimoald and Charles Martel, while the Neustrian King Clovis II is a target of harsh criticism for his apparently immoral lifestyle. Likewise, Fredegar praises the Neustrian King Chlothar II and the Austrasian mayor Pippin I while showing a very mixed opinion of Chlothar’s son Dagobert I.\(^6\)

\(^1\) \textit{LHF}, 41.
\(^2\) \textit{LHF}, 40.
\(^3\) \textit{LHF}, 27.
\(^4\) Fredegar, \textit{Chronicon}, 40-2; \textit{LHF}, 40.
\(^5\) \textit{LHF}, 45-7, 51-3.
\(^6\) Fredegar, \textit{Chronicon}, 43, 60-1, 85.
In the historical works composed in the second half of the eighth century we can see the emergence of a somewhat different conception of community as based on Christianity and loyalty to the Carolingian dynasty. This community still had the Franks at its centre, but Frankishness was no longer seen as its most important feature. These eighth-century texts primarily narrate the wars undertaken by the Carolingian rulers of the Franks, and so tend to focus on the kings rather than the Franks themselves. Rather than highlighting the interplay between the three Frankish kingdoms, they present the Franks as a single entity, and so the Neustrians, Austrasians and Burgundians fall almost completely out of sight, except where the authors borrowed from *LHF* as did Fredegar’s continuator and the author of *Annales Mettenses Piores*. The wars undertaken by the Carolingians were expansionist and aimed at the conquest of peripheral peoples, so it is understandable that the importance of Frankishness would be overlooked in favour of less exclusive characteristics such as Christianity. Of course, Christianity had been an important part of Frankish culture since Clovis I’s conversion and there are plenty of religious references in Fredegar’s *Chronicle* and *LHF*. Carolingian authors, though, were much more explicit in identifying Christianity as one of the key traits of their community. Many of the wars narrated in the early Carolingian sources stress that the Franks had God on their side, and that their rulers triumphed with the help of the Lord. This emphasis on Christianity went hand-in-hand with the emphasis on Frankish unity, and the two served to demonstrate that the Frankish kingdoms were now to be seen as the centre of a wider Christian community united under the Carolingians, a point to which I shall return.

The role of rulers

Even though the narrative sources from the mid-seventh century onwards focus on the active role of the Franks, we cannot overlook the on-going importance of the rulers of the
community, even if their roles changed over time. For Fredegar, the most impressive kings were those who were successful war-leaders, and who displayed bravery, voracity and an ability to instil fear in their subjects. Indeed, the legendary story about Childeric I’s wedding night, in which the king receives vision of successively weaker beasts which represent his descendants seems to be an attack on those kings who did not live up to the standards set by Childeric’s son Clovis I, ‘the bravest of all king’s’ in Fredegar’s words. Reading this tale literally would imply that the Frankish kingdoms reached their nadir at the end of the sixth century, under the descendants of Kings Sigibert I and Chilperic I, all of whom came to their thrones as minors and acted under the guidance of the queen-regents Brunhild and Fredegund. If we combine this tale with the demonization of Brunhild, we can sense a distrust of child-kings and over-mighty regents running through the Chronicle: when weak kings were ruled by others they could not fulfil their correct royal roles, and there was a risk that the kingdoms would fragment and descend into civil war. Such civil wars required the Franks to unite under a strong ruler to bring them to an end, as they did when the Austrasians and Burgundians abandoned Brunhild for Chlothar II, allowing the latter to assume sole-rule of the Frankish kingdoms, an act for which he receives Fredegar’s praise.

Such emphasis on unity under one king is found to an even greater extent in LHF, although the later author was less concerned with the problem of child-kings than Fredegar. Indeed, for this author such kings would have seemed a normal part of the political life of the kingdom. It may be for this reason that, rather than praising ability in war, the LHF-author praises those kings who were remembered as peace-keepers. In this sense he shared Fredegar’s high opinion of Chlothar II, but also particularly well-thought of were Dagobert I – who was compared positively with Solomon – and Childbert III – remembered as a just ruler. For the LHF-author, kings were not expected to lead the Franks in war. Instead they acted as figureheads for Frankish unity, a role which could be fulfilled by a king whatever his
These kings also represented a sense of continuity in the community’s history, and so the author also made sure to note dynastic succession, particularly for the kings of his own time who were based in Neustria but ruled all three kingdoms. Thus almost all the kings mentioned from Theuderic III are succeeded either by their son or their brother. The notable exception here, though, is Chilperic II, who was chosen as king by the Neustrians after the death of Dagobert III and whom the *LHF*-author reports was ‘A former cleric named Daniel whose hair had grown back on his head… and they called him Chilperic’. His ancestry is not mentioned, and while he performed well as a war-leader, he was not praised for doing so: there may even be a subtle criticism when the author mentions a missed opportunity to end the civil war by making peace with the Austrasian leader Charles Martel. In summary, then, Chilperic was of dubious legitimacy and did not act like a late Merovingian king should. Despite the eventual reconciliation of Chilperic and Charles Martel effectively bringing the civil war to an end, the author added one more crucial detail to his narrative; following Chilperic’s death ‘The Franks set up Theuderic over them as king… he was a son of Dagobert [III]’. With this simple statement the author shows that the stability of the Frankish community has returned and the consensus through which political decisions are made has been restored: the Franks are once again able to choose their own king, and he is a descendant of Theuderic III.

Of course, Theuderic IV turned out to be the penultimate Merovingian, the last being Childeric III, known from the infamous description of him in the opening chapter of Einhard’s *Life of Charlemagne*. The Carolingian rulers who replaced the Merovingians were much more warlike than their predecessors and were leading the Frankish armies against non-franks before they became kings with Pippin III’s usurpation in 751. By focussing on external wars and beginning their narratives before 751, though, Carolingian authors could

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7 *LHF*, 52.
8 Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*.
9 *LHF*, 53.
stress continuity by showing that the role of the leaders of the Frankish community was to lead the Franks in war. Like earlier historians, though, the Carolingian authors still saw cooperation between ruler and Franks as a virtue. Thus there are many examples of Pippin and Charlemagne holding assemblies with their people before deciding courses of action, whether in war or other matters. Indeed, Fredegar’s continuator makes more references to the annual Mayfield than all earlier authors had done to the Marchfield which it replaced. Likewise, just as the Franks were coming to represent the centre of the Christian community, so their kings came to represent the embodiment of this Christianity: they fight against pagans and heretics and triumph over them with the help of God; they aid the Papacy in its struggles against the Lombards; they hold Church councils. In all these things, however, they not only tie together the Frankish community, but also protect the interests of the wider Christian community.

Franks and non-Franks

Perhaps the most complex aspect of the Frankish community was the relationship between it and the peoples on the peripheries of the kingdoms. The narratives provided by Gregory of Tours and Fredegar describe many instances of the Franks marching to war against other peoples and subjecting them to some kind of rule, whether it be agreements of aid in future wars or claims of annual tribute. Yet the idea that this could have led to a communal sentiment seems to have been a difficult one for Frankish authors. Interactions between the Franks the peripheral peoples could be just as important as the interactions between the sub-groups of Franks, and they were not always hostile. These peoples shared rulers, at least nominally, and fought together in the same armies led by the same kings. This appears to have been the case particularly for the Austrasian kings, who were most troubled by wars with peoples across the Rhine, but likewise could summon armies which contained Saxons,
Thuringians and Alamanni. In the seventh century we can also see the emergence of non-Frankish regions ruled by Frankish *duces*, for example Bavaria. The peripheral peoples, then, were without doubt part of the Frankish world – and a central part. But they were never part of the Frankish community. Throughout the Merovingian and Carolingian periods, the Franks maintained and relied upon ethnic distinctions in their dealings with the peripheral peoples.

Such distinctions are found throughout the sources of the seventh and eighth centuries. Indeed, these distinctions could also serve to highlight Frankish unity; or at least Frankishness was worth emphasising when addressing issues which concerned relationships with non-Franks. Thus, for example, Fredegar describes how the Lombards owed an annual tribute which had originally been promised to Kings Guntram and Childebert II, but this tribute was not owed to these kings personally: it was simply owed ‘to the Franks’, and when Chlothar II excused them from the payment he was well within his rights to do so as the sole king and representative of the Frankish community. Likewise, the Lombards placed themselves not under the personal overlordship of Guntram or Childebert, but under the overlordship of the Franks. The distinction between Franks and non-Franks is seen clearly in the *LHF*-author’s almost sole focus on explicitly Frankish matters, with the peripheral peoples barely featuring in the narrative at all, although when they do it is at particularly dramatic moments, such as the war of Chlothar II and Dagobert I against the Saxons, or of the Neustrian alliance with the Frisians against Charles Martel. It is worth noting that the author also consistently highlighted the paganism of Radbod, the ruler of the Frisians, perhaps as a way of stressing the fact that his people were not part of the Frankish community.

A religious distinction was even more important to Carolingian authors, and paganism was an obvious barrier to membership of a community which was inherently Christian. Yet in the Carolingian sources we find a more ambiguous relationship between the Franks and the
peripheral peoples than had been found in the Merovingian sources. Certainly the Carolingian authors had more to say about this relationship, since their narratives primarily focused on wars between Franks and non-Franks. The wars, though, were justified on the basis that the peripheral peoples owed loyalty to the Franks, as could be seen in the historical texts these authors had available to them. Thus peripheral peoples who refused to accept Carolingian rule were labelled as rebels, and the wars against them were depicted as being fought to bring them back into the fold. Similarly, when the Carolingians fought wars against peoples identified as pagans, for example the Frisians and Saxons, Frankish victories always resulted in the conversion of the defeated. Thus the wars were being fought – at least in theory – to bring pagans into the Christian community. The Carolingians, then, were actively attempting to create a kingdom – or empire – which did not rely on Frankishness, and this is reflected in the sources. Ethnic identities continued to be important, but the ideal community was now pan-ethnic, and relied on loyalty to the Carolingian dynasty and on adherence to Christianity. The army which Charlemagne led in his Saxon Wars was described as the Frankish army, but the community which he ruled when he was crowned emperor in 800 was Christian rather than Frankish.

Conclusions
To conclude, I would like to return to the three questions I posed at the beginning of the paper. The nature of the community of the regnum Francorum – perhaps obviously – was that it was first and foremost a Frankish community, and I believe it retained this Frankishness even when such an ethnic identity became less viable as a point of unity for the subjects of the kings of the Franks. The role of the community’s leaders was to provide a focal point for its unity, whether through peace or war, and whether by uniting the different Frankish groups or by solidifying Frankish rule over the peripheries. The relationship
between Franks and non-Franks remained ambiguous and dominated by ethnic labels, even if the Carolingians began to attempt to overcome these barriers by focussing on other common interests. The relevance of the relationships between different Frankish sub-groups certainly became less important during the eighth century, and indeed may have been something that early Carolingian authors purposefully tried to overlook, but the core of the pan-ethnic community remained indisputably Frankish, and it was the Franks who led the way towards the golden age of a Frankish hegemony defined by loyalty to the Carolingians and adherence to Christianity.