Walter Pohl

Phantoms of Identity in Early Medieval Historiography

After more than a quarter of a century, it is time to acknowledge the lasting importance of Patrick Geary's *Phantoms of Remembrance*.¹ In the context of many works on social and cultural memory in the Middle Ages, a few published before and many after it, it still stands out as an exemplary study of the ways in which the past was subtly transformed to fit the needs of the present.² It reads almost as fresh as when it was written: avoiding the use of loaded terms, wide-ranging in the well-chosen examples, and precise in their interpretation. The book, which appeared in 1994, introduced the "creative process of reforming the relationship between past and present" to early medieval studies.³ Taking as an example forged Merovingian charters on papyrus, the *Chronicle of Novalesa* or the memories of Pannonian dragons by Arnold of St Emmeram in Regensburg, Geary focused on the way in which memories could be transformed in the context of the manuscript transmission of a text. His observation was that around 1000 many earlier texts were selected, copied, reworked or obliterated, and thus, the lasting memory of the earlier period was reshaped. Most significantly, the book moved the subject beyond the black-and-white world of established dichotomies: "First, historians of memory have focused too much, I think, on the putative dichotomy between individual and collective memory and collective memory and history. Second, historians and anthropologists have overstressed the distinction between oral and written remembering. Finally, previous studies have focused primarily on the formation of conscious narrative memory rather than on the structures by which memories of all sorts are transmitted and created."⁴

Indeed, the study of memory and history has created a surprising number of dichotomies through which humanities and social sciences scholars have tried to get a better grip on a phenomenon to which many of them owed their material. After the Enlightenment and in the process of professionalization of the historical disciplines, generations of scholars tried to establish the superiority of their discipline over naive, non-academic attempts to write or narrate history. Historical memory should go through a progressively-refined set of filters to ensure that nothing could pass as

1 Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance. Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium*, Princeton 1994.

2 See, for instance, James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory*, Oxford 1992; Otto Gerhard Oexle, *Memoria und Memorialüberlieferung im frühen Mittelalter*, in: *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 10 (1976), 70–95; Karl Schmid, Joachim Wollasch (eds.), *Memoria: Der geschichtliche Zeugniswert liturgischen Gedenkens im Mittelalter*, Munich 1984; Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory. A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge 2nd ed. 2008.

3 Geary, *Phantoms* (note 1), 9.

4 Geary, *Phantoms* (note 1), 10.

historical truth that did not correspond to the methodological standards of the discipline. ‘*Die deutsche historische Schule*’ of the 19th century was in a sense the apotheosis of the epistemological optimism that allowed professional historians to recount “how it had actually been”, “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*”, as Leopold Ranke famously put it.⁵

In the 1930s, the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who represented, as Gérard Namer writes, “la gauche durkheimienne”, completely reversed the thrust of the argument, and radicalized the underlying dichotomy.⁶ Halbwachs distinguished between collective memory and historical memory. According to him, the first represents spontaneous, natural memory and is very selective, whereas historical memory aims at a more inclusive, broader picture, but in a much more self-reflective and therefore manipulative manner. The historical background of his work was the ascent of totalitarianism, against which Halbwachs found a remedy in popular, ‘democratic’ memory. History, he claimed, strips the past of its magic. It is worth noting that the founding father of the theories of ‘collective memory’ current in historical research to our day came close to asserting that history ruined the spontaneous memory that a society kept from its past. It is a paradoxical inheritance for historians to work with.

In the 1980s, Pierre Nora followed Halbwachs’s model when he edited the three-volume series “*Les lieux de mémoire*” about the French “places of memory”.⁷ The concept was a spectacular success and acquired wide currency, so that today we can call almost everything linked to memory a “*lieu de mémoire*”; not only physical spaces such as the Pantheon or the Louvre, but also cultural artefacts such as the Marseillaise or the Diary of Anne Frank, imaginary figures such as King Arthur or the Hobbit, or events such as the voyage of the Mayflower or the year 1968. It may seem peculiar that a year could be a *lieu*, a ‘place’ of memory, but the concept inspired numerous studies. In any case, Nora elaborated on the distinction that Halbwachs had made: the original form of collective memory thrives in the milieus de mémoire, “genuine, social and untouched memory”. However, these cultures of memory disappear with modernity and with professional historiography, which leads to the “ever faster fall into an irrecoverably dead past, to an indistinctive perception of all things as disappeared”. Memory is delegated to specific spaces, museums, ar-

5 “Man hat der Historie das Amt, die Vergangenheit zu richten, die Mitwelt zum Nutzen zukünftiger Jahre zu belehren, beigemessen: so hoher Aemter unterwindet sich gegenwärtiger Versuch nicht: er will bloss zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen.” Leopold von Ranke, Vorrede zu *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker*, Leipzig et al. 1824, 1.

6 Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, Paris 1939; Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris 1925; Gérard Namer, *Le contretemps démocratique chez Halbwachs*, in: *Erinnerung und Gesellschaft*, ed. by Hermann Krapoth and Denise Laborde, Wiesbaden 1995 (*Jahrbuch für Soziologiegeschichte*), 55–64, 57.

7 Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols., Paris 1984–1992; English translation: *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1: *The State*, Chicago 1999; vol. 2: *Space*, Chicago 2006; vol. 3: *Legacies*, Chicago 2009; vol. 4: *Histories and Memories*, Chicago 2010.

chives or memorials, in short, the “lieux de mémoire”. The warmth of tradition is transformed into the cold gaze of the unconcerned observer. This dichotomy modifies the, more plausible but still simplifying, distinction between ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ societies proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss – ‘hot’ societies use their history as a catalyst of change, while ‘cold’ societies seek their balance through oblivion.⁸

“Such distinctions are deceptive”, as Geary commented.⁹ As historians, we may regard Pierre Nora’s model as a warning not to take our own professional perception of the past for granted. Invariably, we lose the heat of the moment, the immediacy of the living memory. Yet methodologically, the safe grounding in historical methodology may be preferable to the spontaneous warmth of tradition. Nora’s distinction also obscures one rather essential point. Professional history has not terminated popular social memory. Neither is it simply its contrary. The “lieux de mémoire” can be brought back to life, in attempts that may seem artificial, but that nonetheless repeatedly had considerable social impact in the history of the 19th and 20th centuries. Historians were often part of such re-invented “milieus de mémoire”, often in the context of nationalist ideologies, where the past can acquire explosive political potential. Patrick Geary has addressed the political misuses of the “migration period” in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages in his book on the *Myths of Nations*.¹⁰ Only a few years ago, these “barbarian migrations” were back in the focus of ideological misuses in the debates about the wave of immigration in Europe in 2015/16. It was striking to observe how right-wing Germans, who for generations had identified with the Germanic migrants who had overcome decadent Rome, suddenly regarded them as a warning example of the fatal consequences that uncontrolled migration could have on a supposedly superior civilisation.

Whichever form it takes, the dichotomy between ‘learned’ and ‘spontaneous’ social memory is not very helpful. This also concerns the related juxtaposition between ‘written’ and ‘oral’ memory.¹¹ Written transmission does not necessarily codify a text, on the contrary: by copying it, it can be constantly modified. Oral transmission, generally believed to be much more liable to changes, may be bound by strategies of co-

⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, Paris 1962, 309. For a critique and a more differentiated reading of the uses of the past in different societies, see Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, Munich 1999, 66–86.

⁹ Geary, *Phantoms* (note 1), 11.

¹⁰ Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations. The Medieval Origins of Europe*, Princeton 2001. See also František Graus, *Die Ohnmacht der Wissenschaft gegenüber Geschichtsmythen*, in: František Graus, *Ausgewählte Aufsätze (1959–1989)*, ed. by Hans-Jörg Gilomen, Peter Moraw and Rainer Christoph Schwinges, Stuttgart 2002, 50–64.

¹¹ Among the extensive bibliography see, for instance, Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral*, Cambridge 1977; Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy. Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Princeton 1983; Walter Pohl and Paul Herold (eds.), *Vom Nutzen des Schreibens. Soziales Gedächtnis, Herrschaft und Besitz*, Wien 2003 (*Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters* 5).

dification, so as to preserve the features of a text over the generations.¹² Koran or Vedic schools do just that until today: they ensure that the pupils learn the text by heart (although it is available in writing). Learning by heart: at least in the English language, the heart can be an organ of memory. Therefore, memories can also be ‘discordant’.

It is of particular interest that Geary not only put memory but also forgetting firmly on the map. To a historian, memory may seem as the more natural process whereas oblivion is the stronger force: remembering is always precarious, forgetting is final. Patrick Geary has underlined “the inadequacy of memory”.¹³ This is a point that Johannes Fried also makes in his book *Der Schleier der Erinnerung*. Fried offers a 100-page summary of the “neurocultural basis of historiography” in order to pave the way for a new approach that he calls “mnemonics”.¹⁴ We were not born as historians, he concludes, with an accurate memory of the facts. We remember what our cultural matrix induces us to select and transform from an almost infinite range of things-to-remember. The problem is not simply forgetting but remembering things differently because they seem to make sense that way. As historians, we may see that as a problem. None of the written sources from the Middle Ages offer an accurate representation of things “as they had actually been”. Yet the methodological bottom line of Fried’s approach remains unclear. It could lead to a sombre epistemological scepticism: we will never know what really happened. In Fried’s own successive publications, he has employed “mnemonics” as a trump card in debates about which accounts of certain events (for instance, Henry IV’s penance in Canossa) in contemporary sources are more reliable; the analytical potential of the impressive “neurocultural” input in such debates remains unclear.¹⁵ On the whole, Fried has contributed to a general sense of caution in using historiographical sources. However, 200 years of *Quellenkritik* have equipped us with quite sophisticated tools to deal with all the lies and bias, the omissions and distortions in medieval historiography. In my view, we should always remain critical of our work routines, yet avoid encouraging wholesale dismissal of our proven methods.

In reaction to a wave of studies of ‘cultural memory’, sceptical comments have begun to appear. Gadi Algazi has pointed out that “memory provides us with a very restricted vocabulary for describing the shaping of the past. ... It cannot match the richness of a scholarly tradition that has developed in the course of studying historiography, rhetoric and literature in its wider sense”.¹⁶ Indeed, ‘memory’ has followed

¹² Cf. Paul Zumthor, *La lettre et la voix. De la ‘littérature’ médiévale*, Paris 1987; Brian Stock, *Listening for the Text. On the Uses of the Past*, Philadelphia 1990.

¹³ Geary, *Phantoms* (note 1), 19.

¹⁴ Johannes Fried, *Der Schleier der Erinnerung. Grundzüge einer historischen Memorik*, Munich 2004.

¹⁵ Johannes Fried, *Canossa. Entlarvung einer Legende. Eine Streitschrift*, Berlin 2012.

¹⁶ Gadi Algazi, *Forget Memory. Some Critical Remarks on Memory, Forgetting and History*, in: *Damnation in memoria. Deformation und Gegenkonstruktionen in der Geschichte*, ed. by Sebastian Scholz,

the trajectory of many terms that have emerged over the past decades as key concepts in historical research, such as ‘identity’, ‘culture’ or ‘globalization’: they seem to hold great promise when they appear, stimulate new questions, are explored by some first-rate scholars in wide-reaching studies, and acquire a rich set of overtones, which makes them attractive as shorthand terms seemingly offering great explanatory potential. Increasingly, they are then employed as buzz-words in many second-rate studies that use them as short-cuts for the interpretation of their material. They begin to be overused, and their meaning becomes vague and contradictory. Soon critical scholars begin to suggest to ‘forget memory’, culture or identity. I would rather argue that we should keep the terms, but mostly for the questions and approaches they still offer, and not as answers that speak for themselves.¹⁷

In that sense, Geary’s *Phantoms of Remembrance* provides methodological options that merit further exploration. First, the book focuses on memory and oblivion not within the life-span of contemporaries and their written testimonies, but as a gradual process of selection in the course of transmission. The accent here is not so much on the neurological conditions of transformation and deformation of the things remembered, but on the social and cultural process of retaining, guarding or obliterating relevant and formative memories in a given community. This is a line of research that has also become productive in Zurich.¹⁸ Such decisions do not follow a consistent logic, they may be erratic and contingent, and influenced by rather momentary and particular interests. Nevertheless, they can be studied in their social contexts, and, when taken together, may show a certain bias or profile. For instance, we owe most of the classical Latin texts that have been preserved to Carolingian copyists, and their efforts were certainly due to a common impetus to copy on parchment and in a readable hand-writing what one had inherited from a distant past.¹⁹ The 11th century, as Geary describes it, was rather a period of “radical discontinuities” and “artificial continuities”, of restructuring the past: “Much of what we think we know about the early Middle Ages was determined by the changing problems and concerns of eleventh-century men and women.”²⁰

Gerald Schwedler, and Kai-Michael Sprenger, Cologne 2014 (Zürcher Beiträge zur Geschichtswissenschaft 2), 25–34, 27.

17 Cf. Walter Pohl, *Historiography and Identity – Methodological Perspectives*, in: *Historiography and Identity 1: Ancient and Early Christian Narratives of Community*, ed. by Walter Pohl and Veronika Wieser, Turnhout 2019, 7–50.

18 *Damnatio in memoria* (note 16). See, in particular, Gerald Schwedler, *Was heißt und zu welchem Ende untersucht man damnatio in memoria?*, *ibid.*, 9–24, and Sebastian Scholz, *Verformungen der Erinnerung*, *ibid.*, 109–114.

19 Rosamond McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word*, Cambridge 1989; Helmut Reimitz, *Carolingian Approaches to History and Identity: An Introduction*, in: *Historiography and Identity III. Carolingian Convergence and Its Limits*, ed. by Helmut Reimitz, Rutger Kramer, and Graeme Ward, Turnhout 2021, 1–37.

20 Geary, *Phantoms* (note 1), 6–7.

Second, and consequently, the book directed scholarly interest toward the study of manuscript transmission. Research on historical memory in the Middle Ages requires going beyond editions and looking at the way in which texts were modified as they were copied. Traditional critical editions were mainly interested in coming as close as possible to a hypothetical *Urtext*.²¹ Variants of a text were regarded as errors or manipulations and collecting them in the apparatus of the edition mainly served the purpose of documenting in what ways the copies varied from the original. Yet many of the changes to a text, “ré-écritures”, were in fact deliberate, ranging from correction of what was regarded as a mistake, through subtle adaptations to contemporary interests and attitudes, to major cuts, modifications or additions.²² The context of a manuscript can provide important clues to the significance and function of a text in the time when it was copied.

Third, Geary widened the horizon to use not only historiography, but also archival practices, charters, wills, personal and familial memories, hagiography and other forms of written memory, in order to establish a broader picture of practices of social memory. Distinction by genre is not always helpful if one wants to understand how a society chose to preserve texts, and which ones. In the rest of this paper, however, I will take a step back to focus once more on historiography.

As if he knew that ‘memory’ was bound for excessive use, Patrick Geary chose ‘remembrance’ for the title of his book and addressed it as a ‘phantom’. In a masterfully open-ended conclusion, he asked who the phantoms really were: past actors written out of history by its successive re-appropriations? The little-known scribes and archivists who condemned parts of their past to oblivion? Or the modern historians who try to impose their vision of the past on the discipline?²³ One might add that our concepts are phantoms as well, seemingly full of explicatory potential, but elusive and sometimes deceptive if we try to pin down our view of the past with their help. In the following, I will try to chase two of these phantoms, historiography and identity, in order to see how useful they may be in accompanying us further. I will thus move to a subject treated more extensively in other works by Patrick Geary, notably his masterful *Myth of Nations*.²⁴ It follows a line of research that Hel-

21 Sebastiano Timpanaro, *The Genesis of Lachmann's Method*. Translated by Glenn W. Most, Chicago 2005.

22 Bernard Cerquiglini, *Éloge de la variante. Histoire critique de la philologie*, Paris 1989; Walter Pohl, *History in Fragments. Montecassino's Politics of Memory*, in: *Early Medieval Europe* 10/3 (2001), 343–374; Monique Goullet, *Écriture et réécriture hagiographiques. Essai sur les réécritures de Vies de saints dans l'Occident latin médiéval (VIII^e–XIII^e)*, Turnhout 2005 (*Hagiologia* 4); Richard Corradini, Max Diesenberger, and Meta Niederkorn-Bruck (eds.), *Zwischen Niederschrift und Wiederschrift: Historiographie und Hagiographie im Spannungsfeld von Edition und Kompendienüberlieferung*, Vienna 2010 (*Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters* 18).

23 Geary, *Phantoms* (note 1), 180–181.

24 Geary, *Myths of Nations* (note 10).

mut Reimitz and I have pursued in a series of six collaborative volumes on *Historiography and Identity in the Middle Ages* that we are editing.²⁵

Both concepts, and all the more their conjunction, are problematic, and have often been criticized and sometimes refuted altogether. Already a hundred years ago, historical positivists became deeply suspicious of ‘intentional’ historiography and turned to the more reliable ‘functional’ documentary evidence – a position that some of my teachers in Vienna still strongly advocated. One of them once reacted to a paper about a work of historiography with the remark: “Ich sage nur: Klausur! Klausur! Klausur!” – arguing that medieval monks in their cloisters had no idea of the real world when they wrote their chronicles – true nerds of the Dark Ages. In the 1980s, historiography came under fire as ‘fiction of fact’ during the linguistic turn.²⁶ In this respect, post-modernism blended with historical positivism and current trends in literary criticism, three approaches otherwise very different from each other. The literary approach advocated analysing works of historiography as literary texts, which were more useful as a source about the author and his intentions than about the past that they talked about. This was the way in which Walter Goffart introduced the new paradigm into early medieval studies in his enormously influential book *The Narrators of Barbarian History* (1988): early medieval histories, he argued, may tell us more about their authors and “about the age they lived in than the information wrested from their pages.”²⁷ Postmodernism went further than that, also eliminating the author from the equation and regarding the text with all its intra- and intertextual vicissitudes as the only legitimate object of study. It was an exciting time and a fascinating intellectual challenge. However, what became of these critiques was increasingly narrowed down to the simple message that medieval historiography was not a privileged way of access to the past but an opaque barrier: an elite pursuit with partisan intentions, which had little impact on what people thought and did.

25 Walter Pohl, Veronika Wieser (eds.), *Historiography and Identity I. Ancient and Early Christian Narratives of Community*, Turnhout 2020; Helmut Reimitz, Gerda Heydemann (eds.), *Historiography and Identity II. Post-Roman Multiplicity and New Political Identities*, Turnhout forthcoming; Helmut Reimitz, Rutger Kramer, and Graeme Ward (eds.), *Historiography and Identity III. Carolingian Approaches*, Turnhout 2021; Walter Pohl, Daniel Mahoney (eds.), *Historiography and Identity IV: The Writing of History across Medieval Eurasia*, Turnhout 2021; Walter Pohl, Francesco Borri, and Veronika Wieser (eds.), *Historiography and Identity V. The Emergence of New Peoples and Politics, 1000 – 1300*, Turnhout forthcoming; Pavlína Rychterová (ed.), *Historiography and Identity VI: Communities in Transition in Central and Eastern Central Europe (13th–16th Centuries)*, Turnhout 2021.

26 “Fiction of Fact”: Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore 1978; “Linguistic Turn” in *Medieval Studies*: Gabrielle Spiegel, *History, Historicism and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages*, in: *Speculum* 65 (1990), 59–86; and Gabrielle Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography*, Baltimore 1997.

27 Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History: A.D. 550–800. Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon*, Princeton 1988, 437.

I have always suspected that this argument is not quite consistent.²⁸ To validate it, one would need to show that in general elites and their concerns had little impact on what people thought and did. Furthermore, we would have to surmise that medieval institutions invested huge amounts of labour and resources – many hundreds of calf- or sheep-skins for the historiographic holdings of a moderately well-stocked monastic library – in an enterprise that had little effect on anyone. In that vein, Jacques LeGoff in his early book, *Les Intellectuels au Moyen Âge*, argued that monks and clerics of the Carolingian period copied thousands of texts just for penance.²⁹ We know today that there was more to this ambitious programme of copying manuscripts, and to the recurrent interests in the historiography of a distant past. Therefore, we should acknowledge that the ‘linguistic’, ‘literary’ and ‘cultural’ turns at the end of the 20th century were very helpful to remove old scholarly habits of building huge arguments on isolated passages in relatively remote sources. But we should not relegate the study of historiography to purely literary pursuits. Studies of cultural memory in many contexts often conclude that there is a close connection between shared memories of a group and their identity and sense of allegiance. Jan Assmann, for instance, has developed an impressive theoretical model of cultural memory on the basis of his studies of ancient Egypt and Israel, arguing for the close connection of symbolic systems, cultural continuation and political identity.³⁰

I cannot return to the controversial debates on the significance of identity and ethnicity here.³¹ As I have argued, social identities are created and maintained in interaction and communication. People identify with a group. The group represents itself, in collective ritual or through speakers, and distinguishes itself from others. Outsiders perceive and describe the group. These interactions can be verbal or symbolic. Identities are the result of an at least partial overlap of these different modes of identification. They may develop from inside identifications or from outside perceptions. This model can explain both the flexibility in allegiances in some cases, and the extraordinary resilience of group identities in other cases.

My interest here – and our interest in the “Historiography and Identity” book series – is in broad and inclusive groups with a distinctive name which are variously defined by shared ethnic, cultural, and/or political characteristics. Historiographic works focusing on such groups – for instance, Jordanes’ *Getica*, Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, or Paul the Deacon’s *History of the Lombards* – have often been classed as

²⁸ For an overview of the debate, see Pohl, *Historiography and Identity* (note 17).

²⁹ Jacques LeGoff, *Les Intellectuels au Moyen Âge*, Paris 1957.

³⁰ Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (note 8), for his concepts of identity, see 130–160.

³¹ See Walter Pohl, *Introduction. Strategies of Identification. A Methodological Profile*, in: *Strategies of Identification. Ethnicity and Religion in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. by Walter Pohl, Gerda Heydemann, Turnhout 2013, 1–64; Walter Pohl, *Von der Ethnogenese zur Identitätsforschung*, in: *Neue Wege der Frühmittelalterforschung. Bilanz und Perspektiven*, ed. by Walter Pohl, Max Diesenberger, and Bernhard Zeller, Vienna 2018, 9–34.

‘national histories’; but that is a problematic category.³² It makes little sense to debate whether these groups – Goths, Franks, Lombards – were ‘ethnic’ or not. Ethnicity could matter more or less for their cohesion. Yet what we can say on the basis of the sources is that they were regarded as *gentes*, and their names as *nomina* (or *vocabula*) *gentium*.³³

This, then, is an element in the sources that we need to account for: a system of distinctions between named macro-groups, peoples, which was a fundamental cognitive feature attested in many early medieval texts: not only in historiography, but also in law books, charters (for instance, in royal titles), letters, poems and other genres. These names did not only allow to explain contemporary affiliations, but they could also be used to express collective agency. It was not the kingdom that could act, but the people, either as a collective or through its representatives.³⁴ As far as memory is concerned, these designations – it would be hard to avoid regarding them as ethnonyms – also established diachronic continuity, often reaching far back into the past.³⁵ Such identifications could be fictive (for instance, when Huns, Goths or Avars were called “Scythians”), but that only reinforces the impression that historiography could hardly work without ethnonyms that helped to link past and present. They represented both synchronic distinction and diachronic cultural continuation. I would call this system of distinctions ‘ethnicity’. A people did not ‘have’ ethnicity, it had to find its place within the cognitive scheme of ethnicity to be acknowledged as a people.

Historiographic uses did not necessarily correspond with actual ethnic identities (as in the case of the early medieval “Scythians”), but they had to be evidence-based to some extent. To what degree mentions of ancient and early medieval peoples corresponded to self-identifications varied; in some cases, outside denominations triggered self-perceptions. The ancient Germans are almost exclusively attested as an ethnographic umbrella term, and to this day the name has never really become a self-designation.³⁶ The *Theotisci*, “speakers of the popular language”, were also introduced as an outside denomination; but the name eventually established itself as a stable self-identification of “die Deutschen”.³⁷ Florin Curta’s hypothesis that a similar thing may have happened with the Slavs seems plausible.³⁸ The fact that An-

³² Pohl, *Historiography and Identity* (note 17).

³³ For instance, in Isidore, *Etymologies*, ed. by Wallace M. Lindsay, 2 vols., Oxford 1911, 9.2.

³⁴ Walter Pohl, *Debating Ethnicity in Post-Roman Historiography*, in: *Historiography & Identity 2: Post-Roman Multiplicity and New Political Identities*, ed. by Gerda Heydemann and Helmut Reimitz, Turnhout 2020, 27–70.

³⁵ Walter Pohl, *Ethnonyms and Early Medieval Ethnicity: Methodological Reflections*, in: *Hungarian Historical Review* 7/1 (2018), 5–17.

³⁶ Walter Pohl, *Die Germanen*, Munich 2nd ed. 2004 (*Enzyklopädie deutscher Geschichte* 57).

³⁷ Joachim Ehlers, *Die Entstehung des Deutschen Reiches*, Munich 1994 (*Enzyklopädie deutscher Geschichte* 31).

³⁸ Florin Curta, *The Making of the Slavs. History and Archaeology of the Lower Danube Region c. 500–700*, Cambridge 2001.

gles and Saxons became the English may owe its impulse to Gregory the Great's and Bede's preference for the "Angels" over the "Daggers" (or the "Rocks").

This model does not limit historiography to an outside reflection of something arcane that happened inside the group but regards written testimonies as part of the process of identification. However, further research is needed to explore how that could work. Research on historiography and ethnic identity has always, and perhaps too much, concentrated on texts that we might regard as 'foundational', such as the *origines gentium*. This is what Reinhard Wenskus called "Tradition", Anthony D. Smith "mythomoteur" or Jan Assmann, "formative" and "normative texts".³⁹ The study of myths and norms that explained to members of a group where they came from and how they were supposed to act is still rewarding.⁴⁰ It should not be abandoned because they are 'just' myths, and not factual histories; or because we do not have proof that they were known and mattered to all members of the group. *Origines gentium* are interesting for what they do not say, or for how they say it. Why does the *Getica* make so little of the presumed Scandinavian origin of the Goths, and why does it insert the Amal genealogy in such an oblique place, after a minor victory of the Dacians over the Romans?⁴¹ And why do so many authors seem to feel embarrassed when they introduce origin myths or ancient genealogies? They express this discomfort in various ways. Jordanes prefixes the Amal genealogy by an odd and grammatically garbled explanation of what a genealogy is, and that it is all true: *Quorum genealogia ut paucis percurram vel quis quo parente genitus est aut unde origo coepta, ubi finem effecit, absque invidia, qui legis, vera dicentem ausculta*.⁴² Fredegar, as Ian Wood has shown, introduces a good dose of irony into the key passage that relates the Merovingians' supernatural descent from a sea-monster: "Whether conceived by a beast or by a man, the son received the name Merovech."⁴³ Paul the Deacon distances himself twice from the Longobard origin story that he relates

³⁹ Reinhard Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung. Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen Gentes*, Graz 2nd ed. 1977; Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, London 1986; Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (note 8), 142.

⁴⁰ Cf. Walter Pohl, *Narratives of Origin and Migration in Early Medieval Europe: Problems of Interpretation*, in: *Narratives of Ethnic and Tribal Origins. Eurasian Perspectives*, Special issue, *Medieval History Journal* 21/2 (2018), 192–221.

⁴¹ Herwig Wolfram, *Gotische Studien. Volk und Herrschaft im frühen Mittelalter*, Munich 2005, 207–224; Walter Pohl, *Gotische Identitäten*, in: *Theoderich der Große und die Goten in Italien*, ed. by Ulrich Wiemer, Munich 2020, 315–39.

⁴² Jordanes, *Getica*, ed. by Theodor Mommsen, in: *MGH Auct. Ant.* 5,1, Berlin 1882, 43–138, 13.78, 76. English translation by Charles Christopher Mierow, *The Gothic History of Jordanes*, Princeton 1915, 73: "Their genealogy I shall run through briefly, telling the lineage of each and the beginning and the end of this line. And do thou, O reader, hear me without repining; for I speak truly".

⁴³ *Chronicarum Fredegarii scholastici libri IV cum continuationibus* 3.9, ed. by Bruno Krusch, in: *MGH SS rer. Merov.* 2, Hanover 1888, 95; Ian Wood, *Fredegar's Fables*, in: *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. by Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter, Vienna 1994 (*Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 32), 356–366.

by calling it a “ridiculous fable”, “worthy of laughter and to be held of no account”.⁴⁴ And Asser, at the beginning of his *Life of Alfred*, interrupts his impressive pedigree of the king with a passage linking the divine pagan ancestor Geat with “comedy’s absurd Geta”.⁴⁵ It would be wrong to conclude that these stories should therefore “be held of no account” by modern research. The more these authors subverted their stories, the less can they be suspected of having concocted them.

Beyond actual origin myths, scholars have looked at what used to be called “national histories”: Jordanes’ *Getica*, Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* or Paul the Deacon’s *Longobard History*, and similar works up to the high medieval eastern European Histories such as Cosmas’ *History of the Bohemians*, Gallus and Magister Vincentius on the Poles or the *Russian Primary Chronicle*.⁴⁶ We are all familiar with the ways in which 19th- and 20th-century national histories have contributed to constructing national identities and ideologies. This model should not be projected back and taken as a guideline for studying medieval histories featuring one people. It is little known that Walter Goffart only attacked the notion that Jordanes and Gregory of Tours wrote national histories: at the same time, he happily conferred that label on the seventh-century works of Isidore, Fredegar, and on the *Origo gentis Langobardorum*: “The century that brought papal history to fruition also generated the first ‘national’ histories.”⁴⁷ Whether or not we want to call them ‘national’ (a label that I would rather avoid): it is not very interesting to find out that Jordanes constructed a Gothic, Bede an English and Cosmas a Czech identity. It is much more productive to note how ambiguous and sometimes broken these constructs are: how their authors react to alternative options, and how they seek to embed the people they feature in a broader frame of identification.

We have learnt much about this from Helmut Reimitz’s book about *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity*, a fundamental study about the wide range of strategies of identification in Frankish historiography.⁴⁸ Walter Goffart had already established that Gregory of Tours did not write *Historia Francorum*.⁴⁹ Reimitz has shown that Gregory deliberately wrote the Franks out of his history, and

⁴⁴ Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, ed. by Ludwig Bethmann and Georg Waitz, in: MGH SS rer. Langob., Hanover 1882, 12–187, 1.8, 52.

⁴⁵ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, transl. by Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, London 1983, 1.

⁴⁶ Many of them discussed in Alheydis Plassmann, *Origo gentis: Identitäts- und Legitimitätsstiftung in früh- und hochmittelalterlichen Herkunftserzählungen*, Berlin 2006, who confusingly terms the entire works as “origo gentis”.

⁴⁷ Goffart, *Narrators* (note 27), 245. Goffart contrasts these 7th-century histories much too starkly with the earlier works by Jordanes and Gregory of Tours.

⁴⁸ Helmut Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550–850*, Cambridge 2015.

⁴⁹ Walter Goffart, *From Historiae to Historia Francorum and Back Again: Aspects of the Textual History of Gregory of Tours*, in: *Religion, Culture, and Society in the Early Middle Ages: Studies in Honor of Richard E. Sullivan*, ed. by Thomas F. X. Noble and John Joseph Contreni, Kalamazoo 1987 (*Studies in Medieval Culture* 23), 55–76.

thus reacted to alternative identifications that began to underline the Frankish character of the kingdom in the very days when Gregory wrote his *History*. The first evidence for the official use of the title *rex Francorum* by the Franks comes in the letters written by King Childebert II to the Byzantines in the 580s.⁵⁰ Gregory, like Bede, essentially wrote a Church history, and unlike Bede, not a *Historia ecclesiastica gentis* (in his case, *Francorum*). Paul the Deacon did write a *Historia Langobardorum*, but he extended it with essential information about the Byzantine empire, the Franks and other matters. Thus, in a ninth-century manuscript from Verona, the so-called *Epitome Philippiana*, much of the Longobard history could be removed and the other material highlighted in an excerpt from Paul's *History*.⁵¹ The four books of the *Fredgar Chronicle* are similarly broad in their outlook and embed an unproblematic concern for Frankish identity in a vision of a world of *gentes*. The examples could be continued. All these histories offer both more and less than a coherent affirmation of the identity of the people that appears, or may not appear in the title.

What used to be regarded as 'national histories', then, were far from just being streamlined towards affirming the identity of the people in question. Conversely, not only histories dealing with the fates of a particular people played a role in shaping their identities. Ian Wood already concluded in 1990 that "the military concerns of Ammianus, the religious ideals of Orosius and Gregory of Tours, the legal criteria of Gundobad and Sigismund, and the imperial vision of Agobard, are all integral to the history of Burgundian ethnicity and ethnogenesis. In many respects they are more central to that history than are the Burgundians themselves who are defined not by blood, but by those who wrote about them."⁵² Many texts contributed to the shaping and re-shaping of the ethnic topography of their time – of course depending on their role in the circuit of communication and identification in which ethnic identities were at stake.

For a long time, modern historical research has privileged a national framing of its historical narratives – a key argument in Patrick Geary's *Myth of Nations*.⁵³ Early medieval histories of particular peoples are rarely geared towards their subjects in a similar manner. They may highlight a people's achievements and extol its talents and courage (as the Gothic histories of Jordanes and Isidore do), but they do not construct the people as the ultimate instance that confers meaning upon its history,

⁵⁰ *Epistulae Austrasicae*, ed. by Henri M. Rochais, in: *Corpus Christianorum*, Series Latina 117, Turnhout 1957, 28–42, 451–465. See Walter Pohl, Introduction: Early Medieval Romanness – a Multiple Identity, in: *Transformations of Romanness in the Early Middle Ages: Regions and Identities*, ed. by Clemens Gantner, Cinzia Grifoni, Walter Pohl, and Marianne Pollheimer, Munich 2018, 3–39, at 7.

⁵¹ Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Phill. 1885, fols. 50r-75r; see Giovanna Tondini, *Un modello per il regno dei Carolingi in Italia. L'Epitome Phillipsiana e l'identità urbana di Verona dopo il 774*, PhD thesis Padova 2011 (<http://paduaresearch.cab.unipd.it/3544/1/Tondini.pdf>).

⁵² Ian Wood, Ethnicity and the Ethnogenesis of the Burgundians Ethnicity, in: *Typen der Ethnogenese unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Bayern*, vol. 1, ed. by Herwig Wolfram and Walter Pohl, Vienna 1990, 53–69, 64.

⁵³ Geary, *Myths of Nations* (note 10).

as national histories did. It is often the other way around: only God makes the existence and actions of the people meaningful. That also places Goths, Franks or Angles on a par. They might compete for God's special grace, but none of them is consistently presented as 'the' chosen people – except for some rare moments of exuberance.⁵⁴

Early medieval histories offer a variety of identifications. Some are strongly grounded in the vision of a Christian society, or in castigating the present community because it has strayed from this path. Other authors put more emphasis on identities of status or place. When ethnic identities are highlighted this often points to an urge to do so under difficult circumstances: both Jordanes' *Getica* and Paul the Deacon's *Longobard History* were written after the end of the respective kingdoms. On the other hand, where ethnic identities recede into the background that may simply mean that the authors took them for granted. We also have to consider that early medieval texts unproblematically endowed peoples with agency. They also remembered the past as populated by *gentes*, since Noah's sons had initiated their genealogy.

We may picture the early medieval *gentes* as phantoms: ghosts that sometimes seem to be only marginally present in accounts of the business conducted by kings, bishops and nobles. The routine identifications that created and kept alive the *gentes* are rarely highlighted by contemporary sources. Where first-person identifications occur, for instance by our authors themselves, they are often ambiguous. Jordanes acknowledged at the end of the *Getica* that as a Goth he might be suspected of having written in their favour.⁵⁵ Gregory of Tours was proud of his senatorial origin and of his family of bishops but never went as far as calling himself a Roman.⁵⁶ Paul the Deacon interrupted his history for memories of his Longobard progeny, but otherwise spoke of the Longobards as 'them', not 'us'.⁵⁷ Still, a hundred years later Erchempert read Paul's history as a praise of Longobard greatness, unlike his own: "It is the custom of the teacher and writer of history, especially in discussions concerning his kin (*stirps*), to repeat only those things which are recognized to lead to an accumulation of glory". However, "since nothing praiseworthy can be written truthfully at this time about the Longobards at Benevento, I am writing for the purpose not of their rule but of their overthrow, not of their happiness but of their misery, not of their triumph but of their ruin."⁵⁸ The distant memory of the Longobards had become much more favourable than Paul may have intended.

54 Walter Pohl, Gerda Heydemann, The Rhetoric of Election – 1 Peter 2.9 and the Franks, in: Religious Franks: Religion and Power in the Frankish Kingdoms, ed. by Rob Meens et al., Manchester 2016, 13–31.

55 Jordanes, *Getica* 60 (note 42), 316, 138.

56 Reimitz, History (note 48), 83–87.

57 Walter Pohl, Paul the Deacon – between Sacci and Marsuppia, in: Ego Trouble. Authors and their Identities in the Early Middle Ages, ed. by Richard Corradini, Matthew Gillis, Rosamond McKitterick, and Irene van Renswoude, Vienna 2010 (Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 15), 111–124.

58 Erchempert, *Historiola*, transl. by Joan R. Ferry, *Erchempert's History of the Lombards of Benevento. A Translation and Study of Its Place in the Chronicle Tradition*, Diss. Rice University Houston 1995, 1, 121–122; Erchempert, *Historiola*, ed. by Georg Waitz, in: MGH SS rer. Langob., Hanover

‘Then’ sometimes feels closer than ‘now’. Identities that can build on a shared past tend to be more durable. This imagined trajectory between common past and future makes communities real in the present. Yet it also accounts for a certain vagueness, like a phantom, particularly notable in ethnic identities. When we try to define them, they often seem to dissolve. When we think we can do without them, we realize that something important is missing. That is what makes chasing these phantoms so interesting.

1878, 234–64: *Mos enim historiographiae doctoris est, maxime de sua stirpe disputantis, ea tantummodo retexere quae ad laudis cumulum pertinere noscuntur*. See Walter Pohl, *Historiography of Disillusion. Erchempert and the History of Ninth-Century Southern Italy*, in: *Historiography and Identity III. Carolingian Approaches*, ed. by Helmut Reimitz, Rutger Kramer, and Graeme Ward, Turnhout 2021, 319–54.