

On Merovingian Latin  
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This presentation is given in preparation for my dissertation prospectus.

Merovingian Latin, along with the Latin of the Iberic peninsula, Southern Gaul and Italy, lies at the very tail end of the history of Vulgar Latin. By 'Merovingian Latin' I mean the language of 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> c. northern Gaul (which would in turn become the area where the *langues d'oïl* dialect continuum will be spoken, in opposition to the southern half, where one will find the *langues d'oc*). Relatively little work has been done on this era in the study of Latin. Recent research has focused on the question of situating the emergence of early romance and on evaluating the level of importance of the written word in Merovingian society. A limited number of linguistic analyses of clusters of Merovingian sources are available, along with some general overviews, but a close study encompassing the entirety of the original Merovingian corpus is still lacking.

At the turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> c., reforms were imposed on the Latin language to standardize it, going back to earlier models. These reforms were actually started under the last Merovingian king, Pepin the Short, but the brunt of the work was done under Charlemagne, and the reforms have thus come to be associated with him. By that period, the vernacular language had evolved so much as to make comprehension of earlier Latin difficult. These two factors brought about a rupture between the vernacular language (which no longer can be deemed Vulgar Latin, but should be referred to as Early Romance), left to develop on its own, and the written language, Latin, archaizing and highly codified. We can then speak, from the end of the Merovingian period onward, of a situation of diglossia.

Pre-reforms Merovingian Latin, however, did not operate under such constraints. To say the least, it was creatively non-classical, which was all the better to reflect the evolving vernacular language. This has brought to its scribes accusations of semi-literacy, fueling the debate among historians as to the place of the written word in Merovingian society. However, this is missing the point that Merovingian Latin simply did not operate under such heavy normative constraints as during other periods.

In this presentation, I will be going over **1)** the features of Merovingian Latin, and, more specifically, of a certain subset of sources by which it has been transmitted to us – charters. Charters are highly idiosyncratic, as the legal phraseology they contain is artificial and convoluted, archaizing, and formulaic, yet they do exhibit the dynamic novelty characteristic of Merovingian Latin. Charters also have the advantage of commonly being easily datable, and their issuing authority is also commonly clear. I will then be discussing : **2)** the effects of the Carolingian reform on the language of the charters, using charters from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> c. (that is to say, some decidedly Merovingian, some decidedly Carolingian, and some straddling the line of the reforms), **3)** the language of the original Merovingian charters and that of later copies, in an attempt to assess whether copies of Merovingian charters can be trusted as a reliable source for linguistic data, or if their text has been overly tampered with. **4)** Other direct attestation of Merovingian Latin (inscriptions, transcriptions of inscriptions, manuscripts produced during the Merovingian period).