

# The Peasant Rusticus: Life near Paris in the Time of Clovis

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History

“History,” wrote the late Eileen Power, “is largely made up of Bodos.”<sup>1</sup> With that final sentence of her essay on Bodo, a Carolingian-era peasant near Paris, Power announced the arrival of the common man on the scene of popular historiography, a genre that was then dominated by examinations of famous men and their deeds.<sup>2</sup> Among medievalists, Power needs little introduction. Medieval People, her most famous and popular work, has had ten editions and numerous reprints since its original publication in 1924.<sup>3</sup> The first of its profiles was titled, “The Peasant Bodo: Life on a Country Estate in the time of Charlemagne,” and remains a common fixture on the reading lists of history undergraduates.

Bodo was an unlikely revolutionary. A dutiful serf on an ecclesiastical estate, the most rebellious thought Power attributes to him is a wish that “the [estate] house and all its land were at the bottom of the sea,” expressed as he “shivers and shakes the rime from his beard” while plowing the abbot’s fields on a midwinter morning.<sup>4</sup> It was in expressing such feelings at all, if only through the speculations of an historian writing eleven centuries later, that Bodo became an early standard bearer for the masses of so-called “ordinary people” and their “everyday lives” that have so thoroughly occupied generations of social historians since Power’s time. These efforts have benefited modern readers by giving new illumination, color, and depth to narratives that were once rendered in flatly political, military, or economic hues.

The study of Late Antiquity, which has sought to shed additional light on the transition from the world of classical antiquity to that of the Middle Ages, has reaped particularly large benefits from the rise of social historiography. Indeed, it does not seem unreasonable to claim that without the social perspective, Late Antiquity might not exist as a separate field of study (a distinction for which it must

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<sup>1</sup> Power 38.

<sup>2</sup> Kelley 104-5.

<sup>3</sup> Archer 1027.

<sup>4</sup> Power 26.

still fight in some quarters). Social history, however, has not been a panacea; many historical theaters within Late Antiquity remain stubbornly resistant to inquiry, their meager sources providing just enough information to tantalize those who would fill in the blanks.

One of the most notorious examples is that of post-Roman Gaul, a subject so poorly documented and so awash in modern conjecture that in 2000, Michael Kulikowski cautioned his colleagues against mistaking the accumulated body of historiography for primary sources.<sup>5</sup> Northern Gaul, in particular, is virtually invisible in the sources for more than a century, with little more than the hagiographic *Life of Genevieve* and a few pieces of personal correspondence comprising the survivals from between 450 and 550. Most of our information for northern Gaul during that period comes from oblique references made by authors located elsewhere, such as Sidonius Apollinaris, or from historians writing decades after the fact.

It is out of this “dark” age that Bodo and his world emerge in the records, three hundred years later. Bodo, his family, his neighbors, and all the material assets of the abbey of St. Germain des Prés were recorded in exhaustive detail in an estate book, or polyptych, roughly comparable to the famous “Domesday Book” ordered by William of Normandy following his 11th century conquest of England.<sup>6</sup> It is only because of that polyptych that we know Bodo existed at all, but exist he did, and Power was able to use him to introduce her readers to the early Middle Ages from a “day in the life” perspective they might never have previously encountered.

Historians of northern Gaul’s murkier past might wish they had a Bodo of their own to present to their students; someone who could, through a similar snapshot of his material world, comment on the great debates that have been churning through the field’s literature since Edward Gibbon published The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire in 1776. When Roman power receded from the region, what happened to the people who were left behind? Did they, in fact, regard themselves as having been “left behind,” or did they continue to lead some sort of Roman life? Was life in northern Gaul “Roman” enough to begin with that the absence of a Roman state would have made a significant difference to most people? What of the infamous barbarians who, in the popular narrative, brought down the grand but sclerotic edifice of Roman civilization in a wave of violent conquests throughout the fifth century? How barbaric were they, in practice? In short, what might an early 6th century “Bodo” tell us about northern Gaul’s transi-

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<sup>5</sup> Kulikowski 325. Kulikowski was referring to scholarship on the barbarian invasions in early 5th century Gaul, but his point is equally valid for the study of 5th century Gaul in general.

<sup>6</sup> Power 20.

tion from a province in a transcontinental empire, where his ancestors were citizens, to the proto-French backcountry where the actual Bodo lived?

As discussed above, any attempt to replicate Power's exercise in a setting three hundred years earlier is at a colossal disadvantage. Although it has been suggested that the format of the St. Germain des Prés polyptych may be directly descended from late Gallo-Roman tax registers, no comparable records survive from the period of interest.<sup>7</sup> There is, therefore, no direct evidence for the existence, in the beginning of the 6th century, of any particular peasant living in the environs of Paris. In the absence of that evidence, the only way to proceed is to attempt to construct a hypothetical ancestor for Bodo. This paper will attempt to do so. It will first provide, as concisely as possible, some political, economic, and social contexts in which an early 6th century peasant near Paris would have lived. It will then, in the hope of providing the reader the materials to visualize a typical day in such a person's life, propose a description of their physical and spiritual world.

In a nod to his status and profession, and because the use of the name in both fifth and sixth century Gaul is attested by Gregory of Tours, our proposed Bodo antecedent will be called "Rusticus."<sup>8</sup> For the sake of expediency, he'll henceforth be referred to as though he had actually existed. So who, then, was Rusticus?

He was, among other things, a resident of a region that had, at the beginning of the previous century, been a part of the Roman Empire for nearly 450 years. Ammianus Marcellinus, a former military officer who had once served in Gaul, offers a glimpse of how the provincials of Gaul were perceived by the educated classes of the imperial core during the late Empire. Writing in Rome around 390, he describes them as physically formidable, well-suited to military service, and sometimes prone to alcoholism, but also as possessing a certain self respect. Though "hardened by cold and by incessant toil" (a description that Bodo, with his rime-caked beard, would have recognized), even the most destitute were "clean and neat...throughout the whole region." This, he tells us, was in contrast to most of the empire, where the poor were "dirty and in rags."<sup>9</sup> To Ammianus, the people of Gaul may have been rustics, but they were more civilized—and thus more Roman—than most other Roman provincials.

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<sup>7</sup> Goffart 2008, 166-7.

<sup>8</sup> The History of the Franks 2.13: Rusticus was the seventh bishop of Clermont in the mid-fifth century; The History of the Franks 7.31: A Rusticus was bishop of Aire (modern Aire-sur-L'Adour) in SW Gaul in the 580s. Given these, it's ironic to learn from Brown (2003, p. 151-2) that to the "well-groomed" clerics of southern Gaul, such as Caesarius of Arles (r. 502-542), a rusticus was a "boorish peasant," often pagan, and thus "devoid of reason and unamenable to culture...driven by brute passion alone."

<sup>9</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus 15.12

More than a century later, however, how “Roman” was Rusticus? By modern reckoning, he was certainly not a citizen of a Roman Empire. Imperial control of northern Gaul, including Paris, had steadily ebbed since a large group of migrating Germanic peoples crossed the Rhine River, Gaul’s northeastern frontier, in 406.<sup>10</sup> For Rusticus (or, more likely, for his father), perhaps a last vestige of actual Roman state authority had been wiped away in 486, when the Salian Franks defeated Syagrius, a Gallo-Roman military leader whose territory, based in Soissons, some fifty miles to the northeast, is believed to have encompassed Paris.<sup>11</sup> Of course, Rusticus’s cultural identity was not defined solely by the presence or absence of a state, but it is a reasonable place to start.

### ‘Consul or Augustus’

By Bodo’s time, Paris’s status would return to something close to what it had been under the Romans. That is, it would decline in importance. While not a backwater, precisely, the Paris of the early 9th century was a town of secondary importance in the Carolingian kingdom, much as Lutetia Parisiorum had been in Roman Gaul.<sup>12</sup> Rusticus, however, lived at the start of an era that foreshadowed

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<sup>10</sup> Along with A.D. 476 and some other red letter dates, the breach of the Rhine frontier in 406 is one of the events by which the decline of Roman state authority in Western Europe is traditionally demarcated. Even as debate continues over how ultimately violent or disruptive this migration was for the Gallo-Romans in its path, its ramifications for the fate of Roman imperium in Gaul are almost universally acknowledged. Drinkwater (1992: 216) is unequivocal in his belief that no such entity as “Roman Gaul” long survived the event. King (p. 202) writes that “if any date can be taken the mark the end of Roman Gaul, this one has the best claim.” For a brief overview of the A.D. 406 migrations and their significance, see J.B. Bury, The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians (London, 1928; reprinted New York, 1967 & 2000), pp.80-83. For a more recent and extensive analysis, see P. Heather, The Fall of the Roman Empire (Oxford, 2006), pp.192-250.

<sup>11</sup> See J.B. Bury, “The End of Roman Rule in North Gaul” (*Cambridge Historical Journal* Vol. 1, No. 2, 1924, pp. 197-201). The official title of Syagrius, if he had one, is not recorded in any surviving source. R.W. Burgess says he “was clearly a warlord,” (review of “Late Roman Warlords” by P. MacGeorge, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 2003.09.44) a view shared by King, who applies the same label to Syagrius’s father, Aegidius (p. 210). Aegidius held the title *magister militum*—master of soldiers—and was a close ally of the western Emperor Majorian (r. 457-461). Whether their domain (which has been variously labeled a “kingdom,” a “rump state” of the empire, or a “disconnected province” of same) was any more or less “Roman” than the erstwhile imperial possessions surrounding it, or whether Syagrius had anything more than a notional connection to the imperial government are, like so much else in this historical theater, matters for conjecture.

<sup>12</sup> Bodo’s Paris remained an important ecclesiastical center—its abbots were on a short list of people furnished with a copy of Charlemagne’s will, and it would host an important church council in 829—but its political significance had diminished with the rise of the Carolingian

Paris's future as one of the world's leading cities. Clovis, the first Christian king of the Franks, had just made Paris the seat of his kingdom—and thus, arguably, second only to Rome as the most important city in western Europe.

The most influential source in our understanding of Clovis—and 6th century Gaul in general—is the *Historia Francorum* (“History of the Franks”) by Gregory of Tours. Gregory is a problematic source for Clovis, most obviously because he wrote more than half a century after Clovis's death in 511, but also because his qualifications as a historian have been questioned by modern scholars.<sup>13</sup> Guy Halsall compares the use of Gregory for early medieval history of north Gallic towns to writing “a history of late Tudor London from the props box of the Globe Theatre.”<sup>14</sup> Be that as it may, his narrative is the only one that survives.

Gregory's account depicts a violent warlord who worships pagan deities and, after defeating Syagrius, allows his troops to plunder the region's churches. His conversion to Christianity takes place under duress; he resists the entreaties of his wife to convert until a desperate fight against a rival Germanic people, the Alamanni, inspires him to make a battlefield conversion in exchange for victory. Through a combination of conquest and subterfuge, Clovis eliminates all of his rivals to the Frankish throne, including many members of his extended family. Some he executes personally by cleaving their skulls with his axe. When all other visible contenders for the kingship have been eliminated, Clovis publicly bemoans his familial solitude in a ploy “to find some relative in the land of the living whom he could kill.”<sup>15</sup> He is, seemingly, the archetype of the violent barbarian ruler.

In the midst of all the bloodletting, though, Gregory shows us a different Clovis. Arriving in Tours after defeating the Visigoths and expanding his domain over most of Gaul, Clovis stages his own coronation at the shrine of St. Martin, one of the holiest sites in western Europe, outside of Rome: “He stood clad in a

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Frankish dynasty in the 8th century. Paul Fouracre surveys the shifting political situation in 8th century Gaul in Vol. 2, Ch. 3 of *The New Cambridge Medieval History* (1995). On the significance of Lutetia relative to other urban centers in Roman Gaul, see Drinkwater 1983, pp. 141-159. King (pp.72-73) suggests that early Roman Paris, along with other “important Gallic towns,” was reduced to “the lowly status of vicus (street of houses)” as a consequence of its people's resistance to Caesar's conquest. This status placed it as a disadvantage for economic and civic development versus towns such as Reims, Autun, and Lyon, which were founded by groups that had allied themselves with Caesar.

<sup>13</sup> An overview of the problems with Gregory the historian (along with some intriguing suggestions for working around them) is available from Brown (2002, pp. 16-28).

<sup>14</sup> Halsall 217.

<sup>15</sup> *The History of the Franks* 2.27-42.

purple tunic and the military mantle, and he crowned himself with a diadem. He then rode out on his horse and with his own hand showered gold and silver coins among the people present all the way from the doorway of St. Martin's church to Tours cathedral. From that day on he was called Consul or Augustus."<sup>16</sup>

The question of which, if any, official Roman titles Clovis actually received has never been settled (though we can safely assume that "Augustus" was not among them). A more useful question is what need an all-conquering, axe-wielding barbarian warlord would have for Roman titles and pomp. One plausible idea that has been advanced is that Clovis was competing for status with Theodoric the Ostrogoth, who then ruled Italy with the blessing of the remaining Roman emperor in Constantinople.<sup>17</sup> Another, more compelling answer requires a return to Rusticus, albeit via a circuitous detour.

### **A tradition of insecurity**

When the Visigoths sacked Rome in 410, it was a horrifically alien experience for most of its inhabitants, for Rome had not fallen to an invader for nearly 800 years. Across the Mediterranean Sea, in what's now Algeria, St. Augustine was compelled to write his *City of God* in an attempt to explain how and why the Almighty could allow such a thing to happen. Out in the Gallic hinterlands, however, Rusticus's forebears had no such innocence to be shattered. By Rusticus's time, threats to property, life, and limb had been an important part of living memory, if not a fact of daily life, for two and a half centuries.

In what Stephen Mitchell calls "an alarming preview of future events," large scale Germanic raids across the Rhine into the northern Gaul began in the 250s, a time when the Roman government was racked by violent internal conflict.<sup>18</sup> In response to the failure of the frontier defenses, most towns of northern Gaul erected massive defensive walls, some of which survive to this day.<sup>19</sup> In Paris, the early

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<sup>16</sup> [The History of the Franks 2.38.](#)

<sup>17</sup> Fanning 334.

<sup>18</sup> Mitchell 349. Pat Southern has written a brief overview of the empire's so-called "Crisis of the Third Century" for general readers at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/thirdcenturycrisis\\_article\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/thirdcenturycrisis_article_01.shtml). For a more comprehensive study, see David Potter's [The Roman Empire at Bay: A.D. 180-395](#) (Routledge, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Johnson uses archaeological and architectural evidence to argue that many, if not most, of these walls were part of an "official scheme of planned defense" and not a "spontaneous and haphazard local reaction to the invasions of the late third century."

imperial town on the south bank was abandoned and the inhabitants withdrew to the fortified Île de la Cité.<sup>20</sup>

Outside the towns were the farming estates that made Gaul such an important breadbasket for the empire. Archaeological survivals have focused much of the modern attention paid to these estates on the magnificent villas where the landowners and their families lived.<sup>21</sup> As impressive as they were, however, they were usually dwarfed by their associated holdings. The surrounding estate lands could be hundreds or thousands of acres. They supported not just the landowner's family, but also the labor force of slaves, hired freedmen, and peasant sharecroppers—people not unlike Rusticus—who supported the agricultural operations of the estate.

These estates formed a patchwork of rural civilization along the network of roads that connected the established towns, and were minor population centers in their own right. St. Martin of Tours is said to have “passed through the estate” of a wealthy landowner named Lupicinus sometime in the late fourth century. There he encounters a “crowd” of people mourning the suicide of a young house slave. Lupicinus himself is conspicuously absent from the story. Martin's roadside encounter was not with the holder of the estate, but with a community joined in grief over the death of a member.<sup>22</sup> Essentially undefended and easily accessible to passers-by, these estate communities were easy pickings for Germanic raiders, who literally plundered their contents by the boatload.<sup>23</sup>

Ammianus describes raids and looting by Germanic groups as routine occurrences in eastern and central Gaul in 357, when the future emperor Julian was working “to restore the shattered fragments of the province.” The presence of an imperial army under Julian was in response to “exceptionally aggressive” raids that had pushed “further than usual” into Roman territory. Even with Julian in the re-

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<sup>20</sup> King 177.

<sup>21</sup> See “Estrées-sur-Noye” in Cornell, T. and Matthews, J., Atlas of the Roman World (1982), p. 130.

<sup>22</sup> The Life of Martin of Tours 8.

<sup>23</sup> Mitchell 349. Three boatloads of typical villa booty including coins, silver and bronze vessels, tools, household equipment, and other materials, dated to A.D. 278, were found in 1980-82 during a dredging operation in the Rhine riverbed near Neupotz, Germany. cf. Todd, Malcolm. “The Germanic peoples and Germanic society.” The Crisis of Empire, A.D. 193–337. Eds. Alan K. Bowman, Peter Garnsey and Averil Cameron. Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 442. Todd's review of the original archaeological publication, Die Alamannenbeute aus dem Rhein bei Neupotz : Plünderungsgut aus dem römischen Gallien by E. Künzl, et al. is an excellent English summary of the finds and can be read in *Britannia*, Vol. 27, (1996), pp. 481-482.

gion, a tribe called the Laeti forced the residents of Lyon to take shelter within the city walls; they then “laid waste to whatever they could find outside the town.”<sup>24</sup> The Alamanni (the foes against whom Clovis would one day make his conversion deal with God) were even able to besiege Julian himself in the town of Sens, about 70 miles southeast of Paris, during the winter of 356/7.<sup>25</sup> Julian’s efforts at pacification of the German frontier were successful in the short term, but his letter to the Emperor Constantius in 360 makes it clear that the province was not fully secure. Calling the residents of Gaul “victims of perennial trouble and the most serious disasters,” he pleads with Constantius to refrain from pulling military manpower from the province to support Roman operations against Persia. “The barbarians are not yet checked and...these provinces, if you can bear to be told the truth, need strong reinforcements themselves.”<sup>26</sup> The following year, Julian marched east, leaving a fragile Roman frontier behind him.

Nerves remained frayed in the towns behind that frontier. Some time into the episcopacy of Martin of Tours, probably around 370, Trier was “thrown into a panic” by rumors of an imminent barbarian attack.<sup>27</sup> The rumors were disproved, but the story is evidence of how badly Gallo-Romans’ conception of their safety and security had eroded, even in a city as well-defended as Trier, an imperial capital with an estimated population of 80,000.<sup>28</sup> The sense of threat and insecurity would have been even more oppressive in the open countryside. In response, the provincials relied primarily on a hodgepodge of static defenses, second-rate local auxiliary units, and *ad hoc* militias of retired veterans and other able-bodied men. The protection afforded by a Roman field army, imperfect though it was, was a rare and unpredictable luxury, and after the fateful breach of the Rhine frontier in 406, the responsibility for the security of northern Gaul seems to have fallen entirely to local authorities.

Brian Ward-Perkins regards this development as part of nothing less than the militarization of the Roman populace.<sup>29</sup> As usual, the sources are scarce, but it’s a transformation that seems likely to have been traumatic and, at best, partially successful. Writing around 440, the bishop Salvian of Marseilles, himself a refugee

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<sup>24</sup> AM 16.11.

<sup>25</sup> AM 16.11.

<sup>26</sup> AM 20.8.

<sup>27</sup> The Life of Martin of Tours 18.

<sup>28</sup> Mitchell 351.

<sup>29</sup> Ward-Perkins 48-49.

from northern Gaul, indicated that the now-former capital of Trier had since been sacked four times. Mainz, where the frontier had been breached in 406, was “destroyed and blotted out,” while Cologne was “overrun by the enemy.” He adds that the situation was similar “in many other cities of Gaul and Spain” which had “come into subjection to barbarian jurisdiction.”<sup>30</sup> About ten years later, the residents of Paris would cower in terror from Attila the Hun, who threatened but ultimately passed over the town; a hagiographer writing around 520 credited this outcome to a days-long prayer vigil held by St. Genevieve and “the matrons of the city.”<sup>31</sup> Such a close call with the “Scourge of God” and his mounted army of central Asian nomads would surely have been remembered by Rusticus’s grandparents, who would have sought shelter in the town upon word of Attila’s approach.<sup>32</sup> With the passage of another decade, Paris’s area of northern Gaul was under the nominal control of Syagrius’s father, Aegidius, the last recorded officer of the Roman military in northern Gaul. Working closely with the Frankish king Childeric, to whom he had granted administrative control of the province of Belgica Secunda in extreme northern Gaul, Aegidius defended the region from Visigothic invaders in 463 and 469. Childeric remained an ally when Aegidius’s son, Syagrius, took over his father’s domain, probably sometime in the 470s. An inconclusive reference in the *Life of Genevieve* suggests that Childeric may even have occupied Paris against Gallo-Roman rivals of Syagrius during this period.<sup>33</sup>

Childeric died in about 481. It is not known why his son, Clovis, broke the alliance with Syagrius and invaded the domain of Soissons just a few years later, but it would be a mistake to unnecessarily dramatize this development or even to cast it as the true barbarian *coup de grâce* for the western Roman Empire, as some lay commentators have. It is better to view it in the context of Clovis’s subsequent moves against internal and external rivals, his father’s administrative rule of a Roman province, and even his allegedly reluctant conversion to Christianity. From this vantage point, the Clovis who donned the imperial purple at St. Martin’s shrine in 507 was not merely posing for the benefit of Theodoric and the emperor Anastasius. He was giving notice to his subjects that for the first time in generations, they

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<sup>30</sup> On the Government of God 5.8

<sup>31</sup> Vita Genovefae 10, as cited by Cooper (pg. 1).

<sup>32</sup> The Life of St. Severinus depicts very similar scenes, some with decidedly unhappier outcomes, along the Danube River (in what is now northern Austria) during the 460s. Most of that Life was completed at least ten years before the Life of Genevieve. It’s conceivable that the unknown author of the latter was inspired by the text.

<sup>33</sup> Daly 627-8.

lived under the aegis of a man who was capable of ruling and defending his territory in the ancient manner.

It is reasonable, then, to imagine that the entourage of the new “Clovis Augustus” indulged in a certain amount of ceremony as it arrived in Paris to establish the new capital. The resulting commotion might initially have given Rusticus, out working in the field, a scare. Should he take cover? Did he have time to run to his house and retrieve his family? Which belongings could he carry easily? Once he perceived that there was no immediate danger, he would have joined his gathering neighbors to watch the remarkable sight of a Frankish king progress up the old Roman road from Tours. They would have whispered amongst themselves about his bizarrely long hair and mustache, which would have drawn attention in any event but looked even stranger with a diadem and imperial purple cloak. Rusticus would recall the news of the coronation, which seemed a distant and irrelevant piece of information at the time, and look upon his new ruler with nervous awe. Would he have been filled with hope or dread? In material terms, did the new king matter to Rusticus’s life at all?

### **A sliding scale of domination and subordination**

An attempt to answer Rusticus’s question requires a closer examination of what is meant by describing Rusticus as a “peasant”. Rusticus was not a slave, at least not in the Roman mode. The evidence for agricultural slave labor in Gaul is very limited, particularly after the 2nd century. What slaves remained by the beginning of the fifth century in Gaul seem to have been engaged in domestic service for the rich.<sup>34</sup> Slaves seem to have remained relatively rare in the early Merovingian period, despite references to them in the law codes.<sup>35</sup> Rusticus was not, however, “free” in a modern, Western sense. He occupied a spot on what’s been aptly described as “a sliding scale of domination and subordination,” on which absolute servitude and absolute freedom were the terminal ends.<sup>36</sup>

This scale had many gradations and was subject to great regional variation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to survey all of these, in so far as they are known; the scholarship is vast and consensus is elusive.<sup>37</sup> With this disclaimer in

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<sup>34</sup> MacMullen 368-70.

<sup>35</sup> Halsall 258.

<sup>36</sup> Smith 153.

<sup>37</sup> See Wickham, pp. 519-590, for a highly readable overview of this topic that begins with “the recently revived debate about the nature of the late Roman colonate” and seeks to identify “the most important changes experienced by peasantries as the empire divided into successor states.”

place, it is sufficient for current purposes to begin by grouping Gaul's population at the beginning of the fifth century into three very broad economic categories: slaves, free people without land, and free people with land. Proposing what it meant to be a northern Gallic "peasant" a century later requires a brief look at the later two.

During the late Roman republic and early empire, free rural laborers typically agreed to short-term sharecropping contracts with landholders. After the emperor Diocletian took charge of a late third century empire on the verge of economic dissolution, landlords were required to register these tenant farmers, or *coloni*, on tax rolls, thus identifying the tenant as "part of a chain of responsibility for the taxes of the land."<sup>38</sup> The length of the contracts grew. At the turn of the fifth century, landowners in Gaul were legally entitled to the services of their tenants for a period of thirty years.<sup>39</sup> Together with laws that authorized the chaining of runaway tenants "in the same manner as if they were slaves" and other laws that required sons to pursue the professions of their fathers, membership in the *colonate* became effectively hereditary.

On the other hand, most *coloni* were not responsible for actually paying any taxes themselves. That fell to the landowners. The more land one owned, it seems, the more flexibility one had in dealing with tax collectors. Smaller independent farmers faced a hard deadline. Ammianus regarded the disadvantageous terms reserved for poor freeholders as a matter of common knowledge. According to Ammianus, the poor had to pay their annual tax burden in full at the beginning of each year. Deferments, installments, or other alternate arrangements were not available. Given this, it is easy to understand why Julian inspired "everywhere...dances of joy" when he lowered the annual *per capita* tax in Gaul from 25 to 7 gold pieces.<sup>40</sup>

The relief was temporary. The praetorian prefect of Gaul regarded his authority to enforce levies as such a fundamental prerogative that when Julian attempted to overrule him in 357, he wrote a letter of complaint to the Emperor Constantius, who admonished Julian.<sup>41</sup> Julian persuaded Constantius with his own letter and won that particular dispute, but it is reasonable to conclude that later prefects of Gaul remained quick to assert full authority over the provincial tax apparatus whenever it was expedient to do so.

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<sup>38</sup> Grey 165-66.

<sup>39</sup> Grey 163.

<sup>40</sup> AM 16.5.

<sup>41</sup> AM 17.3.

More local authorities also had access to the tax apparatus, with similarly harsh consequences for small taxpayers. That is the impression given by Salvian in the fifth century when he alleges that “the rich themselves from time to time make additions to the amount of taxation demanded from the poor.”<sup>42</sup> Salvian indicates that in response to these pressures, some small landowners voluntarily gave up their holdings and assumed *coloni*-like status.<sup>43</sup>

Still others seem to have abandoned the Roman system entirely, fleeing to the mysterious “Bacaudae.”<sup>44</sup> First appearing in third-century sources, the Bacaudae are described by various writers as rustic laborers, country folk, “brigands” and “revolutionaries.”<sup>45</sup> J.F. Drinkwater argues that these earlier Bacaudae, who emerged during the empire’s third century “crisis,” “should be seen as dislocated peasants who sought security in the leadership of second-order figures of authority.”<sup>46</sup> The security issues of the fifth century, as described above, would appear to be fertile ground for the resurgence of the phenomenon. Towards the middle of the fifth century, Drinkwater finds them living an essentially “Roman” life in the Gallic interior, disconnected from the Roman state but not hostile towards it until its agents sought to draw them back into the Roman administrative fold and its attendant economic abuses.<sup>47</sup>

It is tempting to think of the Bacaudae as romantic, self-sufficient rebels who had shaken off the shackles of an overbearing state, but the retreat of Rome would not automatically result in the egalitarian paradise imagined by the author of the *Querolus*, a play performed in early fifth century Rome that contains a unusual, possibly Bacaudic reference to life in central Gaul.<sup>48</sup> Leaders would inevitably

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<sup>42</sup> On the Government of God 5.7.

<sup>43</sup> On the Government of God 5.8, “Many of them leave their tiny fields and shops to escape the enforced payment of taxes...they put themselves under the care and protection of the powerful, make themselves the captives of the rich and so pass under their jurisdiction.”

<sup>44</sup> On the Government of God 5.5.

<sup>45</sup> MacMullen 370.

<sup>46</sup> Drinkwater 1992, 208.

<sup>47</sup> Drinkwater 1992, 217.

<sup>48</sup> Drinkwater 1992, 210. cf. Thompson, E.A., “Peasant Revolts in Late Roman Gaul and Spain.” *Past & Present* 2 (Nov., 1952) pp. 11-23. “Men live there under the natural law. There's no trickery there. Capital sentences are pronounced there under an oak tree and are recorded on bones. There even rustics perorate, and private individuals pronounce judgment. You can do anything you like there.”

emerge in Bacaudic regions (regardless of whether these regions were identified as such by Roman authorities) through criteria of wealth, deference to former status, or martial prowess, which could help explain Syagrius or any of his Gallo-Roman rivals. Nor need these new hierarchies have formed on regional scales. Archaeological evidence indicates that when groups of poor farmers took over abandoned villa sites, one was often richer than the others.<sup>49</sup> When one looks for economic powers that remained prominent in late fifth century Gaul, one in particular stands out.

There is a significant chance that Rusticus, like Bodo, would have worked on land owned by the Roman Catholic Church, whose landholdings in the late Empire dwarfed those of every other entity but the imperial fisc. Clovis's conversion to Christianity and amicable relations with the regional clergy are positive indicators for the church's ability to retain or even expand these holdings after the departure of the Roman state.<sup>50</sup> As with so much else in northern Gaul c. 500, it is impossible to know the extent of church landholdings around Paris. However, we know from a letter written by Sidonius Apollinaris in 474 that Patiens, then bishop of Lyon, was able "to distribute corn to the destitute throughout all the ruined land of Gaul at [his] own expense," so effectively that Sidonius, writing from landlocked Clermont, "saw the roads encumbered with [Patiens's] grain carts."<sup>51</sup>

Clovis would have had little reason to meddle with Rusticus, particularly if he were a tenant of church land, but Rusticus was not without grounds for concern. Chris Wickham notes that under the late Empire, laws governing the *colonnate* were often trumped by "local customs, local parameters for social action, and, above all, local power relations."<sup>52</sup> By the start of the sixth century, this principle would have been still more applicable to whichever features of late Roman rural hierarchies had persisted into Rusticus's time. The earliest segments of the body of Frankish law, the *Pactus Legis Salicae* (The Laws of the Salian Franks), are generally believed to have been codified near the beginning of the sixth century, during Clovis's reign. That Clovis recognized a need for a Latin codification of Germanic law suggests that he was inclined to make use of any existing Roman customs and practices that suited his purposes. On the other hand, the law codes leave little doubt as to the status of Romans versus their new neighbors.

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<sup>49</sup> Whittaker and Garnsey 297.

<sup>50</sup> Daly, 631-641, discusses Clovis's personal relations with the bishop Remigius and other clergy.

<sup>51</sup> Whittaker and Garnsey 301, referencing Sid. Apoll. Ep. 6.12.

<sup>52</sup> Wickham 524.

The life of a “free Frank or other barbarian who lives by Salic law” was worth twice that of “a Roman landholder who is not a table companion of the king.”<sup>53</sup> A section “concerning homicides committed by a band of men” equates “Romans” with “half-free men or servants” and levies a murder fine half of that charged to persons found guilty of attacking a “freeman.”<sup>54</sup> There are numerous penalties specified for “bondsmen” and “half-free men” who leave their appointed places without permission, and for persons who entice them to do so, while a full section is dedicated to the conditions under which a man may settle in a particular village.<sup>55</sup> Though it’s uncertain whether these particular laws were codified during Clovis’s time, it is likely that “free” status, were it available to Rusticus, would have been no guarantee of either freedom to move or of freedom from violence.<sup>56</sup>

### **Rusticus’s Paris**

Three hundred years later, Bodo would tend his fields in a place called Villiers, a seven-mile walk down the left bank of the Seine. Today, it is a large public park just south of the town of Saint-Cloud, which is itself named for the tomb of Chlodovald, a grandson of Clovis who died around 560. There is no evidence for what was there at the time of Rusticus. It could have been the site of an abandoned or repurposed Roman villa. There could have been nothing at all. In the absence of rural estates, going any distance beyond a town meant walking into the wilderness. This was true even in the more populous late Roman period. Seeking refuge from petitioners, St. Martin only had to travel two miles outside Tours to find a place “so remote and secluded that it was equal to the solitude of the desert.”<sup>57</sup>

The abbey which would one day own Villiers did not yet exist, either. Now an 11th century church on the western side of the Latin Quarter in Paris, the abbey of St. Germain des Prés was, in Bodo’s day, in the middle of a gently sloping field about a kilometer from the Ile de la Cite, which had been the core of the settlement since the Roman conquest of Gaul in the first century B.C.. When Clovis arrived in Paris, it was still half a century from being built, but because it played such a large role in Bodo’s world, it is a reasonable spot from which to begin an explora-

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<sup>53</sup> The Laws of the Salian Franks 51.1; 51.9.

<sup>54</sup> The Laws of the Salian Franks 52.4.

<sup>55</sup> The Laws of the Salian Franks 39; 45.

<sup>56</sup> Rio 11-12.

<sup>57</sup> Life of Martin of Tours 10:1-2.

tion of Rusticus's Paris. Let us imagine that this is where Rusticus lived, along with a smattering of neighbors, in sunken huts of thatch-and-post construction.<sup>58</sup>

Rusticus did not go into town every day, but he was going today, because his wife wanted to plant a new garden and her bush hook had proved too dull to remove the brambles.<sup>59</sup> A friend had told him that a small group of traveling craftsmen and merchants had arrived on the river the previous afternoon. Perhaps one of them could sharpen it. Bush hook in hand, he headed up a foot trail that led to the southwest road. As he approached the road, he passed between a pair of small, overgrown pagan mausoleums, making the sign of the Cross as he did so. To the right, two days' journey on foot, was Chartres, and Tours was two days further on. Rusticus proceeded to the other side of the road and onto the old *decumanus*, which had once been the east-west street of the Roman town. Like most people he knew, Rusticus was slightly suspicious of outsiders.<sup>60</sup> Before visiting the travelers, he would stop and ask others whether they were the right sort for doing business.

He paid no attention to the road surface, a mixture of packed dirt, broken paving stones, and clumps of brush that reflected the street's deprecated importance. Nobody lived at the west end of the *decumanus* anymore, and empty foundations marked the spots where buildings had once stood. Some of the foundations now housed carefully cultivated gardens. The building materials had long since been scavenged for use in other homes, some of which Rusticus now approached. They were of similar construction to his own hut, but they had been able to make some use of the remains of the brick and stone Roman structures that had preceded them. Some of these remains were loose *spolia*, taken from disused buildings elsewhere in the settlement. Other structures had integrated *in situ* remains such as walls and entryways in such a way that a well-traveled contemporary who squinted might imagine he was on a side street in Arles, or perhaps even Rome. The road was better maintained here, but the repairs were a piecemeal affair. There, part of a funerary monument (perhaps lifted from one of the pagan mausoleums Rusticus had passed) was used as a paving stone, while an inscription honoring a long-

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<sup>58</sup> See Appendix, Figure 4.2.

<sup>59</sup> A mid 6th C. worker in central Italy is described using a "bush hook" for this purpose in the *Life of Benedict* (Vita Benedict 6.1)

<sup>60</sup> Though I do not cite her directly here, Olivia Constable's *Housing the Stranger in the Mediterranean World* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) examines attitudes towards travelers from the classical period up through the Renaissance and, I believe, supports this characterization.

forgotten *decurion* was the front step of someone's home.<sup>61</sup> Rusticus may have had a vague notion that the street had once looked a bit grander, but it was not a thought that would have stayed with him as he dodged a passel of small children playing a game that their modern counterparts would recognize as "monkey in the middle."<sup>62</sup>

A bit further up the hill, Rusticus approached the center of old Roman Paris, where the east-west *decumanus* met the north-south *kardo*. The latter still served as the main road into town. On Rusticus's right was the old forum, which had once been the town's central space for public congregation and the undisputed center of civic life. Like most Gallic *fora*, it had featured a basilica, which played a role roughly akin to that of a modern city hall, and a pagan temple.<sup>63</sup> Now it was mostly a ruin. A few wooden huts squatted beneath the remnants of the old porticos; these probably housed beggars or recent arrivals.<sup>64</sup> The remains of the temple had been converted into a crude Christian chapel to ensure that the old "demons" who had once inhabited it would be unable to reclaim the space. There was no room for exiled gods in the towns. Rusticus, though Christian, knew not to speak openly of the hollow tree with the face-like knots that stood between his home and the river. It was there, as a small child, that his father had taught him to make offerings for good weather.<sup>65</sup>

The Roman town fathers were gone, but the forum's location at the old cross streets meant that its northeast corner, at least, remained an informal meeting place for people going hither and thither, whether they were going home, to the Île de la Cité, or to work the fields beyond the edges of town. Rusticus would soon encounter someone he knew, perhaps someone already engaged in conversation, and ask whether they'd heard anything about the merchants on the boat.

Whether he was speaking with his family, his neighbors, or his betters, it is safe to assume that Rusticus would have spoken Latin. By itself, however, that description is insufficient, for the Latin of Rusticus would have immediately marked him as a country bumpkin to anyone in Rome, or even to those in the urban centers of southern Gaul. Evolved in a region where echoes of the pre-Roman, Celtic lan-

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<sup>61</sup> Similar adaptations were observed during excavations of the late Roman forum at Nicopolis in southern Greece (Vladkova 211).

<sup>62</sup> A game fitting this description is attested by Sidonius Apollinaris (Hen 216).

<sup>63</sup> Drinkwater 1983, 144.

<sup>64</sup> 6th century wooden huts occupied the old forum at Luni, in Italy. Speculation on their occupants is mine. (Gauthier 57)

<sup>65</sup> Description based on Brown 2003, 148.

guage would still be audible to Gregory of Tours, decades later, Rusticus's Latin was a far cry from that displayed by his erudite near-contemporary, Sidonius Apollinaris. It was still further removed from the classical Latin that has come down to us from Cicero, Virgil, and other literary giants of Roman antiquity. It was, perhaps, no more closely related to that rarefied tongue than to the Germanically-seasoned Latinesque stew from which Old French was just beginning to emerge in Bodo's time.<sup>66</sup>

One of Rusticus's acquaintances knew of someone who'd purchased supplies from one of the craftsmen, and directed Rusticus to the foreman of a building site across the *kardo* from the forum. It was there that the blessed Genevieve, who'd once deflected the Huns through force of prayer, had been entombed just a few years earlier. In Roman times, entombing someone within the settlement would have been highly unusual, but hopeful Christian ideas about the temporary nature of death had helped to erode old taboos about living among the dead.<sup>67</sup> One of Clovis's first actions upon entering the environs of the city would have been to pay homage at the tomb of the saint who his father, though pagan, had known and respected.<sup>68</sup> Now, Clovis was replacing the small shrine erected by the locals with a great church in her honor.

The structure being raised by the laborers might not have impressed a modern observer. Paris's Pantheon, which replaced the ruin of Genevieve's later, medieval church in the 18th century, would have utterly dwarfed it.<sup>69</sup> To contempora-

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<sup>66</sup> The History of the Franks 1.32: "And coming to Clermont he set on fire, overthrew and destroyed that shrine which they call Vasso Galatæ in the Gallic tongue"; Hen (pp. 21-29) provides a brief overview of the modern debate on Merovingian Gaul's transition from High Latin and Vulgar Latin to Old French (or "Romance", as Hen and others sometimes refer to it), though I am not convinced by his argument that "the process of changing...happened mostly or entirely during the Carolingian period," i.e., from the mid-8th century. This position is difficult to reconcile with the idea of living languages in general. I believe the clerics attending the Council of Tours in 813, who agreed that Latin homilies should be "transferred into the unpolished Roman tongue (*rustica Romana lingua*) or the German language, so that everyone may be able more easily to understand them," were responding to very old problems of increasing mutual unintelligibility between regional dialects that had, relatively recently, crossed some threshold of ecclesiastical inconvenience. A new (and, by some reviewers' accounts, definitive) work on the history of Latin is The Blackwell History of the Latin Language by James Clackson and Geoffrey Horrocks (Blackwell, 2007); see Chs. 6-7 for a survey of the differences between written and spoken Latin across various populations from the mid-Imperial period to A.D. 1000.

<sup>67</sup> Gauthier 66.

<sup>68</sup> Daly 627-8.

<sup>69</sup> See Appendix, Fig. 2

ries, though, it promised to be a church to rival the greatest shrines in Gaul. It was an ideal project for a recently crowned monarch who sought to make a trademark public building in the Roman tradition, and it would give the once abandoned Roman town on the left bank a new life as a pilgrimage center. A monastery would soon follow the church, and a small constellation of other facilities would eventually spring up to meet the demands of visitors.<sup>70</sup>

Having received a favorable report on the merchants from the site foreman, Rusticus returned the favor by setting out to retrieve a tool inadvertently left behind by the foreman earlier that day. Further east, beyond the settlement, the hillside sloped towards the incipient course of the Bièvre river. Off to the left, some rafts or skiffs may have been visible on the Seine, cargoes fastened precariously to fragile decks.<sup>71</sup> Dominating the view was perhaps the greatest remnant of the departed empire: the old amphitheater, which remained the largest structure in the town. Rusticus had never been a patron, and rarely had reason to visit, for the stage and arena where the comedies of Terence and other, bawdier (and bloodier) entertainments had once played was covered in a thick layer of earth. A handful of disturbed areas betrayed the presence of recent graves. The amphitheater of Luteitia had become a sparsely populated cemetery.<sup>72</sup> Now disused for more than two centuries, most of its monumental bulk was shrouded in ivy and other overgrowth, but some signs of activity were evident; bright, jagged sections of freshly exposed marble were visible atop the ancient walls, and entire sections of the stands had been hauled away to serve as building material elsewhere. Rusticus inspected this area and found the tool, an iron mallet, right where the foreman had told him to look.

After returning the mallet to its owner, Rusticus was at last ready to make his way to the Île de la Cité to get his wife's bush hook repaired. As he crossed the bridge and approached the city gate, Rusticus passed a wicker chapel dedicated to St. Martin of Tours.<sup>73</sup> He may also have drawn an appraising glance from a mustache-wearing Frankish man-at-arms.

Among the first things Rusticus would have seen inside the walls was the episcopal palace, home to the local bishop, which was probably built sometime during the late fourth century. It was on Rusticus's right as he entered the walls, and its growing cathedral complex was the forerunner of today's Notre Dame. Off

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<sup>70</sup> Gauthier 65.

<sup>71</sup> Daly 627.

<sup>72</sup> See Appendix, Fig. 1

<sup>73</sup> Gauthier 60.

to the left, under construction but perhaps not yet developed enough to draw Rusticus's notice, was Clovis's new palace. A Merovingian palace on the Île de la Cité is not firmly attested until the seventh century, but it is reasonable to guess that Clovis would have ordered the construction of a royal residence, and that the episcopal palace would have been the lowest bar against which he would have measured his ambitions. Somewhere between the two was a marketplace, and it is here that Rusticus finally found his craftsman.<sup>74</sup>

As he waited for the metalworker to sharpen the blade of the bush hook, Rusticus received a valuable commodity from one of the man's colleagues: news from elsewhere. Under the Roman Empire, the rapid spread of news from place to place was greatly assisted by a well maintained road system and by the *cursus publicus*, the imperial post system. Though the latter was primarily used for official purposes and probably did not disseminate much public news, both had ceased to exist in Rusticus's time. The hearsay available from traders, markets, and fairs was virtually the only remaining avenue that Rusticus had for gaining any sense of the wider world.<sup>75</sup> In this sense, Gaul was reverting to a condition that it had not experienced for more than 500 years.

Prior to the Caesarian conquest, Gaul beyond the Central Massif—*Gallia Comata*, or “long-haired Gaul” in the parlance of the day—was divided by thick primeval forests, impassable marshlands, great rivers and other formidable natural barriers that formed the territorial borders of rival Gallo-Celtic tribes. Though the economic unity and infrastructural advances of the Roman era had diminished the ability of these barriers to carve the Gaulish hinterland into disparate political units, the fifth century retreat of the Roman administrative apparatus had allowed them to regain much of their ancient power.<sup>76</sup> Gregory of Tours, who lived on the *de facto* border between northern and southern Gaul, the Loire River, was under the jurisdiction of three different rival Frankish factions during the 20 years of his episcopate.<sup>77</sup> Rusticus was laboring in the early morning of an age of extreme localization. It is no wonder that his distant descendant, Bodo, “had never seen and could not imagine” the sea.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Gregory of Tours describes “shops,” including at least one jeweler, in the Île de la Cité in the 580s. (The History of the Franks 6.32)

<sup>75</sup> Graham 103-112.

<sup>76</sup> Drinkwater 1983, 8.

<sup>77</sup> Brown 2003, 159.

<sup>78</sup> Power 26.

## Conclusion

It bears repeating that Rusticus is an invention, one that might be dismissed by some positivist reviewers as hopelessly fanciful. Continuing research, particularly archaeological research, offers the hope that future iterations of him may be less so. Patrick Périn notes that archaeological study of early medieval France was nearly non-existent outside of church renovations prior to the 1970s.<sup>79</sup> English-language publications in this area remain rare, a state of affairs that seems likely to change as the body of new discoveries grows. Even new textual evidence is not out of the question. The *Vita Genovevae* was dismissed as “a fabrication of little historical value” until the mid-20th century.<sup>80</sup>

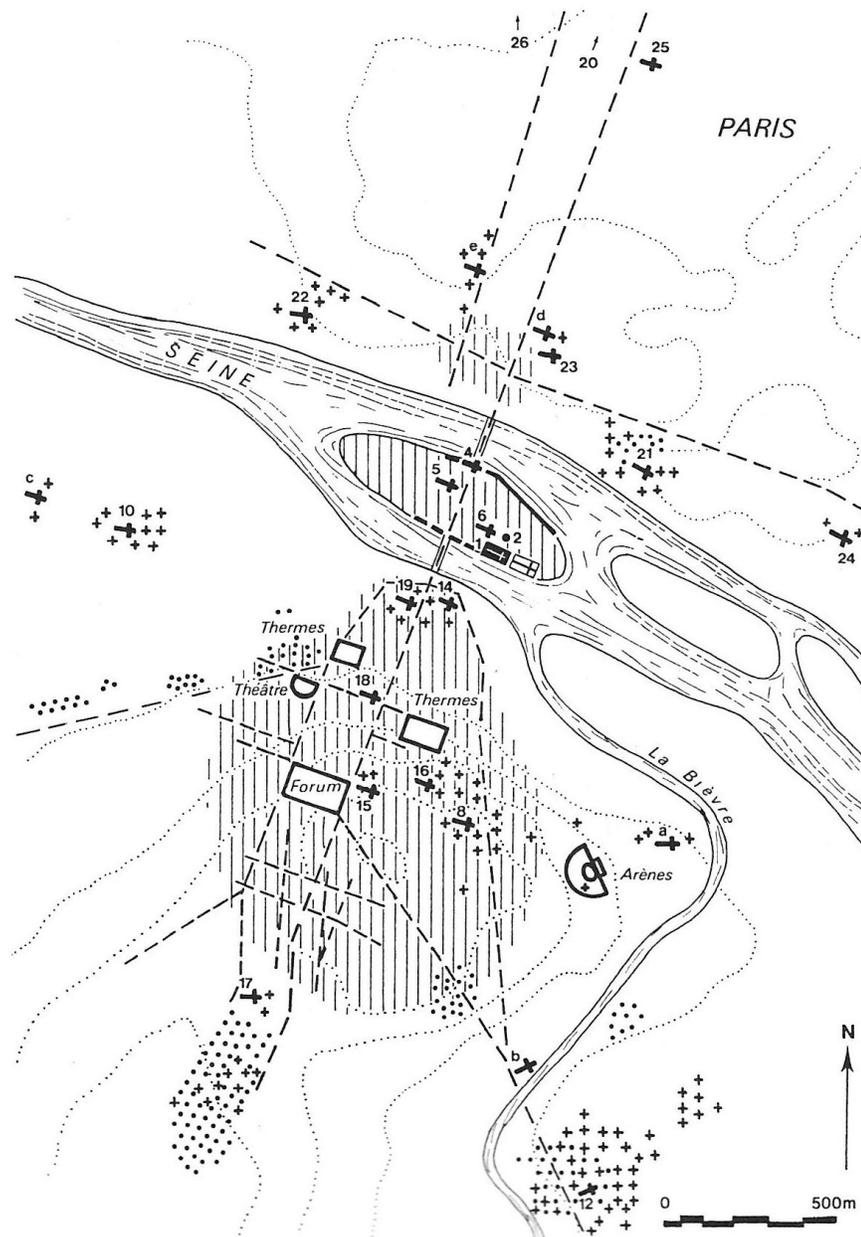
If, however, it took a history “made up of Bodos” to introduce general readers to a medieval period that was not populated exclusively by royal actors and their armies, perhaps a history made up of “Rustici” can be used to help those same readers visit some barbarians who were not thoroughly barbaric, a Dark Age that was not universally dark, and a Roman civilization that did not “fall” in all the ways that schoolchildren have been taught to imagine.

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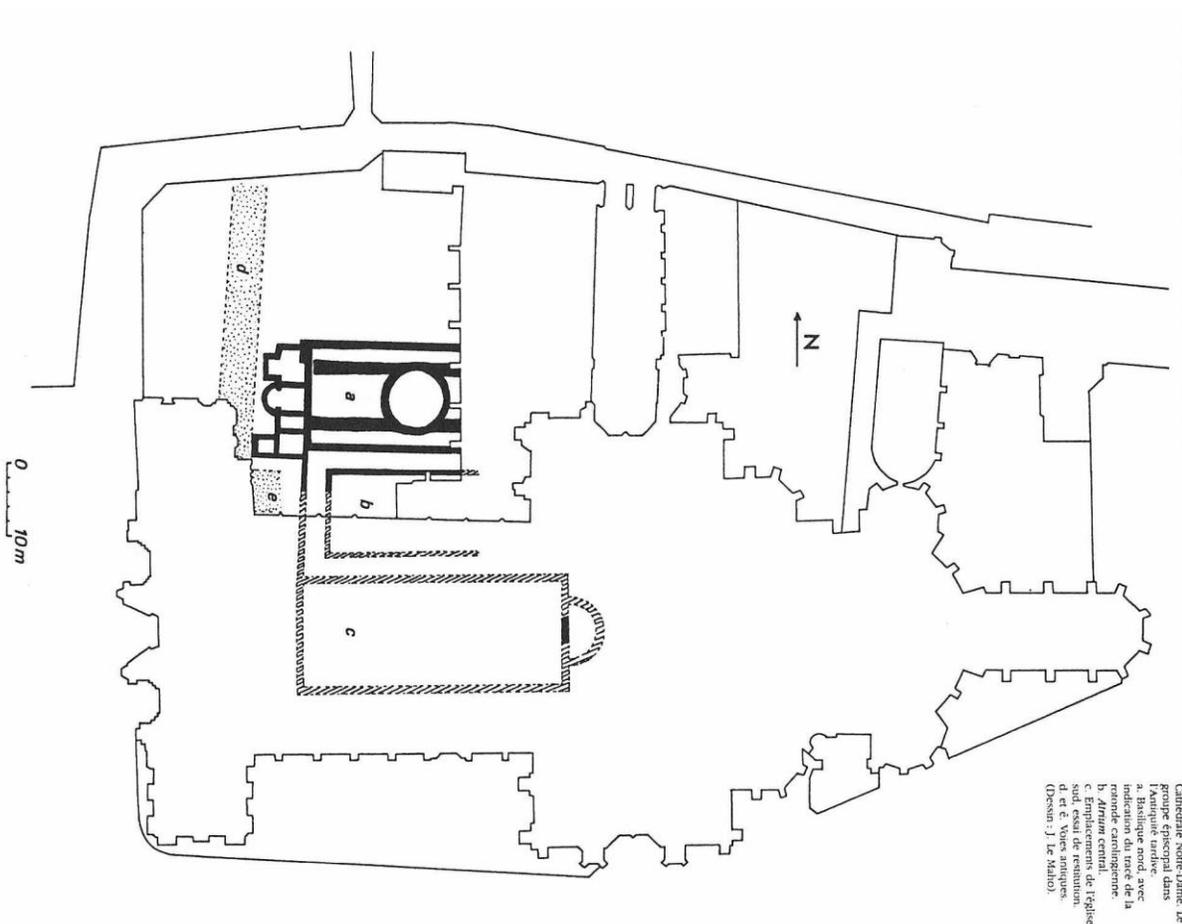
<sup>79</sup> Périn 68, 77.

<sup>80</sup> Daly 626.

## Appendix: Maps and diagrams

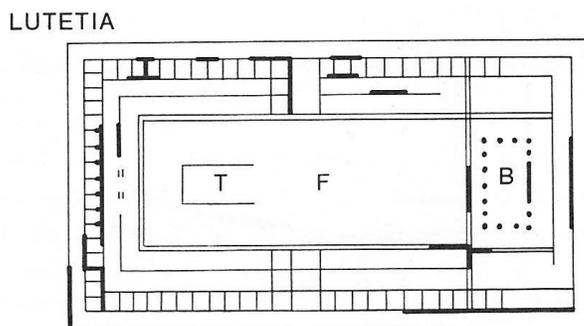


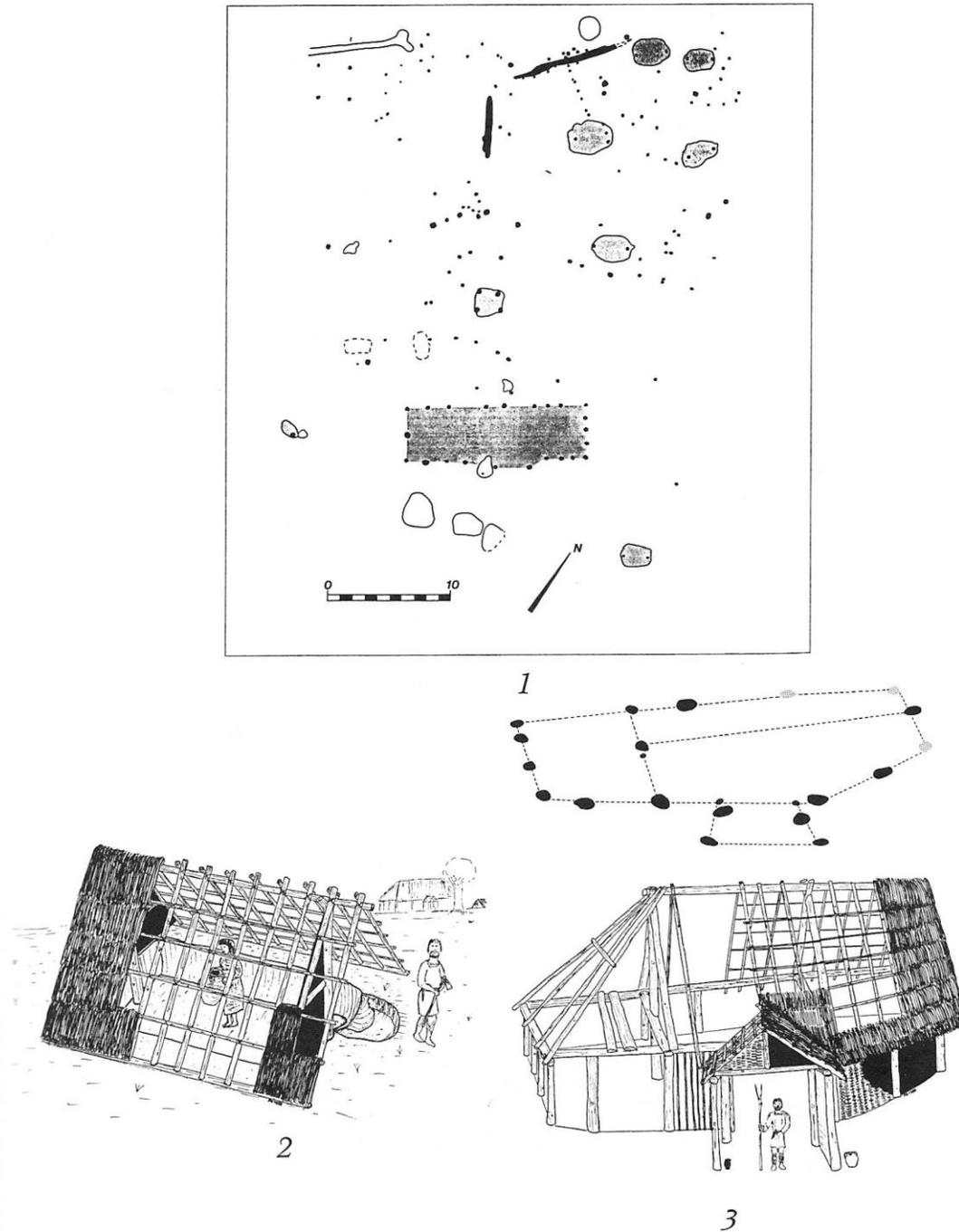
**Fig. 1:** Plan of Paris in the late Roman and early Merovingian periods. The legend to this map was not included in its reprinted form, but I have inferred it with some degree of confidence. (Périn 89) Large crosses denote churches or shrines. Small crosses denote areas of Christian burial. Small circles denote areas of pagan burial. Estimated area of settlement is represented by vertical lines. Broken lines denote Roman-era roads and streets that were still in use. Topographical gradations are represented by lines of dots. Notable landmarks in this paper include the future site of St. Germain des Prés (10) and the church of St. Genevieve (15).



**Fig. 2.** The scale of churches in the Merovingian period. The foundation of the late antique church (c) is visible under the outlines of the current cathedral of Notre Dame in Rouen. (Périn 90) The long axis of the current cathedral is about 480 feet; that of Notre Dame in Paris is about 435 feet.

**Fig. 3.** The reconstructed plan of the Roman forum in Paris. Dark lines are extant remains at the time of excavation. T = Temple, F = Forum, B = Basilica. The long axis of the forum ran east-west. (Drinkwater 1983,





**Fig. 4.** Speculative reconstructions of rural Merovingian settlements based on archaeological evidence. (1) Excavation plan of a Merovingian settlement at Aisne. (2) Sunken hut at Val-d'Oise. (3) Larger wooden building at Val-d'Oise. (Périn 95) At Paris, structures like these could have exploited the presence of Roman-era stone ruins on the left bank by abutting standing walls or reusing their foundations.

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