When one thinks about the Merovingians—and, really, who doesn’t?—one seldom thinks of the Mediterranean. There is good reason for that. Whatever else the Merovingians may have been, they were a hodgepodge of northern clans, tribes, and kingdoms who came from one end of the northern tier of Europe and settled eventually in the other. They drank beer rather than wine; cooked in lard rather than olive oil; avoided cities as centers of evil spirits; had little literature that we know of and less science; had no ships other than rivercraft; and lived, fought, and died on scattered parcels of farmland cleared from the immense, dense forest of the continent. That is not to say they fitted the prejudiced Dark Age caricature of them as mere “barbarians”—a kind of gruesome but temporary way station between the glories of Rome and Aachen. As shown by a generation of scholars from Walter Goffart and Ian Wood to Chris Wickham, Andreas Fischer, and Peter Heather, the period from Rome’s fall to Aachen’s ascent deserves to be studied for its own self and not merely as another of history’s dreary “periods of transition”; after all, every age is one of transition, and the transitions involved—political, cultural, intellectual, technological, and every other type—are usually themselves the chief points of interest.

Most of this new work emphasizes the active involvement of the Merovingian kingdoms in the broader, and specifically Mediterranean, world. The volume under consideration both results from and mimics the east-west and north-south contact it discusses, for it is the culmination of a joint research project by mostly younger scholars at the Freie Universität Berlin and the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, funded by the German-Israeli Foundation for Scientific Research and Development. The thirteen studies that make up the volume cover a broad spectrum of topics and use a wide array of primary sources, although this is less the result of an expansive interpretive vision of the topic than of the scattered and fragmentary nature of the surviving documents. Composite volumes like this have significant value in themselves and as spurs to further research, but they seldom result in the kind of cohesive theoretical or interpretive model they aim for. This volume certainly points to such a model even if it fails to reach it. That is hardly the fault of the authors. For the period and place they examine, after all, virtually every single surviving piece of written evidence that we have (not counting monastic copies), gathered together in its modern published edition, would fit on my own unimpressive desk. It would all even fit into my Kindle. Given this reality, the
best we can hope for is an unfinished, however ac-
complished, mosaic. The present volume, bright
with promise, presents just such a mosaic.

The thirteen studies treat four main themes. First is the question of how the people of the Mer-
ovingian era perceived themselves. Were they late-
arriving Romans or post-Romans? Did they think
of themselves, in other words, as a society distinct
from the one that preceded it or as an extension of
it? The Franks undoubtedly became Romanized
when they entered western Europe; they adopted
Roman language, elements of Roman law, and parts of Roman technology, and their rulers at
least mimicked aspects of Roman governance. But
was this identification with Rome or mere con-
venience? Yitzhak Hen argues that the dissemi-
ation of the *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*, a
fourth-century Greek geographical text, across
western Europe in a fifth-century Latin translation
illustrates one aspect of this identity formation. He
may be right, but in the complete absence of a ma-
uscript tradition it is impossible to tell. (The text
is known only from a much-marred seventeenth-
century edition.) The existence of the text cer-
tainly means *something*. There is no reason,
though, to assume that the Latin version was com-
piled by a Merovingian or on behalf of a Mer-
ovingian, or even was ever read by a Merovingian.
It may well have been the work of an urbane Itali-
ian who wanted to soothe his worried mind with a
tome on the glorious expanse of his beloved, if
troubled, empire. Helmut Reimitz contrasts the leg-
al decrees from the third episcopal Synod of Mâ-
con (585 CE) with the description of that gathering
in Gregory of Tours’ *Historia Francorum*. The syn-
od was convened by the then-archbishop of Lyon
and involved, according to Gregory, nearly sev-
enty bishops or their representatives. Three issues
predominated: the Gundovald affair (in which a
pretender to the Merovingian throne and would-
be spouse to the charming widow Brunhild, queen
of Austrasia, pressed his case by pointing out the
support he had from figures in the Byzantine
court); the question of bishops’ authority to de-
mand the payment of tithes from their parishes;
and the vexed question of whether or not, and
when, the Latin word *homo* ("man") could be inter-
preted to mean both men and women. Reimitz em-
phasizes the synod’s reliance on Roman law, in
contrast to Gregory’s relative dismissal of Roman
precedents in favor of considerations of divine
purpose. Again, the conclusion drawn—that the
Frankish clerics emphasized Roman secular law as
the means to resolve their disputes since they saw
themselves as Romans—is perfectly plausible but
is by no means the only sensible one. Gregory’s
aim in his *Historia Francorum*, after all, was to
show God’s hand still at work in a fallen world, not
to provide a record of a series of legal briefs.

The second part of the volume consists of four
studies that trace the extent of the diplomatic
reach of the kingdoms of the era. Anna Gehler-
Rachunek begins, appropriately, with a look at
Frankish marriage negotiations in the sixth cen-
tury. This was an age in which marriage-diplomacy
was arguably the only real diplomacy, since the
political rights of rulers usually came down to
what they were entitled to by a marriage or an in-
hheritance from one. Once again Gregory of Tours
provides most of the evidence, with some assist-
ance from Isidore of Seville. Gehler-Rachunek
starts with the conversion of the Visigothic king,
Reccared, from Arianism to orthodox Latin Chris-
tianity in 589 and his subsequent expectation that
his relations with the Frankish kings Guntram and
Childebert would improve now that he had joined
them in the true faith—only to be rebuffed by Gun-
tram because of Reccared’s maltreatment of his,
Guntram’s, niece Ingund. Was Reccared’s conver-
sion therefore a diplomatic ploy? Did family honor
take precedence over religious brotherhood?
Gehler-Rachunek shows the many marriage links
established between the Visigothic royal family
and those of the Austrasian and Neustrian Frank-
ish houses that preceded Reccared’s reign, bringing
in the diplomatic involvement of Spanish Byz-
antine courtiers as well, to show that the Germanic kingdoms were in considerably more and closer contact with one another and with far-off Constantinople than previously thought. Unfortunately, she does not consider the various Byzantine sources of the era, which might have added considerable nuance to her argument by providing an “outsider’s” view. Next, Hope Williard provides a summary of the ties of diplomatic friendship (amicitia) among Frankish royal and nobles as related by the ever-present Gregory. By Williard’s own count Gregory discusses eight cases of amicitia in his history, and she argues that the term had ambivalent meanings that ranged from the connections between a lesser (in the political sense) individual and a superior one, which case amicitia implies something like cozening in search of political favors, to the friendly relations between political equals that precedes betrayal and strife. As Gregory uses it, she argues, amicitia echoed the ties between ancient Roman clienteles, and if she is right then she is making a very important point. The point is more suggestive than conclusive, since eight examples out of a four-hundred-plus-page text cannot be regarded as definitive, but it fully merits further study. Bruno Dumézil and Yaniv Fox turn their attention to the Epistolae Austrasicae, a collection of diplomatic letters from the fifth and sixth centuries that survives in a single ninth-century manuscript that has long been regarded as a product of the Carolingian court—that is to say, the collection itself, not merely the manuscript copy. Dumézil makes a strong argument that the Epistolae was actually the work of Magneric, the bishop of Trier, sometime around the year 590. If Dumézil’s is codicological, Fox’s is rhetorical and focuses on two diplomatic episodes, first the effort by Byzantium to win Frankish support against the Lombard invasion of southern Italy, and second the negotiations over the fate of Athanagild, the young nephew of Childebert II who got caught up in the rebellion against restored Byzantine power in Visigothic Spain and ended up in Byzantine custody. In both cases, Fox argues, the Franks and Byzantines relied heavily on language that was religiously tinged rather than based on law or politically strategic appeal.

Part 3 collects four studies dealing with the social dimensions of law and religion. Lukas Bothe takes the prize for best essay title with his “Mediterranean Homesick Blues,” which inspects Germanic laws regarding the slave trade. Here he follows the granular, quantitative work of Michael McCormick’s Origins of the European Economy (2001) but looks in particular at the European Christian justification for engaging in human trafficking. The slave trade, he finds, reached far into the Germanic hinterlands, but each society (the Visigoths, the Burgundians, the Franks) responded differently to the moral question of that trade. Till Stüber examines the so-called Three Chapters controversy as it was debated at the 5th Council of Orleans. The controversy itself centered on the supposedly Nestorian writings of three theologians that had been debated at the Council of Chalcedon. Stüber ignores the theological issues themselves and emphasizes instead the significance of a council in northern Francia engaging in the debate, a debate having originated in an exchange of letters between the bishop of Arles and Pope Vigilius—while he was residing temporarily in Constantinople. The Frankish Church, the implication goes, was not peripheral to the Church Universal but was actively and continually engaged with it. Next come two studies on rituals as described in Merovingian liturgical and hagiographical texts. Rob Means goes in depth into the Sacramentary of Gellone, a late eighth-century text from Meaux, and discusses the ordo for ritually purifying an altar where a murder has been committed. This being the Dark Ages, the question is not altogether theoretical and the existence of such a rite should be contrasted with the fact that whereas Gregory of Tours narrates many a defilement of altars and churches by bloodshed he never mentions a purification of those sacred spaces. Tamar Rotman

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closes this section of the book with an inspection of the sources regarding the pillar-climbing ascetic, Vufiliac of Trier, focusing once again on the ever-present Gregory. She emphasizes the ways Gregory shapes Vufiliac’s story in order to provide a distinction between his tale and that of Simeon Stylites over in Syria.

The last section of the volume contrasts Frankish and Byzantine portrayals of emperors: Pia Lucas studies Gregory’s depiction of Tiberius II; Stefan Esders examines Fredegar’s portrait of Constans II; and Federico Montinaro shifts the perspective by analyzing a Byzantine view of Frankish political rulership, namely, Theophanes’s discussion of the end of Merovingian rule and the rise of the Carolingian version. The general conclusion of these studies is that western writers used descriptions of Byzantine politics as a way of depicting rulership as an aspect of Christian history, a means of promoting God’s will on earth, whereas a Byzantine writer like Theophanes reveals a factually shaky but genuine interest in matters far away from the cosmopolitan center of Constantinople.

All in all, this is an engaging and impressive collection. The essays are filled with sharp insights and an eager willingness to upend traditional interpretations that makes the reading enjoyable without weakening their scholarly gravitas. Two weaknesses stand out, however, almost across the board. First, with the exception of Bothe, the authors fail to emphasize the distinctions between the societies of Dark Age Europe. The Visigoths were not like the Franks, who were not like the Burgundians, who were not like... The authors are well aware of this, of course, and may have written their contributions assuming that the likely readers of a volume like this would also be aware of the fact and therefore need not be reminded. Nevertheless, using the general term “Merovingian” in the title to describe all these societies could easily mislead an unexperienced reader. More significant, though, is the near-total absence of Byzantine sources. Only Theophanes appears in any meaningful way, and he only in a readily available English translation. Any research project aimed at showing the interaction of the western and eastern worlds of the Mediterranean should surely look through both ends of the telescope.
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