Political uses of ethnicity in early medieval Europe

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Ethnicity and Roman expansion

I would like to start this contribution by making a general point: the so-called 'migration period' in Europe at the end of Antiquity is crucial for our understanding of ethnicity in several respects.[1] First, it can help to explain how the emerging modern European nations built on resources of the past that had been accumulated in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, and what that may have implied for their development. Second, attitudes towards ethnic and political communities and discourses of ethnicity that took shape in this period influenced much later perceptions of identity and otherness. For instance, ethnic perceptions of African peoples in the 19th century were not least promoted by European missionaries, who were familiar with biblical and classical concepts of ethnicity that had been synthesized in the period between the 4th and the 9th century (Geary 2001: 157–74). Third, although the European Early Middle Ages are still regarded as 'Dark Ages', we do in fact have a considerable number and variety of sources from this period at our disposal (including rich archaeological material). This evidence allows a long-term overview of ethnic processes that can serve as test-cases for theories of ethnicity. It shows many facets of the importance and the limits of ethnicity as a cognitive model and as a political resource. Unfortunately, in most debates about ethnicity this fascinating

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evidence is still being ignored. Admittedly, the appropriations of ethnic identities by nationalist ideologies in the 19th and 20th centuries make the contemporary research on the topic somewhat uncomfortable.[2] But these appropriations do not make it any less interesting, since they become subject to analysis themselves.

One thing that studying the Early Middle Ages can teach us is that some current grand narratives and general theories of ethnicity are too simple to be profitably applicable to the whole range of historical cases. The debate over whether ethnicity and/or the nation are primordial or modern phenomena does not link neatly with the evidence about the early medieval situation (Smith 2000). There is broad agreement that ethnicity is socially constructed, but that does not mean that it is a mere invention, or any less real for that.[3] If ethnicity was only created by European colonial expansion, which research term should we use for earlier periods? The ancient and medieval *ethnē*, *gentes* or *nationes* may not always coincide with modern scholarly concepts of ethnicity, but they were quite consistently used to describe related phenomena, which should by no means be excluded from interdisciplinary research on ethnicity.

The fact that European colonial powers established ethnic divides as a cognitive and repressive tool does not imply that this is the only way in which ethnicity can become meaningful in history. In fact, the relations between the Roman Empire and the "ethnic" groups in its periphery provide a very instructive case for comparison, which displays both striking parallels with and differences from the uses of ethnicity by European colonial empires. The Romans divided their 'barbarian' periphery according to *gentes*, while they distinguished Romans by their cities of origin, and regarded them as a *populus*, a 'people by constitution' defined by common polity and law. The implication was that the barbarians lived in a natural world, where social groups were formed by procreation, whereas Romans lived in a cultured universe where communities were established by law and politics. The ethnic ascriptions used for the barbarian 'Other' were partly fictive; that applied first of all to ethnographic umbrella categories, such as *Germani* or Scythians, which hardly corresponded to any established self-ascription. Ethnic designations of smaller groups were aimed at controlling the periphery of the empire. These groups could then be integrated into the empire under specific conditions depending on political

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2   For instance, German nationalists appropriated the ancient and migration-age Germans, and the French the Gauls and Franks, which led to widely discordant views of the end of the Roman Empire (cp. Geary 2001; Pohl 2002).

3   The term "imagined communities", coined by Anderson (1991: 6), is often understood that way, in spite of his assertion that all communities larger than face-to-face groups are imagined, in the sense not of falsification but of creation.

circumstances, and were granted varying degrees of autonomy. Alternatively, Rome also constructed alliances with its barbarian neighbours, playing them off against each other, or identifying them as enemies who had to be subjected to a wide range of repressive measures.

This is, in fact, what many empires have done in history – first in the course of their expansion, and then once they had consolidated their positions, by establishing asymmetrical relations with their peripheries. But that does not necessarily mean that the system of ethnic distinctions applied to the 'barbarians' outside the empire was constructed from scratch; several observations contradict such a conclusion. Our evidence rarely allows us to track the previous identities of populations before they had come under the sway of the Roman Empire. However, we can make a number of useful observations. No one would doubt that the Jews already had a very strong identity long before they were subdued by the Romans; and although scholars have tried to minimize the ethnic element in Jewish identity, it is certainly very present in the Old Testament.

The evidence for the barbarians in the Northern parts of Europe is more indirect. Greek and Roman ethnography since Herodotus had collected considerable informations about them (Müller 1997). This material may not have been wholly adequate and was coloured by stereotypes, but the distinctions between different groups had to be reliable enough to deal with them on a political level. Greeks and Romans did not have the military or political means to impose ethnic identifications on 'barbarian' populations outside their realms. Thus, they simply could not afford to apply a cognitive model to these barbarians that had nothing to do with real groupings and feelings of solidarity among the latter. We know of a number of cases in which relatively slight mistakes in diplomatic dealings with barbarian groups beyond the frontier led to serious military trouble for the Roman Empire. Roman propaganda could certainly fantasize about 'barbarians' in triumphal inscriptions and panegyric poems, and give them antiquated or imaginary names; some of which might also appear in works of ethnography or historiography. But we have enough evidence to see that in their diplomatic and military contacts with foreign *gentes*, the Romans relied on excellent intelligence. On the whole, their perception of ethnic groups around them was adequate and allowed them some form of control over their 'barbarian' periphery for many centuries. We cannot not always trust the details. However, the ways in which the Romans distinguished the populations beyond the frontiers using ethnonyms surely corresponded broadly to the latters' internal organisation and self-perceptions.

ETHNICITY IN THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF POST-ROMAN EUROPE

From the beginning of the 5th century CE, Roman rule in the West slowly eroded. Large bands of soldiers of 'barbarian' origin, most of them with families and followers, settled on Roman territory under their own commanders, often at least nominally in the service of the empire. Although their composition was initially more or less heterogeneous and volatile, they were consistently distinguished by ethnic names. Increasingly, instances of self-identification come to be attested. As these groups became more familiar with their late-Roman environment, they built up their own power bases. In the course of the 5th and 6th century CE, Roman provinces were thus transformed into kingdoms named after ruling ethnic groups – Vandals, Goths, Franks, Angles or Saxons – which constituted small minorities. The new political units were not distinguished by their long-standing regional names – Africa, Hispania, Gaul or Britain – but by these ethnic designations, which became proud self-designations.

Generations of historians who thought in terms of national histories considered it natural that it should have happened that way – invading Germanic peoples established their states in conquered regions and stamped their names on them. But that was not natural at all. We know now that the composition of the invading groups changed considerably in the course of their migration and integration into the Roman World (Wolfram 1997; Pohl 2002). Furthermore, things developed very differently in the East when Muslim armies conquered Syria, Egypt and other Roman provinces. They established the rule of Islam, of dynasties, or of sectarian groups, but not of tribes or peoples (although tribal distinctions played a great role in Arab society) (Pohl/Gantner/Payne 2012). Thus, the process by which ethnicity became a political resource in the early medieval West is much less linear and teleological, and much more contingent, than has been assumed. For a long time, the Early Middle Ages were regarded as the period of origin of most European nations. But these ethnic and national histories were much more fragmented and contradictory than the old master narratives assumed. It was not nations that emerged in the Middle Ages, but a model of ethnic rule that continued to be used, intermittently but repeatedly, in European history. Ultimately, this precedent could serve as an ideological device for building European nations on myths of distant origins.

Accordingly, there is a lot more to explain about the rise of ethnic kingdoms in early medieval Europe than traditional historiography has assumed. But whichever explanation we choose, it would hardly work without using the

category of ethnicity. Scholars may of course decide that 'ethnicity' is not very useful for their topic of study, but in this particular field we would miss an important element of the political process if we abandoned it. Ethnic designations not only served as distinctions among polities and their elites: agency was ascribed to the ethnic groups, and not to their states. The Franks, and not their kingdom, waged war or raised a king. Soon, ethnic representations of rulership became current: 'king of the Franks' (*rex Francorum*), 'king of the people of the Longobards' (*rex gentis Langobardorum*) and suchlike.

Initially, the armed ethnic groups that dominated the new kingdoms constituted small minorities. In a process that took centuries, the Latin-speaking majority population took on the ruling identity, while the ethnic elites largely adopted the language and culture of the majority. Thus, the kingdom of the Germanic Franks, the most successful of the new units, gradually turned into Romance-speaking France. This integration was possible because the distinctive feature of common blood and kinship among the ruling elite could be bypassed quite comfortably. The Franks even came to believe that they had originated from the Trojans, which made them relatives of the Romans.

Still, Latin terminology implied a biological frame of reference: *gens*, *genus* and *natio* were all derived from verbs denoting birth. And, perhaps surprisingly, the ethnic framing for the new kingdoms was supported by Christianity. The Old Testament offered a rich repertoire of ideas to support an ethnic view of the political world: a people chosen by God over all the others, constituted by tribal units and competing with other peoples, whom God sometimes employed as instruments of his wrath. The Jewish people periodically ruled their own state, which sometimes was split in two, or destroyed by enemies, so that the Jewish people would be forced to live under foreign rule or be dispersed in exile. In a set of very impressive stories, the Old Testament explained the origin of peoples (from Noah's sons after the flood) and of languages (the Tower of Babel), and recounted a model migration (in Exodus). These stories became basic in Western culture. In the New Testament, the message of Christ was to be taken to all peoples, and the Jews thus assumed a role in the history of salvation. However universal a doctrine Christianity presented itself as, its holy books reserved an important role for ethnicity.

I would argue that the early medieval evidence, sketched here very briefly, supports the use of ethnicity as a category to describe how the post-Roman kingdoms operated. Without it, we would miss an important indicator with which to distinguish the changes that took place in the Latin West from different transformations of the Roman World in other regions. Therefore, we have to employ a definition of ethnicity that is adequate to the material that we are

studying. There are of course several definitions available; objective or subjective, by common cultural features or by the belief in common origins (which I find more helpful). A cultural definition would fail to grasp the continuity of Frankish identity and its political role, while the Franks successively adopted the religion, language, costume and many other cultural traits of the majority in their kingdom. The definition that we choose must then be put in perspective with contemporary definitions and perceptions of the phenomena that we want to describe as 'ethnic'. That would allow us to historicize the term, and to take on board 'native' knowledge about its application. This is of course an open, hermeneutic process aimed at arriving at an operational definition that might not fit the strict requirements of a definition in some sectors of the social sciences. But it is adequate to the needs of historical research, an activity which risks being limited by overly narrow definitions while studying phenomena that were in constant transformation.

An approach that has proved productive in early medieval studies is to see ethnicity as a principle of distinction between social groupings that may be more or less salient or relevant according to the context. The significance of ethnic distinctions and identifications is well attested in the period (as in many premodern contexts), but they were by no means equally important everywhere. Ethnicity does not only exist due to outside or imperial ascription, but external perceptions nevertheless play an integral part in the process of identification that establishes ethnic identities. They are rarely exclusively emic or etic; they only acquire some stability if individual identifications with a group, collective or symbolic self-identification of a group as such are engaged in a relatively continuous process of communication with external identifications. Ethnicity has no teleological development, but undergoes irregular periods of relative inactivity. Its politicization can take very different forms: reinforcing ethnic cleavages; aiming for a better status as an ethnic minority; or, as in the cases that I have sketched, legitimizing privileges for an elite, or its right to rule. Ethnicity is socially constructed and built on myths, but has an impact in the social world, and can have real significance for peoples' identities.

In fact, the question of whether a social group is ethnic or not is often wrongly put. For instance, it is not very productive to debate whether the Jews were an ethnic or a religious community; they were both, and to different degrees in different contexts. We rarely encounter ethnicity in its 'pure' form – it often overlaps to a large extent with political, religious, territorial, military or other types of identifications. The same social group can be more or less ethnic at different times, and even appear more or less ethnic to different individuals at the same time (Pohl 2013a). Ultimately, the claim that ethnicity makes is that it

defines groups that people are born into. Therefore, the solidarity associated with an ethnic group is not accidental or episodic, but is seen as an expression of an intrinsic nature, bound by kinship and common origin. Of course, we know that this essentialist claim is highly ideological. It can also go along with much more pragmatic attitudes that allow for changes of ethnic identity, at least over time. Likewise, the promise of ethnic solidarity is never entirely reliable. But we also know that ethnic groups have often proven surprisingly stable, not least in the face of adversity.

This tension between strong concepts and weak practices of ethnicity creates conceptual problems; some scholars insist that we should only speak of ethnicity when we can prove that a strong concept is actually exemplified by a specific case (Gruen 2013). However, such an approach would be unnecessarily limited. Ethnicity is a relational system of distinctions which allows orientation to all actors involved, regardless of the intensity of ethnic identifications on the ground. Ethnic distinctions only require a basic consensus about their broad significance and applicability. In the period between the 5th and 8th centuries, ethnonyms were consistently used to identify collective political actors, who were described as *gentes*, and sometimes also as *nationes* or *genera*. The etymologies of these words already suggested notions of common origin. The Old Testament provided strong models of providential ethnic history. Furthermore, in some texts we find theoretical reflections about the meaning of contemporary ethnic names and terminology, as in Isidore of Seville's 7th-century *Etymologies*, which give access to an underlying discourse. In this matrix, the rather fragmented histories of the peoples that emerged during the dissolution of the Roman Empire in the 5th and 6th centuries CE could be understood. In research, it would be hard to grasp the dynamics of these histories without tapping into the rich (if controversial) theoretical toolbox provided by research on ethnicity. In turn, these remote histories offer test-cases that can be very valuable for the study of ethnicity in very different times and places.

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