

Was an effective and
lucky war lead



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To answer this question it is important to examine the concept of success in the context of Merovingian Gaul. We could look at success in terms of military glory and territorial power alone. Whilst it is wholly necessary to discuss these factors it would be short sighted to see them as the only measures of success.

As we shall see the differing contexts in which Kings succeeded to the throne played a large role in the formation of their kingships. The brutal in fighting of the Merovingian's themselves suggests that survival was an achievement in itself. Already we begin to see effective and lucky war leadership as forming only one facet of a multi-faceted view of successful Merovingian kingship. There can be no doubt that successful war leaders have been viewed as successful Kings.

The exploits of Clovis, Theudebert and Charles Martel highlight the success associated with Frankish kings in this period. It is important to note that these Kings won external as well as internal battles. Clovis achieved great victories against the Visgoths, Theudebert against the Alamanni and Thuringians and Charles Martel's over the Saxons and the Saracens. During the later period however civil war victories played an increasingly important role. Here we see Chlothar's victories against Theudebert and Theuderic and Charles Martel's victories against the Neustrians as examples of internal victories.

Territorial gains not only increased power but also the Merovingian fisc. Manors, revenues and taxes all added to wealth of the Merovingians. Even in Italy, traditionally a Frankish graveyard, we see large gains from war. This

accumulated wealth, as we shall see later, was crucial in maintaining internal support. The manner in which early Kings gained territories aided this process of accumulation. Clovis conquered Roman lands with existing tax and administration structures.

Instead of disrupting these structures Clovis allowed a more progressive integration of Frankish and Gallo-Roman cultures. Similarly Theudebert granted individual and separate legal codes to newly conquered kingdoms. We see Merovingian kings as treating their new found territories in a consistent manner; brutal and violent in warfare but pragmatic and sensible in the aftermath; thereby maximizing revenues and stability. The Merovingian monarchy relied on the acquiescence of the landed aristocracy for support. It was the aristocracy that held the local power in an increasingly large kingdom, it was the aristocracy that provided support and resources for internal and external wars and it was the aristocracy that protected minority Kings. Clearly maintaining aristocratic support was important, but as the rise of the Pippinids and the behavior of later mairoses shows, allowing too large a level of aristocratic power was fatal.

Aristocratic support was not a one way process. The aristocracy favored the stability of the Merovingian house, and whilst they often replaced Merovingian Kings with another family member, it was extremely rare for them to challenge their dynastic right. Nevertheless the kings had to earn their keep. Generous donations of land were seen as a reward for service.

We see Chlothar rewarding his supporters for loyal service after the overthrow of Brunehildis. Similarly we see Dagobert disseminating royal

property. This practice was only sustainable as long as territorial boundaries were extended. However a process by which royal property and future income was run down at the expense of short-term aristocratic support can hardly be viewed as a long-term strategy. Yet, Chlothar and Dagobert employed more sophisticated ways of achieving support. The Merovingians had always been good at incorporating the aristocracy into the court.

Diplomas and judgments often bear the names of numerous aristocratic witnesses. Chlothar II and Dagobert furthered this process by allowing aristocratic sons to be educated at court. In the mid 7th century a cluster of men educated together in this manner, Desiderius, Eligius, Abbo, Supicius, were used as bishops or agents of the crown in their own regional areas as a way of maintaining loyalty in the more distant regions. Again the pattern of regional self-government and autonomy arises. A successful Merovingian King allowed strong local forces to bind the kingdom together.

Chlothar and Dagobert played the regional card well a fact highlighted by the Edict of Paris in 614. The edict promised an end to the central domination that had preceded the civil war. A more centralized administrative structure would surely have created the ideal breeding ground for aristocratic factionalism. However allowing too much regional power and thus regional divergence was problematic. We see the continuing and destructive divergence between Neustria and Austrasia as a case in point. Thus the balance between the power of the aristocracy and the power of the monarchy was a delicate one.

The monarchs of the 8th century have often been called rois faini?? ants - useless kings. However it is also possible to trace the rise of aristocratic power in this period. We see the emergence of maiores such as Ebroin and Pippin as symptomatic of a rise in aristocratic power. The reasons for this rise, be it increased land ownership or iro-frankish monasticism, are varied but in some ways irrelevant. The success of a king, as shown in the early 8th century, was heavily related to the balance of power with the landed aristocracy.

The context of a particular King's succession played a crucial role in the success of a Merovingian King. Clearly a King in his minor years could not achieve success through the medium of warfare. Weak, minor Kings were susceptible, not only to aristocratic pressures, but to their power hungry relatives. The uxorious tendencies of the Merovingians and the tradition of splitting up kingdoms amongst sons meant that young Kings were at the mercy of their brothers and the aristocracy.

The magnates of Austrasia had to protect Sigibert's son Childebert II in 575 after his father's assassination. The weakness of Childebert, with his mother as regent, enabled an attempted usurpation by Gundovald in 583. We see a more aristocratic desire for a strong king in 612 when the Austrasian magnates rejected Brunhild's attempt to place her great grandson Sigibert on the throne. The Austrasian magnates responded by inviting Chlothar II to reunite the kingdom by ruling Austrasia and Neustria. The desire for a strong king was universal.

We see in the succession of Dagobert from Chlothar the ideal model of succession. Chlothar had the vision and foresight to give Dagobert the sub-kingdom of Austrasia before his own death. Thus father and son ruled jointly for 6 years. Dagobert gained prestige in his campaigns against the Bretons, Basques and Visigoths before being exposed to a more independent kingship. Dagobert followed his father's example by installing Sigibert III as King of Austrasia.

The contexts of succession are vital to the relative success of a king. A minority King was as unwelcome as the regents that acted on their behalf and rarely lasted long. Many Kings never had the chance to prove themselves as lucky and effective war leaders. The religious element of a king's success can be traced back to Clovis.

Some argued that Clovis' conversion to Christianity was crucial in the victory against the Visigoths in the early 6th century. Gregory of Tours sees Clovis's wars as Catholic crusades. Ian Wood disagrees by suggesting that Clovis's own religious beliefs were far from stable. He argues that Clovis was torn between the Aryanism of his fellow kings and the Catholicism of his wife.

Wood sees Clovis's conversion as a way of generating the image of defender of the faith. Whilst historians argue over the precise details of Clovis's religious involvement, they can at least agree that religion was important in his success. Ecclesiastical figures were also used to maintain a monarch's power and success. Much like aristocrats the monarchs used bishops as administrators in their local provinces.

Geary intensifies this secular role by informing us that many bishops were originally lay aristocrats and that the role of bishop was simply a step up from that of count. The church lent administrative as well as spiritual support. Again this support was reciprocal. Later kings, and notably queens poured vast amounts of money into monasteries and churches.

Donations, immunity, the power for a monastery to raise taxation were all tools used to cement the powerful support of the church. We see the bishops as fellow members of the aristocracy and this is reflected by the Merovingians generous and expecting treatment of the church. Dagobert was especially generous to St. Denis.

Geary argues that Dagobert's increased patronage of the church was part of a plan to create a more stable monarchy. By endowing the church, he argues, Dagobert tried to weld royal tradition to a specific form of Christianity with the intention of strengthening both. He was not the first King to employ this tactic. Clovis successfully attempted to associate his Frankish kingdom with Martin. There can be no doubt that effective war leadership in this period is synonymous with successful kingship.

However, many other factors contributed to the success of kings. As with most monarchies, the relationship with the aristocracy was crucial. Similarly the church provided the aristocracy with another form of local control, as well as adding a certain form of legitimacy to their rule. The context of succession seems crucial to our understanding of a king's relative success. The smoother the succession of a king the less likely was civil war and aristocratic dissension.

In some ways a King's success or failure was predetermined by their age and the state of the kingdom that they inherited. To say that successful kingship in Merovingian Gaul was simply a matter of being an effective and lucky war leader is to do an injustice to the kings of this period. It was the monarchy's cultivated relationships with the aristocracy, the regions and the church, combined with impressive military success that enabled the Merovingian dynasty to survive into the 8th century.