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## Topographies of power: towns and elites in Merovingian northern Gaul, 450-650

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### 3. Concepts of society: debating Merovingian social structure and the political economy

*When Adam delved and Eve span,  
Who was then the gentleman?*

- John Ball, 1381

#### 3.1. Introduction

Near the Late Roman castellum of *Gelduba*, in the small German village of Gellep on the Rhine, archaeologists found a vast necropolis of more than 6000 graves belonging to the Roman and medieval periods. One of the graves found, number 1782 to be more precise, was an extraordinarily wealthy grave from the early sixth century. The person buried within, a man presumably, was accompanied by a gilded *Spangenhelm* type helmet, a garnet-inlaid ring-sword and a whole host of other weaponry, horse gear, a gold-finger ring decorated with a Chalcedon gem, a bucket, tripod, an Anastasius-solidus (491-518) and a number of bronze vessels. One of the bronze vessels carried the Latin inscription *Arpvar erat (f)elix undique pr(a)e(celsus)*, ‘Arpvar was happy and above all regarded highly’.<sup>288</sup> Whether the name ‘Arpvar’ referred to the deceased, the maker of the bronze vessel, or someone else entirely, cannot be known for certain. Nevertheless, for the sake of entertaining our imagination, let us presume for now that Arpvar was the name of the deceased. He was the first person to be buried in that particular stretch of the cemetery; his grave was also the richest one excavated. The excavator, Renate Pirling, postulated Arpvar to have been a member of the conquering Frankish elite, buried separately from the local Gallo-Roman population. Whether he lived inside or near the Roman *castellum* is unknown; nothing approaching an ‘aristocratic’ residence has been found. Nor are many people contemporary to him buried there, raising the question to how many people he

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<sup>288</sup> As reconstructed by the Roman epigraphist Gézi Alföldi (1966), providing a more likely corrective to the earlier interpretation of ‘(a)r(bo)r era telex unique pre ...’. *Felix* (happy or lucky) can be interpreted as a Christian locution, designating the bliss of being with God; alternatively, it could refer to a more mundane happiness as Arpvar having achieved a successful career, hence being of high regard (*praecelsus*). Note that if the bronze vase did indeed belong to Arpvar, then the inscription was probably carved onto it after his death, given the use of the past tense. I find it probable, therefore, that the inscription functioned as a kind of epitaph and referred to the deceased person it was interred with.

could have been a 'lord', if he was. Nevertheless, like other tombs of spectacular wealth, the grave has been dubbed a *Fürstengrab*, a princely grave.<sup>289</sup>

Who was Arpvar precisely, and why was he buried with so much wealth? In the last chapter, we have seen how the Merovingian mortuary ritual and the composition of lavish graves have often been seen as evidence for individual wealth and social status. On a more fundamental level though, our understanding of the Merovingian burial ritual and the interpretation of the deceased's social status depends more generally on what we imagine 'Dark Age' society to have been like in the first place. If we think of Merovingian Gaul as one of rigid social distinctions, then it is seductive to think of Arpvar as a landed lord, the predecessor of a Medieval duke or baron, converting the wealth from his vast estates into a wealthy funerary assemblage. Another perspective could emphasise instead his identity as a warrior-retainer in Clovis' following, buried with the splendourous gifts once graciously accepted at the hearth of his lord's royal hall. Yet another framework could see Arpvar as the local governor, speaking law and collecting taxes as an agent of an effective royal administration. Or, suppose, that Arpvar was not the *Herr von Krefeld-Gellep* at all, but merely a celebrated individual of his community? Or, perhaps, a combination of the above?

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To deduce meaning from mute artefacts, archaeologists must rely on conceptual models, implicit or explicit, to make material culture speak. The historian's reading of written sources similarly requires a 'constructive imagination', as Collingwood described it.<sup>291</sup> Inevitably, our interpretations are hermeneutically embedded in metanarratives ultimately derived from prior scholarly readings of the written sources within their own contemporary discursive contexts. This is true for graves as it is for towns, settlements, and the landscape as a whole. To map a topography of power, then, it is vital to first map Merovingian society. Who exactly filled the ranks of the Merovingian elite? To whom, if anyone, did the dwellers of the countryside in northern Gaul pay the surplus of their labour? We are, of course, familiar with the kings and queens, courtiers, dukes, counts, bishops and other such prominent functionaries of early medieval society. All these play prominent roles in our written sources and can justifiably be called members of the Merovingian elite. But that only takes us so far. Clovis was no Louis XIV; what did it mean to be a king, duke, or count in the Merovingian period? Certainly, a count was not yet the

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<sup>289</sup> Pirling 2011, 50-64; Pirling 1996, 261-265. Thus, Pirling remarks about the presence of the *Spangenhelm*. 'Es war offensichtlich das Vorrecht weniger Angehöriger der höchsten Adelschicht, einen solchen Helm zu besitzen, der wohl weniger Schutzwaffe als vielmehr Rangabzeichen war' (Pirling 2011, 54).

<sup>290</sup> For Pirling, 'Der Herr von Gellep' was one of the *Gefolgeleute* of Clovis sent to manage the royal domains of Gelduba. Pirling 1996, 262-263.

<sup>291</sup> Collingwood 1946, 242. History-telling is indeed story-telling, or as historical philosopher Hayden White likes to say it, there can be no history without metahistory; White 1973.

inheritable rank of the later Middle Ages, but did that mean anyone could rise to its rank?<sup>292</sup> The sources are ambivalent on how exactly the upper ranks of the Merovingian government were constituted. They also paint a very ambiguous picture of Merovingian society and ranks as a whole, certainly with respect to local societies far away from the royal court. The gaps and ambiguities in our evidence have led to very different readings of the Merovingian social order among scholars, depending on which conceptual framework a scholar brings into their research and which primary sources they decide to emphasise.

My goal in this chapter is to disentangle the different ‘concepts of society’ found in the scholarship of early Medieval social structure and disentangle the historiographic knot of various overlapping and contradicting perspectives on early medieval socio-political organisation. By socio-political organisation I mean a couple of things. For one, the degree of social inequality found in a given society, that is whether social organisation was relatively *horizontal* or ‘flat’ with few (institutionalised) distinctions between members; or *vertical* or hierarchical, with pronounced differences in status, wealth and power between individuals, or somewhere in between. At the heart of this question lies the nature and composition of the Merovingian ‘elite’ or ruling class, i.e. whether it was relatively *closed* or *open*. An ‘open’ elite means there are fewer (intergenerational) obstacles to social mobility in the absence of rigidly enforced class or caste boundaries. If every society has an ‘elite’ in some way or form (more on that below), the difference lies in what exactly constitutes the power basis of the elite, in other words, whether the social groups enjoying a high status have the means to sustain and pass on their privilege while excluding others from.

This intersects with the second issue at play here, namely the nature of political organisation directing the flow of surplus production. Marxists call this the *relations of production*, the socio-political relations that determine the organisation of production, distribution and consumption of goods. Here, I borrow the concept of *political economy* from Timothy Earle, who describes it as ‘material flows of goods and labour through a society, channelled to create wealth and to finance institutions of rule’.<sup>293</sup> For Earle, the political economy emerged with the rise of complex political societies in the Bronze Age, but here my usage of the term differs slightly from his.<sup>294</sup> I take *any* society to have a political economy. That is, in any society, power relationships (can) control the production, distribution and consumption of resources.<sup>295</sup> In an egalitarian society, this would result in

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<sup>292</sup> See below, section 3.5.

<sup>293</sup> Earle 2002, 1.

<sup>294</sup> Note that Earle’s work is explicitly evolutionary, seeing political complexity as the prerequisite to economic complexity. Earle 2002, 1, 9, 13-16.

<sup>295</sup> Thus, the Marxist anthropologist Maurice Godelier (1978, 763) notes that relations of production are present in every type of society, including ‘primitive’ pre-capitalist societies such as those of hunter-gatherers.

more or less equal access to resources for all (male, adult) members of the community, whereas in a stratified society, the surplus flows from the bottom to the top.<sup>296</sup>

There is no room here to capture the historiography of early medieval social structure exhaustively. The amount of literature is simply too vast and spread out over various disciplines, languages and research traditions. Rather, my investigation is an attempt to distil some of the main scholarly frameworks of social structure that frame the interpretation of archaeological and written evidence. Historical research does not exist in a vacuum, and the scholarly understanding of Merovingian-period society fits into broader paradigms. For example, Hans Werner-Goetz has distinguished in the German historiography three distinct phases in the study of early medieval elites. Until the 1960s, the dominant paradigm was that of ‘*Verfassungsgeschichte*’, a legalistic and constitutional approach, whereas subsequently a social-historical approach and then a cultural approach became dominant in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>297</sup> At the risk of stating the obvious, the study of Merovingian elites is thus heavily influenced by the *Zeitgeist* of the scholar. Furthermore, the analysis of Merovingian Gaul has, in the past, been frequently coloured by various nationalist paradigms, but is also complicated by the period’s ambiguous liminality between the classical and medieval periods. As such, scholarly investigations have often been overly concerned with characterising Merovingian society in dichotomies such as Roman/Germanic, Ancient/Medieval, institutional/personal, chiefdom/state, pagan/christian, and so on. Frequently, these dichotomies go hand in hand: scholars characterising Merovingian society as ‘medieval’ will often stress the ‘Germanic’ element of its political organisation, which is thought to have been based on informal and personal relations, whereas a Romanist interpretation tends to emphasise the continued relevance of Roman institutions of law, church and state. This is not always the case, and certainly recent historiography has often tried to move away from discussing whether Merovingian Gaul was more ‘Roman’ or ‘Frankish’, but in practice these scholarly fault lines still simmer below the surface all too often.<sup>298</sup>

Here, I would like to try and circumvent such dichotomies, in so far as that is possible at all. Instead, I have formulated four different ‘concepts of society’. These four concepts are, in the order that I will discuss them below: feudal society, heroic society, bureaucratic society and communal society. The attentive reader will recognise the parallels to the four interpretations of Arpvar’s tomb given above. They are named somewhat provocatively on

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<sup>296</sup> Cf. Ames 2007, 489. I assume that early medieval society was in essence a patriarchal society, therefore privileging male access to resources.

<sup>297</sup> Hans-Werner Goetz, ‘(Weltliche) Eliten: Adelsforschung in der deutschen Historiographie’, *Labaratoire de Médiévisique Occidentale de Paris*, available online: [https://lamop.univ-paris1.fr/fileadmin/lamop/publications/Haut-Moyen-Age\\_Elites/HMA\\_elites\\_noblesse\\_allemande\\_Goetz\\_2003.pdf](https://lamop.univ-paris1.fr/fileadmin/lamop/publications/Haut-Moyen-Age_Elites/HMA_elites_noblesse_allemande_Goetz_2003.pdf), accessed 11-05-2021.

<sup>298</sup> Fouracre 2000, 19.

purpose, although they do well in capturing the different ‘stereotypes’, in order to operationalise the various ways of imagining early Medieval societies. It is worth stressing that these four frames are not necessarily mutually exclusive types of socio-political organisation, nor do they adequately cover the full spectrum of scholarly positions in the debates. Nor do I intend to ‘peg’ scholars into one group or the other. Rather, they are meant as a heuristic tool, helpful in exploring the spectrum of possibilities for imagining the organisation of political and economic power in Merovingian society and scholarly perspectives thereon. While the first three essentially share the idea of Merovingian society as fundamentally hierarchical, they differ in their understanding of how hierarchy was formed and maintained and in what way the political economy was organised. The final concept, by contrast, sees Merovingian social organisation as relatively ‘flat’, opening the way to my heterarchical reading of the evidence in the next chapter.

### 3.2. The terminological toolbox of social structure

First, it is necessary to waddle through a terminological morass. For the question that I aim to answer – who was the Merovingian elite, what was their essence – needs clarification. What do we mean by ‘elite’ in the first place, and how can we best describe relations of (in)equality? Human societies throughout time and space show a bewildering variety in the way and degree in which they are ordered hierarchically. Anthropologists and archaeologists have developed extensive vocabularies and theoretical toolboxes to describe and explain the variety of societies out there. At the risk of repeating anthropology textbooks, it is worth briefly defining some basic terms that help define varieties of social differentiation.<sup>299</sup> Here, I follow terminology as defined in an overview by Kenneth M. Ames.<sup>300</sup> A society can be more or less *egalitarian*, where every member theoretically has equal access to prestige and resources, but most (if not all) historical societies are at least to some degree *inegalitarian*, where different actors have differential access to status and prestige.<sup>301</sup> Thus, despite the ideal of egalitarianism in modern Western democracies, differences in wealth, class, race and so on mean that access to status and the means of production are not equally available to all. On the other end, even in small-scale hunter-gatherer societies people can be ranked differently depending on gender, age, ability, and so on. A more important distinction, then, is that between a *ranked* society, where individuals are ranked relative to each other in terms of status and prestige, or a *stratified*

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<sup>299</sup> For another overview of basic terminology on social (in)equality, see Halsall 1995, 22-24. See also Steuer 1979; 1989.

<sup>300</sup> Ames 2007, 488-490.

<sup>301</sup> At the very least, most early societies at least make a distinction based on gender and age.

society where there is *also* differential access to resources (wealth, land, food, and so on). The distinction is furthermore whether difference in status is *achieved* (acquired in life) or *ascribed* (usually through birth).

Status is an individual characteristic, part of who someone *is* (or is perceived to be). But it tends to come with the ability to tell others what to *do or not to do*. To have power over someone is a sign of social inequality, but it comes in different forms. Power may be personal, the ability to bully or charm one's will in a social situation through raw strength or a forceful personality. Power can be social, like a spider in the web directing manipulating or playing people off against each other. But power can also be structural, where the ability to control and allocate flows of resources (and labour) is embedded in impersonal organisations. Clearly, an elite individual who holds merely the first kind of power is different from one who operates in the latter modality of power.<sup>302</sup>

Another way to describe the power over someone else is having authority or domination. Max Weber has called this *Herrschaft* in German, defined as 'the probability that a specific command will be obeyed'.<sup>303</sup> A structure of power is stable only when there is in society a shared ideology or belief in legitimate domination, in other words when there is a broad consensus among ruler and ruled that the ruler's domination is legitimate. Weber sees three forms of legitimate authority, which are analogous to three of the four concepts of society I will discuss below. These are:

- I. Legal authority. Based on the idea that laws can be enacted and changed according to correct procedure. Its purest expression is that of bureaucracy, its governing body consists of elected or appointed administrators. Obedience is owed not to an individual personally, but to rules and regulations that determine which people owe obedience to whom. In simpler terms, a prime minister leads a country by virtue of their office, not because of who they are. In practice, top positions can be held by non-appointed individuals, such as the monarch, as in the constitutional monarchies of our own time.
- II. Traditional authority rests on the idea of a sacred social order based on the traditions of yesteryear. Traditional norms and values are seen to guide the body politic, the authority of a "lord" over his "subject" is taken as a natural result of the lord's dignity. The lord rules arbitrarily according to his own whims, and his administrative staff consists of dependent men, relatives, friends and associates. A sense of rational duty of office is replaced by ideals of allegiance and honour.
- III. Charismatic authority is characterised by a personal relationship of affection and devotion between the follower and his charismatic lord. The purest types of

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<sup>302</sup> Based on Eric Wolf's four modalities of power, see: Wolf 1999, 5; Ames 2007, 488, 489.

<sup>303</sup> Weber 2000 (1922), 99.

charismatic lords are the ‘warrior hero’ and the prophet, who garner respect and obedience through their magical abilities, feats of heroism, their charismatic speech or quick thinking.<sup>304</sup>

Naturally, in practice the three types of domination can overlap. A successful politician in our own time operates within the framework of legal authority, but their rise to power may well be the result of a charismatic devotion from their constituents. In any case, as ideal types they make distinct the various ways in which a society’s elite remain in power. Clearly, for the Early Middle Ages, a society where elite authority is based on a predominantly charismatic framework is clearly different from a legal one.

Medievalists often use terms such as ‘elites’ and ‘aristocrats’ more or less interchangeably. There are differences, and it will be worthwhile to briefly spend some time defining what I mean by elites and related words. Elite is a difficult term to define precisely, especially because it is rather loosely used in daily speech. Etymologically derived from Latin *electus*, ‘picked’, ‘chosen’, or ‘excellent’,<sup>305</sup> In everyday life, the word ‘elite’ could be used loosely to refer to such concepts as anything from the best students on a university campus to world leaders defining the fate of billions. Thus, the Oxford English Dictionary defines *elite* as:

‘the pick or choice part (of society, a group of people, etc.) [...] (a) a select group that is superior in terms of abilities or qualities to the rest of the group or society; (b) a group or class of people seen as having the most power and influence in a society, especially on account of their wealth or privilege’.<sup>306</sup>

The word, obviously, can refer both to a group as a whole, or a single individual who is a member of an elite group. It will be clear that for our purposes, the second definition emphasizing power and influence (b) is more useful when it comes to researching the Early Middle Ages. The elite as a small group of powerful social actors domineering society can be found in the classic sociological work *The Power Elite* by C.W. Mills.<sup>307</sup> More recently, elite theory similarly emphasises the elite as a minority controlling the major sources of power in a given society. Thus, ‘[c]urrent elite theory defines “elites” as actors controlling resources, occupying key positions and relating through power networks’.<sup>308</sup> At the same time, ‘elite’ remains a flexible, abstract term, and perhaps in its imprecision lies the

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<sup>304</sup> Weber, 2000 (1922).

<sup>305</sup> Charlston/Short 1890, s.v. ‘electus’.

<sup>306</sup> “elite, n.2 and adj.”. Oxford English Dictionary Online. December 2019.

<sup>307</sup> Mills 1956.

<sup>308</sup> Lopez 2013.

academic fruitfulness of the term<sup>309</sup>. It is both an *inclusive* term, including various social categories, such as ecclesiastical or lay, royal or aristocratic, and so forth. It is also a *relative term*, elite implies the presence of a non-elite.<sup>310</sup> Furthermore, the elite is not a unified body, there can be distinct, competing groups at various levels of society.<sup>311</sup> To sum up, elite can be defined in the sense of one or more minority groups occupying key positions of power in society, and the individual members of which these groups are comprised.

This is distinct from terms such as aristocracy or nobility. Aristocracy, originally in classical Greek philosophy, meant ‘rule by the best’. Nobility is derived from Latin *nobilitas*, meaning fame or renown.<sup>312</sup> In practice, the terms are often used synonymously in English, referring to a minority and hereditary ruling class defined, separated from the common people by birthright and shared privilege.<sup>313</sup> Our modern image of aristocracy has been deeply shaped by centuries of aristocratic power in late medieval and early modern Europe. Even beyond the tumultuous revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and up until the First World War, aristocrats continued to play influential roles in politics, war and society at large.<sup>314</sup> To speak of an aristocracy proper for early medieval society, then, one ought to find a class of people able to pass on their privileges to the next generation:

‘[T]he difference between a ruling class and a collection of people who happen to have done well is, precisely, kinship: the ability to marry one’s children off appropriately, and pass one’s advantages on to one’s descendants.’<sup>315</sup>

It is important, in any case, to draw a distinction here: that while all aristocrats (or nobles) are elites, not all elites are aristocrats.

Another way to describe the elite is to call them the ‘leisure class’. Thorstein Veblen coined this term to describe social classes that are non-industrial, that is, who do not need

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<sup>309</sup> It is therefore a *sensitising concept*, a word that opens up avenues of further questioning and reasoning.

<sup>310</sup> Stuart 2003.

<sup>311</sup> Halsall, 2003, 20ff.

<sup>312</sup> Doyle 2010, 1-13.

<sup>313</sup> The conscious scholar may carefully distinguish aristocracy from nobility. Thus, Halsall defines aristocrats as ‘the powerful’, lacking a legal or constitutional groundwork and without a strict hereditary component. Nobility, on the other hand, does have a legal basis and rank acquired by birth; Halsall 1995, 24. I do not maintain this distinction here, simply because in common usage ‘aristocracy’ and ‘nobility’ are used more or less interchangeably. Van Wees and Fischer note that there are two definitions of aristocracy. The narrow, European one of titled orders and hereditary titles, and a broader, American sense based on great wealth, honour and privilege. I advocate for sticking to the first, narrow definition in order to avoid confusion. To speak of a non-hereditary upper class, the more neutral ‘elite’ is far more preferable. I thus follow William Doyle’s definition of aristocracy as a hereditary elite class; Doyle 2010, 9-10; cf. Van Wees/Fischer, 2015, 2.

<sup>314</sup> Doyle 2010, passim.

<sup>315</sup> Graeber 2004, 52.

to perform (manual) labour for their livelihood. Instead, they draw on the surpluses of the working classes to free up their own time for non-productive activities, or 'conspicuous leisure', such as war, government, ritual, or sport. The 'leisure class' thus encompasses nobles, knights, priests, but also the modern-day rentier.<sup>316</sup> It is perhaps a useful definition of medieval elites, although not a perfect one. Not all types of 'elites' need be unproductive, after all; the elites in the "communal" model outlined below probably were not. However, in regards to my research question, an elite class that can be described as a leisure class is surely different from one that is not. The leisure class extracts surplus from the "industrial" classes of society, as Veblen described it; in early medieval Europe, the peasants (or more generally, rurals). Thus, by and large, if archaeologists are looking for elites, what they really mean to say is that they are looking for the leisure class.

The question for the study of early Medieval Europe is whether 'elite' groups constituted a 'leisure class', aristocratic or otherwise. *A priori* we can assume that early medieval society was not egalitarian, since differences in power according to gender, wealth and ability are prominent in textual evidence. A more important distinction is the *type* of social inequality; which could be either ranked, with power and prestige being attained informally on an individual level, or stratified, with access to wealth and power restricted and accumulated on a more institutional level. The same distinction can be made for those particular elites who were in leadership positions. Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins distinguishes between a 'big man' and 'chief'. The first is a leader who managed to attain a high local standing due to personal achievements (often in war) but lacks the institutional power to cement it or pass it on to his heirs. Once a leader is able to maintain its position, once power is based in the *office*, not the *man*, then the nature of their social position changes, they are a chief (or a prime minister, a king, a pope, and so forth).<sup>317</sup> Another distinction that falls along these lines is whether power is based primarily in interpersonal relationships (power over people) or on territoriality (power over land). A modern prime minister, nominally at least, rules over a state with defined borders and territoriality; the power of a 'big man' may not be so clearly defined in space but rather through links of personal loyalty. I will not delve deeper in this distinction, although it will resurface implicitly in the discussion below.

To sum up, if an elite class was able to monopolise their power, we might expect society to have been organised vertically with an 'aristocratic' or 'leisurely' ruling class on the top. If, on the other hand, a person's ranking was unstable and unlikely to be uncontested for their heirs, or are unable to translate unequivocally their wealth into power, we are dealing with a more horizontal organisation of society. In such a horizontal

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<sup>316</sup> Veblen 2000 (1899), 21.

<sup>317</sup> Sahlins 1963.

society, much broader groups in society are potentially able to attain elite status through luck or achievement and the differential in wealth and power is much less pronounced. Moving on, I do not aim to deliberate where precisely early medieval elites fall in this dichotomy. Instead, it will become clear that each of the four models I will discuss have a different configuration of social structure and elite composition.

### 3.3. Feudal society

The first concept of society that I will sketch here is that of a ‘feudal society’, where power is ultimately in the hands of a relatively closed-off class comprising a landowning aristocracy of birth. Take, as a stereotypical illustration of this model, the following statement by Pryor: ‘[d]uring the Merovingian period [...] there was a hereditary landowning class, often regarded as an ancient nobility of blood, in whose hands large amounts of landed property were held’.<sup>318</sup> Such a perspective on the Merovingian elite is not altogether rare, and can be found, for example, in the works of German historians such as Karl Ferdinand Werner, who characterised the Frankish elite as a *Geburtsadel*, defined by property-ownership and personal privileges.<sup>319</sup> Likewise, in his study on the *frühfränkischen Adels*, Franz Irsigler concludes that

In den bisherigen Ausführungen wurde immer wieder deutlich, welch außerordentlich hohe Bedeutung der Besitz von Land und Leuten als Grundlage adliger Herrschaftsmacht hatte und wie eng wirtschaftliche und soziale Differenzierung zusammenhingen. Andererseits konnte [...] gezeigt werden, daß Reichtum allein nicht genügte, um die Zugehörigkeit eines aus den unteren Volksschichten aufgestiegenen Mannes zum Kreise der von Geburt an Adligen zu begründen.<sup>320</sup>

It remains commonplace, too, in modern Anglophone scholarship. Thus, Wickham calls the Frankish elite a ‘landed aristocracy’, at least from the beginning of the seventh century and on.<sup>321</sup> Similarly, in his study on social mobility, Jones concedes that ‘the basis of power for most Gallic noble families was landholding’.<sup>322</sup> The royal court, he states, was for the most part made up of landed aristocrats, and landed families also were more successful in acquiring the bishop’s see than their less privileged peers.<sup>323</sup> There are, of course, nuances

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<sup>318</sup> Pryor 1985, 78.

<sup>319</sup> Werner 1967, 126, especially for the Carolingian ‘Hochadel’. However, Werner (1967, 88) notes for the Merovingian period especially the continuation of the Gallo-Roman landed elite., Cf. Goetz 2003.

<sup>320</sup> Irsigler 1981, 221.

<sup>321</sup> Wickham 2005, 179.

<sup>322</sup> Jones 2009, 94; for Jones, this is true from the late Roman period into the Merovingian period onwards.

<sup>323</sup> Jones 2009, 80-118.

within the model. Thus, Fouracre sees a land-starved nobility competing for more land at the royal court, but the ‘essential precondition both for the formation of an élite, and for competition within that élite, was the existence of a stable work-force made up of a tied peasantry’.<sup>324</sup> These examples will suffice for now; it should be clear that the feudal concept of society is a common one in the historiography of Merovingian Gaul.

I might have called this concept the ‘aristocratic society’, were it not that ‘feudal’ conveys better some of the underlying assumptions common to this model. Nevertheless, ‘feudal’ as a term comes with a lot of baggage and needs some unpacking first.<sup>325</sup> To complicate matters further, it comes with (at least) two distinct, yet oft-overlapping definitions. As a historical term, feudalism is deeply ingrained in our collective historical psyche, and most of us will have encountered an explanation of ‘feudalism’ first as children at schools, perhaps with an explanation not much unlike that given by Marc Bloch:

A subject peasantry, widespread use of the service tenement (i.e. the fief) instead of salary; supremacy of a class of specialized warriors; ties of obedience and protection which bind man to man; fragmentation of authority...<sup>326</sup>

Bloch places his *La société féodale* between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries, far beyond the end of the research period discussed in this book. But Bloch’s is certainly not the only ‘feudal society’, since ‘feudalism’ is also commonly employed in a broader sense as a shorthand for land-based aristocratic regimes. Thus, when the French revolutionaries of 1789 uprooted the old order and abolished the privileges of the nobility, they proclaimed the end of feudalism. For the revolutionaries, ‘feudal society’ represented the entire socio-political order of the *ancien régime*, a compendium of rights and surplus extraction based on violence and aristocratic privilege that was thought to have emerged after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Early-modern jurists and philosophers thought that the seigneurial privileges enjoyed by the landed nobility at the time to have originated from the Medieval fief (Latin *feodum*), hence ‘feudalism’.<sup>327</sup> In reality, however, the system of fiefs (French *féodalité*) and the system of seigneurial rights (*seigneurie*) are not necessarily one and the same, even though they are often conflated. It is best, therefore, to separate two distinct meanings of feudalism as often found in modern historiography.

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<sup>324</sup> Fouracre 2000, 23.

<sup>325</sup> In fact, for many medieval historians the ‘F-word’ has become taboo. In 1974, Elizabeth A.R. Brown condemned it harshly in an article entitled ‘The Tyranny of a Construct’, for being an abstract and artificial construct that distorted the reality of medieval society (Brown 1974). Later in 1994, Susan Reynolds argued that there was no widespread and homogenous in system of medieval institutions centered around the ‘fief’, ‘benefice’ and ‘vassal’, instead emphasising local customs and public power (Reynolds 1994). For an overview of the debate, see Abels 2009.

<sup>326</sup> Bloch 1975.

<sup>327</sup> Crubaugh 2011, 219.

First, there is feudo-vassalism as a system centered around lordship, vassalage, and the fief.<sup>328</sup> In German, it is more helpfully termed *Lehnwesen*, a system of governance based on ‘an hierarchy of fiefs and powers, from the king down to the minor lord’.<sup>329</sup> It is in this more limited sense that it is commonly used by (Anglophone) medievalists. It describes essentially a political system where warrior-aristocrats are granted land tenure in exchange for (military) service. As aristocrats built local power bases independent of royal power, public authority fragmented into highly local sub-units, dubbed ‘banal lordship’ or ‘seigneurie banale’ by French historian Georges Duby.<sup>330</sup> Historians of medieval Europe nowadays ascribe the systems of feudo-vassalism and banal lordship as features of the central Middle Ages, the result of a transition that took place following the breakdown of Carolingian order in the ninth and especially the tenth century.<sup>331</sup> Thus, the feudo-vassalic system describes a highly decentralised political system with local aristocrats effectively acting as independent rulers within their own domains.

On the other hand, in its second, broader sense, feudalism refers rather to a kind of ‘landlordism’, corresponding roughly to the German concept of *Grundherrschaft*<sup>332</sup> and French seigneurialism (or *seigneurie foncière*), as a system of aristocratic ‘control over landed wealth and non-free persons who worked the land’.<sup>333</sup> It is in this sense that the ‘feudal system’ was used by the *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment, finding its way subsequently into the works Adam Smith, and finally that of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.<sup>334</sup> Thus, in Marxist historiography, the *feudal mode of production* refers to a system of economic and social organisation where a class of landlords extract agricultural surplus from the labour of subservient peasants.<sup>335</sup> Peasants can be tied to the land as serfs, or they can be nominally free but still coerced or otherwise obligated to pay rent and/or render labour services to their landowner.<sup>336</sup> It is this system of economic exploitation that lies at

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<sup>328</sup> Classically formulated by Belgium historian Ganshof 1944. Cf. Abels 2009, 1012.

<sup>329</sup> Cheyette 2005, 830.

<sup>330</sup> Duby 1953, 306-330. The archetypical example is that of tenth-century France, where the Capetian king held little actual power outside of his royal domain in and around Paris, while his nominally subservient dukes and counts ruled practically independent domains (cf. Lemaignier 1965). Such a degree of public fragmentation is not unique to post-Carolingian Europe. Another oft-mentioned example is Medieval Japan, where hereditary lords or *daimyo* controlled the provinces while paying lip-service to the *Shogun*.

<sup>331</sup> The ‘feudal revolution’ of the year 1000; for an overview of the debate, see Bisson 1994, 6-9; Tabarrini 2019-2020 West 2013, 1-9; for a general narrative of this breakdown and the formation of a ‘feudal’ order, see Wickham 2009, 508-528.

<sup>332</sup> In German, the former is also called *Landesherrschaft*.

<sup>333</sup> Geary 1988, 109.

<sup>334</sup> Abels 2009, 1011.

<sup>335</sup> Pryor 1985, 69. In Marxist theory, the feudal mode of production of the Middle Ages is supposed to have succeeded the ancient, or slave mode of production – although this greatly overestimates the centrality of slavery to the ancient economy as a whole, cf. Wickham 2005, 262.

<sup>336</sup> Here, I follow Wickham 1984, 6.

the heart of what I call here the feudal concept. Its main ‘ingredients’ are landed estates and noble birth. Land is the organising factor of the political economy and the economic base of social stratification. Birth, nevertheless, is also a crucial element. The feudal landowner is not just a ‘landlord’ in the modern sense, but a member of the hereditary ruling class. The authority of the feudal landlord is rather stable and inherited; there is a parallel here with Weber’s ideal type of *traditional authority*, which ‘rests on the belief in the sacredness of the social order and its prerogatives as existing of yore’.<sup>337</sup> To test the validity of the feudal concept, it is necessary to look in more detail at the historiography on noble birth and landownership respectively.

The first problem is that the concept of a noble birth is hard to find in the written sources. This has been at the core of the so-called *Adelskontroverse* in German historiography, to which I briefly referred in the introduction. There is no explicit aristocratic class to be found in the *Lex Salica*, the most important legal source for the early ‘Franks’. The Latin terminology used for various social groups in the *Lex Salica* and narrative sources is ambiguous and the subject of fierce debate by historians. Grahn-Hoek devoted an entire book to discussing the philological and interpretative dimensions of terms such as *meliores natu*, *domini*, *proceres*, *virii optimi*, *leudes*, and so on; there is no room to re-tread the same grounds here. The gist of Grahn-Hoek’s argument is that, in opposition to the work by Irsigler and Bergengruen, among others, Merovingian sources employ no unambiguous terminology to denote an aristocracy of birth. “Good birth” (e.g. *maiores natu*; *ingenuus*) seems to have referred primarily to one’s status as a freeman as part of the ‘Frankish’ *populus* or people. According to Grahn-Hoek, wealthy and politically powerful people comprised an informal upper class or *Oberschicht* that our sources describe with terms such as *proceres* and *optimates*, best translated as magnates (German: *Größen*) rather than aristocrats. I will return to some of the implications of Grahn-Hoek’s findings later for some of the other concepts of society. For now, all that needs saying is that, to date, his insights have not been comprehensively challenged on philological grounds.<sup>338</sup>

Instead, the common response has been that if our sources lack a legally defined aristocracy of birth, then at least there must have been an aristocracy *de facto*. In the words of Geary, ‘[i]f, instead of looking for a legally defined stratum one looks for an aristocracy characterized by inherited status, wealth, and political power, then a Frankish aristocracy is clearly in evidence from the fifth and sixth centuries’.<sup>339</sup> For Irsigler, too, aristocratic absence in the *Lex Salica* is not indicative of their absence altogether, but proves only that aristocrats did not *need* to depend on royal laws to protect their status.<sup>340</sup> Similarly,

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<sup>337</sup> Weber, ‘The three types of legitimate domination’, 101.

<sup>338</sup> Grahn-Hoek 1976, 118-123, 263-275.

<sup>339</sup> Geary 1988, 111.

<sup>340</sup> Irsigler 1981, 253-254.

Wickham states that since Clovis must have been unable to annihilate rival families following his conquest of Gaul, he instead integrated them as members of an aristocratic ruling class.<sup>341</sup> In addition to competing warlords, Clovis must have encountered, in southern Gaul if not northern, remnants of a Gallo-Roman '*Reichsaristokratie*', consisting of great landowners following Late Roman tradition.<sup>342</sup> Both of these arguments rely on speculation and the *a priori* assumption that the only way for the young Merovingian dynasty to neutralise the threat of competing elite families was to construct an entire system of noble birth. Surely, there are ways imaginable in which Clovis could have given his competitors positions of power and status *without* the trappings of late Medieval 'feudalism'?

The other response to Grahn-Hoek's thesis has been to point out the great amount of wealth owned by some individuals, seen automatically as further evidence of feudal landlordism and the existence of an aristocratic stratum, as for Irsigler: 'The impressive wealth of noble graves from the period of Clovis, the origin of which is to be seen in large-scale landed property'.<sup>343</sup> Note, by the way, how Irsigler unproblematically assumes lavish funerary wealth to be indicative of noble status. Similarly, Wickham, too, emphasises the continuity of the Roman system of landowning as evidence of a Frankish aristocracy.<sup>344</sup>

Thus, where we find in the sources some evidence of a propertied class, scholars are quick to summon the existence of a 'feudal' aristocracy. Here, the model runs into its biggest problem. It is precisely this conflation where the underlying logic of the feudal concept breaks down. Landed wealth does not, on its own, necessitate the presence of a hereditary upper class; the scholar needs to be careful *not* to conflate wealth with social status. I am reminded of the famous character Trimalchio in the satire *Satyricon* by Petronius from the first century. Trimalchio, a former slave and *nouveau-riche* is derided for his distasteful and exuberant show of wealth at a banquet. Similar examples can no doubt be named for more modern blue-blooded aversion of the newly rich, but I will linger in the classical world for a bit longer. Hans van Wees and Nick Fischer edited a volume criticising the concept of "aristocracy" as it is used within scholarship of the classical world. In a parallel situation to my case here, Van Wees and Fischer argue in their introductory article against the widespread tendency by scholars to refer to ancient Greek elites as aristocrats, where no notion of noble birth is clearly attested in the written sources. Wealth, not birth, they argue, was the main social divide; nor was every rich individual automatically part of the ruling class. While both Greeks and Romans did, in practice, often construct elaborate genealogies of prestigious ancestors to legitimate their claim to status, so Van Wees and Fischer argue,

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<sup>341</sup> Cf. Wickham 2005, 180.

<sup>342</sup> E.g. Scholz, 2015, ch. 2.

<sup>343</sup> Irsigler 1978, 106.

<sup>344</sup> Wickham 2005, 180-185.

we should be careful in conflating ‘legitimizing values’ and ‘differentiating values’. The former can *enhance* a person’s status with respect to their peers, but it need not be a practice that differentiates a social class from the masses.<sup>345</sup> Thus:

it is no more than a modern assumption that ruling aristocracies were identical with the upper class of landowners, tacitly borrowed from medieval and early modern models along with the assumption that hereditary aristocracy was the norm in early Greece and Rome.<sup>346</sup>

Replace Greece and Rome for ‘Merovingian Gaul’, and the same argument can be made here.<sup>347</sup> In fact, the concept of ‘aristocracy’ is hardly appropriate for the (Late) Roman system that the Merovingians encountered. In the same volume, L.E. Tacoma argues that the membership of the Roman city council (*curia*) was first and foremost restricted on the basis of wealth. However, this wealth, and therefore social standing, was not stable; instead, there was a high amount of intergenerational difference in wealth, since high child mortality and the absence of primogeniture in inheritance led to the division of land among heirs. Someone unlucky to have many inheriting brothers could end up with a paltry inheritance. As such, despite steep social inequality, constant social mobility – both up and down – led to fragile hierarchies rather than the existence of a stable aristocratic class.<sup>348</sup>

This is an important observation here for two reasons. First, because it means that even the Gallo-Roman landowning class encountered by Clovis cannot, a priori, be characterised as a noble class.<sup>349</sup> Secondly, the same logic applies to the ‘Frankish’ magnates of northern Gaul; without the principle of hereditary status, landownership alone could not give rise to an exclusive aristocratic class. Certainly, some great landowners would have operated in the ‘feudal mode of production’ with tenant peasants farming their great estates, but such a leisure class would not automatically equate to the ruling class.

Furthermore, scholarship is divided just on how prevalent great landowning was in the Merovingian period, especially for sixth-century northern Gaul, as I have shown in the previous chapter. To those who argue for the prominence of great landowning, the following rebuttals can therefore be made. First, we only have a very limited knowledge of landowning due to a very small selection of sources. With the exception of the will by Remigius of Reims from the year 533 or earlier, the first piece of evidence comes from the

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<sup>345</sup> Van Wees/Fischer 2015.

<sup>346</sup> Van Wees/Fischer 2015, 8..

<sup>347</sup> Unfortunately, Van Wees and Fischer contrast the ancient world with the medieval period as a whole. As I argue here, what they call ‘aristocratic society’ and I call ‘feudal society’ are derived mainly from the later Middle Ages and early modern period.

<sup>348</sup> Tacoma 2015, 125-145. F. Theuws 1991, 329.

<sup>349</sup> A comparison to our own society can be made here. A wealthy landlord is not usually an aristocrat, although an aristocrat can be a landlord. Certainly, landlords as a whole do not form a ‘noble class’.

will of deacon Adalgisel Grimo early in the seventh century.<sup>350</sup> Even then, Remigius' properties are not all too spectacular when considered, as I have argued above. Even more damning is the fact that the little evidence we do have is exclusively from an ecclesiastical context. There are also some scattered references in narrative sources of elite-owned estates, often given (and as easily taken away) by the Merovingian kings to their officials. All in all, we have no reliable evidence to quantify the property of secular elites or gauge their extent relative to small landowners. Contrast this situation to Late Antique Egypt, where certainly very rich landowners existed side-by-side with a large group of small-to-medium landowners. We know this only, as Gillet notes, because of the exceptional preservation in the dry sands of the Sahara; on the basis of surviving manuscript evidence, Late Antique Egypt would have looked remarkably similar to Merovingian Gaul.<sup>351</sup> In other words, the estate-centered Gaul of many historians may be an artefact of our source material rather than a reflection of historical reality.

Last but not least, we have an exceptional lack of clarity on the terminology used in the sources, thus we cannot be entirely sure what the Merovingian manorial economy looked like. For example, the Latin word *villa* is frequently translated as 'estate', but may for the Merovingian period perhaps be more accurately rendered as a territory within which multiple people or families could own land (as in a modern French *ville*).<sup>352</sup> Indeed, one possibility is that the estates allocated to royal officials were fiscal units, with the 'owners' being entitled to their tax revenue rather than dues of rent.<sup>353</sup> Such a system would bring us closer to the 'bureaucratic concept' discussed below, and certainly differ substantially from our understanding of the feudal concept. Furthermore, multiple stakeholders (landlords, neighbours, inhabitants, and so on) may have had 'overlapping claims' to the property.<sup>354</sup>

To sum up, the feudal concept is a very common interpretative framework found in scholarship on Merovingian Gaul. Nevertheless, despite its common-sense attractions it presents a deeply subjective model that takes stereotypes derived from the late medieval and early modern *ancien régime*, applying it anachronistically to the Merovingian period. Our sources give little justification for doing so, since there is no evidence for a hereditary upper class or aristocratic ethos. Here, we must be careful in conflating the genealogical

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<sup>350</sup> Wood 1994, 206-207 and see above, ch. 2.5.

<sup>351</sup> Gillet 2020, 534.

<sup>352</sup> Halsall 2012, 288.

<sup>353</sup> As argued, for instance, by Dumézil 2007 : 575. Much like Walter Goffart's thesis on Roman-barbarian *hospitas*. The traditional interpretation was that in the fifth century, 'barbarians' settled on land expropriated from Roman landowners, but Goffart raised the possibility that they rather received entitlement to a portion of the land's taxes, in lieu of the Roman state; Goffart 1980: 206-211. Goffart's thesis is not widely accepted, however, for discussion see Wickham 2005, 84-87, 84-87; Sarris 2011, 56-68.

<sup>354</sup> Theuvs 1991, 304-305.

strategies employed by certain Merovingian elites to pass on their status to their children as evidence for a general aristocratic class consciousness.<sup>355</sup> Certainly, *some* families may have successfully competed at the royal court to entrench the status of their lineage, but on the whole, the ruling class remained open to newcomers, certainly in the sixth century and probably the seventh. This was probably equally true for the episcopal class; prosopographical research by Steffen Patzold has shown that, in contradiction to the impression given by a few noteworthy examples like Gregory of Tours, most Gallic bishops may have actually been from a rather more humble background. Only a few can we say with certainty that they were of senatorial background.<sup>356</sup> Furthermore, while wealth probably helped ambitious individuals climb the social ladder, there is no reason to assume that access was restricted to a small group of landowning families. But if not by birth and land, then what was the determining factor of the ruling class?

### 3.4. Heroic society

Where the feudal concept looks forward in time in its imagination, populating the Merovingian world with the lords and manors of late Medieval France, the next conceptualisation looks back in time to a mythical 'Heroic Age'.<sup>357</sup> Similar to the previous model, this one is essentially 'aristocratic', but the image painted is subtly different. I call this next concept the 'heroic society', borrowing from David Graeber, who succinctly describes heroic societies as 'those in which governments are weak or non-existent and society is organized instead around warrior noblemen, each with his entourage of loyal retainers and tied to the others by ever-shifting alliances and rivalries'. Such warrior noblemen throw feasts as a 'contest of generosity', where they boast of their accomplishments in war. According to Graeber, this type of society is found in epic poetry from around the world, such as in the Greek *Iliad*, the Indian *Mahabharata* and the Old English *Beowulf*, but is also described by ethnographers for peoples such as the Maori in New Zealand or the Kwakiutl, Tlingit and Haidi in the Americas.<sup>358</sup> Graeber's concept of a heroic society is commonly found in the 'ethnographic' imagination of medievalists. Once again, it is worth citing Marc Bloch for an evocative illustration of the heroic concept in medieval scholarship. This time exploring the origins of the medieval system of vassalage,

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<sup>355</sup> Another point brought up in regard to the classical world in the volume by Duploy 2015, 59-84.

<sup>356</sup> Patzold 2014.

<sup>357</sup> E.g. Chadwick's *Heroic Age* (Chadwick 1912), which sees it as the period of the *Völkerwanderung* recorded in mythical literature in various Germanic languages ('the common poetry and traditions of the various Teutonic peoples', 28.); cf. Stephan Stewart Evans's *The Lords of battle* (Evans 1997).

<sup>358</sup> Graeber 2011, 117.

Bloch describes the political structure of Germanic societies just before and during the Migration Age:

The chiefs, especially the young chiefs, surrounded themselves with “companions” (in old German *gisind*, meaning literally “companion for an expedition”; Tacitus has rendered the word very accurately by the Latin *comes*). These companions they led in battle and on plundering expeditions, and in the intervals of rest gave them hospitality in their great wooden “halls” where the atmosphere was congenial for long drinking-bouts. The little band was the mainstay of its captain in wars and vendettas; it supported his authority in the deliberations of the free men; and the generous gifts – of food and drink, of slaves, of gold rings – which he lavished upon these followers was an indispensable element of his prestige. Such, as Tacitus depicts it, is the “companionage” (*comitatus*) in first-century Germania; such it is still, several centuries later, as it appears in the poem of Beowulf and (with some inevitable variants) in the old Scandinavian sagas.<sup>359</sup>

For Bloch, the system of vassalage in the central Middle Ages originated in the old ‘Germanic’ system of warbands formed around personal ties of loyalty between lord and retainers. Ultimately the Germanic warrior retainer will transform into the medieval knight, the gold ring into the benefice of land, the bond of loyalty into the ceremony of *homage*. It is no coincidence, then, that the heroic concept can, and often does, overlap with the feudal concept — the Merovingian world, particularly towards the south, is often conceptualised as a world in transition, the result of a fusion between ‘Germanic’ and ‘(Gallo)-Roman’ cultures.<sup>360</sup>

The *locus classicus* of the ‘Germanic’ warband is the ethnographic description by the Roman author Tacitus in *De origine et situ Germanorum*, written in 98 A.D. According to Tacitus, young men entered the retinue of warrior chiefs and competed for status; in turn, chiefs competed with each other by attracting the largest number of capable followers (who were supposed to be loyal to their leader until death).<sup>361</sup> Tacitus’ Germanic warrior retinue, called *comitatus* in Latin, was translated by German historians in the nineteenth century as *Gefolgschaft*, defined as ‘ein den Germanen charakteristisches Dienst-und

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<sup>359</sup> Bloch 1975, 154. Bloch’s account also traces the military warband back to the Late Roman system of aristocratic patronage, with landlords fielding their own private armies of *bucellarii* in increasingly anarchic times; Bloch 1975, 147-156.

<sup>360</sup> For Bloch, the Germanic conquerors entered a Roman world in ruins, where landowning aristocrats had long surrounded themselves with military retinues or *bucelarii*, Bloch 1975, 154-156; cf. Schlesinger 1953, 259-260: ‘Sodann aber setzt dieser Verschmelzungsprozeß voraus, daß ein germanisches Gefolgschaftswesen auf der gleichen wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Ebene bestand wie die gallo-römische Vasallitat [...] Mann kann sich den Verschmelzungsprozeß dann so vorstellen, daß die fränkischen Herren ihre gallorömischen *vasii* in ihre Gefolgschaft aufnahmen und zusammen mit ihren germanischen bäuerlichen Gefolgsleuten für ihre Fehden aufboten’. In Marxist historiography, the feudal mode of production can be seen as the synthesis of the Roman and Germanic world: Anderson 1974, 128.

<sup>361</sup> Tacitus, *Germania*, 13-14.

Treueverhältnis'.<sup>362</sup> The meaning of the *comitatus* was then further expanded beyond its original meaning of military patronage by historians of the *Neue Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte* in the 1930s and 1940s; for them, the *Gefolgschaft* was at the heart of early Germanic societies, organised on the basis of personal relationships of loyalty (*Treue*) instead of public institutions. They saw the same type of Tacitean *Gefolgschaft* reflected in the much younger poetry of Old English and Old Norse literature.<sup>363</sup> The same concept, too, has supposedly been found in Salic law, where individuals such as those called *antrustiones* are interpreted as royal retainers.<sup>364</sup>

The lordly retainer and his warrior followers *can* be seen as a proto-feudal nobility,<sup>365</sup> with the lord providing his followers with food and lodging, financed from the profit of his estates.<sup>366</sup> An aristocracy of birth is, in my opinion, not a fundamental 'ingredient' of the heroic 'recipe', however, since the fortunes of warrior 'aristocrats' rose and fell with their ability to enter patronage networks and the chief's ability to reward his followers with gifts.<sup>367</sup> More so than in the feudal concept, the social order of heroic society is thus inherently unstable, as summed up by anthropologist Jos Bazelmans:

One of the characteristics of these societies, and probably also of the early Germanic societies, is that positions in the social order are only defined to a certain degree. A certain status or position is attained in a network of relations. This network had to be constantly created, confirmed and re-created, particularly by the selective giving and receiving of a variety of goods, mostly prestige goods, in diverse, often ritualised situations (the so-called *gift-exchange*).<sup>368</sup>

In other words, mobile wealth, not land, is the power basis of the elite; the political economy is first and foremost a prestige good economy, not a manorial economy (although

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<sup>362</sup> Brunner 1887, 185; Schik 1972, 5.

<sup>363</sup> An overview on the historical development of the *Gefolgschaft* in German scholarship: Bazelmans 1991, 110-115; cf. Summer 2021; Hill 2017.

<sup>364</sup> E.g. Steuer 1987; cf. Summer, 2021.

<sup>365</sup> The dominant view of German legal historians in this tradition. E.g. for Dannenbauer, the warrior aristocrats are a *Geburtsaristocratie*, and for Schlesinger a *Geblütsadel*. See Bazelmans, 1991, n. 179. In this case, as far heroic concept applies to the Merovingian world, my criticism on the feudal concept applies here as well.

<sup>366</sup> E.g. Dannenbauer, 'Gefolgschaft setzt Grundherrschaft voraus', cited in Bazelmans 1991, 112, n. 189. Cf. Steuer 1989, 120: 'The Reihengräber are an expression of the open, ranked society of the Merovingian kingdom, in which the farmer-warriors were dependent on the king and a few magnates such as the dukes, members of the Merovingian family, in the broadest sense of the term, or on high officials. Landownership characterised the situation right from the beginning'.

<sup>367</sup> E.g. Hedeager 1992, 174-175. However, contrast Steuer 1989, 120: 'The *Reihengräber* are an expression of the open, ranked society of the Merovingian kingdom, in which the farmer-warriors were dependent on the king and a few magnates such as the dukes, members of the Merovingian family, in the broadest sense of the term, or on high officials. Landownership characterised the situation right from the beginning'.

<sup>368</sup> Bazelmans 1991, 121

it can be, to some extent, both). The road to status is defined by *Königsnahe* (proximity to the king), achievements in war and the giving and receiving of prestigious gifts. If the feudal concept corresponded roughly to traditional domination, then chiefly authority follows Weber's ideal type of *charismatic domination*, the 'affectual and personal devotion of the follower to the lord and his gifts of grace (charisma). They comprise especially magical abilities, revelations of heroism, power of mind and of speech'.<sup>369</sup>

Thus, I take the following to be characteristic elements of the heroic concept of society. First, of central importance is the personal bond of loyalty between lords and their warrior retainers, called *Gefolgschaft* in German historiography. Political organisation or *Herrschaft* was structured along the lines of personal loyalties, called the *Personenverbandstaat* in German, in contrast to the impersonal institutions of modern state societies.<sup>370</sup> Secondly, the bond of patronage is sustained by feasting and, more importantly, gift exchange. In the heroic model, the prestige good system is therefore essential to maintaining social order and the political economy as a whole, which is inherently unstable. Third, where the concept of feudal society was based on Enlightenment perceptions of the *ancien régime*, the heroic concept is a scholarly construct based on a select corpus of Roman and medieval literary texts, ranging from Tacitus' *Germania* to the Old English poem *Beowulf*, and further to the Icelandic sagas written in the thirteenth century; together they are taken as reflections of archaic 'Germanic' society and political constitution.<sup>371</sup> Within the framework of evolutionary archaeologists, heroic society is an antecedent to the state,<sup>372</sup> or at most, a representative of the archaic state.<sup>373</sup>

Originating in the realm of ancient and medieval literature, the heroic concept has subsequently entered the interpretation of material culture. Among researchers of Merovingian archaeology, the work by Heiko Steuer can be taken as a representative

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<sup>369</sup> Weber 2000, 104.

<sup>370</sup> 'Der germanische und der frühe deutsche Staat war ein Volksstaat, er beruhte primär nicht auf der Herrschaft über ein Gebiet, sondern auf einem Verband von Personen' (Mayer 1974, 289). The idea is not exclusive to German historians, compare the following statement by the noteworthy American historian Joseph Strayer (2005, 13): 'in the early Middle Ages the dominant form of political organization in western Europe was the Germanic kingdom, and the Germanic kingdom was in some ways the complete antithesis of a modern state. It was based on loyalties to persons, not to abstract concepts or impersonal institutions. A kingdom was made up of the people who recognized a certain man as king, or in more stable societies, of the people who recognized a certain family as having a hereditary claim to leadership'. Cf. Althoff 1990, 5-7.

<sup>371</sup> Or, occasionally more broadly, it incorporates more broadly the world of insular Celtic myth; see for instance e.g. Stephen S. Evans', *The Lords of Battle* (Evans 1998).

<sup>372</sup> Characteristically for Wenskus, the system of *Gefolgschaft* transformed a tribal kinship-system into lordships as a precursor to early state formation. Reinhard Wenskus, cited from Bazelmans 1999, 5.

<sup>373</sup> For Danish archaeologist Lotte Hedeager, the prestige goods system is characteristic of an intermediate stage on the evolutionary ladder between tribe and state, found in the chieftdom societies of Iron Age Scandinavia; the prestige good was more than a status marker; the prestigious object *created* the status of the wearer and helped legitimise their position as the social elite; Hedeager 1992, 173-174.



One could even speak of an ‘anthropological turn’, marked by a strong interest of Dutch archaeologists to embed the societal model of German historians more firmly in cultural-anthropological theory. Indicative is the title of Nico Roymans’ 1990 book *Tribal societies in northern Gaul: an anthropological perspective*, covering the ‘Gallic-Germanic’ societies of Iron Age Gaul. Roymans similarly departs from descriptions by Julius Caesar and Tacitus, among others, to describe the social organisation of the *La Tène*-period. While political leadership could differ between tribes (being ruled either by aristocrats or kings), the basis of political power lay in the ability to attract warriors; a semi-sacred tie of loyalty bound the noble followers of a *Ritterliche Gefolgschaft* to their lord. Relationships of clientage can essentially be envisioned as a pyramid of ‘hierarchical networks of power’; with the chieftain or king on the top, descending down to their loyal followers who in their turn lead their own *Gefolgschaft* of warrior retainers (note, again, the similarities to feudo-vassalism, or the first definition of feudalism given above). Roymans notes that the system depended on the ability to award followers with prestige goods, acquired either through dependent craftsmen, raiding, external trade, or tribute by clients. Prestige goods, then, flow either horizontally as reciprocal gifts between allied leaders, or ‘trickle down’ from lord to follow, reciprocated by military service.<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Roymans 1990, 17-44.

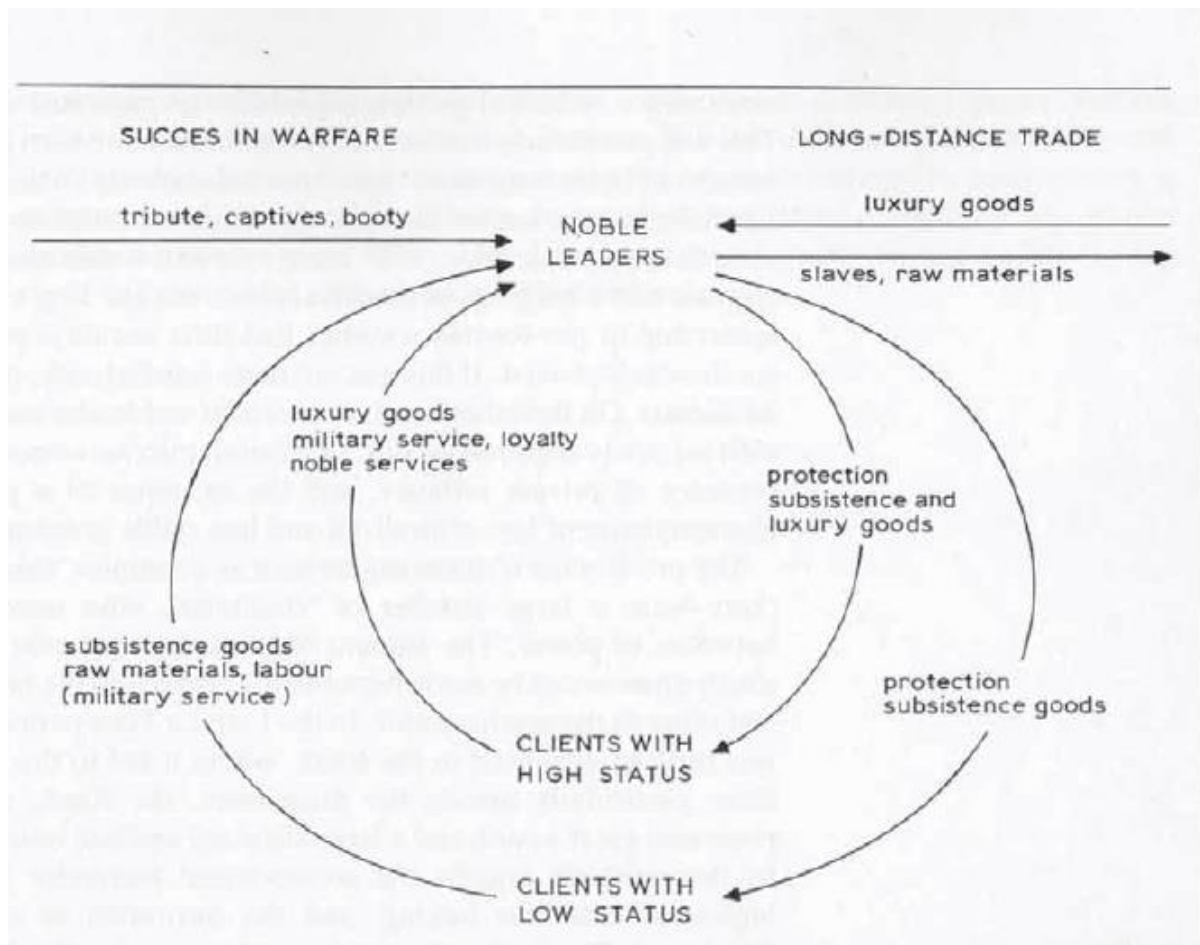


Figure 3.2. Similar to Steuer's model, according to Roymans luxury goods circulate within patronage networks. Nicolay relies explicitly on the same model. Roymans, *Tribal societies in Northern Gaul*, 42; cf. Nicolay, *Splendour of power*, 5.

Six years later, Jos Bazelmans wrote his dissertation on the *Gefolgschaft* and the anthropology of gift-exchange in Beowulf and Tacitus, later published as *By weapons made worthy*, as part of the 'Power and Elite' project headed by Nico Roymans and Frans Theuws. Bazelmans criticised the prevalent approach to the *Gefolgschaft* and gift-exchange for being predominantly explained as a politico-economical phenomenon. Bazelmans' reading of Beowulf instead emphasises the symbolical nature of the gift as a *fait social total*; the ritual of gift-giving can be taken as a reflection of the entire social order. For Bazelmans, the world of the Beowulf poem is fundamentally aristocratic. Thus, at the centre of a people's ancestral land stands the royal hall. The poem describes a 'universe of relationships' moving outside from the king and his hall in concentric circles; people are not taken as isolated individuals (as in modern society), but consistently described in relationship to others (lord of, wife of, follower of, and so on) and in relation to the supernatural world (ancestors, spirits, gods). It is in this 'totality of relationships' that gifts circulate. Following anthropologists Marcel Mauss and Louis Dumont, Bazelmans sees the exchange of gifts as a fundamental ritual that constitutes the person's identity and relation to their greater socio-cosmological universe.

Prestige goods are ‘not exclusively to be attributed to a preoccupation with ostentation, status, or power’;<sup>378</sup> rather, the gift’s and the aristocrat’s ‘worth’ are one and the same, called ‘the commensurability of subject and object’. Thus, from the ritual of gift-giving at various stages in the life-cycle of the warrior-aristocrat (Beowulf) emerges the ‘society as a whole’.<sup>379</sup>

Then, in 2014, Johan Nicolay applied Roymans’ model of socio-political organisation and Bazelmans’ reading of Beowulf in *The splendour of power* to the archaeology of the southern North Sea area between the fifth and seventh centuries.<sup>380</sup> For Nicolay, the circulation of prestige goods within the aristocratic milieus described by Roymans and Bazelmans offers an attractive model to explain the deposition of silver and gold valuables in hoards and graves. The lavish grave, with its silver and gold jewellery, swords, shields and horse gear mirrors the poetic world of Beowulf’s royal hall of *Heorot*. While the once merry feasting in the royal hall has left us no traces to excavate, the ritual deposition of valuables after death at least provides the archaeologist with the final remains of ceremonial gift exchange. Any wealthy find must inevitably, in this model, be proof of high social status, since valuables circulate almost exclusively within the milieu of the aristocratic *Gefolgschaft*: ‘An analysis of the gifts that are described in *Beowulf* makes clear that valuable items or prestige goods only circulated within limited social groups’.<sup>381</sup> Nicolay’s explanatory framework ends up closely resembling that of Steuer’s, but much more explicitly grounded in an anthropological understanding of the written sources, primarily Beowulf.<sup>382</sup>

What does Beowulf have to do with a Merovingian grave, let alone Tacitus or the Icelandic sagas? As much as a millennium and more separates these sources from each other in time and space. Thus, for the British Sir Frank Stenton, the warrior retinue of Tacitus’ *Germania* describes the first-century Iron Age chief just as it does tenth-century Earl Byrthnoth of Essex.<sup>383</sup> This motley collection of texts is united only under the umbrella of a timeless and unchanging ‘Germanic’ culture considered antecedent to Christianity and medieval state formation. Are we to believe that objects and texts as far apart as thirteenth-century Iceland and sixth-century Alamannia are connected residues of a more or less fixed ‘Germanic’ culture? This ‘mixing and matching’ of wildly varying pieces of evidence is made

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<sup>378</sup> Bazelmans 1999, 111.

<sup>379</sup> Bazelmans 1999, esp. 1-10, 111-149; 189-193.

<sup>380</sup> Nicolay 2014. The research area partially overlaps with mine, encompassing. The Netherlands, southern Scandinavia, north-western Germany and eastern England, i.e. those regions supposedly connected by the migration of Germanic peoples together forming a shared ‘North Sea culture’, cf. p. 14. This presupposes the validity of the traditional Germanic, ‘Anglo-Saxon’, migration-narrative; for several instances of scholarship problematising this account, see e.g. Oosthuizen 2019; Halsall 2013.

<sup>381</sup> Nicolay 2014, 11.

<sup>382</sup> Nicolay 2014, 2-11.

<sup>383</sup> Stenton 1971 (1943), 302.

coherent only when studied through this ‘pan-Germanic’-lens.<sup>384</sup> This Germanicising lens is still rooted in the legacy of *germanische Altertumskunde*, where in the nineteenth century the philological study of Germanic texts and languages was combined under one roof with the study of ‘barbarian history’. In this paradigm, archaeologists such as Gustaf Kossinna could marry wildly different types of evidence into a single cultural whole; archaeological cultures conceived as the corollaries of tribes attested in the written sources, analogous to the language families studied by philologists.<sup>385</sup> Unsurprisingly, these straightforward equations between material culture, language and ethnicity offered an attractive narrative to nationalists looking for an ancient Germanic past.<sup>386</sup> Indeed, for the Nazis, the concept of personal loyalty (*Treue*) between members of a military elite served as an effective justification of the hierarchy within their own Nationalist Socialist Party, itself headed by a militarist *Führer*.<sup>387</sup> After World War Two, the pendulum naturally swung the other way, when the straightforward equation of archaeology to linguistic and ethnic identities became heavily criticised by historians and archaeologists alike.<sup>388</sup> Nevertheless, the concept of *Gefolgschaft*, so ingrained in scholarly discourse, remained more or less unchanged in the post-war period. Modern scholarship often risks repeating the same baseline assumptions without the ethnic component of Germanicism under the guise of ‘militarisation’.<sup>389</sup>

Does that mean that the *Gefolgschaft* is nothing more than a historical construct of *Germanische Altertumskunde*? Modern proponents of the *Gefolgschaft* rely essentially on the adagium ‘where there is smoke, there is a fire’, since we do encounter military retinues in a great variety of written sources. I do not want to dispute the reality of patronage systems in various early medieval societies, nor downplay the role of a militarised society, that is to say a society in which every free man is (theoretically) supposed to be available for military

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<sup>384</sup> Harland/Friedrich, 14.

<sup>385</sup> For historiographic discussion, see Kulikowski 2021, 21-22.

<sup>386</sup> Kulikowski 2021, 22-23.

<sup>387</sup> Summer 2020; Kroeschell 1995.

<sup>388</sup> Although the pendulum does swing back and forth. Peter Heather’s *Empires and barbarians* (2010) is emblematic in its revival of mass-migration theory, albeit in a more nuanced form. For the linguistic perspective, it is interesting to note the dissertation by my Leiden colleague Peter Alexander Kerkhof from the linguistics department (Kerkhof 2018, 14-60). Kerkhof laments that historians have often ignored the many examples of old Germanic languages, such as Gothic and Frankish, found in early medieval sources, as well as other linguistic evidence that points to the ubiquity of spoken Germanic languages. Kerkhof is right that historians could pay more attention to the evidence from linguistics, but then claims that language is a reliable guide to identity. Thus, the presence of Germanic linguistic elements is taken as indicative for Germanic *Völkerwanderung*. Here I disagree, while we must surely admit that there were a variety of Germanic identities and cultures (plural!), the point is that these cannot be abstracted into a timeless construct in juxtaposition to ‘Roman’ cultures and identity. For my own views on (ethnic) identity and culture in the post-Roman West, see Barreveld 2015; Barreveld 2020a.

<sup>389</sup> Summer 2021.

service, rather than one where fighting is restricted to a professional standing army, as the Romans had prior to the fifth century.<sup>390</sup> The problem lies with the paradigm that takes the militaristic lord-retainer structure as a social totality of a specifically pan-Germanic political organisation. After all, the Roman world was similarly defined by systems of patronage and personal relations of honour and was for its part a very militarised society.<sup>391</sup> In this sense, it should not surprise us to find the prominence of client-patronage systems in ‘heroic’ sources, nor can we automatically shape it into the *Gefolgschaft*-mould of Germanicist scholarship where we do find systems of clientage.

Moreover, we must ask to what extent narrative descriptions from our sources reflect any underlying ‘historical reality’, even for their own time and place, before we apply them to interpretations of material culture, which have their own discursive structures. For Tacitus, it is well known that his ethnographic depiction of Germania did not adhere to our scientific notions of objective ‘truth’, nor was it written with such a goal in mind. Rather, Tacitus’ depiction of the Germanic ‘other’ functioned as a mirror to reflect and criticise the circumstances of his own *Roman* society.<sup>392</sup> While Tacitus cleverly manipulated Roman literary tropes for his purposes, he and other classical authors operated within a literary genre of ethnography steeped with preconceived notions and stereotypical *topoi*. In Late Antiquity, Roman historians employed these same age-old stereotypes in their narrations of ‘barbarian migrations’. All this should warn the modern reader to be extremely cautious in our reading of Roman ethnography and the application of the Tacitean *comitatus* to the so-called Migration Age.<sup>393</sup>

Chronologically and geographically, the source most proximate to Merovingian northern Gaul is –*perhaps*– the *Beowulf* poem from neighbouring England. I say perhaps, because its date of composition remains an extremely controversial issue. The internal world of the poem seems to take place in sixth-century Scandinavia, which can be gleaned from references to historical figures and events of that century, such as Hygelac’s expedition against the Frisians.<sup>394</sup> The sole surviving manuscript, on the other hand, dates to the early eleventh century (and is part of a compilation on exotic peoples and monsters). That the extant form of the poem is based on older oral traditions is clear, but where in the intervening period that tradition was first put to parchment remains the greatest enigma in the study of Old English literature. A quick perusal of the conference proceedings published

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<sup>390</sup> Sarti 2020, 263-265.

<sup>391</sup> Lendon 1997.

<sup>392</sup> Bazelmans admits as much and provides an excellent summary of Tacitus’ primitivising discourse himself (1991, 93-106). Confusingly, Bazelmans criticises the ‘naïve’ use of primary sources and the construct of a timeless Germanic national character, but nevertheless adheres to the notion of a ‘protohistorical Germanic social structure’ (1999, 1-11).

<sup>393</sup> For a summary of classical ethnographic discourse, see Halsall 2007a, 45-67.

<sup>394</sup> See below, section 4.4.

in the 1981 *The Dating of "Beowulf"* confronts the reader with as many theories of the poem's possible date as there are authors, each searching for clues in the poem's language, style, literary allusions and historical references.<sup>395</sup> To those who wish to read the poem as a reflection of an archaic social reality of the early Germanics or Anglo-Saxons, it is seductive to argue for an early date of composition, so that the poem is not too far removed from the pre-Christian world it purports to describe – that its author(s) was (were) Christian(s) is now beyond dispute.<sup>396</sup> Certainly, many scholars have been eager to assign Beowulf to the 'age of Bede' (c. 670-740), that other great literary work of early medieval England. 'This [Bede's] aristocratic world', Wickham exclaims, 'is also the world of *Beowulf*.'<sup>397</sup> Yet, the seventh century is not the only candidate; the eighth, ninth, tenth and even eleventh centuries have all been put forward as likely candidates of the poem's composition. Since 1989, some scholars have triumphantly declared an early date on the basis of 'Kaluza's Law' – the observation that some linguistic elements in Beowulf's metre appear to be the vestiges of Proto-Germanic phonology lost later in the development of the Mercian dialect. Yet, even Kaluza's Law does not go undisputed, and whether the use of archaic language is itself inevitable proof of an early date is another issue. Suppose, for instance, that the poem deliberately employed archaic language to evoke nostalgia.<sup>398</sup> Linguistics aside, proponents of an early date have also relied on material culture. For them, the material world of the poem corresponds to the archaeological horizon of sixth- and seventh-century England. However, as Roberta Frank warns us, such an association is all too readily grounded in our emotional commitment to associate Beowulf with the splendid burial at Sutton Hoo.<sup>399</sup> The pre-eminent literary artefact and the most famous archaeological monument of pre-Conquest England have in our collective minds seamlessly merged into one imaginative whole. Yet, the poem's panoply of weapons, armour, and so forth are equally at home in the Late Roman period as they are in Viking Age Scandinavia. Thus, we have gone full circle: the poem is taken to explain the archaeology, and archaeology of the poem.<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Chase (ed.) 1997 (1981).

<sup>396</sup> Thus, Bazelmans acknowledges that the poem's dating is controversial, but settles on the period 675-825 as most likely date of composition (1996, 69). On Christianity in Beowulf, see Bazelmans' discussion in the same chapter, 69-110. According to A. Orchard, the poem has undoubtedly Christian elements; Orchard 2003, 130-132. Thus, Beowulf cannot unproblematically be read as a 'pagan' text reflective of a pre-Christian world.

<sup>397</sup> Wickham 2005, 343.

<sup>398</sup> A summary of the discussions on dating Beowulf, and a response to Chase's *Dating of Beowulf*, can be found in Frank 2007. See also David 2014.

<sup>399</sup> Furthermore, as the custom of furnished burial declines as the Early Middle Ages proceeds, it becomes hard to attach the Beowulf material culture to an archaeological correlate. Is this because there was not any, or is it another case of absence of evidence?

<sup>400</sup> Frank 1992, esp. p. 342.

It is not my intention to intervene in the discussion between *Beowulf* specialists on the matter of dating the poem. However, the short treatment of the discussion here should be a cautionary tale to historians and archaeologists approaching *Beowulf* as a reliable source for the social structure of post-Roman northern and western Europe. Even an early date in the seventh century places the poem several generations later than the first Merovingian furnished graves and the 'Frankish' Lex Salica. Suppose *Beowulf* truly was composed in the age of Bede and Sutton Hoo, what then? We still know next to nothing about the historical context in which the text was produced (and transmitted!), rendering it nigh-impossible to deduce the text's social logic and ideological position. One possible reconstruction could be, for instance, that the oral tradition was transformed under the patronage of a royal benefactor eager to sketch an idealised picture of royal power and aristocratic society set in an ancestral land and a semi-mythical past, perhaps to anchor their own genealogical descent.<sup>401</sup> If so, the poem is far from the authentic 'folk tale' it is sometimes taken to be. Whatever the context, it seems to me inevitable that the *Beowulf*-poet(s) in some shape or form adapted oral tradition to their own needs. Thus, we cannot be sure whether the aristocratic milieu of the poem mirrored society at large. To quote Van Wees and Fischer once more:

A single strand of the legitimating values found in the Iliad [or *Beowulf*!, red.] has been picked out because it is reminiscent of "knightly" ideology, and has been wrongly regarded as representing not only the full range of elite legitimations but also the full reality of an exclusive elite lifestyle.<sup>402</sup>

The original quote, of course, referred to Homer and the analogous heroic society of 'Dark Age' Greece. Their criticism applies just as well to 'Dark Age' Europe. Far from an ethnographic field guide to the 'Anglo-Saxon' world of Bede and Sutton Hoo, let alone Merovingian Gaul, the archaeologist (and historian) should be aware that the *Beowulf* poem presents us with an 'illusion of historical truth', as the famous philologist J.R.R. Tolkien pointed out already long ago.<sup>403</sup> Although ubiquitous in the scholarship on early medieval Europe, the concepts of *Gefolgschaft* and aristocratic gift exchange are much less securely grounded in evidence than they first appear, and more so in our own romanticised imagination of a distant heroic age.

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<sup>401</sup> Craig R. Davis speculates, for instance, that the poem passed through the court of Alfred the Great in the later ninth century, who was certainly interested in antiquarian history. Various classical texts were translated from Latin into Old-English at his court; one could even imagine the *Beowulf*-poet(s) had access to Roman ethnographic and historical texts on the ancient Germanics and the Migration Age. If so, an under-researched theme would revolve around the question whether the poem itself replicates a construct of 'Germanic' derived from classical ethnography (Davis 2013).

<sup>402</sup> Van Wees/Fischer 2015, 16.

<sup>403</sup> Tolkien 1983 (1936), 7.

### 3.5. Bureaucratic society

The next concept guides our imagination from the warrior feasts of the Germanic mead hall to the chancellery of the Roman palace. What I will describe here as a bureaucratic concept of society does not necessarily exclude elements from the previous concepts such as gift exchange, chains of loyalty and patronage or a land-based manorial economy; all these *can* be present in a bureaucratic society. Nevertheless, the distinction is that within a bureaucratic society, government and power are ultimately based not on personal loyalty, but on offices and institutions – in theory at least, if not always in practice. Following Weber's scheme again, we find that the bureaucratic concept corresponds to his legal-rational principles of authority, which is a form of authority with established norms that are encoded in law; obedience is owed not to individuals but to rules and regulations, government is enacted by appointed officials, although this does not exclude a hereditary monarchy.<sup>404</sup> Weber may have had more in mind the German state of his own day than a medieval polity. It might also remind the reader of modern democracies or even the states of classical antiquity. This is no coincidence, since the bureaucratic concept of Merovingian society looks for continuities with the bureaucratic Roman state of (Late) Antiquity.<sup>405</sup> Where Germanicist readings of medieval society tend to employ a metanarrative of decline and fall, in which eroding Roman institutions and public power of the ancient world disappeared in order to herald the beginning of the Middle Ages,<sup>406</sup> the Romanist reading of the bureaucratic concept rejects such catastrophist readings in favour of finding continuities and transformations, firmly pulling Merovingian Europe into the orbit of Late Antiquity.<sup>407</sup>

There are a couple of key characteristics of the bureaucratic concept that I will highlight here. First, the importance of the written word within Merovingian administration and society at large. Secondly, the continuity, or at least transformation, of Roman institutions and legal practices. And third, a governmental apparatus consisting of

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<sup>404</sup> Weber 2000 (1922), 99-100. According to Weber, structures of domination do not need to be exclusively bureaucratic. Government may be headed by monarchs, who are hereditary rulers of the charismatic type, and administrative functions may be dominated by a class of notables.

<sup>405</sup> And, of course, the bureaucratic Roman system is implicitly or explicitly often regarded as an analogue to modern government, in contrast to a supposed medieval interlude or state regression.

<sup>406</sup> Murray 2015, 191-193. Murray cites Ferdinand Lot as a representative of the decline-narrative, who characterised Merovingian government as one 'without any principles, in which the specialization of functions is rudimentary', cited from Murray 2015, 193.

<sup>407</sup> While I promised at the start to avoid repeating the tired Roman versus Germanic dichotomy, the legacy of these two paradigms have inevitably shaped scholarly metanarratives. At least my distillation into concepts of societies does not inherently reiterate assumptions about the 'essential' qualities of the 'Roman' and the 'Germanic'.

appointed public officials. This apparatus, and by extension the polity, may, depending on the reader's tastes, be called a 'state'.

Recent generations of historians have done much to alter our understanding of the role of texts within Merovingian Gaul, and medieval Europe as a whole.<sup>408</sup> The traditional scholarly narrative of decline and fall presupposed a decrease in overall literacy, as was seemingly confirmed by Gregory's lament in the preface of his *Ten Books of Histories*: 'In the towns of Gaul the writing of literature has declined to the point where it has virtually disappeared altogether.'<sup>409</sup> It is now generally thought that Gregory much exaggerated the disappearance of learning. While he apologises for his unpolished Latin, his own work actually showcases the extent of his literary and rhetorical talent.<sup>410</sup> Gregory's often violent and chaotic episodes of Merovingian politics further paint a dark picture of cultural barbarism and governmental breakdown. Yet, his account is partial and can be as misleading as taking a broadcast of *Fox News* as representative of the condition of twenty-first-century America.<sup>411</sup> In brief, as I highlighted in the introduction, a more critical literary analysis of Gregory's work by recent generations of historians is continuing to dismantle many of the pessimistic face-value readings of Merovingian society ingrained in more traditional scholarship.

Gregory was not alone in his literary skills. In the epistolary collections compiled in the *Epistulae Austrasiacae*, Venantius Fortunatus and Desiderius of Cahors we can catch a glance at the literary talents of members circling around the royal courts in the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>412</sup> It seems that most magnates and ecclesiastical elites within these patronage networks could read and write, and were expected to be familiar with at least some of the educated ideals of late Roman education, or *paideia*. Far from idle distractions, epistolary writing was an important skill for elites to maintain their social networks and execute the functions of government.<sup>413</sup> As Andrew Gillet puts it, epistolary contact was the 'infrastructure for the functioning of government, church, and aristocracy'.<sup>414</sup> The question as to what extent this was true for the north of Gaul is one I will return to.

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<sup>408</sup> Much work in this regard has already been done for the Carolingian period, see for instance Rosamond McKitterick's *Carolingians and the written word* (1989). Surviving written evidence is heavily skewed towards the Carolingian period, making the Merovingian period seem illiterate by contrast. This is probably more a reflection of textual transmission than an accurate reflection of historical accuracy, as the rest of my narrative should make clear.

<sup>409</sup> Greg. Hist, preface (Thorpe transl., 63).

<sup>410</sup> Wood 1990, 71-73.

<sup>411</sup> Murray 2015, 193-195.

<sup>412</sup> I discuss one of these epistolary networks below in chapter five, which I argue shows the presence of literary culture even in the north of Gaul.

<sup>413</sup> Wood, 1990, 67-71.

<sup>414</sup> Gillet 2020, 546-547.

On a more practical level, texts played a key role in the more mundane affairs of government and law. The study of Merovingian *diplomata*, or royal charters, shed more light on this. Murray divides these royal charters into two classes. The first class consists of royal directives (*praecepta*), including orders, grants, privileges and exemptions; in this form they are derived from late Roman imperial rescripts. The second class consists of *placita*, royal judiciary decisions which recorded the king's settlement of disputes, almost exclusively concerning the ownership of (landed) property.<sup>415</sup> While the corpus of Merovingian *diplomata* is small and late, they correspond well with the Formularies of Marculf, a compilation of formal templates to be used for official correspondence, collected in the second half of the seventh century. These and other sources thus suggest that 'all sorts of transactions had to be set down in writing, and to be registered in the local archives'.<sup>416</sup> These archives, called the *gesta municipalia* in some sources, were probably located within the *civitas*-centres, following Roman practice. Presumably, the proceedings of a court case were recorded and copied, stored both in the private archive of the petitioner as well as the city's archive for later reference. An in-depth study on the *gesta municipalia* has been conducted by Josiane Barbier, who notes that there are surviving examples of city archives until the ninth century, which seems to have been managed by some kind of leftovers of the former curial elite (called *defensores*, *magnifici*, *curiales civium* or other such honorifics). This hints to at least a very basic kind of continuity, in some Gallic towns, with the curial system of the Late Empire, even if in a reduced form.<sup>417</sup> While lay archives have not survived the ages, we can get a sense of what they recorded from surviving formularies, like Marculf's. An earlier reference to lay archives can be found in the late sixth-century *Formulae Andecavenses* from Angers, where a man's archive of documents was stolen from his home by a group of thieves.<sup>418</sup> As Warren Brown sums up:

The sheer number of such formulae suggests that laymen in the early Middle Ages actively relied on written documents to do such things as secure, alienate, or pass down property, get married or get divorced, settle disputes, and otherwise regulate the business of their lives.<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> Murray 2005, 250-251; Fouracre 1986, 23.

<sup>416</sup> Wood 1990, 65.

<sup>417</sup> Wood 1990, 64; Barbier 2014, esp. 11-15; 165-172. On a similar note, Warren C. Brown argues for the survival of the *gesta* well into the Carolingian period, albeit in a changed form. He notes that more important than archiving the document was its public reading and accompanying ceremony in the city's *forum* or other authoritative public space. He notes that the distinction between oral and written mode of proof may have been blurred in Frankish Gaul. I agree, but would emphasise that the same was likely true for the use of documents in imperial Rome. See: W.C. Brown 2002; W.C. Brown 2012.

<sup>418</sup> W.C. Brown 2002, 344-345.

<sup>419</sup> W.C. Brown 2002, 339.

On the whole, the surviving documents reveal the interest of landowners, much like the Late Roman period. But, more broadly, it shows documentary practices regulating daily life under the watchful eye of an administrative government.

Granted, to the archaeologist it may seem that the Merovingian historian gets carried away by a rather small selection of texts. Can we really deduce the ubiquity of the written word on the basis of such sparse evidence? It is important to keep in mind, though, that the surviving texts represent only a tiny tip of the iceberg of documents once penned. As Gillet points out, the roughly 500 surviving letters from the first three centuries of post-Roman Gaul are only a remnant of all the letters once written. We can gain a sense of what is lost by turning, for a moment, to Late Antique Egypt, where the dry sands of the desert have preserved an enormous number of documents on papyrus. Egyptian papyri were read by and produced for a very wide range of social classes, from aristocrats at the top to the smallest and most humble landowners at the bottom. This class of non-elites participating in epistolary and documentary practices are revealed only by the exceptional preservation of Egyptian papyri. By contrast, it is completely invisible in Merovingian Gaul, where only a handful of carefully curated texts have survived the centuries in monastic libraries; secular archives have altogether been lost. Had the level of preservation been the same, Gillet argues, then Merovingian and Egyptian society may have been more comparable than often thought.<sup>420</sup> A transition from papyrus to parchment in the seventh century might explain why the Merovingian written record is so much more sparse than that of the Carolingian Age.<sup>421</sup> If so, the Merovingian world would have been one where royal prescripts were written down, disputes recorded and archived, letters written between friends, family, ecclesiastics and government officials. In short, as stated by Ian Wood and Paul Fouracre, ‘Merovingian Gaul was, in certain respects, a bureaucratic society; “it was a society used to, needing and demanding documents”’,<sup>422</sup> and much more recently, following a survey of the mechanisms of government: ‘all this must imply a continuation of a basic level of bureaucracy’.<sup>423</sup>

The new scholarly understanding of the importance of the written word has opened up to new ways of interpreting Merovingian kingship and governance. A far cry from the

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<sup>420</sup> Gillet 2020, 533-535.

<sup>421</sup> ‘Partant de ces questions, nous souhaitons développer l’idée que les lacunes documentaires des VIe-VIIe siècles doivent être interprétées non seulement comme la conséquence de macro-événements politiques, mais aussi à la lumière des pratiques documentaires et archivistiques de cette période, notamment dans leurs dimensions techniques et matérielles’; Internullo 2019, 524; Cf. Coumert 2023, 61.

<sup>422</sup> Wood 1990, 63, citing Fouracre 1986, 26.

<sup>423</sup> Wood 2023, 555-556. A similar level of written culture can be observed in northern Italy, for instance through Cassiodorus’ state correspondence on a national level and the Ravenna papyri on a local level. See e.g. Tacoma 2020, 195-264 for a discussion of both sources. Similarly, correspondence between the Merovingian kingdoms and Italy is preserved in the *Epistulae Austrasicae* (see chapter five) and the letters of Pope Gregory the Great.

violent warlords of Gregory's narrative, the central importance of the written word at the royal court and administration reveals a less one-sided image of Merovingian rule. A more legal-rational form of government emerges in the bureaucratic concept, one based on the administrative practices of the late Roman Empire. Thus, Wood concludes, 'the administrative classes of sixth- and seventh-century Francia continued the traditions of their Gallo-Roman predecessors'.<sup>424</sup> For Fouracre, the evidence from documentary sources shows a world in which 'the powerful in society, who were the basis of the state, had a great interest in maintaining the public peace through customary legal procedures', which he contrasts to Ganshof's characterisation of late Merovingian Gaul as the 'seed-bed of "feudalism"'.<sup>425</sup>

Whether the existence of a civil service system and bureaucratic apparatus is enough to endow the Merovingian kingdoms with the term 'state' is a controversial issue. Ian Wood, for instance, avoids the term altogether; his handbook on Merovingian history sticks to the more neutral word 'kingdom' (*regnum*). Alexander Murray, on the other hand, strongly favours the term, although he explicitly sidesteps discussing the terminological problems and asks his readers to make up their own minds whether his description of Merovingian administration deserves to be called a state (implying the affirmative).<sup>426</sup> Critics might argue that the term is completely anachronistic for any early Medieval polity. For one, early medieval sources do not use the word 'state' or an analogous term. One solution, then, is for the modern scholar to solely use contemporary concepts, such as *regnum*. This solves little: to understand *their* conceptual framework we must invariably turn to our own vocabulary. Better to clarify our terminology, and see if our concept of state is applicable to medieval societies. This is no easy feat, however, since 'state' is one of those nebulous words where no one seems to agree on its real meaning.<sup>427</sup> A range of various characteristics could be summed up as elements commonly seen as marking statehood: a monopoly on legitimate violence; a concept of public power; a centralised authority; a specialised and multi-tiered system of government; a class-based system of surplus extraction; a political community in a bounded territorial space subject to only one

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<sup>424</sup> Wood 1990, 81.

<sup>425</sup> Fouracre 1986, 43.

<sup>426</sup> Murray 2015, 191.

<sup>427</sup> For an overview of the concept of state and its development in anthropology, Claessen/Skálník 1978 remains useful. As a working definition of the early state they offer 'the early state is the organization for the regulation of social relations in a society that is divided into two emergent social classes, the rulers and the ruled.' Furthermore, the early state has a sufficient number of people to allow for social stratification, citizenship is determined by residence of birth in a given territory, government is centralised and enforced by threat of force, is independent and able to prevent fissure, surplus production is sufficient to sustain state organisation, rulers and ruled can be distinguished and a common ideology exists (1978, 21). At least in this limited definition, the Merovingian polity seems to me to qualify to the definition of 'early state' (cf. Wickham 2005, 57), but this remains controversial among medieval historians (see below).

government.<sup>428</sup> And so on. While formalised hierarchies and elaborate bureaucracies may all be familiar elements of modern states, (early) medieval polities often fail to meet such stringent expectations. In a world where the boundary between public and private authority was fuzzy, where central authorities had great difficulty enforcing their rule on the ground, and where borders and territories constantly shifted, the concept of state can seem out of place.<sup>429</sup>

One can wonder whether it is fair to compare medieval kingdoms with the modern nation-state. Even in the modern world, states can be less effective than they imagine themselves to be on paper, as proven by the existence of black markets of slum neighbourhoods where police forces dare not enter. Furthermore, there is hardly an acceptable substitute for the term state that can help us describe early medieval polities; Patrick Wormald has consequently suggested to speak of 'a state' but not 'the State'.<sup>430</sup> Perhaps a more flexible approach is appropriate; James Scott suggests seeing the state not as an either/or, but as an institutional continuum.<sup>431</sup> Chris Wickham takes a similar approach for early Medieval world, making a distinction between 'strong' and 'weak' states. The former were able to levy taxes in order to finance standing armies (such as the Late Roman Empire), whereas the latter were not (Frankish Gaul). Yet, in both types, Wickham suggests, elites wielded personal power only because they could legitimate it through an ideological connection with the public sphere of power.<sup>432</sup> For now, the 'state' can best be qualified as a multi-tiered, extractive and redistributive apparatus of rule with an ideological distinction between legitimate public authority and private, personal power. From this more limited definition, the Merovingian *regna* within the bureaucratic concept of society can and should be designed as states, since the reappraisal of the written sources has led many scholars to reconsider Merovingian administration and government as rather more developed and effective than conventional scholarship had traditionally assumed. A few examples will have to suffice here.

Perhaps the most optimistic outlook on Merovingian governance can be found in Murray's work. In a summarising article on state and administration, he forcefully argues

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<sup>428</sup> Examples from Pohl 2006, 10; Wickham 2005, 57; Strayer 2005, 10.

<sup>429</sup> For an overview on the debates between medieval historians surrounding the concept of state, see Pohl 2006; Wormald 2006; Meyer 2010.

<sup>430</sup> Wormald 2006, 189.

<sup>431</sup> In the words of Scott: "That is, "stateness", in my view, is an institutional continuum, less an either/or proposition than a judgement of more or less. A polity with a king, specialized administrative staff, social hierarchy, a monumental center, city walls, and tax collection and distribution is certainly a "state" in the strong sense of the term". Scott 2017, 23.

<sup>432</sup> Wickham 2005, 56-57; Wickham 2001, 3-4. Wickham (2005, 57) defines public power as 'ruling system ideologically separable from the ruled population from the individual rulers themselves'. That is to say, for instance, the king as ruler of the kingdom, a public duty, is to be distinguished from the king as owner of his own private domains (the royal fisc).

against what he calls grand narratives of primitivism and barbarism.<sup>433</sup> Thus, he starts by countering the common perspective that Merovingian kingship was representative of an archaic form of Germanic pagan sacral kingship, claiming instead that it was a secular institution. For Murray, Clovis and his descendants inherited the political practices and institutions of the Late Roman provinces and cities. The central authority was based in the royal courts, with governmental duties delegated to a large variety of appointed officials, such as treasurers (*thesaurii*), secretaries (*cancelarii*), chamberlains (*cubicularii*), counts of the palace (*comes palatii*) and so on. Regional administration was based upon the *civitas*, with appointed counts (*comites*) acting as local representatives of the king, overseeing justice, raising levies and collecting taxes with a small cadre of public servants. Contact between central and regional authorities was maintained through the use of written documents produced at the king's chancelleries and legal courts.<sup>434</sup> To sum up, in Murray's account the Merovingian king seems to have been an effective lawmaker and statesman: 'Merovingian governance fitted readily within a late antique context, deriving its forms from its immediate late Roman past [...] The modern conceit that it must have been weaker and less organized than its predecessor (and successor) is best left for the moment in aeternum'.<sup>435</sup>

Murray is a particularly outspoken representative of the bureaucratic paradigm, though he is by no means the only one. While Wood is much more careful to avoid value judgements, he also sees a continuity of (very) late Roman legal and administrative practices in sixth-century Gaul, including the levying of tolls and the raising of *civitas* militias.<sup>436</sup> Likewise, according to Patrick Geary, Clovis inherited Syagrius' provincial Gallo-Roman administration: 'the written word was vital in the administration of the Merovingian realm because the late Roman tax system, a fundamental aspect of royal power, continued to function, and accurate control of taxation meant reliance on paperwork'.<sup>437</sup> Similarly, Yitzhak Hen emphasises the continuity between the Roman and Merovingian *palatium*. Just as ambitious elites in the late Roman period had flocked to the provincial and imperial courts to further their careers, so the Merovingian royal court was the place where elites secured their role as military retainers or high bureaucrats.<sup>438</sup> According to Hen, the royal

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<sup>433</sup> Murray 2015, 191-192.

<sup>434</sup> Murray 2015, passim. The *civitas* could be further subdivided into the *pagi*, but it is my impression that these only gain in significance in the seventh century, following Loseby's thesis of a ruralisation of Merovingian politics and administration.

<sup>435</sup> Murray 2015, 231. See also his review of the most recent edition of the Merovingian *diplomata* by Kölzer, where he criticises the prevailing paradigm of 'moribund public administration [...] linked to the common, but flawed, notion that Merovingian kings represent the emergence of primitive, personal modes of rulership'; Murray 2005, 261.

<sup>436</sup> Wood 1994a, 60-63.

<sup>437</sup> Geary 1988, 92

<sup>438</sup> Hen 2020, 231.

court of the Merovingians housed key administrative institutions; the royal chancery, the royal treasury, the high court of justice, and the royal council. Most of these were modelled directly on Roman imperial predecessors.<sup>439</sup>

One element in particular deserves special interest; the ability of the Merovingian kings to raise taxes. After all, without the ability to finance bureaucrats and soldiers, it would be premature indeed to speak of a state. It is sometimes thought that taxation in Merovingian Gaul was on the decline or nearly absent.<sup>440</sup> That elements of a tax-system survived at least into the sixth century is beyond doubt and well-recorded in the sources.<sup>441</sup> Proponents of the continuist school of thought are, on the whole, quite optimistic about the survival of the Roman tax system far into the Middle Ages. According to Jürgen Strothmann, evidence for continuity of the Roman fiscal system can be found in the so-called *monetarii*-coins. This peculiar type of coins are gold tremisses produced only in Gaul between circa 585 and 670. What makes them unique is their inscription mentioning a place and the name of the moneyer (*monetarius*). Usually, these *monetarii* are thought to be “private” persons issuing their own coins in the absence of a centrally regulated monetary system. By contrast, Strothmann argues that the *monetarii* were agents of the state, with the fiscal system operating on a local level subdivided into the old Roman *civitas*-system. The locations mentioned on the coins’ inscriptions, Strothmann speculates, were not mint-places, but rather the sources of tax gold taken to a central place to be melted down.<sup>442</sup>

Similarly, in his *Les finances publiques de Diocletian aux Carolingiens (284-889)*, historian Jean Durliat concludes that the fiscal system remained relatively stable and unchanged in the many centuries between Diocletian and Charlemagne, in particular on

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<sup>439</sup> Hen 2020, 224-227.

<sup>440</sup> e.g. Wickham 2005, 108: ‘Tax had probably become a marginal imposition by the 570s’; or Wormald 2005, 601: ‘post-Roman government cannot be called bureaucratic. Hence, kings were no longer equipped to tax as emperors had, and were beholden to an aristocracy whose idea of patronage was not office but land’.

<sup>441</sup> Two well-known anecdotes come from Gregory of Tours. In one, Parthenius the tax-collector under king Theudebert is lynched by an unruly mob in a church in Trier, supposedly because he levied taxes over the Franks [*Franci*]. In another story, two tax-collectors travel to Poitiers to renew the tax-lists [*populus censum*] and subsequently travel to Tours. Here, Gregory himself objects and points that the town of Tours has previously gained immunity by royal decree on the grounds of St. Martin. Greg Hist 3.36; 9.30. Both passages can be read to indicate widespread aversion towards taxation and thus decline in the fiscal system. Exactly the opposite is true to my mind; we see the royal dedication to keeping up tax-registers and sending tax-collectors. Gregory is of course a hostile witness in this case and hence portrayed tax-collection in a very negative light. See Wood 1994a, 62-63. Tax-evasion is nothing new for the Early Middle Ages and was a frequent occurrence in the Roman Empire too. See, for instance, the phenomenon of *anachoresis* in Roman Egypt, with peasants fleeing their home villages in order to evade taxes: Link 1993.

<sup>442</sup> Strothmann 2020, 799-808. Cf. Strothmann 2012; 2017. A problem with Strothmann’s model is how to explain the period before 585, exactly when the *civitas* plays a central role according to literary texts, whereas it supposedly declines after 585, especially when the *monetarius*-coin starts to emerge (cf. Loseby 2020). In contrast to Loseby, Strothmann places the decline of the *civitas-centre* later in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, around 670 when coinage changes in character. For a contrasting interpretation of the *monetarius*-coins, see Theuvs 2018, 55-57.

the level of ordinary peasants who bore the burden of paying their age-old dues to changing masters.<sup>443</sup> While Durliat's thesis remains controversial, there is now more widespread consensus that at least some elements of the Roman tax system survived. Stefan Esders traces a number of Late Roman fiscal practices into the Carolingian period. One example of this is the *paraveredus*, the obligation placed upon some landowners to supply the Roman state with horses for use in the state's courier system, the *cursus publicus*. Instances of the *paraveredus* are documented as late as the ninth century, where it seems to have survived as a due owed by some peasants to their manorial landlords.<sup>444</sup> Thus, while the *paraveredus* ultimately was transformed from a public tax to (for lack of better word) a "feudal" obligation by the post-Carolingian age, its survival is testament to the perseverance, if transformed, of Roman fiscal institutions well into the Medieval period. As Esders concludes about this and other 'öffentliche Abgaben': "[...] das römische Imperium seinen Nachfolgern in großer Zahl nützliche, einträgliche und delegierbare Regierungsinstrumente hinterlassen hatte."<sup>445</sup> Yet, caution must be taken, because the example of the *paraveredus* also highlights a different aspect, namely the transformation of fiscal revenues in exchange for a system based on obligations and dues. Thus, many scholars today remain of the opinion that the Merovingians almost completely abandoned taxation, at least in the Roman form of *capitatio/iugatio*.<sup>446</sup>

Directly related to the state's ability to muster taxes is its ability to raise a military force. One way to have an army is to pay a salaried and professional military force. Alternatively, another way to maintain a military is simply to transmute monetary transaction, wages, into payment in kind; preferably land. This custom was already prevalent in the late Roman Empire, which frequently endow soldiers, usually of "barbarian" background, with a piece of land in return for the soldier's obligation to military service. According to Walter Goffart, this became the basis of a general military duty for all "free" Franks in the Merovingian and Carolingian periods. Theoretically, every Frankish male was expected to serve in the fighting force, but the burden was distributed according to wealth. Thus, a group of poor farmers could cooperate to equip one of them for war, whereas a rich farmer was expected to bring his own horse and armour. To calculate this, the state made a catalogue of peasant wealth in terms of *mansus*, recorded in the Carolingian

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<sup>443</sup> Durliat 1990, 185-187; 285-290.

<sup>444</sup> Esders 2009, 191-205.

<sup>445</sup> Esders, 2009, 244.

<sup>446</sup> E.g. Wood (2023, 566) argues that, except for tolls, almost no taxation was enacted. Instead, the court lived off fiscal land, the bureaucracy was small and the army unpaid (i.e. a transfer from taxes to an obligation of able-bodied free males to serve in the army). Because soldiers and magnates were often rewarded with land rather than money, there was another impetus to abandon taxation. Cf. Wickham's (2005, 56-59) division into strong and weak states.

polyptiques.<sup>447</sup> Thus, in Goffart's argument, in Merovingian Gaul a large portion of the late Roman monetary tax had transformed into military service, but the underlying fiscal infrastructure that allocated the share of the burden remained more or less the same, implying 'the existence of a more law-based and administrative royal government than the Franks are often thought to have had'.<sup>448</sup>

Who was the ruling class in this Merovingian bureaucracy? Within this more institutionalising perspective of Merovingian politics, the composition of the 'elite' can be ambiguous, with various possible perspectives. Murray, for instance, freely uses the words 'aristocracy' and 'nobility' (interchangeably), noting that the magnates of Merovingian Gaul could have their power derived from both birth and royal service.<sup>449</sup> Here, there is an overlap with the feudal concept outlined above. Alternatively, the elites could be seen as subservient to the state. That is, royal service, not birth, was ultimately the cause of high status. This has traditionally been argued for by Alexander Bergengruen, who thought the conspicuous absence of a legally defined aristocracy of birth meant that the Merovingian elite should instead be considered as an 'aristocracy of service' or *Dienstadel*, at least before the seventh century.<sup>450</sup> Similarly, Halsall has argued that the power and status of elite local families were precarious and could only be maintained through service for the state.<sup>451</sup> Essentially, the question becomes whether one needed an 'aristocratic ticket' to enter royal service, whether elite status was only open to a "landed gentry", if you will. Or, alternatively, if the Merovingian state was more open to "social climbers", meaning a more open "aristocracy of service" as Halsall suggests. I will argue for the latter to be the case, below in chapter five.

So far, I have neglected the role of the church in my discussion of Merovingian society. This is, admittedly, somewhat inexcusable, considering the great import of ecclesiastical institutions and persons in the early medieval world. However, the church is not an isolated phenomenon, and for a large part the ecclesiastical elite networks overlapped with the secular elite during the Merovingian period.<sup>452</sup> Most scholars, even those who would not at all believe in continuity of the Roman state structures in Frankish Gaul, stress the survival of Roman bureaucratic elements within the ecclesiastic sphere. I see this 'temple society', where bishops and monks continue to fulfil the administrative roles of

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<sup>447</sup> Goffart 2008; Esders 2009, 206-234.

<sup>448</sup> Goffart 2008, 167; for an overview on the Merovingian military, see Sarti 2020. Briefly, the Merovingian military did not consist of a professional, standing army, but rather of temporary levies (Sarti 2020, 262). Sarti (2020, 267-268) follows Bernard Bachrach's thesis that Merovingian military organisation shows continuity with late Roman army practices, in particular those of the fifth-century in which the standing army devolved.

<sup>449</sup> Murray 2015, 208.

<sup>450</sup> Bergengruen 1958, 182-185.

<sup>451</sup> Halsall 2012, 288.

<sup>452</sup> See also below, chapter five.

their Roman secular precursors, as a variation on the bureaucratic concept.<sup>453</sup> In one version, it could be applied exclusively to the ecclesiastical sphere, with the secular state being largely supplanted by the church.<sup>454</sup> Alternatively the church can be seen as a parallel bureaucratic structure working in tandem with the Merovingian state.<sup>455</sup> Merovingian government scarcely knew a division between church and state.<sup>456</sup> The latter option fits better, in my opinion, within the overall framework of the bureaucratic concept. It is, after all, no coincidence that the church with its surviving records has often been seen as a shining light of written culture in a world barbaric illiteracy. Church archives and ecclesiastical authors dominate the written record for the early medieval world. The bureaucratic concept of society as a whole recognises that, to speak in archaeological terms, the formation processes of our textual records heavily favour ecclesiastical archives which have had the benefit of institutional continuity (monasteries and abbeys, especially from the seventh century onwards), whereas the fate of secular institutions has throughout the last fifteen centuries been a lot more volatile.<sup>457</sup> After all, for a sixth-century archival text to survive, we depend on the monks of the Carolingian Age and beyond to be interested in its reproduction. Thus, we should *probably* infer that the same level of textuality and bureaucracy visible for ecclesiastical archives presumably *also* existed in the textually much more obscure secular sphere of kings, dukes, counts and so on. The relative dearth of evidence makes it difficult to corroborate or disprove this model conclusively.

To my mind, the bureaucratic concept is the most fruitful of the three concepts outlined so far. It sidesteps some of the traditional assumptions held by the feudal and the heroic concept and builds on much of the innovative work done in the field of Late Antiquity and the ‘Transformation of the Roman World’-school of thought. However, there are some problems too. First of all, with much of our source material being scarce and ambiguous, it is hard to gauge how effective the post-Roman state was in bringing its ideological aims into practice. Are we truly to believe that the Merovingian kingdoms

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<sup>453</sup> The phrase ‘temple society’ is coined for the early medieval world by Ian Wood (again), borrowing the concept from the history of southern India. He sets out his image of a Merovingian temple society in a 2021 article, where he speculates that by the seventh century as much as one-third of all cultivatable land belonged to the church, granted to sustain its ritual and personnel needs, as well as requirements for charity towards the poor. He estimates a number of about 248,000 ecclesiastics (priests, monks, nuns and lower clergy) for the entire early medieval West!

<sup>454</sup> This is the position Wood takes, seeing the church supplant an increasingly hollowed out secular state: ‘in 300 the Roman empire was primarily organized around the demands of the state: by contrast, the seventh-century west, [...] was organized to a significant extent around the demands of the church’; Wood 2021, 466; cf. Wickham who sees a retreat of civilian literary life into the ecclesiastic sphere: Wickham 2005, 175-176.

<sup>455</sup> As in the parallel roles, sometimes overlapping and sometimes competing, of count and bishop on the *civitas*-scale. E.g. Murray 2015, 220.

<sup>456</sup> Wood 2023, 564, 571.

<sup>457</sup> W.C. Brown 2002, 338.

retained the state power of the Late Roman power? If so, then it is remarkable that we can find so little of its state apparatus in the archaeology. Surely, we would expect to see some of its Romanising grandiosity preserved in the archaeological record? Another more fundamental problem is the one that I already hinted at in the introduction. To many of the proponents of the bureaucratic model, state power is implicitly equated with progress and prosperity; Germanicist readings are derided for being too primitivist.<sup>458</sup> But the bureaucratic concept risks going too far the other way in its Romanist reading. In a response to Strothmann, Theuws has criticised this kind of back-and-forth about whether Merovingian Gaul was more ‘Roman’ or more ‘Germanic’ as a misguided attempt to place Merovingian society along a ‘civilization ruler’ (*Zivilisationsgrad*), with a society having a more organised state with formal institutions being considered more advanced. Furthermore, Theuws also warns that while our sources may well use the same (or similar) Latin concepts as the Romans did, they need not have described the same social reality in the real world.<sup>459</sup> Another problem is geographical; to what extent do Merovingian sources, originating mostly from central and southern Gaul, accurately describe the social realities of northern Gaul or across the Rhine? Thus, attestations for the existence of municipal archives exist exclusively for cities on or south of the Seine.<sup>460</sup> I will return to this question in chapter four when considering the whereabouts of Merovingian kings. Perhaps the biggest fault is the bureaucratic concept is its solipsism. The heavy focus on textuality risks overlooking the world outside of texts, to which historians have no access. It reproduces the reality, or desired reality, of the state, which employs texts to tax, administrate and legitimise its own existence. Textuality as the product of the state provides only a one-sided window on reality. Yet the world outside of the royal court and the bishop’s temple may look vastly different for those people whose lives were not recorded by documents, or who actively sought to escape the grasp of the state’s administration. As James Scott points out in the *Art of not being governed*, if texts are a weapon of the state, then it is the job of the peasant to stay out of the archive.<sup>461</sup>

This smaller, more local and more rural world is hard to access for historians, and more easily studied by archaeologists. Although even here a bottom-up interpretation is still an entanglement between scholarly imagination and textual representation. Let us now leave the warmth of the palace hall and journey to the peasant’s village green.

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<sup>458</sup> Take Murray, who polemises against the anthropological comparison by Régine le Jan between Merovingian and African sacral kingship; Murray 2015, n. 35.

<sup>459</sup> Theuws 2018, n. 169. On the problem of trying to grade a society along a level of “civilization”, see the introduction to this book, section 1.3.

<sup>460</sup> Barbier 2014, 17; 169.

<sup>461</sup> Scott 2009, 34.

### 3.6. Communal society

The final concept of society I will discuss has received the least serious attention in recent scholarship. In discussing it here, my goal is to convince the reader that this, too, is a valid (if not the only) perspective of imagining early medieval societies. If the previous models emphasised hierarchical modes of social organisation, this one sees a quasi-egalitarian social structure and starts from the bottom up. It has taken various names and guises in the historiography, such as “primitive” democracy and “primitive” communism. As we will see, the concept has the tendency to be somewhat romanticised and therefore oft-discarded by more sober historians and archaeologists. I believe a more nuanced and realistic version of the concept can be salvaged, using anthropological and medieval comparisons.

Since the Enlightenment, some scholars have seen early Germanic societies as ‘free’ or even ‘democratic’. Ancient notions of freedom were then teleologically held to be the origin of modern political liberty, as when Montesquieu in his 1748 *De l’esprit des lois* asserted the ancient woods of Germania to have been the birthplace of his own England’s mixed constitution.<sup>462</sup> Some English historians, for their part, also saw the Germanic love of freedom as a quintessential part of their national character.<sup>463</sup> In Germany, early scholars of constitutional history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a broad caste of freemen (*Gemeinfreien*) as the basis of the social order.<sup>464</sup> To mention one prominent example: Georg Waitz in the first volume of his *Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte* (1844) saw free, landed farmers as the basis of an essentially democratic structure, enjoying the prerogative to elect chiefs and generals and gather at assemblies: ‘es war die Genossenschaft der durch Grundbesitz vollberechtigten Freien die die Gemeinde bildete, bei der alle politische Gewalt ihren Ausgang und Mittelpunkt hatte’.<sup>465</sup> The *locus classicus* of the Germanic *Urdemokratie* is a passage from Tacitus’ *Germania*, where the early Germanic custom of assembly is described. According to the Roman historian, the tribal assembly of the Germans was headed by influential chiefs (*principes*), priests (*sacerdotes*) and/or a king (*rex*), but consensus needed to be reached on major issues by the entire tribe:

About minor matters the chiefs deliberate, about the more important the whole tribe. The affair is always thoroughly discussed by the chiefs. [...] When the multitude think proper, they sit down armed. Silence is proclaimed by the priests, who have on these occasions the right of

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<sup>462</sup> Montesquieu 1899 (1784), transl. T. Nugent, 11.6, p. 161: ‘In perusing the admirable treatise of Tacitus “On the Manners of the Germans,” we find it is from that nation the English have borrowed the idea of their political government. This beautiful system was invented first in the woods.’ Cf. 11.8, p. 163.

<sup>463</sup> E.g. Green’s *A short history of the English people* (1915 (1874)), 2-4.

<sup>464</sup> Von Olberg 1991, 32-33. For a modern discussion on the concept of Germanic *Gemeinfreie*, see: Staab 1980.

<sup>465</sup> Waitz 1844, 178. Cf. Staab 1980, 54, 55. Waitz does emphasise the existence of a noble class, but one that does not have a special legal position nor exclusive political power.

keeping order. Then the king or the chief, according to age, birth, distinction in war, or eloquence, is heard, more because he has influence to persuade than because he has power to command. If his sentiments displease them, they reject them with murmurs; if they are satisfied, they brandish their spears.<sup>466</sup>

Similarly, and no doubt influenced by historians' interpretations of Tacitus, the idea of a free Germanic society subsequently entered the writings of Marx and Engels as the 'Germanic mode', a land-based economy characterised by free, independent landowners.<sup>467</sup> Or, in later Marxist historiography, the Germanic tribes before Tacitus' time shared everything in common. Thus, for instance, Perry Anderson:

A primitive communal mode of production prevailed among them. Private ownership of land was unknown: each year the leading men of a tribe would determine which part of the common soil was to be ploughed and would allocate sections of it to respective clans, who would till and appropriate the fields collectively: the periodic redistributions prevented great disparities of wealth between clans and households, although herds were privately owned and provided the wealth of the leading tribal warriors.<sup>468</sup>

For Anderson, the primitive mode was slowly abandoned by the Germanic tribes due to the outside influence of Roman imperialism, which introduced an elite warrior class fighting for and against the Roman army (in other words, the beginning of a 'heroic' society as described above).<sup>469</sup> However, in the tumult of barbarian migrations, an older Celtic landscape of 'primitive hamlets of huts and peasant dwellings' reappeared in Gaul, while Germanic migrants brought with them the tradition of communal village lands.<sup>470</sup> Moving from Marxist to anarchist theory, in *Mutual Aid*, Kropotkin describes the Migration Age as a transition from ancestral and communal clans to that of the 'village community'. In Kropotkin's village community, peasants shared access to common land, worked together on their fields, and assembled in the village folkmote to administer justice. For Kropotkin, the village was not just a settlement structure (and could, indeed, consist even of dispersed hamlets), but rather a social organisation uniting local peasant households who shared all

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<sup>466</sup> Tacitus, *Germania* 11, transl. Church/Brodribb 1868.

<sup>467</sup> In Maurice Bloch's interpretation of Marx's concept, touched upon only briefly in his notes or *Grundrisse*: 'The Germanic mode of production is characterized by a society made up of largely independent family groups, each of which forms a basic and complete productive unit. These independent family groups come together in assemblies for such things as war, religion, and the settlement of disputes, but they do not really form an organic whole', M. Bloch 2004 (1983), 35; cf. Wickham 1984, n. 26.

<sup>468</sup> Anderson 1974, 107.

<sup>469</sup> Anderson 1974, 107-109. See also E.A. Thompson's *The Early Germans* (1965). Thompson describes the early Germans in Caesar's time as relatively egalitarian: 'Differences of wealth among any one Germanic people were slight in Julius Caesar's time, and the private ownership of land was still unknown'; Thompson 1965, 8. However, by Tacitus' time a century later, a noble class with warrior retinues had begun to emerge.

<sup>470</sup> Anderson 1974, 123.

land in common.<sup>471</sup> No private ownership of land was known, since ‘wealth was conceived exclusively in the shape of *movable property*, including cattle, implements, arms, and the dwelling house which – “like all things that can be destroyed by fire” – belonged in the same category’.<sup>472</sup>

The modern reader may be alarmed, at this point, by the historiography outlined so far. The idea of a proto-democratic Germanic ‘race’ comes with heavy baggage, and tends to portray a romanticised image of the past in order to justify a modern political ideology, be it liberal, communist or anarchist. It also often shares a similar Germanic essentialism as the heroic prototype outlined above. More prudent historians of modern times have therefore unsurprisingly tended to dismiss the idea of Ur-Germanic liberty.<sup>473</sup> Partially, I suspect, this is a problem of terminology. A word like ‘democracy’ (or ‘communism’, for that matter) carries a heavy burden, coming with all the connotations and expectations of the modern day. Though, as Edward James admits, for nineteenth-century liberals the idea may not have been that far-fetched, considering what democracy meant in their context, namely ‘rule by propertied males’. If, when talking about ‘primitive democracy’, we exclude women, foreigners, the poor, slaves and freedmen, then the idea may warrant more serious attention.<sup>474</sup> Freedom and political agency in such a society would be the preserve of a relatively large group of free males, certainly comprising a much broader group than a privileged oligarchy. All in all, in relation to the total population, this group of privileged “citizens” would still be a minority group, although a sizeable one. This is not so different from that one famous democracy of the pre-modern world: classical Athens. There, the right to participate in the democratic assembly was similarly restricted to male, adult citizens, excluding the majority of Attica’s inhabitants. The similarities to Athenian democracy may only go so far, since Athens had a full-fledged democratic constitution and experimented rigorously with institutional reforms to enable a radical form of direct democracy (for its time).<sup>475</sup> In any case, it is best to leave aside the term ‘democracy’ when

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<sup>471</sup> Kropotkin 1955 (1914), 115-153. While outdated, Kropotkin’s narrative remains an inspiring and optimistic account of semi-egalitarian village life, taking anthropological examples not just from ancient *Germania*, but also from indigenous communities of Russia and Africa in his own time. For a modern analysis of Kropotkin’s theory in *Mutual Aid*, see De Geus 2014.

<sup>472</sup> Kropotkin 1955 (1914) 124.

<sup>473</sup> E.g., “Die germanische Urdemokratie” is a romantic fiction without any foundation in reliable sources’, Hansen 1976, 116

<sup>474</sup> James 1988, 216.

<sup>475</sup> Although seemingly, only a fraction of the politically enfranchised physically attended the assembly. See Hansen 1976.

discussing the Early Middle Ages,<sup>476</sup> in order to avoid the high expectations, or apprehensions, that may come with such a loaded term.

‘Communalism’, in my opinion, is the most neutral term to describe what I mean here. Communal in the sense of ‘participated in or shared by the whole community or by members of a group; owned in common; collective’.<sup>477</sup> It is cognate with community, but also, common, commoner, commune and communism, all of which are related terms. Community, as a word, itself comes from (late) medieval Latin *communitas*, denoting originally ‘joint possession or use’ but evolved in the late Middle Ages, by extension, to mean ‘body of people who live in the same place’, in other words, society.<sup>478</sup> As used here, the communal concept denotes a horizontal type of social organisation, where political agency, at least on a local scale, is shared by a large group of theoretically equal and free members of society. I want to stress, however, that a communal society is *not* an egalitarian society. While the privileged class of stakeholders is far too large to deserve the name of aristocracy, this does not mean that the right to participate was extended to every member of society, far from it. Yet, overall, the communal society is a ‘free’ society, to a *certain extent* autonomous from outside interference (but see below), or even self-regulating. The communal model as I formulate it has the following characteristics. First, the mode of production is often centered on the household, without systematic surplus production or extraction.<sup>479</sup> Secondly, it is acephalous (that is, without a head). Power is instead decentralised among a broad in-group of theoretically equal members of the community. Third, communal organisation is self-governing, based on an understanding of the common good.<sup>480</sup> Fourth, the resulting social structure is not pyramidal, but can best be visualised as an ‘inverted pear’.

First, let me sketch the economic basis, and thus the relations of production that, from a materialist perspective, shape the social universe. I build my model on Wickham’s ideal type of the ‘peasant mode of production’ and Marshall Sahlins’s ‘domestic mode of production’.<sup>481</sup> In the peasant mode, to follow Wickham’s terminology, the household is the

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<sup>476</sup> Even though communal forms of self-government from Medieval Europe deserve more attention in the history of modern democracy than they often currently receive, compared to the much-lauded Athenian democracy.

<sup>477</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. ‘communal’, seen 11-2-2022.

<sup>478</sup> Idem.

<sup>479</sup> Although in practice this might not always be the case, where the communal society, for instance, intersects the feudal one, or when market forces manage to penetrate rural society.

<sup>480</sup> Cf. De Geus 2014, 862.

<sup>481</sup> Wickham 2005, 537-540. Wickham’s peasant mode is in turn based on economic anthropology of non-state societies, such as Marshall Sahlins’s ‘Domestic mode of production’ which covers mostly hunter-gatherer societies; cf. Sahlins 1974, 41-101.

basic unit of production.<sup>482</sup> Nevertheless, households are not autarkic islands but are linked together in a system of mutual support. During a bad harvest, say, the more fortuitous neighbour helps out the unlucky one, or one household may specialise in a craft to exchange one good with another. Exchange between households does not follow market logic but is reciprocal and socially embedded. Household production is aimed at subsistence, not at generating surpluses; peasants prefer having more leisure time over more labour, as long as subsistence needs are met, even when working harder would result in greater economic output – Alexander Chayanov’s principle Labour-Consumer balance.<sup>483</sup> Without surplus accumulation, there is no economic basis for any one household to gain a permanent position of power, especially since what little surplus is produced is often shared with the community. Nevertheless, status can still be accrued, for instance through gift-giving or leadership capabilities, but one’s rank can never be taken for granted or simply inherited.

In brief, the relations of production in the peasant mode prevent the steep accumulation of wealth, and thus differential access to wealth between households.<sup>484</sup> While the fortunes of individual families may rise or fall, say due to a missed harvest or having too many children, levelling mechanisms ought to prevent wealth differentials from becoming too great. The household internally is not an egalitarian unit, however. We can assume that generally women held less power than men, and that many, if not most, households had (semi-)unfree members – slaves, dependents, clients – helping out with housekeeping or working on the fields. We can assume also that for many early medieval societies the *pater familias* was at the top of the household hierarchy, followed by the eldest son or brother. In other words, the ‘free man’ is the head of his household, but he is theoretically an equal member in a broad peer group of other free male household heads. In some cases, perhaps, the community of households may be linked through kinship bonds,

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<sup>482</sup> For Wickham, the peasant mode was present in early medieval Europe in two forms, its ‘tribal form’ in northern Europe, as well as in the marginal, wooded or mountainous areas of the continent. In addition, in those areas where a feudal economy was present (such as Gaul), he speculates there to have been patches of the peasant mode as islands within a sea of the feudal mode. In other words, landlords had not yet been able to fully subjugate every peasant community, some isolated free villages may have been like Asterix and Obelix holding their inevitable feudal conquerors at bay. Wickham 2005, 540-542.

<sup>483</sup> Chayanov 1966 (1925), 76-78. According to Wickham (2005, 537-539), a lack of surplus means no demand for artisanal goods. Note that this means there is, theoretically, little room for economic growth since there are no incentives for growth. Although, as mentioned in the introduction of the current book, an important critique to be made here is that Wickham underestimates a peasant’s need to accumulate surplus for the ritual fund. This can be reconciled with the ‘domestic’ or ‘peasant’ mode by acknowledging that the rituals are a basic necessity to uphold the socio-cosmological order, and can therefore be seen as part of a household’s needs. A ‘surplus’, for lack of better term, is only generated to meet these needs, *not* to accumulate more wealth for its own sake. Nevertheless, this ritual demand for goods would create at least some economic growth.

<sup>484</sup> In theory, at least. I do not wish to claim that in reality some families may have been better off than others, but differences in wealth would be a lot less sharp than under the feudal or capitalist mode and certainly insufficient to allow for social stratification.

whether real or imagined. If so, then the social order might have characteristics of what anthropologists sometimes call a 'segmentary society', in which the household head is responsible for the domestic domain, but the collective of household heads, or the most respectable among them, such as the elders, make decisions for the community as a whole. In other cases, the shared belief in a common good is sufficient to glue a community together and for households to cooperate.

Following this, the community of householders, 'free men', 'good men', and so on, are, to a certain extent, self-governing and self-organising with the ideological purpose of ensuring the common good. Instances of these are plenty throughout prehistory and medieval history. Kropotkin calls these institutions of mutual aid; 'the tribe, the village community, the guilds, the mediaeval city'.<sup>485</sup> In these institutions, theoretically, equal rights-holders met in general assembly to manage their affairs, solve disputes and reach consensus. Perhaps such a description might fit, for better or worse, to early medieval communities such as the *civitas* and the *pagus*.

I want to dwell here for a moment on the Late Middle Ages, where examples are particularly well documented. 'City air makes free'; well-known are the autonomous late Medieval cities, where free burghers enjoyed the privilege of self-government without the meddling of feudal lords. In practice, many such cities were run by the wealthiest and most influential burgers who formed an oligarchy, but they nevertheless formed a successful counter-structure to the hierarchical feudal system of lords and subservient peasants. Such free 'republics' or communes, were not restricted to cities alone, but could also be found in the countryside.<sup>486</sup> One example is that of late medieval Friesland, where rural communes of hereditary owners of farmsteads, noble and non-noble, were organised into village communes, and above them, so-called *communitates terrae*. No count or duke presided over these lands, rather the *terrae* were self-organised and managed by the communal assembly and the communal court. Historian Peter Blickle has coined this type of social organisation as 'communalism' – the terminological similarity to my 'communal' model is intentional.<sup>487</sup> Both the urban burgher and the rural peasant were the 'common man' (*Gemeiner Mann*), employed in respectable labour that enabled them to maintain their household. The community, as a body politic, was an association of householders who maintained peace for the 'common good'. In a commune, members shared equal rights and obligations, and partook in communal institutions. The (leading) householders self-regulated the administration of justice, determined their own affairs in public assemblies, elected or appointed public officials when necessary, and distributed access to common goods. For

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<sup>485</sup> Kropotkin 1955 (1914), xvii.

<sup>486</sup> See also Curtis 2013, 234-240.

<sup>487</sup> The difference is that Blickle's communalism describes a system of political assembly specific to the period and area he studies.

Blickle, the commune was a particular historical development of the Late Middle Ages, a reaction to the feudal order, but nevertheless working in symbiosis with the territorial state. Many of the communes he studied were formally part of the Holy Roman Empire, their freedom theoretically guaranteed by the Emperor, and were therefore not an antithesis to the state.<sup>488</sup>

Another type of communal self-organisation is both older and far more ubiquitous than Blickle's communalism; that of the commons. Commons are property held in common by a group of rights-holders, such as land for agricultural or pastoral use shared between households. Economist Elinor Östrom has done much to clarify the workings of the commons. The old idea, that of the 'tragedy of the commons', which states that individual self-interest depletes and harms collective property, has been powerfully debunked by her research. Instead, she has demonstrated that commons throughout history tended to be self-governed in ways that ensured their sustainability and equitable use.<sup>489</sup> Note that common land is not necessarily 'public land'; there is an exclusive group of rights-holders that need not include the entire community. Furthermore, the moment they enter our historical record, frequently in the later Middle Ages, there may well be competing claims by feudal landlords.<sup>490</sup> However, the right-holders have equal legal rights to use the commons' resources and to participate in its governance. According to Susan Oosthuizen, many examples of 'common property regimes' can be found throughout prehistoric and medieval Europe. An interesting example to name here is that of commons found in East-Anglian wetlands in early Medieval Britain, used for grazing animals.<sup>491</sup> This would have been contemporary to the Merovingian period studied here, under similar cultural conditions and in a wet landscape not very different from those found in part of my research area, especially in modern-day Netherlands and Flanders.

So far, I have emphasised the horizontal nature of the communal type, while also acknowledging that some inequalities were present. We must not be naïve and form a too rosy picture of medieval egalitarianism. The late medieval *commune* had beggars and the working poor rub shoulders on the street with opulently rich merchant burghers. Similarly, the village elder may overrule the young, or access to the commons may be restricted only to a small group of respectable farmers. Equality, in many cases, is more fiction than fact. Nevertheless, the 'communal' fiction is a powerful antidote to centralising tendencies that

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<sup>488</sup> For an introduction to the concept of communalism, and further references, see: Blickle 2009; Scribner 1994; Vries 2015. Of course, there was tension with the feudal order, as for instance visible in the frequent wars between the Frisians and the Counts of Holland; the emperor was not frequently in a position to intervene in such conflicts; e.g. t' Jong 2018, 238-240.

<sup>489</sup> Östrom 1990.

<sup>490</sup> See e.g. Kos 2004, 150 for an example from the Netherlands with the conflict between 'Wildernisregaal' and the common rights of rural dwellers.

<sup>491</sup> Oosthuizen 2013; Oosthuizen 2016.

shape the feudal, heroic and bureaucratic societies discussed above. There, the social structure looks like a pyramid, with classes stratified or ranked in a relative frequency inverse to their status, a broad base of commoners shoulders the burden that sustains the privilege of the happy few at the top. In the communal model, privilege is distributed more widely, but not necessarily to everyone equally. This social structure can best be described as having the shape of an inverted pear. This visualisation was first proposed by anthropologist Wayne Suttles in his ethnographic research on the Coast Salish people of the Northwest Coast of North America.<sup>492</sup> The Coast Salish studied by Suttles were an indigenous people who had a system of social differentiation but lacked any political centralisation. While many informants expressed the notion of a division into upper and lower classes, in reality it seemed that members of the “high-class” families were in the majority:

I suggest that the structure of native society was not that of a pyramid. There was no apex of nobles, medium-sized middle class, and a broad base of commoners. Instead, native society had more the shape of an inverted pear. The greater number of people belonged to an upper or respectable class, from which leaders of various sorts emerged on various occasions.<sup>493</sup>

The “high class” families justified their status through genealogy, as well as their knowledge of “advice”, which meant knowledge of one’s heritage, tradition and moral conduct, which the lower classes lacked. The lower classes included “worthless people”, such as refugees and the destitute, and beneath them slaves, often captured in war. Suttles’ work has been expanded upon by archaeologists Angelbeck and Grier, who have argued that this social process is visible in the record of cranial deformation among the Coast Salish. Where first only a small group in the burial record can be found with deformed skulls, a practice that may have served to mark young children as members of an elite class, the relative number of deceased with deformed skulls increased over time. Angelbeck and Grier explain this phenomenon as ‘an increase in the proportion of elite to nonelite individuals in Coast Salish society over time’, where more and more people appropriated the custom to signal their free status and resist centralising tendencies.<sup>494</sup>

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<sup>492</sup> Suttles 1958.

<sup>493</sup> Suttles 1958, 499-500.

<sup>494</sup> Angelbeck/Grier 2012, 559; cf. 556-568.

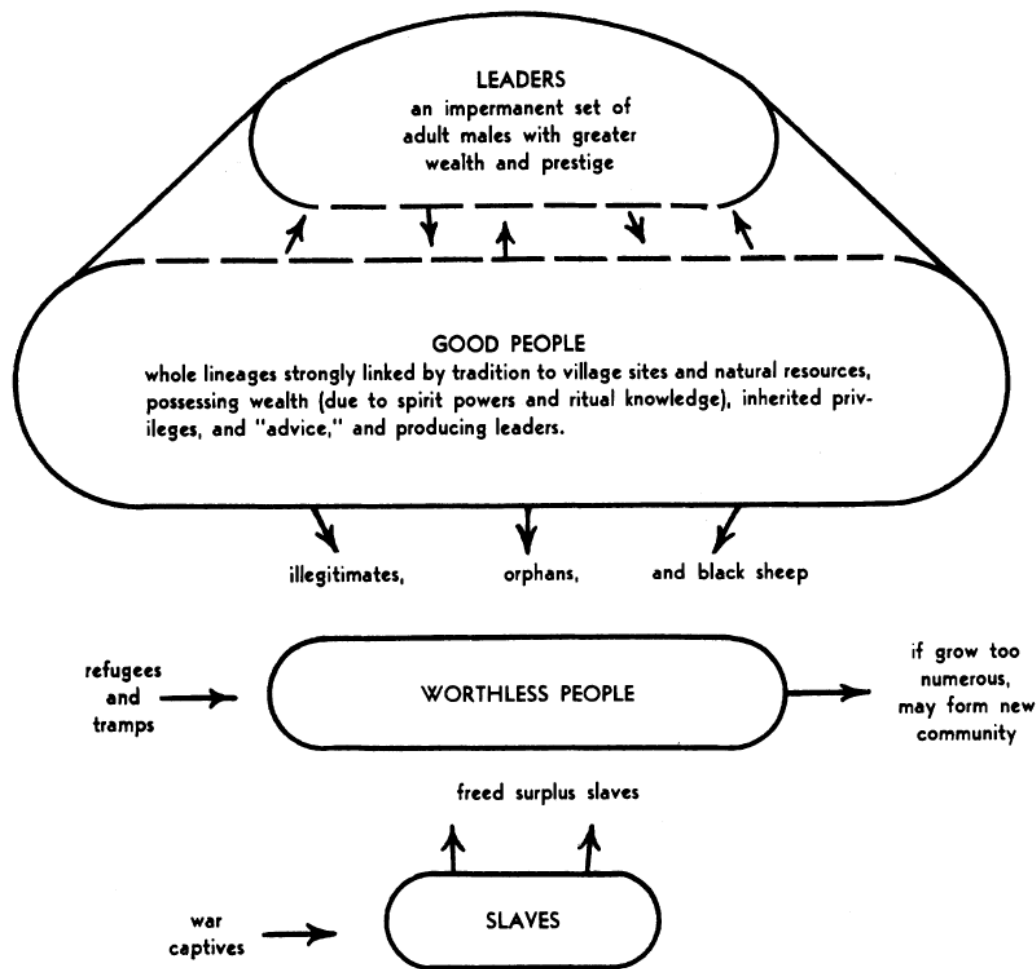


Figure 3.3. The inverted-pear model, displaying stratification in the Coast Salish community according to Suttles. Source: Suttles 1958, 504.

The Coast Salish defy the common dichotomy between hierarchical/horizontal, illustrating a middle-ground typology where social differentiation was present, but not pyramidal. Suttles' inverted pear provides us with a powerful visualisation of the communal model. The 'in-group' of equals, the heads of households, the commoners; they are the "good people" of Suttles' pear. The 'elite', in this model, is not set apart by birth but emerges from the same group of "good people" thanks to their wealth or prestige achieved in life. If any of them rises into a leadership position, they are, in Sahlin's terms, a big man; not a chief.

Certainly, Suttles' pear is not a perfect fit for most medieval societies, and elements of the communalist model may break down on further inspection. Yet, there may be a clear region where I believe this model more or less fits, namely medieval Iceland. I rely here on Jesse Byock's fascinating book titled *Viking Age Iceland*, which despite its name is not a general overview but a study of Iceland's socio-political organisation between the tenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>495</sup> Byock's central thesis is that the Icelandic 'Free State', founded by

<sup>495</sup> Byock 2001.

colonists from Viking Age Norway, mostly autonomous from their motherland, functioned essentially like a self-organising proto-democracy:

The society that evolved on this large island during the Viking Age avoided the establishment of most official hierarchies without going so far as to create egalitarianism. Consensus played a prominent role in decision-making, and Iceland's medieval governmental features find their roots in issues that specifically concerned the political and legal rights of free farmers.<sup>496</sup>

In a slight paradox to my model outlined so far, Iceland did have an elite group called *goðar* (conventionally translated as 'priest-chieftains'), who were not territorial lords and had only limited means to compel free landholding farmers, *bændr*, to do their bidding. Farmers entered a consensual patron-client relation of their own choosing with a *goði* as *thingmenn*, who represented them with their legal knowledge in disputes and at customary assemblies. The authority of the *goðar* was thus based on their knowledge of ritual and legal expertise, which they brought to bear in periodic local assemblies (the *várthing*) and the annual *Althing*, where chieftains with their followers from all over Iceland gathered in the open air to deliberate and speak law. The Icelandic *goðar*, unlike the contemporary lords of mainland Europe of the year 1000, did not rule over territorial units, nor did they have a monopoly over violence. Their authority was based in the first instance not in their genealogy, but on their legal acumen. Furthermore, the free farmers were organised into self-regulating communities or *hreppar*, meant to organise economic subsistence. Each *hreppr* was led by a committee of free farmers, who cooperated to control grazing land, organise labour, distribute resources and organise communal affairs such as poor relief and housing. In any case, Byock stresses the lateral, consensual nature of the power relationship between *goðar* and *thingmenn*. No systematic resource-extraction took place and social structure was fluid. The *goðar* were not a closed-off class but frequently intermarried with free farmers; a free farmer could become a chieftain, and a wealthy *bændr* could be as rich as a *goði*. Free farmers and chieftains both could have dependents, tenant farmers or slaves. Differentials in wealth were relatively small, and not a good proxy for status: 'The outward trappings of rank in Viking Age Iceland were so few that it is frequently difficult to determine whether a prominent individual was a chieftain or just a farmer'.<sup>497</sup> This is an important remark by Byock, and dispels the common archaeological instinct to equate wealth with rank. Likewise, it is nigh impossible to distinguish a chieftain's house from a farmer's house.

While not a perfect fit with the pear model described above, Iceland's social structure was certainly not pyramidal either. The *goðar* represent the 'leaders' of Suttles'

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<sup>496</sup> Byock 2001, 1.

<sup>497</sup> Byock 2001, 68.

pear, even though their status was more permanent than in his ethnographic sample, they were nevertheless relatively open to the large “middle class” of yeomen farmers. The ranks below them consisted of slaves, the landless and, apparently, fishermen; like in Suttle’s ethnography, Iceland was hierarchical, but not centralised. Similarly, Iceland knew self-organising proto-democratic institutions not unlike those of Blickle’s communalism (the Icelandic parliament is called the *Althing* to the current day), and the *hreppar* have the elements of Ostrom’s ‘commons property regime’.

In short, Viking Age Iceland may form an excellent case study of a medieval communal society and provide us with a crucial comparandum for a part of the Merovingian world. The contours of this kind of society may well be recognised in one of the oldest, yet most difficult to interpret sources we have for Merovingian Gaul: the *Lex Salica*. “Salic society”, as depicted in the law texts, is one of small-scale rural world populated by free farmers and husbandmen. There is little notion of hierarchy in the *Lex Salica*, although distinction is made between Frank and Roman, freemen or slave, man and woman, and child or adult. Law is spoken by so-called *Rachimburgi*, judges who may perhaps fit the Icelandic model of the *Goðar*.<sup>498</sup> We might find traces of it too in what we know of how local courts were run by the count, who had to gather and involve all the local landowners and was overseered by the *rachimburgi*.<sup>499</sup> We might also recognise the communal model perhaps in the archaeology, as when we see the relative egalitarianism in the structures of excavated settlements. Geldrop, discussed above in section 2.4, can be taken as an example (even if it ought to be dated exactly to the time of emerging aristocratic landholding); the house plots are of the same size, there is a clearly marked communal zone, with the “village ancestors” sharing a liminal zone between private yard and public space. A site like Geldrop invites us to think about the people who lived here in terms of community and cooperation rather than competition and coercion.

For now, it can be said that ideas found in older scholarship on proto-democracy and egalitarianism should not be dismissed too hastily, as long as some of the romantic excesses are pruned. As we will see, this bottom-up perspective on the written sources aligns well with new insights from archaeology.

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<sup>498</sup> The *Lex Salica*, it should be noted, is a controversial document which delivers considerable interpretative difficulties. For one, the dating is uncertain, with some going as far as claiming it is in essence a Late Roman (e.g. Poly 2016), not a Merovingian-period document. I follow Karl Ubl’s (2017) and Magali Coumert’s (2023) interpretation of the *Lex Salica* being essentially a composite document which makes it impossible to tie it to any one age. In that sense, I do not see the *Lex Salica* as a window on a particular time and place, but rather as a reflection of an idealised “Frankish” rural world at some point between the fourth and eighth centuries. For a description of rural life and the economy of Salic society, see Siems 1997.

<sup>499</sup> Fouracre 1986, 37, 40.

### 3.6. Synthesis: a heterarchic model

These four types I have charted in this chapter depict, in my opinion, and only imperfectly, the various ways in which early medieval societies have been conceived within (scholarly) imaginations. The feudal concept retrojects a high Medieval society back into the Merovingian past, one of land-based and birth-privileged lords and ladies. The heroic concept, on the other hand, is more a depiction of a proper ‘Dark Age’ society ruled by a warrior-aristocracy, where the bond between lord and follower is sustained through the exchange of valuable goods. In stark contrast to the personal relation between lord-retainer stands the institutional, bureaucratic concept that emphasises the continuity of the Roman state and its legalistic approach to power and authority; here, bearded warriors in the mead hall are replaced by appointed officials sitting at court in the *aula palatium*. Finally, the communal concept departs from strictly hierarchical depictions of early medieval society and imagines a more romantic, quasi-egalitarian, and even proto-democratic community of peers.

Concept of society	Social elite	Social status	Political economy	Power basis of the elite	Weberian type of authority
<b>Feudal</b>	Hereditary landowning class (aristocracy/nobility)	Stratified	Feudal mode of production	Land; birth	Traditional
<b>Heroic</b>	Warrior retinues ( <i>Gefolgschaft</i> )	Ranked and/or stratified	Prestige good economy	Gift	Charismatic
<b>Bureaucratic</b>	State officials (‘aristocracy of service’)	Ranked and/or stratified	Tributary mode of production (tax-based)	Office	Legal
<b>Communal</b>	Kinship heads, elders, informal leaders, etc.	Ranked	Domestic / Peasant mode of production	Prestige	Charismatic

*Table 3.1. Schematic overview of the four concepts of society, summarising the position of the social elite, the nature of their social status, their power basis, the resulting political economy and the corresponding Weberian type of authority.*

So, which model is it? Can we designate one concept as Truth, and disregard the others? On the contrary, none of these types has the sole monopoly on historical veracity. Each concept reveals how early medieval societies can appear in a different light, depending on the

perspective from which the scholar approaches the past and its evidence. That said, I have raised some strong criticisms towards both the feudal and the heroic concepts, mostly because I think they are over-represented and have held scholarly creativity at ransom. For the feudal model; yes, there is evidence for landholding; and thus a feudal mode of production; but this need not lead to the automatic conclusion that there was an aristocracy of land or birth. Rather than assuming the existence of a hereditary leisure class, the existence of a more open and informal elite class or '*Oberschicht*' is more probable. Similarly, the second model of a heroic society of aristocratic warrior-retainers relies too much on the construct of a timeless "Germanic" political society. It inherently presents a totalising model of elite-exchange of prestige goods in order to explain funerary archaeology, and relies both on one-sided assumptions about the nature of the burial ritual and on an ahistorical reading of deeply problematic texts such as Tacitus and Beowulf. However, this does not mean that there were no warrior elites, that honour – and therefore status – could *not* be gained in the warband. I claim only that this would not have been the only conceivable route to status; my issue lies with the scholarly superstructure that relies on a monocausal and asynchronic explanation for all primary evidence. There is no need to throw the baby out with the bath water. We will see that there clearly was a Merovingian ruling class constituted by *Königsnahe*; but Late Roman political success similarly required proximity to the imperial court. Elite gift exchange would definitely have played an important role in cementing social ties - but this is not unique to early Medieval society either.

I have been more positive concerning the 'bureaucratic' and the 'communal' model. The first, because I think a close reading of Merovingian sources must inevitably lead to the conclusion of the continued importance of the written word and Roman political culture and institutions under the Merovingian kings in Gaul to a greater degree than traditionally assumed. Whether this is enough to warrant the label of "state" is a more controversial, and also a semantic discussion. The second reason I have decided to advocate more positively for the bureaucratic concept is to challenge the archaeologist. This concept has been formulated first and foremost by historians, and builds on significant historiographical trends of the last few decades. There is a notable, and worrisome, disciplinary divide here, in the sense that the bureaucratic society has not, to my knowledge, found its way into archaeological literature. No doubt, this can be partially explained by the archaeological record, which seems at odds with the optimistic, Romanizing world of historians. If the Merovingian kingdoms were a continuation of the Roman state, where was its infrastructure of rule? Why can archaeologists not find their palaces and cities? This is a paradox that requires resolving in the remainder of this book. In the next chapter, I will return to this problem in a spatial sense; if there was a Merovingian bureaucratic polity,

where are its territorial and social limits? Did the bureaucratic world extend into northern Gaul, or was it a southern reality only?

Finally, I have advocated for the communal model. My justification here has been to try and salvage a workable model from 19<sup>th</sup>-century romantic ideas of proto-democracy. Unlike the other three concepts, the communal model emphasises horizontal, self-organising and collectivist social structures. Instead of visualising society like a pyramid, it sees social hierarchy in terms of an inverted pattern, with a relatively large ‘upper class’. I have argued that with some imagination, a society like this is visible in the Lex Salica and also the archaeological record. Nevertheless, I will return to the conclusion that a communal concept *also* does not give the full picture, but only a partial frame of a more complicated, variegated social structure that can best be described as heterarchic.<sup>500</sup> In simpler terms, if this were a multiple-choice exam question with an option A, B, C, D; then heterarchy is the cheat code: “all of the above”.

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<sup>500</sup> See above, 1.3.