Narratives of Origin and Migration in Early Medieval Europe: Problems of Interpretation

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This contribution concentrates on the origin narratives of the post-Roman peoples and kingdoms in Latin Europe between c. 500 and 1000, including some observations on the elaborate production of origin stories in the later Middle Ages. It thus addresses a period in which a durable multiplicity of polities with ethnic designations emerged in Europe and was anchored in the mental maps of (at least) the political elites through a set of foundational narratives. Most of these new peoples—Goths, Longobards, Franks, Anglo-Saxons and others—prided themselves in their distant origins, be it from Scandinavia or Troy. Their origin narratives are based on a common stock of mythical points of reference, developed in classical mythology and ethnography and complemented by other motifs and memories. Christianity transformed the frame but not necessarily the elements of the narrative. The wide-ranging comparison to other ethnic and tribal origin stories, as exemplified in this issue, sheds better light on the specificities of the Latin European tradition of 'origines gentium', the origins of peoples. The result is that we should look at these texts as essentially hybrid products of cultural encounters in which formerly subaltern peoples developed new identities as a ruling minority in former Roman provinces.

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The Quest for Origins

Now from this island of Scandza, as from a hive of peoples (*officina gentium*) or a womb of nations (*vagina nationum*), the Goths are said to have come forth long ago under their king, Berig by name. As soon as they disembarked from their ships and set foot on the land, they straightway gave their name to the place. And even today it is said to be called Gothiscandza. Soon they moved from here to the abodes of the Ulmerugi, who then dwelt on the shores of Ocean, where they pitched camp, joined battle with them and drove them from their homes. Then they subdued their neighbors, the Vandals, and thus added to their victories.[1]

This is the beginning of a longer passage on the origins of the Goths and on their initial migrations, found in the Gothic history (*Getica*) written by Jordanes in the 550s, one of the most-debated Medieval European origin narratives.[2] Jordanes was an educated citizen of the Eastern Roman ('Byzantine') Empire and came, as he indicates, from a Gothic family. When he wrote, the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy, founded half a century before by Theodoric, was finally succumbing to the Byzantine armies after a long and devastating war. Jordanes advocated an honourable and peaceful integration of these Goths into the Empire after its victory. His history relied, to an extent that is still controversial, on a previous (and lost) Gothic history written by Cassiodorus: a leading Roman senator who had occupied the highest civil offices under King Theodoric.[3] From an opposite perspective (a Roman serving Goths, instead of a Goth serving Romans) and in a rather different political situation, Cassiodorus had similarly supported integration on eye-level. For that purpose, he argued that the history of the Goths was at least as long and noble as that of the Romans.[4] To achieve its goal, the *Getica* drew heavily on classical ethnography, identifying the Goths of their day with the Scythians (who had lived north of the Black Sea 1000 years before), the Getae (in the Balkans) and the Dacians (north of the Danube). The origin story from

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[1] Jordanes, *Getica*, 4.25–29.

[2] On Jordanes and Gothic origins, see Goffart, *Narrators*: 20–111; Christensen, *Cassiodorus*; Wolfram, *Gotische Studien*: 207–24; Gillett, 'The Mirror of Jordanes': 392–408; Coumert, *Origines*: 45–144; Ghosh, *Writing the Barbarian Past:* 39–92.

[3] Wolfram, *Goten*; Goffart, *Narrators*.

[4] Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 9.25: 379.

Scandza/Scandinavia is added as a prequel to this grandiose construction.[5]
It has ethnographic elements in it (the idea that Scandinavia was a 'womb
of nations' and that *Gutai* lived there[6]), but also elements not found in
classical sources. Although that has been fiercely contested, it may well
be that elements from Gothic oral traditions were incorporated in it.[7] As
most scholars would maintain nowadays, that does not prove that the
Goths actually came from Scandinavia.[8]

   The passage quoted above contains many elements that were to
become characteristic of Medieval ethnic origin narratives, for some
of which Jordanes's text may have served as a model. The Goths were
said to have come from Scandinavia and Scythia, two of the preferred
countries of origin in migration narratives along with Troy, sometimes
also Britain or Macedonia: these were mostly situated at the margins of
Europe, lands known above all from legends and long reputed as places
of emigration. They crossed the sea (elsewhere, we also hear that migrants
came in three boats, for instance, Hengist and Horsa, legendary leaders of
Anglo-Saxon migration to Britain).[9] They defeated other peoples to assert
their right of residence and eventually left their name on the land. And
they had a founder king, from whom much later kings could derive their
legitimacy—although in the case of Jordanes, interestingly, the impressive
17-generation genealogy of Theodoric's Amal dynasty does not include the
leader of the exodus from Scandia, King Berig, and his successors (which
I take as an indication that the whole somehow disorderly origins section
was not simply streamlined by Cassiodorus or Jordanes on the spot).

   Origin narratives of European peoples, countries or cities did not start
with Jordanes, they were well-known in antiquity. Already in Herodotus,
myths about far-away peoples were read with pleasure, perhaps more so

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   [5] Scythia and Scandinavia were not necessarily perceived as very distant from each other:
Coumert, *Origines*: 506–08. It was, however, rare that as in Jordanes origins from different
regions were mixed: Plassmann, 'Das Wanderungsmotiv': 63.

   [6] Ptolemy, *Geography*, 2.11.33: 124.

   [7] Wolfram, *Goten*: 15–16; Coumert, *Origines*: 78–83; Ghosh, *Writing the Barbarian
Past*: 65–69. Arguing against any use of oral sources, Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*: 55–67 (not
adequately representing my argument in Pohl, 'Ethnicity, Theory and Tradition'). Attributing
the motif of Scandinavian origins to Cassiodorus's knowledge of Ptolemy: Christensen,
Cassiodorus: 346–47.

   [8] As already argued extensively by Hachmann, *Die Goten und Skandinavien*.

   [9] Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.15.

than histories of events.[10] Greeks in general or their subgroups explained their relationship through genealogical constructs, often involving divine foundation. Athens cultivated myths of autochthony, whereas most other Greek cities (often correctly) attributed their foundation to migrants or colonisers.[11] The origins of Rome were transmitted in many variants, combining the migration of Aeneas from Troy with accounts about the Italians, the Latins and other peoples, which constituted a long prequel to the foundation of the city.[12] The Troy story directly influenced Frankish origin legends. Some Medieval origin stories also refer to the Alexander Romance or to the legends of the Amazons (see the contribution by Salvatore Liccardo). Of tremendous influence on the Medieval imagination of the origins of peoples was the Old Testament, which among others contained narratives on the origin of peoples (the Ark, Noah and his sons), of languages (the Tower of Babylon) and of the Jewish Exodus from Egypt and the conquest of the Promised Land. Increasingly, Medieval genealogies connected pedigrees back to the sons of Noah, which implied that at some point the ancestors had arrived from Biblical lands.[13]

There is a rather wide range of early Medieval origin narratives that have come down to us; almost all of them contain migration stories.[14] Another Scandinavian origin story is transmitted for the Longobards, in a seventh-century text called *Origo gentis Langobardorum* (Origin of the Longobard people), and extended in Paul the Deacon's late eighth-century *Longobard History*. The often-rehearsed story of the Trojan origin of the Franks, first found in Fredegar and the *Liber Historiae Francorum*, is the topic of the contribution by Kıvılcim Yavuz. Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle/s* tell stories about the arrival of the Angles and Saxons in Britain. Unlike other migration narratives, these were complemented by elaborate genealogies going back to the migrant leaders and beyond. In the *Translatio S. Alexandri* (ninth century) and in Widukind's *Deeds of the Saxons* (tenth century), Saxon origins are elaborated.[15] Widukind

[10] Hartog, *Le miroir d'Herodote*: 440–55; Feldherr, 'Love Stories'.

[11] Hall, *Ethnic Identity*: 34–66; Cohen, *The Athenian Nation*: 79–103.

[12] Dench, *Romulus' Asylum*; Farney, *Ethnic Identity*; Pohl, 'Romanness—A Multiple Identity'; Revell, *Ways of Being Roman*.

[13] Pohl, 'Genealogy'.

[14] Wolfram et al., 'Origo gentis': 174–210; Wolfram, *Gotische Studien*: 207–24; Plassmann, 'Das Wanderungsmotiv'.

[15] Flierman, *Saxon Identities*: 1–4.

underlines that at his time, several opinions existed about Saxon origins—they came over the sea, were descended from Danes or Normans or from the scattered Macedonian armies of Alexander.[16]

Later origin stories, which I cannot deal with adequately here, include the Norman histories by Dudo of Saint-Quentin and William of Jumièges, who derive the Danes from the Dacians=Goths, which Dudo in turn equals with the Danai, the Greeks, but believes that these were the Trojans: an impressive synthesis of the main migration narratives in previous origin stories.[17] Saxo Grammaticus, who wrote a history of the Danes around 1200, briefly mentions Dudo's equation with the Danai but instead of migration stories, concentrates on genealogy: Humli was the father of Dan and Angul, from whom Danes and English sprang, and grandfather of Skiold, name-giver of the Danish dynasty.[18] In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the origins of the new Christian polities in Eastern Europe appear in histories whose authors knew a lot about Biblical, classical and Early Medieval origin stories: Cosmas for the Czechs, Gallus for the Poles and Nestor in the *Primary Chronicle* of the Rus'.[19] Hungarian origins are a particularly interesting case. Legendary origin narratives from an outside perspective start within years after their establishment in the Carpathian Basin (c. 900) in the *Chronicle* of Regino of Prum and a little later in *De administrando imperio* by Constantine Porphyrogenitus.[20] Their use by Hungarians is only attested in the twelfth century, with the *Deeds of the Hungarians* by the anonymous notary P and, later, by Simon of Kéza.[21] These narratives mostly build on ancient legends about the arrival of the Scythians and Huns (for instance, led across the Sea of Azov by a hind); they may contain a double immigration (Huns return east and come back as Hungarians) and include an identification with the apocalyptic riders of the Bible, Gog and Magog. Certainly in the Hungarian origin stories,

[16] Widukind, *Res gestae Saxonicae*, 1.2–4; see Rudolf of Fulda, *Translatio S. Alexandri*, 1–3.

[17] Dudo, *De moribus et actis primorum Normanniae ducum*, 1.1–2: 129–30; see Plassmann, *Origo gentis*: 248–51; William of Jumièges, *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, 3–4, vol. 1: 14–17 (less interested in the Danai).

[18] Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 1, vol. 1: 18–21.

[19] Pohl and Borri, *Historiography and Identity vol. 5: The Emergence of New Peoples and Polities*. See also Garipzanov, *Historical Narratives and Christian Identity*; Berend, *Christianisation*.

[20] Regino of Prüm, *Chronica*; Constantin Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*.

[21] Anonymus, *The Deeds of the Hungarians*; Simon de Kéza, *The Deeds of the Hungarians*.

but also in most of the others, myths about the origin of one's own community and outside perceptions are entangled and not always clearly distinguishable. Rather, they represent transnational dialogues about the origins of a multitude of ethnic or regional groups.[22]

Debating Ethnic Origins: Then and Now

The *Chronicle of Salerno*, written in the Longobard principality of Salerno in 970s, relates a story about a Frankish attack on the southern Italian Longobards in the early ninth century. The prince advocated peaceful submission, at which a man called Rampho protested: 'Haven't you read, my prince, how our forefathers left their homes because of the tribute that the Vandals demanded from them?' It is a clear reference to the story of how the Longobards got their name in the *Origo gentis Langobardorum*.[23] This is a rare direct trace of an impact of an origin narrative. It was used in a debate about right and wrong conduct, about honour and military prowess. Such stories could also be relevant for deciding who belonged to the group and who did not and for legitimising the privileged position of the people, of the elites and of the king in their realm. The *Chronicle* assumed that the story had been read in Latin—the use of the Germanic Longobard language had faded out around the time in which the story is set.[24] Most ethnic origin stories in Europe between c. 500 and c. 1200 were written down in Latin and not in the vernacular—among the exceptions, there are the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (c. 900) or the Russian *Primary Chronicle* (c. 1100).[25] This implies a process of cultural translation at the basis of the written texts at our disposal. This process and its textual traces have received less attention than a rather polarised debate on the 'authenticity' of origin myths.

On the whole, in the Middle Ages and still until the eighteenth century, distant and foreign origins were highly valued: 'Germanic' peoples (in a linguistic sense) could claim descent from Trojans and Macedonians, from Scythians and (Iranian) Alans, even from Armenians and from the apocalyptic Gog and Magog (as Isidore of Seville did in the seventh

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[22] See, in general, Pohl, 'Historiography and Identity—Methodological Perspectives'.
[23] *Chronicon Salernitanum*, 39; Pohl, *Werkstätte der Erinnerung*: 170.
[24] Haubrichs, 'Langobardic Personal Names': 217–22.
[25] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; *Nestorchronik*.

century for the Visigoths).[26] Thus appropriations of foreign origin legends which were considered to confer high prestige were quite frequent. This changed fundamentally in the nineteenth century, when the concept of the people was modified according to much stricter criteria of linguistic and cultural unity, a long-standing relation to a fatherland and increasingly also biological unity. National histories were now tailored according to these criteria and should underline the ancient roots of the 'ethnic origins of nations'.[27] As an often-quoted phrase by Homi Bhabha: 'Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye'. And he goes on to argue: 'In each of these "foundational fictions" the origins of national traditions turn out to be as much acts of affiliation and establishment as they are moments of disavowal, displacement, exclusion, and cultural contestation'.[28] The emerging historical disciplines were involved in this process in an ambiguous 'knowledge exchange': On the one hand, they established scientific criteria which had considerable influence on the ensuing debates about the authenticity of claimed national origins. On the other hand, they contributed to exploiting the flexibility of these criteria to highlight the historical role of their own nation. For instance, we have only become aware in recent decades that in fact early Medieval Germans (as scholars call them) had no consistent concept of their own Germanness.[29] The construct of a stable Germanic identity from the Iron Age (or earlier) to modern Germany had been so powerful that nobody realised that the sources from the fifth century onwards had hardly used the term, until educated missionaries in the eighth century re-introduced it to circumscribe the theatre of their activities.

Research on origin narratives since the nineteenth century has for a long time followed the tracks of national histories. Scholars distinguished between 'authentic' origin myths (the Scandinavian origins of Goths and Longobards) and erudite fabrications (the Trojan, i.e., non-Germanic origins of the Franks).[30] In Germany, 'authentic' origin narratives were held to provide a rare and privileged access to the cultural world of ancient Germans, much more valuable than the observations by Latin

[26] Isidore, *History of the Kings of the Goths*.
[27] Cf. Smith, *Ethnic Origins of Nations*; von See, *Deutsche Germanenideologie*.
[28] Bhabha, 'Introduction': 1 and 5.
[29] Pohl, 'Der Germanenbegriff'.
[30] See, for instance, Hauck, 'Carmina Antiqua'.

authors because they directly represented Germanic lore in a way in which only much later Nordic sagas did. After 1945, it took some time to take these partisan constructions apart. The first step was to establish that *Origines gentium* did not report facts about ancient kings or routes of migration but expressed mythical stylisations or later perceptions. The Gothic or Longobard origin narratives do not prove that these peoples actually came from Scandinavia, as they claim.[31] Attention shifted to the structure and function of myths, which was a major topic after the middle of the twentieth century. Reinhard Wenskus, who argued strongly against the biological unity of the early Medieval *gentes*, found their cohesive element in shared traditions, which consisted of common norms and origin narratives.[32] They allowed new aggregations to form around core groups who were guardians of these traditions. Herwig Wolfram continued and transformed this line of research and adopted the term 'ethnogenesis' for this process of identity formation.[33] Wolfram acknowledged the role of classical ethnography in the construction of origin stories but insisted on the presence of 'non-ethnographic' material in some of them, which could not be explained as literary borrowings.[34]

Eventually, some scholars pushed the critique further, not least, under the influence of post-modernism and of the 'literary turn' of the 1980s and 1990s. Walter Goffart and others regarded ethnic origin narratives as pieces of Latin literature without any detectable function for identification.[35] They fiercely denied any role of oral traditions in the texts we have, which they treated as fictions of fact in the sense of Hayden White, without any value as sources for the past and devoid of impact on the present, whenever they were written down.[36] Since 2000, if cautiously, a reappraisal was repeatedly attempted, and research has moved on from the purely deconstructive stage, although in different directions. Alheydis Plassmann, in a book entitled *Origo gentis*, shifted the focus from the actual origin narratives to the entire text of the histories of peoples and kingdoms, which, according

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[31] Hachmann, *Die Goten und Skandinavien*.

[32] Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*. For the history of research, see Pohl, 'Von der Ethnogenese zur Identitätsforschung'.

[33] Wolfram, 'Origo et Religio'.

[34] Wolfram et al., 'Origo gentis'.

[35] Goffart, *Narrators*; Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*. For a critique, see Pohl, 'Ethnicity, Theory and Tradition': 221–40, and Pohl, 'Von der Ethnogenese zur Identitätsforschung'.

[36] White, *The Content of the Form*.

to her, could very well have an impact on ethnic identities.[37] Magali Coumert, *Les origines des peuples*, presented a very detailed analysis of the actual origin narratives, underlining their largely fictive character but also their important role in a 'gigantic collective effort […] to arrive at an explanation for the diversity of Early Medieval kingdoms'.[38] Shami Ghosh compared some of the Latin origin narratives with heroic legends in Germanic languages, for instance, *Beowulf* and *Walthari*, and concluded that the Latin texts must have relied in some cases on orally transmitted stories in the vernacular; however, he was sceptical about their significance for identity constructions.[39] There is still room for debate. To what extent was there an oral tradition that the written Gothic '*origo gentis*' and other origin narratives could rely on?

First, a general point should be made: it is highly unlikely that the 'barbarians' who established their kingdoms on Roman soil really did not preserve any cultural memories of their own. To claim that the histories of Goths, Longobards or Anglo-Saxons were simply pieces of Roman literature reminds one of the modern attitude that has denied any significant culture of their own to other peoples outside the realm of European civilisation. It would be rather ethnocentric to assume that all of these barbarians completely forgot their indigenous traditions as soon as they entered the Roman Empire, and made do with Roman constructs instead, and that their separate identities did not matter to them anyway. Second, current concepts of cultural memory assume a foundational role of the distant past for the cohesion of communities, and it would have to be made plausible why post-Roman 'barbarian' societies should have differed from this general model.[40] Ethnicity was and is generally defined by the idea of a common origin of the group, for instance, by Isidore of Seville in the seventh century CE, and origin narratives substantiated this idea.[41] Third, the wide currency of Early Medieval origin narratives seems to indicate that they did matter to many, at least among political and literate elites. One could try to contrast 'official' (or 'pedagogic', as Homi Bhabha put it) and popular (or 'performative') origin narratives in this

[37] Plassmann, *Origo gentis*.

[38] Coumert, *Origines*: 550 (my translation).

[39] Ghosh, *Writing the Barbarian Past*: 18.

[40] Assmann, *Cultural Memory*.

[41] Isidore, *Etymologies*, 9.2.1: 'Gens est multitudo ab uno principio orta […]'. See Pohl, 'Telling the Difference'; Pohl, 'Strategies of Identification: Introduction'.

period as in that of modern nationalism. That, however, is as hypothetical as assuming that to the contrary, what we have in writing more or less represented popular ideas.[42] Most likely, that differed from case to case. However that may be, if we have evidence that a notion of common origin existed in more or less elaborate form, it would be rather unlikely that it did not matter to anyone.

Fourth, there are repeated direct statements about the existence of orally transmitted 'ancient songs' in the Latin sources. Tacitus, in his *Germania* written c. 100 CE, claims that the Germani 'celebrate in ancient poems, which is their only form of historical memory', Mannus, son of the Earth god Tuisto as the 'origin and founder of their people'.[43] Jordanes repeatedly mentions oral sources, although not as frequently as written material he relied on. 'So the story is generally told in their early songs, in almost historic fashion', is how he seeks to validate his account of the conquest of Scythia.[44] 'In earliest times they sang of the deeds of their ancestors in strains of song accompanied by the cithara; chanting of Eterpamara, Hanala, Fritigern, Vidigoia and others whose fame among them is great', he remarks a little later.[45] The Amal genealogy is written down 'as they [the Goths] themselves relate in their legends (*in fabulis*)'.[46] These references come at strategic points of the text where the truthfulness of the account seems at stake: after the first section of the migration legend and before the Amal genealogy. There can of course be no positive proof for the use of oral lore, and one could claim that Jordanes just employed fictional strategies of truth here. Are these just topoi? Yet to enhance the credibility of a text by reference to ancient songs necessarily presumes that such songs could confer enhanced credibility. It is plausible that these songs existed, although we cannot be sure that they were actually that ancient or that the ones that Jordanes refers to said what he claims. It may inspire some confidence that Jordanes also refuted oral transmission where that suited him. 'Of course if anyone in our city says that the Goths had an

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[42] Bhabha, 'DissemiNation'; Smith, *Chosen Peoples*: 28–29.

[43] 'Celebrant carminibus antiquis, quod unum apud illos memoriae et annalium genus est, Tuistonem deum terra editum, ei filium Mannum, originem gentis conditoremque.' Tacitus, *Germania*: 2. It is, however, doubtful whether this reflected a shared Germanic self-identifcation: Pohl, *Germanen*: 56–57.

[44] Jordanes, *Getica*, 4.28: 61, trans. Mierow: 58.

[45] *Ibid.*, 5.43: 65, trans. Mierow: 62.

[46] *Ibid.*, 14.79: 76, trans. Mierow: 73.

origin different from that I have related, let him object. For myself, I prefer to believe what I have read, rather than put trust in old womens' tales (*in fabulis anilis*)'.[47] He would hardly have invented the fact that discordant versions of orally transmitted Gothic origin legends circulated in Constantinople. When Cassiodorus (in a speech written for King Athalaric at the Senate in Rome) praised his own effort to 'turn Gothic origins into Roman history', he proudly claimed to have done so by reading in books what 'the hoary recollections of old men scarcely preserved'.[48] All of these traces point to a context of communication in which reference to orally preserved knowledge mattered and where one could believe or disbelieve what 'old men', 'old women' or 'ancient poems' said.[49]

However, the existence of orally transmitted narratives about ethnic origins does not prove that these actually represented ancient, immutable traditions. It has been assumed too confidently that loose parallels to motifs in Old-Norse sagas written down 700 or 800 years later sufficed to speak of authentic Germanic elements in Early Medieval origin narratives. For instance, scholars have always connected the story of how Wodan gave the name to the Longobards (see below) to Odin's epithet *Langbardr,* but its late mention may also be due to knowledge of the Longobard story, instead of vice versa.[50] In many cases, we have more than one relatively early version of origin narratives and indirect clues that there were more. As mentioned above, we can guess from the patchy character of the *Getica* that it was not designed in one piece; the ancient genealogy of the Amals is inserted as a digression in the section on the Dacians. 'Non-ethnographic' elements do not constitute a coherent structure and can hardly be used to reconstruct 'authentic' myths. Debating whether or not specific elements in these narratives are 'genuine' or not may not be a very productive approach anyway. In the political sphere of the post-Roman West, origin narratives were a medium of communicating identifications and of negotiating a people's place within an essentially shared past. Scythia, Scandinavia and Troy, and soon also the Old Testament, were all common points of reference within a mental map that stretched far beyond

[47] *Ibid.,* 5.38: 64, trans. Mierow: 60.

[48] 'Originem Gothicam historiam fecit esse Romanam'. Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 9.25.5: 379. Wolfram, *Goten*: 16; Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*: 63, with discordant interpretations.

[49] However, a 'council of elders' that approves or disapproves of oral traditions is only a polemical invention by Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*: 63: I never suggested that.

[50] Nedoma, 'Der altisländische Odinsname'.

the boundaries of the Roman Empire and the Early Medieval West. The origins and, therefore, status and significance of the *gentes* were negotiated within this matrix. Whatever we read about ethnic origins in Latin history books was not arcane knowledge of a restricted circle of druid-type figures who carefully preserved their monopoly of cultural memory. We should therefore look at these texts as essentially hybrid products of cultural encounters in which formerly subaltern peoples developed new identities as a ruling minority in former Roman provinces.

As military elites with 'barbarian' background consolidated their rule over former Roman provinces, their separate ethnic and social identities mattered. That explains the currency of origin narratives. Yet the importance of these stories (and the salience of the ethnic identifications that they promoted) varied.[51] Relatively early origin narratives are only transmitted for some of the post-Roman *gentes* (Ostrogoths, Longobards, Franks, Anglo-Saxons); they appear later for others (Burgundians, Britons, Saxons) or are unattested (Vandals, Bavarians). Only some of the texts reached wider circulation. Others never seem to have spread beyond one text with restricted transmission. Some, especially later, narratives were obviously speculations by educated authors who tried to fill a gap. This is the case, for instance, of the ninth-century intellectual Walahfrid Strabo who took information in Bede's *Chronicle* about the crossing of the Rhine into Gaul by Vandals, Alans and Suebi in 406 and applied it to the Wends, Alamans and Swabians of his day, supposing that they had crossed the Rhine from Gaul (i.e., in the reverse direction) to arrive in Swabia.[52] Similarly, a twelfth-century text from the monastery of Göttweig in Lower Austria claims that the Bavarians had come from Armenia.[53] On the other hand, the Frankish, Anglo-Saxon, Longobard or even Gothic origin narratives enjoyed a wide, and increasing, circulation throughout the Middle Ages and into the Early Modern Period and inspired legends about further peoples. A certain difference between self-identification and outside perceptions remained. Yet increasingly, peoples appropriated such ascriptions and turned them into elements of their self-image. For instance, the Hunnic origins of the Hungarians, first assumed by Western observers, soon became popular in Hungary and remained so for a long

[51] This emerges very clearly from the study of Helmut Reimitz on the shifting significance of Frankishness in Frankish historiography: Reimitz, *History.*

[52] Cf. Pohl, 'Das awarische Khaganat'.

[53] *Vita Altmanni*, 28: 237.

time. Veritable chains of identifications were constructed. The ancient origins and splendid deeds of the Goths inspired writers to derive Swedes and Poles from them (the Three Crowns of Sweden are those of the Goths, Vandals and Swedes), and this, in turn, motivated others to construct Gothic origins of Baltic peoples.[54] The Late Antique and Early Medieval origins of European peoples remained a resource for further identifications.

Framing the Narrative

The Early Medieval use of the term *origo gentis* was ambiguous. It could refer to an ancestor: Tacitus, as we have seen, specified Mannus as the Germanic '*origo gentis*'.[55] It could describe the emergence of a people: Jordanes called his Gothic history *De origine actibusque Getarum*, and remarkably, his Roman History *De summa temporum vel de origine actibusque gentis Romanorum*, underlining that he regarded the Romans as a *gens* like the Goths.[56] The two books thus contained both the 'origin' and the 'deeds' of the peoples. It could cover the entire history of a people: the seventh-century *Origo gentis Langobardorum* relates under this title, although briefly, the whole period up to the seventh-century king Perctarit who obviously reigned at the time of writing.[57] And it could refer to texts about the origins of peoples. In scholarly usage, it would be preferable to limit the terms 'origin narrative' or '*origo gentis*' to texts dealing with distant origins and migrations, previous to the arrival in the present homeland or the foundation of the present state. As with the Tibetan origin narratives, such texts often occurred in 'scene-setting preludes' to larger histories, as Reinier Langelaar puts it in his contribution in this issue. Sometimes, they also appear as ethnographic or anecdotal digressions, which reduce their weight in the historiographic plot. A prominent place for some of these origin stories is as prefaces to law codes of that particular people, which occurs mainly in the case of the Longobards but also of the Franks.[58] This indicates that an account of a people's ethnic origins was in

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[54] Steinacher, 'Wenden, Slawen, Vandalen'; Donecker, *Origines Livonorum*.

[55] Tacitus, *Germania*, 2.

[56] Jordanes, *Romana* and *Getica*, 1 and 53; the titles occur in the manuscripts (unlike many other works of historiography known under titles given by the editors). Cf. Pohl, 'Introduction: Early Medieval Romanness'.

[57] Pohl, 'Origo gentis Langobardorum'.

[58] Pohl, *Werkstätte der Erinnerung*: 117–33.

some way held to legitimise its legislative power (laws were issued by the king, obviously with the consent of a large assembly).[59] At the same time, the normative context could contribute to canonising the origin narrative. If we take the Longobard example, there is indeed little difference between the versions of the *Origo* in three existing manuscripts—from ninth-/tenth-century Modena, eleventh-century Montecassino and Bari, and between those and Paul the Deacon's (otherwise extended) version, which he claimed to have found in a law book.[60] However, in the two late southern Italian copies of the *Origo*, a copyist's error had already obliterated the Scandinavian origins of the Longobards: *insula* was misread as *consule* and thus the story began under a consul called Scadanan instead.

Early Medieval Latin origin stories are set in the context of a, sometimes intense, communication about the origins and significance of the *gentes*. Since Herodotus, classical ethnography had catered to a vivid interest in barbarian peoples, their origins and mutual relations, customs and homelands.[61] Where they came from determined who and how they were. Early Medieval origin narratives were of course imbued with ethnographic topoi and information. They built on one millennium of interaction between Greeks/Romans and 'barbarians', which produced prejudices and misunderstandings, but also valuable exchanges of information, and probably to some extent rested on shared assumptions.[62] The major umbrella terms, Celts/Gauls, Scythians and Germans, had long become ethnographic rather than ethnic categories. In the historiography of the post-Roman kingdoms, Christian/Roman outside perceptions of barbarians and barbarian self-assertion do not appear as two separate strands but rather as a continuum of entangled forms of identification in a Latin cultural matrix.[63] Most known authors who related ethnic origin narratives were of barbarian descent themselves, such as Jordanes, Fredegar, Bede or Paul the Deacon. All authors had a thorough Christian and Latin education and probably little nostalgia for the distant past in which their origin stories

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[59] Cf. Dilcher, 'Mythischer Ursprung'.

[60] Paulus Diaconus, Historia Langobardorum, 1.21; Haubrichs, 'Von der Unendlichkeit der Ursprünge'; Pohl, *Werkstätte der Erinnerung*: 117–29.

[61] Müller, *Geschichte der antiken Ethnographie*.

[62] Skaff, *Sui-Tang China*, has underlined the shared assumptions on which communication between the Chinese and the nomads was based.

[63] I have suggested to conceptualise identity as a result of a constant interaction between outside and inside identification: Pohl, 'Strategies of Identification: Introduction'.

were set. Soon, a mutual interest in origin stories developed; the seventh-century Fredegar *Chronicle* is an example. Among others, it reports the myth of how the Longobards got their name, with some modifications, practically at the same time when the preserved version of the *Origo gentis Langobardorum* was written down.[64]

Origin stories may incorporate two divides or maybe interfaces. One is the passage from the divine or the supernatural to the human, from gods or monsters to kings and heroes or from mythology to legend. The other is the passage from legendary narratives set in elusive times and spaces, ordered by genealogy or single events, to history, which evolves in recognisable time frames and topographies, linked to other known events. The two interfaces are not always clearly distinguishable and sometimes coincide. Typically, in Early Medieval '*origines gentium*', the amount of divine intervention or supernatural creatures is limited, and the explicitly mythical passages are rather brief. All of these accounts were written in Christian societies, and therefore, it is already remarkable that pagan gods repeatedly make their appearance. For instance, Wodan, Germanic god of war, intervenes in the primordial struggle between Winnili and Vandals, tricked by his wife, the goddess Frea. She has advised the women of the Winnili to appear first on the battlefield, tying their hair in front of their faces to look like beards. Wodan, surprised, asks Frea: 'Who are these longbeards?' She responds: 'You have given them their name, now give them victory'. From then on, the victorious Winnili were called Longobards.[65] The story is remarkable for many reasons, not least for its female agency: the Winnili are led by a wise woman, Gambara, who appeals to Frea; the goddess is the one who can really grant victory by outwitting Wodan; and the bearded warriors on the battlefield are the women, who are the true reasons that a male sexual feature is chosen as an ethnonym.[66] The logic of the story presumes pagan divine agency, and it is little wonder that the monk Paul the Deacon warned his readers twice that it was a 'ridiculous fable', but he recounted it much as he had found it in the *Origo gentis Langobardorum*. Fredegar, in his version of the Longobard origin story, openly condemns 'these peoples' who believe

[64] Fredegar, 3.65. See the forthcoming monograph on Fredegar's *Chronicle* by Andreas Fischer. For Fredegar's vision of 'the role of the Franks in a world divided between gentes', Reimitz, *History*: 222–36.

[65] *Origo gentis Langobardorum*, 1; Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Langobardorum*, 1.7–10.

[66] Cf. Geary, *Women at the Beginning*; Pohl, 'Gender and Ethnicity'.

that their god, 'whom in a heathen manner they call Wodan', had given them the name.[67] It is hardly plausible that this objectionable legend had simply been invented by Christian authors.

There was a tension between Christianity and non-Christian supernatural elements in most Early Medieval origin narratives. Supernatural creatures just make brief appearances in supporting roles. Jordanes remarks that the Goths regarded their Amal leaders, 'whose fortune brought them victory, not as pure men, but as half-gods, that is, Ansis'.[68] The Ansis have been linked with the Aesir, a divine lineage in the Prose Edda.[69] Odin/Wodan was one of them, and he appears in the Amal genealogy, in many of the Anglo-Saxon pedigrees, and adopts the Longobards in the name-giving legend. Gapt, also in the Amal genealogy, is another recurrent trace of Germanic religion, features as Geat in Anglo-Saxon genealogies and is later identified with Odin in Old-Norse texts.[70] A subdued sense of divine ancestry (or adoption, in the Lombard case) can be detected in all of these accounts. Jordanes also features unclean spirits from the steppe who mate with Gothic witches, from whom the Huns originate.[71] Fredegar mentions a sea monster with the garbled name Quinotaurus, who rapes King Chlodio's wife on the beach and leaves the reader wondering whether the Merovingian dynasty descended from a bull-headed sea monster or from a king of Trojan lineage.[72] It has often been assumed that this story was what remained from an older myth of descent from a sacred bull. However, the parallels with Germanic mythology seem rather far-fetched in this case, and the story may well be derived from a folk etymology of the name Merovech, which signified 'famous warrior' but could also be understood as the 'sea beast'.[73] The Longobards on the march, according to Paul the Deacon, pretended to have dog-headed *cynocephali* in their army, about whom they told grisly stories, which scared off their enemies.[74] This is as close as we get to

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[67] Fredegar, 3.65.

[68] Jordanes, *Getica*, 13.78.

[69] For the identification of the Ansis with the Aesir, see Wolfram, *Goten*: 42; Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*.

[70] Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*: 124.

[71] Jordanes, *Getica*: 24. 121.

[72] Fredegar, 3.9.

[73] Murray, 'Post vocantur Merohingii'; Wood, 'Fredegar's Fables'.

[74] Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Langobardorum*, 1.11.

anything like the wolf stories of the Turkish origin narrative (see the contribution by Peter B. Golden, in this issue). All of this happens in the heroic stage of the migration narratives and is often served with question marks: no real cynocephali, just a bluff, and no real monster as ancestor, just an ironic slander.[75] Still, the traces of non-Christian mythology in Christian texts were hardly made up by the people who wrote them down; rather, they point to cultural memories maintained by pagan or syncretistic milieus in which these stories mattered, so that a Latin author would not leave them out even if he disagreed with the implications. These narratives were no Christian 'myths of ethnic election', a type of origin narrative that Anthony D. Smith has established on the basis of the Armenian or Amharic origin stories.[76] Only a reworked version of the Longobard origin story written in c. 810 introduces a Christian providential element: they migrated 'not by necessity' but 'to attain salvation from above'.[77]

Finally, when Goths, Franks and Longobards enter Roman territory, the stories can be connected to historical times and spaces familiar to us (and to the Early Medieval authors). This is when the origin narrative proper ends. Often, this divide is not very marked either: 'these texts depict a largely seamless continuity between pagan, "barbarian" pasts and the Christian, Latinate present', as Shami Ghosh remarked.[78] Most of the origin stories are relatively straightforward accounts of migrations, kings and battles. It is after one of these battles that Jordanes remarks: 'So the story is generally told in their early songs, in almost historic fashion'.[79] Indeed, his account of Gothic migration is presented as if it was history. This 'almost historic' narrative style of many Early Medieval origin stories could be a particularity of the post-Roman West. It may be an effect of cultural translation into a Latin and Christian 'regime of historicity'.[80] Here, the veracity of an account about the past was first of all judged by the factual character of a text which was supposed to construct a plausible chain of events.

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[75] Wood, 'Fredegar's Fables'.

[76] Smith, *Chosen Peoples*: 48–77, taking the fifth-century Armenian *Epic Histories* and the Amharic *Kebra Negast* as examples.

[77] *Historia Langobardorum codicis Gothani*: 1.

[78] Ghosh, *Writing the Barbarian Past*: 152 (for Paul the Deacon, Widukind and Dudo).

[79] Jordanes, *Getica*, 4.28.

[80] Cf. Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*.

Of course, the Gothic, Longobard or Frankish origin narratives are pseudo-historical constructs, which gloss over huge 'floating gaps' between distant origins and historical memory, about which nothing was known. Rather than filling this void with legends about the exploits of mythical figures and exemplary heroes, some authors tended to cross-reference them to figures and events known from classical histories. Jordanes' *Getica* (and probably already Cassiodorus's Gothic history) was the most elaborate fabrication of this type, achieved through the identification of the Goths with the ancient Scythians, Getae and Dacians. The intention obviously was (and we have statements by Cassiodorus to that end[81]) to provide educated Romans with an ancient and credible past of the barbarian peoples that now ruled former Roman provinces. What we hear about the Franks between the flight from Troy and their Late Antique exploits on the Rhine is mostly set in a marginal Roman topography.[82] The *Origo gentis Langobardorum* lists a succession of kings and a few regional names, some of which sound like a rudimentary Germanic ethnography.[83] Only later versions embellished these accounts further. For instance, Paul the Deacon added a heroic legend of King Lamissio who was found as an abandoned baby like Moses and later had to fight a band of Amazons in a river.[84] Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars had to employ an overdose of creative fantasy to interpret this mix of Biblical and Amazon motifs as authentic Nordic saga elements.[85] Appropriate for a Christian culture with Latin literacy ruled by speakers of Germanic languages, these origin narratives had been hybrid from the start—the Trojan myth staked a clear claim of classical origin, and populous Scandinavia as a land of origin came from classical ethnography.

How a history begins is always an indicator of where it is supposed to lead.[86] It may be worth mentioning that none of the origin narratives of the Latin West deals with cosmogony or with the origin of man, unlike those in Tibet (see the contribution by Reinier Langelaar, in this issue).

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[81] Cassiodorus, *Variae*: 9.25: 379.

[82] Fredegar, 3.2–3 (build another Troy on the Rhine); *Liber Historiae Francorum*, 1–2 (stay in Pannonia). See the contribution by Kıvılcım Yavuz, in this issue.

[83] *Origo gentis Langobardorum*: 2 (Anthaib, Bainaib, Burgundaib, Rugiland); Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Langobardorum*: 1.13; Coumert, *Origines*: 516.

[84] Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Langobardorum*: 1.15.

[85] Malone, 'Agelmund'; see Pohl, 'Origo gentis Langobardorum'.

[86] Pohl, 'Historiography and Identity: Introduction'.

For Christian authors, that part of the story was fully covered by the Old Testament and is routinely rehearsed in many Early Medieval histories. Jordanes' *Getica* begins with an extensive ethnographic panorama of the regions relevant for the wide-ranging Gothic migrations, and the origin myth from Scandinavia is inserted in the discussion of that region, before it gradually blends into the Scythian-Getic history derived from ancient historiography.[87] Quite differently, Isidore of Seville's *History of the Goths* only picks a few events from the period of (Visi-)Gothic migrations and focuses on the history of the Visigothic kingdom in Spain.[88] From the start, Gregory of Tours establishes the Church of Gaul as a unifying 'vision of community' for the Merovingian kingdoms; the Franks only enter his account in Book 2.9.[89] In the seventh and eighth century, Fredegar and the *Liber Historiae Francorum* (which begins with a coherent account of Frankish origins) offered much more extensive migration narratives of the Franks.[90] The relatively brief *Origo gentis Langobardorum* begins at once with the story of how the Longobards got their name. In Paul the Deacon's version, similar to Jordanes, geographic and ethnographic material is added at the beginning, but basically there is a direct narrative thread following Longobard migrations in different stages to Pannonia and Italy.[91]

Bede starts with a history of Britain, in which the Angles and Saxons make their first appearance in Chapter 14.[92] Similar to the focus of Gregory of Tours on the Gallic Church, Bede highlighted the role of the 'Church of the Angles', the *ecclesia Anglorum*, as the main cohesive frame. Contrary to Gregory of Tours, who wrote about a Church of Gaul and not of the Franks, Bede's vision was an 'English', not a 'British' Church; conflicts between Anglo-Saxon, British and Irish Christian practices, for instance, about the correct Easter date, had been divisive and unpleasant. This meant that 'English' identity as promoted by Bede only really unfolded in a Christian context, whereas origins and migrations played a secondary role.

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[87] Jordanes, *Getica*, 4.25–29.

[88] Isidore, *History of the Kings of the Goths*, 2–21 (trans. Wolf, *Chroniclers and Conquerors*).

[89] Reimitz, *History*.

[90] Fredegar, 3.2–3; *Liber Historiae Francorum*, 1–4; Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Langobardorum*, 1.1–6 (geography).

[91] *Origo gentis Langobardorum*: 1.

[92] Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*: 1.14–15. Pohl, 'Ethnic Names'.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* offers much more material for an affirmation of regnal and Anglo-Saxon identities. Its various versions differ; while the 'Parker Chronicle' (A) begins with the arrival of the Saxon brothers Cerdic and Cynric, and only then zooms back into the Roman period, the 'Laud Chronicle' (E) starts with the latter.[93] From the British perspective, the *Historia Brittonum*, probably written in 829/30 but only preserved in later versions, offered a 'pseudo-history' of the Britons, whose ancestor was supposed to be Brutus, a descendent (or grandson) of Aeneas; even more successful in the long run was the story of King Arthur, who appears here briefly for the first time.[94]

In the complex identities of post-Roman peoples, the ethnic element was in a sense defining, but in some texts, territorial and religious lines of identification took priority. Eventually, ethnonyms and the names of the country became closely entangled, whether the land had been named after the people (as with France, England, Scotland, Burgundy, Lombardy, Hungary or Croatia) or the people after the land (the Spanish, Italians or Aquitanians; this is also the case of Tibet, where the name of the people, *bod-pa*, was derived from that of the land, *bod*[95]). Migration stories were central to most origin narratives. In Longobard Italy, one could in fact be proud to have come from 'the borders of Europe'.[96] Interest in the country of origin was, however, limited in the origin narratives: that was a matter of ethnographic digressions, and these were not concerned with a people's distant roots and their potential for identities but supplied curiosities and exotic ethnographic information. None of the Medieval European peoples was permanently named after the land they had migrated from. Only the Normans retained their outside designation as 'men from the north', similar to the Yemenis who were the 'Southerners' in the Arab context.[97] The Scandinavian Goths, the Winnili or the continental Saxons that one had left behind did not matter in the origin narratives. The continental Saxons as closely related people were only rediscovered by eighth-century Anglo-Saxon missionaries who wanted to convert them. Saint Boniface

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[93] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*: 2–5.

[94] *Historia Brittonum* (Nennius version) 315; Dumville, 'Historia Brittonum'; Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur*: 3–5.

[95] See the contribution by Reinier Langelaar, in this issue.

[96] 'Sublimis ortus in finibus Europae/Langibardorum regale prosapia': *Carmen de Synodo Ticinensi*, vol. 1–2: 190 (written in c. 700).

[97] Webb, 'Integrating Yemenis'.

wrote to the Angles at home asking them to pray for their 'pagan brothers': 'Take pity on them, for they also keep saying, "We are of one blood and one bone, *de uno sanguine et de uno osse sumus*"'.[98] It was Procopius, the mid sixth-century historian of Justinian's Vandal and Gothic War, who repeatedly spoke of direct contacts of barbarian peoples with a distant homeland and of ideas to go back there if things in the new country got out of hand—for instance, in the cases of the Vandals and of the Heruls (both of whom have not left any origin narrative behind). When the Heruls in Southern Pannonia had killed their king, Procopius writes, they sent an embassy to distant Thule, where still many of their royal lineage lived, to find a new king.[99] Such 'transnational' relations between old and new place of settlement are hardly reflected in the origin stories, although it would have been easy to make more of prestigious relatives in the north.

In many cultural contexts, origin narratives are closely linked with genealogies, both ethnic genealogies and pedigrees of families; that surely is the case in Tibet and the Yemen.[100] The British Isles also provide rich evidence for Early Medieval genealogies; perhaps the most elaborate one comes at the beginning of Asser's biography of the late ninth-century King Alfred, which moves back via Cerdic, Woden, Geat and Noah to Adam, and is complemented by a genealogy of Alfred's mother who is supposed to have descended from Goths (identified with Jutes).[101] As I have argued elsewhere, by contrast, genealogies are relatively rare in Early Medieval continental Europe, and that also applies to the earlier origin narratives.[102] Jordanes provides the most elaborate dynastic genealogy known from the period, the 17-generation pedigree of the Gothic Amal dynasty.[103] However, it is not placed in the context of the origin narrative in the *Getica* but inserted in an account of Rome's wars against the Dacians. The other continental strands of origin stories have genealogical elements but no elaborate pedigrees. The Longobard 'Origo', quite untypically for Early Medieval historiography, does not only note the succession of kings but

[98] Bonifatius, *Epistolae*, 46 (c. 738): 75.

[99] Procopius, *Wars*, 3.22 (Vandals); 6.14 (Heruls).

[100] See the contributions of Daniel Mahoney, Johann Heiss and Reinier Langelaar, in this issue.

[101] Asser, *Life of Alfred*, 1–2.

[102] Pohl, 'Genealogy'.

[103] Jordanes, *Getica*, 14.79–81.

often name and origin of the queens and the name of the dynasties—none of which was in power for more than a few generations.[104]

Fredegar's information allows reconstructing the ancestry of King Clovis for only a few generations: Merovech, the eponymous founder of the Merovingian dynasty, was only Clovis's grandfather.[105] More remarkable is Fredegar's genealogy of peoples that descended from Priamus: his successor was Friga, ancestor of the Phrygians, from whom the Macedonians broke away; in the next generation, there was another division between Francio, the name-giver of the Franks, and Torcoth, from whom the Turks descended.[106] It is an unexpected selection of related *gentes*: there are no Germanic peoples among them, and there is no explicit mention of the Romans either. Like this story, many Medieval origin narratives refer to eponymous ancestors who confer the name on the entire people or on a dynasty: Francio for the Franks, Ostrogotha for the Ostrogoths,[107] Gog for the Goths (in Isidore of Seville), Brutus for the Britons, Var and Hun for the Avars, Hunor and Mogor for the Magyars, Dan for the Danes and of course Amal and Merovech for the respective dynasties. The names expressed something about the true character of a people—a principle at the basis of the long list of explanations of ethnonyms in the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville, a leading intellectual of the seventh century, and a work that reached wide distribution throughout the Middle Ages.[108] The name-giving ancestor, who is present in so many origin narratives in Medieval Europe and beyond it, symbolised the idea that belonging to a people was an inborn characteristic of every one of its members. He thus served to naturalise large and heterogeneous social groups that extended far beyond the horizon of the individual.[109]

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[104] *Origo gentis Langobardorum*, 2–6.

[105] Fredegar, 3.9.

[106] Fredegar, 3.2. Ch. 3.9 underlines that the later kings of the Franks came 'from the stock (*genus*) of Priamus, Friga and Francio'.

[107] Ostrogotha may not have come into the Amal genealogy as an eponymous ancestor but rather have been, before the Ostrogoths got their name, a third-century leader of the Goths, as attested in the newly found Vienna fragments of the *Scythica* of Dexippos: Wolfram, 'Ostrogotha'; Grusková and Martin, 'Ein neues Textstück'; Christopher P. Jones, 'Further Fragments of Dexippus Online', https://www.academia.edu/11913736/Further_Dexippus_ online: 7 (accessed on 12 December 2017).

[108] Isidore, *Etymologies*: 9.2. Henderson, *The Medieval World of Isidore of Seville*; Pohl, 'Ethnonyms and Early Medieval Ethnicity'.

[109] Pohl, 'Historiography and Identity—Methodological Perspectives'.

Conclusions

The group of origin narratives sketched here represents traces of a multiple transition. All of them are essentially migration myths; autochthony does not play a role. That is not surprising because myths of autochthony had always been the exception in the Greek and Latin tradition. However, Tacitus had assumed that the Germans had to be autochthonous because nobody would want to migrate to such a wild and unpleasant country.[110] Still, even those who had not come far, such as the Franks or the Saxons, preferred narratives of long-distance migration instead, and that was a trend that continued into the later Middle Ages. One came from the edges of Europe or even beyond that. Successful migration must have conferred prestige. It was not at all important to claim (as in the nineteenth century) that one had come first to one's country of residence or at least before all other inhabitants. The right of conquest was undisputed. Everybody knew that Romans, and before them, Gauls, Britons or Iberians had lived in the countries over which Franks, Anglo-Saxons or Visigoths now ruled.

A second transition described in the texts was the settlement in Roman provinces. Of course, many of these 'barbarians' had already been familiar with numerous aspects of Roman culture before. Furthermore, some of the provinces where they lived offered only rudimentary traces of Romanness by the time they got there (such as Britain or Pannonia). Goths, Franks and Longobards derived their social privileges from their being Goths, Franks and Longobards. In the post-Roman kingdoms, they were better protected by law and were supplied with landed income if they served in the army. They had become Christians and eventually also Catholics; their kingdoms relied on literate administration; they acquired spoken Latin and gradually abandoned their Germanic language; and they changed their dress habits and other customs. The adaptation to late Roman and Christian ways of life must have changed much for the newcomers but had no visible impact on their ethnic identities, which were now an integral part of the political system of their kingdoms. Overall, these are narratives of integration into a Christian and post-Roman world, in which 'barbarians' strove to maintain their separate identity.

Third, this transition was bound to affect the form and content of the narratives that we have discussed. The texts themselves carry signs

[110] Tacitus, *Germania*, 2.

of transition. We cannot assume, as in older research, that these were practically immutable, more or less sacred traditions. Some histories radically altered or omitted the parts about the origins of a people, such as Isidore's *History of the Goths* or the short *Longobard History* in the Codex Gothanus. Others preserved much of the earlier material, such as Paul the Deacon, in spite of explicitly disagreeing with its pagan bias. Mythological elements in the texts did not matter in the way they once may have mattered or were misunderstood: in a pagan context, Wodan naming and thereby adopting the Longobards would imply that they could count on his favours. Such symbolic significance could not unfold within a Christian cultural continuum. On the other hand, the notion of difference that these elements implied may actually have been a valuable asset for the identification of the new elites. Stories that underlined their being different and their origins from the margins of Europe could be helpful for 'strategies of distinction'.[111] They also eased communication, and competition for prestige, between Medieval peoples. Eventually, these origin narratives became something of a shared cultural and political resource in a political landscape largely defined by its *gentes* and their kingdoms.

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[111] Pohl, 'Telling the Difference'.

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