

Ulrich Nonn, Die Franken, Stuttgart (Kohlhammer) 2010, 177 S. (Urban Taschenbücher, 579), ISBN 978-3-17-017814-4, EUR 18,80.

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It can be persuasively argued that the Franks became the most influential people who shaped the cultural, social, and geographical milieu of central Europe – especially France and Germany – prior to Napoleon. The historical trajectory of the Franks spans from the third century to the rise of the Capetians in the late tenth century for western Frankland (France) and the Ottonians in eastern Frankland (Germany). This modest monograph limits itself historically from third century Roman Gaul to the reign of Clovis in the sixth century. The book forms part of a series which has been publishing other specialized volumes on the Merovingians and the Franks. Their intended audience is mainly educated lay people and not specialists. The volumes, however, in this series could be useful for college level introductory courses on the early Middle Ages.

The book is divided into six main sections. In the first »Name, Volk und Land der Franken«, the author explores the earliest references to the Franks in Roman sources and the earliest contacts with the expanding Roman Empire into Gaul pressing up to the Danube region. Archaeology and written sources reveal an uneven process of interaction, at times passive and at others hostile. It was not until quite late, however, when the Romans fully dominated Gaul, but it was short-lived as the empire in the West collapsed rapidly thus giving the Franks the opportunity to begin establishing their own hegemony in Gaul. The reviewer found this section most informative and enlightening since too many books do not treat the rise of the Franks and of the Roman Empire as an interrelated process. The Franks reached almost full dominance of Gaul under Clovis, as the political rule of the Roman Empire in Gaul was only a memory.

Part two of the book »Die Nachbarschaft der Franken und Römer bis zum Ende des 4. Jahrhunderts«, goes into greater depth regarding the Romanization of Gaul. The author details the policies in Gaul of Constantine and Julian which represent the stabilization of the Roman state with a few set-backs that were reversed by Julian. It was under Valentinian I and II, however, that Frankish Gaul experienced meaningful integration into the Roman state. Chapter 3 treats of the calamitous events of the fifth century, »Die fränkisch-römischen Beziehungen in der ersten Hälfte des 5. Jahrhunderts«. Readers are given a brief overview of the reigns of Stilicho, Aetius, Charles Martel – Charlemagne's grandfather – and the havoc caused by the Huns in Gaul, who made an already deteriorating situation worse for Franks and Romans alike. These events clearly indicate that the Romans were on the way out as rulers while the Franks were on the rise.

It is at the point in chapter 4 that the book chronicles the new Frankish kingdom in Gaul, »Der Aufstieg des

salfränkischen Königtums«. The Franks under the early Merovingians expanded across Gaul challenging and defeating foes such as Visigoths, Saxons and Alamanni who stood in the way of their conquest. By this time there really was no Roman Empire to regain these lands for the Emperor. In fact, under Childeric Gallo-Romans and Franks together were forging a new society, but with the Franks clearly in charge. Childeric receives much attention in this part of the book, even devoting a subsection to the theme of his tomb.

Chapter 5, »Lebensform und Kultur der Franken«, presents an overview of life and culture under the Franks. Grave sites are offered as evidence, agricultural practices, and even the extent and quality of cultural life. The last chapter, »Ein auserwähltes Volk?« does not refer to the Franks as ›chosen‹ in any theological sense. Rather that the Franks of all of the tribes in Gaul were the most likely to have emerged as the most powerful and resilient to survive the collapse of the Roman Empire therein. That is exactly what happened in the late Roman period in Gaul. Readers of this volume would do well to supplement it with two important works. The first volume is by Patrick Geary which appeared first in English (Before France and Germany, Oxford 1988) and then in German (Die Merowinger. Europa vor Karl dem Großen, Munich 1996). The second is the recent magnificent study of the culture that flourished in the successor barbarian kingdoms in the Roman West by Yitzhak Hen¹, who devotes a relevant section on the early Frankish kingdom that would enlighten further chapter 5.

The volume is accompanied by a timeline of events and people. For such a modest monograph it contains an extensive up to date bibliography of sources and modern works for further reading. Six detailed maps and an index close out the volume. For anyone wishing to have a solid historical overview of the early Franks that is based on the latest scholarship – literary and archaeological sources – need not look much further than this splendidly written volume by Ulrich Nonn.

¹ Yitzhak Hen, Roman Barbarians. The Royal Court and Culture in the Early Medieval West, Basingstoke 2007(Medieval Culture and Society).