Comparing Communities - the Limits of Typology

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Around the middle of the first millennium CE, identities in many parts of Europe and of the Mediterranean world were transformed in various ways, and new types of community emerged. This historical shift was traditionally called 'the fall of Rome', but the end of imperial rule in the West was only part of a complex process: Christianity spread across the Roman world and soon also beyond it, gradually replacing a multitude of ancient cults. The classical cities and their economic exchanges were in decline. New modes of distinction came to the forefront in the heartlands of the Roman empire, most notably those related to ethnicity. The Roman empire gradually lost control of most of its provinces and gave way to new regional powers, many of them named after an ethnic group that dominated them.[1] This contribution explores aspects of (chiefly ethnic) community building and related processes of identity formation in the period, raising some broader methodological issues in that context.

Why and how this fundamental (and in many respects dramatic) change happened has been one of the big issues in modern historical research ever since it evolved in the 18th century. Numerous explanations have been given, many of them closely linked with a particular world view or a political agenda: the critique or apology of Catholicism, a polemic against the decadence of modern civilization, the glorification of heroic Germanic forefathers or other 'national origins", or chauvinist exaggerations of the fatal consequences of 'barbarian' migrations—a key of interpretation that has recently gained ground again (Demandt 1984; Wood 2013a). The 'fall of Rome', or rather the 'transformation of the Roman world', as most scholars prefer to call it nowadays, has also served as a test-case for methodological problems in historical studies. For instance, the field has pioneered interdisciplinary cooperation between history, archaeology, philology and other disciplines involved, but the correct form of such an approach was a matter of frequent debate.

Questions of Identity: Some Methodological Considerations

It is this methodological aspect that this article sets out to explore somewhat further, suggesting that the development of trans-disciplinary approaches may shed new light on some of the old puzzles. In particular, the ongoing critique of an established Eurocentric master narrative can be further substantiated through comparative approaches. One problem with most research on the 'fall of Rome' is the mostly implicit notion of the historical uniqueness of events. The 'decline and fall of the Roman empire' (as the 18th-century historian Edward Gibbon called it in his famous work) is one of the key elements in a dialectic master narrative about how Europe created the modern world: in a nutshell, classical Greece and Rome laid the basis for the rise of Europe; the medieval 'dark ages' destroyed much of the sophisticated structure built by the ancients, but thus created the fertile ground on which from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment onwards modernity could advance, and on this basis Europe conquered and civilized the world. Recent scholarship has begun to dismantle this Eurocentric narrative (Pohl 2007). But another issue has rather been neglected. It has two aspects: first, so far there has been a lack of comparative studies between the 'transformation of the Roman world' and similar processes elsewhere. To be sure, wide-ranging comparisons between various cases of the rise and fall of empires have flourished in recent years, and they have brought considerable progress.[2] But, and this is the second point, many of them still basically work with wholesale concepts developed in the context of the historiography of Europe.

Historians have mostly used the familiar tools forged in the course of European intellectual history to understand changes of identity and the formation of communities. This seemed natural because modern thinking about communities was at least indirectly influenced by authors—Aristotle, Thucydides, Cicero or St Augustine—on whom medieval writers had already relied. The historical discipline has a long record of dealing with large, overarching social groups and institutions: in traditional research, religion, church, polity, republic, empire, people, nation or civilization were in fact regarded as collective actors, and as the true subjects of history, behind which individuals or more

particular groups almost disappeared; only 'great men' in the service of their nations could step into the limelight of historiography. Needless to say, this came at the cost of reifying and de-historicizing 'the' nation, but also 'the church', 'the people', 'culture/civilization' and other collectives. Often these categories were also juxtaposed in binary pairs of opposites: religious/secular, church/state, lay/clerical, Christian/pagan, ethnic/national, universal/particular, culture/nature or centre/periphery and so on. This is not to say that such classifications should be avoided altogether: they may be useful in many cases. For instance, a 'church/state' juxtaposition surely makes sense in histories of modern Europe. In studies of the medieval period in Europe, however, just as in histories beyond Europe, the familiar collective categories and their juxtapositions have their limits, and may be quite misleading. For instance, religion was configured rather differently in ancient Rome, late Antique Christianity and early Islam, and each of these configurations differed fundamentally from the prevailing modern Euro-American everyday concept of Christian religion as a private creed represented by particular institutions in a secular state, which has also influenced scholarly uses. 'Religion', as used in historical research, may include or exclude elaborate moral standards for daily life, be considered a public duty or a matter of individual conscience, may ban or include magic practices and 'superstitions', may be propagated and controlled by differentiated institutions or not, and may be clearly separated from a secular sphere and a state or not. The latter point presents particular methodological problems if we project modern views of a sacred/secular divide into the past, which has led to quite anachronistic interpretations of medieval states and societies.

Problems with broad categorizations and the respective typologies also arise in the classification of communities or identities, such as their definition as ethnic, territorial, civic, religious or political. This may be useful to structure the field and highlight certain distinctive features. But in historical studies we typically have to deal with aggregate communities, in which ethnic, territorial, religious and political identifications are, sometimes inextricably, mixed. For instance, ethnicity is a very powerful mode of community construction, with its charge of ideas of common origin and of a natural order of human distinction. But it is also a precarious one, because the evanescent mystique of the ethnic community can hardly be made evident in everyday life, especially in times of crisis. It is seldom

sufficient as a sole mode of identification, but has to attach itself to other forms of community—a common homeland, state or religion.[3] Either it is complementary to a political community or, and that is what most of our anthropological and sociological evidence demonstrates, it may furnish a persistent identity to more or less repressed minority groups for whom it reaffirms a sense of common origin and destiny, of cultural distinctiveness and of a lost homeland. In most cases, ethnic identities are stabilized by common territory and language, shared religion and culture, and often also some joint political structure. The relative salience and visibility of these elements varies. None of them is an essential feature of ethnicity, in spite of many definitions that use them.

The Early Middle Ages provide evidence of ethnic groups without common territory, language, religion or culture, or even without several of these (Pohl 1998). These groups could be stable enough to survive the change of language, religion, culture, the ethnonym, or even the loss of the homeland or of political independence. The early medieval Franks shifted their settlement area, converted to Christianity, changed their language, their costume and many customs; when their king Clovis was baptized around 500 CE, Bishop Remigius of Reims is reputed to have told him: 'Adore what you have burnt, and burn what you have adored' (Gregory of Tours, 2.31,77). Even discounting Christian rhetoric, this implies a fundamental change of the Frankish 'set of traditions'. But that did not lead to a loss of Frankish identity, which was soon refashioned around the new religion. The close association with the kingdom 'of the Franks' helped maintaining a sense of Frankishness, although that meant quite different things to different people and at different times (Reimitz forthcoming; Geary, in this issue). Such processes become clearer when we not only look at one dimension, be it ethnic, political, religious or socio-economic, but are careful not to miss any one of them.

To understand the workings of broad and inclusive communities and the emergence of respective identities, is a field in which history and anthropology can interact very profitably. So far the dialogue between the two disciplines has mostly dealt with smaller worlds. That is not surprising: anthropology has mostly addressed 'small places, large issues', to paraphrase Thomas Hylland Eriksen's influential

text book (Eriksen 2001). Obviously, this has created differentiated skills and a rich knowledge about local communities that scholars working on the distant past will never be able to match but have often found inspiring. Historians influenced by anthropology have gradually developed research strategies to deal with smaller worlds and their cultural patterns too—micro-history, regional, gender and cultural studies, histories of mentality or oral history. In German, this approach is often defined as 'historical anthropology', not corresponding to the homonymous sub-discipline of anthropology.[4]

There has been a great temptation to apply the models developed in the anthropological study of pre-modern societies in the modern world directly to societies in the past (some medievalists, following this trend, have even described the European Middle Ages as 'archaic'). Working on the basis of analogies from anthropology can of course be problematic. It should not be taken for granted that to understand the Middle Ages we can simply look to Polynesia for the role of social memory and ritual, to the indigenous peoples of the Amazon for structures of myth or kinship, or to Zomia and the Tarahumaras for 'societies without state', inspiring as such examples may be. We can derive possible interpretations of our sources from them, but should not fill in their gaps too easily. As Barbara Rosenwein has maintained, we are safest when we use comparisons to see what is specific about our own material (Rosenwein 2003);[5] but looking for common features may also be productive. There is a second problem of using anthropological evidence in historical studies. How can we feed the results of all the field work, the 'thick descriptions' and studies of local societies back into a broader panorama of the historical process? Anthropology has some valuable experience in describing the interactions of larger units—states, empires or world religions—with local or regional groups. It has also raised important conceptual issues of identity.[6] But most models have been developed on the basis of small-world studies.

For instance, anthropological models of ethnicity largely build on studies of relatively small communities (Chapman et al. 1989). Many of the classical studies, both in anthropology and in sociology, have been conducted on ethnic minorities, for example in the USA or in the colonies and

post-colonial nations in Asia or Africa.[7] The creation of ethnicity (or of tribalism) was often ascribed to the colonial powers. Anthropology has therefore learnt to think ethnicity from a minority or subaltern perspective (one among several noteworthy exceptions in this regard is Gingrich 2002).

For a pre-modern historian, thinking in terms of ethnic minorities can be inspiring for studying ancient ethnicity in its relationship with the Roman empire, but as I will argue it is hardly sufficient to explain the emergence of the rule of *gentes* in post-Roman Europe. The 'ethnic origins of nations', as Anthony D. Smith (1986) has phrased it, and the continuing role of ethnic identification in many modern nations does not necessarily correspond to what we know about ethnic minorities in the modern world. To allow for historical variance in identity formation we need a flexible and dynamic (although certainly not completely malleable) concept of identity. 'Identity' has frequently been criticized for being too broad, too hazy and hardly usable. But none of the attempts to replace it, either by one or by several terms, has been quite convincing. We need a broad concept to circumscribe the complex interface between the individual and the social group, which allows looking at individual allegiance to a group and the ways in which a group is constituted by its members in conjunction (Pohl 2005b, 2010). Basically, identities are constituted by an inherent dialectic between belonging and difference, and between outside ascription and self-identification (Gingrich 2004: 6). I would propose the following model (for a more extensive discussion, Pohl 2013): Identity is constituted by serial acts of identification on several levels: of individuals or small groups with a larger social group, the collective self-representation of a group as such, and outside perceptions. Which of these three elements comes first may vary, and is usually hard to tell. To what degree they overlap also differs; stable identities can form even in case of some misrepresentations, for instance, if the outgroup consistently uses a different ethnonym than the in-group, a frequent case in early medieval Europe. But all these elements, and a significant overlap in them, are basically necessary for identity formation. This requires some regular interaction and communication inside the group and with outsiders (an element stressed by many anthropological studies). It also requires shared concepts that allow for meaningful distinctions between communities.

This model may seem unsurprising, but it makes it possible to settle some contentious issues by allowing for a continuum of possibilities. We do not have to decide whether a community is ethnic, religious or territorial—even single acts of identification may imply all of this at once. Outside perceptions may coincide with self-identification to different degrees, and the same applies to differences between the collective self-representation of a group and what its members identify with. For instance, there are many examples that newly-baptized Christians in the Early Middle Ages understood the implications of the ritual very differently from the Church they had now become members of. A 9th-century Frankish author describes how one year an unexpectedly large group of Danes arrived at Easter for baptism, so that there were not enough presents for all the converts. Some Danes protested, saying they had come every year for some time, but had never been rewarded so badly (Notker 1959, II, 19, 90).

A further advantage of the proposed model of interrelated identifications is that it changes the status of our, written and material, sources. Instead of simply reflecting a community that is somewhere 'out there' more or less adequately, texts and objects can be understood as part of the process of communication in which identities are formed. They attest to the effort of identification rather than to its result. We can and should of course use all the sophisticated instruments of historical and archaeological source criticism to contextualize such efforts, and check their plausibility if possible. We also need to be cautious in assessing the quantity of testimonies that survive from the distant past. Predictably, we rarely get direct proof of individual self-identification with a community; this makes it hard to work with any subjective definition of ethnicity in early medieval studies. Those traces of individual identification that we have may be a sign that this identification needs to be stressed because it is precarious or even unacceptable to the community. Some communities (especially religious ones) employ formal liminal rituals expressing conversion, such as Christian baptism, which has left ample sources, from protocols of Church councils to pictorial representations and baptismal fonts. But informal speech acts or a wide range of forms of symbolic communication, such as adopting shared customs or costumes, are more frequent; the symbolic value is often hard to access, for instance in the case of grave goods (Pohl & Mehofer 2010). These acts, and the group membership expressed

by them, have to be accepted by the in-group. In face-to-face groups it may suffice just to be born into the group and behave as its members do. In many cases, it is sufficient to 'do Pashtu' or to act 'in ways that validate Lueness' without any explicit statement (Moerman 1965: 1219). But in larger communities, more explicit acts of identification and representation will usually be needed.

There are more sources that attest to collective self-representations of a group as such. This can be done through collective rituals and public ceremonies, for instance feasting, public assemblies or the yearly get-together of the Frankish army on the 'marchfield'. Some of these rituals give space for expressions of individual belonging: for instance, the 'communion' of the faithful in which Christian mass culminates, or the oath-taking required by Frankish rulers. Collective self-identification can also be expressed by representatives or 'speakers' through symbols or in texts. Cultural memory, its appropriation and its re-enactment is also an important form of identification, and written texts may contain rather extensive statements of social identity (Gantner & Mc Kitterick forthcoming). This level of identification is well researched both in anthropology and in history, and the sources are quite profuse in many cases, especially with Christianity, which has left a strong profile of self-analysis in the medieval written record.

The bulk of our sources from the period, however, come from outside observers. This is of course problematic because our sources may also contain misunderstandings or fabrications. In many cases 'etic' definitions from the period rely on ancient ethnography or on identifications with biblical peoples and not on contemporary perceptions ('etic' vs. 'emic': Moerman 1965: 1219). For instance, the already quoted Bishop Remigius of Reims addressed the Frankish king Clovis at his baptism as 'Sugamber', an ethnonym attested in the wars of Augustus in roughly the same region where the Franks later formed (Gregory of Tours 1934: 2.31, 77). The particular points of view of the sources are a problem that Patrick Geary addresses in this issue. But for one thing we know that concepts that made ethnic distinctions meaningful were available in the period, both in ancient ethnography and in the Old Testament. If these conceptual resources were amply used by contemporaries to make sense of

their social world, we can of course argue that this distorts our evidence (Clovis may have had little interest in the Sugambri). But at the same time it proves that ethnicity provided useful concepts for navigating the social landscape of the time and had some impact on actual distinctions between the actors on the political platform. Furthermore, the great number of mentions of some peoples in the sources leaves little doubt that the written attestations corresponded to some extent with current self-identifications. In some cases, outside identifications may have been there first, and fed back into self-perceptions; several Roman inscriptions show that 'barbarians' (modern historiography still has not been able to replace this derogatory term as a broad label) in Roman service identified with the Franks. But it is also important to note that ethnicity was not a free-standing concept in early medieval Europe; it blended in a variety of forms with other cohesive/distinctive mechanisms. Praying, fasting and psalmodizing for the victory of the Franks could be an important way of showing one's allegiance to the *gens*, to the kingdom, to Christianity, and to a local community at the same time.

The larger and the more inclusive communities get, the less can they rely on the cohesive force of regular interaction and the obligations imposed by it. They have to invest in the second type of identification, self-representation through texts and symbols: they need 'visions of community' that stress the value of togetherness, explain the obligations that members incur and the norms that govern it, and sketch the common identity, its past and its future. Many particular communities derive important elements of their identity from an even more inclusive level, a 'larger social whole', for instance Christian or Islamic religion, classical culture, the caliphate or the Roman empire (Reimitz forthcoming). This lends extra legitimation to particular groups. Smaller communities often claim to excel in the shared values of the 'larger social whole'. Christian monasteries see themselves as a privileged part of the entire community of orthodox Christians and pride themselves in the stricter observance of Christian teachings. Bedouin tribes can feel a strong sense of Arabic and Islamic identity and usually regard themselves as more valiant than the average Arab. Often, it is in such smaller and more self-aware communities that discourses for broader identities are formed.

Most communities are framed by more than one type of 'vision of community'; they are rarely only ethnic, religious or political. Therefore, the whole range of modes of identification needs to be considered. Then these shared frames of reference can be compared: for instance, ancestral lineages, noble progeny, supernatural origins, sacred places, martial valour, shared history, the grace of God, the moral high ground, ascetic feats, tribal solidarities, legal practices, rituals of conflict resolution, exchange networks or outside perceptions. Such frames of reference overlap and typically create more than one level of identification. These different modes of identification do not always coincide with each other and with the boundaries created by group membership, and the more so the larger the community is. This may give rise to internal conflict about who 'really' belongs or to increased attempts to reinforce the boundaries, or it may remain ambiguous and open to situational interpretation. Communities can, among others, be assessed and compared in their use of such strategies of identification. It is in such mid-range comparisons—not departing from universal categories, but trying to reach 'bounded generalizations'—that a comparative approach of community-building and identification in the medieval West and the Islamic world can be most fruitful (Pohl, Gantner & Payne 2012).

These comparisons should not hinge too much on broad ahistorical concepts or 'ideal types', and avoid the 'temptation to use it for all kinds of universalist theorizing' (Gingrich & Thelen 2012: 385). Historians, but also anthropologists, need to think more about the changing significance of the concepts that they use, and to historicize them. At the same time, they should assess them through perspectives of potential cultural diversity. Strong and rather ahistorical categories for collective actors make large-scale historical comparison a deceptively straightforward affair. But they tend to impose European models on non-European societies (Rüsen 1998). These methodological problems do not mean that comparison between European and non-European communities should be avoided, on the contrary, they are necessary to help us realize the potential and the limits of the concepts that we use. They also might help us to understand the wider significance implied in the particular histories that we study.

Emerging Communities after Rome: Elements for Comparison

Maybe the methodological issues become clearer if we take a closer look at the period around 500 CE, and the complex process of transformation that happened in Western Europe and around the Mediterranean (Pohl 2008). Up to a point, we can distinguish between several levels of change. First, classical religion in its many forms was replaced by Christianity. As mentioned above, Christianization also fundamentally changed the contemporary notion of what *religio*, religion, meant (Brown 2006). The new creed did not only offer myths about a supernatural world and cult practices by which it could be influenced. Unlike classical religion (but much like Jewish faith) it also claimed to possess a unique revelation of the truth, and established detailed behavioural standards for all aspects of daily life. The new religion claimed precedence over other forms of identity and, correspondingly, Christian communities were more invasive, organized and hierarchical than most other religions. An institutionalized Church based on a distinct class of clerics and monasteries as spiritual models for a communal life of the elect established an expanding system of guidance and control. But at the same time, *ecclesia*, the Church, was also conceived as a community of the faithful, clearly delineating its members from outsiders. Late antique and early medieval Christianity produced an amazing amount of written texts that have been transmitted to us. And it fundamentally shaped European perceptions of community.

Second, since the late 4th century the power and authority of the Roman empire eroded. Rome had developed one of the most sophisticated languages of imperial representation in history, and a powerful frame for political and cultural identification. What had begun as a remarkably dynamic civic community with a balanced set of republican institutions successively integrated other cities, ethnic groups and kingdoms, and more or less accommodated their elites in a Roman political matrix. A great variety of communities, traditions and life-styles could unfold in the shadow of the spectacular markers of Roman political identity: the Latin language of state, an elaborate political rhetoric, public buildings, monumental statues and inscriptions, Roman law, an inclusive concept of citizenship (which was granted to all free subjects of the empire in the early 3rd century) and other items, many of which are still part of modern political representation. We owe the very terms 'republic' and 'empire'

to the Romans, and this background has shaped contemporary debates about the merits and disadvantages of these forms of governance. The openness of the Roman imperial identity explains its extraordinary persistence. Only the last step of integration in the Roman system led to its dissolution in the western half of the empire: when the ranks of the Roman army were gradually filled with solid groups of 'barbarians' drafted from outside the empire, these mercenaries eventually grabbed power in Roman provinces. The imperial Roman identity based on empire, classical culture, on a sophisticated symbolical language and on a hierarchy of status lost its coherence and became available for a wide range of appropriations and transformations. 'Roman' could become a label for many different communities: the empire that had become Greek but continued to call itself Roman (Byzantium); the city of Rome; the Catholic Church of Rome governed by a monarchical papacy; the renewed Western empire of the Franks (and later the Germans); regional and ethnic communities of Romans; speakers of romance languages; Selchuks or Ottomans called 'Rum' by their eastern neighbours because they ruled over parts of the former empire; or the orthodox Russian empire of the 'Third Rome'. Romanness is an extraordinary but telling example of the flexibility of types of community (Pohl forthcoming).

Third, new 'barbarian' military elites from the periphery of the classical world began to rule over Roman provinces and formed new kingdoms named after the respective ethnic groups, Franks, Goths, Lombards or Angles and Saxons (Wolfram 1997). The transformations of ethnicity in this process are a remarkable case. Greeks and Romans thought that in their own, the civilized world, people lived in their city (*polis* or *civitas*), and formed a community 'by constitution' (*populus*). The 'barbarians' beyond the boundaries of the classical world, on the other hand, could be distinguished by their ethnic group (*gens* or *ethnos*) (Geary 2002). Unlike civilized communities, those of the barbarians were regarded as established by nature. As in other imperial systems, ethnicity provided a useful cognitive and political tool to dominate large frontier areas. The Romans had a differentiated language of ethnicity, including broad, ethnographic categories that were derived from ethnonyms but provided a means of classification according to broad cultural models (for instance, *Germani* for the central European barbarians, or *Scythae* for the steppe peoples); it is uncertain if not unlikely whether these

terms corresponded to any coherent self-identification. But the Romans also used ethnonyms for medium and smaller groups. We often have too little independent information to tell to what degree which ethnonyms reflect actual ethnic or tribal groups or only represent Roman constructions.

One additional methodological problem makes recovering a native perspective of the migrants particularly problematic: German nationalism culminating in Nazi ideology used the existing traces to construct a grandiose and untenable edifice of primordial Germanic culture, which still leads many researchers to avoid any consideration of these traces (see, for instance, Goffart 2006). However, we should not adopt a unilaterally Roman perspective on 'barbarian' communities and deny any native role in their construction. It is likely that our sometimes rather detailed information on the ethnic landscape beyond Rome's frontiers was adequate to a degree. Roman diplomacy was very efficient in establishing differentiated alliances or playing off rival groups against each other. We know a number of instances in which incorrect information led to diplomatic blunders with serious consequences. For instance, when a Roman embassy in the 5th century distributed presents among the tribal leaders of the Akatzirs north of the Black Sea to reinforce their alliance, they got the hierarchy slightly wrong, so that the most powerful leader was offended and turned against the Romans (Priscus 1983: 11, 2, 259). By implication, the Romans must have got it right most of the time; they could not afford to use ethnic mappings that were purely imaginary, and unlike modern colonial powers in Africa, they did not have the means to force people (who lived outside their empire) into groups that they had constructed.

It is likely that in the age of Augustus, around the beginning of the Christian era, the *Germani* outside the Roman frontier, east of the Rhine and north of the Danube, lived in small to medium-sized ethnic groups, numbering between a few thousand and a few tens of thousands people. Centuries of wars, alliances and other experiences with the Roman neighbours led to the emergence of larger groups, such as the Franks, Alemanni or Goths, initially rather loose units (James 2009). In the late fourth century, partly due to the arrival of the Huns in eastern Europe, but also to increasing Roman demands for barbarian soldiers, many of these groups migrated to Roman territory. Here, their composition

changed, groups split and merged. For instance, in the 5th and 6th century CE several groups of Goths existed between the Crimea and Spain, not only Ostrogoths and Visigoths but also several others (Wolfram 1988). It is possible that some of them had only recently adopted the prestigious name 'Goths'. Many 'barbarian' peoples used names that Roman sources had already mentioned some centuries before, sometimes in slight variation. But what emerged on Roman territory was essentially a new ethnic landscape. The need for ethnic 'strategies of distinction' probably arose in response to an overwhelming and partly hostile Roman imperial system. The competing groups of warriors are not easily distinguished culturally, and certainly not (as Barth concluded from his 1960s studies for the special case of the Pathans) by complementary occupation (Barth 1969; cf. Pohl 1998). It was their political success that made the difference; less fortunate groups either joined the Roman army, or one of their barbarian competitors, where they formed minority groups that were in some cases still distinguishable after centuries.

Only groups that could muster a large enough army, between 15,000 and 30,000 men, established some form of stable leadership and knew how to use the Roman system to their advantage had a chance to face the fierce competition for carving out bits of Roman territory in which they could establish their rule in the name of a distant emperor. As a result, around 500 CE an Ostrogothic kingdom ruled Italy, a Vandal kingdom North Africa, a Visigothic kingdom the Iberian peninsula and a Frankish kingdom, Gaul. The perception was that these *gentes*, peoples, as a whole had acquired the right to rule over these territories. Theirs was the agency to raise kings or wage wars, and they enjoyed certain privileges. Thus, armed minorities of perhaps 80,000 or 100,000 people ruled over more or less romanised populations of some millions. To keep their privileges, they tended to control access to their ethnically defined elite. But in the course of time the old (civil/ecclesiastic) and the new (military) elites merged, and upwardly mobile groups of the subject population changed their identity. This was a process that took centuries, even with the most successful of the barbarian peoples, the Franks. But in the long run the bulk of the population in the Frankish kingdom adopted Frankish identity, whereas the ruling minority in most parts of the kingdom switched to the Romance language

of the majority. This set off a very broken process of political community-building that could later be understood as the emergence of the French nation.

Christianization, the transformation of the Roman world and the emergence of ethnically denominated states have all been thoroughly studied by the historical disciplines and are supposed to have provided the basis for the development of medieval and modern Europe. But we do not yet understand their interplay adequately. For instance, how did Christianity affect the dissolution of the empire, and the rise of ethnic states? These shifts of identity were more deeply entangled and interdependent than has usually been assumed. Universal Christendom and ethnic particularities have always been thought to represent opposite principles. Indeed, in the ancient world, many peoples (and not least, the Jews) had their particular religion, while Christianity, as a strongly proselytizing religion, claimed to be the same for all peoples. But at the same time, it offered them opportunities to pride themselves in a special link to God. It can be shown that the Old Testament, juxtaposing the 'chosen people' of Israel with other peoples, provided an influential model for medieval ethnicity. The New Testament history of salvation presented the world as a world of gentes, each of whom had to be taught the Gospel. Medieval kings ruled in the name of both God and the *gens*, or the land named after it: *Dei gratia rex (gentis) X*, by the grace of God king of (the people) X, was the most frequently-used royal title (Pohl 2013).

For our concepts of ethnicity, the ethnic and Christian states of the Early Middle Ages represent a challenge. We need a concept of hegemonic ethnicity to understand them. How did the conjunction of ethnic identification, political rule and its Christian legitimation transform the mechanisms and meanings of ethnic integration? This question is also very relevant for understanding the development of modern European nations. Ethnic states and nations differ in many respects, but early medieval political ethnicity created important resources for the later development of nationalism (Smith 1986, which is, however, not very strong on the medieval evidence). The ethnic kingdoms of the first millennium CE created more or less stable aggregates of ethnic, territorial, religious and cultural communities. But they did not fully amalgamate them. Michael Moerman (1965: 1215) remarked in

his study of the Lue: 'Since language, culture, political organization, etc., do not correlate completely, the units delimited by one criterion do not coincide completely with the units delimited by another.' This also applies to early medieval communities, where historical, archaeological and linguistic boundaries can only rarely be made to match. Only modern nations claimed that all of these features, common origin, territory, language, culture etc., coincided as natural expressions of their identity; but in spite of using all available media to convey this ideology, and sometimes also violence and 'ethnic cleansing' to put it into practice, they have never achieved the desired national homogeneity.

National ideologies had a long-lasting impact on the historiography of medieval Europe (Wood 2013b; Geary & Klaniczay forthcoming). We should be careful not to project back such modern views. This also means looking at all modes of identification with and within a community, even if they do not overlap completely. No type of identification should be regarded as prioritarian in principle. After a long tradition of national historiography, we still tend to privilege ethnic or national identity over other forms of identification. This may also explain why current definitions of ethnicity often give long 'itemized lists' of distinctive features (for instance, Smith 1986: 22–30). If we define the Franks as an ethnic group from the start, we have to subsume expressions of allegiance to the Frankish church, with the king or with the territory of Francia under what we define as the central element of this aggregate of identifications. In medieval studies, it is certainly more helpful to ask whether, and to what degree, a 'social relation has an ethnic element'' (Eriksen 1993: 12), than to define whether a community is ethnic or not.

As a reaction to nationalism and ethnic conflict, many historians tend to downplay the role of ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages. That is often argued by using terms such as 'constructed', 'imagined', 'invented', 'malleable', 'fluid' or 'situational'. Most of these catchwords, however, are used quite independently of their original scholarly context. If ethnicity is 'constructed', that does not mean it is imaginary (Berger & Luckmann 1967). Fredrik Barth is often cited for the relative ease with which people could change their ethnicity; but he states clearly: 'Boundaries persist despite a flow of

personnel across them. In other words, categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility' (Barth 1969: 9).[8] The title of Benedict Anderson's book, *Imagined Communities*, is often cited to argue that there was nothing real about ethnic groups, without noticing that Anderson clearly states in the introduction that we should not assimilate invention to fabrication and falsity: 'Communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.' (Anderson 2006: 6) The terms listed above, therefore, should not be used to argue that ethnicity did not matter in the period. Instead, they underline that ethnic communities did not exist naturally, an essence unchangeable in the historical process. They became real through serial acts of identification and communication, and only through them. And they became meaningful and comparable in a historically specific matrix of ethnicity.

On this basis, comparison between the emergence of communities in early medieval Europe and similar processes in other political cultures can become more precise. We do not have to class our evidence in stable categories such as ethnicity, religion, statehood or nation-building, but can treat these and other elements as variables in dynamic processes of identification. To make it clearer what was particular to the 'identity crisis' at the end of Antiquity in Europe, it is helpful to compare it with the rather different development of communities in the early Islamic world (Kennedy 2007; Pohl, Gantner & Payne 2012). Provinces that had been part of the Roman Empire for half a millennium took rather different trajectories after they had left its sphere of influence. Comparing the Latin west, Byzantium and the Islamic world does not mean reifying and juxtaposing two or three different 'civilisations', Christian (Catholic and Orthodox) and Muslim; rather, it allows looking at certain variables and the way in which they interacted in the historical process. The Christian empire strove for religious unity, whereas the Caliphate accepted certain forms of heterodoxy as long as it could tax the non-Muslims under its rule. When 'barbarian' armies had grabbed power in the west, they gradually took on the Christian religion and the Late Latin language of their subjects, while integrating them into their ethnic communities. The subjects of the Arab expansion were not necessarily integrated into the ethnic/tribal organisation of their new masters, but gradually, although never completely, adopted their language and religion. In the west, particular ethnic identities (Franks,

Lombards) mattered, while the overarching 'German' identity played no part in medieval community building (the English term 'Germans' for '*die Deutschen*' is very misleading here); in the Islamic east, the broad self-identification as 'Arabs' became much more important. These differences are well known, but as yet poorly understood in their interrelationship. Some important clues may be derived from the modalities of settlement of the western barbarians in the 5th/6th centuries and the Islamic conquerors in the 7th (Wickham 2005). In both the Latin-Christian and the Islamic world, ethnicity (or tribalism) were important, but in rather different ways. This begins with terminology: *gens* covers a wide semantic field of smaller and bigger vertical groups in Latin, whereas Arabic has a very differentiated, more horizontally oriented terminology for ethnic communities.

A comparative anthropological perspective may help to see more clearly what was specific about the communities that grabbed power in the west. The *gentes* on western Roman territory in the 4th to 7th century were mobile warriors who constituted ethnically defined minorities among a culturally dominant majority, and it is very likely that ethnic distinctions were relevant to both sides in this context. They also competed with each other for profitable integration into the late Roman system. Those who succeeded did not settle as cultivators, but profited from the existing Roman system of surplus extraction from dependent and mostly unfree agricultural workers. What may be comparable is that in some cases they sought to limit access not to their land, but to their privileged status, which again made ethnic distinctions useful. In some cases, we also have evidence for endogamy. In the long run, given diffused tendencies of acculturation and social mobility, such ethnically defined restrictions could not be maintained. Upward mobility by Romans under barbarian rule took several forms: ecclesiastical careers that remained a predominantly Roman prerogative for a while; accession into the ruling military elite, which did not necessarily imply an immediate change of identity (we know of several high Roman commanders under Frankish rule), but had that effect after a few generations at the latest. On the other hand, lower-status groups among the ruling *gens*, which had always existed, expanded numerically, not least because they were still better placed than the corresponding indigenous group, which becomes obvious in some cases in the lower rates of *wergeld* for Romans (blood-money payable as a recompense after killing someone, depending on social rank).

The post-Roman kingdoms were polyethnic societies, and ethnic boundaries seem to have mattered in some respects, although perhaps not as rigidly as the ones described by Fredrik Barth; territorial boundaries were less relevant. Initially, some of the immigrant groups seem to have cultivated memories of homelands, more or less mythical countries of origin (Scandinavia or Troy), but also more accessible countries with which one attempted to remain in touch. It took a while until the new *patria*, the country of settlement, became an important point of reference. For much of the elite, whose landholdings were regionally concentrated, these regions became the focus of their interest, but without acquiring a strongly defining character. Conflict rarely arose along tribal or ethnic delimitations. Although Arianism, an alternative theological view of Christian doctrine, still created some political unrest, religious dissent was less of a political issue in the early medieval west than in the late Roman empire, or in the early Muslim world. On the whole, boundary maintenance does not receive much attention in our sources. With the exception of the British Isles, genealogies also seem to have mattered less than elsewhere. Even where we get individual genealogies,[9] they do not always connect with a tribal ancestor. Dynasties are relatively rarely named, with the exception of some Lombard sources: modern historians consistently call the dynasty that ruled the Frankish kingdoms from the 5th century to 751 Merovingians, but contemporary texts seldom use this name.

The post-Roman west certainly was not a tribal system, and although its *gentes* are still sometimes called 'Germanic tribes', they were neither Germanic nor tribes. Initially, these communities were fairly unstable: most of the new kingdoms of the 5th and 6th century soon succumbed to stronger rivals. What remained was ethnicity as a principle of distinction that could be routinely employed, and highlighted whenever politically expedient. Perhaps a comparison can be made here on a very abstract level with the different world in the Yemen, where a fairly stable 'tribal' cosmological system provided a readily available frame of reference, and structured perceptions and expectations (see Gingrich, in this issue). In spite of all political shifts, ethnically-denominated Christian powers became a default (although not unique) model, a kind of grammar of identity/alterity that made it possible to distinguish between basically analogous players (Baumann & Gingrich 2004). It was within a

Christian world of *gentes* that ethnicity could become a defining feature of the European political landscape, whereas Islamic polities were mostly known by their dynasties. The long-term impact of these early medieval developments may be considerable, up to the different dynamics of modern nation states in both regions. The specific embeddedness of ethnic distinctions in Christian forms of legitimation and in Roman military, political and ethnographic models may be part of an explanation for the different balance between aspects of community in east and west. But there is still much comparative research to do in order to arrive at a clearer picture.

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[1] For overviews see Pohl 2005a, Brown 2003, Halsall 2005 and Wickham 2009.

[2] cf. Morris Scheidel 2009, Scheidel, Bang & Bayly forthcoming, and Donner, Greeley, Sluglett & Weiss forthcoming.

[3] For an extensive discussion, see Pohl 2013

[4] Van Dülmen 2001; cf. Gingrich 2012; see also Gingrich, in this volume.

[5] See also de Jong 1996.

[6] See, for instance, Eriksen 1993.

[7] See, for instance, Glazer & Moynihan 1975; Hutchinson and Smith 1996; Romanucci-Ross & de Vos 1995.

[8] See also Barth 1969: 16f. and 21.

[9] For instance, the ten ancestors of the 7th-century legislator king Rothari in the prologue of the first Lombard lawcode, Edictus Rothari 1869: 1–3.