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Guy Halsall

The Decline and Fall of the Ancient Triumph

Abstract: This chapter argues that although victory remained absolutely central to royal ideals and imagery, there was a crucial change between the late Roman and the early medieval western worlds. Though key features remained (processions etc.) there was a decisive shift of emphasis towards Christian celebration presided over by the church; towards thanksgiving rather than praise; and towards Old Testament imagery. It is argued that a key phase of this shift took place after the Justinianic wars of the mid-sixth century. This change is explained in terms of the renegotiation of the ideological bases of power caused by Justinian's wars and the end of the Roman Empire. In this more Christian mode of thought, credit for victory was not appropriately given to mortal warriors, however skilful. Finally, the developments in the nature of 'triumphal' rulership are ascribed to a change in the 'geo-political' nature of the West and perhaps to a difference in the types of warfare being waged.

The early medieval world was stalked by the ghost of Rome. It was a ghost which many early medieval rulers did their best to conjure, especially after the reign of Charlemagne. And yet, as with all hauntings, there was something unwelcome about the ghost of Rome, something uncanny, something out of time.

This is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the celebration of successful warfare. One thing that certainly persisted from the classical world through late antiquity and into the early medieval period was the importance of military success to the notion of good kingship. Michael McCormick has demonstrated this very clearly.¹ He skilfully brought together plentiful and impressive evidence of the continuation of kings being styled as *triumphator* or given other ostentatiously victorious epithets and titles; kings were addressed and praised in poetic and other works as victorious leaders; they continued to hold victory parades, some of which still bore at least some trappings of imperial Roman ritual; other public rituals celebrated victories and humiliated the defeated; kings were depicted visually in ways that echoed earlier Roman ideas of the victorious king.² A famous example, used by McCormick, is the well-known Valdinievole plate showing the Lombard king Agilulf receiving the submission of barbarous enemies and flanked by winged victories.³ Alas, research by Cristina La Rocca and Stefano Gasparri casts reasonable doubt on the authenticity of this piece. But

¹ McCormick 1986. Not the least task of the present paper is to attempt to say something significant and additional to McCormick's monumental volume.

² McCormick 1986: 260–387.

³ McCormick 1986: 289–293.



Fig. 18.1: The Valdinievole or 'Agilulf' plaque (gold, seventh century). Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello. © bpk | Scala – courtesy of the Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo

the general point stands.⁴ From the late Roman period through to the Carolingian Empire, the centrality of military success to the concept of good rulership remained a constant.⁵

There are indeed few times and places in the earlier Middle Ages where kings were not expected to lead their armies in person and to win battles. In that sense the importance of victory might be said to have been even greater than it had been during the Empire. The penalties for failure were high. At the very end of the period studied in my 2003 book on warfare, the Emperor Charles III – the so-called Charles the Fat – can be argued to have lost his throne because of his perceived failures against the Vikings. Simon MacLean has very cogently argued that, in the abstract, the actions that Charles took to defend his realm were no different from those pursued by previous members of his dynasty.⁶ Nonetheless, in the precise political circumstances of the 880s the failure actively to defeat the Vikings in battle presented a golden opportunity to Charles' enemies to portray him as a Bad King.⁷ This was the case not least because the leader of his opponents, Count Odo, had been able to be presented as waging a heroic defence of Paris against the odds while Charles did nothing. Within a year Charles had been deposed and died. In West Francia, Odo replaced him as king.

⁴ Gasparri/La Rocca 2010.

⁵ Halsall 2003a: 25–30.

⁶ MacLean 1998: 74–95. See also MacLean 2003: 23–47.

⁷ Halsall 2003a: 30.

Over a hundred years previously, the Mercian king Æthelbald was killed at night by his own bodyguard, in an act of betrayal that was evidently shocking even by Mercian standards.⁸ It seems plausible to associate this with the battle, two years previously, at Burford, where Æthelbald was beaten by the West Saxons, over whom he had claimed overlordship.⁹ Again, the picture is not so simple; some evidence suggests that Æthelbald had restored his dominance over the south.¹⁰ Nonetheless the talismanic value of battlefield success or failure remained high. If we continue our journey backwards through time towards the Roman era, further examples are presented. The defeat of the Austrasian army by the Thuringians in the 630s left Merovingian hegemony east of the Rhine in tatters, and nothing illustrates this better than Fredegar's pathetic image of the young king Sigibert III sitting, weeping on his horse at the rout of his army by the rebellious Duke Radulf.¹¹ Sixth-century Visigothic kings knew better than anyone the price of failure. At least two appear to have been killed or deposed as a result of military failure: Theudis was murdered shortly after a reverse outside Ceuta in (newly retaken) Roman Mauretania; Agila faced a revolt and lost his crown after suffering a defeat at the hands of the citizens of Córdoba.¹²

The principal exception seems to have been the Merovingian *Francia* between the death of Chlothar I (561) and that of Chlothar's last surviving son, Guntramn of Burgundy, in 592/3. Although Chlothar's sons had commanded armies during their father's lifetime,¹³ they rarely led military forces when they were kings, usually delegating such a role to their dukes and patricians.¹⁴ Yet, to examine the poetry of Venantius Fortunatus is very quickly to discover that there was no evident lessening of the importance of war-leadership in the list of kingly virtues.¹⁵ Gregory of Tours seems, to judge from the Preface to Book V of the *Histories*, not necessarily to have had a problem with *external* warfare as a mark of good kingship. It was of civil war, within the *regnum francorum*, that he disapproved.¹⁶ Whether or not one believes it to be sincere (and I do not), the diatribe against Chilperic at *Histories* 6.46 makes a similar point.¹⁷ The diatribe takes the standard points of good kingship in turn and flips them into their negative. Rather than being a great war-leader, Chilperic was simply a ravager and desecrator of his own lands. It would seem, therefore, that such was the success of the Merovingians in establishing themselves securely on the

⁸ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* s.a. 757 (*recte* 755) (ed. Whitelock, doc. no. 1, p. 175).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Sawyer 1982: 100.

¹¹ Fred. *Chron.* 4.87 (ed. Krusch).

¹² Isid. *Goth.* cc. 42, 45–46 (ed. Mommsen *Chron. min.* 2, pp. 267–295).

¹³ E.g. Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 3.21, 4.16, 4.45, 4.47 etc. (ed. Krusch/Levison).

¹⁴ E.g. Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 4.30, 4.42, 5.4, 5.26, 6.11, etc.

¹⁵ E.g. Venant. Fort. *Carm.* 6.1, 6.1a, 6.2, etc. (ed. Reydellet).

¹⁶ *Contra Goffart* 1988: 220.

¹⁷ For my analysis of this passage, see Halsall 2002: 337–350.

Frankish throne that – like the Roman Emperors in some periods, not least the sixth century – they had no need to demonstrate their martial ability in person. They could garner the laurels from any victories won by their subordinates while simultaneously evading the negative effects of defeat. Nevertheless, this phase seems to have been short-lived. By the later 590s, in a development probably related to the general crisis in the Frankish kingdoms at that point, the grandsons and great-grandsons of Chlothar I had returned to leading their armies in person.¹⁸ This probably remained the case throughout the rest of the Merovingian period, at least where kings had come of age.¹⁹ This is difficult to see given the lacunose sources for later Merovingian military history, their tendency to dwell on the activities of the chief palatine notables, and sometimes their pro-Carolingian provenance. Nonetheless, it is mentioned that adult kings accompanied their mayors on campaign and it may only be the burden of historiography that makes us assume that they did so merely as figureheads.²⁰

Nonetheless, to be at least capable of military leadership remained a *sine qua non* of kingship throughout the early medieval period, something that perhaps reached its apogee towards the end of the millennium in the (to students at least) ever-amusing tale of King Sancho I Ramirez – ‘Sancho the Fat’ – of León (956–966).²¹ After ruling for two years, Sancho was deposed, supposedly for being too fat, his obesity allegedly preventing him from riding a horse and thus leading the army in the perpetual warfare against Christian and Muslim neighbours. However, the story had a happier sequel. After fleeing (quite slowly, one imagines) to the court of ‘Abd al-Rahman III, Caliph of Córdoba, he slimmed sufficiently, under a régime managed by the court physician, to be able to retake his throne and reign for a further six years before (perhaps appropriately for a king whose epithet related to his diet) being poisoned. Even his murder, however, was possibly linked to Sancho’s failure to stop an upsurge of inroads by the kingdom’s neighbours.

Nonetheless, all this fighting, as we shall see, took place in an early medieval political and military context which was quite different from that of the Roman Empire. When it came to the celebration of triumphal kingship, therefore, the resurrection of Roman models and idioms was far from straightforward, especially, as I hope to show, after c. 600.

If we remain in Spain, but three centuries before the reign of the unfortunate Sancho I, we encounter some instances of changes to which I would assign more significance than did McCormick. Two texts can be placed alongside each other; McCor-

¹⁸ E.g. Fred. *Chron.* 4.17, 4.20, etc.

¹⁹ E.g. Fred. *Chron.* 4.87.

²⁰ *Ann. Mett. pr. s.a. 690 (recte 687)* (ed. von Simson).

²¹ For which see, e.g. Collins 1983: 241–242.

mick cited both.²² First we can take Isidore of Seville's discussion of the triumph.²³ The point I want to make (McCormick made it too²⁴) is that it is entirely cast in the past tense. This is what the Romans *did*. There's absolutely no sense that this sort of thing goes on any longer. McCormick rightly pointed out, however, that, whatever the impression given by Isidore, victory processions certainly persisted through the seventh century. Indeed they did but there is, in my view, a crucial difference. McCormick makes something of a sleight of hand; the Visigoths had a liturgy for triumphant return from war but he comments on this on the basis of the liturgy for the *profectio belli*.²⁵ The latter ceremony is not about triumph; it is a ceremony for divine blessing before the start of a war. It still demonstrates the importance of victory and warfare, to be sure, and it has Roman connotations, if with contemporary Byzantium rather than with the late Empire, but a triumph it is not and in no sense, therefore, does it contradict Isidore. Even if McCormick is right, though, and the liturgy for victorious return looked much the same, crucial changes must be noted.

Christian elements had intruded into Roman and post-imperial political ceremony for some time²⁶ but the concentration on church ritual is nevertheless interesting. Certainly this looks *qualitatively* different from what we can detect of later fifth- and early sixth-century royal victory rituals, which were more firmly located within the late Roman tradition. Victorious kings – like Theudebert I of Austrasia when he took over the government of Provence in the 530s – held celebrations in the circuses, like later Roman emperors.²⁷ The triumphal entry into towns, or at least the ceremony of *adventus*, continued²⁸ and, as we shall see in a moment, victorious titles of entirely Roman nature were employed. McCormick assembled a substantial body of evidence for these practices. As intimated, they are entirely in harmony with the victory celebrations of contemporary emperors and this is probably not coincidental. As stated, the focus on Church ceremony seems different, even if victorious kings and emperors attended church as part of earlier celebrations (as Clovis did in 507), and even if public procession remained an element of later victory ritual. What seems to have occurred is an important shift in the *relative* importance of the elements; a complete break or rupture with earlier traditions is not postulated. I propose that Isidore's setting of the classical triumph in the past tense is neither surprising nor coincidental. The importance of victory to rulers remained; triumphal processions there still were as well; but nothing that looked like a triumph. Even Clovis' procession through

²² McCormick 1986: 302, 308–312.

²³ Isid. *Etym.* 18.2 (ed. Lindsay).

²⁴ McCormick 1986: 302.

²⁵ McCormick 1986: 308–312.

²⁶ No one showed that better than McCormick 1986: esp. 63–79; McCormack 1981.

²⁷ Proc. *Bell.* 7.33.5 (ed. Dewing).

²⁸ See, e.g., Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 8.1. McCormack 1972: 721–752.

Tours in 507,²⁹ to which I will shortly return and which diverged considerably from the ‘proper’ Roman way of doing things, will have looked, I suggest, more like a triumph than anything Isidore might have seen.

The particularly Old Testament emphasis in the Visigothic liturgy is striking and significant. The liturgy draws upon *The Wisdom of Solomon* as the king receives the banner and goes to war. This is especially interesting, given the usual stress upon peace that was involved in early medieval Solomonic kingship, recently discussed at length by Paul Kershaw.³⁰ It is emblematic of the shift towards the Old Testament in royal ideology that occurred between the earlier and later sixth century. If one were to reprise the theme taken up by Daly in his important 1994 article on Clovis,³¹ it is interesting to compare Gregory’s treatment of the 507 campaign with what seem to be more contemporary data. Gregory describes Clovis’ triumphal return to Tours after Vouillé in terms that can be and have been assimilated into a straightforward late antique tradition.³² Indeed, the procession, the distribution of coin, the acclamation, are wholly in keeping with other royal triumphal celebrations (let us simply call them that) of the early sixth century. Gregory says that Clovis was thenceforth called *consul aut augustus*,³³ a phrase that most historians have been wont to dismiss as a misunderstanding, even as they have accepted every other detail of the Bishop of Tours’ account.³⁴ I am less confident that it should be rejected. In the context of the rather strange half-century between 476 and 526 it seems to me *entirely* possible that a Frankish king might have allowed himself to be acclaimed as *augustus*, just as his contemporary Theodoric of Italy allowed one of the Decii, no less, to erect an inscription describing him as *gloriosissimus adque anclytus rex ... victor et triumphator semper augustus*.³⁵

By way of comparison we can examine Gregory’s description of a miracle that predicted the Frankish victory.³⁶ Clovis’ messengers entered the Church of Saint Martin, Tours, just as the priest intoned Psalm 17:40–41: “you girt me with strength in war and you cast down beneath me those who had risen up against me and you gave me the backs of my enemies” (cp 2 Sam. 22:41) – a prophecy fulfilled when the Goths turn their backs, *iuxta consuetudinem*, in battle.³⁷ This Old Testament language seems to fit with Gregory’s very Old Testament Clovis.³⁸ “Day in and day out God submitted

²⁹ Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 2.38; McCormick 1989.

³⁰ Kershaw 2011.

³¹ Daly 1994.

³² Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 2.38; McCormick 1989.

³³ Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 2.38.

³⁴ McCormick 1989: 157–159. McCormick is also unwilling to reject the imperial acclamation.

³⁵ McCormick 1989: 158; McCormick 1986: 278–280.

³⁶ Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 2.37.

³⁷ Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 2.37.

³⁸ On whom see Daly 1985.

the enemies of Clovis to his dominion and increased his power, for he walked before Him with an upright heart and did what was pleasing in His sight”:³⁹ what could be more resonant of an Old Testament leader than that? In keeping with the theme, in the aftermath of Vouillé the walls of Angoulême collapse before the royal gaze.⁴⁰ In Gregory’s account of the Vouillé campaign itself, the next miracle he relates after that involving the messengers at Tours concerns a pillar of fire such as appeared before the Israelites (and seems to be taken from Venantius’ *Miracles of Saint Hilary*).⁴¹ ‘Giving me their backs’ seems not so far removed from the reference to the *calcatio colli* (Deut. 33.29) in Visigothic liturgy and other seventh-century sources.⁴² The clear difference between the depiction of these events suggests that Gregory’s description of Clovis’ celebration at Tours comes from sources closer in time to the event, while it may be reasonable to assume that his account of the other miraculous occurrences during the campaign come from sources nearer to Gregory’s own day (the 570s at that stage of the *Histories*⁴³).

As intimated, Gregory was not unusual in his Old Testament flavouring of contemporary warfare. After the defeat of an Arian uprising in Spain in 588, the inhabitants of Mérida celebrated “like the ancients” (in this case meaning the Israelites, which is significant in itself) and celebrated in the open, singing the victory song of Moses.⁴⁴ Gregory’s contemporary John of Biclar described a Gothic victory over the Franks in the same or next year in entirely Old Testament language.⁴⁵ And so on. A shift of emphasis away from Roman exemplars, towards those drawn from the Old Testament seems very clearly to have taken place.⁴⁶

This shift of emphasis certainly requires explanation. Post-imperial rulers knew enough about the Roman triumph and what it looked like to have staged one if they wished. Isidore’s text makes that clear. So too does a possibly sixth-century bronze buckle plate from Meursault in Burgundy.⁴⁷ This depicts a man riding in a two-horse chariot, carrying some sort of standard and possibly attended by a winged victory. The chariot horses appear to be trampling some sort of beast underfoot. Doubtless a seventh-century triumph would have looked like a bizarre caricature to any time-traveller from Republican or early imperial Rome, but it would have been recognisable as a triumph all the same. In that sense, and especially given that even late impe-

³⁹ Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 2.40.

⁴⁰ Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 2.37.

⁴¹ Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 2.37; Venant. Fort. *Virtut. Sanct. Hil.* 6.20–7.24 (ed. Krusch).

⁴² McCormick 1986: 310, 313.

⁴³ For this dating, see Halsall 2007.

⁴⁴ *Vit. Pat. Emer.* 12.6–7 (trans. Fear, pp. 99–100).

⁴⁵ Ioh. Biclar. *chron.* 589? (ed. Mommsen *Chron. min.* 2, p. 218).

⁴⁶ See also Hen 1998.

⁴⁷ Poulain 1999.



Fig. 18.2: Sixth-century buckle plate from Meursault, possibly depicting a triumph, in the Musée Archéologique de Dijon (inv. 996.4.1) © Musée archéologique de Dijon (photo: François Perrodin)

rial triumphs departed from the prescribed forms in many ways, the debate on which precise technical term correctly describes Clovis' victory celebrations at Tours seems to me to miss the point. In 507, Clovis made a very clear appeal to classical imperial tradition and symbolic vocabulary. Within a century of his death, his successors had ceased even to try to do that.

In explaining this change, one factor we must consider is the end of the typical elements of the *Inszenierung* of classical victory celebrations. The urban landscape of western Europe underwent serious contraction from the end of the third century, as is well known. From the beginning of the fifth century that contraction gathered pace dramatically in some areas, like Britain and Northern Gaul. Even in areas where the urban fabric survived better, such as southern Gaul, Spain and Italy, desertion, contraction and dereliction are well-attested. The actual construction of the public buildings that formed the back-drop to Roman triumphs had largely ceased, even in Italy, by the fourth century and in Rome itself after c. 400. Concerns about the dilapidation of public buildings follow soon after. From about 700, the towns in the south of western Europe declined further. Whereas the fortunes of towns in the north-west revived from around 600, these settlements were very different from their Roman precursors and often located on slightly different sites. Everywhere, there was a significant reorganisation of what might be termed the spatial hierarchy of these towns, away from the classical centre, the forum, and towards Christian religious foci, often

located on the perimeters of the Roman settlement, in former cemeterial areas. This is an element to which we must come back in due course, but it underlines the increasing Christianisation of the liturgies of rulership already touched upon. Directly related to these points is the decline of urban populations, the traditional audience for the classical triumph. The audience for such royal ritual appears to have become more restricted. These changes cannot but have affected the ability of post-imperial kings to stage triumphs of the old type.

Yet, we should not be too mechanistic about this. Post-imperial kings liked the settings of imperial ritual. Their palace complexes reflected those of the emperors, including the same key elements: audience halls, access to large churches and areas for public display like arenas. The chief urban centre of the Merovingian kingdom of Austrasia, Metz, had all of these features, which of course were inherited from the town's Roman past.⁴⁸ Chilperic of Neustria cannily refused to respond to a challenge to battle issued by his brother, Guntram of Burgundy, and nephew, Childebert II of Austrasia, and instead ostentatiously constructed circuses in Paris and Soissons.⁴⁹ As noted, Theudebert of Austrasia had held races in the circus at Arles. The Northumbrian residence at Yeavinger contained a structure ('Building E') that seems to have been built to resemble a *cuneus* (segment) of a Roman theatre or amphitheatre, and Charlemagne's palace complex at Aachen contained numerous elements borrowed from imperial models. Later sixth-century kings (or at least rather unusual ones like Chilperic I) could think in terms of the urban crowd. Chilperic is said by Gregory of Tours to have threatened to assemble a crowd in Tours and given them a slogan to chant at their bishop.⁵⁰ This is very redolent of classical urban politics.

The location of Aachen and Yeavinger, away from old Roman urban centres – in the case of Yeavinger in the open countryside – and their other associations nevertheless point further towards the ruralisation and Christianisation of political assembly, to which I shall return. This development, away from the traditional Roman, civic foci for political procession and display, is sharpened by the fact that an urban revival began to take place in the north-west of Europe at exactly the point when, I suggest, western kings stopped using Roman-style ritual and when a move towards the enclosed, the ecclesiastical, for royal display comes into focus. After c. 600 it is even difficult to detect any continuation of the use of Roman public arenas for royal spectacle, at least before the Carolingian 'renaissance'.⁵¹ As we shall see, the emphasis

⁴⁸ Halsall 1995: 214–241.

⁴⁹ Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 5.17.

⁵⁰ Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 5.18

⁵¹ Charles III 'the Fat's' use of Grand in Lorraine (départ. Vosges) for his coronation as king of West Francia was probably related to the large amphitheatre there. Note though that this once impressive structure was attached to a shrine of Apollo, not to a city or small town. Abandoned in the late fourth century, it is unclear how much of the building survived in the 880s but, even if overgrown, a large bowl would have remained, entirely suitable for a royal display. MacLean 2003: 126–128.

shifted to the other scene of display, the church. In other words, early medieval kings had access to and could probably have restored or even constructed equivalents of, the sorts of urban settings for Roman-style triumphal celebrations. They chose not to.

The origins of the Austrasian royal presence at Metz hint at a more complex explanation. The first Merovingian kings of this line, Theuderic I and his son Theudebert I, tried to make their base in the former imperial capital at Trier.⁵² Yet it seems that the remains of the imperial palatine complex loomed over them uncomfortably. It became clear that a royal identity could not so easily be inscribed on a site whose past weighed so heavily upon it. Thus, by the 560s at least, the Merovingians had moved up the Moselle to Metz, whose Roman remains could still be used, but on the kings' own terms.⁵³ This development compares well with similar moves in the mid- to late sixth century from old imperial centres to lesser, 'second-division' Roman towns: the Goths to Toledo; the Lombards to Pavia.⁵⁴ This is part of a range of evidence suggesting that the traditional, Roman bases for royal (and other) ideologies had ceased to be viable after the Justinianic wars of the sixth-century. The difference between Gregory of Tours and his contemporaries' accounts of victorious royal warfare and those of sources from the start of the sixth century, already mentioned, is another element of this evidence. With an emperor proclaiming the West to have been 'lost' to barbarians and thus in need of reconquest, continued reference to Roman ideals and bases of authority were simply no longer as viable. New sources were sought and these were readily available in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament; long established virtues – wisdom, piety, justice, victory – could continue to be celebrated but in different language and with different exemplars. In the 580s a Frankish prince was even named Samson,⁵⁵ which might have been an attempt to recast the famously long-haired dynasty in more Old Testament mode. One reason for this shift is that Old Testament imagery was more generally appropriate in a world where politics and political units straddled or even lay entirely outside the former imperial *limes*. It should be stressed, again, that what is proposed is a significant shift of direction and emphasis, not a complete, radical break. Old Testament imagery had been used before, and classical exemplars continued to be alluded to afterwards.

It may also be the case that from the late sixth or early seventh century, political ritual came to be increasingly focused upon the major churches of the realm, rather

⁵² See, for example Greg. Tur. *Vit. Patr.* 17 *passim* (ed. Krush/Levison).

⁵³ This is the subject of a still unpublished paper delivered over a decade ago: 'The unbearable weight of being post-Roman: Awkward ideologies in Merovingian Trier.' Elements of the argument can be found in Halsall 2003b: 72 (reprinted in Halsall 2010: 228–229) and Halsall 2010: 163.

⁵⁴ The Neustrian Frankish centre of Paris, too, can be seen as a second-rank Roman centre, but the Merovingians' associations with the city began earlier as a result of Childeric I's and Clovis' links to the city.

⁵⁵ Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 5.22. For an interesting but (to my mind) not entirely convincing treatment of this issue, see Goosmann 2012.

than using traditional classical urban settings (the latter rather run down and derelict in any case by this date). Where these were the great martyrial or other basilicas, these were frequently located outside the old Roman centres in any case, leading to a certain shift in setting.⁵⁶ Additionally, as well as being located in and around churches and monasteries, the foci for politics were increasingly rural, taking place on royal *villae* rather than in the former cities and smaller towns of the Empire.

The audience for political display changed significantly too after the end of the Western Roman Empire. The Roman army had, obviously, been a major ‘player’ in imperial politics, but it had been only one element. The display of military strength and of the control of the army through the triumphal procession was thus aimed at an audience comprised of some of the other players: notably the senate and people of Rome itself. Even in the immediately post-imperial period it might have been that the parade of the army, the ‘barbarian’ element in politics, continued to have a similar function in manifesting power to the Roman landed aristocracy that still staffed the church and much of the bureaucracy in the successor kingdoms. Social and political change around 600 led to significant developments in the raising of armies and in the role played by ethnicity within the post-imperial realms. Rather than largely being raised from that element of the population that claimed non-Roman ethnic identity, as such identities came to be almost universal within the kingdoms the nature of armies mutated into forces drawn from the landed aristocracy and its followers.⁵⁷ The army thus, effectively came to represent all of the significant elements within secular politics. It is thus unsurprising that the assembly of the army came to be the location *par excellence* for political ceremony. Laws were passed, for example, at musters of the army. Charters could be issued while on campaign.⁵⁸

An additional element of the changes under discussion may have been a change in the ways in which people thought about victory. In 2003 I opened my book about warfare with a discussion of the fact that, for a society in which warfare played such a prominent role, there was a puzzling lack of attention to military detail in contemporary accounts of battles.⁵⁹ This contrasted sharply with classical Greece, for example, where tactics were analogous and battle waged at similarly, brutally close-quarters. At the end of a somewhat inconclusive treatment, the best that I could do by way of

⁵⁶ One ought not to over-emphasize this. The church of St Martin, Tours, for example, is barely a fifteen-minute walk from the old Roman amphitheatre. In other towns, churches had come to be associated with, and even built on, the site of the amphitheatre, as at Metz for example. Amphitheatres themselves were, of course, usually peripheral.

⁵⁷ The process is described in Halsall 2003: 46–70. I would now modify the argument in places. Some clarifications are made in my contribution to the forthcoming *Cambridge History of War*, ed. Anne Curry.

⁵⁸ E.g. Birch 1885: no. 389, pp. 539–540. The authenticity of this charter is, alas, disputable.

⁵⁹ Halsall 2003: 1–6.

conclusion was to suggest that – as several early medieval writers in fact said⁶⁰ – whatever tactical skill one had, ultimately battle was such a lottery that the outcome could only reasonably be assumed to be in the hands of God. This in itself suggests one reason why there appears to have been a significant shift towards religious, ritual investment in the stages *before* battle, compared with those afterwards, and why there appears to have been a move from celebrating the military victor towards giving thanks to God for the judgement He made in awarding the victory. It cannot, of course, be claimed that the divine was believed to play no role in classical victory; as throughout this paper, what is suggested is an important shift of emphasis rather than a revolutionary change of practice. Thus, during battles divine signs are often given – particularly to holy men – that one side has been victorious, underlining the Almighty's role in determining victory. In the late seventh century, for example, the Anglo-Saxon holy man Cuthbert received, at the precise moment of King Ecgrith of Northumbria's death, a vision that the king had been defeated and slain by the Picts.⁶¹ In this context it seems not unexpected that it would be hubris in the extreme to publically glorify a king or commander for winning a battle when credit for the victory came from God. This was a point that Gregory of Tours made many times in the *Histories*.⁶² Perhaps the most obvious illustration was the fate of Sigibert of Austrasia in late 575. Having defeated his brother Chilperic and hemmed him into the town of Tournai, Sigibert ignored the advice of Saint Germanus of Paris and proceeded to attend the siege and finish his brother off. While there he allowed himself to be hailed as king by the Neustrian Franks and raised on a shield. And that was precisely the moment that he was struck down by assassins sent by Chilperic.⁶³ Emphasising this point, as the early medieval period progressed, the imagery of a triumphal entry into a city became increasingly restricted to depictions of Christ's entry into Jerusalem. This would underline the hubristic element of putting on a triumph in the Christian post-imperial west.

Adding to this, another possible explanation for the decline and fall of the Triumph might be sought more squarely in Roman ideas. Ammianus Marcellinus, in his well-known account of Constantius II's triumph in Rome,⁶⁴ expressed the view that celebrating a triumph over Romans was regarded as in somewhat bad taste. One feature that emerged from fifth-century politics, and was underlined by the middle of the sixth century, was that no western ruler had decisively acquired the mantle of Rome in such a way that he could celebrate his wars as victories over barbarians. It's interesting that Theoderic of Italy seems to have tried to do this after his troops

⁶⁰ E.g. Sedul. Scott. *de rector. Christ.* 3 (ed. Dutton, pp. 402–411).

⁶¹ Bede *Vit. Cuth.* 27 (trans. Colgrave).

⁶² E.g. Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 5. *praef.*, 5.30, 6.31.

⁶³ Greg. Tur. *Hist. Franc.* 4.51.

⁶⁴ Amm. 16.10.1–3 (ed. Rolfe, pp. 342–349).

took over Provence (from fellow Goths) in 508.⁶⁵ In the early medieval West, warfare tended to be endemic and small-scale.⁶⁶ When major victories were won, they were celebrated, but rarely if ever did they involve the utter conquest of a people, with their king dragged in irons through the streets. The shaming of beaten rebels has Roman roots (and biblical reference points too) but it does not seem to me to be quite the same thing. In the case of the humiliation of the usurper Paul and the defeated queen Brunhild, that shaming took place, in any case, before the army. It may have been in decline in the late Roman period, but the sort of warfare represented by the traditional triumph simply does not seem to have existed in the early medieval period.

Whichever way one looks at it, whether ideologically or militarily, Isidore's view is symptomatic. While victory remained of central importance to kingship, there was no longer any place for anything as inappropriate, or as antiquated, as a triumph.

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⁶⁵ Cassiod. *Var.* 3.17 (trans. Barnish, pp. 54–55).

⁶⁶ Halsall 2003: 134–143.

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