

Ethnic Origin Narratives in Early Medieval Europe

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In the first part, this article presents a concise overview of brief or longer passages in early and high medieval historiography that deal with ethnic origins, and their context, ranging from the relatively extensive accounts in Jordanes' *Getica* and the *Origo gentis Langobardorum* or the Frankish myth of Trojan ancestry, to the scattered brief references about Burgundian origins, the different versions of Anglo-Saxon and Irish migration legends, and to Cosmas on the Bohemians and other accounts of the origins of the new kingdoms of eastern Europe. It then addresses some of the key questions of the often-controversial debates in recent research: Were these narratives mainly based on classical ethnography, and thus products of outside perceptions? To what degree could they reflect indigenous traditions? And what impact did they have on the cohesion of a group, a community, a people? The article argues that these legends should not be dismissed altogether as Roman literary fictions, but assessed individually for the amount of non-ethnographic elements they contain. Instead, it proposes not to place their creation into a binary between Roman literary fiction and authentic indigenous tradition. To a considerable extent, Romans and »barbarians« shared an ontology and an epistemology that relied on supernatural agency, genealogies including divine ancestors, and animal spirits. It was only Christianity that changed some of these paradigms. Therefore, what we can observe over time is a tendency by Christian writers to distance themselves, subvert or omit »barbarian« ontologies now considered as pagan. Still, even Christian clerics such as Paul the Deacon did include »ridiculous fables« about Germanic divinities in their texts, so they must have mattered to their audience.

Keywords: Early Middle Ages, origin myths, historiography, Goths, Longobards, Romans, ethnography, epistemology, ontology, identity

This thematic section of *Medieval Worlds* addresses a wide range of examples from all over Eurasia from the ancient world to early modern societies. This exciting diversity may help us to put the much-discussed origin myths of early medieval peoples of Europe into perspective. Their meaning has often been overdetermined due to their importance for the creation of

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›myths of nations‹ in the heydays of modern European nationalisms in the 19th and 20th centuries, and by the ensuing debates and polemics.¹ The source material collected in this volume will offer the reader examples not only for the diversity of their stories and themes, poetics and styles, mythologies and beliefs, but also for the multiplicity of scholarly approaches and the many angles from which they could be used and can be studied.

In the medieval European context, we seem to have a rather limited repertoire of narrative elements: first ancestors and their reproductive partners, divine interventions, emblematic animals, flight or expulsion from a land of origin, the crossing of seas or rivers, migrations and the search for a new homeland, divisions and mergers, primordial deeds, internal and external conflict, the achievements of wise women and the raising of kings.² These European origin stories often lead us far back into putative histories of particular communities, and prompt the question how far their elements can be assessed for their possible factual basis. Did the people in question ›really‹ come from their supposed original homeland? Did women have a more prominent place in political life in times of old?³ Similar questions concern the search for traces of ancient beliefs and identifications that may have been current at the time when the respective origin stories were put into writing. Were these narratives mainly based on classical ethnography and thus products of outside perceptions?⁴ To what degree could they reflect indigenous traditions? And what impact did they have on the cohesion of a group, a community, a people?

In the historiography of medieval Europe, this was one of the main foci of the interpretation of origin myths of early medieval communities such as the Goths, Franks, or Longobards, whose kingdoms were established as more or less ethnically defined realms on the territories of the former Western Roman Empire.⁵ For a long time, they were interpreted in modern research as representing an ethnic mentality that came to replace the constitutionalism of the Roman empire, and as representing the beginning of the long history of European nations. Hence, the interpretation of medieval origin stories in Europe became closely linked to the often-controversial debates about the role of ethnicity and identity in the formation of the post-Roman kingdoms. Did origin myths matter for ethnic identities, and did ethnicity matter for the people concerned?

These big issues were raised on the basis of a relatively small body of mostly short texts or brief passages that address the question how ethnic groups originated, and where they came from. Interest in origins was not limited to the origins of peoples, but also concerned the wider issue of the origin of mankind and of the world at large. Especially popular in Antiquity were urban foundation legends; Naoise MacSweeney has collected over 1000

1 Pohl, *Suche nach den Ursprüngen* (2004); Geary, *Myths of Nations*; Bernsen, Becher and Brüggem (eds.), *Gründungsmythen Europas* (2013); Pohl and Mahoney (eds.), *Narratives of Ethnic and Tribal Origins* (2018); Brady and Wadden (eds.), *Origin Legends in Early Medieval Western Europe* (2022).

2 Pohl, *Narratives of Origin and Migration*.

3 Geary, *Women at the Beginning*; Pohl, *Gender and ethnicity*.

4 Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians*; Maas, *Conqueror's Gift*.

5 Pohl and Wieser, *Introduction: The Emergence of New Polities in the Shadows of Empires*.

textual witnesses in her study of the origin myths of Greek cities.⁶ Some myths cover many types of origins: The Hebrew Bible, and the Old Testament, included accounts of the origin of the world, of mankind, of all peoples of the earth (descended from the sons of Noah), of the different languages (after the confusion at the tower of Babylon), of the Jewish people in particular, its migration to the Holy Land, and the building of the temple in Jerusalem.⁷ The fourth-century text called *Origo gentis Romanae*, building on earlier texts, addresses both the complex story of the formation of the Italians, of their gods, of the Latini and the Roman people, and of the foundation of the city of Rome.⁸ The Tibetan origin narrative covers the origins of mankind, of the Tibetans, and also of the Chinese and the Mongols.⁹

Such inclusive narratives are rare in the early medieval West. Most of the ethnic origin myths were written down in Christianised societies, where the question of the origin of the world, mankind, and the emergence of the peoples and languages of the world already received elaborate answers in the Bible. Ethnic and genealogical origin narratives could thus be attached to the genealogy of Adam or of the sons of Noah without further explanation. Jordanes prefixed an extensive summary of Biblical history to his *De origine actibusque gentis Romanae*.¹⁰ The *origines gentium*, describing the origins of peoples, have a long classical tradition, and were by no means limited to barbarians. The Romans were interested to know where all the peoples in the wider Roman world had come from, which also allowed inferences about their character.¹¹ This interest had its highs and lows, but became particularly relevant in the sixth century CE when the military elites of the post-Roman kingdoms sought to assert their difference from the majority population of their own kingdom and from the ruling groups of other ones, whereas educated representatives of the now mostly subaltern descendants of the Romans wanted to know more about their new rulers.¹²

The early medieval use of the term *origo gentis* was ambiguous. It could refer to an ancestor: Tacitus, in his *Germania* written in c. 100 CE, gives a brief genealogy of the Germani, and presents Mannus (›the man‹) as their first ancestor; he uses the term ›*origo gentis*‹ for Mannus.¹³ The term could also describe the emergence of a people: Jordanes called his Gothic history *De origine actibusque Getarum*, and that means that the book contained both the ›origin‹ and the ›deeds‹ of the peoples. The title could also cover the entire history of a people: the seventh-century *Origo gentis Langobardorum* relates under this title, although briefly, the whole period up to the 7th-century kings Grimoald and Perctarit with whom the *Origo* ends. In scholarly usage, the terms ›origin narrative‹ or ›*origo gentis*‹ are often limited to texts or

6 See the contribution by Naoise MacSweeney, in this volume.

7 Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel*.

8 *Origo gentis Romanae*, ed. Sehlmeier; Revell, *Ways of Being Roman*; Pohl, Introduction: Early Medieval Romanness.

9 Pohl, The Emergence of New Politics.

10 Jordanes, *Romana*. See Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, Introduction, 19–30.

11 Bickerman, *Origines gentium*; Fromentin and Gotteland (eds.), *Origines Gentium*, with the review by Eva Valvo, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, <https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2002/2002.07.12/>.

12 Anton *et al.*, *Origo gentis*. The new rulers might also underline their ancient relationship with the Romans, for instance in the Trojan origin myth of the Franks; cf. e.g. Kasperski, Some Considerations.

13 Tacitus, *Germania*, 2.

parts of text dealing with distant origins and migrations, previous to the arrival in the present homeland or the foundation of the present state. Alheydis Plassmann, in her influential monograph, has used them for the entire ›barbarian histories‹ by Jordanes, Paul the Deacon and others, far beyond the origin stories.¹⁴

Post-Roman Origin Narratives of the Continent, 6th-8th Centuries: A Brief Overview

Goths

The Gothic history (known as *Getica*; its full title is *De origine actibusque Getarum*, was written by Jordanes in the 550s.¹⁵ It contains one of the most elaborate, but also of the most-debated medieval European origin narratives.¹⁶ Jordanes was an educated citizen of the Eastern Roman (›Byzantine‹) Empire and came, as he indicates, from a Gothic and Alan milieu; he writes at the end: ›And that no one believes that I would have added anything in the favour of the people discussed above except the things I have read or learned, as happens when one draws one's origin from them.‹¹⁷ When he wrote, the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy, founded half a century before by King Theodoric, was finally on the threshold of succumbing to the Byzantine armies after a long and devastating war. Jordanes advocated an honourable and peaceful integration of these Goths into the Empire after its victory.¹⁸ His history relied, to an extent that is still controversial, on a previous (and lost) Gothic history written by Cassiodorus: a leading Roman senator who had occupied the highest civil offices under King Theodoric.¹⁹ From an opposite but similarly pro-Gothic perspective (a Roman serving Goths, instead of a Goth serving Romans) and in a rather different political situation, Cassiodorus had also supported Gothic integration on eye-level. For that purpose, he argued that the history of the Goths was at least as long and noble as that of the Romans, and that was what we also get in Jordanes.²⁰ The difference between them was that Cassiodorus endorsed the legitimacy of the Amals reigning in Italy, whereas Jordanes came from the Alan and Gothic environment of the mixed groups that had passed over into East Roman service after the death of Attila. They had chosen the path of Roman integration already a century ago, and that was what Jordanes supported by extolling their combination of noble and ancient history, military prowess and swift adoption of law and civilisation.²¹

14 Plassmann, *Origo gentis* (2006); ead., *Origo gentis* (2022). Of course, it makes sense to treat these histories, and their possible relevance for the legitimization of the kingdom and the identity of the people, in their entirety; but it makes more sense to limit our concept of ›origin narratives‹ to actual origins.

15 Jordanes, *Getica*, ed. Mommsen; trans. Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof.

16 Wolfram, *Goten*; Goffart, *Narrators*; Christensen, *Cassiodorus*.

17 Jordanes, *Getica* 60, ed. Mommsen, 316, trans. Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, 369. I find little reason to assume that Jordanes was instead of Roman origin.

18 Goffart, *The Narrators*, 95; Kasperski, *Origin Legend*. It does not follow from this intention that the arguments why the defeated Goths should remain in Roman lands were all invented, as Kasperski, *Jordanes versus Procopius*, assumes. For an extensive and balanced overview of the debates about the *Getica*, see Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, *Introduction*, 31–64.

19 Wolfram, *Goten*; Goffart, *The Narrators*; Gillett, *The mirror of Jordanes*; Christensen, *Cassiodorus*.

20 Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 9.25, ed. Fridh 379.

21 Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, *Introduction*,

Jordanes's themes, as he states at the end of the *Getica*, were »the origin of the Getae, the nobility of the Amals and the deeds of brave men«. ²² Like other late antique historians, for instance Orosius, he begins his *Getica* with an extensive ethnographic panorama of the relevant regions, in this case for the wide-ranging Gothic migrations. The northern island Thule, Scandza/Scandinavia and Britannia are highlighted. He lists many peoples supposed to live in Scandinavia, some of them stock names of ancient ethnography, found already in Ptolemy's passage on Scandinavia. ²³ Others names are otherwise unknown – information about them is attributed to a certain Roduulf, King of the Ranii, who had come to visit Theoderic, king of the Ostrogoths, some time ago. Scandinavia, Jordanes maintains according to an ancient ethnographic stereotype, is a place where many peoples originate, *quasi officina gentium aut certe velut vagina nationum*. Then the migration story begins:

And thus from this island of Scandza, as from a workshop of peoples (*officina gentium*) or rather, like a scabbard of nations (*vagina nationum*), the Goths are said to have emerged at some point under a king called Berig. As soon as they left their ships and made landfall, they immediately gave a name to the place. For that place is still, so it is said, called Gothiscandza. Moving quickly onward from there to the land of the Ulmerugi, who then inhabited the shores of the Ocean, they pitched camp, started a battle, and drove the Ulmerugi from their homes. And then they also subdued the neighbours of this people, the Vandals, and thus added them to their conquests. ²⁴

The passage quoted above contains many elements that were to become characteristic of medieval ethnic origin narratives. Scandinavia and Scythia were two of the preferred countries of origin in migration narratives, along with Troy; sometimes Macedonia, Britain or Spain played a role. ²⁵ These lands were mostly situated at the margins of Europe, lands known above all from legends and long reputed as places of emigration. It seems to have enhanced the prestige of a people (or a person) to have come from the »outmost boundaries of Europe (*de extremis finibus Europae*)«, as a poem composed around 700 in Italy says about the Longobards. ²⁶ Migrants crossed the sea, defeated other peoples to assert their right of residence, and left their name on their new land. And they had a founder king, from whom much later kings could derive their legitimacy – although in the case of Jordanes, interestingly, the genealogy of Theoderic's Amal dynasty does not include the leader of the exodus from Scandza, King Berig, and other kings he mentions. A sixth-century invention streamlined to enhance the glory of the Amals would hardly have built in such a contradiction to Cassiodorus's claim that the Amals had »as many kings as ancestors« in their pedigree. ²⁷

22 Jordanes, *Getica*, 60, ed. Mommsen, 315, trans. Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, 368; Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, Introduction, 61.

23 Merrills, *History and Geography*, 147.

24 Jordanes, *Getica*, 4.25-26, ed. Mommsen, trans. Van Nuffelen 232-233; Wolfram, *Origo gentis*.

25 Reynolds, *Medieval origins gentium*.

26 *Carmen de synodo Ticinensi*, ed. Bethmann, 190: »ortus in finibus Europe«; Walahfrid, ed. Krusch, 280-337, 282, l. 30 – Saint Gallus arrives »de extremis finibus orbis«. Reimitz, *Grenzen und Grenzüberschreitungen*. See also Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, Introduction, 44-48.

27 Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 9, 25, 5, ed. Fridh, 379.

Berig's fifth successor Filimer led a part of the Goths on to Scythia, called Oium in Gothic. At this point, Jordanes blends the Scandinavian origin story of the Goths, for which he is the only source, smoothly into the rich material that classical ethnography and historiography offered about Scythia, the Scythians and other peoples who had lived in the lands north and west of the Black Sea.²⁸ This is not Jordanes', or rather, Cassiodorus' invention: »None of these identifications is without precedent«. ²⁹ Since the Scythians had gradually vanished in the first centuries of the Common Era, »Scythians« had become an ethnographic category, and was applied to Sarmatians, Alans, Goths, Huns and many other peoples from the Eastern European steppes. Therefore, Jordanes could easily identify the Goths with the ancient Scythians who had lived north of the Black Sea a thousand years before, but also with the Getae (attested in the Balkans in the Hellenistic and early Roman period) and the Dacians (whom the Romans had fought north of the Danube in the 1st century CE). As the Scythians, the Goths are also linked with the mythical Amazons, who played an important part as terrifying but also attractive female warriors in the Greek and Roman imagination.³⁰ In a sense, Jordanes (and not unlikely, already Cassiodorus) put the ethnographic notion that all these peoples could be classed as Scythians on its head by claiming that they were all Goths. The origin story from Scandza/Scandinavia is added as a prequel to this grandiose construction.

From a late stage in the learned summary of the barbarian neighbours of Greece and Rome in the north-eastern steppes, the narrative switches once more to distant origins, and Jordanes introduces the genealogy of the dynasty of the Amals, the family of Theoderic. Jordanes remarks that the Goths regarded their Amal leaders, »whose fortune brought them victory, not as pure men, but as half-gods, that is, Ansis«. ³¹ The genealogy begins: »The first was Gapt, who begat Hulmul. Hulmul begat Augis: and Augis begat him, who was Amal, from whom the origin of the Amals proceeds«, and so on until Athalaric in the seventeenth generation. This was propaganda for the Amal family that ruled Italy until 536, and it can very plausibly be attributed to Cassiodorus. In a speech written for Theoderic's grandson Athalaric in the senate, Cassiodorus had boastfully mentioned that Athalaric was the seventeenth in a genealogy of as many kings as ancestors, in order to convince the senate that the new king's genealogy was at least as ancient and noble as theirs.³² It was in this same speech that Athalaric thanked Cassiodorus for having written a history of the Goths.

Gothic history could be told quite differently, with little reference to ancient origins. Isidore of Seville's *History of the Goths*, written in the Visigothic kingdom in the early 7th century, only picks a few events from the period of (Visi-)Gothic migrations, and focuses on the history of the Visigothic kingdom in Spain.³³ He also identifies Goths and Scythians, but

28 Müller, *Geschichte der antiken Ethnographie*; Merrills, *History and Geography*; Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*; Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians*; Maas, *The Conqueror's Gift*.

29 Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, Introduction, 51.

30 Mayor, *The Amazons*; Pohl, Gender and ethnicity.

31 Jordanes, *Getica*, 13, ed. Mommsen, 78. Wolfram, *Gotische Studien*, 27-29.

32 Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 9, 25, 5, ed. Fridh, 379. Wolfram, *Goten* 16; id., *Gotische Studien*, 218, with further Roman and Biblical examples for 17 generations. Sceptical Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, Introduction, 61.

33 Isidore, *History of the Kings of the Goths*, 2.21, trans. Wolf.

only with the explanation that the two names are almost identical, if you simply removed the »S« in »Scythians«, and no further historical information. For Isidore, origins were best explained by the etymology of the word or name; his huge encyclopaedic work, the *Etymologies*, was therefore also called »Origines«.³⁴ Isidore of Seville was a pivotal figure in the efforts of the Iberian bishops to pacify the quarrelsome Gothic kings, and had no reason to remind those Goths of their pagan ancestors.³⁵

Longobards

Another Scandinavian origin story is transmitted for the Longobards, in a text written down in the 660s/670s and called *Origo gentis Langobardorum* (Origin of the Longobard people).³⁶ In the late 8th century, the monk Paul the Deacon copied it quite faithfully into his *Longobard History*, although he warned his readers twice that it was a »ridiculous fable«.³⁷ He added further legendary elements of a Longobard migration story, especially about the later king Lamissio who was abandoned as a baby and found by a princess, like Moses, and later fought Amazons in a river.³⁸

Just as the Goths, the Longobards were supposed to have come from Scandinavia, here in the version of the *Origo gentis Langobardorum*:

There is an island called Scadanan, which is interpreted »destructions« (*excidia*), in the regions of the north, where many peoples dwell.³⁹ Among these there was a small people that was called the Winnili. And with them was a woman, Gambara by name, and she had two sons. Ybor was the name of one and Agio the name of the other. They, with their mother, Gambara by name, ruled over the Winnili. Then the leaders of the Vandals, that is, Ambri and Assi, moved with their army, and said to the Winnili: »Either pay us tribute or prepare yourselves for battle and fight with us.«⁴⁰

The Winnili chose to fight. The Vandals asked Godan/Wodan (the Germanic god of war, but also of fore-knowledge) to give them victory, and Godan answered: »Whom I shall first see at sunrise, to them will I give the victory.« Gambara, on the other hand, solicited help from Godan's wife, the goddess Freya.

Then Freya gave counsel that at sunrise the Winnili should come, and that their women, with their hair let down around the face in the likeness of a beard, should also come with their husbands. Then when it became bright, while the sun was rising, Freya, the wife of Godan, turned around the bed where her husband was lying and put his face towards the east and

34 Isidore, *Etymologiae*. Henderson, *The Medieval World of Isidore*.

35 Wood, *The Politics of Identity*; Buchberger, *Origin Legends*.

36 *Origo gentis Langobardorum*, ed. Bethmann and Waitz; Pohl, *Origo gentis Langobardorum*; id., *Historical writing*; Coumert, *Origines des peuples*; Costambeys, *Origin legends*.

37 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 8, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 54-56; Pohl, *Historical Writing*.

38 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 1, 15-17, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 54-56.

39 The etymological remark that *Scadanan* was derived from Germanic *skadan-* (damage, danger, German »Schaden«) occurs only in the *Origo*. Cf. Reichert, *Skandia(e)*.

40 *Origo gentis Langobardorum* 1, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 2-3; in all quotes revised after the translation by Foulke, 315-316; cf. Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 1, 7, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 54-56

awakened him. And he, looking at them, saw the Winnili and their women having their hair let down around the face. And he said, »Who are these Long-beards?« And Frea said to Godan, »As you have given them a name, give them also the victory.« He was now obliged to give them victory, and from that time the Winnili were called Langobards.⁴¹

The story is remarkable for many reasons. There is a strong element of female agency in it; two pairs of brothers with emblematic names appear; and two Germanic divinities play decisive roles in it.

The Frankish Fredegar Chronicle, terminated around the same time as the *Origo gentis Langobardorum*, also relates the story around the same time (c. 670) in modified form – Scandinavia is on the continent, and the battle is fought against the Huns – and openly condemns »these peoples« who believe that their god, »whom in a heathen manner (*fanatice*) they call Wodan«, had given them the name.⁴² This parallel transmission supports the hypothesis that Queen Gundeperga or King Perctarit, who descended from the ancient Lething dynasty in the female line through Frankish marriages, may have commissioned the *Origo*.⁴³ That may explain the attention to female agency in the text, which untypically also features queens in its genealogy. The Longobard origin story is only purged of its pagan remnants in a Frankish-inspired version of c. 810 that introduces a Christian providential element instead: they migrated »not by necessity«, but »to attain salvation from above«.⁴⁴

Further Continental Examples

By far the widest diffusion of origin stories in the course of the Middle Ages is attested for the Franks. Its earliest substantial transmission comes in the Fredegar Chronicle, compiled in several stages up to c. 670, and in the *Liber Historiae Francorum* of c. 715.⁴⁵ It adopts the Trojan origin story of the Romans, and adds a number of more topical bits of information. Among them, there is Fredegar's remarkable genealogy of eponymous founders of peoples that descended from the Trojan king Priamus: Priam's successor was Friga, ancestor of the Phrygians, from whom the Macedonians broke away; in the next generation, there was another division between Francio, the name-giver of the Franks, and Torcoth, from whom the Turks descended.⁴⁶ It is an unexpected selection of related *gentes*: there are no Germanic peoples among them; and there is no explicit mention of the Romans either. Another much-discussed element is the genealogy of the Frankish kings. Merovech, the eponymous founder of the Merovingian dynasty, was King Clovis's grandfather.⁴⁷ Fredegar sows some doubt

41 *Origo gentis Langobardorum* 1, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 2-3; Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Langobardorum*, 1, 7-10, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 52-53.

42 Fredegar, *Chronicle* 3.65, ed. Krusch 110.

43 Pohl, *Origo gentis Langobardorum*.

44 *Historia Langobardorum codicis Gothani* 1, ed. Bethmann and Waitz.

45 Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity*.

46 Fredegar, *Chronicle* 3.2, ed. Krusch, 93; 3.9, ed. Krusch, 95, underlines that the later kings of the Franks came »from the stock (*genus*) of Priamus, Friga and Francio«.

47 Fredegar, *Chronicle* 3.9, ed. Krusch, 95.

whether his father had actually been King Chlodio from the Trojan lineage, or a sea monster comparable to a »Quinotaurus« that Chlodio's wife had encountered on the beach.⁴⁸

For other post-Roman *gentes*, no extensive texts exist before the ninth century, apart from mentions in Tacitus or other ethnographic texts of the imperial age. An etymological explanation for the name of the Burgundians is mentioned in Ammianus Marcellinus and later in Orosius: »In earlier times, when the interior of Germany had been subjugated by Drusus and Tiberius, the adopted sons of Caesar, the Burgundians were stationed at different frontier posts. Later they united to form a great people. They took their name from their stations, for the dwelling places at frequent intervals along the frontier are commonly called *burgi*.«⁴⁹ According to the eighth-century *Passio* of St. Sigismund, the sanctified Burgundian king, the Burgundians originated on the island of Scanadavia, after which they had initially been called Scandinavians until the emperor Tiberius had settled them in forts, *burgus*, on the Rhine.⁵⁰ From then on they were called *Burgundofarones* and later Burgundians.

Some notion of Scandinavian origins is also reported in the 6th century for the Heruls. Procopius tells the story that some Heruls migrated to Thule (which he obviously uses for Scandinavia⁵¹) after the defeat against the Longobards; and those who settled in southern Pannonia sent envoys there to get a king from their royal dynasty.⁵² According to Jordanes' *Getica*, the Heruls were among the most prestigious people on the island of Scandinavia.⁵³ He also mentions Ostrogoths in Scandinavia, but no Winnili/Longobards. For other *gentes*, no origin story has been transmitted. The Vandals just received cameo appearances in early stages of the Gothic and Longobard origin stories, but no account of their own.⁵⁴ About the Gepids, we have Jordanes' assertion that their name was derived from *gepanta*, lazy, because they had arrived late when they crossed the Sea from Scandinavia together with the Goths.⁵⁵

For the Huns, Priscus, Procopius and Jordanes all repeat the story of a doe that showed the Huns a passage across the Maeotis, the Sea of Azov, upon which they attacked the Goths.⁵⁶ As Sandra Wabnitz shows in her contribution, a story of a leading beast (here regarded as animal spirit) is also transmitted in the Chinese *Weishu*, the chronicle of the 5th/6th-

48 Fredegar, *Chronicle* 3.9, ed. Krusch, 95.

49 Ammianus Marcellinus, 28.5; Orosius, *Historiae Adversus Paganos*, 7.32; Anton. Origo gentis, 238

50 *Passio Sancti Sigismundi Regis* 1, ed. Krusch 333: Tempore Tyberii senioris Augusti [...] egressa est gens de insula, quam mare Oceanum cingit, cuius vocabulum est Scanadavia, qui ex vocabulo quoque regionis Scanadavii nuncupati sunt. Cumque alia regna vel regiones mulieribus et prolis suis penetrassent et ad Renum fluvium pervenissent, ibi a iussione Tyberii imperatoris detenti, burgus ultra Renum fluvium per multorum annorum spacia custodire coacti sunt, unde et Burgundofarones nuncupati sunt et usque hodie Burgundiones vocantur.

51 Cf. Kasperski, The origin legend, 142: »Where Procopius places Thule, Jordanes places Scandinavia«.

52 Procopius, *Wars* 6.15, ed. Dewing, vol. 3, 414-425.

53 Jordanes, *Getica* 3.19-24, ed. Mommsen, 58-59; trans. Van Nuffelen/Van Hoof, 228-232.

54 There is a brief passage in Dexippos, fr. 29, ed. Martin; in which he »offers an account of the origins of the Vandals that is, quite frankly, incredible«, claiming that they had inhabited a region between the ocean and the Roman frontiers that was so huge that it needed a year to cross: David Potter, *Dexippos' Gothic anthropology*, 359.

55 Jordanes, *Getica*, ed. Mommsen.

56 Priscus, fr. 1, ed. Blockley, 223-25; Procopius, *Wars* 8, 5, 7-9; Jordanes, *Getica*, 121-26.

century Northern Wei dynasty, for the migration of the Tuoba branch of the Xianbei.⁵⁷ Jordanes offers an un-classical explanation for the origin of the Huns: Gothic witches, whom he calls *Haliurunnae*, were expelled and mated with unclean spirits from the steppe.⁵⁸ For the Avars, the Byzantines received information about their origins from diplomatic exchanges with the Turks. These contradicted the obvious explanation that the Avars were a part of the Rouran/Avars who had fled after having being defeated by the Turks, and claimed that they were only Pseudo-Avars, and in reality Ogur groups of Var and Chunni who had united and should therefore be called Varchonites.⁵⁹ The controversial discussion about this question now seems decided after archaeogenetic analysis has now found substantial east Asian ancestry in hundreds of Avar-period burials in Eastern Central Europe.⁶⁰ The spread of Bulgars across several parts of Europe in the seventh century is attributed in Byzantine chronicles to five brothers, each of whom went their separate ways, as discussed in Daniel Ziemann's contribution in the issue.⁶¹

These examples of people of the period lacking a more elaborate *origo gentis* proper demonstrate that even so, their origins could matter. They did not only concern Roman intellectuals, but also other peoples, for instance Goths (in the case of Huns and Gepids) or Turks (about the Avars).

Origin Legends in the British Isles

In Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written in the 730s, the main interest is, as the title says, in the conversion of the English and in the development of their Church. Their origin narrative is, therefore, much reduced:

Then the people of the Angles, or Saxons, being invited by the aforesaid king (Vortigern), arrived in Britain with three long ships, and had a place assigned them to reside in by the same king, in the eastern part of the island, ostensibly to fight on behalf of their country, whilst their real intentions were to conquer it. (...) Those who came over were of three very powerful peoples of Germania – Saxons, Angles, and Jutes. (...) Their first leaders are said to have been two brothers, Hengist and Horsa. Horsa was afterwards killed in battle by the Britons, was buried in the eastern parts of Kent, where a monument, bearing his name, is still in existence. They were the sons of Wihtgisl, whose father was Witta, whose father was Wecta, son of Woden, from whose stock the royal stock of many provinces claimed their descent.⁶²

This genealogy of the leaders of the Angles and Saxons goes back to Woden in just five generations; no divine nature or supernatural power is associated with him in Bede's account. The different versions of the migration story in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle/s* are all based on the

57 *Weishu* 1.2. see the contribution by Sandra Wabnitz, in this volume

58 Jordanes, *Getica*, 24, ed. Mommsen, 121.

59 Theophylactus Simocatta, 7, 7-8, trans. Whitby; Pohl, *Avars*; Pohl, *Kingdoms of the Eurasian Steppe*.

60 Gneecchi-Ruscione *et al.*, *Ancient Genomes Reveal Trans-Eurasian Connections*; Wang, Tobias *et al.*, *Ancient DNA Reveals Reproductive Barrier*.

61 Nicephorus 21, ed. Mango; Theophanes a. 6171, trans. Mango and Scott, 358.

62 Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.15, ed. Colgrave and Mynors 150-51,

narrative of the arrival of Hengist and Horsa, but also supply further names and genealogies of groups arrived later who had become ancestors of regional dynasties of England: notably, Cerdic and Cynric (Cerdic's son) who came with five ships and founded the kingdom of the West Saxons.⁶³ As Bede remarks, the dynasties of many kingdoms had originated from Woden's lineage.⁶⁴ The god Saxnot, who had also been revered among the Saxons on the continent, featured at the beginning of the genealogies of the kings of Essex, where he was eventually made a son of Woden.⁶⁵ Asser's *Life of Alfred* starts with King Alfred's extensive genealogy ascending via Cerdic, Scyld, the founder of the Danish (Scylding) dynasty, Wodan and Geat to Noah and Adam.⁶⁶ Asser states that Geat had been venerated as a god by the pagans, but identifies him with Roman »comedy's absurd Geta«, an unusual strategy to neutralise supposedly divine ancestry. A second and briefer genealogy of Alfred's mother follows, with a claim that her grandfather »was descended from the Goths and Jutes«. The Biblical genealogy of the sons of Noah is prefixed to the, formerly pagan, divine descent of the dynasty.

Early medieval origin stories were also told of other peoples in the British Isles, the Britons, the Irish and also the Picts.⁶⁷ We have early attestations of origin narratives in British sources, Gildas who probably wrote in the 6th century and the *Historia Brittonum*, which originated in c. 830; and in several Irish texts, the earliest of about 700, »The Primer of the Poets«, *Auraicept na nÉces*, and the most inclusive, the 11th-century compilation of the *Lebor Gabálae Éirenn*, »The Book of the Settlement of Ireland«. Many of these texts address the question of origins of several or all peoples in the British Isles (as Bede does). The origin of the Britons was usually attached to the Trojan origin myth of the Romans, and goes back to a certain Brutus, supposed to be a grandson of Aeneas. He was not the kind of eponymous hero to be proud of. As the *Historia Brittonum* relates, Aeneas had a wizard examine his pregnant daughter-in-law, and the wizard prophesized that this child would kill his mother and father, and be hateful to all men. After this devastating announcement, Aeneas's other son killed the wizard, the mother died in childbirth, and as a boy, Brutus killed his father by accident when he shot an arrow. As a consequence, he was banned from both Italy and Greece, and finally came to Britain which was as yet uninhabited.

The origin of the Irish in the *Auraicept* begins with the origin of the Irish language, set in the biblical story of the Tower of Babylon and the confusion of languages: »Fénus Farrsaid invented it at Nimrod's tower at the end of ten years after the dispersal from the tower, and it is every one speaking the same language that went from there to his territory and not every one of the same kindred.«⁶⁸ It is remarkable that here the criterium of identification explicitly

63 *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 2-5, trans. Swanton.

64 Hengist and Horsa erant autem filii Victigisili, cuius pater Vitta, cuius pater Vecta, cuius pater Voden, de cuius stirpe multarum provinciarum regum genus originem duxit. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.15, ed. Colgrave/Mynors, 50-51, cf. *ibid.* 2.5, ed. Colgrave/Mynors, 150-151; cf. Dumville, *Kingship, Genealogies and Regnal Lists*, 79.

65 Dumville, *The West Saxon Genealogical Regnal List*.

66 Asser, *Life of Alfred*, 1-2, trans. Keynes and Lapidge.

67 Brady, *The Origin Legends of Early Medieval Britain*; Charles-Edwards, *Origin legends in Ireland*.

68 Charles-Edwards, *Origin legends in Ireland*; Brady, *Origin Legends of Early Medieval Britain*, 123.

is not kinship and common origin, but the shared language. Most origin narratives that use Old Testament material derive their first ancestor from one of the sons of Noah in the story of the flood, which implies identification by common origin; here, it is language. Already Isidore, in his *Etymologies*, had connected the origins of the *gentes* with the division of languages, although he also linked them with the sons of Noah.⁶⁹

A different version of Irish origins is first attested in some detail in the *Historia Brittonum*, in which the Irish come from Spain, and not without problems: »Partholon came first with a thousand, men and women, and they grew until they were four thousand, men and women, and a plague came upon them, and in one week they all died, and there remained not one of them. Nemet, son of Agnoman, came second to Ireland, and is said to have sailed over the sea for a year and a half, and then made port in Ireland, by shipwreck, and stayed there many years, and set sail again with his people, and returned to Spain ...« At the third attempt, all the people on 30 ships were overwhelmed by the sea after landing, except one ship that had already been shipwrecked, but whose crew had survived. It was their offspring that gradually filled all Ireland, plus later arrivals from Spain.⁷⁰ Thomas Charles-Edwards has called this Spanish origin story the »Milesian legend« because in its Irish version the settlers are led by a man called Míl, or in Latin, *miles Hispaniae*, the soldier from Spain.⁷¹

A ninth-century poet, Máel Muru, produced an integrated version of the Auraicept and the Milesian story, which bridges the gap between the Tower of Babylon and the Spanish origins by extensive overseas travel; Thomas Charles-Edwards summarises it as follows: »When the people of Israel, led by Moses, escaped from Egypt to undertake their long migration across the desert to the land of Canaan, the kindred of Nél grandson of Fénus escaped from Egypt aboard ship, down the Red Sea ›past India, past Asia‹, back to Scythia from where Fénus had come. Subsequently they migrated again to Crete, Sicily, and then to Spain, ready for the final journey across the sea northwards, from Galicia to Ireland.«⁷² In the 11th-century *Lebor gabála*, The Book of the Taking of Ireland, the Gaels (Scots) are presented as descendants of Noah's son Japhet and of the Scythians. They arrive in Ireland via the Iberian Peninsula, and encounter first a mysterious woman, who tells them she is also descended from Adam, which prompts further questions about the way she descends from Noah.⁷³ Among the erudite Irish clerics, the Old Testament and the classical tradition had already become the main resource to answer questions of origin, and to construct evermore complex routes of ancestral *peregrinatio*.

These British and Irish origin legends show that the origins of a people and the deeds of its ancestors did not have to be heroic. They could include long detours, fatal coincidences, terrible prophecies and even an outcast as name-giving ancestor. The Irish and British origin legends are no exception. Romulus, the founder of Rome, killed his own brother Remus when the latter broke the taboo and jumped over the city wall, perhaps an indication that a true

69 Isidore, *Etymologiae* 9.1-2, ed. Lindsay.

70 Brady, *Origin Legends of Early Medieval Britain*, 47.

71 Charles-Edwards, *Origin legends in Ireland*.

72 Charles-Edwards, *Origin legends in Ireland*.

73 See also Brady and Wadden, *Introduction*, 1; Brady, *Origin Legends of Early Medieval Britain*, 58-62.

Roman had to take the necessities of the Roman state more serious than his family bonds.⁷⁴ Such negative tones may be surprising because these legends were supposed to be fundamental for the construction of identities. But of course, these identities were most needed in times of hardship, and the stories certainly underlined that in all calamities the forefathers had shown tremendous perseverance and followed their leaders at all costs. The predominantly heroic and positive notes of the Gothic and the Longobard origin stories were not a given. Especially Jordanes, and Cassiodorus before him, were clearly intent to convince their Roman readers of the illustrious role of the Goths throughout history.

Later Origin Narratives

The origins of the Saxons on the continent are elaborated in Rudolf of Fulda's 9th-century *Translatio S. Alexandri* and in Widukind's *Deeds of the Saxons* (10th c.).⁷⁵ Rudolf maintains that the Saxons had come to the continent from England, and thus turns the actual migration of the Saxons to Britain on its head. In his narrative, the Saxons had landed on the continent in a place called Haduloha, and later defeated the Thuringians in an alliance with the Frankish king Theuderic to win their land. Widukind underlines that at his time, several opinions existed about Saxon origins: »Opinions about their origin differ, as some believe that the Saxons have their origins from Danes and Normans, but others think, as I have heard someone argue in my youth, that they came from the Greeks, because they say that the Saxons were the remains of the Macedonian army which had followed Alexander the Great, but after his untimely death had been dispersed across the whole world. (...) However, we know for sure that the Saxons have come to this region by ship and had first landed in a place that is still called Hadolaun today.«⁷⁶ Then follows the story of their victory over the Thuringians. A multiplicity of stories and variants is not unusual; Jordanes fiercely contradicts a derogatory story about Gothic origins in Britain, which indicates that many people must have believed it.

Later origin stories include the Norman histories by Dudo of Saint-Quentin and William of Jumièges, who derive the Danes from the Dacians = Goths. Dudo moreover equals them with the Danai, the Greeks, but believes that these were the Trojans: an impressive synthesis of the main migration narratives in previous origin stories.⁷⁷ In this case, the obvious Scandinavian origins clearly were not enough. Saxo Grammaticus, who wrote a history of the Danes around 1200, briefly mentions Dudo's identification with the Danai, but instead of migration stories, concentrates on genealogy: Humli was the father of Dan and

74 Livy 1,8; Dench, *Romulus' Asylum*.

75 Rudolf of Fulda, *Translatio S. Alexandri* 1, ed. Pertz, 674: Saxonum gens, sicut tradit antiquitas, ab Anglis Britanniae incolis egressa, per Oceanum navigans Germaniae litoribus studio et necessitate quaerendarum sedium appulsa est, in loco qui vocatur Haduloha, eo tempore quo Thiotricus rex Francorum contra Irminfridum generum suum, ducem Thuringorum, dimicans ... quibus secum quasi iam pro libertate et patria fortiter dimicantibus, superavit adversarios, vastatisque indigenis et ad internitionem pene deletis, terram eorum iuxta pollicitationem suam victoribus delegavit.

76 Rudolf of Fulda, *Translatio S. Alexandri*, 1-3; Widukind, *Res gestae Saxonicae* 1.2-3, ed. Lohmann; Flierman, *Saxon Identities*.

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

Angul, from whom Danes and English sprang, and grandfather of Skiold, name-giver of the Danish dynasty.⁷⁸

In the 12th and 13th centuries, the origins of the new Christian polities in eastern Europe appear in histories whose authors knew a lot about biblical and/or classical and early medieval origin stories: Nestor in the *Primary Chronicle* of the Rus', Cosmas for the Czechs, Gallus for the Poles and the Anonymous Master P for the Hungarians.⁷⁹ The *Primary Chronicle* begins with one of the most extensive Old-Testament-based genealogies of peoples in medieval historiography. Then it claims that the Slavs came from Pannonia, which relies on the Lives of Constantine and Methodius who gave the impulse to Slavic literacy. Only then it switches to the Poljane and other Slavic tribes in the core area of the Kievan Rus'.⁸⁰

Cosmas tells the story of a group of migrants, of unknown name, unknown origin, and unknown number, who arrive in an empty land of plenty, Bohemia, which is named after their leader about whom we hear little apart from his name.⁸¹ It is remarkable that the author shows little interest in the origin of this people, let alone of the Slavs in general, or in telling a heroic story about migration and conquest. Cosmas was a cultured cleric educated in Flanders, with a deep admiration for the Roman Empire of his time, who had to represent the interests of the papal and imperial church in a less than stable polity on its border. The search for origins did not necessarily have to reach far back into the past, to Greeks, Trojans or Scandinavians – sometimes a simple »nobody knows anything« could end in a real success: The story that Cosmas created about the arrival of the nobodies from nowhere proved so powerful that it survived without any changes until the dawn of modernity in the duchy and later kingdom of Bohemia.

The first Polish Chronicle by the so-called Gallus Anonymus was even less interested in the origins of the Poles, but only in the beginnings of their dynasty.⁸² To fill this gap, late medieval historiography reformulated Cosmas' story about the not-really-exciting conquest of Bohemia so that it could also provide a suitable origin story for neighbouring countries: according to this, Lech and Rus, two brothers of Bohemus/Czech, leader of the newcomers into pristine Bohemia, migrated further and occupied the areas north and east of Bohemia, Poland and Rus. The new Christian polities, Poland and Bohemia, also shared the second part of the origin story, about the beginnings of rule – both tell the story of a leader who, from the humblest of circumstances, rises to the highest dignity through the will of the people (which might build on the Gallus story in the Polish case). In the case of the first Bohemian duke, Przemysl, his claim is legitimised by his magical connection with nature, which identifies him as a hero – his name, translated from West Slavic-Czech into Latin, can mean Prometheus. So, Greek origins do appear after all, albeit only as a well-hidden linguistic joke. Cosmas,

78 Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 1, vol. 1: 18-21. Humli reminds one of Hulmul, son of Gapt, in Jordanes' Genealogy in the Getica.

79 Garipzanov (ed.), *Historical Narratives*. For this and the following, Pohl, Borri and Wieser (eds.), *Historiography & Identity* 5; Pohl, *Historiography of the New Europe*.

80 *Nestor Chronicle*, 1-27, ed. Müller 1-6; Tolochko, *Creating Time*; Ostrowski, *The debate*, 450-84.

81 Cosmas of Prague, *History of the Czechs*, 1.3-4; Wolverton, *Cosmas*; Rychterová, *The Legenda Christiani*.

82 Dalewski, *Creating Dynastic Identity*.

trained in Liège at one of the best cathedral schools in the Empire, found ways to display his literary skills.

Legendary origin narratives of the Hungarians from an outside perspective start, within years after their establishment in the Carpathian Basin (c. 900), in the *Chronicle* of Regino of Prüm, among others, with an etymological speculation deriving their name from the German word for hunger, because they had been forced to migrate by a famine.⁸³ At the tenth-century court in Constantinople, Constantine Porphyrogenitus collected rich material from the archives, including several origin narratives of Eastern European peoples, including Serbs, Croats, Chazars and, not least, the Hungarians, whom he calls Turks.⁸⁴ He mentions ancestral tribes, the names of former homelands and of early rulers, which may be based on recorded information. In Hungary itself, texts about origins are only transmitted from the 12th century in the *Deeds of the Hungarians* by the anonymous notary P, and sometime later, by Simon of Kéza.⁸⁵ These narratives mostly build on ancient legends about the arrival of the Scythians and Huns (led across the Sea of Azov by a doe), they may contain double immigration (Huns return east and come back as Hungarians), and include the identification with the apocalyptic riders of the Bible, Gog and Magog, as in Isidore's Gothic history. In the origin stories of the new Christian kingdoms, mostly written centuries after their foundation, adapting to biblical, classical and previous models of ethnic origin legends seems to have been the main concern. We may wonder whether pre-Christian myths about the origins of one's own community were not accessible, or of little value to most authors. Rather, these narratives represent transnational dialogues about the origins of a multiplicity of ethnic or regional groups, and the prestigious position that each of them could occupy in this varied world of *gentes* and kingdoms.

Shared Ontologies and Discursive Shifts in Origin Narratives

Conceptual Problems

Conceptualizing differences between our mindset and that of the people who told stories about ethnic origins as divergent »ontologies«, as sketched in the introduction, is a precarious enterprise. Yet as the introduction has argued, it could help us to overcome the juxtaposition between »authentic tradition« and »literary creation«. First, we need to differentiate. »Ontology« describes what a society regards as existent or non-existent, and thus also what can be regarded as possible elements in a narrative. »Epistemology« regards what we can and what we should know, and how we can find out whether it is true or at least credible. »Discourse« circumscribes all that is being said in a society, and how these statements or texts are related to each other. That can be categorised as a whole set of discourses in different social fields or textual genres. Discourses validate ontologies and epistemologies, but are also shaped on them, and depend on powers that control discourses – anything between

83 Cf. Regino of Prüm, *Chronicon*, a. 889.

84 Constantin Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio* 38, trans. Moravcsik and Jenkins, 170-75.

85 Anonymus, *The Deeds of the Hungarians*; Simon of Kéza, *Gesta Hungarorum*; Veszprémy, *Christian Identity*.

parents telling a child what not to say, and the Spanish inquisition that bans a whole set of discursive elements as heretical.

First of all, this distinction regards our own research: It makes a difference whether we doubt that we can make valid statements about things in the past, which is an epistemological question; or whether we deny that these things existed, which in an ontological assessment. It has become mainstream to assume that what origin narratives can tell us is only what those who wrote them believed, and nothing about the actual origins of a people.⁸⁶ That is a plausible epistemological doubt. Many also claim that these peoples did not really exist, but were only constructed; consequently, origin narratives cannot contain any meaningful knowledge or tradition. and not what those who had transmitted such narratives had known or thought about that. That is an ontological claim.⁸⁷ Tracing the uses of the past at the time of writing, and later during the transmission of the written text is indeed a valuable approach. But the texts we have are clearly multi-layered, and far from being consistent narratives that can be attributed to one author. For instance, Jordanes blends classical traditions about Scythians and Dacians and the topos of Scandinavian origins with a set of information unknown from previous written texts. Paul the Deacon couches the distinctively non-ethnographic story how the Longobards got their name into motifs from the Bible. According to Paul, King Lamissio had been abandoned as a baby, found and adopted at court, similar to Moses, and fights the Amazons taken from classical mythology).⁸⁸ Cosmas merges the Biblical story of Moses with Greek mythology in classical Latin disguise with local narratives. Such elements and changes in the texts can be traced in the manuscript transmission of a text, but also be made plausible through the analysis of a transmitted text.

What Herwig Wolfram defined as »pre-ethnographic« or »non-ethnographic« information, unattested in the rich body of classical ethnography, should not simply be dismissed.⁸⁹

It is clear that the romantic and nationalistic reconstructions of »authentic« myths ignored the Roman and Christian framing of the transmitted texts, and they have been sufficiently disproven. However, Roman construction of »barbarian« origin narratives is not a sufficient hypothesis to explain all elements in them, Roman ethnography represents an imperial discourse of the »Other«, but it had to rely on discursive elements of these others (the same point could be made about Chinese perceptions of nomads).⁹⁰ We can understand some of the process in which these elements were integrated if we distinguish between the Roman ethnographic tradition, the Christian framing and the indigenous elements preserved in the Latin texts, without reifying these different backgrounds. The texts were written down in a context in which the despised »barbarians« had grabbed power, and they handled the balance between the divergent discourses in rather different ways. In a Christian and mostly post-Roman context, these narratives manoeuvred along a Roman-barbarian and a Christian-pagan axis.

86 Brady and Wadden, Introduction, 15.

87 Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making*.

88 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, 1, 9-10, ed. Bethmann and Waitz 54-55.

89 Wolfram, *Origo gentis*, 174.

90 Cf. Skaff, *Sui-Tang China*.

The Christian/pagan and the Roman/barbarian binaries represent the schemes of alterity in which perceived religious and cultural differences between humans were expressed in the period. There are many reasons why the actual diversity in these fields cannot be reduced to these binaries. After all, the authors were either descendants of barbarians who had received a thorough Roman education, or educated Romans who catered to the interests of a ruling elite of barbarian background. Therefore, these juxtapositions are unhelpful in an analysis of origin narratives. The reconstructions of authentic »Germanic« myth that older research proposed were inadequate not because these narratives were in fact Roman ethnographic fantasies, as recent researchers have believed, but because the assumption of an authentic layer of Germanic culture relied on the heavily-ideologised binary model of Romans vs. barbarians.⁹¹ The same assumption was still at the basis of the positivist/deconstructionist critique, and was the reason why it sought to refute the entire complex of possibly »Germanic« and »ethnic« elements in these narratives and attributed it all to Roman ethnographic fantasy.⁹² Pushing binary schemes to their extremes is unhelpful. It is a more productive approach to explore the entire range of differences in the origin stories. These narratives were not immutable traditions, but moving targets, and we can get glimpses of how they moved through time.

Shared Ontologies

If we adopt the criterion of differing ontologies, we note that many basic assumptions about what can be real and what cannot, are shared between Roman and non-Roman narratives. This observation has to be handled with care because Christian authors with classical education tended to regard non-Roman »paganism« through the lens of Graeco-Roman religion. However, they would hardly have been capable of inventing stories featuring Germanic names and divinities simply using concepts familiar from classical paganism, and it is unlikely that they would have wanted to, given that their intention was to keep such stories under control or get rid of them altogether. On the other hand, we should not underestimate the creativity of the individual authors. From the 11th and 12th centuries, we have evidence of a rather light-hearted approach to various »pagan« traditions. It is of course possible that this is due to the fact that it was already considered a distant past by many authors, which had completely lost its threatening potential in a fully Christianised Europe. Nevertheless, we should remain vigilant.

The shared ontological assumptions include the existence of supernatural beings in general and of a plurality of divinities in particular. These gods or divine entities are imagined as anthropomorphous and often behave like humans. The home story of Wodan and Freia in which she tricks him into giving victory to the Winnili is a case in point.⁹³ They have supernatural powers, can intervene in human affairs, for instance give victory or punish, but they are also prone to deception or failure of their designs. What was particular for ancient Western Eurasia was the extent to which local and regional deities were translatable into each other. That worked not only between Greek and Roman gods, but also included correspondences

91 Von See, *Deutsche Germanenideologie*.

92 Gillett (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity*; Pohl, *Debating ethnicity*.

93 *Origo gentis Langobardorum* 1, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 2.

with Celtic and Germanic deities, for instance, between Jupiter and Dolichenus or Thor, between Mercury and Wodan, or between Venus and Freya, as still evidenced in the names of the days of the week (Giovedì = Thursday, Venerdì = Friday).

Apart from gods populating Olympus or the Old-Norse Walhall, there was an intermediate sphere in which humans could be deified or divine beings become human or have human offspring, as in the genealogies of the Amals or of the Angles. In this supernatural twilight zone, »semidei« (half-gods) moved, such as the *ansis*, the Gothic ancestors presented by Jordanes, whose name corresponds to the divine kindred of the *Aesir* of Norse mythology.⁹⁴ This middle ground between gods and humans also allowed Christian authors to eventually demote »pagan« gods to humans. In the Fredegar Chronicle, a version of the story how the Longobards got their name contains a comment that it is impossible that humans (such as Wodan) can give victory.⁹⁵ This realm of supernatural beings on earth also includes witches (such as the Gothic *haliurunnae*), demons and evil spirits (with whom the Gothic witches mate), and white sorceresses who marry the chosen ruler and legitimize his new standing, as in Cosmas' story of Libussa. Yet the evidence of the continental origin myths hardly matches the great variety of giants, ogres, trolls, dwarves and other mostly unpleasant beings that the mythological ontology of the sagas offers.

Animals and human-animal beings also move in the supernatural sphere of which we get glimpses in the early medieval origin narratives. After the name-giving episode, Paul the Deacon inserts a story in which the Longobards pretend to have dog-headed *cynocephali* in their ranks, who drink the blood of their enemies.⁹⁶ Another case is the *bestia Neptuni*, some kind of Quinotaurus, a sea-monster that features as Merovech's possible father in the Fredegar Chronicle.⁹⁷ Both monsters are inspired by classical mythology, have (if garbled) Greek names and may be ethnographic ascriptions, although that was always debated. A Germanic folk etymology of the name Merovech could be »sea beast«, and the Fredegar story could well be read as an ironic defamation of the Merovingians.⁹⁸ Again, shared ontologies eased the mythological transfer. Animals could also behave like humans or interact with them in miraculous ways, for instance, leading animals such as the doe that led the Huns across the Maeotis.⁹⁹ Wolves feature a lot in origin stories, although we have no hints to humans born or reared by wolves, as in the Turkic and the Roman origin myths.¹⁰⁰ Paul the Deacon recounts how his ancestor was led out of Avar captivity by a wolf as a »god-given« guide; when he eventually tried to kill it, it disappeared, and was replaced by the vision of a (surely holy)

94 Simek, *Lexikon der nordischen Mythologie*; Wolfram, *Origo and religio*.

95 Fredegar, *Chronicle*, 3, 65, ed. Krusch, 110.

96 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 1, 11, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 53: Simulant, se in castris suis habere cynocephalos, id est canini capitis homines. Divulgant apud hostes, hos pertinaciter bella gerere, humanum sanguinem bibere.

97 Fredegar, *Chronicle*, 3,9, ed. Krusch 95.

98 Wood, *Fredegar's fables*; Murray, *Post vocantur Merovingii*.

99 See above, p. 17.

100 See the contribution by Sandra Wabnitz, in this issue.

man.¹⁰¹ In the late Roman/early medieval period, »wolf« in personal names was particularly frequent both in Latin (Lupus) and in Germanic languages (names on -wulf).

Christian ontology coincided with the classical one in assuming supernatural agency and the possibility of interceding with the divine, but diverged in some important respects. The supernatural was now rigorously divided between the one God and his beneficial workings, directly or through angels and saints, and the wide range of satanic and demonic forces which could be ascribed to the devil. This strictly dualistic model meant that any supernatural agency by pagan divinities could only be due to demonic forces and diabolic deceit. An easier way to integrate pre-Christian gods into Christian ontology was to regard them as human beings that had falsely been regarded as divinities, which was convenient in genealogies. Christian authors, such as Fredegar or Asser, reminded their audience that Wodan or Geat had »*fanatice*« been venerated as gods.¹⁰² As all early medieval authors who wrote down ethnic origin narratives since the sixth century were Christians, and often clerics, it is remarkable that traces of pre-Christian ontologies were transmitted at all.

Epistemological Tensions and Discursive Elements

On the level of epistemology, the issues are what we can know, how we can know it, and how knowledge can be structured. Characteristically, myth is assertive and follows a different kind of programme of truth which does not require proofs or arguments for its veracity.¹⁰³ In historiography, by contrast, debates about the truthfulness of an account were and are frequent, and »*effects de vérité*« and attempts to enhance the credibility of a text are already frequent in ancient and medieval historiography.¹⁰⁴ Myths regarded as essential for self-identification and cultural habitus can be subjected to codification to guarantee their authenticity, such as the Hebrew Bible or the Bhagavad-Gita. In the early medieval *origines gentium*, at least in their written form, we can rather see modification at work. On the other hand, it is also remarkable that some clearly pre-Christian lore is transmitted intact. The story how the Longobards got their name may also have been codified because the text had been attached as a preamble to codices of Longobard law.¹⁰⁵

In most cases, however, the mythical passages in the *origines gentium* were subjected to a different epistemology, or »regime of historicity«.¹⁰⁶ One of the issues here was the transition from oral to written transmission of texts and information, as we can gather from a number of comments, which represent a whole range of different attitudes to the reliability of oral information. »Early songs« of the Goths can support claims of reliability, but written information can also be preferable to »old womens« tales.¹⁰⁷ Mythological truth programmes

101 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 4, 37, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 131.

102 Fredegar, *Chronicle* 3.65, ed. Krusch, 110; Asser, *Life of Alfred*, 1-2.

103 Veyne, *Did the Greeks believe in their myths?*

104 Pohl, *Historiography and Identity: Methodological Reflections*.

105 Pohl, *History in fragments*; Dilcher, *Mythischer Ursprung*.

106 Hartog, *Régimes de l'historicité*.

107 Jordanes, *Getica*, 4.28, 5.38, ed. Mommsen, 61 and 64; see also 5.43, 14.79, ed. Mommsen, 65 and 76; Pohl, *Narratives of Origin*.

allowed for ambiguities and contradictions; but when the decision between alternatives mattered in a certain context, »fables« could easily be discredited.

The next question is how information was structured, and which type of knowledge was deemed important in the context of origin narratives. First, it was essential to know where a people had come from; hardly any of the passages in our source texts, however fragmentary they may be, do not mention any region of origin, with the notable exception of Cosmas of Prague who seems to play with the expectations of his audience, a handful of well-educated churchmen who knew very well what a proper origin story should look like, and which questions it should answer. Informed by centuries of historiographical narratives, they derived their pleasure from the intellectual game of persiflage. Otherwise, the interest in locating the country of origin seems to have been common ground between the Romans and the *gentes*, and information about it often came embedded in Roman geographical interests and information, or was substituted by it. The »topos *origo*«, as Dieter Timpe called it, addressed »where from« to disclose »who« someone was, and gave access to a rich body of geographically-structured ethnographic knowledge piled up since the day of Herodotus.¹⁰⁸ For instance, »Scythia« connected Goths or others with the ethnography of the Pontic steppes, and with an ethnographic umbrella category still called by the name of the ancient Scythians. »Scandinavia« conjured up images of a cold land with fertile inhabitants which made it a veritable source of new peoples. However, unlike for Scythia, there was no ethnic category of »Scandinavians« that would have been used for immigrants. There was a multitude of peoples in and from Scandinavia (as listed by Ptolemaeus or Jordanes, among others), but no umbrella term for them.¹⁰⁹

The category of »Germani« had long been closely linked to the Germania, and Tacitus had remarked shortly after 100 CE that the Germani were autochthonous, because nobody would have wanted to migrate to their inhospitable country.¹¹⁰ Yet since the fifth century, it was not used as an ethnographic umbrella term any more to describe the contemporary ethnic landscape; and the Germania of Tacitus was almost forgotten.¹¹¹ Considering that most peoples who settled in the Western Empire actually came from Germania, directly or indirectly, it is striking how rarely origin from there is explicitly stated in migration narratives. Even though sixth-century Greek authors (such as Procopius) often equated the Franks with the Germani of old, the Franks (or Western authors in general) never appropriated this obvious identification. Authors of the sixth to eighth centuries give them all more distant places of origin. Paul the Deacon says that the Longobards were descended from the Germani, but then identifies Scandinavia as their country of origin.¹¹² Ironically, Fredegar, in his summary of the Longobard name-giving story, locates Scandinavia »between the Danube and the Ocean«, that is in Germania, from where the Longobards entered Pannonia and defeated the Huns.¹¹³

108 Timpe, *Ethnologische Begriffsbildung*; Hartog, *Le miroir d'Hérodote*.

109 *Claudii Ptolemaei Geographia*, ed. Nobbe; Jordanes, *Getica* 4, 25.

110 Tacitus, *Germania* 2.

111 Jankuhn and Timpe, *Beiträge*; Pohl, *Germanen*, 2-7.

112 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 1, 1, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 48.

113 Fredegar, *Chronicae*, 3, 65, ed. Krusch, 110: Scathanavia, que est inter Danuvium et mare Ocianum.

Geographical indications in Latin origin stories, then, clearly were or had become part of a Roman epistemology; and they only made sense in the context of a rather broad and detailed knowledge of geography and the ethnosphere that enveloped them in past and present, as transmitted in numerous lists and geographical digressions.¹¹⁴ That does not mean that we could not find traces of a different epistemology in them. The *Origo gentis Langobardorum* contains several Germanic place names marking the stages of Longobard migrations (and Paul the Deacon adds a few more): from Scoringa and Muringa via Anthaib, Bainaib and Burgundaib up to Rugiland and the *feld*, field.¹¹⁵ The only name that we can locate both in space and time is the »land of the Rugians« north of the Danube in what is now Lower Austria, from where the Rugians had been expelled by Odoacer's army in 487.¹¹⁶ Yet even if we cannot make sense of all the other names (are they references to the lands of the Antae, Boii/Baiuvarii and Burgundians?)¹¹⁷, and probably Paul the Deacon could not locate them either, they must have made sense to somebody sometime, before they were incorporated into a Latin text. It is a precious fragment of an indigenous epistemology of migration, which would indicate that population movement was not understood as a transfer from an original homeland to a new permanent settlement area, but as a gradual process with many intermediate stages, or, alternatively, incorporating rather different ideas of where parts of the migrants had come from.

At the beginning of the Gothic and Longobard migration route as set out in the *Origo gentis Langobardorum*, there is Scandinavia, a well-known ethnographic term; this is why scholars, beginning with Rolf Hachmann, have mostly distrusted it.¹¹⁸ However, a new type of evidence has reopened the question. Recent archaeogenetic surveys have found a substantial Scandinavian component that arrived in Pannonia around 500 CE.¹¹⁹ We also have evidence of a Scandinavian component along the lower Vistula River in the first centuries of our era, where the Gutones were supposed to live.¹²⁰ This genetic element does not warrant the claim that »the« Longobards and »the« Goths came from Scandinavia. Notably, neither the archaeological nor the linguistic evidence point to a Scandinavian background for the sixth-century Longobards, and none of the hundreds of personal names known from Italy is typically old-Norse.¹²¹ In the Longobard case, it is also as yet unclear whether the Scandinavian gene-flow had already arrived in southern Jutland and northern Saxony around the turn of the common era and moved on from there later, which would fit the historical sources about Longobards along the lower Elbe in the 1st century CE, or whether the genetic evidence rather pointed

114 Liccardo; *Old Names, New Peoples*; Merrills, *History and Geography*.

115 *Origo gentis Langobardorum* 2, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 2; Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 1, 13, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 54.

116 Eugippius, *Vita Severini* 44, ed. Nüsslein, 117-19.

117 Gerhard Köbler, Germanisches und gotisches Wörterbuch, translates langobard *aib as district, *pagus* (accessed on 26 Jan 2026: <https://www.koeblergerhard.de/germ+got/germ+got17742abs20140325.htm>),.

118 Hachmann, *Die Goten und Skandinavien*. But see Wolfram, *Goten*, 47-49, with the hypothesis that a Longobard core group had come from Scandinavia.

119 Tian, Koncz *et al.*, The role of emerging elites.

120 McColl, Kroonen *et al.*, Steppe ancestry in Western Eurasia.

121 Pohl, Migration, Ethnogenese, Archäogenetik.

to some Scandinavian influx to the continent in the 5th century CE. However that may be, it would be a strange coincidence that the two peoples for which we have a clear statement of Scandinavian origin in writing also happened to have a substantial Scandinavian component in the genome, attested in the genetic analysis of hundreds of samples, without any connection between the two types of evidence. Does that mean that the two origin myths actually preserved genuine cultural memories transmitted for over half a millennium in both cases? In the case of the Goths, Cassiodorus or Jordanes could have relied on information about the names of peoples inhabiting Scandinavia, among which Procopius lists Gauti and Jordanes Ostrogoths.¹²² However, in neither of these quite extensive lists do we find the Longobards or Winnili, and it is unlikely that the author of the Latin *Origo gentis Langobardorum* had access to further written material. He could have had the idea from Jordanes; but Jordanes wrote *Scandza*, the Origo *Scadanan*, Fredegar *Scathanavia*, Paul the Deacon *Scadinavia*, whereas Procopius used *Thule* throughout, so that a common written source for these tales of Scandinavian origins seems unlikely.

The question when the primordial events happened features much less in the narratives. When it occurs, the chronology is clearly derived from Graeco-Roman epistemology.¹²³ Yet not even Paul the Deacon, author of a Roman history, connected the story of Longobard migration with the repeated mentions of Longobards in the early imperial age. The epistemology of myth does not require a transparent chronological frame. It accommodates floating gaps – and that also applies to the »Romanate« Trojan origins of the Franks, in which the more than 1500 years between the Priam and Clovis are bridged with very little pertinent information.

The main structural tools in the origin narratives (and in their wider textual environment) to develop a temporal dimension are king lists and genealogies. Both are also familiar in classical epistemology. Which of these two related instruments are used is also of interest. Traditional research assumed that genealogies were a Germanic form of social memory, whereas list of rulers or magistrates were a typically Roman concern.¹²⁴ However, it is more complicated than that. Early medieval genealogies abound in England and Ireland, and (in later transmission) in Scandinavia, and many of them contain the names of pagan divinities. As mentioned above, biblical pedigrees were attached before the pagan ones. In a similar manner, Snorri Sturluson later projected the origin of the Norse gods back to the Creation and the Flood.¹²⁵ Connecting genealogies to the sons of Noah and the Old-Testament succession back to Adam was also current in Islam.¹²⁶ In Abu'l-Fazl's Akbarnama (the Life of Akbar),

122 Prokop, *Bella*, 6, 15, ed. Dewing, vol. 3, 414–425; Jordanes, *Getica* 3, 19–24, ed. Mommsen 58–59; trans. Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, 228–232.

123 Inserting the Scythian and Dacian prehistory into the Gothic origin narratives placed it within the tight temporal grid provided by the Eusebius-Jerome Chronicle. That corresponded with the explicit intention of Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 9.25, ed. Fridh 379, to «turn Gothic origins into Roman history». The settlement of the Burgundians is dated under Tiberius, and Frankish encounters with the Romans also locate this stage of their supposed wanderings within a Roman imperial timeframe.

124 Scheibelreiter, *Genealogie*.

125 Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, Gylfaginning 8, trans. Byock 16–17.

126 Borst, *Turmbau von Babel*.

for instance, Türk was inserted as Japhet's eldest son, and Mughul Khan, the ancestor of the Mughal dynasty, appeared as his fifth descendant.¹²⁷

We have only few long genealogies from the post-Roman kingdoms.¹²⁸ The most elaborate one is the 17-generation genealogy of Theodoric's dynasty, the Amals, as related by Jordanes.¹²⁹ A list of 17 Longobard kings also appears in the Prologue of King Rothari's Edict (issued in 643); the *Origo gentis Langobardorum* adds genealogical information, dynastic names and, quite untypically, names of royal consorts.¹³⁰ Interestingly, both Jordanes and Paul the Deacon, who relate Gothic/Longobard royal king lists/genealogies, also provide genealogical information about their own families.¹³¹ Genealogies were, however, scarce in the Frankish kingdoms. The person in Merovingian Gaul about whose kin we know more than about anyone else's (apart from the Merovingians) is Bishop Gregory of Tours, who mentions his senatorial ancestry and was proud of the many bishops that had sprung from his kindred. Yet we have to reconstruct his genealogical knowledge from his writings.¹³² A momentous change in family remembrance did happen in the late- and post-Roman world in the course of Christianisation: the ancestor cult that was the duty of each *pater familias* faded out, and eventually the memory of the deceased was delegated to monasteries and other Christian institutions. A second momentous change was the disappearance of the naming system of the *tria nomina*, the tripartite Roman personal names, in which the second was the name of the *gens*, the kin group (for instance, the *gens Iulia* in Gaius Iulius Caesar). In the 6th century, even high-status Romans in the Frankish kingdom were simply called Lupus or Mummolus in the sources. All that changed the epistemology of relatedness, and must have had an impact on personal identities.

The Franks seem to have adapted to this relatively low-key and informal representation of kinship and personal distinctions. The name of the Merovingian dynasty is mentioned only once in the Fredegar Chronicle (c. 670), and its king lists contain no genealogical information. The first, and relatively short genealogy of the Carolingian family was compiled by none other than Paul the Deacon in his history of the Bishops of Metz, for one of them had been an ancestor of Charlemagne.¹³³ The dynastonym appeared even later in the sources. What differed between the northern European and the less profuse continental genealogies was not the importance of noble families, but the importance of remembering all individual ancestors as far back as possible. Proof of ancient nobility was only one function of a long pedigree. In many societies it was more important that each ancestor could connect one's own kindred to another one, and shared ancestors might constitute or reinforce bonds between families, help mitigating conflicts and negotiating support and solidarity.

127 *The Akbar nama of Abu-l-Fazl*, trans. Beveridge, vol. 1, 168-170.

128 Pohl, Genealogy.

129 Jordanes, *Getica* 14.79-81, ed. Mommsen.

130 Pohl, Narratives of Origin.

131 Jordanes, *Getica*, 266, trans. Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, 345; Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 4, 37, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 131.

132 Wood, Individuality of Gregory of Tours.

133 Paulus Diaconus, *Liber de Episcopis Mettensibus*, ed. and transl. Kempf; Kempf, Introduction.

A further discursive element in at least some European origin narratives, and one that is largely absent from Roman discourses of origin, is female agency. In the Longobard origin story, the Winnili are led by a wise woman, Gambara, who appeals to Frea; the goddess is the one who can really grant victory by outwitting Wodan. The bearded warriors on the battlefield are in fact the women, whose appearance are the true reasons why a male sexual feature is chosen as an ethnonym. This is one instance of what Patrick Geary has called »women at the beginning«. ¹³⁴ Another famous case is Libussa, the female leader of the first Czechs in the origin legend told by Cosmas of Prague. ¹³⁵ Hers is a golden age, until the Czechs demand that Libussa should marry a man who would then become their duke. Scholars have often seen a faint memory of an early matriarchate in these narratives, but that may go too far. However, it is clear that female power and wisdom in ancient times must have seemed perfectly plausible to authors and audiences of these stories. Both Paul the Deacon's and Cosmas's accounts also contain passages of a later battle in which martial women were defeated by men, as the Amazons were by King Lamissio. ¹³⁶

Some Conclusions

The phenomenological approach developed by Waldenfels, set out in the introduction of this volume, enables us to formulate a paradox. ¹³⁷ Seen from an enlightened scholarly perspective, supernatural origins, divine ancestors or animal agency can only be constructions because they do not belong to any demonstrable empirical reality. Our modern ontology forbids classing them as real. Seen from a premodern ontology, however, this part of origin narratives represents the ontological sphere to which human agency, rational construction and conscious formation of communities have no access. It explains what otherwise cannot be explained. If we want to follow Waldenfels, they express the confrontation with the alien that is prior to human purpose and understanding. ¹³⁸ This is why myths are an interesting, but very difficult object of study. In modern times, myths have been most attractive as objects of study in periods of counter-enlightenment, irrationalism, and historicism – in the Romantic Age of the first half of the 19th century, and in the reactionary movements of the first half of the 20th century. The early 21st century was still dominated by a contrary tendency, the effort to deconstruct myths, grand narratives and romantic fictions. But a new irrationalism already seems to be spreading, and not only on the far right. Irrationalism will not be stopped by embracing irrational epistemologies, but understanding them may help.

Why are the early medieval European origin myths interesting? Some of the Asian texts treated in this volume are more »mythological« and contain more material on religious beliefs (if we want to call them »religious«), supernatural beings and animal-spirits. In Europe, the rare supernatural traces occur in the early stages of the migration narratives or of genealogies. They are often accompanied by question marks or disclaimers: no facts, just fables; no

¹³⁴ Cf. Geary, *Women at the Beginning*; Pohl, *Gender and Ethnicity*.

¹³⁵ Cosmas, *Chronicle*, ed. Bak and Rychterová; Rychterová, *The Legenda Christiani*.

¹³⁶ Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 1, 15, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 55.

¹³⁷ Pohl, Rychterová and Reimitz, *Challenges of Interpretation*.

¹³⁸ Waldenfels, *Bruchlinien*.

real cynocephali, just a bluff; no god in the genealogy, just a ridiculous figure from Roman comedy; and no real monster as ancestor, just an ironic slander. Still, the traces of non-Christian mythology in Christian texts were hardly made up by the people who wrote them down; rather, they point to cultural memories maintained by non-Christian or syncretistic milieus in which these stories mattered, so that many Latin authors would not leave them out even if they disagreed with the implications. It is perhaps no coincidence that the most consistent traces of indigenous beliefs are found in the Lombard kingdom, where in 613, King Agilulf still refused to convert; as Saint Columbanus wrote to the pope, the king had stated that he would believe if he knew for sure what to believe. Little wonder, because Catholics, Arians and Three-Chapter dissenters disagreed about the right creed.¹³⁹

The origin myths do not only provide clues to the functions and meanings of origin narratives at the time when they were written down, but also allow reconstructing a process in which Christian ontology gradually marginalised pre-Christian, »pagan« motifs and narratives. Most likely, writing down the origin stories in Latin already represented an advanced stage in this process. We do not know what Agilulf believed instead of believing what Catholics wanted him to believe; most likely that was already a syncretistic mix. It is unlikely that the creeds and cults of his ancestors had completely vanished. Probably, Wodan played a role, perhaps assimilated to the Christian almighty god in a similar way as the Prose Edda had morphed Odin into the role of the All-Father, the »highest and oldest of the gods«, although that contradicts other information in the Edda about his late birth and vulnerability.¹⁴⁰ This contradiction points to a fundamental difference between Christian and »pagan« epistemology: Christianity propagated an absolute, revealed truth about god, and required firm belief in a detailed formula about his characteristics, as established at the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Wodan was much more elusive, a warrior, a priest and a prophet, a god or a man, descended from giants, a mortal hero, cunning and sometimes dangerous, at the centre of a wide range of stories. To fit into a Christian narrative, he can easily be pictured as a man, but his supernatural qualities remain a threat.

The extensive Nordic material, put into writing centuries after Christian conversion, is in contrast to what remains from indigenous myths in continental Europe. It is comprehensible that earlier scholars used second-millennium Old Norse mythology to reconstruct a first-millennium Germanic one. Some elements indeed coincide, and migration-period archaeological evidence (gold bracteates, animal style decorations, runic inscriptions) provides further indications.¹⁴¹ But overall, the written traces are too few to re-establish a consistent Germanic religion or culture. In the origin stories, king lists and genealogies, almost all the names are Germanic, so they had a Germanic linguistic and cultural background. But as we have seen, a neat categorisation of »Germanic« vs. »Roman« cultural elements would be misleading. Roman and ancient Germanic creeds were based on shared ontologies and epistemologies from the start, they were to an extent translatable into each other and had been

139 Columbanus, Ep. 5, ed. Walker, 44: fertur enim dixisse, si certum sciret, et ipse crederet.

140 Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, Gylfaginning 3, trans. Byock, 11.

141 Hauck, *Carmina Antiqua*. In his many studies »Zur Ikonographie der Goldbrakteaten«, he interpreted their motifs in the light of the Icelandic sagas. See also *idem*, *Bilddenkmäler zur Religion*.

in dialogue and under mutual observation for centuries. This cultural continuum was only shattered by Christianisation, which devoted intensive efforts to imposing new ontologies of the supernatural. These efforts had a spectacular success in most contexts, and as a result, the traces of pre-Christian mythology are scarce on the European continent. Moreover, Christianity also offered alternative ways to legitimise ethnic identifications and the rule of *gentes* over the post-Roman kingdoms. The Old Testament provided a model for divine election of one people, whereas the New Testament required that the gospel should be taught to all *gentes*.¹⁴² This could give a providential meaning to the fact that the Western Roman Empire had been replaced by a plurality of kingdoms with ethnic designations, and on the special grace of God to which each of them should aspire.

This was the context in which ethnic origin narratives were written down in early medieval Europe. Power had been transferred from the Roman Empire to post-Roman kingdoms governed by a military elite of barbarian origin. They employed a number of strategies of distinction to set themselves apart from similar elite groups, and from the majority population of former Roman provinces.¹⁴³ At the same time, a forceful process of Christianisation eliminated the public performance of what the Christians regarded as »pagan« cults and creeds. This created a complex field of tension in which the narratives were put into writing. What we could expect to find are narratives that explained the origins of the new ruling groups, and provided legitimising accounts of their distant origins, supernatural background, divine election, ancient lineages and military prowess. What we have is somewhat less than that: some of the kingdoms, the Ostrogoths and the Longobards, produced origin narratives that could tick several of these boxes, although the texts we have (Jordanes and Paul the Deacon) were only produced soon after the fall of the kingdoms. Some made do with a rather brief migration narrative supplemented by genealogies rooted in divine ancestors (Angles and Saxons). Some appropriated classical narratives blended with some additional elements (Franks and, again, Ostrogoths). Some reduced their early history to Biblical motifs (the Visigoths). Some could only rely on late speculations (Burgundians, continental Saxons), and for some, we have no early medieval origin narrative at all (Vandals, Alamans, Bavarians).

All these stories are transmitted in the tension field between indigenous myth, imperial ethnographic tradition and Christian ré-écriture. The present issue offers the opportunity of wide-range Eurasian comparison. The two contributions by Julia C. Schneider and Sandra Wabnitz raise the issue of an exclusively Chinese written transmission of the origin myths of Turks and Jurchen. The imperial-barbarian dichotomy also shapes (although not necessarily invalidate) our sources about barbarians as long as Roman authors wrote about barbarians. The imperial gaze at uncivilised neighbours did not disappear when barbarians came into power; but it created a new, more level playing-field in which different authors and texts reacted very differently with the situation. Perhaps that is more comparable to what the Wei-shu has to say about the Tuoba or the Qing emperors about the origins of the Manchu, although their control of the presentation of their »barbarian« past exceeded what western

142 Pohl, Disputed identifications.

143 Pohl, Strategies of distinction.

kingdoms could achieve. Christian authors in the West employed more subtle strategies to manoeuvre barbarian origin myths out of too conspicuously »pagan« assertions. The extent to which traces of indigenous motifs remained in the course of transmission can most plausibly be explained by the resilience of such non-Roman and pre-Christian elements.

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Abbreviations

CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
AA	Auctores antiquissimi
SS	Scriptores

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