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## Introduction

One of the great virtues of the European Science Foundation's project on the Transformation of the Roman World (1993–98) was that scholars from many different countries were brought together on a regular basis to discuss a common set of problems. Most of those involved found the experience to be extremely beneficial. There was a feeling that the exchange of ideas, in relatively small and informal groups, meeting once or twice a year, moved the subject on with remarkable speed. The fact that the meetings brought together scholars trained in different academic traditions, and who therefore had different strengths and were sensitised to different questions, rapidly altered the horizons of individual researchers. Each scholar became aware of a wider range of issues, and also of approaches towards understanding them.

In 1996 a number of us who had profited from this experience determined that our students should be given a similar opportunity. As a result Mayke de Jong (Utrecht), Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge), Walter Pohl (Vienna) and Ian Wood (Leeds) instituted an annual gathering of their research students. Since 2003 the group has expanded to include the students of Régine Le Jan (Sorbonne). In addition, students from other universities (St Andrews, Lille, Barcelona, Paderborn, Notre Dame-Indiana, Virginia) occasionally joined the group, because they were known to be working on subjects that fitted well with what was being discussed. The chosen theme for the meetings was 'Texts and Identities': T & I. The first meeting was held in the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS), in Wassenaar in 1997. Meetings followed in Cambridge (1998, 2001, 2004), Vienna (1999, 2002, 2005) and again at NIAS (2000, 2003). These meetings were generously supported from a variety of funds: notably the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO), the Research Institute for History and Culture (OGC), Utrecht University, Newnham College Cambridge, the G.M. Trevelyan Fund of the Faculty of History, University of Cambridge, and the University of Leeds.

In addition to these annual meetings, the T & I group also decided to present their work to a wider audience on a regular basis, and as a result booked a number of sessions each year at the International Medieval Congress of the University of Leeds: three sessions in 2000, five in 2001, eleven in 2002, and seven each in 2003, 2004 and 2005. At the Leeds congress, ideas that had already been worked up for the annual T & I gathering, could be tested in front of a different and wider audience. Moreover, the T & I sessions at Leeds also gave research students (and indeed more established scholars) from other universities the opportunity to be involved in the work of the group.

The title of the whole project, and indeed of this volume, "Texts and identities", provides a deliberately wide framework for case studies in different fields of early medieval history. They include apparently disparate topics such as historiography and hagiography, monastic spaces and memories, lay and ecclesiastic legislation, liturgy and penance – to mention just a few. Rather than defining a common field of research, the meetings from which these papers emerge derived their coherence from a joint methodological framework. This approach, upon which we focussed throughout the project, combines two elements: on the one hand, great stress has been laid on the careful analysis of the transmission of texts and of the manuscript evidence; on the other, we have concentrated on the problem of identity, or rather, of processes of identification, including perceptions of difference on

the part of specific social, political and religious communities. Texts not only reflect ethnic, social and cultural identities, they contribute to the creation of “strategies of distinction”. They give meaning to social practice and are often intended to inspire, guide, change or prevent action, directly or indirectly. The written texts that have been transmitted to us are therefore traces of social practice and of its changes, not only in a merely descriptive way, but also as part of a cultural effort to shape the present by means of restructuring the past.

In order to explore the precise context of texts that continued to have this kind of impact, the study of manuscripts is indispensable. For all their usefulness and erudition, modern editions tend to obscure the very different ways in which works of historiography or hagiography – to mention just two examples – were understood by successive generations of readers, and amended according to new perspectives and purposes. What seems, at first sight, to be one work, written by one author – e.g. Gregory of Tours’ *Histories* – then turns out to be a multitude of transmitted texts embedded in distinctive manuscripts, with alterations and adaptations that need to be investigated if one is to understand what being ‘Frankish’ meant throughout the early medieval period.

This approach emphasizes the plurality of the voices from the past, and goes well beyond traditional historical criticism and its time-honoured suspicion of authorial intent. If texts are mainly used as mirror images of social reality, however distorted, their differences and contradictions merely detract from the researcher’s main objective, that is, the ‘faithful reconstruction’ of this distorted reality. Traditionally, the reaction to this problem has largely been to eliminate the differences between texts in order to find out what ‘really’ happened. If, on the other hand, texts are seen as an integral part of the past realities under scrutiny, including a plurality of interpretations after the event, then their differences become more interesting than the reality they agree on. The often discordant voices of medieval authors allow modern historians to grasp something of the multiplicity of the early medieval world, and of the disagreements, conflicts, idiosyncrasies and individual perceptions among the people who inhabited it. What did “the Franks” or “monastic life”, to name just two examples, mean to different people at the same time? Differences between texts as observed in manuscripts, also provide a precious insight into historical change. How did perceptions of identity, and the text that contributed to an ongoing debate on self-identification, change over time? Many contributions in this volume propose a specific method for studying changing identities. They analyse differences between similar texts over time, or, specifically, changes in texts in the course of their transmission, a methodological tool which has almost lain unused hitherto. Not all variants in a copied text are simply mistakes; they may be deliberate changes or traces of a changed cultural or political context. Editions, as we have already stated, mostly aim at presenting an ‘authentic’ text and therefore more or less obliterate these traces; going back to the manuscripts can therefore bring copious new results. The varying manuscript context, the lay-out, images and the flow of handwriting, the traces of usage, annotations and obliterations all testify to the constant reproduction of cultural significance. Social memory is transformed in a complex interrelationship with changes in society at large; the past is cautiously adapted to the present without ever losing its distinct flavour of otherness.

‘Identity’ has become a much-discussed term in recent research in the social sciences and cultural studies, and has sometimes been criticized for being too static as a concept. It is used here to describe the constant efforts of identification made by individuals, social groups or large heterogeneous communities within a meaningful social universe. ‘Identity’ matters at the interface between the individual and society, where social roles, cultural language and political integration are being negotiated. What does it mean, and what does it require to be a member of a *gens* or part of a religious community? What benefits does it bring and what sacrifices can it inspire? This volume fills a gap for it deals less with ethnic identities, the subject of many recent debates and publications, and more with spiritual, ecclesiastic, cultural, or social identities. If we leave aside grand abstractions such as “Christendom”, “the Church”, and master narratives such as “the Christianisation of Europe” or “the rise of monasticism”, there is a wide and varied landscape of Christian life and discourse to discover.

Being Christian always meant to some extent becoming Christian, striving to fulfil the obligations of ever-more specific directions for monks and priests, for kings and laymen, for husbands and wives.

Few previous religions, perhaps with the exception of post-Babylonian Judaism, had been so demanding. Far from constituting a barbarian 'dark age' at the obscure beginnings of the western 'process of civilisation', the early middle ages witnessed an unparalleled effort of changing the lives of the whole community and thus improving the world. Writing played a fundamental role in that process. The diffusion of the Bible is at the core of these massive educational efforts. But a plethora of other texts were also written, re-written, circulated and discussed: exegesis and the works of the Fathers, sermons and saints' lives, the acts of councils and admonitory letters, prayer books and liturgical works, martyrologies and reckonings of time, epitaphs and spiritual poems, penitentials and papal responses, libri memoriales and florilegia, and many other texts. Nowadays, after many centuries of Christian culture in the West, the rich literary production of the Church may seem obvious, a familiar territory no longer in need of investigation. Thus, we tend to underestimate the impact of the cultural offensive of the Christian pioneers in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Yet the very familiarity of Christianity is deceptive, especially in an ostensibly more secular age. Younger historians fully realize this, approaching the world of early medieval Christianity as a foreign country worth exploring. Unlike many of their elders, they are well aware that these texts merit careful study, not so much for the history of Christian doctrine and institutions which have been studied in great detail, but as instruments of social change, for their role in far-reaching strategies of identification. The Christian textual heritage aimed at defining the place and the role of individuals and groups in society and at influencing their actions. It is not always easy to grasp the immediate success of these efforts. Yet the massive movement called 'Christianisation' remains one of the most significant historical phenomena of early medieval Europe. Attempts to define ethnic communities that could sustain the exercise of power were made within the political framework of the new kingdoms of the West, which were also the power-bases from which the spread of Christianity was launched. Kings ruled with bishops, which helps to explain why the development of a Christian discourse has provided the basic grammar for the political culture of medieval and modern Europe, and, quite often, the language in which definitions of identity were expressed.

The papers collected in this volume are the result of a common effort to study the many facets of the textual articulation of new identities in early medieval Europe. Seen as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, they can help to illustrate the point that texts were integral parts of a social world in transformation. They were all, if to a different degree, written to give meaning to the complex and changing societies of the post-Roman world, and to locate specific groups of laymen, clerics or monks within it. By taking the concerns expressed in these texts as a point of departure we can hope to reconstruct some of the complexity of the early medieval world.

