

INTRODUCTION — STRATEGIES OF IDENTIFICATION: A METHODOLOGICAL PROFILE

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Part 1: Definitions of Ethnicity

‘Identification matters because it is the basic cognitive mechanism that humans use to sort out themselves and their fellows, individually and collectively.’ This is how a recent introduction into ‘social identity’, written by the sociologist Richard Jenkins, puts it. ‘Identity’, therefore, is a strategic concept that helps to bridge some of the simplifying, binary opposites fundamental to scholarship, such as individual/collective, objective/subjective, structure/action, theory/practice, or intended/unintended.¹ The present volume, and its companion volume, *Post-Roman Transitions*, take a similar approach.² They raise the question how similarities and differences between human beings were shaped and made meaningful by ethnic and other forms of classification that offered broad frames of identification for large numbers of people. These studies are a result of a major project on ‘Ethnic Identities in Early Medieval Europe’, financed by the Wittgenstein Prize of the Austrian Science Fund.³

¹ Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity*, pp. 13 and 46.

² Pohl and Heydemann, eds, *Post-Roman Transitions*.

³ The Wittgenstein Prize was awarded to me in 2004, making possible a project conducted at the Institute for Medieval Research of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and at the University of Vienna/Institute for Austrian Historical Research. I would like to thank Gerda Heydemann,

Ethnicity and identity are rather recent terms in scholarship; both became current in the 1950s and 1960s, at a time when the decline of the national paradigm opened the way for critical concepts. Both terms developed into fundamental tools to describe problems of individual and social identification, but their significance and definition remained problematic.⁴ As it is used here, 'ethnic' is a relational mode of social organization among a number of distinctive groups, which are perceived as being constituted by an ingrained common nature. 'Ethnicity' denotes this way of partitioning the social world and the discourse that gives meaning to it and guides the corresponding strategies of identification and differentiation. This discourse is sufficiently similar across space and time to constitute 'ethnicity' as a field of study, although it changes over time.⁵ Individuals and groups do not 'have' ethnicity, they produce it and are identified according to it. I would suggest that it is useful to distinguish between 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic identity'. Ethnic identity denotes a reciprocal relationship between a person and a group that is reproduced through verbal or symbolic statements and acts of identification and complemented by ascriptions of alterity.⁶ Ethnic identity is thus created by serial and routinized identifications according to the pattern or discourse of ethnicity current in the respective society. These identifications, and the symbolic markers used in them, are regarded as expressions of an inner self (individually) and of a natural community (collectively). It is this belief in the ingrained nature of ethnic identity in a person that is at the core of the concept.

Pavla Rychterová, Helmut Reimitz, and Herwig Wolfram for their suggestions and Meg Leja for help with the English.

⁴ For a discussion, see Chapter 1.1. The terminology of ethnicity is inescapably problematic. In this article, I partly or completely avoid using several contemporary English terms that describe ethnic groups or phenomena. I only use 'race' for the notion of fundamental biological difference — which hardly existed in the early Middle Ages (not even in early medieval anti-Judaism) — and not as a translation for the word *gens*. I do not use 'nation' for the early medieval period, although this choice may be debatable (see below). For the terminological problem of 'tribe', see Pohl, 'Archaeology of Identity', pp. 13–17; and Gingrich, 'Envisioning Medieval Communities'. I render both *gens* and *populus* as 'people' (or leave them in the Latin, where I want to distinguish between them). 'People' is certainly a term full of modern overtones as well, but I do not see a better alternative.

⁵ I would rather avoid using the term 'ethnicity' in the sense of 'the quality of belonging to an ethnic group', or even 'the essence of an ethnic group', which is current in some of the sociological and anthropological literature. Cf. Hutchinson and Smith, eds, *Ethnicity*, p. 4.

⁶ See Gingrich, 'Conceptualizing Identities'. A rather straightforward but workable definition of 'identity' is found in Jenkins, *Social Identity*, p. 18: "Identity" denotes the ways in which individuals and collectives are distinguished in their relations with other individuals and collectives'.

Both individual and group identities can vary according to the degree and ‘salience’ of ethnic identification involved. ‘Identification’, then, can describe 1) the personal act of expressing allegiance to a social group; 2) the collective self-representation of a group through its speakers or as a collective; and 3) the classification of social groups by outsiders. These identifications take place in a circuit of communication that determines which features (such as actual or notional common origin, a shared memory of the past, and common territory, language, outward appearance and dress, customs, myths, norms, beliefs, codes of honour — in short, culture) will be used or imagined as markers of ethnic identity. All these elements of ethnicity are recurrent, but specific to context and culture. Only two elements seem to apply to all cases: First, ethnic groups are invariably distinguished by a proper name, an ethnonym. Second, ethnic identification is only successful if it is not regarded as deliberate but as expression of a ‘deep structure’. Membership in ethnic groups is typically regarded as intrinsically constituted, not dependent on social status or function and unaffected by personal decision or the passage of time. In research, a fourth level of identification is added, namely 4) the scholarly identification of social groups and their categorization as ethnic. This is a hermeneutic process based on (past and present) social communication and on previous scholarship.

1.1. Ethnicity and Identity: False Friends?

Amin Maalouf has called the word ‘identity’ a ‘faux ami’, a false friend: ‘Nous croyons tous savoir ce que ce mot veut dire [...] quand, insidieusement, il se met à dire le contraire.’⁷ The range of possible meanings is, in fact, rather broad. A right-wing politician may use the word to underline the unchanging substance and ancient bloodline of his people, while a critical scholar may employ it to stress the fluidity of all ethnic and national identities. Because the shift from the old national paradigm to a new, more dynamic understanding was only gradual, the new terminology has also been adopted by scholars operating more or less within the horizon of the old paradigm. Consequently, ‘ethnicity’, ‘ethnic identity’, ‘social identity’, ‘identification’, and similar terms are often being used in a rather haphazard way, and also perhaps too frequently.⁸ Authors deal-

⁷ Maalouf, *Les Identités*, p. 9. For the following two paragraphs, see the more extensive treatment in Pohl, ‘Aux origines d’une Europe ethnique’.

⁸ See Gingrich, ‘Identität’. For a radical critique of the term ‘identity’, see Niethammer, *Kollektive Identität*.

ing mainly with the 'hard dynamics and essentialist claims' of contemporary identity politics are sometimes worried that the broad range of meanings of 'identity', further blurred by the vagueness of the 'constructivist stance', may make 'identity' unsuitable for social analysis.⁹ But the critical potential of the term lies not least in the possibility to provide a common frame for research on ethnic and religious, individual and collective, contemporary and past, identities — the last point being especially attractive for historians. Admittedly, we need to reflect more on the uses and misuses, the reifications and misunderstandings, connected with 'identity'. This includes thinking about problems of definition, although we should not be too worried about precision here. We are dealing, after all, with 'operational' terms whose meaning is established in the course of their scholarly use, and not with 'classificatory' categories that offer clear definitions of a circumscribed class of objects or phenomena.¹⁰

Taken literally, of course, the term 'identity' does not make sense at all, as none other than Ludwig Wittgenstein reminded us: 'Von *zwei* Dingen zu sagen, sie seien identisch, ist Unsinn, und von *Einem* zu sagen, es sei identisch mit sich selbst, sagt gar nichts'.¹¹ Still, in the decades after Wittgenstein died in 1951, 'identity' has become one of the most successful concepts in the humanities and the social sciences. It carries a massive hermeneutic weight, since it indicates both collective/social identity and individual identity. Indeed, it can be understood as an interface between the individual and society. It describes two complementary processes: one in which allegiance to several social groups, and emulation of several cultural *personae*, are integrated into one individual personality; and the other in which considerable numbers of rather different individuals are linked to, or subsumed under, a single social group. Social identity is what makes a group real for its members.¹² From the point of view of social psychology, this seemingly simple definition covers a complex interaction of 'intra-group' and 'inter-group identities', a dynamic of inclusion and exclusion that is often full of contradictions.¹³ The social sciences have assembled an impressive body of empirical data, collected in part from interviews testing shifting attitudes of/to insiders and outsiders, and sophisticated statistical

⁹ Brubaker and Cooper, 'Beyond "Identity"', p. 1.

¹⁰ Oeser, 'Methodologische Bemerkungen'.

¹¹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, p. 62; Wagner, 'Fest-Stellungen', p. 44; Hall, 'Introduction: Who Needs Identity?'.

¹² Turner, 'Towards a Cognitive Redefinition of the Social Group'.

¹³ Worchel and others, 'A Multidimensional Model'.

methods to measure relative social distance and intra-group behaviour.¹⁴ Social anthropologists have studied ethnic groups from many angles, and this has led to lively theoretical debates.¹⁵ In the humanities, two fundamental approaches have expanded our knowledge about social identities. One is the study of the cultural models and constructs that help to shape identities; such study may be carried out through, for instance, discourse analysis and the interpretation of narratives. The other is the historical study of the formation and trans-formation of identities.

Social identities are, in fact, full of paradoxes. In the perception of the individuals concerned, social groups represent continuity and maintain the *longue durée* of a community far beyond the horizon of individual lives. Just as an individual, in his/her own self-perception as well as in the eyes of others, essentially remains the same throughout his/her lifetime, ethnic or other social groups are thought of as enduring and 'identical' from a distant past to a distant future. Indeed, this is one of the key roles of identities in society: they frame individual existence and give meaning to individual efforts and sacrifices. In reality, of course, both individual and social identities are affected by changes, threatened by crises (not only 'of identity'), and can never be fully achieved.¹⁶ The task of historians is to uncover these changes of identity that often (though not always) remain hidden behind contemporary perceptions of immutability. In this respect, early medieval history is a particularly promising object of study because for the period between the fourth and the eighth centuries (and in eastern Europe, until the eleventh century), the transformation of social identities was accelerated through Christianization and Islamicization, through migrations and the appearance of new peoples, and through economic and political transformation.¹⁷ Thus, even contemporary observers sometimes realized that identities had changed. But we not only have to take the mutability of historical identities into account, we also need to historicize our categories. 'Identity'

¹⁴ See Capozza and Brown, eds, *Social Identity Processes*; Hutchinson and Smith, *Ethnicity*; and Glazer and Moynihan, eds, *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*.

¹⁵ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*; Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*; Romanucci-Ross and De Vos, eds, *Ethnic Identity*; Baumann and Gingrich, eds, *Grammars of Identity/Alterity*.

¹⁶ See Grossberg, 'Identity and Cultural Studies', pp. 100–02; and De Vos, 'Ethnic Pluralism', p. 17: 'ethnic identity [...] is a continually evolving social process'.

¹⁷ Important overviews include Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*; Smith, *Europe After Rome*; Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*; Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome*; and Heather, *Empires and Barbarians*.

and 'ethnicity' are rather recent terms, but they refer to social phenomena that were present in most societies in a wide range of different forms, and accordingly, were conceptualized in a variety of ways. This is a central concern of this volume. There is, in fact, a surprising lacuna in studies of what ethnicity could generally mean in the early Middle Ages, as compared with the many exemplary studies that have been conducted on, for instance, what it may have meant for the Goths.

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Explaining what ethnicity is may seem paradoxical. It is part of general social knowledge to explain what a 'people' or a 'tribe' is; but the more one tries to define the criteria, the more elusive they become. Scholarly definitions have always built on popular semantics and have listed more or less extended catalogues of criteria to arrive at an objective definition of ethnicity. The criteria have actually changed relatively little from ancient literature to modern sociology.¹⁸ Items on the list usually include common language, habitus, customs, and territory, sometimes also law, common political organization, or ways of fighting. These 'itemized lists' can be understood as 'ideal types' in the sense of Max Weber and give a more or less adequate picture of the range of meaning of ethnicity.¹⁹ Like other modern terms and typologies (such as society, class, Weber's types of *Herrschaft*), they may help to describe the workings of societies past and present, societies in which ethnic groups were certainly part of the picture. But they also tend to simplify and de-historicize matters. Here, the issue is to understand how ethnicity works, and how its social significance changes over time; this requires a careful analysis of the meanings of ethnicity both in the early Middle Ages and now. As Rogers Brubaker has put it, 'ethnic common sense' (his term for what I call 'ethnic discourse' here) 'is what we want to explain, not what we want to explain things with'.²⁰ Weber's ideal types do not help much with this issue; rather, they risk reducing its complexity and obscuring its problems.

We do, of course, use many of these criteria if we want to guess at a stranger's origin, and early medieval people may have done the same; we scan physiognomy, language, dress, and behaviour (and with some experience, can develop subtle ways of recognition that are hard to theorize). In the last resort, we are

¹⁸ Pohl, 'Telling the Difference'.

¹⁹ For a use of 'ideal typical' definitions of the nation in respect to ethnicity, see Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations*, p. 19; see also Wickham, 'Conclusions'.

²⁰ Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, p. 9.

inclined to believe what the stranger tells us (unless there is reason to believe that he is lying). Such pragmatic strategies of identification often are not too far off the mark, although they may also fail in many cases. But they hardly offer a sound basis to define ethnicity. For one thing, the criteria for scanning another's appearance are not aimed solely at checking ethnic identities, but may also refer to civic, regional, national, or even religious identities. On the other hand, only some of the criteria apply to most given ethnic groups, and they rarely apply to all of them.²¹ In the early Middle Ages (but also in other periods), there are many examples that show that one or the other of these criteria did not matter. The association with a specific territory is hard to attest in an age of migrations, when, for instance, Goths lived scattered from the Crimea to Spain.²² Language, too, is not always ethnically distinctive. Paul the Deacon, the leading grammarian of the eighth century, regarded the language spoken by the Lombards, Bavarians, Saxons, and others as the same (soon to be called *lingua theotisca*, the 'language of the people'), whereas he did not bother to mention that the Lombards, his own people, were gradually adopting the late Latin spoken by the majority of the 'Roman' population in Italy.²³ Dress is regularly regarded as a distinctive feature, but the instances in which it demonstrably served as a recognizable marker of ethnic identity are surprisingly rare.²⁴ The Franks, Goths, and Lombards at times shared most cultural traits with their neighbours, and changed almost all of them between the fourth and the eighth century, including their language, religion, dress, way of life, and funerary rituals; none of that had any visible effect on their ethnic identities. The second problem with an itemized definition of ethnicity was already raised by Michael Moerman in his study of the Lue: 'Since language, culture, political organization, etc., do not correlate completely, the units delimited by one criterion do

²¹ For a similar argument about the limited applicability of objective features of ethnicity, see Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*, pp. 19–26. He arrives at a rather formal definition, pp. 20–21: 'The criteria of ethnicity are a definitional set of attributes by which membership in an ethnic group is ultimately determined. They are the result of a series of conscious and socially embedded choices which attach significance to certain criteria from a universal set while ignoring others.'

²² Wolfram, *Die Goten*; Pohl, *Die Völkerwanderung*, pp. 40–69.

²³ Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, ed. by Waitz, I. 27, p. 70; Pohl, 'Telling the Difference', pp. 22–27; Wolfram, *Gotische Studien*, pp. 241–62. See also, Pohl and Zeller, eds, *Sprache und Identität/Language and Identity*, including my 'Introduction' and the contributions by Herwig Wolfram, Hans-Werner Goetz, and Wolfgang Haubrichs.

²⁴ Pohl, 'Telling the Difference', pp. 40–51; Von Rummel, *Habitus barbarus*.

not coincide completely with the units delimited by another'.²⁵ A similar problem occurs with ethnic mappings proposed by historians, archaeologists, and philologists on the basis of their respective early medieval evidence in Europe, since this evidence can often differ considerably.

Some definitions also boil down these itemized lists to a rather vague 'distinctive shared culture'. But this is a problematic criterion to meet, and Moerman's objection also applies here. As archaeological distribution maps show, even single cultural traits — types of weapons, female ornaments, house and pottery forms, or inhumation practices — fall into different topographical patterns, and hardly allow one to draw clear cultural boundaries.²⁶ Early medieval archaeologists have responded by isolating one or a few individual traits that are considered ethnically specific because their distribution more-or-less corresponds to a settlement area known from the written sources; on this basis, they construct a 'cultural model' attributed to a specific *gens*.²⁷ Other types of objects or evidence found in the same territory are then explained by the presence of foreigners (for instance, foreign-born wives). This is a particularly controversial issue in early medieval archaeology.²⁸ In some cases, this model may be helpful and give quite a good idea of the way in which, for instance, the Lombards in Italy or the Avars in the Carpathian basin typically lived around AD 600. But we should not forget to what degree a 'Lombard' or 'Avar' cultural model is an abstraction constructed on the basis of often relatively minor differences in the material culture. It does not allow one to conclude with any certainty that a person buried with 'typically Lombard' apparel was, indeed, a Lombard; perhaps the expensive demonstrative use of 'typical' grave goods was intended to show that a person of non-Lombard origin was, after all, a member of the Lombard ruling class.²⁹ But in any case, nowhere in the migration period was there an all-inclusive 'distinctive culture' actually shared by any ethnic group and only by it.³⁰

²⁵ Moerman, 'Ethnic Identification in a Complex Civilization', p. 1215.

²⁶ Cf. Brather, *Ethnische Interpretationen*.

²⁷ Bierbrauer, *Ethnos und Mobilität*.

²⁸ See also Graves-Brown, Jones, and Gamble, eds, *Cultural Identity and Archaeology*; Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity*; Härke, 'Archaeologists and Migrations'; Siegmund, *Alemannen und Franken*; Halsall, 'Burial Writies'; Bierbrauer, 'Zur ethnischen Interpretation'; Brather, ed., *Zwischen Spätantike und Frühmittelalter*, especially the contributions by Pohl, 'Spuren, Texte, Identitäten', and Brather, 'Bestattungen und Identitäten'; Theuvs, 'Grave Goods, Ethnicity and the Rhetoric of Burial Rites'; and Pohl and Mehofer, eds, *Archaeology of Identity*.

²⁹ Pohl and Erhart, eds, *Die Langobarden*; Barbiera, *Changing Lands in Changing Memories*.

³⁰ In the case of the Avars in the eighth century, the regional distribution of a distinctive

An alternative to the lists of objective criteria has been to adopt an essentially subjective definition: ethnicity is a form of community based on the shared belief in common origin. An early and authoritative subjective definition was that of Max Weber: 'We call "ethnic groups" those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization or migration'.³¹ Reinhard Wenskus in his 1960s book that profoundly influenced early medieval studies also used a markedly subjective approach.³² He relied on Wilhelm Mühlmann's definition: 'Das Wichtigste am Ethnos ist das Bewußtsein der Zusammengehörigkeit auf Grund des Glaubens an eine gemeinsame Abstammung'.³³ This definition has been widely accepted in early medieval studies, including my own early work; but it risks reducing the complexity of ethnicity.³⁴ For Wenskus, shared 'traditions' that transported myths and norms were an important feature. This corresponds with the definition given by George A. de Vos: 'An ethnic group is a self-perceived inclusion of those who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by others with whom they are in contact'.³⁵ A different addition is offered by Moerman, who defined the Lue by subjective belief and by corresponding action: 'Someone is Lue by virtue of believing and calling himself Lue and of acting in ways that validate his Lueness'; he calls this self-identification an 'emic category of ascription', to be distinguished from the 'etic' category of outside ascription.³⁶ Thomas Hylland Eriksen has given a 'subjective' turn to the cultural definition of ethnicity: 'Ethnicity is an aspect of social relationships between agents who consider themselves as culturally distinctive from members of other groups with whom they have a minimum of regular interaction'. But he also refers to common origin: 'It can thus also be defined as a social identity (based on contrast *vis-à-vis*

material culture and the territory attributed in the written sources to an ethnically defined population and state overlap to a considerable degree. Yet even in this case, many people of Slavic and other origins apparently shared a number of these features. See Pohl, *Die Awaren*.

³¹ Quoted here from Weber, 'The Origins of Ethnic Groups', p. 35.

³² Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*.

³³ Mühlmann, *Methodik der Völkerkunde*, p. 229; Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*, p. 12.

³⁴ For a critique of a purely subjective definition, see also Wolfram, 'Terminologisches', p. 790.

³⁵ De Vos, 'Ethnic Pluralism', p. 18. He lists 'folk religious beliefs and practices, language, a sense of historical continuity, and common ancestry or place of origin' among the elements included in such traditions.

³⁶ Moerman, 'Ethnic Identification in a Complex Civilization', p. 1219.

others) characterized by metaphoric or fictive kinship'.³⁷ There are three methodological problems with most subjective definitions. First, self-identification may not be enough to create a stable ethnic identity, given that it also needs to be validated by the out-group. Second, it is a difficult criterion to employ in research on past identities because we do not always have direct clues as to the subjective sense of belonging. And third, self-identification with a group on the basis of common myths and traditions is also characteristic of other social groups, so it does not help to distinguish what is particular about ethnicity.

The subjective or 'emic' definitions can be filled in with objective features, so that we arrive at mixed definitions. For example, Richard Schermerhorn defines ethnic groups as 'a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood' (and here, some of the 'objective' traits are being listed, such as kinship patterns, physical contiguity, religious affiliation or language).³⁸ A. D. Smith, leaning more towards the objective features, lists six criteria: a collective name, a common myth of descent, a shared history, a distinctive shared culture, an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity.³⁹ If we are aware of the limitations of each of these criteria, this is a pragmatically straightforward list, useful for orientation. Ethnic groups surely could inspire a sense of solidarity, otherwise ethnicity would not have been such a successful form of social organization in many historical contexts. But even that is not always applicable. Frankish, Lombard, or Gothic solidarity certainly did not stop almost continuous bloody internecine conflict and civil war, which for some time in the seventh century was much more frequent than inter-ethnic strife.

The belief in common descent as a decisive criterion raises another problem. To be sure, the belief in a common origin and the sense of shared history, which constitutes a symbolic 'mythomoteur' (as A. D. Smith has called it)⁴⁰ and draws an ethnic group together, remains an important element of ethnicity. But in the early Middle Ages, origin legends, genealogies, or 'ethnic histories' are only attested in some, not in all, ethnic groups. If we define ethnicity by a belief in common origins, this poses the problem of proving its occurrence and its fundamental significance in any given ethnic group (which otherwise

³⁷ Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, p. 12.

³⁸ Schermerhorn, *Comparative Ethnic Relations*, p. 12.

³⁹ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, pp. 22–30.

⁴⁰ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, pp. 57–68.

could not be classed as ‘ethnic’). For the early Middle Ages, there is reason to assume that such a belief mattered in many ethnic groups. For quite a few of them, origin myths, *origines gentium*, have been transmitted in many copies; an example would be the Scandinavian *origo gentis* of Ostrogoths or Lombards, or the Trojan origin story of the Franks.⁴¹ Still, the argument is more problematic than has long been assumed. There are other peoples for whom such founding legends are late to appear, peripheral in transmission, or more-or-less missing — for instance, the Burgundians or Alemanni. Were these groups less ‘ethnic’ than, for instance, the Romans, for whom a very influential origin myth is attested? In many cases, origin stories are transmitted in erudite contexts and can be related to demonstrably specific interests. Some contemporary scholars would be happy to do away with early medieval ethnicity on these grounds.⁴² Of course, it is quite likely that the *origines gentium* written up in Latin constituted the tip of an iceberg among a richer lore of origin myths that were transmitted only orally. But we should be cautious. Where (often late) written versions of vernacular oral legends and sagas have been transmitted, they are often trans-national and not ethnically specific (not only motifs, but also persons wander: Theoderic or Attila figure in many of them). And most of them are not ‘foundational’ myths of origin — some of the most successful medieval legends were, in fact, myths of destruction, such as the *Song of Roland* or the *Nibelungenlied*. It is unlikely that early medieval *gentes* lacked a sense of belonging and the corresponding myths and beliefs. But our evidence is too patchy to put decisive weight on that as a criterion.

Rather, it may be useful to describe the criterion in a more abstract way, and understand ethnic groups as ‘putatively deeply constituted, quasi natural, intrinsic kinds’.⁴³ Many social groups, such as warriors, clerics, and slaves, are defined by a specific function or status in society; others are at least notionally constituted by individual decision (religions, heresies, migrant groups). Although ethnicity can in practice sometimes be limited to warrior groups, it is notionally inclusive (tending to incorporate all social functions). At the same

⁴¹ Wolfram and others, ‘*Origo gentis*’.

⁴² See Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*; and Gillett, ed., *On Barbarian Identity*, with Pohl, ‘Ethnicity, Theory and Tradition’. I will return to this debate, which is characterized by a surprisingly wholesale misrepresentation of my position, elsewhere. See also Pohl, ‘Rome and the Barbarians’.

⁴³ ‘The tendency to partition the social world into putatively deeply constituted, quasi natural, intrinsic kinds’: Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, p. 36, with reference to Hirschfeld, *Race in the Making*.

time, it is perceived as an expression of a natural order that is not within an individual's power to reverse. Only gender and family belong to the quasi natural 'deep structure' of society in a similar manner. Ethnicity uses a language of kinship and genealogy, which belongs to the realm of personal bonds, in order to denote a much more inclusive community.

It is also important to underline the element of agency, present in some definitions but often forgotten. As cited above, Moerman identified the Lue not only by 'believing and calling himself Lue', but also by 'acting in ways that validate Lueness'.⁴⁴ A strong statement on this subject appeared in Frederick Barth's influential essay, 'Ethnic Groups and Boundaries': an ethnic group does not automatically reproduce itself according to an 'itemized list' of distinctive categories, but the difference has to be reiterated by constant 'boundary maintenance'. It is not being Pashtu, but 'doing Pashtu' that constitutes Pathan identity.⁴⁵ This focus on agency is especially important for the study of past identities. Early medievalists may have no access to whether or not people believed themselves to be Goths and only limited evidence on who called themselves Goths; it is more promising to look at the ways in which people were perceived as Goths and how they validated their Gothiness.

1.2. Problems with Ethnicity

Why is the definition of ethnicity so problematic? First, we have to take the inescapable inadequacy of ethnic labelling into account. Ethnic groups are never as coherent as insiders and outsiders tend to believe. The social function of 'ethnicity' can be described (in terms of Niklas Luhmann) as a reduction of contingency.⁴⁶ To act successfully in a complex social system would be impossible without massive cognitive and pragmatic efforts to make the world more manageable. Thus, ethnicity reduces the complexity created by the fact that all persons are different, and may act differently and have multiple allegiances. Therefore, 'ethnic groups' necessarily constitute abstractions. 'Ethnic groups' are not reality itself, they are tools for understanding reality; only if they are sufficiently successful at making expectations and actions correspond do they become 'real' in the social world. This means that in a sense we need to reverse one of the most fundamental ways in which the social world has always been

⁴⁴ Moerman, 'Ethnic Identification in a Complex Civilization', p. 1219.

⁴⁵ Barth, 'Introduction'.

⁴⁶ See Luhmann, *Macht*.

understood in Western culture — according to this vision, a people or tribe acts together and shares common characteristics because it is related by an overarching kinship or common origin. In fact, such a simplification in how ethnic groups are conceptualized may have changed less from the ethnographic work of Herodotus to the present US census than we tend to believe.⁴⁷ It is difficult to disentangle ourselves from such a powerful matrix. Yet the cognitive tools of ethnicity are more culturally specific than we generally think.⁴⁸ The varied semantics of ethnic groups in different languages is just one example of how the range and conceptualization of phenomena that we would interpret as ethnic can change considerably.

Second, many ethnic groups do not think of themselves as ethnic groups, but regard only the others as ethnic: ‘The dichotomy of a non-ethnic “us” and ethnic “others” has continued to dog the concepts in the fields of ethnicity and nationalism.’⁴⁹ This applies, to a different extent, to peoples with ethnocentric names (such as Alamanni, ‘full men’),⁵⁰ to ancient Israel, to many classical Greeks and Romans, and to medieval Christians. But many nation-states of the present cultivate the same notion. The very notion of ethnicity in scholarship (as archaic, irrational, disruptive, defined by distant origins) is influenced by its juxtaposition to the modern nation (as modern, rational, integrative, defined by constitution).⁵¹ For the early Middle Ages, such a dichotomy is hardly applicable. That is in fact a methodological advantage, for it allows reconstructing ethnicity without nations. Premodern perceptions of the ‘ethnic other’ were of course often influenced by ethnocentric or colonial constructions. Still, the outside views of an ethnic landscape may also be more adequate than ethnocentric self-stylizations. Consequently, we should not be surprised to find more evidence on the ethnic perceptions of others than on ethnic self-identification.

⁴⁷ For the limitations of the figures on ethnic groups in the US census, see Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, eds, *Ethnic Los Angeles*, with the appendix at pp. 471–79.

⁴⁸ There certainly is a postcolonial dimension to the critique of ethnicity, which is rather commonplace in social anthropology. See, for instance, Amselle, *Logiche metisse*. This dimension has also been noticed in early medieval studies. See for instance, Geary, *The Myth of Nations*; Kulikowski, *Rome’s Gothic Wars*, p. 69.

⁴⁹ Hutchinson and Smith, *Ethnicity*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Haubrichs, ‘*Nomen gentis*’.

⁵¹ See, for instance, the essays collected in Romanucci-Ross and De Vos, eds, *Ethnic Identity*. There is, however, also a contrary tendency in recent scholarship to underline the ethnic character of nations. See, for instance, Connor, ‘Beyond Reason’, p. 71.

Third, most definitions of ethnicity raise the problem of which social groupings should be subsumed under 'ethnic' and how (and on the basis of which criteria) that could be decided. They often seem to work on the basis of a pre-scientific, shared understanding of what ethnicity is or is not, and only make some of the more obvious elements of that common semantic concept explicit. This problem is surprisingly little noted in the current literature. For instance, A. D. Smith devotes a whole chapter of his recent book on *The Cultural Foundations of Nations* to the problems surrounding the definition of the nation and national identity, and how these are linked to ethnic groups, without ever raising the problem of what the difference between an 'ethnie' and a nation actually is (his definitions of both are closely related).⁵² A successful definition of ethnicity should allow us to discern what it is not. In what follows, I will discuss several types of social distinctions that have many characteristics in common with ethnic groupings.

a) Kinship Groups

Are families, extended families, dynasties, lineages, clans, or small tribes 'ethnic groups'? If we focus our definition of ethnicity on common origin, we need a criterion of distinction between kinship groups and ethnic groups. Both kin groups and ethnic groups often represent their allegiance by genealogies, which in both cases may be fictive. The role of size comes to mind, but none of the current definitions of ethnicity list size, perhaps for good reason, since ethnic groups can vary dramatically in size and may even be constituted of one clan or extended family. Many defining features of ethnicity do not allow for the exclusion of clans and families; these defining features include: a collective name (although it is only attested for some early medieval families), a common myth of descent, a shared history, and an association with a specific territory. Families certainly belong to the social 'deep structure', and (with the exception of exogamous marriage) they are regarded as a matter of blood and not of choice. Families normally share language, customs, symbols, and other cultural traits, but most of these do not distinguish them from other families — with some exceptions, for instance the long hair of the Merovingian dynasty (which, however, was a sign of vertical and not of horizontal distinction).⁵³ It should

⁵² Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations*, pp. 12–27. 'Ethnie' is Smith's term for ethnic group.

⁵³ Diesenberger, 'Hair, Sacrality and Symbolic Capital'.

be noted that early medieval terminology does not always distinguish between families and peoples; the Merovingians or the Agilolfings, whom we would not regard as ethnic groups, are sometimes called *gens* in the sources. Kinship certainly belonged to the axis of inherited identities that were perceived of as natural and ranged from gender through family to ethnicity. That makes it hard to distinguish them. But kinship served as a conceptual metaphor for ethnicity, not as its principle of construction. In ethnic discourse, the language of kinship facilitated social integration and differentiation at a macro-social level. One important, if gradual, difference is that, unlike kinship groups, ethnic identities in complex societies normally served as a common denominator for socially differentiated groups, which were internally distinguished by prestige, status, and social function; this inclusive character was, in fact, often symbolically highlighted. However, not all ethnic groups completely realized this ideal — one partial exception will be discussed under point e).

b) Ethnographic Categories

Early medieval 'ethnic' groups also fade into zones of terminological ambiguity with regard to 'ethnographic' umbrella terms, as they were used by Greeks, Romans, and by others. Some of them obviously did not correspond to any stable, widespread self-identification such as *Germani*.⁵⁴ *Scythae* had once been used for a more specific people but then became a generic term for all steppe warriors, something that also happened later to the Huns. 'Slavs' had a similar wide-ranging meaning as *Germani* but seems to have corresponded to, or at least turned into, an actual self-description; it was complemented by the outside denomination 'Wends', which many languages adopted from the Germanic (this is similar to 'Welsh/Wallons/Vlachs' for Roman populations).⁵⁵ Some ethnic designations spread due to the success of the corresponding political unit and came to be used as rather generic terms, as with the Franks or Arabs. In most of these cases, categorization maintained the idea of a common origin and common culture, but there was no common self-identification that corresponded to this concept.

⁵⁴ Pohl, *Die Germanen*, p. 1: 'Ein Volk, das sich Germanen nannte, hat es vielleicht nie gegeben.'

⁵⁵ Curta, *The Making of the Slavs*; Pohl, *Die Völkerwanderung*, pp. 207–08.

c) Territorial and Regional Identities

In the early Middle Ages, the *patria* ('fatherland') often referred to an emphatic sense of identity, but it could also serve as a purely descriptive term.⁵⁶ It was often, but not always, regarded as directly related to a *gens*,⁵⁷ yet it was also acknowledged that its population could be heterogeneous. Likewise, in medieval history, a certain difference can be drawn between political realms based on territorial designations and those based on ethnonyms. In the long run, the ancient regions Italia and Hispania became the names of modern nations; France, Hungary, and Croatia were derived from ethnic designations, whereas England/Britain preserved a duality of ethnic and regional names. Upon closer inspection, however, the distinction becomes blurred. Some ethnonyms gradually turned into territorial designations, either in states that developed into modern nations (Francia, Anglia, Hungaria) or in regions that did not become nations, such as Burgundy (which applied to different regions between the sixth and fifteenth century) or Lombardy. On the other hand, territorial designations gradually came to be used for the respective population, as with, for instance, Provençals or Lotharingians, a name created for an episodic dynastic partition that eventually came to define the region. For instance, the Tuscans were counted among the *gentes* in some later manuscripts of the *Frankish Table of Nations*.⁵⁸ This shows that under specific circumstances, their regional identities could be ethnicized; they thus fell into the same category as Lombards, Burgundians, and Bavarians, whose ethnic identities had acquired a strongly territorial note, which in turn may have facilitated the inclusion of the Tuscans. A similar process can be observed with the inhabitants of Roman provinces, some of which had once been named using an ethnic label (Gallia, Germania, Britannia, Raetia, Thracia, several Italian provinces, etc.), and could become re-ethnicized to some extent in late Antiquity.⁵⁹ Francesco Borri shows in the companion volume that for a time in the early Middle Ages a sense of belonging to the Dalmatian *parentes et convicini* existed.⁶⁰ Obviously, the degree to which

⁵⁶ Eichenberger, *Patria*.

⁵⁷ See, for instance, the phrase *patria vel gens Gothorum* used in the *Leges Visigothorum*, ed. by Zeumer, II. 1. 8, pp. 53–54; and Wolfram, *Die Goten*, p. 23 with n. 76, p. 377.

⁵⁸ See Stoffella, 'Tuscans as *Gens*?'.

⁵⁹ See, for instance, Cassiodorus, *Variae*, ed. by Mommsen, III. 13, p. 86 (inhabitants of Samnium as 'Samnites').

⁶⁰ Borri, 'Arrivano i barbari a cavallo!'

territorial identities came close to ethnicity varied considerably, depending on whether an alternative ethnic identity in the same region was more salient, and on the degree of political autonomy and the stability of its boundaries. A territorially defined population did not necessarily share a distinctive language, culture, or a sense of common origin, but under stable circumstances often came to do so. In such an instance, the population of the *patria* could acquire the characteristics of an ethnic group. However, it is interesting to observe that, in medieval Europe, in most cases territorial identities beyond the range of small regions were rather weak bases for political power. The dissolution of the Roman Empire in the West is a case in point; none of the Roman provinces or regions directly became the base for a new kingdom. The failure of the Britons to maintain some kind of political unity is a good example.

d) Urban Identities

Again, we have the problem that a number of criteria for ethnicity might very well apply to an urban population: a collective name, an origin myth, a shared history, an association with a specific territory, a sense of solidarity, and possibly also a distinctive shared culture. Were the Athenians ‘a nation’?⁶¹ But most civic origin myths (including that of Rome) differ from ethnic origin myths in that they focus on the act of foundation, as opposed to the purportedly ‘natural’, genealogical origin of ethnic groups. There are, of course, exceptions. For instance, the comparison of Venetian origin myths with those of Dalmatian cities demonstrates that these ‘myths of destruction’ as the basis of new foundations are in many ways analogous to ethnic origin myths.⁶² As with regional affiliations, civic identities could acquire an ethnic flavour. In late antique usage, for instance, cities could be ethnicized, and sometimes even linked to pre-Roman *gentes* in the region; for instance, educated inhabitants of the *civitas Arvernorum* (Clermont) in Gaul, such as Sidonius Apollinaris, styled themselves as *Arverni*, a name going back to pre-Roman times.⁶³

⁶¹ See Cohen, *The Athenian Nation*, esp. pp. 22–30. Fraser, *Greek Ethnic Terminology*, p. 5, insists that *ethnos* was not used for civic self-identification in Athens. Cf. also Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*.

⁶² Borri, ‘Arrivano i barbari a cavallo!’.

⁶³ For instance, see Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistolae*, ed. and trans. by Anderson, IV. 21. 2, II, p. 140: ‘Haedus pater tibi, mater Avena est’.

e) Armies, Army Units, and War-Bands

In English-language research about late Antiquity, barbarian armies are often seen as the cradle of barbarian identities; Michael Wallace-Hadrill wrote: 'War-bands are tribes in the making'.⁶⁴ Some affinity between military and ethnic identities is indeed attested in many cultures. In the Roman army, many units had ethnic names, even centuries after the mostly barbarian *gentes* under that name had otherwise disappeared; this use of ethnonyms may have contributed to the success of ethnic identifications when imperial Romanness finally lost its grip. Most empires systematically employed troops of foreign origin, such as the many federate groups serving in the Byzantine army, the Turks in the Caliphate, the Ottoman Janissaries, or the Russian Cossacks. Undoubtedly, ethnic solidarities contributed to the success of these armies, even though the armies were, at the same time, considered to be of lower status by the ruling elite of these empires. Normally, however, the common origins of such groups (where they existed) referred to ethnic units that had existed prior to these military formations. Others rarely developed into self-perpetuating ethnic groups.⁶⁵ In the Eurasian steppes, migrating war-bands were known by ethnic names, although these names often seem to have been outside ascriptions drawn from a conventional repertoire of ethnonyms. In this case, as with the migration-period barbarians in Europe, prolonged military expeditions and migrations that excluded women (the subject of chauvinist stylization towards the middle of the twentieth century) seem to have been the exception and not the rule. For instance, the one detailed source that describes the migrations of Theoderic's army in the Balkans goes to some lengths in describing the efforts necessary to coordinate the movements of the fighting troops with the wagon train carrying women, children, and dependants.⁶⁶ The success of these barbarian armies considerably enhanced their status, and some of the ethnically-defined elites could collectively pride themselves on their privileged standing (for instance, the *libertas Gothorum* in the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy).⁶⁷ Others were regarded as having collectively sunk into servitude after a crushing defeat (for instance,

⁶⁴ Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship*, p. 11. Liebeschuetz, 'Alaric's Goths: Nation or Army?', p. 83, puts it in more flowery terms: 'Patriotic community-building forces radiated from Germanic war-bands and emerging Germanic kingdoms'. Cf. Kulikowski, 'Nation vs. Army', esp. pp. 82–83.

⁶⁵ For the example of the Janissaries, see Imber, *The Ottoman Empire*, pp. 138–42.

⁶⁶ Malchus, *Fragmenta*, ed. and trans. by Blockley, II, 434–51.

⁶⁷ Wolfram, *Die Goten*, pp. 300–01; Wolfram, *Gotische Studien*, p. 235.

the Gepids under the Avar yoke).⁶⁸ Still, these cases were regarded, at best, as particular stages in the history of more balanced ethnic communities. Thus, it was not the war-band that ‘made’ an ethnic group. Rather, military and ethnic fortunes and solidarities overlapped for a certain period.

f) Nations

Is there a fundamental or only a gradual difference between ethnic groups and modern nations? One of the most important research areas in which the modern theory of ethnicity has been developed is the contemporary USA — a nation composed of a mosaic of ethnic groups.⁶⁹ From a modern ‘Western’ perspective, the nation is a community of citizens, regardless of their ‘ethnic’ origin. The children of Algerian or Vietnamese immigrants born in France have been automatically accepted as French citizens. But just across the Rhine, Germany regarded Romanians or Russians of distant German extraction, even if they did not speak any German, as Germans, while the children of Turks born and raised in Berlin were not considered German. This distinction between the ‘people by origin’, *gens*, and the ‘people by constitution’, *populus*, goes back to the Greeks and Romans, and it provides an important tool in our research on ancient and early medieval ethnicity.⁷⁰ Thus, the nation defined by citizenship is often seen as a different, non-ethnic category.⁷¹

However, this idea runs into problems, since most nations have ethnic origins.⁷² Different concepts of nationhood coexist even today; thus, when a Spanish court ruled in 2010 that the constitution knew no other nation than the Spanish on its territory, a million Catalans protested with shouts of ‘we are a nation’.⁷³ From late Antiquity onwards, the ancient terminological distinction between *polis* or *populus* and *gens/ethnos* became more and more fluid, not least due to Christian influence. We may still distinguish between the *populus Christianus* and the *gens Francorum* in the Carolingian period, but, in practice,

⁶⁸ Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, ed. by Waitz, I. 27, p. 69.

⁶⁹ Glazer and Moynihan, eds, *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*; Romanucci-Ross and De Vos, eds, *Ethnic Identity*.

⁷⁰ Geary, *The Myth of Nations*, pp. 49–52.

⁷¹ For a clear distinction between nation and ethnicity see, for instance, Wehler, *Nationalismus*, pp. 36–40.

⁷² Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*.

⁷³ *Kurier*, 12 July 2010, p. 5.

the two concepts were increasingly conflated.⁷⁴ Thus, ethnic groups are somehow at the origin of many modern nations, and it seems futile to ask when exactly the 'ethnic' Franks, Danes, Hungarians, or Poles became nations. Their 'national' histories are broken and full of paradox, but the very names are ethnic. Medievalists have often sought the beginnings of the modern nation in the post-Carolingian period, when France, England, and, in a very indirect form, Germany began to develop.⁷⁵ But that relies too much on the master narratives of particular national histories, many of which seek national origins in that period; the question of what is distinctive about the 'nation' should be addressed more systematically. Both the post-Carolingian kingdoms and the new Christian realms in northern and eastern Europe differed much less from the post-Roman ethnic states than from modern nations. A view with more impact is that of the modernists, who variously seek the origins of 'the nation' (which they equate with the modern nation) in the sixteenth (Hastings),⁷⁶ eighteenth (Anderson),⁷⁷ nineteenth (Gellner, Hobsbawm),⁷⁸ or at the beginning of the twentieth century (Walker Connor).⁷⁹ A. D. Smith has been the most outspoken critic of the 'modernist' school of the study of the nation and has rightly underlined that the premodern 'ethnic' history of European nations has to be taken into account, for they did not appear out of the blue in the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries.⁸⁰ Not by coincidence was this a period when modern nationalism emphatically sought identification with medieval ethnic namesakes and predecessors.⁸¹ The term 'nation/al' is not used here for early medieval states and *gentes*, but that does not represent a 'modernist' approach. This article seeks to identify conceptual resources for the modern nation in the early Middle Ages. The ethnic element in many nations and the national potential in many ethnic groups cannot be properly grasped through a rigid distinction between 'ethnic' and 'national' identities.

⁷⁴ De Jong, 'Ecclesia and the Early Medieval Polity'.

⁷⁵ See, for instance, Bues and Rexheuser, eds, *Mittelalterliche nationes*.

⁷⁶ Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood*.

⁷⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

⁷⁸ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*; Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*.

⁷⁹ Connor, 'When is a Nation?'

⁸⁰ Smith, *The Nation in History*; Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations*.

⁸¹ Geary, *The Myth of Nations*, pp. 15–40; Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe*.

g) Religious Identities

In Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, the only type of group beside the *gentes* for which he gives a long list of proper names are the heretics in Book VIII, *De ecclesia et sectis*. Some of these heresies are named after their founder (*Ariani, Manichei, Pelagiani*), and some after the main element of their dissent (*Anthropomorphitae, Gnostici*).⁸² This is a clear sign of how religious identities had become dissociated from ethnic, civic, and regional identities in the late Roman period; only in rare cases does Isidore hint as to the location of these sects.⁸³ In many earlier societies, religion had been much more closely linked to cities, peoples, or states. Classical religion had still accommodated endless regional variants of what was considered to be essentially a common pantheon.⁸⁴ But the Helleno-Roman *koiné* eased the spread of transversal religions, with many of them (such as the cults of Isis, Mithras and, most successfully, Jesus Christ) outgrowing their initial ethnic or regional limitations. In modern scholarship, much has been made of the fundamental shift from particular to universal religion, and of the axial age (*Achsenzeit*) that witnessed it.⁸⁵ But such grandiose constructions tell us relatively little about the ways in which religious identities changed in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. The Christian *populus* was not simply the expression of a new universalist vision juxtaposed to the old ethnic communities. The universalist tone in many Christian writings was mixed with a distinct Old Testament flavour that encouraged the formation of particular Christian communities and allowed for them to be distinguished from each other.⁸⁶ In fact, the early Christians repeatedly styled themselves as a *gens*.⁸⁷ The Jews were a highly visible example of how religious and ethnic identities could be intertwined and were rather inconsistently regarded by Christians as a *gens*, a (heretical) sect, or a religious group.⁸⁸ To be sure, a

⁸² Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. by Lindsay, VIII. 5.

⁸³ For instance, see Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. by Lindsay, VIII. 5. 27: 'Cataphrygiis nomen provincia Phrygia dedit, quia ibi extiterunt'.

⁸⁴ Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion*; Ando, *The Matter of the Gods*.

⁸⁵ Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*; Eisenstadt, *Kulturen der Achsenzeit*.

⁸⁶ Lieu, *Christian Identity*; Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*; Pohl, 'Disputed Identification'. See also the contribution by Gerda Heydemann in this volume.

⁸⁷ Buell, *Why This New Race?*.

⁸⁸ Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*; Chazan, *Fashioning Jewish Identity*; Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*.

fundamental difference between religious and ethnic identities was that one became Christian by an act of conversion. But as this had happened by God's will, both religious and ethnic communities could soon adduce the same biblical passages to style themselves as God's 'chosen people, [...] holy nation, a people of His own' (1 Pt 2. 9–10).

h) Political Identities

In contemporary thought, a nation without a state is regarded as somewhat anomalous,⁸⁹ whereas ethnic groups are normally seen as constituting a minority in a state or even as being in opposition to it. This concept is relatively inadequate for the early Middle Ages. There is a wide range of possible relationships between ethnic groups and political organization, from an ethnically-denominated state that could, not unreasonably, be called a 'nation',⁹⁰ to kingdoms governed by small ethnic elites, to multi-ethnic states whose name might even fluctuate in the sources. In some cases, such as with the Avar khaganate in central Europe, the identity of the ruling elite seems to have been closely connected to the state and quickly faded outside of it.⁹¹ Political identities could be imperial (Rome), territorial (the kingdom of Italy), ecclesiastical (the state of the bishops of Chur), civic (Venice), or later, feudal, and in many cases they could also be a mixture of the aforementioned. It is not easy to define what the characteristics and content of political identities may have been beyond what these types of community implied. But it should be borne in mind that political formations in many cases established their own logic supplementing the recurrent reference to ethnic identity. The Roman model supplied a wide range of precedents for forms of political loyalty and representation. If, for instance, Charlemagne required a solemn oath from his subjects, this was primarily a claim for political allegiance following Roman models, and not for ethnic solidarity.⁹² Generally, in any case, political identity could only have an impact in conjunction with other forms of identity that supplied further, symbolic points of reference, whether these were ethnic, religious, or territorial.

⁸⁹ For a critique of this view, see Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations*, pp. 25–27.

⁹⁰ Teillet, *Des Goths à la nation gothique*. I would not follow her terminology, although her argument about the Visigothic kingdom is generally feasible.

⁹¹ Pohl, *Die Awaren*.

⁹² See Esders, 'Sacramentum fidelitatis'; Esders, 'Rechtliche Grundlagen frühmittelalterlicher Staatlichkeit'; and Becher, *Eid und Herrschaft*.

i) The Example of Romanness

Roman identity is an interesting test case.⁹³ The Romans were the quintessential *populus*, although they were occasionally also defined as a *gens* — famously, for instance, in Virgil: ‘*tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem*’.⁹⁴ But Romanness started out as an urban identity that eventually became imperial. Livy and other foundational texts underlined the mixed origins of the founders of the city of Rome, who became a *populus* by the imposition of a common law, regardless of their ethnic origins.⁹⁵ Cicero claimed that the Roman republic required men to show greater affection and willingness to sacrifice their lives for the republic than for their hometown.⁹⁶ Although arguing from the perspective of city-states, the text is interesting for its juxtaposition of identity by birth and identity by enfranchisement, the latter of which should be the one for which men would be prepared to die. As a result of its very success, and its integration of increasing numbers of citizens of provincial origin in the imperial age, Romanness, however, remained an ‘*identà incompiuta*’, an unfinished identity, as Andrea Giardina has put it.⁹⁷ The *Constitutio Antoniniana* in the third century AD underlined the legal and civic character of Roman identity.⁹⁸

In late Antiquity, Roman identity began to fluctuate strongly between civic, cultural, territorial, political, and ethnic overtones.⁹⁹ Imperial, ‘central’ Romanness lost ground to the provincial forms of *romanitas*.¹⁰⁰ After the end

⁹³ See the contribution by Clemens Gantner in this volume, and Maskarinec, ‘Who Were the Romans?’, Von Rummel, ‘The Fading Power of Images’, Barbiera, ‘Remembering the Warriors’, in the companion volume, *Post-Roman Transitions*.

⁹⁴ Virgil, *Aeneis*, I. 30.

⁹⁵ Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, I. 8: ‘*Rebus divinis rite perpetratis vocataque ad concilium multitudine quae coalescere in populi unius corpus nulla re praeterquam legibus poterat, iura dedit*’. IV. 3. 13: ‘*Dum nullum fastiditur genus, in quo eniteret virtus, crevit imperium Romanum*’.

⁹⁶ ‘I do indeed think that all municipal men have two homelands, one by nature and the other by citizenship. [...] But it is necessary for the latter to stand first in our affection, to which the name “Republic” has attached itself to us all. For this we must die, for this we must give ourselves entirely, and for this we must give all our possessions as though for sacrifice’. Cicero, *De legibus*, II. 5, trans. by Farney, *Ethnic Identity and Aristocratic Competition in Republican Rome*, pp. 6–7. See Maskarinec, ‘Who Were the Romans?’.

⁹⁷ Giardina, *L’Italia romana*; Edwards and Woolf, eds, *Rome the Cosmopolis*; Dench, *Romulus’ Asylum*.

⁹⁸ Wolff, *Die Constitutio Antoniniana*.

⁹⁹ See Mitchell and Greatrex, eds, *Ethnicity and Culture*, especially the contribution by Greatrex, ‘Roman Identity in the Sixth Century’.

¹⁰⁰ Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, pp. 432–43.

of the Western Empire, the Greek speakers in the Byzantine Empire continued to call themselves Romans (*Rhomaioi*).¹⁰¹ ‘Romans’ could also mean the Latin speakers of the West, the inhabitants of regional ‘Roman’ units in the post-imperial world,¹⁰² the citizens of Rome, and the followers of the Roman church;¹⁰³ they were mostly regarded as a *gens* among others (for instance, by Isidore).¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, Roman history continued to exert a strong influence on medieval politics, and the Empire served as a model not only for the recreated ‘Roman Empire’ but also for other states such as the Frankish/French kingdom. The idea that Romanness could be achieved by free choice, by education, or by conversion, and that it depended on political and cultural features, survived in many environments. Similar problems of identification applied to the early medieval Greeks. ‘Hellenes’ had been the ancient self-designation, but, in Christian eyes, it came to denote the pagans of the past, whereas ‘Greek’ essentially remained an outside designation.¹⁰⁵ Their self-identification as Romans did not facilitate distinction; still, terminological differentiations (such as *Romanoi* for the Romans of Dalmatia, as opposed to the Greek-speaking *Rhomaioi*) did not gain wide currency.¹⁰⁶

1.3. Definitions of Ethnicity — Some Conclusions

Obviously, most elements regularly found in modern definitions of ethnicity also apply to many of the social groups enumerated above. This specifically regards common symbols, culture, customs, and territory, and, of course, a

¹⁰¹ Koder, ‘Byzanz, die Griechen und die Romaioi’; Olster, ‘From Periphery to Center’.

¹⁰² See, for instance, the way in which Charlemagne’s Roman patriciate was understood in a St Gall charter to refer to Alamans and Romans in Raetia: ‘Car(o)lo rege Franchorum ac patricio Romanorum et Alamannorum’. *Urkundenbuch der Abtei St Gallen*, ed. by Wartmann, p. 161; Wolfram, ‘Political Theory and Narrative in Charters’, p. 48.

¹⁰³ For instance, see Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria martyrum*, ed. by Krusch, c. 24, p. 502: ‘Romanos enim vocitant nostrae homines relegionis’; English translation: Gregory of Tours, *Glory of the Martyrs*, trans. by Van Dam, p. 23: ‘By Romans they [i.e. Arian Goths] refer to men who accept our [Catholic Nicene] Christianity’.

¹⁰⁴ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. by Lindsay, ix. 2. 84.

¹⁰⁵ See Zacharia, ed., *Hellenisms: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity*, especially the contribution by Rapp, ‘Hellenic Identity, Romanitas and Christianity’. Cf. also Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius’ Praeparatio Evangelica*, p. vii, who argues that the Greeks of the Classical Age shared ‘a pervasive sense that they possessed a highly distinctive identity’.

¹⁰⁶ See Borri, ‘Arrivano i barbari a cavallo!’.

common history and sense of solidarity (which, however, we should not over-emphasize in any social group, especially when it outgrows face-to-face dimensions). Most of the groups discussed here (with the exception of kinship and military groups) are also socially inclusive. What is more marked in ethnic groups, although not unproblematic, is the belief in a common origin and a generalized sense of kinship. To put it in a more abstract way, most identities discussed above have a decisive point of reference outside the group: the city, the land, the state, the army, a religious creed. Symbolic strategies of identification attach themselves to these figures that represent the common denominator, the defining feature of the community. In ethnicity, by contrast, the principle of distinction and the symbolic essence of the community are thought to lie in the human group itself. Its symbolism builds on kinship, blood, origin, and fate. Distinctive features are perceived as expressions of an innermost self, an ingrained common nature.¹⁰⁷ Ethnicity belongs to the 'primordial codes' of collective identity.¹⁰⁸ The mystique is in the people themselves, not in any foundational object. Therefore, ethnic bonds are generally regarded as resistant to the loss of a homeland or political organization or to the change of language, religion, culture, or even ethnonym. Ethnicity is a very powerful mode of community construction but also a precarious one, because the evanescent mystique of the ethnic community has to be made evident in everyday life. It seldom survives in its pure form; rather, it has to attach itself to other, more tangible forms of community — a common homeland, state, or religion.

In reality, therefore, ethnic distinctions overlap with other macro-social mappings. This is what generally distinguishes ethnic groups from nations, where land and state are conceived of as integral parts of the national body.¹⁰⁹ Ethnicity can also serve as a conceptual metaphor by which to underline the deep-rooted character of a religious, civic, or political community — a use that is not always easy to distinguish from straightforward ethnic language when

¹⁰⁷ This corresponds to some degree to a criterion also used for the definition of the nation, as summed up by Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe*, p. 15, 'that the "nation" is the most natural, organic collective aggregate of humans'. Of course — and it needs to be stressed again in order to avoid the misunderstanding that I am advocating any return to ethnic essentialism — this is what people thought, at least in the period under study here, and is not a biological reality.

¹⁰⁸ Giesen, 'Codes kollektiver Identität', p. 18.

¹⁰⁹ Hence, the second element in the definition by Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe*, p. 15, 'that, as such, the nation's claim to loyalty overrides all other allegiances', is not consistently applicable to ethnic groups.

working with texts from a distant past. Our concept of ethnicity, therefore, requires no sharp distinctions between ethnic and other social groups, but should allow us to assess degrees and salience of ethnicity in a given social landscape. A key element here is the agency assumed by and attributed to a group — is it the people that acts or a state and its representatives?

* * *

The following methodological conclusions follow from this discussion:

1. Since ethnic and other social identities were not clearly separated typologically, they have to be studied together.
2. Ethnicity should not be understood as the inherent quality of an 'ethnic' group but as an organizing principle of society that shaped the social world and its perception.
3. 'Ethnic' is a relational term that defines a number of social groups against one another and tends to constitute an entire landscape of ethnic groups.
4. In different historical circumstances, ethnicity can become more or less important and 'salient' for the integration and delimitation of social groups.
5. This can happen at different levels of power, either with small autonomous groups, with ethnic minorities within larger states, with ethnic elites ruling larger units, or with larger ethnic groups organized into states.
6. What a definition of 'ethnicity' therefore has to offer is not so much a set of criteria by which to distinguish between those social groups that were 'ethnic' and those that were not, but indices to assess the salience of ethnic identifications in a given society.
7. Ethnic identifications depend on communication between the individual, the in-group, and the out-group in order to become salient; this communication relies on certain codes, which are furnished by a 'discourse of ethnicity'.

The first level on which the role of ethnicity can be studied is, therefore, the discourse: what was being written about ethnic groups and identities in a certain social context, both in a general sense and in specific cases? What was the structure ('grammar') of this discourse, and what were the repertoires from which models and narratives of ethnic identity could draw? The second level is the impact of ethnic organization, which can be measured by the political and cultural strategies of identification and distinction, by their success, and by the degree to which observers ascribed agency to ethnic groups. The third level is

the role of ethnic identification for individuals and small groups; in the early Middle Ages, this can only be studied in relatively rare cases.

* * *

For the research agenda proposed here, this means that the principal research question is not to class social groups according to a set of sophisticated modern categories. Rather, the question is what options for identification the societies of the period could offer, how these options changed, and how they contributed to shaping social groups that we can observe in the historical record. This will mainly be studied on two levels in this volume. The first level seeks to discover what ‘visions of community’ and discourses of identity were written down in a certain context, how these related to other discourses, and how they were shaped by specific circumstances. The second level asks what political impact ethnic organization or other highly-aggregated identities had, and where and when they had this impact. And how did this reflect back on discourse?

Part 2: Elements of Ethnicity

2.1. The Discourse of Ethnicity

Isidore of Seville discusses the *gentes* in Book IX of his *Etymologies*. It begins with a section *De linguis gentium*, in which Isidore raises the problem of the relationship between languages and peoples.¹¹⁰ He then proceeds to list a great number of ethnonyms in IX. 2, *De gentium vocabulis*. The chapter begins with an interesting definition: ‘Gens est multitudo ab uno principio orta, sive ab alia natione secundum propriam collectionem distincta’ (IX. 2. 1). Common origin is only one option for the definition of *gens*, while the other option is differential, elegantly combining the element of distinction (‘distinguished [...] from another nation’) with that of integration (‘in accordance with its own grouping’).¹¹¹ Next, Isidore moves on to expound the biblical genealogy of

¹¹⁰ Pohl and Zeller, eds, *Sprache und Identität/Language and Identity*.

¹¹¹ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. by Lindsay, IX. 2. English translation: Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, trans. by Barney and others, p. 192. The French translation, Isidore of Seville, *Étymologies, livre IX*, trans. by Reydellet, pp. 40–42, has ‘regroupement particulier’. See also Pohl, ‘Telling the Difference’; Goetz, ‘Gens: Terminology and Perception’, pp. 44–45; and Adams, ‘The Political Grammar of Isidore of Seville’.

the sons of Noah, which frames his long list of ethnonyms. According to his method, he attempts to explain the inherent characteristics of each people by the etymology of the name. At the end, he discusses two doubtful cases, the Antipodes and the Titans, and argues that they do not exist: ‘Sed neque hoc ulla storiæ cognitione firmatur, sed hoc poetæ quasi ratiocinando coniectant’.¹¹² Historical knowledge is the criterion for the existence of a people; poetry and fables do not suffice. However, had they really existed, they would have been included in Isidore’s rather broad conception of ethnicity.

Isidore’s text is one of the relatively rare early medieval examples of a systematic attempt to define and describe ‘ethnicity’ as a structuring principle of the social world. It is interesting to compare this theoretical framework to Isidore’s work as a historian.¹¹³ A comparable case of a historian, political figure, and conceptual thinker is Cassiodorus; his *Commentary on the Psalms* contains notable and little-known attempts to define key categories of ethnicity, and it is analysed in the contribution by Gerda Heydemann in this volume. Augustine’s views on community, which were to become fundamental for many medieval thinkers, are discussed in Richard Corradini’s contribution. There are a few more examples of an explicit reflection on the discourse of ethnicity from the period. Otherwise, we have to analyse what is being said about specific ethnic groups and identities and about related ‘visions of community’ in the texts. So far, discussions about early medieval ‘texts of identity’ have focused on a few key texts; there were ferocious debates about Jordanes’ *Getica* and the significance of his Gothic *origo*,¹¹⁴ or lively discussions about Frankish and Anglo-Saxon historiography. This volume, and its companion volume, *Post-Roman Transitions*, attempt to extend the range of analysis to other works of historiography (Maya Maskarinec, John Clay, Jamie Wood) and several other genres of text, among them, biblical exegesis (Richard Corradini, Gerda Heydemann), hagiography (Max Diesenberger, Albrecht Diem, Alexander O’Hara), sermons (Marianne Pollheimer), letters (Clemens Gantner), and epigraphy (Flavia de Rubeis).¹¹⁵ Many of these examples do not reflect directly on the significance of ethnicity. But they allow us to place it in the context of a broader discourse on forms of identity and community.

¹¹² Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. by Lindsay, IX. 2. 133.

¹¹³ See Wood, ‘*Religiones and Gentes*’.

¹¹⁴ See, most recently, Gillett, ‘The Mirror of Jordanes’.

¹¹⁵ For a broad range of concerns, see also Corradini and others, eds, *Texts and Identities*.

These early medieval texts can each be read by themselves, but they can also be seen as constituting a body of social knowledge, a 'discourse' in a wider sense. The individual texts can thus be understood as representing an overarching structure, an 'order of discourse'. Michel Foucault's discourse theory is still a very adequate instrument to understand the rules that govern such a system or 'discursive formation'.¹¹⁶ 'Every society has its own order of truth: not "the ensemble of things that are true", but "the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true"'.¹¹⁷ A complex and, to a large extent, implicit set of rules governs the way in which members of a given society can decide, not only what is true or false, but also what is possible or impossible, what exists and what is an illusion, what can be said and what cannot, what is desirable and what should be disapproved. In some societies (unlike in ours), for instance, it is possible to say that the deity has been favourable because of the correct sacrifice of animals; in others, that someone has acted according to a pact with the devil; in others yet, that he has been reborn as a reptile. Meaningful communication is only possible on the basis of such a preselection of what can be said and in what way.

Foucault has underlined the role of power in the shaping of discourse. The powerful always exert some control over what can, and what may, be said. This 'order of discourse' is rarely established by decree, but by repetition that finally makes certain arguments, narrative models, or norms self-evident. Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages certainly were a period in which Christian dogmatic controversies prompted massive attempts to establish a rigorous control of certain forms of discourse. The explicit goal in most premodern societies hardly was to exert social control in an instrumentalist sense but to fight for the truth. Christian discourse attached particular social consequences to a precise agreement on correct doctrine. But generally, discourse in itself represents a form of power. Foucault, departing from structuralist paradigms, assumed that discourse formations remained relatively unchanged for a long time and then were transformed quite rapidly and radically. As historians, we may opt for more gradual changes in many cases. Still, Foucault's insistence on the intrinsic relationship between the exercise of power and the control of discourse is fundamental. Methodologically, this means that for an analysis of the contemporary significance of any particular social phenomenon, we need to take into account three levels, which Foucault has discussed with reference to

¹¹⁶ Foucault, *L'Ordre du discours*.

¹¹⁷ Foucault, 'Truth and Power', p. 132.

ancient sexuality: first, the ‘formation of knowledge linked with it’; second, ‘the systems of power that govern its enactment’; and third, ‘the forms in which individuals recognize themselves as subjects of it’.¹¹⁸ This approach can also be used as an (admittedly rough) roadmap to explore the ‘discourse of ethnicity’ and its possible impact, and it corresponds to some degree with the research agenda disclosed above.

It is debatable whether personal identifications — with one’s own body, family, or certain habits — always need the filter of language. But on the macro-social level, there is certainly no ethnic or religious identification without the massive production of meaning by discourse. ‘I am a Frank’ is not a spontaneous discovery but a knowledge-based realization that requires a relatively complex series of cognitive and social operations. It presupposes knowing who the Franks were and are, who is and who is not a Frank, how Franks should behave, and what a *gens* (or perhaps, *theod*) is in general. This explains why the simple question ‘who were the Franks?’ is so difficult to answer.¹¹⁹ For most early medieval persons, the forms and limits of their social identifications are difficult to assess. But we have first-hand knowledge of a rather wide range of (known or anonymous) authors. Their texts can be analysed on a number of levels, from the use of the personal pronouns (who are ‘we’?) to traces of conflicts of identity. Surprisingly little has been done in this field so far. A collaborative volume from the Wittgenstein project, *Ego Trouble: Early Medieval Authors and Their Identities*, has produced very interesting results.¹²⁰ In early medieval texts, we are far from a supposed archaic, unreflective identification by individuals with powerful social groups that could rely on total conformism. The individuality of these authors is not, of course, displayed in the rhetoric of modern self-reflection that research has taken as the defining feature of the ‘modern individual’. But it can be found in the tensions and paradoxes between conflicting social roles and identifications and in the overlapping of different (Christian and classical, religious and lay, ascetic and poetic, philosophical or pragmatic) discourses. Contrary to modern prejudice, early medieval authors could explore a relatively wide range of controversial identifications and attitudes. But they expressed these attitudes and opinions according to the rules of discourse of the period.

¹¹⁸ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 2.

¹¹⁹ See Wood, ‘Defining the Franks’; Reimitz, ‘*Omnes Franci*’; and the contribution by Helmut Reimitz in this volume.

¹²⁰ Corradini and others, eds, *Ego Trouble*; Pohl, ‘Introduction: Ego Trouble?’.

The rules of discourse establish what we could call a ‘grammar’ according to which a society communicates about, for instance, social groups.¹²¹ This ‘grammar’ affects the ways in which meaningful statements can be made and understood, the ways in which an order of knowledge is established, and also the ways in which controversial issues can be debated. This works on several levels. One level is the semantic field — in our case, of the terms of identity and community and their meanings. The semantic field could change considerably, as becomes obvious from differences between early medieval and modern terminology. Again, we can take Isidore as an example. Among his *vocabula gentium*, for example, he lists the Athenians, the inhabitants of Rhodes and Thessaly, and the Romans (IX. 2). In his chapter about monsters (*De portentis*), he first enumerates mixed creatures (*commixtiones*), such as the Hermaphrodites or the Minotaur. Then he proceeds to say: ‘Just as in single *gentes*, some of the humans are monsters, so in the whole human race, some of the *gentes* are monsters, such as the Gigantes, Cynocephali, Cyclopes, and others’.¹²² From a modern scholarly perspective, can inhabitants of cities, islands, or regions be counted alongside monsters as ethnic groups? Perhaps not. But we should not simply disregard what our sources say. The semantic field of *gens* in Antiquity and the early Middle Ages was much broader than modern concepts of ethnicity.

In fact, it has often been noted that the ethnic terminology in the sources is rather ambiguous. The Latin terms *gens*, *natio*, *populus*, *genus*, etc. overlap and only partly seem to differentiate along lines comprehensible to us.¹²³ Of course, that comes as no surprise because few modern languages have a clearer terminology of ethnicity. The use of early medieval ethnonyms, where it can be studied in detail (as with the Franks), does not always differentiate between a more and a less inclusive understanding; ethnonyms may variously refer only to the elite, the army, or the free population, or they may refer to all the subjects of the kingdom. They may include or exclude women, which is not always easy to tell — we find men defined as *Francus* or *Langobardus*, but hardly ever

¹²¹ For an extensive discussion of the use of the ‘overcharged’ term ‘grammar’ for ‘social processes of classifying identity/alterity’, although in a slightly different sense than it is used here, see the introduction by the editors Baumann and Gingrich, eds, *Grammars of Identity/Alterity*, pp. ix–x. They distinguish between three grammars, ‘negative mirror imaging’ (‘orientalization’), ‘segmentation’, and ‘encompassment’.

¹²² Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. by Lindsay, XI. 3. 12: ‘Sicut autem in singulis gentibus quaedam monstra sunt hominum, ita in universo genere humano quaedam monstra sunt gentium, ut Gigantes, Cynocephali, Cyclopes, et cetera’.

¹²³ Zientara, ‘*Populus — Gens — Natio*’.

the female form. Classical Greek usage of *ethnos*, *genos*, etc. has also been characterized as inconsistent.¹²⁴ However, these terms have a logic ‘derived from contrast with their cognitive complements’, in which *ethnos* often figures as the opposite of *polis*.¹²⁵ Such contrasting uses can also be detected in early medieval Latin, in, for instance, the difference between *populus* and *gens*.¹²⁶ In many cases where semantic contrast is not used in a significant manner, that may have been deliberate in order to show, for example, that the *gens* and the people of God were converging. This demonstrates that a purely semantic study does not suffice to clarify early medieval concepts of ethnicity. We have to look at ethnic discourse in a broader sense — that is, the knowledge about ethnic groups and what could be said about them.

Discourse consisted of a set of rules that we can call a ‘grammar of identity’, and it allowed people to construct meaningful statements. This ‘grammar’ also roughly structured narratives about ethnic groups, narratives such as the *origines gentium*. The ethnic groups in these narratives could be expected to have a (divine or human, and often eponymous) ancestor (sometimes also two), and to have adopted a new name, left their homeland, raised a king, won a decisive battle, crossed a river or a sea, and conquered their new homeland.¹²⁷ Even where Gregory of Tours obviously subverts a coherent account of the Frankish *origo gentis* in his *Histories*, his discussion sticks to this narrative structure (see the contribution by Helmut Reimitz, in this volume). The analysis of such narratives moves us from the level of a ‘grammar’ of ethnicity to another key element of discourse, its repertoires.

2.2. Repertoires of Identification: The Case of the Old Testament

Whereas what I have tentatively called a ‘grammar’ established the limits of what might be said, or understood, ‘repertoires’ can give us clues about the ideas that writings about *gentes* (in general or in particular) typically conjured up in peoples’ minds. Early medieval discourse of ethnicity relied on two rich bodies of knowledge: ancient mythological, historiographic, and ethnographic

¹²⁴ Jones, ‘*Ethnos* and *genos*’, p. 315.

¹²⁵ Cohen, *The Athenian Nation*, p. 25.

¹²⁶ Geary, *The Myth of Nations*, pp. 41–62; Adams, *The ‘Populus’ of Augustine and Jerome*; Werner, ‘Volk, Nation, Nationalismus, Masse’; Colpe, ‘Ausbildung des Heidenbegriffs’, with references to other biblical languages.

¹²⁷ Wolfram and others, ‘*Origo gentis*’; Pohl, ‘Memory, Identity and Power in Lombard Italy’; Coumert, *Origines des peuples*.

literature, as well as the Bible.¹²⁸ In some cases, this could be complemented by ‘pre-ethnographic data’ (as Herwig Wolfram has termed it) from non-classical oral sources.¹²⁹ These repertoires could provide *exempla* (things to be imitated) from the past, which had been a main function of Roman historiography, and they could also provide *typoi*, in which past events prefigured things to come.¹³⁰ Although the influence of these ‘repertoires’ is acknowledged, they are generally underrated. In particular, the role of the Old Testament for early medieval constructions of identity has been rather under-researched.¹³¹

The Old Testament worked on several levels. On the general discursive level, it provided some key metaphors on the meaning of ethnicity. The two most important of these myths were the Tower of Babel, which explained the origin of languages, and Noah’s Ark, which allowed people to link the genealogy of all peoples to the sons of Noah.¹³² Interestingly, languages and peoples are traced back to separate mythical origins, which puzzled scholars and inspired a huge body of medieval literature. Isidore dealt with the question of whether the *gentes* are derived from languages, or vice versa;¹³³ he maintained that, at the beginning, there had been as many *gentes* as languages, but then, as the peoples split, more and more of them ended up speaking the same language — Isidore was surely thinking of Greek and Latin, and not of the Germanic languages, because he believed that different Germanic peoples were distinguished, among other factors, by difference of language.¹³⁴ The limited number of nations derived in the Old Testament from the sons of Noah (for which exhaustive catalogues already circulated in late Antiquity) created huge problems of identification, which were bypassed in ingenious ways or simply ignored on a practical level.¹³⁵

¹²⁸ Grosby, *Biblical Ideas of Nationality*; Brett, ed., *Ethnicity and the Bible*.

¹²⁹ Wolfram, ‘Terminologisches’, pp. 797–98.

¹³⁰ Rapp, ‘Old Testament Models for Emperors’, pp. 177–80. See also Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality*.

¹³¹ But see, for instance, *The Power of the Word* [= *Early Medieval Europe*, 7. 3 (1998)]; and De Jong, ‘The Empire as *ecclesia*’.

¹³² Arno Borst has provided a somewhat exhaustive overview of the impact of the stories of the Tower and the Ark up until the end of the Middle Ages, but he is only interested in scholarly debates, not in the impact of biblical narratives on perceptions of the social world. See Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel*.

¹³³ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. by Lindsay, xi. 1.

¹³⁴ Pohl, ‘Telling the Difference’, pp. 23–24.

¹³⁵ Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel*. See also the contribution by Richard Corradini in this volume.

On the level of repertoires of identification, a similarly momentous construction was the idea of the 'chosen people', the people of Israel, who were under a covenant with God.¹³⁶ 'You shall be holy unto me, because I the Lord am holy, and I have separated you from other peoples, that you should be mine', is the word of the Lord in Leviticus (Lv 20. 26). Identifications of a people as a 'new Israel' certainly occurred in the early Middle Ages (for example, with the Franks), although they were less current than is often assumed.¹³⁷ 'Israel' was, after all, an ambiguous name, and the Christians strove to distance themselves from the Jews while appropriating Jewish history as their own, which required the skills of generations of exegetes.¹³⁸ Perhaps more influentially, the medieval notion of divine election passed through the strategies of identification among early Christians. The letter attributed to Peter told the early Christians: 'But you are a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own: that you may declare his virtues, who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Who in time past were not a people: but are now the people of God. Who had not obtained mercy; but now have obtained mercy'.¹³⁹ This was based on Exodus: 'Et vos eritis mihi regnum sacerdotale et gens sancta, haec sunt verba quae loqueris ad filios Israhel' (Ex 19. 5). It is remarkable that ethnic identifications were used for the early Christian community, here and elsewhere.¹⁴⁰ Ethnic discourse provided an attractive range of symbolic identifications, which could also be used for groups that were not really considered ethnic by the standards of the time. Peter's powerful formula was intended to harness, and thereby also to neutralize, the affective potential of sanctified ethnicity for a rather different vision of community. This opened up the ethnic language of the Old Testament to a variety of uses. In the early Middle Ages, this de-ethnicized ethnic discourse, with its strong providential charge, was paradoxically reapplied for single peoples. Around 500, Gildas parallels the misfortunes of Israel with those of the Britons of his day: 'When they strayed

¹³⁶ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*.

¹³⁷ Garrison, 'The Franks as the New Israel?'

¹³⁸ For example, see Lieu, *Christian Identity*; Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*; Scheil, *The Footsteps of Israel*; and Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*.

¹³⁹ 1 Pt 2. 9–10: 'Vos autem genus electum regale sacerdotium gens sancta populus acquisitionis ut virtutes adnuntietis eius qui de tenebris vos vocavit in admirabile lumen suum | qui aliquando non populus, nunc autem populus Dei, qui non consecuti misericordiam, nunc autem misericordiam consecuti'.

¹⁴⁰ Buell, *Why This New Race?*; Lieu, *Christian Identity*, pp. 239–68; Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*.

from the right track the Lord did not spare a people that was peculiarly his own among all nations, a royal stock, a holy race'.¹⁴¹ And Alcuin, using the words of Peter again, wrote in the *Vita Vedastis* that, by the baptism of Clovis, the Franks had been turned into a 'gens sancta, populus adquisitionis'.¹⁴² Thus, conversion came to be seen as a mark of divine election.

On the other hand, according to the essentially ethnocentric Old Testament model, there were the *gōjīm*, the *gentes*. Their role was ambiguous: often they were seen as enemies, but they could also become partners. In some cases, the Old Testament demands the complete annihilation of defeated enemies, yet in other cases they were integrated or associated. Foreign peoples often also served as instruments of God's wrath, sent to punish Israel. In any case, the world was seen as essentially constituted by peoples. The Hebrew of the Bible could differentiate between the *'am*, the people of God, and the *gōjīm*, but in some rare cases *gōj* could also be used for Israel if it was treated on a par with other peoples.¹⁴³ The Latin translations of the Old Testament generally followed this distinction and only sometimes pictured Israel as one *gens* (or *populus*) among others.

The idea of divine choice and providence also implied strong beliefs about divine help and protection in war. This was not at all unusual in itself; in most ethnic religions, cult practices, intended to ensure divine support against enemies, are a central element. But rarely was this idea rendered in such an elaborate set of narratives. The Exodus, a lengthy and rather repetitive narrative that culminates in the crossing of the Red Sea, was one of the strongest images of divine intervention in favour of Israel.¹⁴⁴ Perhaps it is not a coincidence that one of the oldest extant, and rather free, poetic treatments of a biblical motif in a Germanic language is the *Old English Exodus*, preserved in the Junius manuscript alongside similar poems about Genesis and Daniel.¹⁴⁵ More than in most other religions, the biblical narrative, in its radically changing scenarios of triumph and divine punishment, represented the entire range of possibilities for ethnic identification and provided a matrix of moral and political explanations for them. In this field of tension between victory and defeat, responsibility for

¹⁴¹ Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, ed. and trans. by Winterbottom, praef. 13, p. 15.

¹⁴² Alcuin, *Vita II Vedastis*, ed. by Krusch, c. 2, pp. 417–18.

¹⁴³ Bächli, *Israel und die Völker*, pp. 116–17; Clements, 'Gōj'; Lipinski, 'am'.

¹⁴⁴ Langston, *Exodus through the Centuries*.

¹⁴⁵ *The Old English Exodus*, ed. by Turville-Petre. See also Langston, *Exodus through the Centuries*, pp. 132–33.

the securing or squandering of divine favour and protection did not belong only to a few priests or military leaders, who performed the right ritual in the correct way, but to all citizens. Introducing foreign cults, even if only some Jews practised them, could lead to terrible displays of divine wrath. The low points of this drama of the covenant were the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian exile. The idea that only impeccable moral behaviour could bring divine protection in war became central in early medieval Christianity. For instance, Julian of Toledo describes how the Visigothic king Wamba marching against the usurper Paul severely punishes some of his own soldiers who have committed abuses. This act is explained with reference to the fate of Eli in 1 Samuel 4: 'Si purgati maneamus a crimine, non dubium erit, quod triumphum capiamus ex hoste' ('If we remain pure of crimes there is no doubt that we will seize victory from the enemy').¹⁴⁶ An elaborate liturgy of war was created, which, by the Carolingian period, at least notionally involved all Christians in the Frankish realm.¹⁴⁷ It also provided a basic 'grammar' by which the vicissitudes of war could be interpreted and translated into the appropriate moral admonitions.

The Old Testament also offered numerous precedents for the internal organization of a people. Some of the books abound with ethnic language; observe, for instance, the endless genealogies in 1 Chronicles. The people of Israel were seen to be composed of twelve tribes, a model which could be used to explain and channel inner conflicts along internal ethnic structures, or to integrate smaller 'tribes' into larger units. It also served as a precedent for the modern idea that the 'Germanic' peoples were all 'Deutsche Stämme', and that the German people had already existed in antiquity through its tribes.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, the Old Testament contained a rich repertoire of political organization. Here again, the Bible was ambiguous, and could be used for quite contrary arguments. It provided two strong royal figures of identification, David and Salomon, so that many medieval kings could be called 'a new David'. But even these model kings were not impeccable, and were succeeded by a number of worse, or, indeed, bad, kings. There is even an explicit argument about the disadvantages of kingship. In 1 Samuel 8, it is God himself who makes Samuel warn the people of Israel against raising a king, enumerating the things a king

¹⁴⁶ Julian of Toledo, *Historia Wambae regis*, ed. by Hillgarth, pp. 226–27; English translation: *The Story of Wamba*, trans. by Pizarro, p. 195.

¹⁴⁷ Pohl, 'Liturgie di guerra'.

¹⁴⁸ Wolfram, 'Terminologisches', p. 792; Goetz, 'Die "deutschen Stämme"'.

will take from them: 'And you shall cry out in that day from the face of the king, whom you have chosen to yourselves, and the Lord will not hear you in that day' (1 Sm 8. 18). Other forms of constitution include charismatic leaders (such as Moses), commanders in war, tribal assemblies, and judges, and prophets; each of them is strongly linked with the ethnic identity of Israel. Kings and other leaders, first of all, represented the people of Israel. Prayers for the king and a whole liturgy of royalty became, therefore, an important feature in early medieval kingdoms.¹⁴⁹

Examples of the Old Testament as a 'repertoire of identification' are numerous. In part, it was so universally applicable because it provided precedents for quite contrary situations and judgements. For instance, it condemned *alienigenae uxores*, foreign-born wives (as in the case of Salomon), but it also presented Ruth as a model for marriage between different ethnic groups. For a while, eighth-century popes advocated a ban against such marriages, since it was in their interest that the Carolingians not be drawn into marriage alliances with other peoples.¹⁵⁰ But much of the continuing impact of the Old Testament was also due to its forceful images, compelling narratives, and poetic language. The Old Testament uses a number of vivid ethnic metaphors that became part of Christian usage — for instance, the *semen* of Abraham, the vine, or the shepherd and his flock (the topic of Marianne Pollheimer's contribution in this volume). Perhaps the most effective book of the Old Testament, in terms of inspiring reflection on matters of state and ethnicity, was the Psalms. We must not forget that chanting the Psalms was an integral part of the liturgy of war; before Charlemagne's army invaded Avar territory in 791, a general fasting of three days was held, while all priests present had to psalmodize in continuation.¹⁵¹ This is one of the reasons why Cassiodorus's *Commentary on the Psalms*, presented in this volume by Gerda Heydemann as part of an ongoing project on the early medieval 'exegesis of identity', is such an interesting source.

Cassiodorus also represents a new interpretation of the ethnicity of Israel in an age when much of the Roman world had come to be ruled by *gentes*. Psalm 22 (vv. 27–29) allowed for the displacement of the ethnocentric worldview current in much of the Old Testament in favour of a view that acknowledged a multitude of nations: 'All the ends of the earth shall remember, and shall be converted to the Lord. And all the lands of the *gentes* (*patriae gentium*) shall

¹⁴⁹ Hen, *Roman Barbarians*, pp. 117–23.

¹⁵⁰ Pohl, 'Alienigena coniugia', pp. 159–88.

¹⁵¹ Pohl, *Die Awaren*, pp. 315–36; Pohl, 'Liturgie di guerra'.

adore his sight. For the kingdom is the Lord's: and he shall have dominion over the nations (*gentes*). Christian commentators saw this passage as a foreshadowing of the Christian message. Cassiodorus concludes that the preceding passage, 'All you descendants of Israel, stand in awe of Him!', must consequently also refer to all peoples: 'By the *seed of Israel* (*semen Israel*) He does not signify the people of a single nation (*populus*). It rather denotes the complement of nations (*gentes*), from where the church is collected'.¹⁵² The New Testament message was that God's covenant was with all people who followed Christ, regardless of their origin. The early medieval interpretation was that *cunctae gentes*, all peoples, were called to salvation. Thus, the *gentes* as such became integral components of the history of salvation. It was Jerome who, in the prologue to his *World Chronicle*, underlined 'quod historia multiplex est, habens barbara nomina, res incognitas Latinis, numeros inexplicabiles'; Christian historiography insisted on the ethnic multiplicity of history.¹⁵³ This created an interesting dynamic on the conceptual level. While ethnicity found its defining features in the group itself, Christianity introduced a strong transcendental point of reference, which could both subvert and affirm ethnic identities.

2.3. Ethnic Discourse and Social Practice

Social groups, such as the *patria* or the *civitas*, are mere 'fashionings of our hearts' imaginations', which do not 'have an existing persona', as Cassiodorus observes in a surprisingly radical phrase; these groups are thus unlike the *ecclesia*, which is identical with her members.¹⁵⁴ In this passage, Cassiodorus does not reflect on the way in which these 'imagined communities' are at the same time social realities, a subject that he treats elsewhere in his *Explanation of the Psalms*.¹⁵⁵ This is

¹⁵² Cassiodorus, *Expositio psalmorum*, ed. by Adriaen, XXI. 25, p. 204: 'Semen Israel non unius populus significatur, sed cunctarum gentium cognoscitur plenitudo, unde constat Ecclesiam colligendam'. Cf. Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, trans. by Walsh, I, p. 230. Walsh translates the last sentence as 'so clearly the Church is to be understood here'. The translation of Psalm 22. 27–29 is here given according to Walsh.

¹⁵³ Jerome, *Chronicon*, ed. by Helm, praefatio, p. 5. See Reimitz, 'Omnes Franci'.

¹⁵⁴ Cassiodorus, *Expositio psalmorum*, ed. by Adriaen, IV. div., p. 56: 'Per totum psalmum uerba sunt sanctae matris ecclesiae, quae non in cordibus nostris phantastica imaginatione formatur, sicut patria uel ciuitas uel aliquid eorum simile, quod personam non habet existentem, sed ecclesia est collectio fidelium sanctorum omnium, anima et cor unum'. See the contribution by Gerda Heydemann in this volume.

¹⁵⁵ For the term, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, esp. pp. 5–7.

still a problem today, when most of our conceptual tools are deeply impregnated by the opposition between idealism and materialism, theory and practice. A good means by which to surmount the problem has, however, been laid by the ground-breaking work of Berger/Luckmann, Foucault, Bourdieu, and others.¹⁵⁶ I would like to sketch some methodological implications here.

Ethnic discourse provides the repertoire for a symbolic language that allows us to mark, communicate, legitimize, affirm, deny, and negotiate the identity and difference of ethnic groups. It enables a wide variety of operations; here are just a few examples. It regulates the use of certain forms of 'us' and 'them' and allows people to draw boundaries between them. It helps to define what is common to 'us' by using the language of kinship, genealogies, origin narratives, or blood metaphors, and it gives meaning to a wide range of symbolic markers of identity and difference (language, outward appearance and dress, customs, myths, norms, beliefs, codes of honour, etc.). It can create narratives of identity in order to effect orientation in a 'storied' world.¹⁵⁷ It allows one to differentiate between various forms of alterity and categorize it in ethnic groups. It can construct either equivalence or fundamental difference between the type of identity of 'us' and 'them' ('we are all *gentes*', or 'only they are'). It allows one to produce and argue all kinds of value judgements about ethnic groups, to transport prejudices and to shape expectations. It can help to invent imaginary ethnic groups and use them to establish an order of the unknown (for instance, the 'monstrous races' found in Isidore). It allows one to relate ethnic groups to other frames of identification (cities, countries, political entities, religions, etc.), and to employ ethnic language to describe, or enhance, the cohesion of all sorts of groups (which may make the distinction between 'ethnic' and other identities rather difficult). Basically, ethnic discourse provides the means to essentialize large human communities, and to mark them as 'primary' identities.¹⁵⁸ For most premodern (and indeed, for many modern) observers, symbolic markers of identity were not arbitrary signs but expressions of an inner self (individually) and of a natural community (collectively). In a rather paradoxical way, this belief in the essential and time-resistant nature of ethnic groups was compatible with perceptions of mutability — for instance, fluctuation between groups, name-change, merging, or separation of ethnic groups.

¹⁵⁶ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*; Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*.

¹⁵⁷ See Somers, 'The Narrative Constitution of Identity'.

¹⁵⁸ Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity*, pp. 48–50.

Such operations use a wide variety of verbal and non-verbal forms of expression. They have a cognitive and a symbolic dimension. But very often, they also imply social action. ‘Strategies of identification’ are most efficient if they combine discursive and social/political operations: for instance, explaining who belongs to the in-group and why, and, in consequence, excluding the others from political participation. Although motivation and behaviour are not straightforwardly related to identities — it can hardly be predicted whether persons are really going to act in consonance with a group — a connection is usually obvious. There is always an element of interest in identification.¹⁵⁹ This can help us to find out more about past ‘strategies of identification’, because discourse can be related to agency. In our early medieval evidence, the point is whether a group acted in such a way as to reaffirm its perception of itself as an ethnic unit, and whether it was, therefore, consistently regarded as such and distinguished from other ethnically-organized groups in our sources.

The use of ethnonyms in the sources is a principal indicator of ethnicity. The proper name serves the purpose of distinction, but there is more to it.¹⁶⁰ Ethnic names often have strong meanings that are at least intelligible to the in-group (for instance, the *Alamanni*, ‘full men’). Some carry suggestive associations in their own or other languages (‘non Angli, sed angeli’); but they can also be used derisively (*Avari*, *Vulgares*). They are often directly connected to a mythical origin, whether through an eponymous ancestor or a name-giving legend (Lombards/Longobards). Names often tell stories and place a *gens* somewhere in a differential ethnic topography. Isidore, like other classically trained scholars, thought that names expressed some of the essence of a people and sought to decipher them through (in our eyes, fantastic) etymologies connected with specific qualities or historical situations. The name represented the continuity of the *gens*: as Cassiodorus comments on Psalm 77, the Jewish people (*populus Iudaeorum*) were known to continue *nomen et gentem Hebraeorum* after the exodus.¹⁶¹ It is remarkable that the continuity of the name is established

¹⁵⁹ Jenkins, *Social Identity*, pp. 6–7.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Rübekeil, ‘Völkernamen Europas’.

¹⁶¹ Cassiodorus, *Expositio psalmorum*, ed. by Adriaen, LXXVII. 52–54, p. 726: ‘Sed dum ageretur de populo Iudaeorum, ipsos notum est ad hanc ciuitatem fuisse perductos, qui suis patribus succedentes et nomen et gentem Hebraeorum continuasse noscuntur’; English translation in Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, trans. by Walsh, II, p. 269: ‘But since the discussion is about the *populus* of the Jews, it is clear that those who succeeded their forbears and are acknowledged to have carried on the *nomen* and *gens* of the Hebrews, are known to have been led to this city’. See the contribution by Gerda Heydemann in this volume.

using two names, Jews and Hebrews, and two different ethnic terms, *populus* and *gens*. It is as if Cassiodorus wanted to demonstrate that the *nomen* was an underlying identity, which could then be transferred to the Christians.

The occurrence of an ethnonym in the sources cannot necessarily serve as proof for the existence of a community or its ethnic character. If ethnonyms occur in our sources as outside attributions, that can, however, count as evidence for ethnic categorization. If an ethnonym is also attested for self-identification, this allows the hypothesis that we are dealing with an ethnic group. In the absence of self-identification, we have to find other clues. This is the methodological problem that Isidore of Seville already made explicit when he wrote about monstrous peoples: did they really exist? His criterion, as we have seen above, was historical knowledge.¹⁶² We may put that a little differently. Are there any traces of communication among the in-group, its individual members and the out-group/several out-groups in our sources? Does social practice, as far as we can deduce from our information, show any agency of the group that is described by an ethnonym? Or, to put it a little more bluntly: has a people made history? According to this criterion, it would, for instance, be very hard to regard the ancient Germans as an ethnic group, because there is no evidence that *Germani* ever acted in unison (at least notionally), followed common interests, or identified themselves as Germans in any consistent manner.¹⁶³ But we could regard the Avars as an ethnic group, even though we have no direct evidence of any self-definition as Avars; they consistently acted together and had their set place in the complex ethnic landscape of early medieval eastern Europe. It is, in fact, not even necessary that all parties use the same name for an ethnic group. The Turks called the Avars Varchonites, but, in their diplomatic dealings with the Byzantines, there was no problem establishing which group both sides meant.

Many early medieval historians used ethnic identifications as a means to structure their accounts. In historiographic narratives, *gentes* are among the chief transpersonal actors; they migrate, wage war, raise kings, and send embassies or raiding parties. Many authors also employ ethnonyms in their titles: *De origine actibusque Getarum*,¹⁶⁴ *Liber historiae Francorum*, *Gesta Hungarorum*, etc. Many other works display them in at least some of the manuscripts (Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum*), start with the origins of the people

¹⁶² Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. by Lindsay, IX. 2. 133.

¹⁶³ Pohl, 'Der Germanenbegriff'.

¹⁶⁴ Jordanes, *Getica*, ed. by Mommsen, I. 1, p. 53, gives this as the title of Cassiodorus's twelve books, which he used for his excerpt.

(Widukind's *Res gestae Saxonicae*) or are described in library catalogues as ethnic histories.¹⁶⁵ Procopius structures his account of Justinian's *Wars* by ethnic adversaries: 'Medians' (Persians), Goths, Vandals, and Moors. Ethnographic tractates and chapters give long lists of ethnic groups, law codes address certain *gentes*, and other genres of text use ethnic identifications to introduce new characters in their narrative or to allude to familiar ones.

Ascriptions of ethnicity by outside observers create certain expectations concerning how these ethnic groups will act, thereby reducing the social and political contingency of dealing with strangers. Such expectations can be wrong (as, for instance, when the ninth-century Franks attacked the Danes to take revenge for an attack by *Northmanni* coming from Norway).¹⁶⁶ In some cases, such ascriptions may still be upheld in spite of disappointed expectations. But, in the long run, the results of interaction usually feed back into outside perceptions. For instance, the ethnic category *Germani* stopped being used for contemporaries in late Antiquity.¹⁶⁷ Often, an analysis of group behaviour in recorded events can give us clues as to the role of ethnicity in the group's construction. Another phenomenon has to be taken into account. Imperial systems often try to establish an 'ethnic' order at their frontier, which they can control and manipulate more easily (the Romans did that, as did the French colonialists in Africa in the nineteenth century).¹⁶⁸ This ethnic order often does not correspond with the self-identifications of the people concerned. But, in the long run, imperial perceptions may actually create these 'ethnic' groups and the resulting ethnic conflicts — modern Africa is a poignant example.

In complex societies (and early medieval kingdoms were rather complex societies), each individual has a number of options for social and cultural identification. Many of them were not chosen by deliberation but corresponded to

¹⁶⁵ Goffart, 'From *Historiae* to *Historia Francorum*', has the merit of having pointed out that titles given in modern editions and handbooks do not always correspond to the titles in the early manuscripts. See also the contribution by Helmut Reimitz in this volume.

¹⁶⁶ Fried, 'Gens und regnum'.

¹⁶⁷ Pohl, 'Der Germanenbegriff'.

¹⁶⁸ Wells, *The Barbarian Speaks*, p. 116, maintains that the barbarian 'dynamics of identity' were in fact a reaction to the Roman conquests: 'Tribes form in response to interaction between indigenous peoples and larger societies', a view based on a comparison with indigenous peoples in the Americas. See Hill, ed., *History, Power and Identity*, esp. pp. 1–19. This has much to recommend it. Still, it would be misleading to reduce ethnic processes on the peripheries of empires simply to a stimulus-response model. Also, it is questionable whether the complex realities of migration-age barbarians can adequately be described as a 'tribal system'. See Pohl, 'Archaeology of Identity'.

‘default settings’ of the social landscape into which someone had been born or had migrated. For instance, a citizen of an ancient city most likely subscribed to the cult of the civic god or goddess and of the Greek/Roman pantheon, whereas early medieval identities were made more complex by the way ‘universal’ Christianity interacted with particular (ethnic/regional/political) identities.

The approach that we have to take as historians is to access past social groupings through texts (or through symbolic objects) that reflect the way in which a society communicates about ethnic groups. This is not meant to indicate that ‘in reality’ these ethnic groups did not exist, and that they were only ‘imagined communities’. But, of course, the key methodological question is how we can infer social practice (in this case, ‘ethnic practice’) from our sources. This, however, is exactly what the historical discipline is well equipped to do, and the challenge of the ‘literary turn’ in the 1990s has helped to develop further its methodical instruments. Apart from the toolbox provided by source criticism and textual and discourse analysis, a few observations should suffice here. Most importantly, discourse is not simply a reflection of past society; it is a social practice in itself. Early medieval texts are a trace of communication about social problems seen as relevant (otherwise, no one would have wasted all the precious animal skins for parchment). Even where (as is usual) we have little information about the actual short-term impact of a text, there are ways to reconstruct ‘negotiations of identity’. Helmut Reimitz’s contribution in this volume is a good example. Many texts respond to missing texts or are otherwise intertextually related, or react to alternative interpretations current in their societies.¹⁶⁹ The manuscript transmission of texts can provide good clues as to the lasting or changing significance they had as resources for identification. Furthermore, reference to ethnic groups often has a serial character. If, for instance, Jonas of Bobbio refers to beer-drinking Dardanians living on the Ocean,¹⁷⁰ this is a rather isolated occurrence and can easily be interpreted as an erudite (if misguided) echo of classical ethnography. But most of the major peoples of the period are well enough attested. The transmitted texts, taken together, register, interpret, and shape the ethnic configuration of the social world. We should not only slice this evidence into separate sets of information pertaining to this or that people; we should also understand that, comprehensively, it represents the process in which ethnicity was established as one of the constructive principles of the early medieval world.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Pohl, ‘History in Fragments’. See also the contribution by Max Diesenberger in this volume.

¹⁷⁰ Jonas of Bobbio, *Vita Columbani*, ed. by Krusch, I. 16, p. 82. See also O’Hara, *Jonas of Bobbio and the Columbanian Familia*.

2.4. Strategies of Identification

Ethnicity can help to shape very different groups: empires and small tribes, national states and minorities, diaspora communities and migrating war-bands. It can lead to the establishment of loose bonds or of closely-knit communities.¹⁷¹ Don Handelman has proposed four 'degrees' of ethnicity: loose ethnic category; ethnic network (a system of interaction following ethnic lines); ethnic association (with a goal-directed collective organization); ethnic community, which is characterized by regular interaction, common interests, collective organization, and bounded territory.¹⁷² This typology may be understood to represent different strategies and intensities of identification. 'Goths', for instance, could be used as a purely descriptive category by Romans and probably also by Goths themselves; it could also be applied to ethnic networks formed from the disparate groups of Gothic soldiers on Roman territory, who eventually developed common interests, and soon began to build ethnic associations under their own commanders and, later, rulers. Ethnic community, following Handelman's typology, would then be reached when the Visigoths settled in Spain and acquired a fixed territory and stable forms of organization, the *patria vel gens Gothorum*.¹⁷³

What is remarkable here is the relationship between ethnicity and power. It has been asked whether the *gens* created a *regnum* (as was traditionally believed) or the *regnum* created a *gens*.¹⁷⁴ This is, in fact, a chicken-and-egg problem. Power does not begin with kings and kingdoms; power relations permeate society and are also closely linked to discourse, as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu have shown.¹⁷⁵ One is tempted to assume that military leaders manipulated ethnicity in order to create loyalty among their followers. It is indeed remarkable that, in spite of much fluctuation, self-led barbarian armies on Roman territory preserved some basic coherence, regardless of numerous setbacks and changes in leadership (for instance, the Visigoths in the years after the death of Alaric I and the murder of Athaulf).¹⁷⁶ Procopius assumed that eth-

¹⁷¹ See the list of different types of early medieval ethnic groups in Pohl, 'Archaeology of Identity', pp. 14–16.

¹⁷² Handelman, 'The Organisation of Ethnicity'; Eriksen, *Small Places, Large Issues*, p. 268.

¹⁷³ *Leges Visigothorum*, ed. by Zeumer, II. 1. 8, pp. 53–54.

¹⁷⁴ Goetz and others, eds, *Regna and Gentes*.

¹⁷⁵ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*; Foucault, *L'Ordre du discours*; Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*.

¹⁷⁶ Pohl, 'Pistis e potere'.

nicity could reinforce the coherence and loyalty of war-bands. In his account, before the battle at Tadinæ, Totila ridiculed the Byzantine army because

[...] it presents a collection of men from the greatest possible number of nations (*ethnōn*). For an alliance which is patched together from many sources gives no firm assurance of either loyalty (*pistis*) or power, but being split up in nationality (*tois genesi*), it is naturally divided likewise in purpose.¹⁷⁷

Totila lost the battle, but, on the whole, ethnic loyalties seem to have created an important advantage for the barbarians against Roman armies.

To a certain extent, ethnicity could always serve as a political expedient, and it is not unlikely that some early medieval political figures knew how to manipulate it to their advantage.¹⁷⁸ But the many individuals whose allegiance was needed to construct a successful ethnic group, and the outside observers who were part of the game of identification, show the limits of a purely instrumentalist hypothesis. Strategies of identification were, therefore, both top-down and bottom-up, and they needed to converge sufficiently in order to create a successful and relatively stable community. These strategies could be both pragmatic and symbolic. On a pragmatic level, relevant joint activities could be organized, and it was important to take part in them. War and other types of conflict play a crucial part here; indeed, situations of conflict and their descriptions are among the most important traces of ethnic identities in our sources (which is not to say that conflicts were predominantly inter-ethnic in the early Middle Ages). Political and juridical activities were also important; these might include: electing leaders, deciding matters of common interest, settling disputes, and dealing with matters of inclusion or exclusion. All of these activities receive a lot of attention in early medieval historiography. On the whole, this is how a community acquired the capacity to act as a collective. By writing about these activities, contemporary chronicles and other texts contributed to the success, and perhaps also the failure, of ethnic groups. It was not the state, the *regnum*, but the *gens* to which they ascribed political agency in the early Middle Ages.¹⁷⁹

This is also due to symbolic strategies of identification. They built on the current discourse of ethnicity and its repertoires. These strategies could be used

¹⁷⁷ Procopius, *Bella*, ed. and trans. by Dewing, VIII. 30. 17–18.

¹⁷⁸ See also Heather, 'Ethnicity, Group Identity, and Social Status in the Migration Period', p. 46: 'There is a strong element of self-interest in group identity'.

¹⁷⁹ Pohl, 'Regnum und gens'.

by all three sides in the negotiations of identity: Persons and smaller groups who wanted to demonstrate their allegiance could use a recognized set of symbolic representations in language, dress, hairstyle, ornaments, weapons, and other signs to express their ethnic identity. The group as a collective or its representatives could promote certain of these symbolic forms and introduce new ones, deliberately or implicitly; a variety of public rituals could be staged, or texts circulated. Outsiders could use ancient stereotypes or new observations to characterize an ethnic group and to shape options on how to deal with it. Ethnic identities were the complex result of the interplay of all three levels. Still, ethnicity cannot be fully grasped on the level of signs but must be considered in terms of significance. Something about it always remains undisclosed. There were Longobards without long beards, Franks who did not carry a *francisca* (the Frankish battle-axe), and Byzantines or Alemanni who did carry such weapons.¹⁸⁰ Outward signs never fully allowed pragmatic distinction between different ethnic groups; often enough, they were displayed by those who were not fully accepted in the group but wanted to be.

Taken together, these multiple strategies contributed to creating a symbolic charge, an ethnic profile connected with an ethnonym, often expressed in exemplary narratives. What mattered was the 'social energy' created by the accumulation of acts of identification.¹⁸¹ This is evidenced, for instance, in Theophylact Simocatta's story about how the Avars got their name. A band of Var and Chunni fugitives from central Asia attacked a number of Hunnic groups:

[These groups] plunged into extreme panic, since they suspected that the settlers were Avars. For this reason they honoured the fugitives with splendid gifts and supposed that they received from them security in exchange. Then, after the Var and Chunni saw the auspicious beginning to their flight, they appropriated the ambassadors' error and named themselves Avars: for among the Scythian nations that of the Avars is said to be the most adept tribe.¹⁸²

The author engages in these negotiations of identity by calling these Avars 'Pseudo-Avars' in order to debase them. Some of the migration age peoples, such as Huns, Goths, Vandals, and Burgundians, accumulated an exceptional imaginative potential in their relatively short periods of success. This created

¹⁸⁰ Pohl, 'Telling the Difference'; Von Rummel, *Habitus barbarus*; and, with a different interpretation, Siegmund, *Alemannen und Franken*.

¹⁸¹ See Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*.

¹⁸² Theophylact Simocatta, *The History*, trans. by Whitby and Whitby, VII. 8. 2, p. 190. See Pohl, *Die Awaren*, pp. 31–36.

the resources for a series of further identifications, from the late medieval Grand-Dukes of Burgundy to the derogatory use of ‘Vandals’ and ‘Huns’ in the twentieth century.¹⁸³

We can access, as far as possible, these strategies of identification through a variety of texts transmitted from the period. Taken together, these texts do more than provide references to the role of this or that people and the extent of ethnic identifications connected with that role. As we have seen, ethnicity is not the quality of single persons; it is a principle of distinction among several groups that usually becomes more or less salient in a broader social framework. If one group successfully highlights its distinctiveness, others will follow. The texts can thus give clues to a changing ethnic landscape and the attempts, or strategies, to structure it. Social groups of the period differ by their respective use of ethnic, political or religious modes of identification. The stress could be on common biological origin or on openness to integrate foreigners, or, perhaps paradoxically, on both. For instance, the political community of the Romans underlined its political constitution and the divergent ethnic origin of its constituent parts, whereas the Lombard *origo gentis* placed stress on the equivalence of the ethnic and the political community.¹⁸⁴ We should also distinguish between a relatively tranquil and self-assured sense of belonging on the one hand, and more or less conscious strategies of identification and distinction on the other hand. For example, the Lombard principalities in southern Italy after 774, a time when cultural differences between the Lombards and their Latin/Roman environment had almost disappeared, were especially eager to put their Lombard origin in the forefront.¹⁸⁵

This volume is mostly concerned with ethnic groups that left a mark. Many ethnic groups could be active and meaningful on a local and regional level, but sources for that are relatively scarce in the period, so we can say little about them. What is of interest here are identities on a macro-social level and the ways in which ethnicity became relevant in the context of late-Roman and post-imperial power politics. In this respect, the period is of specific interest.¹⁸⁶ Ethnicity seems to have allowed competing barbarian war-bands to iden-

¹⁸³ Steinacher, ‘Wenden, Slawen, Vandalen’; Berndt and Steinacher, eds, *Das Reich der Vandalen*; Kaiser, *Die Burgunder*, pp. 176–205. See also the contributions in Reimitz and Zeller, eds, *Vergangenheit und Vergegenwärtigung*.

¹⁸⁴ Pohl, ‘*Origo gentis*’; Pohl, ‘Memory, Identity and Power in Lombard Italy’.

¹⁸⁵ Pohl, *Werkstätte der Erinnerung*.

¹⁸⁶ Pohl, *Die ethnische Wende*. On the period, see also Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and*

tify themselves with ancient and prestigious ethnonyms.¹⁸⁷ Such 'strategies of distinction' allowed them to profit from the symbolic capital of these names and to expand the loyalties, the *pistis*, of groups of rather mixed origin. It is interesting that there are relatively few traces of active 'boundary maintenance' among the barbarian *gentes* of the period.¹⁸⁸ Rather, integration seems to have been achieved by means of a 'prestige economy' and codes of honour, which made membership in ascending ethnic groups accessible but not indiscriminate. For a while, such membership conferred status and privileges in the new *regna*, and that seems to have been a decisive mechanism in the foundation of relatively stable ethnic identities. Success created new repertoires for identification. Therefore, in large parts of Europe one of the significant changes at the beginning of the Middle Ages was that ethnic organization evolved in conjunction with supra-regional political power and was legitimated by a Christian discourse of community.¹⁸⁹ Gradually, the royal title with reference both to the grace of God and to an ethnic group (or the territory named after it) became standard in most medieval kingdoms; Roland Steinacher's contribution in the companion volume illuminates the rather situational contexts of some of the earliest occurrences of ethnic titles in the Vandal kingdom in Africa.¹⁹⁰ This was the beginning of a long, and certainly not unbroken, story in which national states developed in Europe. Comparison with other parts of the post-Roman world, Byzantium, and the Islamic realms can help to make this process clearer; a first step was taken in a conference organized in the context of the Wittgenstein project in 2009.¹⁹¹

the Roman West; James, *Europe's Barbarians*; Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome*; Wolfram, *The Roman Empire*; and Pohl, *The Barbarian Challenge*.

¹⁸⁷ This did not necessarily mean that there was any direct continuity between the *Gutones*, *Vandilioi*, *Langobardi*, or *Burgundiones* of the early imperial period and groups of the same or a similar name in the migration period, but some continuity may have existed: Pohl, *Die Völkerwanderung*, esp. pp. 13–23.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Pohl, 'Telling the Difference'.

¹⁸⁹ Pohl, 'Aux origines d'une Europe ethnique'; Geary, *The Myth of Nations*.

¹⁹⁰ Steinacher, 'Who is the Barbarian?'.

¹⁹¹ Pohl, Gantner, and Payne, eds, *Visions of Community*.

Early Medieval Ethnic Identities: Some Conclusions

Social identities only work if they continue being communicated. On the macro-level of large-scale ethnic, political, and religious identities that are of interest here, the level of communication required to make these communities work is relatively high. If they worked, this process of communication can be expected to resound somehow in our sources. They recorded the political impact of ethnic organization (or other large-scale communities) and thereby fed back into the process of communication that gave meaning to the social world and its groupings. We should read our sources neither as simple reflections of reality nor as ‘opaque barriers’ between ourselves and that reality but as direct expressions of continuous efforts of social identification. Early medieval societies in much of the West and the Mediterranean were sufficiently literate to leave traces of these ways of ‘communicating identities.’ We thus have access to identification on different levels: we can trace the underlying discourse and its rules for the cultural production of meaningful reality; we can follow the strategies of identification in texts and relate them to certain social actors; we can read narratives in historiography (but also in other genres) as efforts to give meaning to communities to which agency is attributed; we can trace some of the shifting patterns of inclusion and exclusion that shaped the ethnic landscape; and sometimes we can also follow the subtle dialectic between the textual and political strategies of explaining and organizing identity. There is, however, one caveat: the identities that we are looking for cannot be assumed to have simply been ‘there,’ and research cannot ‘fill in’ the necessarily patchy information to reconstruct consistent social groups. Still, in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, we can find many traces of identities in the making.

The studies united in this volume and its companion, *Post-Roman Transitions*, therefore share (if to varying degrees) the following methodological principles and approaches:

- 1. Ethnicity is not a ‘given’; it is the result of a historical process and, in the last resort, depends on human efforts to establish meaningful social groupings and distinctions between them.**

This point needs little further explanation. Methodologically, this means that we have to be very cautious in using ethnicity as an interpretative matrix. If we do not have independent clues, we should not automatically assume that, for instance, conflicts were more likely to happen between different ethnic groups, whereas conflicts within them were tempered by intra-group solidarity; or that

people belonging to the same *gens* were culturally more homogeneous than people belonging to different ethnic groups; or that people buried with grave goods of similar character and style tended to belong to the same ethnic group and were therefore also more likely to speak the same language. Early medieval evidence strongly points to the conclusion that all of these scenarios may have applied in some cases but by far not in all, so that we cannot use ethnic categories as a 'default setting' in our interpretation of early medieval written material and linguistic evidence. This is especially consequential in archaeology.¹⁹² Of course, a relatively high degree of correspondence between a marked cultural group and an ethnic group is perfectly possible; but we need evidence in every single case in order to claim that.

2. Ethnicity has to be studied in the context of a broader spectrum of social identities and forms of community.

This has been argued at length above (see especially the conclusions to Part 1). Individual identities were composite, implying gender, ethnic, regional, religious, political, and status dimensions in various conjunctions. Ethnic identities could create a special dynamic because they found their *raison d'être* within the group itself and not in any external identifier such as god, land, state, or city. Generalized kinship across a vast segment of society offers a considerable potential for both the integration and the exclusion of foreigners. However, it hardly suffices on its own to create lasting cohesion when it is stretched beyond the comfortable horizons of the face-to-face group. Larger ethnic units can only be maintained in conjunction with (or, in the case of minority groups, in contrast to) other forms of social identity and organization. Thus, ethnic forms of identification could lend coherence to civic, regional, national or religious groups, if to differing degrees. They could also constitute floating resources that could become detached from any social group but were available for appropriation by rather different social actors under certain circumstances (as was the case with the Burgundians, Vandals, or Huns). These political strategies of identification are the easiest to access in early medieval sources.

3. Ethnicity is the result of (often unreflective) social practice but also of cognitive processes and of efforts to produce significance.

The production of significance as a social practice is still not very well understood in the humanities and social sciences, in spite of some groundbreaking theoretical works. The application of these theoretical models often runs into

¹⁹² See Pohl, 'Archaeology of Identity'.

problems. Typically, it either leads to simplified (and therefore banal) descriptions of social realities, or it fails to match the complexity of the theoretical approach with an adequate hermeneutic of our sources. In our research practice, we may still be too hooked on old binary opposites: theory or practice, identity or difference. It is hard to conceive of theory as practice and, still harder, of practice as theory.¹⁹³ It is also difficult to keep in mind that ‘identity’ is not only the opposite of difference but necessarily accommodates difference, or sometimes even differentiates between what may be alike. Identity is never only identical. But it is typically aimed at reducing difference, and therefore also contingency, in order to make human action more manageable and easier to understand. The methodological challenge, therefore, is to grasp a process in which ethnic identities are both the expressions of a mind-set and the results of concerted action. In historical research, this has the great advantage of corresponding to one of the traditional strengths of the discipline: assessing the complex relationship between text and event. Communication was the absolute prerequisite of ethnic identification. To make ethnicity meaningful, the individual had to communicate with the in-group to which he/she thought him/herself to belong; and the in-group and the out-group had to communicate about ethnonyms, signs and meanings, and the past and present of an ethnic community. The early medieval sources only contain traces of this communication, but they are traces, not just distant reflections, of the process in which ethnic identities were negotiated.

4. In different historical contexts, ethnic identities matter to different degrees or possess a different ‘salience’.

The problem of ‘salience’ has been tackled in various ways by different authors — for instance, Don Handelman by suggesting four ‘degrees’ of ethnicity,¹⁹⁴ or Jan Assmann by proposing a distinction between a basic level (*Grundstufe*) and an advanced level (*Steigerungstufe*) of ethnicity.¹⁹⁵ Several elements are important here. One is social relevance: how strongly do ethnic identifications impinge on human decisions and actions and what role do they play in the political field? The second is the size of the group: is it a local face-to-face group or a minority population with limited relevance beyond its range, or is it

¹⁹³ Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*; Luhmann, *Gesellschaftsstruktur*.

¹⁹⁴ Handelman, ‘The Organisation of Ethnicity’.

¹⁹⁵ Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, pp. 144–60.

a supra-regional association or community that creates a sense of common origin and destiny among people who have never met? And the third is the important distinction between simple ethnic identification and ethnic organization. A sense of belonging to an ethnic group may be relevant for the social orientation of more or less large numbers of individuals, and may also be expressed in a number of symbolic cultural practices, but not necessarily lead to any need for political unity. On the other hand, such a sense of belonging may also serve as a valuable resource for political integration. Typically, this corresponds to more or less explicit strategies of identification, which include: ethnic ideologies, a conscious drawing of boundaries, elaborate symbolic communication with the aim of enhancing a feeling of belonging, appropriations of the past in the name of the ethnic group, and systematic attempts to mobilize the whole group, or more often its representatives, in common action (in ritual, political, or juridical decision-making, or war.) Such efforts build on resources of identity (an ethnonym, myths, histories, common symbols, joint goals, etc.), and, if successful, they create new ones.

* * *

This volume sets out to explore the significance of ethnicity in the context of religious, political, and other early medieval identities. In a number of exemplary studies, it analyses different types of texts for the clues that they could bring in understanding discourses and strategies of identification. We still know too little about how societies work, and about the ways in which individuals contribute to their functioning. The early Middle Ages, remote and yet strangely familiar in many respects, offer a fascinating testing ground for models and methodologies in research about societies past and present. The Wittgenstein project has provided a wonderful opportunity to experience this fascination with an extraordinary group of young scholars. I hope that some of the excitement of this intellectual venture can be perceived in the present volume.

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