Ethnic identity as a situational construct in the early middle ages*)

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Zusammenfassung

In der Spätantike und im Frühmittelalter stellte die Ethniziät eine bedeutende Kategorie dar, derer sich die Autoren häufig zur Charakterisierung von Personen bedienten. Eine moderne Sicht der ethnischen Strukturen des ersten Jahrtausends in Europa verdanken wir Eugen Ewig und Reinhard Wenskus. Im Gegensatz zu früheren Arbeiten, in denen die ethnische Zuordnung als unveränderlich, ausschließlich von der Herkunft bestimmt, gesehen wird, betonen sie die Bedeutung der Territorialisierung ab dem 7., und – damit zusammenhängend – der Sprache ab dem 9. Jahrhundert. Kürzlich wurde diese Position erneut übrprüft, wobei betont wurde, daß ethnische Differenzierungen im Bereich der Nobilität noch im 8., wenn nicht noch im 10., bzw. 11. Jahrhundert existieren.

Die neueren Studien haben mit Ewig und Wenskus gemeinsam, daß sie nach einem „objektiven" Modell der Ethnizität suchen. Ein solches ließe sich in fünf Punkten zusammenfassen: 1. Ethnizität hängt eng mit Recht und Sprache zusammen. 2. Jedermann hat eine spezifische ethnische Identität, die – 3. von den Zeitgenossen als solche begriffen worden ist, und über die man sich einig war. 4. Die ethnische Identität ist nur schwer austauschbar. 5. Sie ist stets eine Quelle für Auseinandersetzungen in der spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Geschichte.

Befragt man die Quellen des Frühmittelalters, so findet man als Kriterien für eine ethnische Zuordnung die Begriffe Herkunft, Sitte, Sprache und Recht. Bei näherer Untersuchung zeigt sich aber, daß keines der Kriterien objektiv anwendbar ist, sondern daß sich die einzelnen Merkmale durchaus widersprechen können: Ein Mann mag eine romanische Sprache verwendet, sich als Franke gekleidet und sich zum burgundischen Recht bekannt haben. Dieser Widerspruch ist nur von einem neuen Ansatz her auflösbar.

Neuerdings versucht man sich dem Problem der ethnischen Gliederung vom Gesichtspunkt der Subjektivität her zu nähern: Individuen definieren sich selbst oder werden von anderen als „andersartig" definiert. Der Historiker begreift dementsprechend ethnische Gruppen nicht als mehr oder weniger beständige „Organismen", sondern sucht zu erfahren, unter welchen Umständen die Ethnizität überhaupt eine relevante Kategorie darstellt.

Untersucht man einige ausgewählte Quellen des späten Frühmittelalters, so wird man feststellen, daß eine ethnische Terminologie nur in relativ seltenen, wohl besonderen Fällen verwendet wird. In der Regel werden nur Mitglieder der sozialen Elite, meist aus der unmittelbaren Umgebung des Königs mit ethnischen Bezeichnungen versehen.

Weiters werden Heere ethnisch apostrophiert: Die *gens Francorum* ist der *exercitus Francorum*. Selten kommen ethnische Bezeichnungen im Zusammenhang mit Religionsgemeinschaften vor (z. B. bei Gregor von Tours), während die Übertragung der Stammesnamen auf geographischen Einheiten den Prozeß der Territorialisierung belegt.

Die ethnische Zugehörigkeit eines Mannes wird oft erst durch seine militärische Funktion sichtbar: Offenbar wird die Beziehung zwischen dem Anführer und seinen Leuten besonders bewußt. Ein zweiter Anlaß, die ethnische Zuordnung eines Mannes herauszustreichen, besteht dann, wenn dieser fernab von seinem normalen Lebensbereich wirksam wird. Ein gutes Beispiel stellt der „Franke" Samo dar, der im 7. Jahrhundert ein unabhängiges Slawenreich errichtet.

Die Ethnizität ist also eine politische Kategorie im Sinn von Mintz (Ethnizität *für* etwas), wobei zwischen der Selbstzuordnung des Individuums und seiner öffentlichen Funktion eine Art Wechselwirkung besteht. Die Ethnika sind offene Systeme, ein Wechsel der ethnischen Zuordnung war daher höchst einfach. Die ethnische Terminologie des Frühmittelalters stellt sich nunmehr als Code dar, der entschlüsselt werden muß, wenn man die Prozesse des sozialen Wndels erkennen und untersuchen will.

Summary

The investigation of early medieval ethnicity has been hampered both by the complexity of the traditional, nationalistic concerns within which scholarly interest in the subject arose and by the difficulties of understanding the contemporary meanings and uses of ethnic terminology. In general, medieval historians have assumed that ethnicity was an objective category which should be amenable to precise determination. In contrast, the present paper suggests that early medieval ethnicity should be viewed as a subjective process by which individuals and groups identified themselves or others within specific situations and for specific purposes.

Early medieval authors stress origin, customs, language and law, as the most significant characteristics by which ethnicity was determined. In contemporary terms, each of these characteristics was subjective and largely arbitrary and together do not provide a means by which one can determine the ethnic identity of individuals or groups.

When one examines the actual uses of ethnic labels, one finds that these articulated criteria in fact had a very limited role in determining the use of the vocabulary of ethnicity. Apparently ethnic identity became conscious to writers largely within the context of politics, and ethnicity was perceived and molded as a function of the circumstances which related most specifically to the interest of lordship.

One concludes that ethnicity did not exist as an objective category but rather as a subjective and malleable category by which various preexisting likenesses could be manipulated symbolically to mold an identity and a community.

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Studying early medieval ethnicity is a dangerous and difficult undertaking. In part these difficulties arise from the fact that, like "feudalism", ethnicity is a modern construct rather than a contemporary category, and hence examinations of "ethnic identity" risk anachronism when the origins of contemporary concerns and antagonisms are sought in the past.

As Falko Daim has pointed out, the terminology of ethnicity is used by modern ethnographers, sociologists, folklorists, archaeologists, and historians in ways that often have little in common with each other and possibly nothing in common with the uses of similar terminology in antiquity or the early Middle Ages[1].

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[1] Falko Daim „Gedanken zum Ethnosbegriff", *Mitteilungen der anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien*, vol. 112 (1983), pp. 58–71.

In addition, this particular construct has been intimately connected since at least the eighteenth century, to that other related modern creation, "nationalism", and even today medievalists appear unable or unwilling to separate the two. Obviously National Socialism focused considerable attention on the German folk and created a dangerous and damaging body of literature on the subject[2]). But this Nazi period was but an extreme aberration of a much longer and more fundamental tendency in Germanic scholarship: the search for a national identity. In the period prior to 1870 the problem was one of search for some *substratum* of unity in the face of political disunity. After 1945 the same problem has reemerged in a slightly different form: is there a Germany?[3]) Not surprisingly, therefore, in German scholarship the searches for ethnic and national identity have become intertwined.

The two are perhaps even more intimately connected in France, where nationalism has a longer history, where that tradition has not been discredited by the extremes of fascism, and where the events and aftermath of three wars have created an enduring climate of anti-Germanic sentiment. Not only did the great positivist historians of the early twentieth century, such as Maurice Chaume, allow themselves to be carried away in excesses of nationalist or regionalist fervor[4]), but even today as excellent a scholar as Michel Rouche can present an image of civilized Romans in the *Midi* fighting the faithless barbarity of the Germanic Franks well into the eighth century[5]).

Perhaps, in light of these difficulties, it would be better to avoid the topic altogether. However, to do so would be inappropriate for two reasons. First, the scarce sources from the sixth through tenth centuries do use terms such as *populus, gens,* and *natio,* to characterize social groups, and they qualify some individuals as being *"ex genere Francorum, Romanorum, Burgundionum,"* and the like. Some sense must be made of this inescapable linguistic evidence for the existence of something one can call, for lack of a better term, ethnic consciousness. Second, as has been indicated above, too much continues to be written about early medieval ethnicity which is not only conceptually and materially weak but which, because it perpetuates popular stereotypes of age-old divisions between Romance and Germanic groups, presents a distortion of the past which continues to inhibit a proper understanding of the present.

Until quite recently the generally accepted view of the amalgam of Germanic and Gallo-Roman societies has been that presented by Eugen Ewig and Reinhard Wenskus, the two scholars who have done more than anyone else in the post-war period to temper the misconceptions of early medieval ethnicity[6]). In contrast to a generation of scholars who argued that the basis of ethnic identity lay in the inherited

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[2]) For example, P. Kirn, *Aus der Frühzeit des Nationalgefühls* (Leipzig: 1943).

[3]) *Die deutsche Einheit als Problem der europäischen Geschichte,* ed. Carl Hinrichs and Wilhelm Berges (Stuttgart: 1960). The intimate connection between ethnicity and national identity is evident in many of the essays in Helmut Beumann and Werner Schröder, eds., *Aspekte der Nationenbildungen im Mittelalter, Ergebnisse der Marburger Rundgespräche 1972–75.* Nationes: Historische und philologische Untersuchungen zur Entstehung der europäischen Nationen im Mittelalter, Bd. I. (Sigmaringen: 1978).

[4]) Maurice Chaume, "Le sentiment national bourguignon de Gondebaud à Charles le Téméraire", *Annales de l'Académie de Dijon* (1922).

[5]) Michel Rouche, *L'Aquitaine des Wisigoths aux Arabes 418–781: Naissance d'une région* (Paris: 1979).

[6]) The old studies of G. Kurth, *Etudes franques* (2 vols.: Paris–Brussels, 1919), while containing some intelligent ideas, are no longer adequate discussions of medieval ethnicity. More important are E. Ewig, „Volkstum und Volksbewußtsein im Frankenreich des 7. Jahrhunderts", first published in *Caratteri del secolo VII in occidente* 2. Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioaevo 5 (Spoleto: 1958) and reprinted in E. Ewig, *Spätantikes und fränkisches Gallien,* 1952–73, ed. H. Atsma, vol. 1 (Munich: 1976), *Beihefte der Francia,* vol. 3/1, pp. 231–273; R. Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung. Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen Gentes* (Cologne–Graz: 1961); „Die deutschen Stämme im Reiche Karls des Großen", *Karl der Große* I (1965), pp. 179–219; R. Spandel, „Struktur und Geschichte des merowingischen Adels", *Historische Zeitschrift* 193 (1961), pp. 33–71; and K. F. Werner, "Les nations et le sentiment national dans l'Europe médiévale", *Revue Historique* 244 (1970), reprinted in *Structures politiques du monde franc VI–VIIe Siècles. Etudes sur les origines de la France et de l'Allemagne* (London: 1979).

and immutable tradition of personal legal identity, they have emphasized the import-
ance of territorialization, even as early as the seventh century, and language which,
according to Wenskus, became increasingly important from the ninth century. In
general, they argue that the fusion of Germanic and Gallo-Roman elements in European
aristocracy had begun even before the settlement of barbarians within the Empire, and
that by the eighth century this process was complete. The old tribal groups had ceased
to cohere by roughly 700, and after this time designations such as Roman, Frank, Goth,
and Aleman were more territorial than ethnic.

Very recently this position has come under reexamination both in France and in
Germany as a younger generation of scholars argue that ethnic differences in the
aristocracy in some areas of Francia persisted well into the eigth, if not into the tenth
and even eleventh centuries[7]).

While the revisionists dispute the chronology of their predecessors, in general they
share with them five basic suppositions about the meaning of early medieval ethnicity
prior to its. dissolution, whether this dissolution occurred in the seventh or tenth
century, suppositions which must themselves be examined with care: 1. Ethnicity is
closely related to law and language. 2. Everyone had a specific ethnic identity. 3.. All
contemporaries should have been able to recognize this one ethnic identity – a person
should not be called a Frank in one source and a Roman or Alamanian in another.
4. Except over many generations, ethnic identity proved very diffiult to change, largely
because of the personal nature of inherited law. 5. Ethnic identity was a source of
friction in society.

· These suppositions create an objective model for examining ethnicity which, while
simplifying the problem, may simultaneously distort the phenomenon. Ethnicity, as
sociologists, anthropologists and even some medievalists are increasingly aware, should
be seen not only in objective, but also in subjective terms. In the words of Wsevolod
Isajiw, "In contrast to the objective approach by which ethnic groups are assumed to
be existing, as it were 'out there' as real phenomena, the subjective approach defines
ethnicity as a process by which individuals either identify themselves as being different
from others as belonging to a different group or are identified by others or both identify
themselves and are identified by others as different[8])." As applied to early medieval
ethnicity, the implication of this concentration on ethnicity as subjective process is that
the proper task is not to determine who was a Frank, who a Roman, or what effects
these different ethnic identities had on communal relations. Rather, one must attempt
to determine by what criteria individuals and groups might be so identified and, equally
important, under what circumstances ethnicity was perceived at all. That is, in what
situational contexts ethnicity becomes a relevant issue. ·

One should begin with an examination of categories by which persons in the early
Middle Ages identified, or at least purported to identify, different people. (Peoples,
incidentaly, is a very poor term to use. The exact terminology underwent a constant
transformation from the fifth to the tenth centuries. As Jeremy Adams has demon-
strated, the patristic term *populus,* beloved of Augustine and Jerome, cedes in impor-
tance from the early seventh century to terminology directly related to the language of
kinship and suggesting a common biological origin: *gens* and *nations.* In a sense these
categories imply that ethnic identity is merely kinship "writ large"[8a]). *Gens* was the
major term into the ninth century, although *natio* appeared increasingly from the later

[7]) J.-P. Poly and E. Bournazel, *La mutation féodale X–XIIe siècles* Nouvelle Clio 16 (Paris: 1980),
part III, Chapter 7: "Unité politique et oppositions ethniques", pp. 313–348; Horst Ebling, Jörg Jarnut,
Gerd Kampers, „*Nomen et gens:* Untersuchungen zu den Führungsschichten des Franken-, Langobarden-
und Westgotenreiches im 6. und 7. Jahrhundert", *Francia,* vol. 8 (1980), pp. 687–745. Ebling on the Franks,
pp. 687–701.
[8]) Wsevolod Isajiw, *Definitions of Ethnicity* (Toronto: 1979), p. 9.
[8a]) On *gens* and *natio* see Daim, pp. 60–61.

ninth[9]). These categories, which might be termed the categories of the "native model" of ethnicity, are seldom articulated[10]). Through most of the period, one finds little that indicates specific reflections on the characteristics by which peoples were distinguished. Much of this, such as Isidore of Seville's discussion of *gentes,* is heavily dependent on the Biblical story of the tower of Babel[11]). However, in general, the characteristics stressed by contemporaries were origin, customs, language, and law, as in a much discussed passage in Regino of Prüm written in the late 800s: "Diverse nations of peoples (nationes populorum) differ among themselves in origin, customs, language, and laws"[12]); in the Diet of Verona (983) "a coming together of Saxons, Suevs, and Lotharingians, Bavarians, Italians and of others dissimilar in birth (natione) language and custom"[13]); or in Ado of Vienne's (mid-9th century) lament over the battle of Fontenoy in 841 at which, for the first time, major Frankish armies met in disastrous confrontation: "Not dissimilar in arms or distinct in the custom of peoples, but only opposed in their camps"[14]).

. If we examine in turn these four characteristics, we find that they are relatively fluid and in a sense arbitrary. Regino lists first *genus,* origin, similar to the. *natio* of the Diet of Verona. Origins can include geographical origin, personal ancestors, or even the common origins of a people. All are, in anthropological terms, fictive, in that a selection or re-creation must be exercised to determine with which of the myriad possible origins an individual or group will identify. Examples of the flexibility within the Frankish tradition are the Trojan origins of the Franks, which first appear in the Chronicles of Fredegar written in the mid seventh century and the so-called Frankish genealogical tree compiled ca. 700, which presents the peoples of the West as descendents of three brothers[16]). The Goths, Visigoths, Vandals, Gepids and Saxons are said to descend from the first, Erminus; the Burgundians, Thuringians, Lombards and Bavarians from the second, Inguo; and the Romans, Britons, Franks and Alamanni from the Third, Isto.

The second characteristic emphasized by Regino, *mores,* corresponds to the *habitus* of the Diet and of Ado. Mores or customs, too, are certainly open to change and alteration. Already in the fifth century some Gallo-Romans were adopting barbarian dress, just as barbarians, at certain times, adopted the dress and customs of the Romans[17]). Dress and weapons seem to have had particular significance as a sign of

[9]) Jeremy Du Quesnay Adams, *The Populus of Augustine and Jerome: A Study in the Patristic Sense of Community* (New Haven: 1971), esp. pp. 42, 68, 97 and 109–121; "The Political Grammar of Isidore of Seville", *Actes du quatriéme Congrés international de la philosophie médiévale* (Montreal–Paris: 1969), pp. 763–775.

[10]) B. Ward, "Varieties of the Conscious Model: The Fishermen of South China", *The Relevance of Models for Social Anthropology,* ASA Monographs 1 (London: 1965). Cited by Fredrik Barth, "Pathan Identity and its Maintenance", in F. Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (London: 1969), p. 120.

[11]) Isidorus, *Etymologiarum sive originum Libri XX,* ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: 1971), Liber IX, de linguis, gentibus, regnis, militia, civibus, affinitatibus. On medieval exegesis of the Babel story see Arno Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel, Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker,* 4 vols. (Stuttgart: 1957–63).

[12]) *MGH SS rer. Germ.* Regino of Prüm, *Epistula ad Hathonem,* p. xx. For the most recent examination of this text with extensive bibliography, see Helmut Beumann, „Die Bedeutung des Kaisertums für die Entstehung der deutschen Nation im Spiegel der Bezeichnungen von Reich und Herrscher", in Beumann and Schröder, *Aspekte der Nationenbildung,* pp. 351–352.

[13]) On this text see Werner, "Les nations", p. 291.

[14]) *PL* 123–136.

[15]) *Chronicarum quae dicunter Fredegarii Scholastici,* ed. Bruno Krusch, *MGH SSRM II* II, chapters 4–8, pp. 45–47; III, chapter 2, p. 93. On this legend, which appears independenty in the *Liber Historiae Francorum, MGH SSRM* II, pp. 241–242, see J. M. Wallace Hadrill's introduction to his edition of *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar* (London: 1960), pp. xi–xii, and his *The Long-Haired Kinrgs* (New York: 1962), pp. 79–83.

[16]) *MGH SSRM VII,* p. 851. On the significance of this text see Reinhard Wenskus, „Die deutschen Stämme", p. 180.

[17]) On the cultural fusion and cross-cultural influence during the fifth century see Pierre Riché, *Éducation et culture dans l'occident barbare VII–VIIIe siècles* (3rd edition: Paris 1972), pp. 92–118.

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belonging to a specific group, as in the case of Louis the Pious who, as king of the
Aquitanians, dressed as a Gascon on his father's orders[18]), or that of Charles himself,
who dressed in the Frakish manner, except on two occasions when at papal request he
dressed in the Roman fashion[19]).

Language is the third characteristic mentioned by Regino, and the second by the
Diet. Much has been written on the increasing tendency, evident from the ninth century,
to emphasize the unity of Germanic language in opposition to Romance as a characteri-
stic of ethnic difference[20]). However, in the earlier period, in spite of the standard
acknowledgment of linguistic differences which were largely based on the Babel story,
medieval authors were acutely aware of the fact that every *gens* did not have its own
language. Gothic disappeared within two generations as a spoken language; and in
Neustria, although by the eighth century legend had it that the earliest Franks had
exterminated all of the *Romani* living in the region, the same legend also contended that
the *Franci* had adopted the language of the eradicated population to such an extent that
no one knew what the original language of the *Franci* had been[21]). In addition,
bilingualism was characteristic of large portions of the population, particularly of the
aristocracy[22]). Like the previous characteristics, language was then at best a fluid index
of ethnic identity.

Regino mentions *leges* last in his list; others do not mention law at all. Already by
the late ninth century, when Regino was writing, references to the laws of individuals
(so-called personality of law) were decreasing except in such places as Septimania and
Italy. However, one should not conclude that an ancient, immutable, non-territorial
legal tradition, passed from father to son, was at last breaking down. This personality
principle did not precede the establishment of the Germanic peoples in the Empire, nor
did it appear in such early laws as the lex Salica. Its first appearance, as Heinrich
Brunner pointed out in the last century, was in the *Lex Ribuaria*, but there only
specifying that in judicial proceedings the accused was to respond "according to the law
of the place wehre he was born"[23]). A sense of law as a heritage from parents regardless
of the place in which one was born developed only with the expansion of the Salian
Franks and their domination over other peoples. This was the retention of the law of a
conquering and ruling elite among members of that elite in far-flung corners of the
empire, which ordinarily retained their traditional laws. But even this sort of personali-
ty of law varied with intermarriage, through which individuals might deal with

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[18]) *Anonymi vita Hludowici* c. 4. *Quellen zur karolingischen Reichgeschichte* I, ed. Reinhold Rau
(Darmstadt: 1974), p. 264. It is perhaps most significant that Louis is described as dressed in the manner of
Gascon youths of his age when he led the Aquitanian host to Paderborn in order to assist his father against the
Saxons. As we shall see, ethnic identity is most acute under arms.

[19]) Einhard, *Vita Karoli* 23: Vestitu patrio, id est Francio, utebatur ... Peregrina vero indumenta,
quamvis pulcherrima, respuebat nec umquam eis indui patiebatur, excepto quod Romanae semel Hadriano
pontifice petente et iterum Leone successore eius supplicante longa tunica et clamide amictus, calceis quoque
Romano more formatis induebatur.

[20]) Wenskus argues in „Die deutschen Stämme", 207–210, that the distinction between those speaking
lingua theodisca and *lingua Romana* was increasingly important by the ninth century. More recently, see
Karl Heinrich Rexroth, „Volkssprache und werdendes Volksbewußtsein im ostfränkischen Reich",
Nationes, pp. 275–315 for the Germanic regions of the realm and Max Pfister, „Die Bedeutung des
germanischen Superstrates für die sprachliche Ausgliederung der Galloromania", *Nationes*, pp. 127–170, for
the Romance areas. While the consciousness of difference based on language was certainly increasing in the
ninth century, both within Germanic- and Romance-speaking regions, as late as the mid-ninth century Haimo
of Auxerre (died 855) could list among those speaking *lingua Romana Romani, Itali, Aquitani, Franci,
Burgundiones,* and *Gotthi.* (Cited by Wenskus, p. 209).

[21]) Ewig, „Volkstum und Volksbewußtsein", p. 273.

[22]) On the importance of bilingualism in the aristocracy see Wenskus, „Die deutschen Stämme",
pp. 209–212. Max Pfisters discusses the influence of the Germanic language of the aristocracy on the
linguistic map of Gaul in his „Die Bedeutung des germanischen Superstrates", pp. 142–158, and the regions of
bilingualism on pp. 139–140.

[23]) Heinrich Brunner, *Deutsche Rechtsgeschichte*, vol. 1 (2nd ed.: Munich–Leipzig, 1906), no. 35,
pp. 382–399.

different matters such as inheritance according to the laws of the side from which the inheritance had come, and it was attenuated through the increasing tendency in the later eight and ninth century to settle disputes according to "the law of the place where the crime was committed"[24]). Finally, it is not at all clear that the so-called "profession of law" required at the outset of juridical proceedings found in Italy, Burgundy and Septimania need be understood as a technical declaration of ethnicity. The *Caputularia missorum* ordering missi to inquire into the birth law of individuals, proved ambiguous in specifying whether the law is that which they have from their parents, or from their birth, that is, from where they were born[25]). Thus once more one finds that this final category of ethnicity was far from stable and immutable, neither for individuals nor for multi-generational groups.

One can conclude from this examination of the characteristics emphasized by contemporaries as most important in determining ethnicity that each of them was to a large extent subjective and arbitrary. Moreover, they may have existed within an individual in a complicated and contradictory combination. A man might speak a Romance language, dress as a Frank, and claim Burgundian law. How he perceived his ethnic identity, and how he was in turn perceived by others, if in fact anyone thought of his ethnicity at all, is impossible to determine *as an objective category*[25a]). The only alternative is to look at specific instances in which individuals or collectivities are given ethnic identifications, and attempt to discover the reasons for these labelings. Unfortunately, given the fragementary and laconic nature of early medieval documentation, it is seldom if ever possible to determine exactly why an individual was termed a Goth, Frank, Roman, or Burgundian. The opportunity for thick description, outside of the case of a Gregory of Tours, is entirely lacking, and one risks falling into the trap of attempting to determine what the ethnicity of individuals ought to be–that is, once again objectifying ethnicity[25b]).

Instead, one should examine not primarily why specific individuals were labeled as they were, but rather consider why they were labeled at all. In the narrative sources of the sixth and early eighth centuries (chiefly Gregory of Tours, Fredegar and the Continuators, and the Book of the History of the Franks), the most remarkable finding is that in fact very few persons are ever identified by ethnic group. Gregory, writing in the sixth century when the Frankish conquests of the kingdoms of the Romans, Burgundians, and Goths was less than a century old, did not bother to mention the *gens* of even two dozen of the hundreds of persons whose names appear in his works[26]). The seventh-century history of Fredegar and his continuators, whose tendency to note the *gens* of at least some of his principal actors has been noted, actually gives and ethnic

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[24]) Brunner, *Ibid.*, pp. 386–387.

[25]) *MGH Capit.* I, p. 67, no. 25, c. 5.

[25a]) The most famous example of the complex ethnic identities of important early medieval families is that of the Welfs. Scholars have long been troubled by the fact that contemporaries of the second wife of Louis the Pious, Judith, whose father was Welf, identified the family's origins differently. Various attempts have been made to see them as Bavarian, Saxon, Frankish, or Alemannian. The most reasonable conclusion is that all of these identifications were equally correct but were the result of different situational and contextual observations of the family. See Karl Brunner *Oppositionelle Gruppen im Karolingerreich*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für österreichische Geschichtsforschung, vol. 25 (Vienna: 1979), pp. 102–103.

[25b]) "Thick Description" is the term borrowed by Clifford Geertz from Gilbert Ryle to characterize ethnographic description. Geertz further describes this description as a microscopic interpretation of a social discourse which seeks to ". . . rescue the 'said' of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms". Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture", in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: 1973), pp. 3–30, esp. pp. 5–7 and 20–21.

[26]) Counted are only those individuals identified by a "folk name", as, for example, *Valdenus Francus,* or by *gens,* as *Vulfilaicus genere Langobaruds.* For reasons discussed below, individuals are identified, for example, as *Rex* or *Dux Francorum* are excluded. The resulting list (compiled from the Arndt-Krusch edition *Gregorii Turonensis opera, MGH SSRM* I, Hannover: 1884) includes 8 Francs, 3 Britons, 1 Burgundian, 2 Goths, 1 Hun, 9 Jews, 1 Lombard, 1 Thoringian, 1 Theifar, and 1 Barbarian.

label for only 15% of the roughly 230 individuals in the text[27]). The *Liber historiae Francorum* (LHF) identified even fewer: only five in all[28]). Perhaps everyone in the intended audience knew the ethnic identity of all the others, but this is most doubtful, and in any case, were such things general in knowledge, the intended public would certainly have already known the ethnic identity of many of those who are so designated. Thus one encounters a very highly limited and selective use of ethnic terminology, and must therefore attempt to determine what circumstances made contemporaries conscious of others in relationship to larger social groupings.

A preliminary distinction must be made between instances of ethnic identity asssigned to groups from that assigned to individuals. Most commonly, terms which related to *gens, populus,* or *natio* were applied to large collectivities such as the *gens Francorum,* the *gens Saxonum,* and so forth. As Jeremy Adams has observed, the term *gens* has become for Isidore a word with much stronger emotional charge in political contexts, and has even taken on a legal, constitutional character. As in the Visigothic law codes, it is the *gens* against which one commits treason. *Gens* enjoys a closer relationship with the *regnum* than does its satellite *populus* ..."[29]). However, the context was seldom if ever suggestive of a community of common origin, custom, language, or law. Essentially, the terms *Franci, Alamanni, Burgundiones, Gothi,* and the like appeared in connection with kings and with war. The kings were kings of peoples, as were dukes, and by far the most common use of the ethnic labels was to modify the names of kings. When Gregory, Fredegar, or the author of the *LHF* speak of peoples, they normally meant the warriors, the army[30]). The *gens Francorum* was the *exercitus Francorum,* led by its king or its *duces.* This tradition was hardly novel in the sixth century. As Reinhard Wenskus and Herwig Wolfram have demonstrated, the peoples of the migration period acquired their identity through their adherence to particular royal or ducal families alongside whom they fought and whose traditions they adopted[31]).

This migration period tradition continued long after territorialization. Through the eighth century, military organization continued to be the fundamental form of association in the free society: assemblies of the Frankish realm continued until the reign of Louis the Pious to take place under arms; counts served not simply as local administrators but as military leaders of the host from their county; and freedom and bearing arms were synomous[32]).

Membership in the *gens Francorum* or *Burgundionum* in the sense of the *exercitus* certainly did not depend on shared cultural, linguistic, or legal background. The Frankish host regularly included subgroups of Burgundian, Saxon, and other contingents[33]). Likewise, the *exercitus Burgundiae* could include contingents led by Franks, Burgundians, Saxons and Romans[34]).

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[27]) *Fredegarii Chronicorum Liber Quartus cum continuationibus,* edited J. M. Wallace-Hadrill (London: 1960). For Book Four of the Chronicon, the appearance is as follows: 15 Francs, 4 Romans, 5 Lombards, 1 Saxon, 1 Burgundian. For the Continuations: 6 Franks and 1 Anglo-Saxon.

[28]) *MGH SSRM* II, pp. 238–328. The only persons identified by *gens* original chapters are two Saxon queens and three Franci.

[29]) Adams, *The Populus,* pp. 120–121.

[30]) Out of numerous instances, one might cite the description in Fredegar of the battle between Theudericus and Theudebertus in which the latter came to meet Theudericus "cum Saxonis, Thoringus uel ceteras gentes que de ultra Renum uel undique potuerat adunare". Ch. 38, p. 31.

[31]) Wenskus, *Stammesbildung,* esp. pp. 38–39, 319–320. Wolfram, *Geschichte der Goten,* esp. pp. 111–116, 362–380.

[32]) On Frankish military organization in general see Bernard S. Bachrach, *Merovingian Military Organization 481–751* (Minneapolis: 1972) and for the Carolingian period F. L. Ganshof, *Frankish Institutions under Charlemagne* (New York: 1968), pp. 59–68. See also Arnold Price, „Die Nibelungen als kriegerischer Weihebund", *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte,* vol. 61: 2 (1974), pp. 199–211, for a discussion of the role of warrior bands in the formation of a new "people".

[33]) As for example, *Fredegarii chronica* IV, 38, 74.

[34]) *Fredegarii chronica* IV, 78.

A second and much rarer sense in which ethnic identification seems to have been made, at least in the sixth century, was in terms of religion. Gregory of Tours quoted the Gothic Kind Theodegisil (died 549) who, skeptical of a miracle performed by an orthodox Christian, dismissed it as due to the cleverness of the Romans. Gregory explained that "they called the men of our religion Romans". If this is so, then by this date Romans included not only Gallo-Romans but Franks and Burgundians as well[35]).

A final collective identification appeared from the fifth century. This was simply the geographic terms, such as Francia, Gothia, Burgundia, and Alemannia, all used by Gregory, which indicated, already in the sixth century, that the process of territorialization of ethnic consciousness to which we referred in our discussion of law, was taking place[36]).

One must keep in mind these uses of ethnic labels when considering those situations in which specific individuals were identified by ethnic background. Here, one finds the same general tendencies observed in the use of such terms for collectivities. First, authors became conscious of ethnic designations most often when their subjects were part of the elite, either fulfilling some official office or duty to which they had been appointed by the king, or when they had close personal relations, by blood or friendship, with a king. Second, but closely related to the first, were instances in which individuals were serving in a military capacity. Third, authors found it appropriate to mention ethnicity when their subject was in some sense "out of place", either geographically or religiously.

Examples of persons who were close to kings: Gregory told of one Silarius, "a certain Goth, who was bound to King Alric with great love (735)"[37]). In Fredegar six of the individuals mentioned by *genus* were mayors of the palace or Patricii[38]); two of the five individuals so designated in the *LHF* were queens[39]). This does not imply that the individuals identified by ethnicity shared the ethnic label of the king: the queens were both Saxons, the mayors of the palace in Fredegar may have been Franks or Romans. The point, rather, is that in the proximity of the king, or in carrying out a duty assigned by a king, ethnic affinity became significant.

The relationship between *duces* leading armies and the populations composing those armies has been the subject of considerable debate and misunderstanding. Usually *duces* are not identified by any *gens* or by region at all. When they are, language of the sources presents their relationships to the *exercitus* or *gens* in one of two ways. Either they are termed *dux Bagoariorum, Alamannorum,* and the like[40]), or they are termed *dux ex genere Francorum, ex genere Romano, ex genere Burgundionum,* etc.[41]): Too many examples of *duces* described in the first manner who had been appointed duke in region other than that of their origin have been found to argue that such dukes were the native leaders of ethnic groups. Examples include the dux Radulf placed by the Frankish king Dagobert over the Thuringians[42]) and the Aticus or Adalricus described as leading the gentile band of the Alamanni elsewhere described as issued from a "most noble origin by parental genus, arising in the territory of the Gauls", and still elsewhere as being "from the very noble *gens* of the Franks"[43]). The duke led a

[35]) In *gloria martyrum* 25, p. 502.

[36]) *Francia* in Gregory quoting Sulpicius Alexander, *LHF,* II, 9; Saxons invade Francia IV, 16. Gothia, IV, 51. Burgundia II, 24. Alamannia, *Vitae patrum* I, 2.

[37]) *Vitae patrum* XVIII, 2.

[38]) Mayors of the palace: Bertoaldus, c. 24; Claudius, c. 28; Floachad, c. 89. Patricii: Quolenus, c. 18; Protadius, c. 24; Ricomeri, c. 29.

[39]) Nanthilde, c. 42; Balthilde, c. 43.

[40]) For example, Leutharius dux Alamannorum, *Fredegarii chronica* IV, 88; Odilio dux Bagoariis, *Fredegarii chronica* IV, 25.

[41]) *Fredegarii chronica* IV, 78.

[42]) *Fredegarii chronica* IV, 77. Similarly, after Theuderic II and Theudebert II defeated the Gascons in 602, they appointed a duke Genialis over the Gascons, *ibid.,* IV, 21.

[43]) *Vita Odiliae SSRM,* VI, 29, "ex nobilissimo Francorum genere ortus". *(Lectio idibus Dec.)* The vita

regional army which was designated by the predominant gentile-territorial designation of the region. Although such dukes might have established themselves as integral parts of these regions in an effort to achieve a regional hegemony, particularly in the late seventh and again in the late ninth centuries, once more the terminology of ethnicity was a military and not a cultural, legal, or linguistic designation.

The solution to the problem of dukes described as being *"ex genere Romano* or *Burgundionum"* is less obvious. The most famous instance occurs in chapter 78 of the Fourth book of Fredegar, in which Dagobert's Burgundian Referendary, Chadoind, raised an army from the "universal kingdom of Burgundy". Chadoind made for Gascony "with ten dukes with armies". Fredegar then proceeds to list eight individual duces he termed *"ex genere Francorum"*, one *ex genere Romano,* one *genere Burgundionum,* and one *genere Saxonum.* In what manner these eleven individuals were perceived as from specific *genera* is not clear[44]). What is clear is that their *genera* were identified because of their military function: leading specific armies within the host. Under arms, the relationship between leaders and peoples became more conscious.

The third type of circumstance within which ethnic affiliation was likely to be mentioned was when individuals seemed "out of place" either in terms of geography or religion.

Here, too, one could cite a number of examples. Samo, the Frank who organizes the Slavic people into a powerful if ephemeral real, is a "Frank", among Slavs[45]). Vulfilaic, the hermit and imitator of Simeon Stylites in the area of Trier, is *ex genere Langobardus* – a man out of place both by his distance from Lombard Italy and his fervent if extra-episcopal orthodoxy[46]). Much has been made of an episode in the life of St. Eloi of Noyon in which he confronted men in the household of the Neustrian *maior domus* Erchinoald celebrating an old pre-Christian feast, only to be told, "You Roman, no matter how frequently you try, you will never be able to change our customs"[47]). Suggestions that *Romani* was meant as a synonym for *Aquitaini* because Eloi was from the South, or even that *Romani* translated the Frankish *Welch* – enemy, may be placing too much emphasis of supposed antagonisms between Gallo-Romans and Franks[48]). More significant are the circumstances – orthodox opposition to heterodox religon – in which the speaker is aware of Eloi's Romanness. The parallel to the definition of Gregory, "They call the men of our religion Romans", is perhaps more germane. Not Eloi's inherited ethnicity or geographical origin, but rather his strict religious sentiment induced his opponent to think of him as a Roman.

To summarize this brief examination of the uses of ethnic terminology in the early Middle Ages, one finds a contradiction between the articulated criteria by which peoples were to be differentiated, and the circumstances in which these differentiations actually took place. Criteria such as origin, customs, language, and law, while subjective and malleable, were still characteristics of cultural ethnicity. The actual circumstances in which ethnic designations seem to have been felt most acutely were largely political. The kind of ethnicity, then, that we are examining is essentially what Sidney Mintz describes as political ethnicity – "ethnicity in the service of politics"[49]). One must

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itself describes Adalricus "ex nobilissimis parentibus generis originem sortiens, Galliensium territorio oriendus". In the *Vita Germani abbatis, MGH SSRM* V, p. 37. This same Dux is described as leading with him the "phalangas Alamannorum gentis iniquae". On Adalricus see Horst Ebling, *Prosopographie der Amtsträger des Merowingerreiches, Francia Beiheft* 2 (Munich: 1974), no. VIII.

[44]) The Saxon was Aigyna, apparently from a community of Saxons settled on the Garonne, who served as Dux in Aquitaine under Chlothar II and as *Dux terrae Wasconiae* under Dagobert I. See Ebling, XVIII. Whether or not an important part of his *exercitus* was composed of Saxons from this region is unknown.

[45]) *Fredegarii chronica* IV, c. 48. Samo, who is not described as either of an illustrious family or in any official position, is the only person designated by Fredegar not by *gens* but by *natio.*

[46]) *HF,* VIII, 15, pp. 333–334.

[47]) *Vita Eligii* II, 20, *SSRM* IV, p. 712.

[48]) See *Wenskus,* „Die deutschen Stämme", p. 185, and notes 58–59.

[49]) Sidney W. Mintz, "Ethnicity and Leadership: An Afterword", in *Ethnic Leadership in America,* ed. John Higham (Baltimore: 1979), p. 197.

never lose sight of the fact that the characters who pass through the pages of a Gregory or a Fredegar were, with few exceptions, members of a small political elite to whom political power, lordship, was the major concern. If the first set of explicit categories by which contemporaries claimed to distinguish ethnic identity could be interpreted as nothing more than kinship writ large, these circumstances in which ethnic labels were actually used seem to be quite different. Here, rather, the primary interest seems to be the use of such terms to identify forms of political, non-kindred organization, even if kinship-like terms are used[49a]). The *gens Francorum* may have been much more than the Frankish army, but that which it was in addition to the free warriors was not of particular importance to our authors. Within these elite circles, ethnicity was perceived and molded as a function of the circumstances which related most specifically to the paramount interest of a lordship. Thus a duke may have been Gallic when his birthplace was mentioned, but he was a Frank when talking of his close connection to the king, and an Alamannian when leading the Alsacian levy.

Ethnicity was not an objective phenomenon, a stumbling block to the assimilation of diverse European peoples. But it was likewise not entirely arbitrary. Again, in the words of Mintz "Ethnicity is not a phantasm, the result of an act of sheer imagination; but its peculiar and particular expression in the form of claims — ethnicity *for* something — is the precipitate of wider forces, acting in conjunction upon the awareness of people for whom *some* aspects of their preexisting likeness have become sociologically relevant"[50]). Mintz's emphasis on "ethnicity *for* something" is essential to understanding the role of ethnic labeling in early European society. Ethnic identity in itself was not the basis of political unity or opposition. Rather, political opposition was often expressed through the symbolic manipulation of these "preexisting likenesses" in order to mold an identity and a community in opposition to one's enemies. Since these likenesses or "native models" were subjective, movement across ethnic boundaries was not only possible but natural within that small elite element of society visible in our sources that sought to acquire or to maintain its dominant position. As Fredrik Barth suggests in a discussion of changes of ethnic identity, "What matters is how well the others, with whom one interacts and to whom one is compared, manage to perform, and what alternative identities and sets of standards are available to the individual"[51]). Within the context of the early Middle Ages, aristocratic groups seeking autonomy from royal or central authority could identify themselves with such groups as Thuringians or Romans, and hence these identifications were the result, not the cause, of opposition within the greater Frankish realm.

In conclusion, let us return to the initial observation that early medieval ethnicity has too often been viewed as a motivator, an explanation of antagonisms, a source of conflict in early medieval society. This view is inadequate because it leads historians to ignore the processes which gave rise to the conflicts and hence to the strategic formation of ethnic consciousness. This process, which Herwig Wolfram termed ethnogenesis in the migration period and which, in a contemporary context, Andrew Greeley calls Ethnicization, continued through the early Middle Ages, and indeed beyond[52]). As Immanuel Wallerstein says, ethnic groups "are constantly created and re-created; they also constantly 'cease to exist'; they are thus constantly redefined

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[49a]) I am grateful to Professor Mintz for pointing out to me the significance of the use of kinship terminology for the erection of new levels of organization. On the uses of fictive kinship see his article co-authored by Eric R. Wolf, "An Analysis of Ritual Co-Parenthood (Compadrazgo)", in *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 6 (1950), pp. 341–368.

[50]) *Ibid.*, p. 198.

[51]) Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (London: 1969), p. 25.

[52]) Herwig Wolfram, *Geschichte der Goten*, 2nd edition (Munich: 1980), „Entwurf einer historischen Ethnographie am Beispiel der Goten", pp. 448–460.

and change their forms at amazingly fast rates"[53]). Thus early medieval ethnicity should not be the end point of an examination of society, but rather a beginning, a code which must be deciphered in order to understand the process of social change.

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[53]) Emmanuel Wallenstein, "The Two Modes of Ethnic Consciousness: Soviet Central Asia in Transition?" *The Nationality Question in Soviet Central Asia*, ed. Edward Allworth (New York: 1973), pp. 168–169. Wallerstein emphasizes ethnic consciousness as a form of conflict, but not as a source of that conflict.