

Stranger-kings, Animal Guides, and Sibling Trios: Comparative Reflections on Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasia

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This conclusion offers a comparative synthesis of the origin narratives and analyses presented in this special section. It too thus spans the breadth from early medieval Europe all the way to Japan, while also adducing additional materials from Tibet. It first provides theoretical reflections on narrative change, emphasizing how writers could more easily adapt circulating myths than abandon or replace them. Accordingly, it argues that written myths and their permutations were not detached literary fiction, but had some part in historical social dynamics surrounding collective identities. As such, their form and variation constitute valuable historical resources. The subsequent discussion then highlights three recurring mythemes: stranger-kings, guiding animals, and sibling trios with rhyming or similar-sounding names. Informed by ethnographic theory, stranger-king narratives are analyzed for their insistence on the social centrality of an outside figure, which offers valuable emic support for the volume's theoretical introduction on identity formation. This comparative exercise also sheds helpful light on certain narrative peculiarities touched upon by other contributors, such as the presence of ancestors of dubious standing, or the recurring trope of the hero's exposure. Next, guiding animals and sibling trios are explored for their widespread presence across cultures, revealing structural similarities as well as cultural specificities. Throughout, the article illustrates the tension between the ways in which writers and story-tellers were restrained by, yet also managed to creatively adapt, their materials.

Keywords: ethnic origin stories, historical identity, narrative, textual change, the hero's exposure, (potency of) alterity, Tibet, connectivity, comparative mythology

The articles in this special section are stepping stones towards a more integral comparative and connected perspective on historical origin narratives in Eurasia, and indeed beyond. They result from a workshop organized in the framework of the FWF-funded Cluster of Excellence »EurAsian Transformations«, in co-operation with the FWF project »Buddhist Narratives and ›Tibetan‹ Ethnogenesis«, held in September 2024. The event opened a wide-ranging

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perspective on the origin myths of peoples and polities, and especially their change over time and space. Most contributions to this special section, excepting the co-authored ones, do not however reflect the result of long-standing co-operation between the contributors or intimate knowledge of each other's sources; they largely result from a single meeting of minds. To me, as a specialist of Tibetan studies, these contributions are valuable for the light they shed on my own source material, light that is both comparative and potentially connectivist in nature. It is from this perspective as a Tibetologist, albeit a comparatively inclined and eclectically interested one, that I have the privilege of drawing together, by way of conclusion, a number of threads. I do not invoke the word »privilege« flippantly here.

To wit, the drawback in engaging in detailed work on particular sources in one (or even a few) languages, typical of smaller regional disciplines, is that such approaches correlate with a narrower view of the world. They are not naturally given to broad interdisciplinarity. To combine discipline-specific detail with broader or even global contexts constitutes a delicate balancing act, success at which is harder to achieve, on average, for those working in less mature fields in which much source material still sits untranslated, unedited, or even unstudied, and where fine-grained work on primary sources accordingly soaks up most attention. (I myself, to be sure, have occasionally been forced to stop short of grander goals, delayed by necessary study of uncharted textual variation in the sources). This, combined with the fact that smaller and less mature fields simply have fewer specialists, helps explain why many historical societies are not yet sufficiently represented in broader theoretical literature on premodern origin narratives and identity construction.

Indeed, the maturity of the disciplines and size of the (explored) primary literatures circumscribe the possible levels and methods of analysis. To cite just one example, the elaborate dataset employed by Mac Sweeney and Kopanaki for ancient Greek materials, coupled with available estimates of literary survival rates (this volume),² cannot be replicated in the study of, say, Turkic, Tungusic or indeed Tibetan origin myths. Although such sweeping analyses based on large datasets still seem to be distant in many disciplines, the increasing availability of digital technologies, such as Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) and Optical Character Recognition (OCR) for smaller languages, along with advancements in neural network-based textual analysis, brings us closer to the day when something similar can be attempted³ in smaller fields – the extant evidentiary base permitting. As things stand, however, and despite decades of gains, the voices of smaller regional disciplines still cannot resound with the same volume and refinement of more mature fields.

This, of course, is no reason to assume that the smaller fields are any less relevant theoretically. In fact, their relative lack of resonance is simultaneously a source of promise. They can offer novel material for broader comparative and theoretical reflection, and thus have a key role to play in the complementarity of knowledge that underlies much successful and innovative history writing. The workshop was, and this section constitutes, a forum where such different voices can meet and stand side by side on equal footing, ripe for the reader's picking

2 Mac Sweeney and Kopanaki, Ancient Greek origin myths.

3 Such approaches naturally come with new complications, such as questions of statistical relevance or how (and to what extent) one can quantify qualitative data.

according to their needs and wishes. In line with that approach, the concluding thoughts that follow necessarily reflect my subjective way of having these contributions bear on topics of my own interest. A privilege, indeed.

Change in Origin Narratives and its Relevance

To the degree that the authors in this volume explicitly pick a theoretical lane, they tread a middle ground in treating origin myths as discursive constructions without, however, discarding them as lofty flights of fancy that lack any bearing on social realities.⁴ This eschewal of both deconstructionist scepticism and wide-eyed positivism is in line with the theoretical introduction by Pohl, Rychterová and Reimitz (this volume).⁵ In the first half of their contribution, the trio warns against conflating, on the one hand, the widely accepted theoretical notion that ethnic identities are *constructed*, with, on the other hand, the more controversial idea that premodern ethnic identities never had any substance outside of such abstract construction (particularly, outside the pages of the writings that invoke such identities). Scholars who adhere to the latter view argue that literary talk of ethnic groups was not accompanied by *popular* talk of such groups, or by the subjective experience of affiliation with such groups on the part of described populations, let alone by the actual existence of such groups. The introduction to this volume rejects such approaches that seek to sap origin narratives of any and all social relevance, and argues instead that origin narratives form part of »a circuit of communication and interaction« that is rooted in, and itself helps reshape, social realities.⁶

In keeping with this framework, Wabnitz compares sources in Latin, Byzantine and Chinese historiographical sources to argue that the motif of beasts in steppe peoples' origin stories was not simply the product of derogatory analysis by outsiders, yet was, in fact, »also significant for the steppe people themselves«. ⁷ Remnants of »non-Christian mythology in Christian texts«, Pohl and Rychterová argue in their contribution, »were hardly made up by the people who wrote them down«, and instead »point to cultural memories maintained by non-Christian or syncretistic milieus in which these stories mattered«; most writers, in sum, could not simply ignore them.⁸ Something similar seems to have been the case with widespread Tibetan Buddhist origin narratives that trace the Tibetans' origins back to a monkey (and a blood-thirsty demoness), which appear to be Buddhist adaptations of non-Buddhist myth.⁹ Another Tibetan origin narrative, too, circulated for centuries in different guises, being adapted to new settings time and again.¹⁰ In sum, writers and narrators often

4 The most critical note in this regard comes from Mac Sweeney and Kopanaki, who speak of origin narratives' »prolific irrelevance« in the specific context of Greek erudite literature in the 2nd c. CE, claiming that these narratives lost much relevance »to wider Greek society« during that time (Ancient Greek origin myths, 257).

5 Pohl, Rychterová and Reimitz, Challenges of interpretation.

6 Pohl, Rychterová and Reimitz, Challenges of interpretation, 95-96.

7 Wabnitz, Fantastic beasts, 184.

8 Pohl and Rychterová, Early Medieval Europe, 153.

9 Langelaar, Empire and identity.

10 Langelaar, Colours of the rainbow.

built on pre-existing templates. And if these templates were found to be unfavourable, they were more easily bent than abandoned.¹¹

As such, the formulation and, more commonly, reformulation of peoples' origin narratives constituted interventions (or reflected positions) in broader social contexts or specific debates. These narratives accordingly speak to larger issues in the societies and cultural logics that produced them. Scheid, for instance, suggests in his contribution to this section that a shifting appreciation of the »foreign« in Japanese origin myths can be tied to developments in Japanese geopolitics in the 7th c., when the far eastern Eurasian mainland turned from an admired fount of cultural technologies to a political threat.¹²

The very fact that such narratives change, along with the backgrounds of such change – in other words, their constructed nature – makes these stories and the identities they narrate analysable from a historical perspective. Their different positions along the axes of time, space, and minds reveal snippets of the »circuit of communication and interaction« of which these narratives formed part. As the introduction argues, any intuitive hunch that such changeability amounts to mere ephemerality, and ultimately translates into social irrelevance, is better abandoned. Consider, for instance, the simple example of a river: If its waters were static, they would neither constitute a river nor require much study. A fluvial morphologist, after all, finds little work in staring at a bath tub. Such too is the case with origin narratives and identities. Their adaptation to context, their embeddedness in causal factors of the past, is what allows them to be meaningful to people in the first place, and this change is exactly what constitutes history, and what we can study. Rather than »a key task«, perhaps this, indeed, is *the* »key task of identity research«. ¹³ Such change, in any case, is by and large what the workshop and the authors in this volume focus on. How did these narratives develop over time, and why?

Lee wonderfully illustrates the enormous range and adaptivity of origin narratives among Turkic language-speaking peoples, which helped narratively anchor these populations in different historical, cultural and geographic contexts. Mac Sweeney and Kopanaki situate Greek origin narratives within their larger regional and historical developments, mapping their ebb and flow across genres, and tying their content and literary contexts to changes in the broader social and literary world. Pohl and Rychterová offer reflections on the field of tension between indigenous myth, Roman imperial ethnography, and Christianisation in early medieval Europe, and how this affected origin stories. Schneider traces the developments of Jurchen and Manchu origin narratives, probing the ties between them. Ziemann, as part of a broader discussion, suggests that new brothers were added to Bulgar origin narratives of migrating siblings in order to account for the presence of Bulgars in the Avar Khaganate and Lombard Italy. Wabnitz notes how a guiding animal that features in an origin story of

11 In this context, a noteworthy counterpoint is offered by the origin narratives of Turkic peoples, which constitute a rather »disparate body of narratives«, as Lee details in this volume (Lee, *Origin myths of Turkic peoples*, 217). He explains this diversity by pointing to »the heterogeneous origins of the [various] Turkic peoples« (*Origin myths of Turkic peoples*, 217, fn. 73).

12 Scheid, *Foreignness in Japanese origin myths*.

13 Pohl, Rychterová and Reimitz, *Challenges of interpretation*, 94.

the Huns could be »derogatorily« (re)framed as an »instrument of evil« by later observers.¹⁴ These stories, then, were malleable resources that helped cognitively structure, reorient, or account for, given social realities.

I might add an example from the Tibetan highlands, where, over the greater part of the 2nd millennium CE, many origin narratives of the populace were composed locally, rather than by distant outsiders. Buddhist authors, tradents and scribes repeatedly adapted the origin myth of the Tibetan people's descent from a monkey, which consequently accrued changes, additional layers of detail, and new interpretative slants. In adopting and adapting such stories, they promoted particular Buddhist views of the (social) world, reinterpreting circulating narratives in line with a Buddhist worldview. There was certainly »fiction of fact« involved.¹⁵ Still, the form of these origin narratives and especially their sustained role and adaptation across premodern centuries would be hard to account for if their increasingly Buddhist content did not resonate more broadly, and if the abstract notion of a Tibetan people never developed any traction (and indeed, various lines of evidence – such as ethnonyms in group names, inscriptions, ancestor cult ritual, and records of orality – suggest that it did).¹⁶

To sum up, by connecting origin narratives, and especially their various permutations, to specific authorial or social contexts and agendas, we can partly pull such stories from the alleged realm of literary fiction back into the social worlds that helped shape them, and which they themselves sought to affect in turn. Rather than have such narratives sit idle as isolated figments of detached elite thinking, we should attempt to historicize their form, deployment and role in the broader circuits of communication of which they formed part.

Some Strands and Tropes

Stranger-Kings and Alterity

One trope that emerges from several of the contributions included in this section is that of the »stranger-king«. This term was coined by Marshall Sahlins to describe the wide-spread tendency of kings to not belong, at least purportedly, to the people over whom they reign or rule, but rather to be of outside provenance – divine, foreign or otherwise alien. This tendency reflects a wide-spread and pervasive cultural belief that power over society does not emerge from society itself, but must come from outside of it. Brought to wide attention in ethnography since Sahlins' initial article,¹⁷ this analytic framework (helpfully expanded in a later contribution)¹⁸ has been adopted by historians, too, although its uptake among the latter has been more muted.

As the introduction to this volume argues, attempts to specify where origin stories come from, and why they look the way they do, must necessarily draw on a wide variety of

14 Wabnitz, *Fantastic beasts*, 195.

15 A phrase by Hayden White, as discussed in this volume's introduction (Pohl, Rychterová and Reimitz, *Challenges of interpretation*, 92).

16 Langelaar, *Empire and identity*.

17 Sahlins, *Stranger-king*. In this article, Sahlins built on the work of various earlier authors, chiefly Georges Dumézil, James G. Frazer, Luc de Heusch, and Arthur M. Hocart.

18 Sahlins, *Elementary forms*.

disciplines. Unsurprisingly, then, ethnographic theory offers helpful inspiration, too. The concept of the stranger-king and the broader notion of what Sahlins describes as »the potency of alterity«¹⁹ can help explain 1) structural similarities in narratives across widely different cultures, 2) why, as the introduction wonders, many founding figures and ancestors are not necessarily individuals to take pride in,²⁰ and even 3) broader dynamics of identity formation, offering perhaps unexpected theoretical support for the framework of identity formation forwarded in this section's introduction.

Schneider, writing in this section, explicitly identifies the stranger-king as a trope in her materials on the Jurchen and Manchu. The old ruler of the Jurchen supposedly came from the Korean peninsula, and the Manchu Qing, in apparent emulation of the Jurchen, were later said to have originated from a mountain on the peninsula's northern border.²¹ Likewise, as Scheid reports in this volume, a Japanese source from 715 relates the arrival of the culture hero Ame no Hiboko from Korea, who brought civilization from outside. And when the continent came to be seen as a threat in Japanese circles, Scheid argues, the alien provenance of elites was simply shifted into heaven; they did not become indigenous.²² The Turfan Uyghur rulers supposedly descended from a boy born from a tree,²³ implying once more that power may arise from nature, but certainly not from the community itself. The Volga Bulgars claimed Alexander the Great as a foundational figure.²⁴ Romulus, the first ruler of Rome, was the son of the god Mars. This trope of the alien ruler is found across the breadth of Eurasia, and indeed across the world (Africa, the Americas, Polynesia, etc.). Accordingly, political formations surrounding a stranger-king have even been theorized to be »the dominant form of premodern state the world around, perhaps the original form«.²⁵

The widespread assumption that true power must come from outside society, and is fundamentally alien, helps explain another trope, also common cross-culturally, namely that of the ruler or founder's exposure as a child at the margins of society. Thus, Chinese accounts record that the ancestor of the Türks, founders of the Türk Qaghanate (552-745 CE), was left to die in a swamp with his feet cut off.²⁶ The Wusun ruler Kunmo, too, as Sima Qian (c. 145-86 BCE) reports, was »abandoned in the wilderness«.²⁷ The boy Fanca, ancestor of the Manchu according to a 17th-c. source, saw his entire clan massacred.²⁸ The ancestor of a Tibetan ruling house was abandoned on a mountain peak.²⁹ Yet all survived, being saved by animals. The Jurchen ancestor Bukūri Yongšon, who did not have an earthly father to begin

19 Sahlins, *Elementary forms*, 192.

20 Pohl, Rychterová and Reimitz, *Challenges of interpretation*, 103.

21 Schneider, *Southern Tungusic origin myths*.

22 Scheid, *Foreignness in Japanese origin myths*.

23 Lee, *Origin myths of Turkic peoples*, 205.

24 Lee, *Origin myths of Turkic peoples*, 208-209.

25 Graeber and Sahlins, *On Kings*, 5.

26 Lee, *Origin myths of Turkic peoples*, 203 and Wabnitz, *Fantastic beasts*, 185-186.

27 Cited in Lee, *Origin myths of Turkic peoples*, 204, fn. 4.

28 Schneider, *Southern Tungusic origin myths*, 242.

29 Czaja, *Medieval Rule*, 38-39.

with, was sent down a river by his mother, eventually reaching his new homeland.³⁰ Paul the Deacon reports how the Longobard king Lamissio was abandoned as a baby.³¹ This list does not even include the most famous examples of the exposed hero infant, such as Sargon of Akkad, Moses, Karṇa, and Romulus. Beckwith has presented some additional parallels from Eurasia.³²

The connection between the hero's survival outside of society and his social elevation becomes quite clear in a 14th-c. Tibetan rendition of the genealogy of the heads of the Tangut Empire, or the Western Xia (1038-1227 CE). The ancestor, still a little boy, is prophesied to eventually wrestle power from the Chinese ruler, causing the latter to order the child's death. Placed in a funerary box, the boy is cast into dense weeds in the water, and left for dead. At some point, however, a cow appears and nurses the child. After several days, the cow's owner follows the cow's trail and stumbles upon the boy. Seeing the animal gently nurse the infant, she exclaims: »This boy is obviously something special!«,³³ and adopts him. Notably, no credit goes to the humanitarian cow; it is the helpless child who is considered to be special.

Indeed, the pervasive cultural logic, both in this story and in parallel accounts of the hero's exposure, is that any human being who, as a vulnerable infant of an eminently social species, can survive without community support must somehow have access to otherwise untapped powers, powers external to, and independent of, society. Outside of Eurasia, too, we find stories of alien rulers who survive ordeals outside of society. Thus, some 8,000 kilometers from the closest Eurasian coast, »a typical Fijian myth« of the rulers' origins features the (adult) ancestor having an accident at sea. He does not drown, but is »befriended by a shark«, who ensures that the ancestor safely arrives at an island, where his descendants subsequently form the ruling lineage.³⁴ Beyond the margins of community, cut off from all kith and kin, survival relies on tapping extra-societal power. One Chinese narrative cites an interpretation of an exposed child's survival as »a divine sign«. ³⁵ The child can stand alone, and for a human being, that is a superhuman feat.

This independence demonstrates not only a strange and awesome power, but simultaneously creates the capacity for objectivity – especially in view of the hero's loss of all previous kinship ties. A stranger to everyone alike, he can decide fairly over conflict within the community.³⁶ It is therefore exactly his lack of ties, his status as an outsider to society, that makes him eminently fit to hold sway over it. His strangeness, in fact, often suffices for him to attain rule: »Stop fighting!«, the man who discovered the Manchu ancestor is noted to have

30 Schneider, *Southern Tungusic origin myths*, 237.

31 Pohl and Rychterová, *Early Medieval Europe*, 135.

32 Beckwith, *Empires*, 1-12.

33 Tshal-pa-Kun-dga'-rdo-rje, *Hu-lan-deb-ther*, 27.1 (*bu-tsha-'di-khyad-par-can-cig-yin-par-'dug- ...*)

34 Sahlins, *Stranger-king*, 112.

35 Lee, *Origin myths of Turkic peoples*, 204, fn. 4.

36 Thus, as the 14th-c. *History of the Jin* relates the early history of the Jurchen, it was only a foreigner who could mend relations between two feuding clans (Schneider, *Southern Tungusic origin myths*, 229). Similarly, in a 17th-c. narration of the Manchu's origins, »the Heavenly Khan« had to send a spirit to quell the infighting of the three Jurchen clans (Southern Tungusic origin myths, 236). The effective mediator (or arbitrator) comes from outside.

said to the fighting Jurchen clans: »At the ford of our river is a very beautiful, good boy (...) [who] is not of our Jurchen people.« They decide to make him their ruler, and peace settles over society.³⁷ Similarly, one common version of the Tibetan imperial genealogy describes the first emperor arriving as a stranger, and, without having uttered a single word, being lifted to rulership.³⁸

Oftentimes, however, the hero's advent is not silent, but is rather combined with outrageous feats of strength, which serve to underline his alien character. Sahlins finds that power is »typically founded on an act of barbarism—murder, incest, or both«.³⁹ Crimes against family, for instance, separate the founder or ancestor from society and the norms that govern it. His transcendence over the moral order is what simultaneously allows him to transform it. It is in this light, Sahlins suggested, that we should see Romulus' murder of his brother Remus prior to his ascension as Rome's first ruler.⁴⁰ The abundant »fratricide, filicide, and geronticide« in dynastic origins in Old Norse literature has been interpreted in the same manner.⁴¹

Although most narratives of stranger-kings presented in this volume are rather more subdued,⁴² we may well find echoes of such norm-breaking foundational violence, perhaps softened by the ethical dictates of religions such as Christianity and Islam. Pohl, Rychterová and Reimitz express some bemusement at the fact that oftentimes founding figures were not »models to be proud of«, citing the example of the British ancestor Brutus,⁴³ who was »prophesized to kill his mother and father and be hateful to all men«.⁴⁴ Indeed, as foretold, Brutus' mother would die in labour, and he ended up accidentally shooting his father with an arrow. Oghuz Khan, too, is reported to have killed his father.⁴⁵ Such depictions may indeed be »surprising« or even »seem ... devoid of narrative logic«.⁴⁶ Yet this might simply be because they represent Christianised and Islamised versions of earlier narratives of transformative violence at the dawn of society. Both stories, to wit, may have rendered the father's killing more palatable to Christian and Islamic sensibilities by framing these otherwise heinous acts as, in the case of Brutus, an accident, and, in the case of Oghuz Khan, a necessary defence of monotheism. The resulting narrative, especially in the case of Brutus, is arguably neither fish nor fowl; he strikes the reader not as a transgressive hero, but as an unfortunate fool. Yet

37 Schneider, *Southern Tungusic origin myths*, 237.

38 Sørensen, *Mirror*, 139.

39 Sahlins, *Stranger-king*, 112. Note that in what Schneider calls the Hürha and Mount Bukūri myths of the Manchu Qing, the spirit sent by the Heavenly Khan to become the Jurchen leader in effect impregnates his own mother-to-be (*Southern Tungusic origin myths*, 234-236).

40 Sahlins, *Stranger-king*, 112.

41 Wellendorf, *Old Scandinavian literature*, 521.

42 Oghuz Khan's exploits in the »pagan« origin story, however, clearly reveal his larger-than-life powers, including the description of his alien, animal-like physique, and his »slaying a fearsome monster« (Lee, *Origin myths of Turkic peoples*, 209-210).

43 Pohl, Rychterová and Reimitz, *Challenges of interpretation*, 103.

44 Pohl and Rychterová, *Early Medieval Europe*, 139.

45 Lee, *Origin myths of Turkic peoples*, 210.

46 Pohl, Rychterová and Reimitz, *Challenges of interpretation*, 103.

when seen from a broader comparative perspective, it is hardly surprising to see a founding figure kill his own kin.

The wide spread of stranger-kings belies any interpretation of the motif as fundamentally »Eurasian«, either in origin or nature, and it similarly complicates any usage of this trope as evidence of relations within a more coherent, say, monolingual, literary record.⁴⁷ Rather than such narratives constituting evidence of cultural connectivity, then, they instead seem to reflect a fundamental propensity of human cultures to situate the source of true power outside of society.

This cross-cultural tendency to locate (and tap) power outside of human community may be a contributory reason why certain peoples and dynasties laid claim to such fantastic origins, seeking roots in an ancestral wolf, demoness, monkey, magpie, or even sea monster.⁴⁸ Perhaps we can even see the tendency of European peoples to claim descent from »lands ... mostly situated at the margins of Europe« in the same light. As Pohl and Rychterová write: »It seems to have enhanced the prestige of a people (or a person) to have come from«, and here they cite a poem from around 700 CE, »the ›outmost boundaries of Europe (*de extremis finibus Europae*)«.⁴⁹ The margins hold a powerful appeal.

We can move the analysis somewhat further still. Locating the source of power outside of one's society is homologous with the universal cultural tendency to situate agency and power outside of living human beings altogether, namely in gods, spirits, ancestors, and so on. That is to say, it is homologous with humans' propensity to have »religion«. Sahlins accordingly later expanded his analysis, arguing that the incorporation of the potency of alterity is the fundamental form underlying not only traditional societies' politics and religion, but kinship too (to the degree that these domains can be separated). In »politics«, this is expressed in the incorporation of the stranger-king (or, where kings are absent, the attainment of metahuman powers through other means, such as strange, powerful objects). In »religion«, it is reflected in attempts to access, and establish beneficial relations with, metahuman forces. In »kinship«, finally, it is evident in the need to incorporate others through marriage, as dictated by the incest taboo. In all these fields, the incorporation of the other serves to establish a viable whole, a dynamic sum that is larger than its parts. Identity, Sahlins notes, is »made by the assimilation of alterity«.⁵⁰

And this point brings us back full-circle to the theoretical introduction to this section, which has much to say about the relation between self, alterity, and identity. Pohl, Rychterová and Reimitz argue against influential strands of modern theorizing on identity formation, contending that they have often placed too heavy a focus on the processes of identity formation, to the neglect of any ontological basis (i.e., »making difference« as opposed to actually

47 Of course, the more specific the formulation of the trope gets (e.g., the exposure of a sole surviving boy in a basket that is set adrift), the likelier it is that we are, in fact, staring in the face of cultural connections.

48 As the articles by Pohl and Rychterová (Early Medieval Europe, 151-152) as well as that of Wabnitz (Fantastic beasts, 191) suggest, such stories may well have been more common in Europe before Christians, in their aversion of pagan and especially zoosexual mythology, started shunning animal ancestors.

49 Pohl and Rychterová, Early Medieval Europe, 91.

50 Sahlins, Elementary forms, 196.

existing social »difference«, »othering« as opposed to »the other«). Such a theoretical focus fosters the impression that the individual and/or the community can almost freely define the »Other«, as if unhindered by external realities. This of course nicely fits with near post-modern constructivist approaches that seek to unmoor ethnic origin stories from historical social realities by framing them as detached constructions by elite outsiders. As an alternative, the three authors adopt Bernhard Waldenfels' responsive phenomenology to argue against any notion that the other could simply be invented wholesale. Instead, they note, the alien must at first encounter, confront and/or challenge the self, and only this actual encounter sets off a hermeneutic spiral of challenge and response, of identity formation. Put simply, »the »Other« also exists before othering«.⁵¹ As far as identity research is concerned, such a confrontation with the Other serves as a reality check that restricts the free range of identity construction. The self, in sum, is not sovereign; power also lies elsewhere, namely with the other, that alien presence that can at times be »overwhelming, frightening«.⁵²

Stranger-king narratives, it seems, are potent metaphorical expressions of this exact dynamic. The local community first finds itself confronted with a powerful alien. It successfully engages with it, ultimately incorporates it, and ends up being richer and more dynamic for it, finding itself better balanced: »The Jurchen tribes stopped fighting«.⁵³ Narratives of the alien ruler's arrival capture how humans successfully grapple with whom and what is other, incorporate and harness it, partially defanging it in the process. This appropriation can only succeed partially, because, as Waldenfels' phenomenological approach argues, the alien cannot be fully integrated into the self. The stranger-king, to be sure, becomes part of society only in the sense that he now sits above it, where he still wields a potentially dangerous alien power that requires continued careful handling.

In capturing these dynamics, stories of the stranger-king's advent are not merely »a mystification of power, framed in the interests of the ruler«. These narratives also function as a genuine expression of local ontologies of social life.⁵⁴ As humans we must cope with people who are neither kin nor friends, who are fundamentally other, at once threat and promise. Such encounters can go awfully awry, yet are at the same time a precondition for social reproduction and human flourishing. Ideally, indeed, such meetings produce a dynamic and improved whole, a sum that is larger than its parts, in a word: society.

Animal Guides

Perhaps even more wide-spread than the stranger-king is the trope of the animal that leads the way to a foundation site, new homeland, or founding figure. Already some two centuries ago, Jacob Grimm pointed out the recurring role of guiding animals (»weisende Thiere«), citing various narratives of wolves, raven, bear, stags, hinds and so on that lead protagonists to the foundation sites of »colonies ..., cities, castles, churches ...«.⁵⁵ Vladimir Propp, in his

51 Pohl, Rychterová and Reimitz, *Challenges of interpretation*, 101.

52 Pohl, Rychterová and Reimitz, *Challenges of interpretation*, 101.

53 Schneider, *Southern Tungusic origin myths*, 237.

54 Sahlins, *Stranger-king*, 114.

55 Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, vol. 2, 1093-1094.

groundbreaking formalist study on the functional structure of Russian fairy tales, similarly cited the hero being led to his target, sometimes by animals, as a recurring narrative element.⁵⁶ In this volume, Sandra Wabnitz highlights the appearance of this trope in sources from both the east and west of the Eurasian landmass. Daniel Ziemann highlights Jordanes' 6th-c. narrative of the Huns chasing a doe across the (shallow) Sea of Azov to account for their historical migration, as well as the coeval Procopius' similar accounts concerning the Kutrigurs and Utigurs.⁵⁷ As Pohl and Rychterová note, Paul the Deacon's ancestor was supposedly led out of Avar captivity by a wolf,⁵⁸ and Oghuz Khan, too, at least in the non-Islamic narrative discussed by Lee, was »[g]uided by a sacred wolf« during his successful campaigns.⁵⁹

The ethnographer Nick Allen has gathered numerous similar tales from all along the Himalayas. He presents narratives from as far west as Nuristan (Afghanistan) and as far east as Nagaland (north-eastern India) (a territory some 2,500 km across), all of which feature animals such as a wild boar, dog, deer, goat, ram, cow, yak, musk deer, rat, mithun (or gayal) and pig in the role of guide.⁶⁰ The guiding animal is common in South Indian temple foundation myths, too, where a protagonist often follows a cow to a spot where a temple will later be founded.⁶¹ The origin narrative of the Tangut emperors, already cited above, also involves a woman following the trail of her cow to the site of the abandoned future hero. In Tibet, the animal in question is often a female yak or yak-cow hybrid known as dzo (Tib. *mdzo-mo*). Allen quite successfully summarized this variety of narratives in his classification of Himalayan foundation myths into three types: those that lead to a person or god, to a cult or its site, or to the settlement of a new area.⁶²

A partial explanation for the wide occurrence of this trope can certainly be found in the simple fact that in past periods, when live animals played a more central role in many people's day-to-day activities, looking for lost cattle, chasing game, or following animal trails was likely a common path to, well, greener pastures. The search for animals was certainly a familiar theme in many regions: in the Near East, it was central to Jesus' parable of the lost sheep. Krappe, in accounting for the prevalence of the animal guide in narratives, pointed out long ago that navigators in the past would use guiding birds, that »desert-dwellers [relied on] the scent of their animals to discover hidden wells« and »ravens and crows will accompany marching armies«. ⁶³ This is certainly not to say that these stories featuring animal guides always or even often reflect historical events, but rather that they made for logical, credible templates.

The animal, moreover, which we already encountered above as the customary saviour of the exposed hero, often constitutes, represents or channels those elusive powers outside of

56 Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 51.

57 Ziemann, Bulgarian origin legends, 176.

58 Pohl and Rychterová, Early Medieval Europe, 144. See also Wabnitz, *Fantastic beasts*, 191.

59 Lee, *Origin myths of Turkic peoples*, 210.

60 Allen, *Animal guides*.

61 Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*.

62 Allen, *Animal guides*, 386.

63 Krappe, *Guiding animals*, 245.

human control. Depending on the species and the society involved, animals may be liminal or altogether extra-social beings, and as such can function as a natural way to introduce non-human agency, and as a natural path in and out of society – a bridge to alterity, where, again, we find both danger and promise.⁶⁴

Recognizing the wide spread of narratives with animal guides can help shift our analytic perspective. One contribution to this section, for example, first read this trope, as it appears in an etic-composed origin story of a pastoralist population, as reflecting an etic assumption that herd migrations dictated pastoralists' movement. Set against a broader backdrop of guiding animals in myths across cultures, however, this suddenly seemed less convincing, even if such narratives can naturally function on multiple discursive levels at once. The trope's wide spread also cautions us, once more, against taking structural similarities as a sign of cultural connectivity all too quickly. This has of course been observed before, particularly following the work of Georges Dumézil, who sought to establish the interconnectedness of the Indo-European world based on the similarities in the myths of its various societies.⁶⁵ Further anthropological research building on his approach largely proved that assumption untenable, demonstrating that many similar mythological themes cannot be directly linked to one another.⁶⁶ To be sure, this is not to rule out that narrative details, especially more specific ones, can reveal actual instances of connectivity. Allen, for one, cites examples among the Rai in which the guiding animal leaves a trail from, quite distinctly, a pierced packet of ash.⁶⁷

Accordingly, we must develop a finer eye for those details that make stories so appropriate for, and typical of, their specific context. One immediately recognizes the relevance of local ecology (we would hardly expect a mithun in a Tibetan story), as well as the relevance of specific cultural settings. Grimm already concluded, citing the example of a hind leading the Franks to a ford in the river Main, that »Christian heroes prefer to be led by a deer, rather than a heathen wolf«. ⁶⁸ Similarly, Oghuz Khan's guiding wolf, which features in what Lee describes as »the pre-Islamic (or pagan)« version of Oghuz Khan's narrative, does not appear in the Islamic one.⁶⁹ We find a different approach in Procopius and Jordanes, who (re)framed a guiding doe as an »instrument of evil spirits« in an origin story of perceived enemies (the Huns).⁷⁰ All these writers thus managed to make such stories their own, adapting the trope of the guiding animal to varying contexts and sensibilities.

64 Note in this context also Allen's brief remark concerning possible links between myth and ritual, suggesting that perhaps »animals at one time played a ritualized role in decision-making ...« (Allen, Guiding animals, 387).

65 Dumézil, *L'idéologie tripartite*.

66 In this context, consider also the broad-ranging anthropological debates on the tension between the universalist tendencies of structuralism and the need to appreciate socio-cultural specificity, particularly the contributions by Daniel de Coppet, Raymond Firth, Rodney Needham, Nick Allen, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Marshall Sahlins.

67 Allen, Guiding animals, 375-376, 386.

68 Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, 1094.

69 Lee, Origin myths of Turkic peoples, 210.

70 Wabnitz, *Fantastic beasts*, 195.

Sibling Trios

Some authors in this volume identify another recurring trope: three siblings who separate at the outset of origin narratives, leading to the foundation of new societies. Schneider explicitly highlights the three siblings as a recurring mytheme in Tungusic origin myths. The Bulgar origin narratives also feature migrating siblings, either in a group of three or five, with Ziemann believing that the narrative »originally featured only three sons«.⁷¹ The trope of three brothers is indeed common. Famously, Dumézil linked various trios of brothers in Indo-European myths and pantheons to the three societal functions of his hypothesized Indo-European »tripartite ideology«.⁷² Although there is no obvious connection to such social roles in our materials, his highlighting the deep historical resonance of sets of three brothers speaks to its wide spread. Folklorists recognize the trope as well: stories of quests »[v]ery often ... involve three brothers« who then go separate ways.⁷³

Ziemann cites a telling parallel from Herodotus, a myth of Scythian royal succession that features three brothers named Lipoxais, Arpoxais and Colaxais, who end up ruling separate parts of the realm.⁷⁴ In the Tibetan highlands, narratives surrounding the Tibetan imperial genealogy regularly feature a key episode with three similarly named brothers as well: Shya-khyi, Nya-khyi, and Bya-khyi, all of whom move to different regions.⁷⁵ Similarly, two origin myths of the Manchu Qing trace the people back to one of three heavenly sisters, named Enggülen, Jenggülen, and Fekülen.⁷⁶

Such sibling trios with similar names are common fare in the broader Tibetan cultural area as well. For instance, a foundation myth from the far western Nepali Himalayas features an ancestral set of brothers named Dkon-mchog-dpal, Tshe-ring-dpal, and Bsod-nams-dpal.⁷⁷ In Sikkim, north-eastern India, we encounter three sibling-ancestors called Kyaborab, Langmorab, and Mitponrab.⁷⁸ These examples could be multiplied without much effort. Larry Moses has also pointed out a tendency in *The Secret History of the Mongols* to present men in sets of threes (and the same goes for »measures of time, space, or distance«).⁷⁹ Notably, he remarks how it is odd and »probably inexplicable« that Chinggis Khan's »3 oldest sons are so often mentioned without the youngest, Tolui«.⁸⁰ It is conceivable that these various narratives, especially those featuring three brothers with rhyming names, reveal a degree of cultural connectivity.

Still, we need to be most careful in drawing conclusions concerning connectivity from similarity alone. A telling warning is issued by the origin stories of the Duchy of Bohemia. The

71 Ziemann, *Bulgarian origin legends*, 173.

72 Dumézil, *L'idéologie tripartite*.

73 Gary and El-Shamy, *Motifs in Folklore*.

74 Ziemann, *Bulgarian origin legends*, 175.

75 E.g., Tshal-pa-Kun-dga'-rdo-rje, *Hu-lan-deb-ther*, 33-34.

76 Schneider, *Southern Tungusic origin myths*, 234, 236.

77 Levine, *Origins*, 60-61.

78 Balikci, *Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors*, 70.

79 Moses, *By the Numbers*, 79.

80 Moses, *By the Numbers*, 79.

early-12th-c. *Chronica Bohemorum*, written by Cosmas of Prague, introduced the Moses-like forefather *Bohemus* into the discourse on the Duchy's origins. This narrative enjoyed enduring success. Yet from the middle of the 14th-c. onward, several adaptations of the story started attributing two brothers to the Bohemian forefather: the younger sibling Lech, who parted ways with his brother to found Poland, and the youngest, Rus, who ventured even further east.⁸¹ The three siblings, then, are demonstrably not a prehistoric mytheme but rather a creative invention by ambitious authors, who, incidentally, sought to accommodate the geopolitical interests of their patron, the Bohemian King and Roman Emperor Charles IV (1346-1378). Similarly, the third rhyming brother from the Tibetan imperial genealogy adduced above is absent from an earlier 9th-c. inscription documenting the same episode.⁸² Although Georges Dumézil highlighted sets of three as a deep and old feature of mythical narratives, we must not forget that individual narrators had widely different reasons for retaining, introducing, and transmitting certain narrative elements.⁸³

Research on myths has always inspired comparison, from the romantic interest in authentic popular legends to narratology, structuralism, and more recent cultural anthropology. Building on this tradition, the present collection offers new comparative perspectives on origin myths. We hope that it has become evident that a broad perspective can help to finetune theory, better contextualize our sources, avert mistaken impressions of cultural isolation and reveal commonalities across cultures, sharpen recognition of what is culturally specific, highlight possible instances of cultural connectivity, and also spotlight the possible relevance of mnemonics and aesthetics in accounting for certain narrative patterns. If, in contrast, we analyse a trope from within a bounded paradigm, the bounded paradigm ends up reproducing itself. Yet if we dislodge bricks from disciplinary walls, we initiate a virtuous circle that helps further dismantle the divide: other fields help open up our own fields. Indeed, much like stranger-kings and animal guides illustrate, there is a lot of promise in what is strange to us.

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81 Žůrek and Rychterová, Slavonic and Czech identity.

82 The third brother was called Kar-po (see Hill, Rkong po inscription).

83 One reason for the recurrence of rhyming trios of brothers is surely that the human mind responds well to sets of threes, and generally loves a rhyme. The pattern accordingly extends far beyond founding brothers: we may cite the phrase *veni, vidi, vici* (»I came, I saw, I conquered«) attributed to Julius Ceasar, the ancient Zoroastrian creed (in Avestan) *humata, hūxta, huvaršta* (»good thought, good word, good act«), and the 20th-c. cartoon ducks Huey, Dewey and Louie.

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