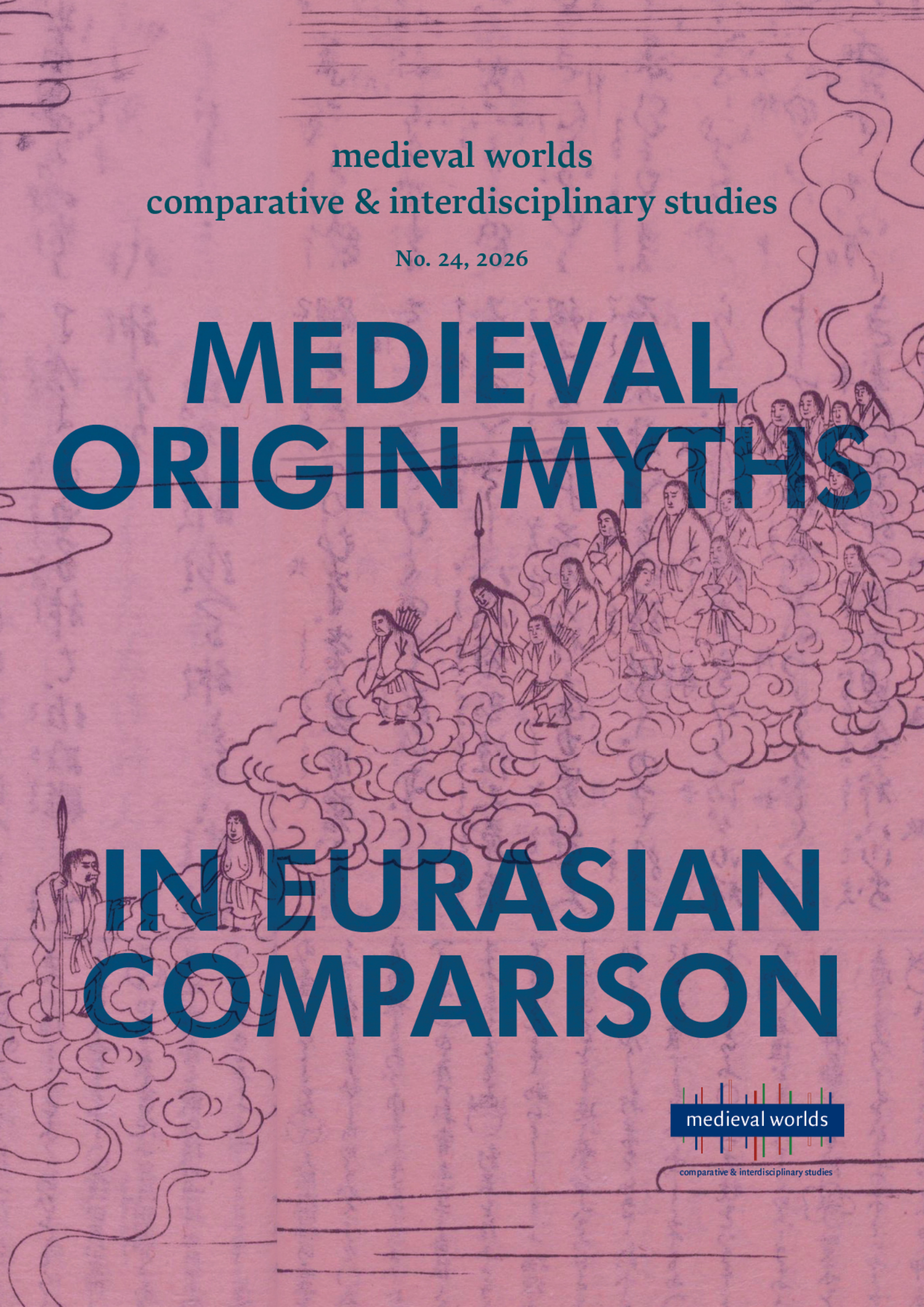
medieval worlds
comparative & interdisciplinary studies

No. 24, 2026

MEDIEVAL ORIGIN MYTHS IN EURASIAN COMPARISON



medieval worlds
comparative & interdisciplinary studies

medieval worlds
comparative & interdisciplinary studies
Volume 24, 2026

Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasian Comparison

Guest Editor:
Reinier Langelaar

ÖAW AUSTRIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

medieval worlds
comparative & interdisciplinary studies

All rights reserved
ISSN 2412-3196 Online Edition
Media Owner: Institute for Medieval Research
Copyright © 2026 by Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna
Cover design, layout: Daniela Seiler
Proofreading: Brigitte Willinger and Leora Courtney-Wolfman
Cover image: Ho no Ninigi and his entourage of Heavenly Deities on their way from Heaven to Earth. Book illustration (woodblock print) by Hosoda Tominobu, *Kamiyo no masakoto* (*True words of the Divine Age*) vol. 3, published 1827. National Archives of Japan Digital Archive, public domain.

Austrian Academy of Sciences Press
Dr. Ignaz Seipel Platz 2, 1010 Vienna, Austria
Tel. +43-1-515 81/DW 3402-3406
Fax +43-1-515 81/DW 3400
hw.oeaw.ac.at, verlag.oeaw.ac.at

Editors

Walter Pohl, *Austrian Academy of Sciences/University of Vienna*

Nina Mirnig, *University of Vienna/Austrian Academy of Sciences*

Editorial Board

Maximilian Diesenberger, *Austrian Academy of Sciences*

Christian Gastgeber, *Austrian Academy of Sciences*

Johann Heiss, *Austrian Academy of Sciences*

Claudia Rapp, *Austrian Academy of Sciences/University of Vienna*

Helmut Reimitz, *Princeton University*

Irene van Renswoude, *Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences*

Pavlína Rychterová, *Austrian Academy of Sciences*

Veronika Wieser, *Austrian Academy of Sciences*

International Advisory Board

Glenn Bowman , *University of Kent*

Sabrina Corbellini, *University of Groningen*

Mayke de Jong, *Utrecht University*

Nicola di Cosmo, *Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton*

Stefan Esders, *Free University of Berlin*

Patrick Geary, *Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton*

John Haldon, *Princeton University*

William C. Jordan, *Princeton University*

Osamu Kano, *Nagoya University*

Hugh Kennedy, *SOAS, University of London*

Gábor Klaniczay, *Central European University*

Elisabeth Lambourn, *De Montfort University Leicester*

Eduardo Manzano, *Centro de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales (CSIC)*

Lars Boje Mortensen, *University of Southern Denmark*

Marina Rustow, *Princeton University*

Dittmar Schorkowitz, *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology*

Teresa Shawcross, *Princeton University*

Naomi Standen, *University of Birmingham*

John Tolan, *University of Nantes*

Przemysław Urbańczyk, *Polish Academy of Sciences/Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw*

Dan Varisco, *Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton/American Institute for Yemeni Studies*

Luo Xin, *Peking University*

Journal Management

Ingrid Hartl, *Austrian Academy of Sciences*

Homepage

www.medievalworlds.net

Table of Contents

Editorial 3
Ingrid Hartl and Walter Pohl

Individual Articles

Stories in Motion
The Kaleidoscope as Metaphor in Comparative Studies of *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome* 4
Emilie van Opstall

Translations from Greek into Latin in the Middle Ages
Some Minor Texts and Diagrams 25
Christian Gastgeber

Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasian Comparison
Guest Editor: Reinier Langelaar

Origin Myths: Challenges of Interpretation 86
Walter Pohl, Pavlína Rychterová and Helmut Reimitz

Deities of Heaven, deities of Earth, and two aspects of foreignness
in Japanese origin myths 108
Bernhard Scheid

Ethnic Origin Narratives in Early Medieval Europe 129
Walter Pohl and Pavlína Rychterová

Bulgarian Origin Legends 164
Daniel Ziemann

Fantastic Beasts and where to find them in the Eurasian Steppe:
The Beast Motif in Origin Stories of Eurasian Steppe Peoples, 4th-9th centuries 184
Sandra Wabnitz

The Origin Myths of the Turkic Peoples:
From the Wolf Tale of the Gaoche to the Kazakh Legend of Alasha Khan 202
Joo-Yup Lee

eISSN-Nr. 2412-3196
DOI 10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026s1

Southern Tungusic origin myths in Chinese and Manchu sources 221
Julia C. Schneider

Ancient Greek Origin Myths 253
Naoíse Mac Sweeney and Eleni Kopanaki

Stranger-Kings, Animal Guides, and Sibling Trios:
Comparative Reflections on Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasia 277
Reinier Langelaar

Editorial

Ingrid Hartl and Walter Pohl

Stories in Motion. The title of our first contribution sets the tone for the entire volume. Stories are constantly told, retold, adapted, translated. What happens, then, when a story is retold in a different cultural context, a different language, a different political situation? Our first contribution approaches this question from a literary perspective and uses the metaphor of a kaleidoscope to examine a tale taken from the Sindbad tradition in the comparative analysis of its early Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, and Latin versions.

The second individual article focuses on the translation of Greek texts into Latin and draws our attention to practical texts for daily use that were popular in the early Middle Ages, such as prognostics and handy tables for according local calendars with the Roman one, calculating Easter or showing days of the week for specific dates. They are categorised as non-literary, but charmingly contain stories of their own, explaining how to calculate one's future based on numerical values of letters in one's name; or what to do to ensure the best outcome if one travels abroad, if one feels ill, if one wants to find love, or how to be well received, to escape scandal, to ward off magic, to build a house and many other everyday situations in the vagaries of life.

Our thematic section then addresses stories as potential evidence for identity construction in the past. For this, it turns to origin myths, one of the earliest form of stories. They do not necessarily recount the beginnings of the world or the human race, many explain the beginnings of specific groups: Japanese, Jurchen, Manchu, Gaoche, Kazakh, Bulgar, Greek, Goth, Langobard, Burgundian, Anglo-Saxon, Irish or Bohemian, as the case studies in our cluster on *Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasia* present. The versions that have come down to us in the written sources provide insight into adaption and narrative change. Examined with suitable tools, they are not only literary fiction but could also be used to learn more about the groups which shaped them. The introductory article discusses the methodological and philosophical approaches with which to tackle this aspect of stories in motion. The conclusion focuses on the comparative aspects and provides a synthesis of the most striking motifs that seem to permeate many Eurasian origin stories. This section was the result of a work package and an international workshop of the Austrian Cluster of Excellence »EurAsian Transformations«.

Finally, we would like to make it transparent that one of the authors in the cluster is the editor of this journal. Of course, he was not involved in the peer review process. Still, it may raise ethical questions and be seen as constituting a short-cut to enhancing his publication record. However, this publication will not bring him any personal benefits in academic competition, given that he is already retired.

eISSN-Nr. 2412-3196
DOI 10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026s3

Stories in Motion
The Kaleidoscope as Metaphor in Comparative Studies of *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/ The Seven Sages of Rome*

Emilie van Opstall*

This article proposes the kaleidoscope as a hermeneutic tool for comparative research on *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome* – a frame narrative with embedded tales that circulated from the Middle Ages into the early modern period in many languages and across a vast geographical area. In recent years, scholars from a range of disciplines have increasingly shifted their attention away from reconstructing genetic relationships within the textual tradition toward the cross-cultural analysis of versions of this story matter from different linguistic and cultural spheres. This approach has the potential to offer new insights into similarities and differences between medieval societies in the East and West. However, the complex nature of the story matter and the fact that it crossed so many boundaries also poses considerable methodological challenges. The present article introduces the kaleidoscope as a dynamic metaphor to approach the multiplicity of factors involved in this kind of research. A case study of the embedded tale of the bath attendant/seneschal, examined in four early versions – Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, and Latin – serves to demonstrate the heuristic potential of this tool. After an introduction, the article discusses the material within its historical and cultural contexts, the principal features of the frame narratives; the characteristics of the embedded stories; the relationship between frame narrative and embedded tale. Throughout, the kaleidoscope metaphor serves to visualize the interaction between cultural and material contexts (the tube of the kaleidoscope), frame narrative (the mirrors), and embedded stories (coloured stones): from the interplay between these elements the moral lessons of each version emerge (refraction resulting in an intricate pattern) to the audience (person looking through the lens). Turning the kaleidoscope results in ever-changing and mesmerizing patterns for the onlookers to contemplate, each representing a different version of *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome.*

Keywords: cross-cultural comparison, The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome*, frame narrative, embedded stories, the story of the bath attendant/seneschal, methodology, hermeneutic metaphor, kaleidoscope*

---

* Correspondence details: Emilie Marlène van Opstall, senior lecturer in Classics at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, School of Humanities, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, Netherlands, e.m.van.opstall@vu.nl

eISSN-Nr. 2412-3196
DOI 10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026s4

Introduction

The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/*The Seven Sages of Rome* is set at a royal or imperial court in a far-away country and in a remote time. It centres upon a stepmother who falsely accuses her stepson of rape and is ultimately punished for her crime. The story, structured as a frame narrative with tightly related embedded stories, is designed to instruct and entertain. Rather than offering straightforward resolutions to political, social, or ethical dilemmas, its narrative form engages storytellers and audiences on multiple levels, both internal and external, to actively participate in the process of interpretation.

Whenever the story material was translated into a new language, it was adapted to a different cultural context: the setting of the frame narrative was reshaped, different themes were foregrounded, narrative outcomes were modified, some embedded stories were added, others were omitted. Over time, this process generated a vast and highly diverse corpus of versions. On the basis of shared narrative features, these versions have traditionally been divided into a so-called »Eastern« group, conventionally gathered under the title *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher*, and a »Western« group, known as *The Seven Sages of Rome*. These two groups have for a long time primarily been studied in isolation and within their respective linguistic traditions. A more recent trend favors a comparative approach involving both the »Eastern« group and the »Western« group.[1]

The fact that *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher*/*The Seven Sages of Rome* has a multifaceted nature and that it crossed many boundaries poses considerable methodological challenges, which it has in common with other medieval stories, such as *Kalīla wa-Dimna* and *Barlaam and Josaphat*.[2] These global textual traditions are notoriously difficult to grasp and have been characterized as »unruly«, »fluid«, »shifting« (e.g. Matthew Keegan)[3] and as »fuzzy sets« (Karla Mallette).[4]

What hermeneutical tools are available for this kind of complex research? Literary studies have developed a range of metaphors to visualize intertextual relations between texts and their reception by audiences. These draw on images of lines, water, layers, structures, communication, and movement. Literary tradition, for example, is often conceptualized as a »chain« extending from the past to the present, while intertextuality is famously represented by Julia Kristeva as operating along horizontal and vertical »axes«.[5] Images of flowing water inform terms such as »influence« (from the Latin *fluere*, »to flow«) and *Quellenforschung* (source reserach). The stratified nature of texts has been captured through the metaphor of the

1 There are various types of larger and smaller collaborations and projects, e.g. by Bettina Bildhauer (University of St. Andrews), Jutta Eming (Freie Universität Berlin), Ida Toth (University of Oxford), Emilie van Opstall (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam). The output is pluriform: a database (https://db.seven-sages-of-rome.org/Main_Page), new editions (Rita Schlusemann, *Seven Vroeden* and eadem, *Poncianus*), special issues and numerous articles (see bibliography).

2 See the *AnonymClassic* project (2018–2023) on *Kalīla wa-Dimna* by Beatrice Gruendler (Freie Universität Berlin) and *Retracing Connections on Byzantine Storyworlds in Greek, Arabic, Georgian and Old Slavonic (c. 950-c. 1100)* by Ingela Nilsson (Uppsala University).

3 Keegan, Elsewhere. See also Gruendler and Toral, *Unruly Classic*.

4 Mallette, Seven Sages, 18-22.

5 Kristeva, *Desire in Language*.

»palimpsest« (Gérard Genette),[6] whereas large-scale networks of textual relations are evoked through metaphors such as »weaving« (from Latin *texere*), »mosaic«, or »polyphony« (Mikhail Bakhtin; Kristeva).[7] The communicative dimension of literature has been theorized through concepts such as »dialogue« and »reader response« (Bakhtin; Wolfgang Iser),[8] while Paul Zumthor's notion of *mouvance* foregrounds textual mobility and ongoing processes of adaptation.[9] Karla Mallette adds game theory (a metaphor taken from economy) to »the toolkit of global narrative«, to move away from the traditional approach and become aware of different patterns in the history of narrative traditions: She imagines them as a »game« played by various actors (authors, translators, copyists) who strategically and unpredictably adapt their texts to their audiences (in the case of *Seven Sages of Rome*).[10] She also uses »**Raumschach**« (three-dimensional chess) as a metaphor for the way characters, translators, copyists, printers, illustrators and scholars move within the textual tradition (in the case of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*).[11]

Within the context of the emerging theories on global story matter, I would like to propose another metaphor to analyse the intricate variety of patterns that emerges for an audience when reading or hearing the different versions of *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome*. I think that the image of the kaleidoscope might serve as a productive hermeneutic tool to capture all variables in this particularly dynamic corpus. The following case study of the embedded tale of the bath attendant/seneschal in four early versions (Greek, Hebrew, Arabic and Latin), which is present in nearly all versions of the story matter, will demonstrate its potential use to address the complexity of this kind of story matter.

Four Early Versions

This section describes the cultural contexts in which the four early versions of the story matter were produced, encompassing the wider socio-historical and religious conditions of its making, the manuscript witnesses through which it has been preserved, the presence or absence of paratextual matter, and the agents involved in its transmission – authors, translators, adaptors, and patrons – as well as the audiences for whom it was intended. When the places of origin of the four versions are set side by side (see below), it becomes readily apparent that the customary opposition between the »Eastern« group and the »Western« group is misleading. Although the Greek version arose in what is conventionally termed the »East«, the Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin versions all took shape in regions commonly assigned to the »West«. The persistence of an East–West dichotomy thus obscures rather than clarifies the geographical realities of transmission. Drawing upon the material evidence of the manuscripts – their dates and places of production – and, where fortune allows, upon paratextual traces such as dedicatory statements or spiritual exegesis, it is possible to sketch, if only in broad outline,

6 Genette, *Palimpsestes*.

7 Bakhtin, Holquist and Emerson, *Dialogic Imagination*; Kristeva, *Desire in Language*.

8 Bakhtin, Holquist and Emerson, *Dialogic Imagination*; Iser, *Act of Reading*.

9 Zumthor, Intertextualité et mouvance.

10 Mallette, Seven Sages, 20-21. Instead of using concepts from economy, Beecroft, *Ecology* uses ecology as a metaphor to describe the transmission of world literature.

11 Mallette, Raumschach.

the distinct contexts in which these four versions were fashioned, and to consider how such circumstances bear upon their interpretation. Metaphorically speaking, the Greek, Hebrew, Arabic and Latin versions of this case study each represent a different position of the tube of the kaleidoscope, which determines the position of the mirrors (frame story) and the coloured pieces (embedded stories), thereby creating a specific pattern for the viewer.

Greek

The Greek *Book of Syntipas the Philosopher* is the oldest complete version we possess of the story.[12] It contains valuable paratextual material: a dedicatory poem and a prose introduction state that it was written down by the secretary (γραμματικός) Michael Andreopoulos (11th century). He presents himself as the first Greek translator of a Syriac story with Persian origins (both now lost),[13] and tells us that his work has been commissioned by Gabriel, governor of »the city named after honey« – probably Melitene (present-day Malatya in Eastern Anatolia). Both Michael and Gabriel were Christians. Most likely meant as didactic literature for the 11th-century Byzantine court,[14] the story »especially criticizes evildoers and praises good deeds« (§1: τοὺς κακεργάτας διασύρει μάλιστα … πράξεις ἐπαινεῖ τὰς καλῶς εἰργασμένας). Michael added the prologue of the Syriac original, which describes it as »a story full of wisdom to the benefit of its readers« (§2: διήγησις ἐμφιλόσοφος … πρὸς τὴν τῶν ἐντυγχανόντων ὠφέλειαν).[15]

Michael's patron was probably Khoril of Melitene (1055-1103), a wealthy dux (amir or military commander) of Armenian descent who adhered to Byzantine orthodoxy.[16] During his governance, Melitene was a large semi-independent cultural centre with a multicultural history at the border of the Byzantine empire and at the intersection of the Euphrates and the ancient Persian Royal Road. The town was mainly Syrian Orthodox, but in it lived also Melkites and Armenian Christians. In the Battle of Melitene in 1100, Khoril enlisted the help of Bohemond of Antioch (ca. 1054-1111) against the Dānishmend Turks, to whom he eventually lost the town. He married off his daughter Morphia with a considerable dowry to Baldwin of Bourcq (count of Edessa, 1100-1118, and king of Jerusalem, 1118-1131).

The geographical and social hub in which Gabriel operated, the position of the town he presided over, as well as his international networks are suggestive of the potential readership

12 For the Greek, I consulted the original language. I used the edition of Jernstedt and Nikitin (1912) and the English translation (sometimes adapted) of Beneker and Gibson (2021). The paragraph numbers in the Greek quotations refer to the latter. Jernstedt and Nikitin based their edition on 6 MSS (14th-17th centuries). There are several other manuscripts with slightly different versions which hitherto have not been studied seriously. A current research project under the supervision of Ida Toth at Oxford University aims to fill this gap.

13 For the origins of the Greek version, see Redondo, Faithful Dog, Krönung, Fighting with tales 1, Toth, Fighting with tales 2, Messis and Papaioannou, Translations, 206-208, Minets, *Language of Speaking*, Shukurov, *Byzantine Ideas*, 163-164.

14 See Toth, *Motif of Wisdom*.

15 In the last paragraph of the *Book of Syntipas the Philosopher* a similar statement is repeated by the primary narrator regarding the prince's »responses to his father that are useful for life« (Michaelis Andreopuli, *Liber Syntipae*, ed. Jernstedt and Nikitin, §154/129.14ss.: ταῖς βιωφελέσι πρὸς τὸν πατέρα ἑαυτοῦ ἀποκρίσεσιν).

16 See Jeffreys *et al.*, *Prosopography* s.v. Gabriel, http://pbw2016.kdl.kcl.ac.uk/person/Gabriel/4001/ and Kiratz, *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary* s.v. Melitene, https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/entry/Melitene.

of *The Book of Syntipas the Philosopher* and how it might have travelled, although we do not have any proof. It could even have been taken further towards the West by merchants or by his daughter and son-in-law. It should also be noted that there is an important time gap: while the oldest complete version dates from the 11th century, the oldest manuscript in which it has been transmitted dates from the 14th century.

Hebrew

In contrast to the Greek *Book of Syntipas the Philosopher*, the Hebrew *Mishle Sendebar* is not preceded by any dedicatory poem or prologue. Therefore, it is much more difficult to make suppositions about the cultural context in which this version of the story originated and about the purpose for which it was written down. On the basis of the content, the book is part of the so-called »Eastern« group, although the two oldest manuscripts from the Oxford Bodleian Library, used by Morris Epstein for his 1967 edition (group B), were produced in Western Europe.[17] The first manuscript, MS Bodley Or. 135 (ff. 292r-300r, below: Ox. I), is a miscellaneous collection of Hebrew texts from the mid-13th century (after 1215), written in an Ashkenazi semi-cursive script and produced in North Champagne (France).[18] However, the manuscript did not always circulate within Jewish communities, since at some point it was owned by John Grandison, Bishop of Exeter (1328-1369). The second manuscript, MS Bodley Heb. d.11, was compiled by the German Eleazar ben Asher ha-Levi in the mid-14th century, and contains religious, medical and astrological texts, partly from Germany (14th century) and partly from Italy (12th century) (ff. 289r-294v, below: Ox. II). It is especially known for »The Book of Memory« (*Sefer ha-Zikhronot*), a German anthology meant as a universal history of the world and the Jewish people.[19] According to Epstein, both manuscripts derive from an earlier version, thought to date from around 1150.

Epstein places the Hebrew version even before the Greek version on stylistic grounds: [the Greek *Syntipas*] »seems not to be a literal translation of an earlier version. The stories are inflated, the rhetoric is flowing, and there are many embellishments. This version very likely does not represent the oldest type and may well be a development of the [*Mishle Sendebar*] cycle, tracing its way back through the Syriac to a lost Hebrew version«. He further suggests that »the simplicity and appropriateness of detail in [*Mishle Sendebar*] are hallmarks of an early stage of development«.[20] However, simplicity or complexity of style are not necessarily linked to consecutive developmental stages and could very well depend on other factors, such

17 I use the edition and English translation by Morris Epstein (1967: 212-217, 11.730-70), based on two MSS (Group B, MS Bodl. Or. 135 and MS Heb. d. 11), i.e. the earliest MSS, from the 12th/13th cent. and 1325 respectively. In his notes, Epstein also refers to variants in other MSS, such as MS Vat. 100.3 from Group A. I thank Peter Broers and Pierluigi Lanfranchi for their help with the Hebrew original.

18 The catalogue of the Bodleian Library says North Campagne instead of North Champagne, but this must be a mistake (see https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/search/?q=mishle+sendebar, accessed on 7 June 2025). During the 11th century, the region of Champagne (especially Troyes) had been noted for the presence of its Jewish community, in which especially the scholar Rashid had played an important role.

19 See Dunphy, *Encyclopedia*, lemma »Eleazar ben ha-Asher«, Yassif, *Book of Memory* and Boyarin, They shall serve.

20 *Tales of Sendebar*, ed. Epstein, 19 and 21.

as the social position of the person who translated, adapted and wrote down the text,[21] as well as the different uses and audiences of a particular version. The bimodal nature of the story, i.e. its transmission in oral and written form, should not be neglected either where brevity is concerned. As Omar El Akkad explains in his introduction to the annotated *Arabian Nights*: »Every story is simply bone. The marrow, the life-full thing, is the telling«.[22] A written text can represent different stages, from a blueprint for oral retelling to a full-blown literary text with citations of classical literature.[23]

Arabic

The Arabic version of the *Seven Viziers* that this paper discusses is part of the *101 Nights*, the lesser-known cognate of *1001 Nights*, that circulated in Western Europe through Muslim Spain and the western regions of North Africa. The manuscript was a spectacular discovery by Claudia Ott, who noticed it in a showcase during the Berlin exhibition »Treasures of the Agha Khan Museum: Masterpieces of Islamic Art« in Berlin (2010) and realized it could be of interest. It turned out to be the oldest known representative of the story, written in Granada by a Maghrebi hand. The manuscript does not contain any embellishments, except for certain elements in red ink. Its language is literary, but easy to understand, suspenseful and pleasurable. It contains some traces of orality.[24] Unfortunately, the last part of the story (from night 85 to the end) and the colophon are missing. Ott dates the copy to 1234, based on the date accompanying the geographical treatise bound in the same volume. Ulrich Marzolph and Aboubakr Chraïbi[25] are more cautious as to the dating, but they also assume an early date of production. Prior to Ott's discovery, the oldest known manuscript of *101 Nights* dated to 1776.

As we will see below (section *The Double Embedding of the Seven Viziers*), the narrative situation of the story of the bath attendant is complicated by the fact that it is embedded in the frame narrative of the *Seven Viziers,* which in its turn is embedded in the frame narrative of *101 Nights*, in which Shahrazad tells stories to an Indian king.

Latin

The Latin version, the *Historia Septem Sapientum*, is part of the so-called »Western« group. It can be linked to an earlier French prose text from Alsace dating to the 13th century, which circulated in Northeastern France (Alsace-Lorraine), South Germany and Austria, often together with the *Gesta Romanorum*, a popular collection of anecdotes and tales. The oldest transmitted Latin version of the *Historia Septem Sapientum* can be found in the Innsbruck Codex 310, dating from the year 1342. Detlef Roth divided the manuscripts into four groups,

21 In some cases, the paratextual material contains information about the author/translator/adapter, for example the grammarian Michael Andreopoulos in the Greek *Syntipas* (see above) and the monk John of Alta Silva (i.e. the monastery of Haute Seille in France) in the Latin *Dolopathos*.

22 El Akkad, in *Arabian Nights*, ed. Lemos Horta and trans. Seale, xiv.

23 I do agree with Epstein that *Mishle Sendebar* is clearly adapted to a Jewish audience. In spite of the exotic setting of the frame story in India, it abounds in biblical language and references and includes two unique embedded stories on Absalom. Its style is distinctively humorous, as it uses biblical texts in an ironical way, as we will see below.

24 See *101 Nacht,* trans. Ott.

25 Marzolph and Chraïbi, Hundred and One Nights.

three of which contain allegorical exegeses (Groups I, II and III).[26] The addition of spiritual exegeses throughout the Latin text gives us important insight into the various uses of the Latin version of the story.[27]

For the purpose of my comparison, I use his edition of the two earliest groups of manuscripts, Groups I and II, since the manuscripts from these groups contain the most elaborated exegeses.[28] As paratexts these are of special interest for us here: they reveal how the external translator/adapter wanted his contemporary audience to interpret the frame story and the embedded stories (called *narraciones* by the narrator and *exempla* by the characters) by offering spiritual allegories of persons, objects and actions. The exegeses interrupt the frame narrative, with »etc.« (*et cetera*), a title (*Reductio*) and a direct address to the external audience (»*Karissimi*!«, »Dearest people!«), followed by a Christian interpretation. They are presented as entities separate from the frame story and are written as – sometimes quite far-fetched – explanations for a contemporary Christian audience of all sorts (religious and worldly). In certain cases, the commentator even adapted the content of the *Historia Septem Sapientum* to create a conceptual unity directed at the downfall and redemption of the soul. In contrast to biblical texts, contemporary fiction lacked spiritual authority and could be freely adapted. Since some manuscripts note that the author of the spiritual commentaries is a Franciscan monk,[29] Detlef Roth theorizes that they could have been written for preachers to be used as independent *exempla* of edifying literature in their sermons, addressing virtue and sin for the moral education and salvation of their audience.[30] In fact, it was common practice for Friars Minor to include various popular stories as *exempla* in their sermons to connect better with their congregation.[31]

---

26 For this section, see Roth, *Historia*, vol. I, especially 7-14, 177-180, 192-199, Steinmetz, *Exempel und Auslegung,* 48-56 and Gábor, Seven Sages.

27 Csilla Gábor, Seven Sages, 25, argues that the exegeses in Groups I and II, with their somewhat detached and simple tone, are suitable for sermons, whilst those in Group III are more personal and spiritual and seem to convey a message that lends itself to devotion and meditation.

28 Groups I and II (14th cent.) belong to the H tradition (which is inspired by the French A tradition from the 13th cent.). For the Latin text of *Senescalcus*, see Roth, *Historia*, 365-366, no. 10.17-19; 368-371, no. 11.1-10; 373-374, follow-up no. 11.17; 377, exegesis). The translations from Latin into English are mine.

29 *Historia*, ed. Roth, 198.

30 *Historia*, ed. Roth, 178-179; 198 n.73 and also 27, 29, 41, 66 for the author of the commentaries (a monk of an order of the Friars Minor) and their use for sermons (to teach moral lessons) in the case of both the *Gesta Romanorum* and the *Historia septem sapientum* (often transmitted together). See, for example, the remarks in MS F Fiecht, Library of the Abbey St. Georgenberg-Fiecht, MS 15 (olim Cod. 129) f. 100v: *expliciunt Gesta imperatorum moralizata a quodam frate de ordine minorum,* and MS W1 Würzburg, Franciscan Abbey MS 115, f. 166r: *Incipit Moralitas Cuiuslibet hystorie in Speciali et sunt Omnes predicabiles et proprijssime ad mores hominum trahende*.

31 See Delcorno, *Exemplum*. I thank Eleonora Lombardo for this reference. In contrast to the Friars Minor, the learned Dominican clergy tended to emphasize teaching and defending doctrine. They seem to have preferred the use of more overtly Christian stories for their sermons, such as *Barlaam and Josaphat.* See Smirnova, De l'histoire à la rhétorique.

Frame Narrative

This section offers a brief outline of the frame narrative as it can be found in most versions. Its principal features will be presented and some general characteristics of the four versions will be discussed. Metaphorically seen, the frame narrative represents the mirrors within the tube of the kaleidoscope. When one turns the tube, for example, when one passes from Greek to Hebrew, the angle of the mirrors changes too, i.e. the frame story is adapted.

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there was a ruler who had only one son. He sent him away to be educated, but when he returned, he no longer spoke. The ruler was very upset, because he did not know that the stars had warned his son to remain silent for seven days, otherwise he would die. Then the prince's stepmother offered to take him to her room and make him talk. She made all sorts of proposals, ranging from making love to overthrowing the king and marrying her. But the boy resisted and, worse still, threatened to expose her.

The stepmother tried to save herself by tearing her clothes and scratching her face open, accusing the prince of attempted rape. The king, furious, immediately ordered his son's execution. For seven days, seven wise men of the court told him stories, urging him to discover the truth and not to trust any woman, whilst the stepmother, with a strong appeal to her husband's emotions, told him stories to convince him not to trust the wise men.[32] These are stories populated with people of all social classes, animals, or fairytale beings. The king immediately changes his judgement after each speaker: now absolving his son, then condemning him again. On the eighth day, the prince finally speaks and the final verdict is delivered. In some versions the stepmother is acquitted, but in most versions, she is condemned.[33] Justice is restored and the prince's succession secured. Sometimes this is followed by the conversion of the prince and chapters on wisdom.

The frame story is always set in a (pseudo-)historical time and a remote place, creating a certain exotic distance between the protagonists and the medieval audience. The Greek *Book of Syntipas the Philosopher* is set at the Persian court of King Cyrus. The stepmother is one of Cyrus's seven concubines. In the Hebrew *Mishle Sendebar*, we find ourselves in India. The ruler is King Bibar, husband of eighty wives. The stepmother is Bibar's favourite wife. The frame story of the *Seven Viziers* is set at the oriental court of sheikh Sayf al-Alam, the stepmother being one of his wives. The Latin *Historia Septem Sapientum* is set in Rome during the reign of the (fictitious) emperor Pontianus, whose son is called Diocletian. The stepmother is his second wife, the empress.

There are, however, some major differences. Although in all versions the stepmother is presented as wicked by the external narrator, in the »Western« group, she is depicted as much more depraved and punished much more severely: from the outset, she desires the downfall of the prince and when she is found out (now with additional proof of adultery), she is killed

32 Generally speaking, the wise men tell two stories per day in the »Eastern« group and one story per day in the »Western« group.

33 Although the female protagonist of the frame story has a negative role, not all female characters in the frame story and the embedded stories are depicted as monolithically depraved. On this topic, see, for example; Eming, Flynn, and Murath, Female Voices; Foehr-Janssens, Misogyny; Lundt, *Weiser und Weib*; van Opstall, Wicked Stepmother; and Critten, Hating women.

instantly. Furthermore, in the »Eastern« group, the prince is educated by one philosopher (Greek: Syntipas, Hebrew: Sendebar, Arabic: Sindbad) who does not belong to the group of seven philosophers telling their stories at the court. In the »Western« group, the boy is both educated and defended by the Seven Sages.

The frame narratives discussed in this article are the product of four different communities with strong patriarchal structures. The shape of the frame narrative (the mirrors of the kaleidoscope) – its setting, characters, and plot, as well as the gender stereotypes built into it – has a direct effect upon the interpretation of the embedded stories (the coloured pieces of the kaleidoscope) by the internal and the external audiences. This will be demonstrated in the next section with the story of the bath attendant/seneschal. This embedded story is about a corpulent ruler (prince/king), who asks his servant (the bath attendant/seneschal) to arrange a woman in exchange for money. The greedy servant wants to keep the money for himself and secretly brings his own wife. When it turns out that the prince/king very much enjoys having sex with the servant's wife, the latter deeply regrets his deed. This is one of the few embedded stories present in nearly all the versions of *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/ The Seven Sages of Rome*.[34]

The story is either set in a bathhouse, with a bath attendant and a prince (Greek, Hebrew, Arabic), or in a bedroom, with a seneschal and a king (Latin). The change of setting from bathhouse to bedroom (which can already be found in the French example on which the Latin version is based) can perhaps be explained by the degree of popularity of bathhouses in certain cultural contexts. Public bath houses and private baths were widespread phenomena in the Byzantine Empire, in medieval Jewish communities in the East and West (public baths, ritual mikveh), and throughout the Islamic world (hammams, ritual ghusl), from the Middle East to Al-Andalus. They were not only places for physical and spiritual cleansing, but also for socialization.[35] Although bath houses were not an unknown phenomenon in Christian communities in Western Europe, they were a less prominent feature of daily life.[36]

34 In many publications, these stories carry the Latin titles (introduced by Karl Goedeke in the 19th century) *balneator* and *senescalcus* respectively; other stories shared by versions throughout both the »Eastern« group and the »Western« group are dog (*canis*), boar (*aper*), and bird (*avis*). There is no clear connection to oral folk tales for this particular tale, so it is impossible to search its wider international tradition as a tale type by linking the story to ATU numbers.

35 In *Das Bad*, 114-115, Albrecht Berger describes what bathing was like for a Byzantine audience: the members of the Byzantine elite were usually accompanied by an entourage. People bathed naked or clad in a loincloth. After bathing, one could eat, drink and take a nap on a couch. Prices were low and the bath attendants did not earn much. Compared to the large-scale Roman thermae, Byzantine baths were smaller but still numerous, see Marano, *Baths and Bathing*. For bathing in Byzantine literature, see Agapitos, *Grauen und Wonne* and *Erotic Bath*. For Jewish baths and mikveh in the Middle Ages, see Abrahams, *Jewish Life*, 89 and Bodner, *Jewish Ritual Baths*. For a 10th-11th century-witness of hammams in Bagdad, see Hilal al-Sabi' (who calculates 60,000 public baths) in Fairchild Ruggles, *Islamic Art*, 91-92.

36 Speer, Sodomite King, 196 explains the change of setting in the earliest French verse adaptation K (after which the Latin version is ultimately modeled, see above) by the fact that the public bathhouse, the casual nudity in an all-male setting, and obesity were not suitable for Northern European courtly audiences. I would like to nuance this explanation. As far as I can conclude from secondary literature, bathing seems to have not been uncommon in medieval Europe until the 16th century; see, for example, Smith, *Clean*. Regardless of the degree popularity of public baths in medieval Europe, the setting of the bathhouses would have aligned

The Embedded Story of the Bath Attendant/Seneschal

Metaphorically seen, the embedded stories represent the disc with coloured pieces of the kaleidoscope. In the following, the specific characteristics of the embedded story of the bath attendant/seneschal will be analysed, such as its characters, themes and narrative style. It seems that in the process of transmission and adaptation to a new audience, some stock elements were more malleable than others to create a coherent story and align it with the frame narrative. I will examine in more detail how each of the four versions maintains some elements while adapting others. In the Greek, Hebrew and Arabic versions, both the error of judgement on the prince's »manliness« as well as greed for money lead to the downfall of the bath attendant. In the Latin version, greed alone leads to the seneschal's exile. As we will see, the identity and gender of the narrator are of importance for the interpretation of the story. The link between the embedded story and the frame narrative will be discussed in the section *The Link between Frame Narrative and Embedded Tale*.

Corpulency and Sex Trafficking

In the Greek version, the fourth philosopher arrives on the fourth day, advising King Cyrus to carefully examine the case and find out the truth before passing judgement, lest he ends up »like a certain bath attendant«. While telling his story (§§47-48), he elaborates most vividly upon emotions, tying in with the emotional reaction he expects from the king (both are, or risk to be, »struck by regret« (§48: πικρᾷ τῇ μεταμελείᾳ πληγείς and §49: πικρότατα μεταμεληθείς). He tells King Cyrus that a prince went to a bath house to wash and anoint himself. His genitals (§47 τὰ τοῦ νέου αἰδοῖα, cf. below τὰ ἀνδρῶν) were invisible because the prince's body was »quite big and very fleshy« (§47: εὐμεγέθης καὶ πολύσαρκος). As soon as the bath attendant saw him, he was »deeply upset« (§47: περιπαθῶς ἀπωδύρετο), since he assumed that without male genitals the prince could not have sex with a woman and therefore could not have children, voicing his concern about the succession. The young prince gladly accepted the bath attendant's empathic bitter tears, telling him he himself was also at a complete loss about how to have sex with a woman »the way men do« (§47: κατὰ τοὺς ἄνδρας). So, he offered the bath attendant a gold piece for finding him a woman to test his abilities. Could the prince only have pretended not to know whether he was capable of having sex? In the Arabic version, he genuinely despairs, while the Hebrew version suggests that he knew all along (see below).

Many embedded stories in the Hebrew version are relatively succinct, but not this one. On the fifth day, the fifth counsellor tells his story, warning King Bibar not to kill his son, since he will »rue it« (p. 208: ותתנחם), as did the bath attendant. The counsellor elaborates on the fact that the prince was »exceptionally fat« (p. 208: ביותר שמן), adding that »his stomach lapped over his knees and covered his genitals« (p. 208: רוב ארכבותיו וכסה את ערותו). The bath attendant concludes that the prince was unable to »climb on top of a woman as is the custom«

with the (pseudo-)historical setting of the Roman empire frame story. Moreover, there are only two males involved in the story of the bath attendant, i.e. the bath attendant and the prince. Maybe the change of setting is prompted chiefly by the change in the plot to suit the needs of the empress in the frame story or by the Christian use of the embedded story as shown in the exegesis (see below).

(p. 210: לבא על האשה כדרך כל הארץ, cf. also p. 214).[37] He weeps , expressing his worries that his just and beloved king and his offspring were at risk. But the prince himself does not seem particularly worried. He simply offers one hundred gold pieces to find him a woman, a much larger sum than the gold coin in the Greek version, in order to test himself. »Do yourself a good turn« (p. 212: עשה טובתך), the prince adds in manuscript Ox. I, apparently allowing the bath attendant to keep some of the money for himself for his role as matchmaker.

The Arabic version is close to the Greek version, but much shorter. The story of the bath attendant is told to sheikh Sayf al-Alam by his fourth vizier, who warns him against taking a rash decision. Otherwise, he will regret his actions, just as the owner of the hammam did.[38] He points out that the prince was so big that his penis was »barely visible«[39] and that the bath attendant could not »tell if he was a man«.[40] At this point, the Arabic text does not quote the prince's words, but expresses his inner thoughts, including his worries that his father wanted him to marry and his doubts about his capability to get a wife. If in the Greek and Hebrew versions the direct speech offers room to doubt the prince's sincerity, the inner thoughts of the Arabic version convince the audience that his proposal is genuine. Again, the prince offered a high price, a dinar, although the text does not say if it was made of silver or gold.

In the Latin version of the embedded story of the seneschal, the setting shifts from bathhouse to bedroom. Corpulency and sex trafficking remain central to the plot, but the gender of the narrators is inversed. The story is no longer told by one of the sages, but by the empress. Instead of serving as an example in the argumentation of one of the sages, it is adapted to the argumentation of the empress. The consequences of this gender inversion will be elaborated upon below.[41] In the Latin frame story, the empress reproaches her husband for not believing her: otherwise, the same thing will happen to him that happened to a certain king and his seneschal. And she tells him about a king who was »strangely bloated« (11.1: *miro modo inflatus*), to such an extent that women shrank from approaching him (11.1: *mulieres eum appropinquare abhorrebant*). While on his way to Rome to steal the bodies of Saint Peter and Saint Paul,[42] he fancied a woman for the night. But his trusted seneschal told him no woman

37 »Climb on top of a woman« is a literal translation, where Epstein translates »have union with a woman«. The prince is too corpulent to take the missionary position, which was the preferred position of rabbis, see Bickart, Overturning the »Table«. Other positions are not taken into consideration, unless the expression means in a general sense »to have sexual intercourse with a woman«.

38 For this article, I used the German translation of the Aga Kahn manuscript 00513 (1234/5?) by Claudia Ott (101 Nacht, 161-162). Since I did not have access to a digitized version of the Aga Kahn manuscript, I added Arabic quotations in the notes from the edition of *Miʾat laylah*, ed. Šuraybit, 286-287, based on a more recent manuscript (dated 1257 AH / 1841 CE). I thank Rima Redwan for transcribing and translating them for me.

39 See n. 31, compare *Miʾat laylah*, ed. Šuraybi وكان سمينا لا يكاد يظهر ذكره منn »He was so fat that his penis could hardly be seen due to obesity«.

40 *101 Nacht*, trans. Ott, 161.

41 The French model of the Latin version already attributes the story of the *balneator/senescalcus* to the empress. See the insightful article by Speer, Sodomite King, on the transgendering operation in the earliest French verse adaptation K (see also n. 37). For a detailed comparative analysis of the story of the *senescalcus/Roma* in the French A prose version, the Latin H version and the *Scala Celi*, see Steinmetz, *Exempel und Auslegung*, 107-112.

42 In the *Historia Septem Sapientum,* the story of the bath attendant (*seneschal*) is conflated with the story of the king going to Rome to steal the bodies Saint Peter and Saint Paul (*Roma*).

wanted to get close to him without a reward. Because of his obesity the king needed to buy himself a wife. So the king offered no less than 1,000 florins to the woman who agreed to sleep with him.[43]

Error of Judgement and the Vice of Greed

In the Greek, Hebrew and Arabic versions, the bath attendant concludes that the prince did not have male genitals and that it was safe to bring him his own wife. Therefore, he keeps the money and takes her to the bathhouse. In the Latin version, where the king's obesity plays a different role, the seneschal does not make a wrong judgement about the king's sexual capacities and his capability to produce an heir. However, like the bath attendant, the seneschal is overcome by greed (11.3: *ductus cupiditate*). He tries to convince his own wife to have intercourse with the king. Since the empress is the narrator of this embedded story, it does not come as a surprise that the wife's role in the narrative is more elaborated. She is not only described as beautiful but also as chaste, and – in contrast to the other versions – she has some agency when asked to sleep with the king. Her words are reported in direct speech: she was not interested in the king's physical condition, but refused to commit »such a sin against God for some temporary goods« (11.5: *propter bona aliqua temporalia tale peccatum contra Deum*). This motivation could be an addition by the Christian commentator to enhance the link with their allegorical interpretation (see below). However, after being threatened by her husband, she gives in. The seneschal delivers her to the king during the night on the condition that she would not be seen by anyone. Although he pretends that it was *she* who did not want to be seen by the outside world, it is in fact *he* who needs to hide the identity of his own wife from the king.

An Unexpected Outcome

In the Greek version, the prince takes the woman to a place in the bathhouse where a bed is made. They stay there all night and he has sex with her »as men usually do« (p. 37/§48: ὡς ἀνδράσι εἴθισται) until the bath attendant peeks in and sees with his own eyes that the prince is able to have sex »the way men do« (p. 37/§48 κατὰ τοὺς ἄνδρας πράττοντα). »Struck by bitter regret« and »wounded by despair« (p. 37/§48: πικρᾷ τῇ μεταμελείᾳ πληγείς … τοῦ ἀνδρὸς τῇ ἀθυμίᾳ τιτρωσκομένου), he sends his wife home. But she refuses to obey her husband and tells him that he should be ashamed of himself for handing her over to the prince to be violated all night long. Consumed with grief, he takes his own life.

In the Hebrew version, the tone of the story is humorous. When the bath attendant looks through the window and sees the prince making love to his wife no less than four times (a specification added in Ox. I), he rudely summons her to leave: »Haven't you had enough, whore? Cease your fornication« (p. 214 n. 3: צאי מתזנותיך זונה, לא די לך עדין, thus Ox. I, whereas

43 Speer, Sodomite King, describes how the French K version reworked the theme of obesity and sexuality from the »oriental tradition« (using Hebrew and Spanish for comparison). In the French K version, the (Egyptian) king is extensively described as homosexual and suffering from an illness, which the seneschal tries to cure. As we have seen, these elements are absent in the Latin version, where the king's obesity is reduced to a matter of unattractiveness. It is difficult to say whether the depiction of obesity in this story reflects ideas of contemporary audiences or is a matter of adapting the story to the plot (see n. 36).

Ox. II has: »It's time to come out, my mate!« p. 214: צאי כבר זוגתי,). However, she refuses to obey. The fifth counsellor reports her words in direct speech: »What are you complaining about? Did you not hire me out to the prince and take a hundred gold pieces for it? He won't release me until nightfall« (p. 216: המלך וקבלת ממנו מאה זהובים. והוא לא יניחני עד הערב). Instead of being indignant, she apparently enjoys being with the prince as much as he enjoys being with her. As Epstein[44] notices, this is one of the many instances in *Mishle Sendebar* of biblical language employed to a very worldly situation, the wife using God's words to Moses from Exodus, 14:15 to address her husband: »and the Lord said unto Moses: ›Wherefore criest thou unto me?‹« For those familiar with the Hebrew Bible, the contrast between the language and the content is quite provocative. The story ends with the death of the bath attendant: he hangs himself out of regret.[45] So in this version, the wife is no longer a pawn in the game of the bath attendant as in the Greek *Syntipas*. The humorous touch is even more visible in a later Latin adaptation of *Mishle Sendebar* from Northern Italy in the 14th century (edited by Hilka in 1912), where lively dialogues emphasize the pleasure of the prince and the wife even more.[46]

The Arabic version does not give any details about the wife, she has no visible agency through speech, thoughts, actions or emotions. The fourth vizier reports that the bath attendant looked through the peep hole and saw how the prince »laid her on her back and slept with her«.[47] Upon discovering the truth, he ran home and hung himself. There is no interaction between him and his wife.

In the Latin version, the bath attendant comes to the king's bedroom at the first cockcrow to fetch his wife. But the king, pleased with the arrangement, keeps her with him. The seneschal returns a second and a third time, but each time is turned away by the king. Finally, he reveals his secret in order to get her back. The shutters are opened and daylight streams in through the window, confirming the bath attendant's words. The king flies into a rage, exiles the seneschal and keeps his wife to live with her »in honour and joy« (*in honore et gaudio*). He then continues his journey to Rome – where he will be defeated.

The (mis)interpretation of visual evidence (seeing no genitals, watching the privacy of the bathhouse through the peephole) is absent in this version. Instead, the opposition between darkness and light is emphasized (the night in the bedroom behind closed doors, the daylight streaming through the window, uncovering the truth).

---

44 *Tales of Sendebar*, ed. Epstein, 217, n. 2.

45 I translate ויתנחם with »to regret«, not »to be consoled« (*Tales of Sendebar*, ed. Epstein, 217), cf. Num 23:19, where God is said not to have regrets like human beings do. Epstein adds some interesting variants from manuscript Vat. 100.3, e.g. mentioning that the prince's obesity is caused by overeating.

46 *Historia Septem Sapientum I and II*, ed. Hilka.

47 See note 31. Compare *Mi'at laylah*, ed. Šuraybit, صاحب الحمّام ينظر من كوة, فأبصر ما صنع الملك بامرأته وواقعها ثلاث مرات وأقبل –»And the owner of the bath came and looked through a small window, and he saw what the king did with his wife and that he slept with her three times.«

The Link between Frame Narrative and Embedded Tale

This section explores the relationship between embedded tale and its frame narrative in the case study of the bath attendant/seneschal. Using the metaphor of the kaleidoscope, the mirrors and the coloured pieces together form intricate patterns for the onlookers, which change every time the position of the tube is turned.

Generally speaking, in *The Book of Sindbad the philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome*, the interpretation of the moral of the embedded stories depends on how it is linked to the frame narrative: who is the narrator, who is supposed to identify with whom, and how do the themes addressed in the embedded story resonate with the frame story? The link between the frame narrative and the embedded stories is always tight, but seldom straightforward.[48] Although they share characters (ruler, wife, prince, servant) and themes (rash decisions, concern for succession, sexual intercourse without consent), they do not always have a one-to-one relationship. However, every time a character has finished their story, the king immediately changes his opinion regarding his verdict, either condemning his son to death or acquitting him. There is no mention of his inner thoughts and reasonings. As a result, the external audience is invited to actively think about the moral behind each story.

Find Out the Truth!

In the Greek, Hebrew and Arabic frame narratives, the advisors warn Cyrus, Bibar and Sayf al-Alâm respectively not to kill their son too hastily, but to investigate whether the stepmother/concubine tells the truth, before it is too late and they regret their decision. After all, the life of an only son and heir is at stake. They couch their warning in the form of an example and explicitly ask the ruler to identify with the bath attendant. The use of a parable allows the storytellers not only to activate their audience's participation, but also to take some liberties of speech. In the Greek version, for example, the fourth philosopher describes the bath attendant as »foolish« (§48: μάταιος, ματαιόφρων) – an expression he could never have used in a direct warning to King Cyrus (»You are a fool if …«).[49]

The fact that the bath attendant is worried about the prince's succession (albeit very briefly) encourages the ruler (whose emotions and decisions change rapidly throughout the frame narrative) to reflect upon his own legacy: if he kills his only son, he puts his succession at risk. Simultaneously, the question of succession might also remind the external audience of the stepmother/concubine, who, at the beginning of the story tries to make the prince speak in

48 On the difference between loose and tight relationships between frame and embedded stories, see Irwin, Frame. Marzolph, Phenomenology, discusses the nature and potentials of Middle Eastern frame tales, arguing that more attention is needed to the relationship between embedded tales and frame tales in a comprehensive comparative perspective.

49 Interestingly, in many versions (such as the Greek, Hebrew and Arabic versions discussed in this article), the king actually does not pay heed to the philosopher's advice: evidence plays no role in the outcome of the trial of the frame narrative, while the prince's word and the queen's confession do. However, in other versions (like the Latin version discussed in this article), proof of the empress's wickedness is added by the public exposure of a disguised man among her female entourage, with whom she had committed adultery over a long time.

the intimacy of her own quarters. After some sweet talk she proposes that the prince kill his father and marry her in order to become king himself.[50]

However, the fact that the bath attendant uses his own wife for sex traffic does not exactly mirror the situation in the frame story. In the frame narrative, the concubine falsely accuses the prince of rape before the king and is negatively portrayed as a liar and bad woman,[51] but the wife of the bath attendant in the embedded version is portrayed quite differently. In the Greek version, she is characterized as a beautiful, blameless victim with a strong sense of honour; in the Arabic version she remains a flat character without direct speech. In the Hebrew version, the most risqué of the three versions discussed in this article, she is her husband's antagonist and seems to turn her distressful situation to her advantage, getting even with her husband (and one would say rightly so). So, her portrayal is either in line with patriarchal expectations of a good wife or makes fun of these expectations.

The Double Embedding of the Seven Viziers

The way the Arabic version is embedded into a double frame story with multiple layers of narrators, both male and female, merits some attention here. Metaphorically speaking, we are dealing with a kaleidoscope within a kaleidoscope. The story on the bath attendant by the fourth vizier is embedded in the frame narrative of the *Seven Viziers*. In its turn, the *Seven Viziers* is embedded in the larger frame narrative of *101 Nights*, as one of the stories Shahrazad tells an Indian king. Night after night, sitting in her sealed room and spurred on by her sister Danishad, Shahrazad tries to save her own life by telling tales, often interrupting them halfway. As long as the king wants to listen to her, she is safe.

One would expect that this narrative situation might have resulted in a gendered perspective on the tale of the bath attendant, told on one level by the fourth vizier and on another level by Shahrazad. To mitigate the king's rage for being betrayed by his wife, she could have cast the female characters in a more favourable light. However, in the story of the bath attendant, the character of the wife remains sketchy.[52] This could be explained by the fact that there is yet another narrative level, since the totality of *101 Nights* is told by an external primary narrator. This narrator transmits the story in written form and is responsible for the frame story as a whole, including all the embedded stories. During the first nights, he or she is anonymous, but from the second to the fourteenth night he is presented as Sheikh Faharayis (»Sword of the Noblemen«), the philosopher who tells the story of *101 Nights* to a king. His presence is also visible in the text, since he articulates the overall structure with

50 In the Greek version (§9) it is not clear whether this was a provocation to make him speak or a proposal to take seriously (see van Opstall, Wicked Stepmother). The Hebrew (*Tales of Sendebar*, ed. Epstein, 82-85) and Arabic (Ott, *101 Nacht*, 146) versions are less ambiguous on this point.

51 In the Greek version, the wife's words »after being violated« (ὑβρισθεῖσα in §48) reminds the reader of the concubine's words »tried to violate me« ὕβριν πειρᾶσθαι ἐπενεγκεῖν (in §45 and elsewhere in the frame narrative).

52 The positive ending of the frame story of the *Seven Viziers*, where the concubine is absolved by the king, is not a consequence of the female perspective, since other versions, such as the Hebrew version, end likewise. In the Greek version, the stepmother is condemned to a shame parade through town with a shaven head on a donkey, while in the Latin version she (and her female attendants) are condemned to death.

the so-called »night formula's« (»The first night. It is told …«). To this external narrator, one could of course add the final narrative level of the storytellers of flesh and blood who actually told *101 Nights* during oral performances.

Ulrich Marzolph argues that in *1001 Nights* Shahrazad uses the mirroring of the frame story and embedded stories as a tactic to heal the king, but that this therapeutic effect is absent in *101 Nights*: »Shahrazad simply tells attractive and instructive stories in order to entertain the king and arouse his curiosity so that she may live on to the following night« (Marzolph and Chraïbi, *Hundred and One Nights*, 302). I think that the mirroring mechanism between frame narrative and embedded stories of the *Seven Viziers* is the same as in the Greek, Hebrew and Latin versions, but that the multilayered structure of *101 Nights* (a kaleidoscope within a kaleidoscope) causes the audience to lose sight of the lessons the stories contain.

Beware of Your Son! / Don't Be Greedy!

What is the link between the embedded story and the frame story in the Latin version? Let me first turn to the frame story and then to the spiritual exegesis attached to it. Told by the empress, the story serves another purpose, namely to convince Emperor Pontian to kill his son. The emperor is no longer supposed to identify with the seneschal who should have investigated the case and who hangs himself out of regret. Instead, the empress suggests a correspondence between the emperor and the king and the prince and the seneschal. Moreover, the focus shifts from the importance of truth-finding to the vice of greed (11.3: *cupiditas*).

After finishing her story, the empress emphatically asks her husband if he understood the message (11.17: »*Domine, intellexisti quod dixi*?«, »Master, did you understand what I have said?«), explaining that the trusted seneschal in her story, who betrays and confounds his own wife out of greed and is exiled from the kingdom, stands for his son, Prince Diocletian. Since his son intends to confound and destroy his father out of greed for power, she asks her husband to act like the king in the story and exile his son. The parallel offered by the empress is problematic: besides the fact that the king is corpulent, pagan, and lustful, he does not have anything to fear from the seneschal's actions. However, the empress manages again to convince her husband to condemn his son. As Ralph-Henning Steinmetz argues, in the Latin version, the elaborate interpretations with unexpected correspondences suggested by the empress are part of an overall educational strategy for the external audience: »the sevenfold juxtaposition of correct and incorrect interpretative methods [by the sages and the empress respectively] constitutes a critique, presented through narrative means, of the way in which illustrative narratives are handled in argumentation.«[53]

In the meantime, the external audience is well aware that in the frame story the empress has falsely accused Prince Diocletian out of greed for power. In the Latin versions, she first plotted to kill her stepson for power (0.22) and then tried to seduce him (0.35-42). Even if there is no direct link between the wife of the seneschal in the embedded story and the empress in the frame story, it should be noted that the effect of the positive characterization of the bath attendant's wife is different for the internal audience and the external audience:

53 See Steinmetz, *Exempel und Auslegung*, 274 (English translation mine). See also *Exempel und Auslegung*, 127-152 and Gábor, Seven Sages, 28-30.

it invites the internal audience (the emperor) to think positively about women in general, including the empress (seeing them as victims of male greed), whereas for the external audience it emphasizes the contrast between the chaste wife and the lying empress.

The spiritual exegesis (*reductio*) that follows the story in certain manuscripts (see above) gives us a unique insight into an interpretation by and for a contemporary audience. The commentator transposes the story into a Christian parable by drawing different and more extensive parallels than the ones offered by the empress in the frame story. He also includes the positive figure of the bath attendant's wife in his exegesis, who now is said to represent the human soul. The commentator begins with a direct address to his external audience: »Dearest people!« (»*Karissimi*!«). The king, who is on his way to steal the bodies of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, is assigned the role of the devil: »That king is the devil, who is bloated (*inflatus*) to such an extent that he does not want to humiliate himself before God, and in a surprising way craves for women, meaning souls who are cleansed by God through baptism.«[54] The women (souls) hate the king (devil), who, with his army of pride, greed and extravagance (*superbia, avarice, luxuria*), tries to steal the bodies of Saint Peter and Saint Paul (the hearts of the chosen ones cleansed by baptism and penance). The greedy seneschal is the devil's servant, who symbolizes »every greedy man in this world« (*avarus quilibet huius mundi*), who is overcome by greed (*per avariciam ductus*) and delivers his own wife (soul) to the king (devil). He enters the royal bedroom (his conscience, *consciencia*), which is occupied by the king (devil). Although he repents and asks her back three times with words, but not with deeds, he loses the chance of salvation.[55]

While the key word in the tale of the empresses is *cupiditas* (greed in a general sense), the commentator uses *avaricia* (avarice, with regard to material gain). By using *avaritia*, one of the commonly known seven deadly sins (in Latin: *gula, luxuria, avaritia, tristitia, ira, acedia, vanagloria, superbia*), he makes the story suitable and recognizable for a Christian audience.[56] Read as an allegory of the downfall of »any greedy man«, the story of the seneschal could have been used in church to instruct a Christian audience on the consequences of committing one of the seven deadly sins. However, the link to the frame story is lost, and the embedded story now functions as an autonomous parable.

---

54 *Rex iste dyabolus, qui est inflatus superbia in tantum, quod deo non vult se humiliare, et miro modo appetit mulieres, id est animas deo per baptizmum lotas*.

55 Specific numbers appear not only here, but also elsewhere in the Latin embedded stories. They could have been added by the translator/adaptor to enhance the link between the story elements and his allegorical exegesis. In the story *Canis* (2.1-20), for example, there are three nurses, three jumps in the air by the dog, and four feet of the cradle. The spiritual exegesis that follows after *Canis* explains that the three nurses stand for contrition, confession and penitence; the three jumps for praying, fasting, and charity; the four legs of the cradle for the four cardinal virtues.

56 While *avaritia* is the common term for greed in Christian ethics, *cupiditas* is not unknown. It figures in 1 Timothy 6:10 *radix enim omnium malorum est cupiditas quam quidam appetentes erraverunt a fide et inseruerunt se doloribus multis* (»For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs«, transl. NIV). The same reference to the New Testament is present in the Pardoner's Tale of the *Canterbury Tales* (around 1400), concluding with *radix malorum est cupiditas*. Augustine opposes *cupiditas* (earthly greed or desire) to *caritas* (divine love) (*De doctrina christiana* 3.10.16).

To conclude, none of the four versions discussed in this paper is characterized by a one-to-one relation between embedded story and frame story. The position of the mirrors (frame story) within the tube determines the way the coloured pieces (embedded story elements) are refracted into complex patterns that mesmerize the onlooker: in the story of the bath attendant/seneschal as well as in the frame story, there are a king, a prince, an advisor, and a wife; there is sexual intercourse without mutual consent, there is an error of judgement, greed, regret, (self-)punishment. While the moral of the embedded story depends on its position in the frame story, the echoes between the characters and the themes are seldom straightforward but always contain surprises. The power of the embedded tales lies precisely in their open relation with the frame tale, encouraging the internal and external audiences to find out their meaning. Rather than reducing political, social or ethical dilemmas to simple solutions, the narrative structure invites us to actively reflect upon moral behaviour and the versatility of the story matter offers an open instead of a closed message.

Conclusion

The cross-cultural study of a story matter that travelled across so many boundaries has the potential to offer new insights into similarities and differences between medieval societies in the East and West. However, because of its circulation across a wide geographical area and large temporal span in both oral and written form, and because of the interplay between its frame narrative and tightly related embedded stories, the corpus is highly challenging. In this article I have demonstrated how the metaphor of the kaleidoscope might serve as a hermeneutic tool to visualize how different aspects of *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome* are intertwined. The case of the story of the bath keeper/seneschal shows that each version's moral lessons emerge from the continually shifting interaction between the specific cultural context in which it circulated (the position of the tube), the frame story (the angle of the mirrors) and the embedded story (the disc of coloured pieces). Concerning, for example, the change from »error of judgement« and »greed« in the Greek, Hebrew and Arabic versions of the embedded story to the emphasis on »greed« alone in its Latin version: this adaptation can be explained by the switch of narrator from sage to empress (on the level of the frame story), but might also have been influenced by the use of the story as a free-standing example of *avaritia* in Franciscan preaching (on the level of the cultural context). These kinds of adaptations, such as the role of gender, the setting in space, or the (money) transactions, merit to be studied within a larger corpus. The dynamic character of the metaphor of the kaleidoscope, which with every turn shows a new pattern to the onlooker, might help to discover and interpret what is lost and gained in transmission, translation and adaptation, thus facilitating cross-cultural comparison and suggesting new directions for further research.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their careful reading and valuable suggestions, as well as Rachel Scott for our inspiring discussion on theoretical approaches to medieval narratives.

About the author

Emilie van Opstall is specialized in Late Antique and Medieval Greek. Her current research project »Travelling Tales« centers upon the cross-cultural comparison of medieval versions of *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher* and *The Seven Sages of Rome,* including its oral and literary circulation.

References

Manuscripts

MS F Fiecht, Library of the Abbey St. Georgenberg-Fiecht, MS 15 (olim Cod. 129)
MS W1 Würzburg, Franciscan Abbey, MS 115

Editions and translations

Greek

Michaelis Andreopuli, *Liber Syntipae*, ed. Viktor Jernstedt and Petr Nikitin (Saint Petersburg, 1912).

Michael Andreopoulos, *The Byzantine Sinbad, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library*, trans. Jefferey Beneker and Craig A. Gibson (Washington, DC, 2021).

Arabic

101 Nacht. Aus dem Arabischen erstmals ins Deutsche übertragen und umfassend kommentiert. Nach der andalusischen Handschrift des Aga Khan Museums, trans. Claudia Ott (Zurich, 2012).

The Annotated Arabian Nights: Tales from 1001 Nights, ed. Paulo Lemos Horta and trans. Yasmine Seale (New York, 2021).

One Thousand and One Nights/Al-Ḥājj al-Bāhī al-Būnī, Miʾat laylah wa-laylah ... wa-ḥikāyāt ukhrā, ed. Ahmad Šuraybit (al-Maktabah al-Waṭaniyyah al-Jazāʾiriyyah, 2005).

Hebrew

Tales of Sendebar, ed. and trans. Morris Epstein (New York, 1967).

Mishle Sendebar. De Verhalen van Sendebar: een Raamvertelling. Hebreeuwse Tekst volgens MS.Bodl.or.135, trans. P. Broers, Vereniging tot bevordering van kennis van Hebreeuws (2021), accessed on 15 June 2026: https://www.hebreeuws.org/nieuws.php&item=134.

Latin

Historia Septem Sapientum I and II, ed. Alfons Hilka (Heidelberg, 1912/1913).

Historia septem sapientum: Überlieferung und textgeschichtliche Edition I, ed. Detlef Roth (Tübingen 2004).

Dutch

Van den seven vroeden van binnen Rome. Niederländische Versversion der Sieben weisen Meister. Edition – Kommentar – Übersetzung – Audioversion, ed. Rita *Schlusemann,* Texte des späten Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit 59 (Berlin, 2025).

"Poncianus" und "Die seven wijse mannen van Rome" Zwei niederländische Prosaversionen der "Sieben weisen Meister", Edition - Kommentar – Übersetzung, ed. Rita Schlusemann, Texte des späten Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit 60 (Berlin, 2026).

Secondary sources

Abrahams, Israel and Cecil Roth, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (London, 2010).

Agapitos, A. Panagiotis, The erotic bath in the Byzantine vernacular romance Kallimachos and Chrysorrhoe, *Classica et Mediaevalia* 41 (1990) 257-274.

Agapitos, A. Panagiotis, Zwischen Grauen und Wonne. Das Bad in der byzantinischen Literatur, *Journal of Byzantine Studies* 25 (2024) 19-37.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M., M. Holquist and C. Emerson, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays* (Austin, 1981).

Beecroft, Alexander, *An Ecology of World Literature* (Brooklyn, NY, 2015).

Bickart, Noah Benjamin, Overturning the »Table«: The Hidden Meaning of a Talmudic Metaphor for Coitus, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 25/3 (2016) 489-507.

Berger, Albrecht, *Das Bad in der byzantinischen Zeit*, Miscellanea Byzantina Monacensia 27 (Munich, 1982).

Bildhauer, Bettina, Jutta Eming, and Nora Schmidt (eds.), *»Die Sieben weisen Meister« als globale Erzähltradition*, special issue of *Das Mittelalter* 1 (2023), DOI: https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.mial.2023.1.24773.

Bodner, Neta, Jewish ritual baths: Immersion and spiritual renewal in the medieval city, in: Elisheva Baumgarten and Ido Noy (eds.), *In and Out: Between and Beyond Jewish Daily Life in Medieval Europe* (Jerusalem, 1921) 29-34.

Boyarin, Shamma, They shall serve as signs, retrieved on 8 June 2025, https://sboyarin.wordpress.com/2017/01/17/they-shall-serve-as-signs-for-the-set-times-the-days-and-the-years-time-and-memory-in-oxford-bodleian-ms-heb-d-11/.

Critten, R. G., Hating women in the Middle English *Seven Sages of Rome, The Review of English Studies* 77/328 (2026) 1-17; DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgaf081.

Cupane, Carolina and Bettina Krönung (eds.), *Fictional Storytelling in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean and Beyond (8th-15th Centuries)* (Leiden, 2016).

Delcorno, C., *L'exemplum nella predicazione volgare di Giordano di Pisa* (Venice, 1972).

Dunphy, Graeme, *The Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle* (Leiden, 2010).

Eming, Jutta, Caitlin Flynn and Antonia Murath (eds.), *Female Voices in Medieval European Literatures*, special issue of *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 64 (2020).

Fairchild Ruggles, D. (ed.), *Islamic Art and Visual Culture: An Anthology of Sources* (Malden, MA, 2011) 91-92, 4.11: Estimating the Number of Bathhouses in Baghdad.

Foehr-Janssens, Yasmina, Misogyny and the trends of a European success. The French Prose Roman des sept sages de Rome, *Narrative Culture* 7/2 (2017) article 5.

Gábor, Csilla, The Seven Sages as reading for education: Medieval narratives of the Seven Sages of Rome, *Philobiblon* XXI/2 (2016) 15-33.

Genette, Gérard, *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré* (Paris, 1982).

Gruendler, Beatrice and Isabel Toral, *An Unruly Classic: Kalīla and Dimna and Its Syriac, Arabic, and Early Persian Versions* (Leiden, 2024).

Irwin, Bonnie D., What's in a frame? The medieval textualization of traditional storytelling, *Oral Tradition* 10/1 (1995) 27-52.

Iser, Wolfgang, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, 1978).

Jeffreys, Michael, Tassos Papacostas, John Bradley, Harold Short, Paul Vetch, *Prosopography of the Byzantine World* (King's College, London, 2017), retrieved on 12 March 2023: http://pbw2016.kdl.kcl.ac.uk.

Keegan, Matthew L., »Elsewhere Lies Its Meaning«: The vagaries of Kalīla and Dimna's reception, *Poetica 52*/1–2 (2021) 13-40.

Kiratz, Georg A. (ed.), *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage,* electronic edition, Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute (Piscataway, NJ, 2011), retrieved on 12 March 2023: https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/index.html.

Kristeva, Julia, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York City, 1980).

Krönung, Bettina, Fighting with tales: 1 The Arabic *Book of Sindbad the Philosopher*, in: Carolina Cupane and Bettina Krönung, *Fictional Storytelling in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean and Beyond (8th-15th Centuries)* (Leiden, 2016), 365-379, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004307728_016.

Lundt, Bea, *Weiser und Weib. Weisheit und Geschlecht am Beispiel der Erzähltradition von den Sieben Weisen Meistern, 12. bis 15. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2002).

Mallette, Karla, The Seven Sages at Sea. Framed narrative systems in the pre-modern Mediterranean, *Philological Encounters* 2.1/2 (2017) 6-27.

Mallette, Karla, Narration as Raumschach: Kalila and Dimna in time, space and languages, *Postmedieval* 13/3 (2022) 313-329.

Marano, Y. A., *Baths and Bathing in Medieval Byzantium (11th-14th Centuries)* (2002), retrieved on 27 October 2025: https://anamed.ku.edu.tr/baths-and-bathing-in-medieval-byzantium-11th-14th-centuries/.

Marzolph, Ulrich and Aboubakr Chraïbi, The Hundred and One Nights: A recently discovered old manuscript, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 162/2 (2012) 299-316.

Marzolph, Ulrich, A phenomenology of the Middle Eastern frame-tale collections, *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 24/1 (2024) 27-43; DOI: https://doi.org/10.5617/jais.10120.

Messis, Charis and Stratis Papaioannou, Translations from other languages into Greek 3: »Arabic« storytelling in Greek, in: Stratis Papaioannou (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Literature* (Oxford, 2021) 195-218.

Minets, Yuliya, Language of speaking, arguing, and persuading: Cultural exchange and adaptation in Greek and Syriac versions of the *History of Sindban/Syntipas*, in: Bettina Bildhauer, Jutta Eming, and Nora Schmidt (eds.), »*Die Sieben weisen Meister« als globale Erzähltradition,* special issue of *Das Mittelalter* 1 (2023) 155-171. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.mial.2023.1.24773.

NIV = *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (London, 1979).

van Opstall, Emilie M., The wicked stepmother: The representation of women in the Byzantine *Syntipas*/Latin *Dolopathos*, *Fabula* 64/3-4 (2023) 298-321, DOI:10.1515/fabula-2023-0017.

Redondo i Sànchez, *Jordi, The Faithful Dog*: the place of the *Book of Syntipas* in its transmission, *Revue des Etudes Byzantines* 71 (2013) 39-65.

Shukurov, Rustam, *Byzantine Ideas of Persia. 650–1461* (Abingdon, 2024).

Smirnova, Victoria, De l'histoire à la rhétorique. Les recueils d'exempla cisterciens du Moyen Âge tardif, in: *eadem* and Ludmilla Evdokimova (eds.), *L'Œuvre littéraire du Moyen Âge aux yeux de l'historien et du philologue* (Paris, 2014) 393-408.

Smith, Virginia Sarah*, Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity* (Oxford, 2008).

Speer, Mary B., What ails the Sodomite King of Egypt? »Senescalcus« in the *K Sept Sages de Rome*, in: Marion Uhlig and Yasmina Foehr-Janssens (eds.), *D'Orient en Occident. Les recueils de fables enchâssées avant les Mille et Une Nuits de Galland (Barlaam et Josaphat, Calila et Dimna, Disciplina clericalis, Roman des Sept Sages)* (Turnhout, 2014) 193-207.

Steinmetz, Ralph-Henning, *Exempel und Auslegung. Studien zu den „Sieben weisen Meistern«* (Freiburg, 2000).

Toth, Ida, Fighting with tales: 2 The Byzantine *Book of Syntipas the Philosopher*, in: Carolina Cupane and B. Krönung (eds.), *Fictional Storytelling in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean and Beyond (8th–15th Centuries)* (Leiden, 2016) 380-400, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004307728_017.

Toth, Ida, The motif of wisdom in the Byzantine *Book of Syntipas the Philosopher*, in: Bettina Bildhauer, Jutta Eming, and Nora Schmidt (eds.), »*Die Sieben weisen Meister« als globale Erzähltradition,* special issue of *Das Mittelalter* 1 (2023)*,* DOI: https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.mial.2023.1.24773*.*

Yassif, Eli, *The Book of Memory that Is The Chronicle of Jerahme'el* (Tel Aviv, 2001).

Zumthor, Paul, Intertextualité et mouvance, *Littérature* 41/1 (1981) 8-16.

Translations from Greek into Latin in the Middle Ages
Some Minor Texts and Diagrams

Christian Gastgeber*

This article focuses on some anonymous translations of non-literary Greek texts into Latin. The texts and diagrams discussed here relate to astronomy and magic. Some of these texts were widely used in both the Western Latin and the Eastern Byzantine cultures, and their broad dissemination documents the considerable interest in such handy tables or prognostics about future events. A small selection is presented here alongside their Greek counterparts, opening a discussion on the translation of minor »practical texts« in the Middle Ages and moving beyond the frequently addressed classical and patristic authors that were translated into Latin. While some of the Greek models can be traced back to late antiquity, it seems that the Latin versions are not based on ancient strands that may have survived from that period, but rather represent a new and initial access to the texts in the (early) Middle Ages. An interesting source that still illustrates the impact of the respective Greek models is the computus companion created by the 10th-century scholar Abbo of Fleury. Another example is a short treatise on the magical-prognostic use of the Psalms, which is published here for the first time and likely to be attributed to Pascalis Romanus, who translated similar texts in Constantinople in the 1160s.

Keywords: Latin translations from Greek, Byzantine technical texts, astronomy, computus, prognostics, Petosiris, Psalms, Maximus the Confessor, Abbo of Fleury, Pascalis Romanus

Introduction

Following the collapse of the Roman Empire and its division into the Latin Western Empire and the Byzantine Eastern Empire, knowledge and practice of Greek apparently declined in the West and of Latin in the East. This also resulted in fewer Western students and scholars studying in the Greek-speaking areas, thus reducing cultural exchange. Only a few eastern monastic and pilgrimage centres, as well as the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, were still frequented by »Latins«. Even in the capital, however, Westerners were primarily motivated by commercial or political interests rather than an interest in studying the language and texts

* Correspondence Details: Christian Gastgeber, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute for Medieval Studies, Department of Byzantine Research, Dominikanerbastei 16, A-1010 Vienna, Austria; Christian.Gastgeber@oeaw.ac.at

This article is part of the thematic cluster *Ideologies of Translation*, To read all related articles, please access: https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no11_2020 and https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no12_2020.

of others. The transition from papyrus rolls to parchment codices, which coincided with the dissolution of the former Roman Empire, and the limited durability of papyrus hindered the transmission of Greek texts still in circulation in the West. In the West, Greek lost its high reputation as the language of the renowned classical authors every scholar was expected to have read. The poor knowledge of this literature in the Middle Ages can be traced back to a few (late) antique translations.

However, despite the strained relations between the Byzantines and the Latins, which culminated in the Sack of Constantinople in 1204, the Greek language retained its status in the West as the language of the New Testament. Based on John 19:20, which describes the inscriptions on the cross in the three languages Hebrew, Latin and Greek, it was considered one of the three holy languages (the epithet »holy« goes back to Isidore, *Etymologiae* IX 1, 3), and it was the native language of the (accepted) Greek Church Fathers.[1] This respect brought about waves of endeavour to acquire a basic knowledge of the language, at least of the alphabet and the numerals. This was also intended to facilitate the reading, understanding and error-free copying of Greek words that were used in Latin texts, e.g. in the biblical commentaries of the Latin Church Fathers. Throughout the Middle Ages, bilingual scholars continued to translate selected Greek texts of interest into Latin. A notable example is the new Latin translation of the didactic poem *Phainomena* by Aratus of Soloi. This work had been translated several times from classical times until the late antique period, but it was translated again in the first half of the 8th century in Corbie.[2]

Thanks to Walter Berschin's pioneering study, *Greek Letters and the Latin Middle Ages from Jerome to Nicholas of Cusa*, as well as his articles on particular aspects of the reception of Greek in the medieval West,[3] the Western centres, translators, and Grecophile scholars have been outlined in a diachronic and geographical overview. In his study, Berschin incorporated observations from Latin manuscripts, adding essential pieces to the mosaic of Greek influence in the West. Digitization campaigns and open access policies concerning manuscripts held in libraries allow us to follow in Berschin's footsteps and search for further evidence of substantial or alleged knowledge of Greek. Meanwhile, numerous studies have opened up new avenues of research or delved deeper into the reception of Greek in the West, providing a more detailed overall picture of this cultural exchange.[4]

1 See Herren, *Sacred Nectar*; Herren, Pelasgian fountains.

2 de Bourdellès, *Aratus Latinus*; see also the stemma of the textual transmission in Latin translation(s) on p. 15.

3 Berschin, *Griechisch-lateinisches Mittelalter*; Berschin, Griechisches bei den Iren; Berschin, Greek elements; Berschin, Griechisches in der Domschule von Verona; Berschin, Griechisches in der Klosterschule des alten St. Gallen; Berschin, Salerno um 1100; Berschin, Griechisch-lateinische Paulus-Handschrift; Berschin, Griechischer Septuagintapsalter; Berschin, Declinationes Graecorum; Berschin, Griechisches im karolingischen und ottonischen Fulda.

4 To quote some studies which continue research on Greek traces in Latin manuscripts: Herren, ***Sacred Nectar***; Kaczynski, ***Greek in the Carolingian Age***; Radiciotti, Manoscritti digrafici; Schreiner, Kreis um Liutprand (reprint in Schreiner, ***Orbis Romanus***); Herren, Study of Greek in Ireland; Radiciotti, Scrivere e leggere il greco; Schreiner, Begegnung von Orient und Okzident; Herren, Pelasgian fountains.

Major projects focusing on the Latin translations of the works of authors such as Aristotle,[5] Galen,[6] Hippocrates,[7] Plato[8] or Ptolemy[9] (or texts attributed to these authors) expand our knowledge of the texts in question and of how technical terms were rendered in Latin. However, these projects face the serious problem that these works were not always translated directly from Greek into Latin, but often also via (Syriac and) Arabic in culturally overlapping border zones. Bilingual scholars selected texts that interested them or which they deemed worthy of circulation in Latin. As a general rule, translations from Greek, starting from the 12th century and before the new wave under the humanists, should always be cross-checked for indirect transmission via Arabic, particularly for technical texts (in a broader sense).

Needless to say, the knowledge of Greek was confined to certain cultural and ecclesiastical centres, requiring a specific interest among scholars and clergymen to flourish. From paratexts in medieval manuscripts, such as alphabets, and from literary works quoting Greek words, one can discern an elitist sense of pride in »mastering« this language. This could even result in extreme artificiality, with authors cramming Greek words, or words they thought were Greek, into their texts in order to demonstrate their education. The Iberian *Hisperica Famina*[10] or the florilegium Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg.5.35 (mid-11th century, after 1039, Canterbury, Abbey of St. Augustine),[11] famous for its *Carmina Cantabrigiensia*,[12] are good examples of this use (or abuse) of Greek. Another example of this elitist use of Greek can be seen in the widespread use of Greek numerals in Latin medieval manuscripts, for which lists of the corresponding Latin numerals were required (**figure 1**). Alongside Greek alphabets, concordances of Greek and Latin numerals exist in many medieval manuscripts (the explanation in Isidore, *Etymologia*e I 3, and subsequent commentaries significantly impacted medieval users).[13] A comprehensive overview of these paratexts and the respective culture of the *gr(a)ecizantes* remains a *desideratum*.

5 Aristoteles Latinus and Aristoteles Semitico-Latinus, projects 9/2a and 9/2b (Corpus Philosophorum Medii Aevi) of the Union académique internationale (since 1929 and 1971 respectively); see also the updated information, accessed on 27 May 2026: https://hiw.kuleuven.be/dwmc/research/al/.

6 Durling, *Burgundio of Pisa's Translation of Galen's Περὶ κράσεων*; Durling, *Burgundio of Pisa's Translation of Galen's Περὶ πεπονθότων τόπων*; Scimone, Galenus Latinus; see also the catalogue https://www.galenolatino.com/, created by Michaelangiola Marchiaro, Clara Provenziani, and Anna Maria Raia for all translations from the 5th/6th until the 17th c., and the overview in Fortuna, Nuova versione.

7 Kibre, Hippocrates Latinus.

8 Plato Latinus (Corpus Philosophorum Medii Aevi), project 9/1 of the Union Académique Internationale (meanwhile suspended).

9 Ptolemaeus Arabus et Latinus, project 89 of the Union Académique Internationale (since 2015). See also the recent overview of Ptolemaic writings by David Juste: *Latin Ptolemaic Writings*, ed. Juste.

10 Herren, *Hisperica Famina*.

11 Online, accessed on 27 May 2026: https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-GG-00005-00035/1.

12 See recently, *Carmina Cantabrigiensia*, ed. Lo Monaco.

13 A preliminary study of the manuscripts in St. Gallen is published by Kaczynski, *Greek in the Carolingian Age*, 33-42 and appendix 1 (alphabets and numerals), 117-120.

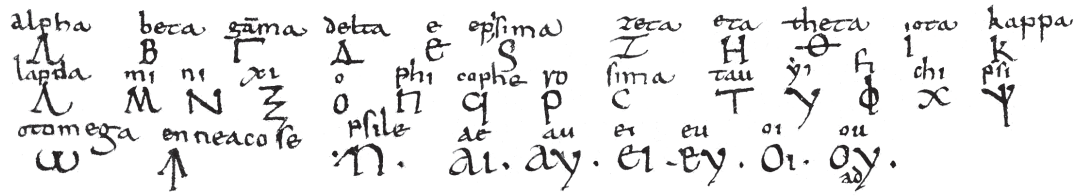


Figure 1: Cambridge UL, MS Gg.5.35, fol. 420v: Greek numerals and their names as well as diphthongs (© traced from the original by the author)

In this regard, an important author of medieval computus literature, the Benedictine abbot and theologian Abbo of Fleury (940/945-13.11.1004), is a good example of an author interested in using Greek letters, words, and numerals[14] to emphasise his scientific claims – or rather to continue the tradition of his predecessor in computist studies, the Venerable Bede.[15] Therefore, it is unsurprising that the computus companion originating from his school in Fleury also provides two concordances of Greek and Latin numerals (fols. 53v and 55r [**figure 2**]), with the second concordance indicating the names of the numerals.

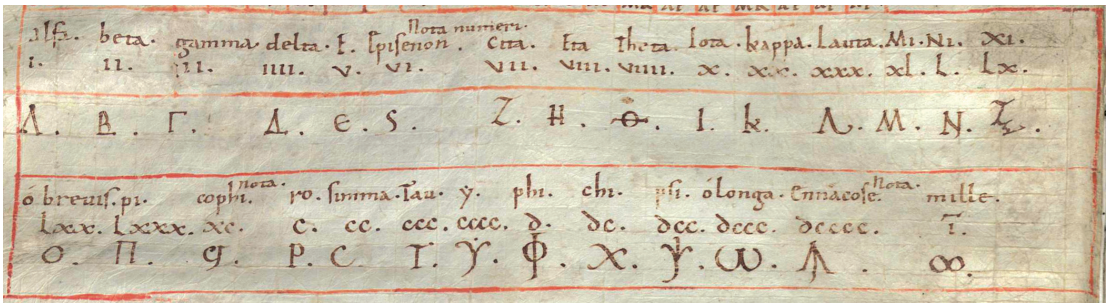


Figure 2: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 55r: Greek numerals and their names (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

14 So, e.g., ch. 1: Greek numbers in the margin (Abbo of Fleury, *Miscellanea de computo*, ed. Lohr, 6-8); ch. 7: the Latin and Greek names of the zodiac signs and the months (ed. Lohr, 28, ll. 12-17, with diagram on p. 29); ch. 8: Greek numerals (ed. Lohr, 32); ch. 11: Greek numerals (ed. Lohr, 37, diagram); ch. 12: Greek numerals (ed. Lohr, 38, ll. 58-61; 40, ll. 39-41 and 46, with diagram on p. 39); ch. 17: Greek letters (ed. Lohr, diagrams on pp. 50-53, 58 and text on pp. 53, l. 8-57, l. 4, but here Abbo verbally quotes Chalcidius' commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*); ch. 19: Greek terms of the waxing and waning moon, sc. *monoydes* (μονοειδής), *dyatomos* (διχότομος), *amphicirtos* (ἀμφίκυρτος), *panselenos* (πανσέληνος) (ed. Lohr 62 and 63, ll. 24-25, 27-28), ch. 23: Greek numerals (ed. Lohr, 78, ll. 3-4, with diagram on pp. 80-81) and Greek terms in the introducing poem (ed. Lohr 78, ll. 25, 29, 35, 36; 79, l. 39); ch. 25: Greek numerals (ed. Lohr 86, ll. 36-40 and the diagrams on pp. 86 and 87); ch. 26: concordance of Greek and Latin numerals (ed. Lohr, 121; see below to the letter from Petosiris); ch. 27: Greek numerals and the initials of the zodiac signs (ed. Lohr 126, ll. 55-58, 64-66 and diagram on p. 125); ch. 28: concordance of Greek and Latin numerals (ed. Lohr 128, diagram). For Abbo's knowledge of Greek, see also Juste, Comput 104-105; on Abbo, see also Verbist, *Duelling with the Past*, 35-84.

15 In chapter 1 of *De temporum ratione* (*De computo vel loquela digitorum*), Bede emphasizes the superiority of Greek numbers over Latin ones and also provides a concordance of the numbers in both scripts.

Apart from research on translators of Greek texts known by name, many more texts need to be examined to improve our understanding of the cultural exchange between the Greeks and the Latins during the Middle Ages. Unlike literary works, including those of classical authors, practical instructions in popular science did not arouse the same level of interest in modern research. These texts cover topics such as astrology, astronomy, medicine, prognostics and, to a certain extent, magic.

Some of these texts have come to our attention through inaccessible or outdated editions, which often focus solely on the Latin translation. Greek texts are occasionally referenced, but the problematic transmission of the sources has often prevented further investigation. This contribution presents additional minor texts and diagrams, some of which have new or improved editions, and aims to encourage comparative studies of further non-literary texts translated from Greek into Latin (or, vice versa, also from Latin into Greek).[16] It goes without saying that this comparative view of some non-literary texts is just the first step into a broad research field, as many questions remain concerning the date of translation, the first use, the subsequent dissemination, and an overview of »all« – at least medieval and early humanist – manuscripts. A core problem with practical texts is that they underwent several modifications: parts were added or omitted, and the order of text units was changed. Consequently, there are several versions of the same text that differ to varying degrees. It is often impossible to trace the original text or to identify the exact source of the translation. In some cases, the existing manuscripts only provide access to later revisions in both Greek and Latin.

For Latin, modern corpora that serve as veritable gold mines for discovering texts of this kind include the *Catalogue of Incipits of Mediaeval Scientific Writings* by Lynn Thorndike and Pearle Kibre,[17] as well as specialised catalogues of Latin medical and astrological manuscripts such as the *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts,*[18] the *Catalogue des manuscrits alchimiques latins,*[19] and David Juste's *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Latinorum* (2011-).[20] For Greek, the *Pinakes* database, maintained by the Greek Department at the *Institut de Recherche et d'Histoire des Textes* in Paris, is a good starting point,[21] but it has not yet incorporated all minor texts. Valuable collections of Greek astrological manuscripts are the *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum* (CCAG), a twelfe-volume set (= 20 books, according to countries and their libraries) published in Brussels between 1898 and 1953,[22] the follow-up edition project *Corpus des Astronomes Byzantins* of the Union Académique

16 See the translation of Dionysius Exiguus' explanation of how to calculate the date of Easter and the continued list for a full cycle of 532 years in Gastgeber, Ostertabelle.

17 Thorndike and Kibre, *Catalogue*.

18 Singer, *Catalogue*.

19 Corbet, *Catalogue* 1-2.

20 *Catalogus*, ed. Juste: volume 1 (2011) includes manuscripts in the Bavarian State Library of Munich, volume 2 (2015) contains manuscripts in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (2015).

21 *Diktyon*, reference number of Greek manuscripts on the homepage Pinakes, CNRS, IRHT, Paris; accessed on 27 May 2026: https://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr/.

22 Unfortunately, not all libraries could be investigated; see the relevant volumes cited in this article and listed below in the bibliography at the end.

Internationale (eleven volumes, since 1985, ongoing)[23] and the *Catalogue des Manuscrits Alchimiques Grecs*, an eight-volume set (again, according to countries and their libraries) published between 1924 and 1932.[24] Linked to the latter project is the ongoing edition project *Les Alchimistes Grecs*.[25] In 2020, Alain Touwaide recently published the newly revised and updated[26] *Catalogue of Greek Medical Manuscripts* (including the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, vol. 2, and the *Corpus Galenicum*, vol. 3)[27].

Latin Technical Texts: The Computus Companion of Abbo of Fleury

A comparative study of the work of a Latin author in relation to the neighboring Greek culture reveals some remarkable parallels in medieval »technical« treatises. If a Greek model seems to originate in classical or early Christian times, it was assumed that the Latin translation also dated back to this early period rather than being a new translation in the Middle Ages – or even the first translation – since Greek was rarely practised. Although no papyrus rolls or early manuscripts containing the (late) antique translation have been found, it is thought to have survived until its discovery by medieval scholars, or to have been preserved by authors whose works no longer exist today. Even if an earlier Latin translation of a (late) antique Greek text also exists (or once existed), it cannot be ruled out that the Latin text was newly translated in the Middle Ages, since these are very short, practical guides or compilations that did not require the linguistic skills of a scholar.

Without going into details in this study, I will start by presenting five examples of surprising parallels between (earlier) Greek and (medieval) Latin texts and tables[28] that have been overlooked in studies of the Latin versions. These examples belong to the broader context of computus texts and astronomical commentaries:

(1) a concordance of the months in various cultures (and languages),
(2) a table showing the lunar days in each part of the zodiac,
(3) a table showing the lunar day for each date,
(4) a table showing the days of the week for each date, and
(5) a sundial.

23 Project 41 of the Union Académique Internationale; see the overview and the digitized volumes on the homepage, accessed on 27 May 2026: https://www.uclouvain.be/fr/instituts-recherche/incal/ciol/ecab.

24 The following libraries or topics are included in the volumes: manuscripts in Paris (1), Italy (2), Great Britain (3), Germany, Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Switzerland (4), Spain (5), Michael Psellus (6), anonymous treatises about the *ars metallica* (7), and alchemical symbols (8).

25 The latest volume (9, 1) of the series was published in 2021 (*Traité*, ed. Haleux-El Gammal) out of numerical order of the series volumes (volumes 10 and 11 were published in 2000 and 2010 respectively).

26 Based on *Handschriften* 1 and 2, ed. Diels.

27 *Greek Medical Manuscripts*, ed. Touwaide.

28 The value of such tables is beyond question, since modern scholars still consult Grotefend's *Taschenbuch der Zeitrechnung des deutschen Mittelalters und der Neuzeit*.

(1) Concordance of the Months in Contemporary Calendars

The concordance was important for equating the Roman months with those used by the Jews, Egyptians and Greeks in the early computus treatises. Further names of the months were added to cover all possible areas and their particular calendars. Extended lists of this kind, with a concordance for each day of the month, are known from Greek manuscripts.[29] Additional material from an »early« manuscript of the *Handy Tables* of Ptolemy (or what is believed to have been elaborated by him[30] and, partially, from the respective commentary by Theon of Alexandria) dating from the end of the 9th or the beginning of the 10th century provides illustrative parallels: Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 28.26[31] (*Diktyon* 16207), fols. 45r-50v, copied under Emperor Leo VI (886-912)[32] (C6 Tihon)[33] (**figure 3**). It contains a concordance for each of the twelve months, starting from January, in fourteen local calendars, and is titled *monthly calendar of various cities* (ἡμερολόγιον μηνῶν διαφόρων πόλεων) (i.e. Romans, Alexandrians, Greeks, Tyrians, Arabs, Sidonians, Heliopolitans, Lycians, Asians, Cretans, Cypriots, Ephesians, Bithynians and Cappadocians). A similar concordance appears in the supplementary texts of the computus treatise *Brevis enarratio christiani paschatis* by Maximus the Confessor (c. 580-662)[34] (a work to which we will return later). This concordance is limited to the Greek, Latin and Egyptian names (e.g. the mid-10th-century manuscript Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 33 [*Diktyon* 37986], fols. 20r-21v,[35] starting from January, **figure 4**). These tables were used to convert dates according to different calendar systems.

Maximus the Confessor may have played a key role in transferring such tables, which were used to calculate the date of Easter, from the East to the West. As staunch opponent of the Byzantine emperor, who supported Monotheletism, he formed an alliance with the pope and remained in Rome during the second half of the 640s. His computus treatise, based on

29 Kubitschek, *Kalenderbücher*; Mountford, De mensium nominibus; Jones, Polemius Silvius.

30 See the caution in Tihon, Tables Faciles 47: »Quant aux tables elles-mêmes (i.e. the work), elles existent dans quantité de manuscrits, mais la tradition les a séparées du mode d'emploi de Ptolémée, et il n'est pas certain qu'elles aient conservé exactement la forme que le maître leur avait donnée.« See also Tihon's analysis of the different categories of tables: 51-56. For a recent overview of research on Ptolemy's Handy Tables and translations in Latin, see David Juste, Ptolemy, Handy Tables (Greek) (update: 11 May 2025), and Juste, Ptolemy, *Preceptum canonis Ptolomei* (tr. before c. 1000) (update: 11 May 2025) in *Ptolemaeus Arabus et Latinus. Works*, accessed on 27 May 2026: http://ptolemaeus.badw.de/work/153, and http://ptolemaeus.badw.de/work/52.

31 For the manuscript, see Bianconi, Il Laur. Plut. 28.26; Tihon, *Petit Commentaire*, 139-141; Tihon, Tables Faciles 64-66.

32 This luxurious manuscript contains an old core (the *Handy Tables* of Ptolemy and other tables), written during the reign of Emperor Leon VI (886-912), as well as a modern prefixed section and additions within the core, copied by the well-known 14th-century scribe Michael Klostomalles. He worked as a notary in the imperial chancery in Constantinople. For information about the scribe, see Lamberz, Das Geschenk, and Lamberz, Georgios Bullotes, 44-46.

33 See Tihon, Tables Faciles, 55, 66.

34 *Clavis Patrum Graecorum* 3, no. 7706, ed. Geerard; Maximus Confessor, *Brevis enarratio*, PG 19, cols. 1217-1280. A critical edition is still missing.

35 Accessed on 27 May 2026: http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:1560058.

the calculation of the current date of Easter, dates from 641.[36] He or his followers may have introduced the Romans to such clear visualizations as a starting point.

To take an example of a Latin medieval author, the Venerable Bede (672/3-735) explains the names of the months in his work *De temporum ratione* in chapters 11 (*De mensibus*, concerning the Jewish and Egyptian names), 12 (*De mensibus Romanorum*) and 14 (*De mensibus Graecorum*). He wrote the Greek names in Latin transliteration; the modern editor, Charles W. Jones, referred to Polemius Silvius' *Laterculus* in the *apparatus fontium*.[37] A Carolingian commentator identified as Martin of Laon,[38] who had some knowledge of Greek, added to Bede's summary name lists (which the modern editor included in a separate *apparatus*) in the margins of folios 25r and 27r of his copy, Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1832 (**figures 5a** and **5b**), and reconstructed the names in their original form.[39]

Such lists circulated in the Latin West, starting from the Carolingian period onwards. For example, the 12th-century manuscript St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, 453 contains one such list (p. 207: *De nominibus mensium secundum Latinos, Hebreos, Egyptios, Grecos*,[40] **figure 6**). For further parallels originating from Greek texts, I will refer to the astrological computus companion of the manuscript Berlin, Phillipps 1833, which is linked to the school of Abbo of Fleury (940/5-1004, abbot of Fleury Abbey from 988). On folio 31v, Abbo's table of the *cursus lunae per duodecim signa* shows the concordance of the Latin and Greek months (**figure 7**).[41]

36 See Lempire, Calcul.

37 Beda Venerabilis, *De temporum ratione*, ch. 14, ed. Jones, 327.

38 For Martin of Laon, see Jones in the preface of Beda Venerabilis, *De temporum ratione*, 257-261.

39 Beda Venerabilis, *De temporum ratione*, ch. 11, ed. Jones, 318, note to l. 88: Egyptian month names written in Greek letters (fol. 25r); 14, ed. Jones, 327, note to l. 16: Roman and Greek month names, both written in Greek letters (fol. 27r). For the glosses and the cultural background, see the introduction in Jones on pp. 257-261 (the glosses, all of which were written before 873, are attributed to Martin of Laon [819-875], an Irish scholar who was head of the local cathedral school and a connoisseur of Greek. He acquired his knowledge from glossaries), and Contreni, Bede's Scientific Works, paragrs. 4-11.

40 Accessed on 27 May 2026: https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/de/csg/0453/207, written in Latin letters; description of the manuscript, accessed on 27 May 2026: http://dx.doi.org/10.5076/e-codices-csg-0453.

41 For the table, see the introduction by Alfred Lohr in Abbo of Fleury, *Miscellanea de computo*, LI-LXV, ed. Lohr and Obrist, Tables et figures abboniennes. For the manuscript, see Lohr in Abbo of Fleury, *Miscellanea de computo*, LXV-LXIX; the manuscript is online, accessed on 27 May 2026: http://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/SBB0001A74A00000000.

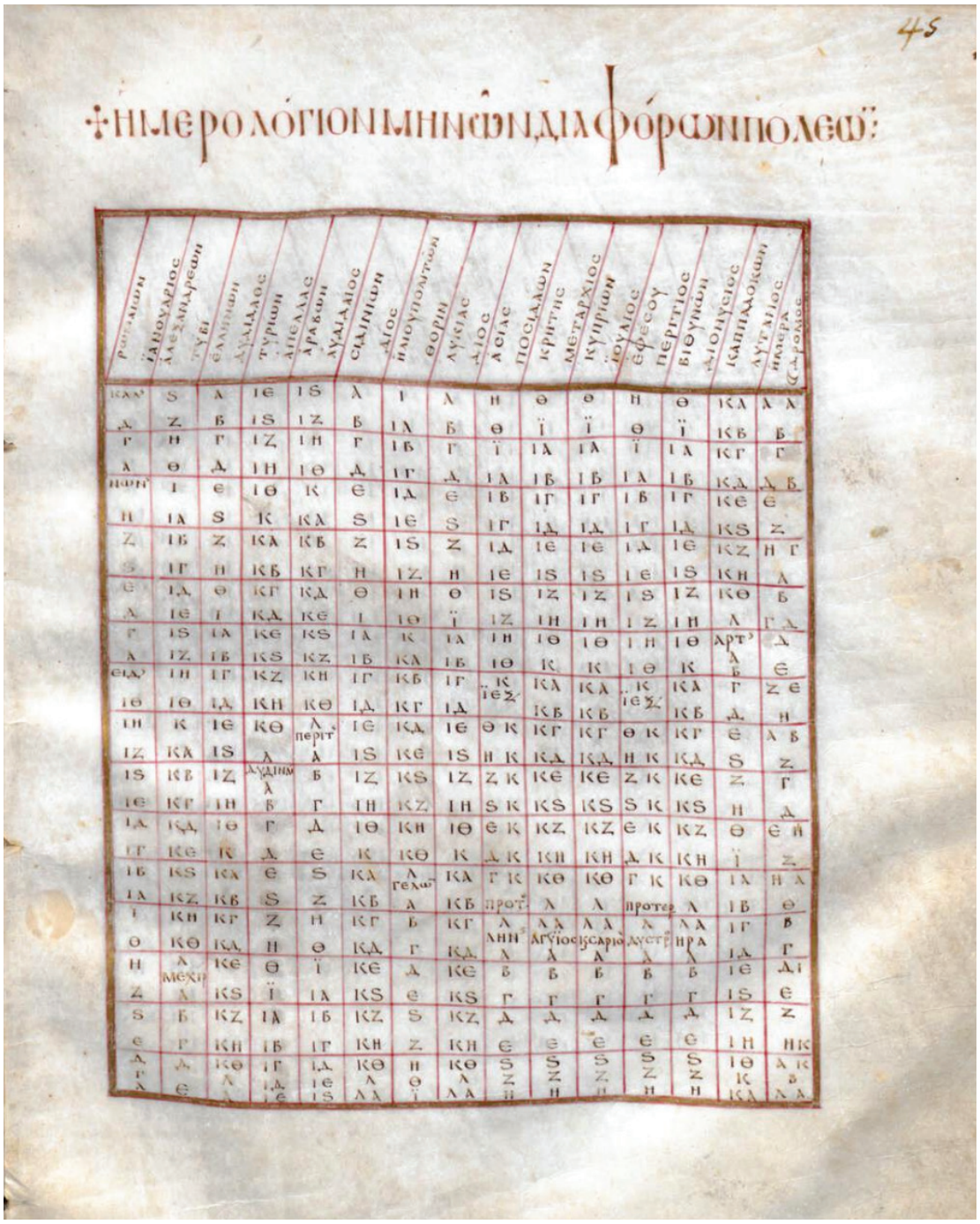


Figure 3: Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 28.26, fol. 45r: hemerologion for January (© Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Digital Repository, https://tecabml.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/plutei/id/475232, CC BY-NC-SA)

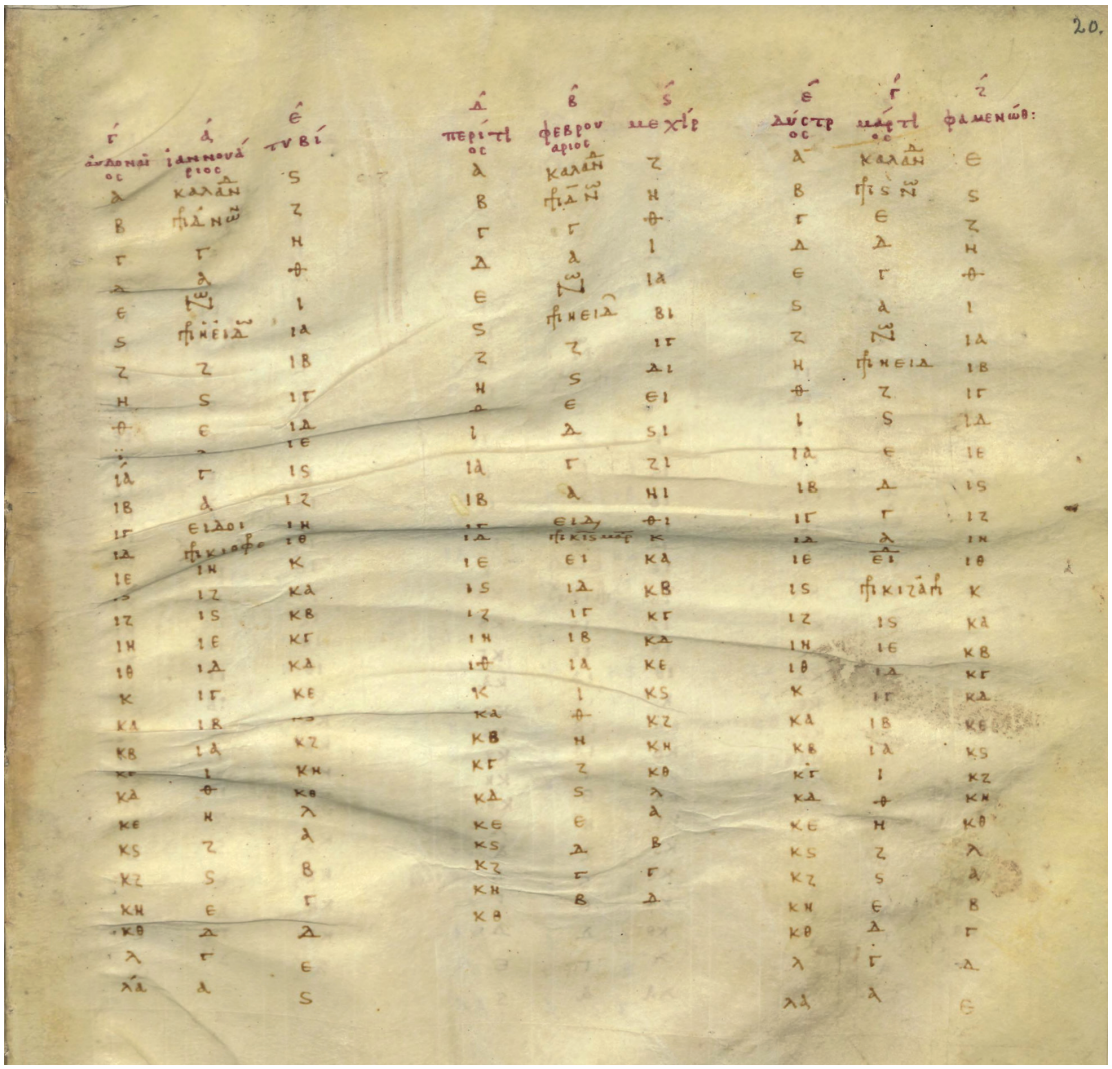


Figure 4: Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 33, fol. 20r: calendar concordance (Roman, Greek, Egyptian) (Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, SCA 33, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

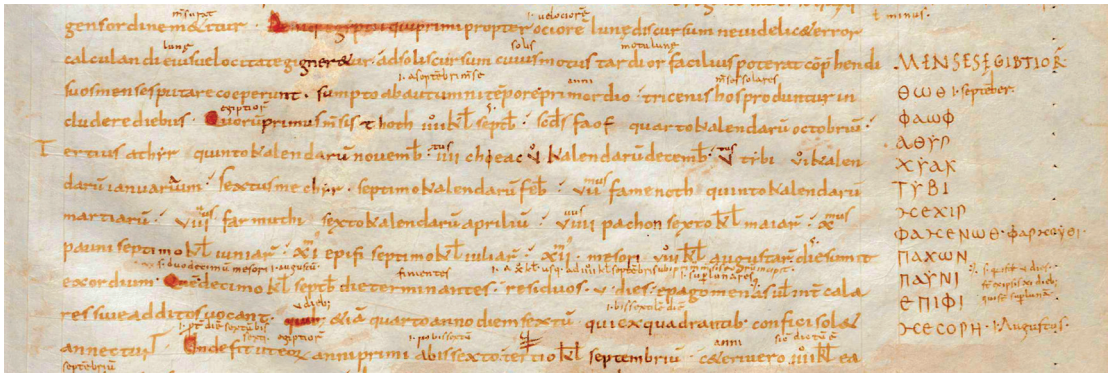


Figure 5a: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1832, fol. 25r: Egyptian months in Greek letters (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

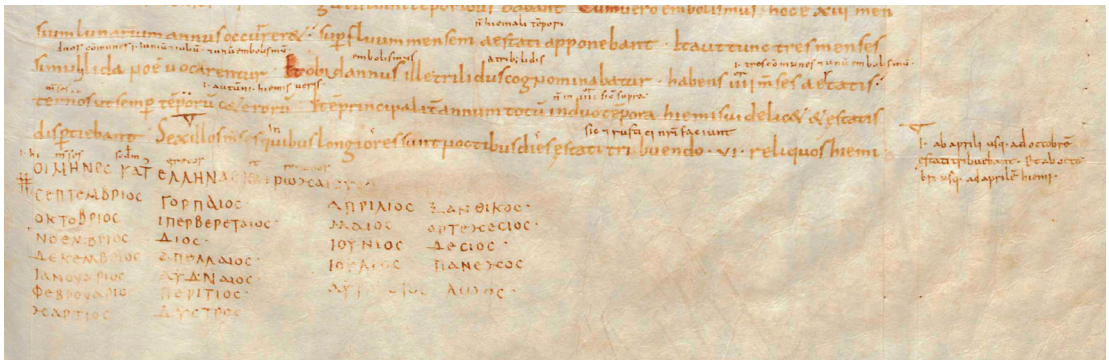


Figure 5b: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1832, fol. 27r: Roman and Greek months in Greek letters (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

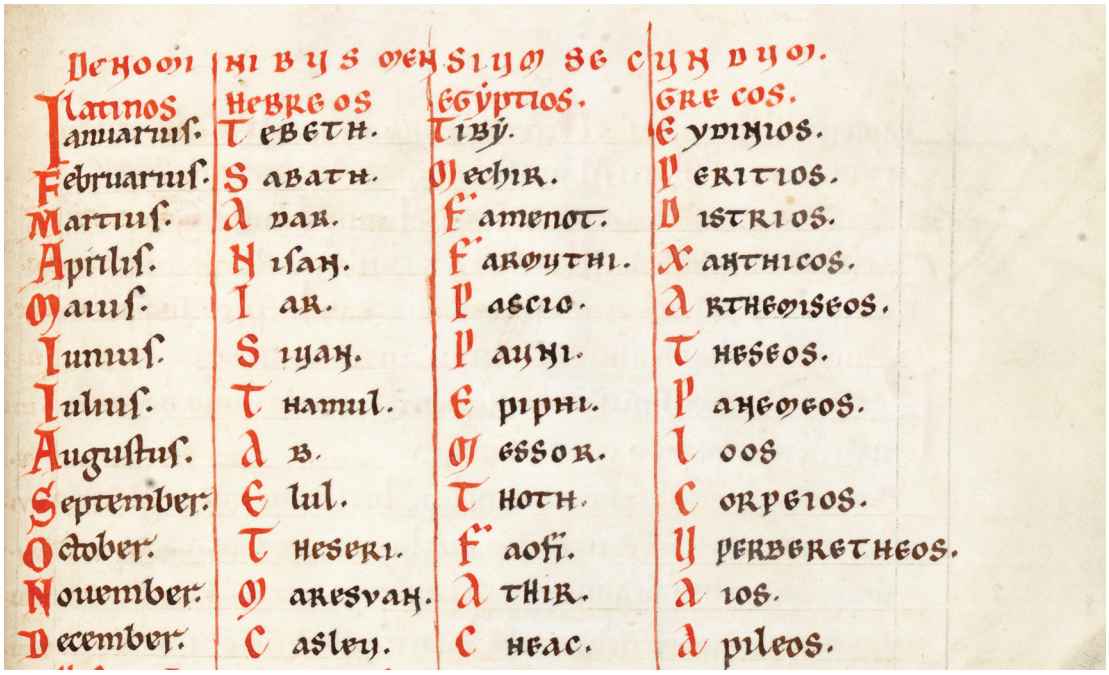


Figure 6: St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, 453, p. 207: De nominibus mensium secundum Latinos, Hebreos, Egyptios, Grecos (© St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 453; CC BY NC 4.0 [https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/de/list/one/csg/0453])

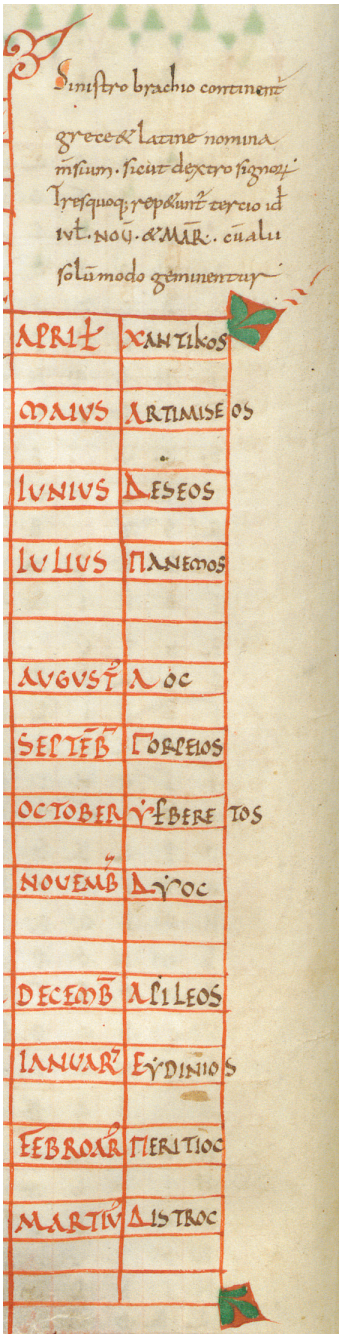


Figure 7: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 31v: list of Roman and Greek month names (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

(2) The Days of a Lunar Orbit According to the Zodiac Signs

The different positions of the moon in the sky were determined by the twelve zodiac signs. A helpful visualization of this can be found in a supplement to Ptolemy's *Handy Tables* (which is supposed to stem directly from the original work, although the original shape of these visualizations is under discussion)[42]. The left-hand outer column shows the 30 days of a lunar orbit around the earth and the header shows the 12 months with their Latin and Egyptian names, starting with January (S1 Tihon)[43] (**figure 8**). The table shows the zodiac sign corresponding to each lunar day. A similar table is used by the computist Maximus the Confessor in the appendix to his already mentioned *Brevis enarratio* (**figure 9**).[44] Abbo of Fleury[45] also includes a zodiac table of the lunar days in his Berlin companion, starting with March (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 39r).[46] The most striking feature is the identical shape of the alternately oblique inscriptions (from the bottom to the top or *vice versa*), which imitate the Greek version exactly (**figure 10**). However, the time units differ because Abbo's table also uses half days. It remains to be established whether Abbo or, rather, an earlier computist translated it into Latin.

42 See n. 30.

43 See Tihon, Tables Faciles, 55, 65.

44 See n. 34; the edition of Maximus the Confessor's *Brevis enarratio* in PG 19, cols. 1217-1280, omits the appendix.

45 Obrist, Tables et figures abboniennes, 153-154, refers to the tables in Maximus the Confessor's *Brevis enarratio* and quotes the manuscript Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr. 505 (*Diktyon* 67136; accessed on 27 May 2026: https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.505, dated 1520). Unfortunately, she did not consider the appendix on fols. 243r-251v, and the Vaticanus is only a very late witness to the text. Both the text and the appendix exist in earlier manuscripts dating from the 10th century onwards. Hereinafter, I shall refer to the earliest witness, Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 33 (*Diktyon* 37986), which is dated to the mid-10th century.

46 Abbo of Fleury, *Miscellanea de computo*, ed. Lohr, 62 (figure) and 63 (Abbo's explanation); short commentary in the introduction by Alfred Lohr on pp. LIX-LX; see also Obrist, Tables et figures abboniennes, 172-177.



Figure 8: Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 28.26, fol. 43v: κανὼν σελήνης ἐκ συνόδου, additional material to Ptolemy's Handy Tables (© Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Digital Repository, https://tecabml.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/plutei/id/475232, CC BY-NC-SA)

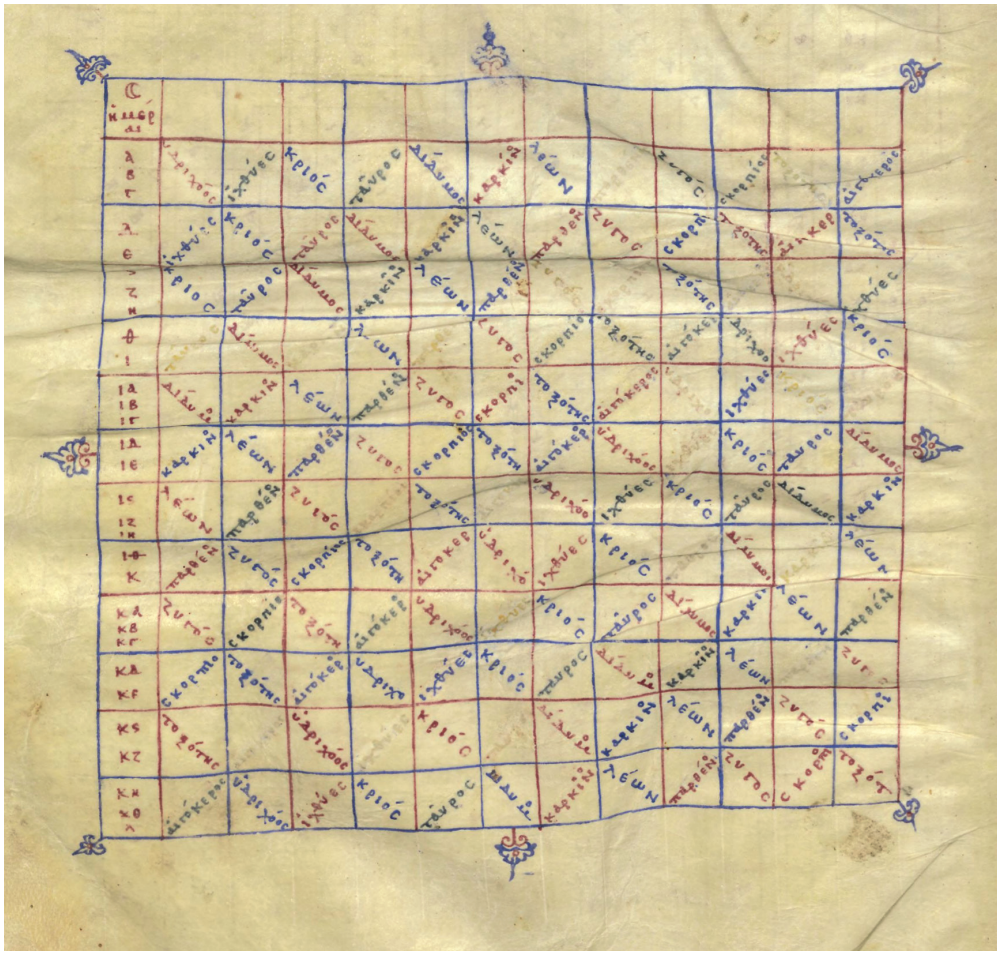


Figure 9: Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 33, fol. 25v: σελήνης ἡμέραι and the zodiac signs in the appendix to Maximus the Confessor's Brevis ennarratio (Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, SCA 33, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

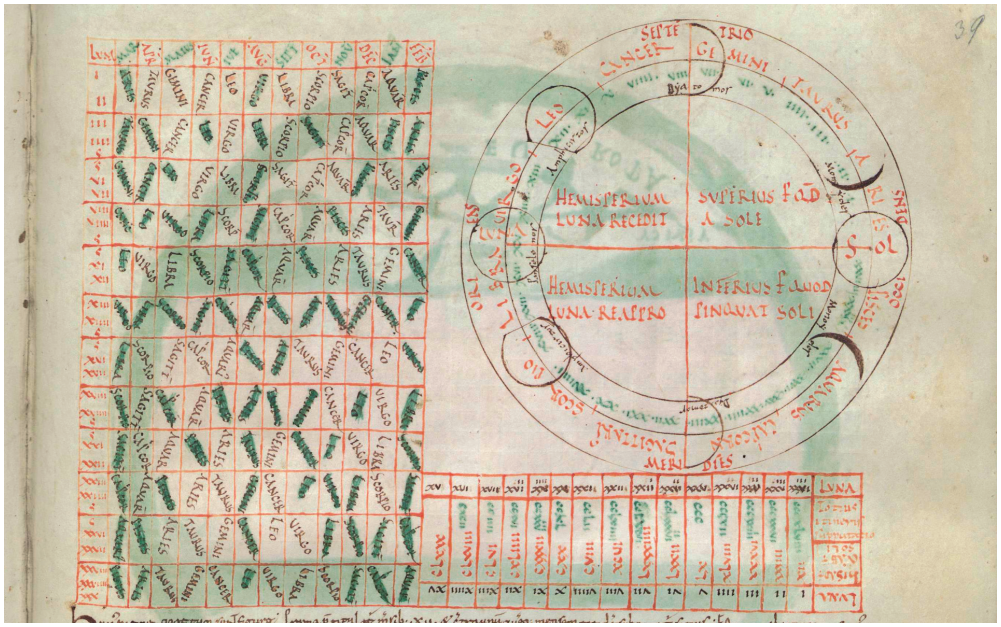


Figure 10: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 39r: computus companion by Abbo of Fleury (mistake of the scribe at the transition from lunar days 7 to 8; the direction of the inscription is not alternated) (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

(3) Table Indicating the Lunar Day for Each Date

Additional material circulating alongside Ptolemy's *Handy Tables* includes a concordance of the weekdays for each month of the year (Α, Β, Γ, Δ, Ε, Ζ, Η, ἡμέρα) and the corresponding lunar days (**figure 11**). The lunar days are indicated by the letters Α, Β, Γ, Δ, Ε, Ζ, Η, Θ, Ι, Κ (to be read from top to bottom), as well as by one or two spaces between these letters (ἡμέρα σεληνόδρομος; not the numeric value of the Greek letter). These ten letters encompass a full lunar month of up to 30 days (i.e. one letter and two spaces correspond to three days). Based on this complete calendar, it is possible to find the lunar day for each date in a separate diagram inscribed only with the lunar letters Α-Κ. However, a user must know the current year of the lunar cycle. The lunar days are indicated in the outer right column according to the 11-day interval of the annual lunar epacts (the difference of 11 days between a lunar year of 354 days and a solar year of 356 days). They start from Α= 1 and continue in the following order ΙΒ = 12, ΚΓ = 23, Δ = 4, and so on, i.e. the addition of 11. If the sum is greater than 30, 30 is subtracted and a lunar leap month is added to the lunar year (384 days). The header (numerals 1-30, i.e. Α-Λ) indicates the lunar days of this 30-year cycle (C8 Tihon).[47] A similar table can be found in the *Brevis enarratio* by Maximus the Confessor: The lunar days are inscribed in the same 11-day interval, but the diagram is rotated 90 degrees anticlockwise and these lunar days represent the header (**figure 12**). The Berlin computus companion by Abbo of Fleury imitates the table with the epact interval (according to the Ptolemy model) and has 30 columns for the years as the header (**figure 13**). Interestingly, he uses Greek numerals for the 30 years and imitates the Greek model in the table with the (Latin) letters A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, K (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 45r[48] and, modified, fol. 32v[49]), but he also provides a »pure« Latin version with Roman numerals I-XXX (and inscribed letters A-K) in an alternative table on fol. 32r[50] of his Berlin companion. Here, both the header and the left outer column bear the numerals I-XXX. According to the explanation on fol. 32r, the basic data required for the schemes on fols. 32v (and 45r) are the lunar letter from the *annale* and the lunar year (corresponding to the respective numeral in the header).[51]

47 Tihon, Tables Faciles, 55, 65.

48 Abbo of Fleury, *Miscellanea de computo*, ed. Lohr, 87 (table and Abbo's explanation), commentary in the introduction on p. LXII. The table refers to a separate calendar (*annale*) on fol. 44v, which uses Latin and Greek numerals (*hoc magis Grece quam Latine compositum annale, elementorum scilicet distinctione, superius descripsi suo ordine. sed ne auctoritatem grecizantis* [= Abbo, see in the introduction, p. LXII] *abolerem, hic id ipsum repetens innotescere decrevi …* [Abbo of Fleury, *Miscellanea de computo*, ed. Lohr, 86, ll. 36-38]): The Greek numerals indicate the days of the month according to the Roman system of Kalends, Nones, and Ides. These terms are written in Latin and run from bottom to top).

49 Abbo of Fleury, *Miscellanea de computo*, ed. Lohr, 30 (table and Abbo's explanation), commentary in the introduction on pp. LIV-LV.

50 Abbo of Fleury, *Miscellanea de computo*, ed. Lohr, 31 (Abbo's explanation), 32 (table), commentary in the introduction on pp. LIV-LV.

51 See the explanation in Abbo of Fleury, *Miscellanea de computo*, ed Lohr, LIV-LV.



Figure 11: Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 28.26, fol. 44r: ἡμέραι κατὰ σελήνην: the lunar days and the epacts, in the additional material to Ptolemy's Handy Tables (refers to the last column in the model calendar: 45r-50v) (© Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Digital Repository, https://tecabml.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/plutei/id/475232)

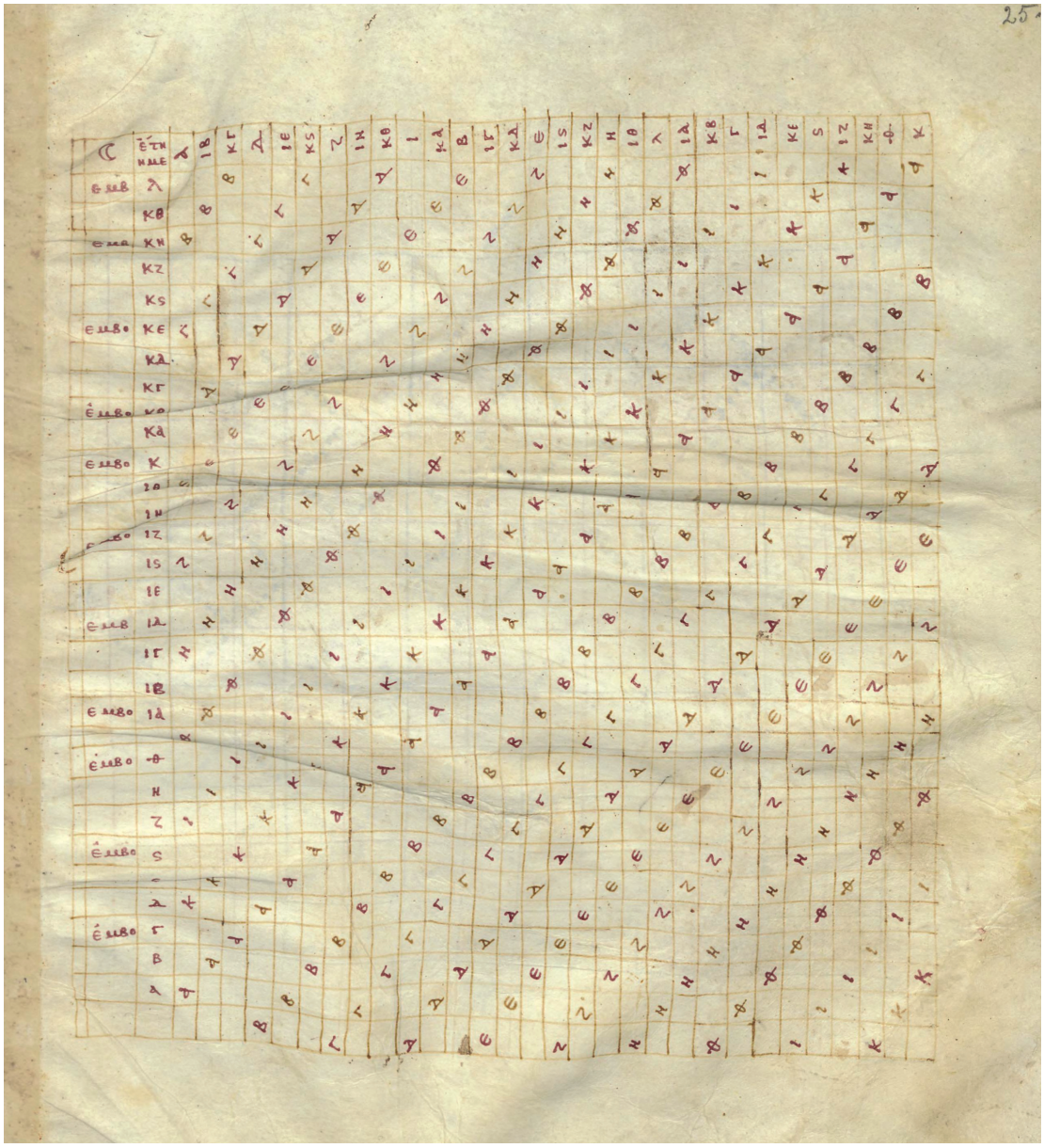
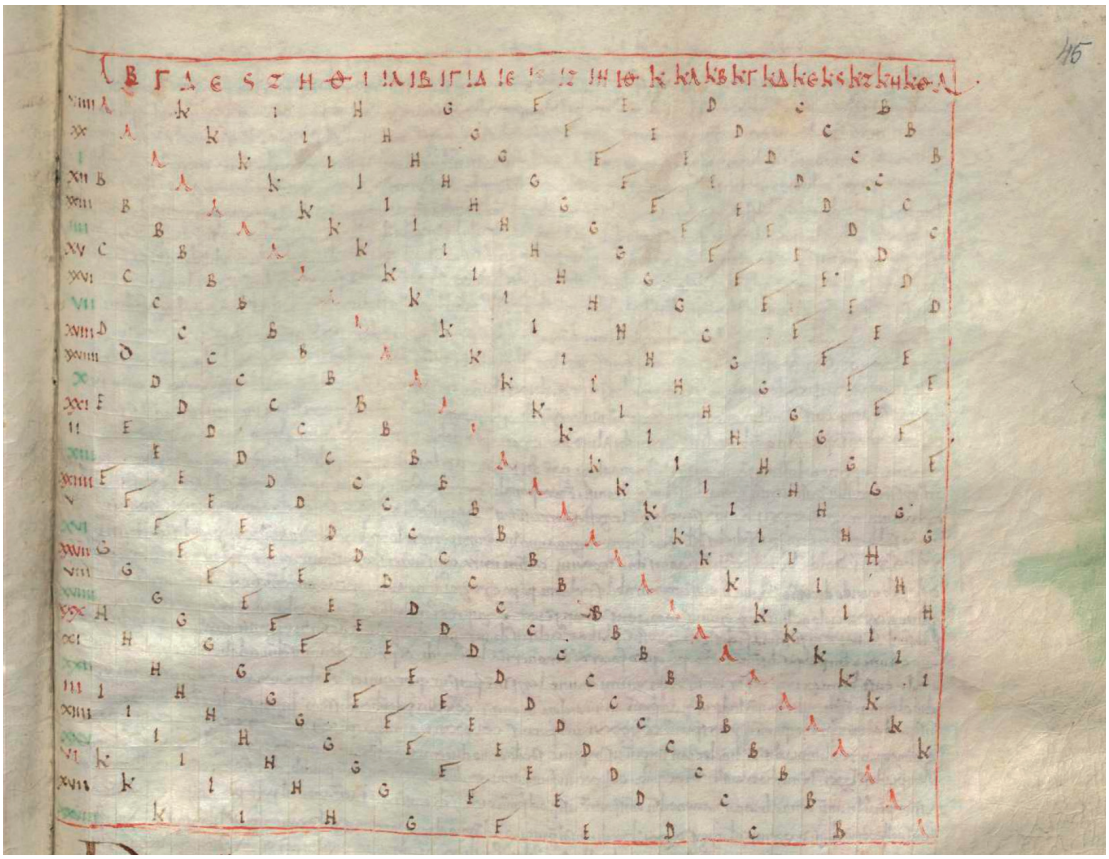


Figure 12: Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 33, fol. 25r: list indicating the lunar day for each date in the appendix to Maximus the Confessor's Brevis ennarratio (it refers to the lunar column of each month in the model calendar on fols. 23v-24r) (Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, SCA 33, Public Domain Mark 1.0)



Figures 13: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 45r: list indicating the lunar day for each date in the computus companion by Abbo of Fleury (reference calendar on fol. 44v) (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

(4) Table Showing the Weekday for each Date

To calculate Easter Sunday for any year, it is first necessary to determine the weekday of the 14th day of the first lunar month (i.e. the full moon) in the solar calendar. This can be done by calculation or by referring to tables providing a quick overview.[52] The appendix to Maximus the Confessor's *Brevis enarratio* indicates the first weekdays of each year in a 28-year solar cycle, including the leap days every fourth year (**figure 14**). He starts with Sunday and lists the weekdays using the letters A, B, Γ, Δ, E, Z, H without numerical value. Abbo of Fleury

52 In his *Brevis enarratio*, Maximus the Confessor provides a method of calculating the day of the week for any given date. To simplify the process, he adds a circle containing the sun epacts (in Latin *paschalia,* the so called *concurrentes*) for each year of a solar cycle, and inscribes a table showing the first week of each month in the first year of the solar cycle (Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 33, fol. 12r); however, as his commentary (f. 11rv; Maximus the Confessor, *Brevis enarratio*, PG 19, cols. 1264-1268) explains the calculation process (addition of the epacts and days, division by 7), the user must calculate the result (rather than simply consulting the tables), as the tables in the appendix only serve to simplify the process.

illustrates this *septizodium*[53] with three tables (one for leap years, one for the days of a leap year until the leap day – both starting with Saturday –, and one with leap days included, starting with Sunday; the dates differ due to scribal errors) and explains it on fol. 29r of his computus companion,[54] Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833 (**figure 15**). Basic data is included again in the *annale* on fols. 23r-28v.

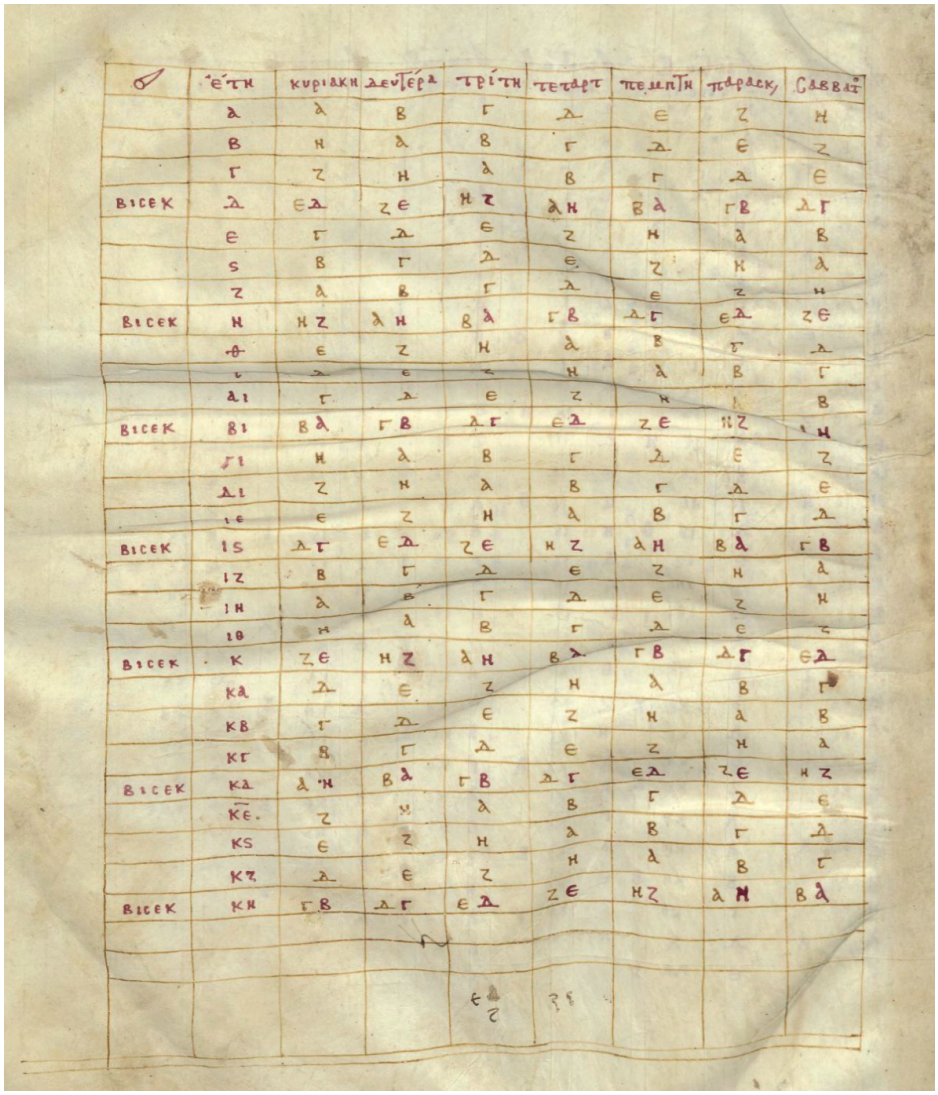


Figure 14: Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 33, fol. 24v: list indicating the weekday for each date (Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, SCA 33, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

53 Abbo of Fleury explains the *ratio septizodii* as follows: »Because the letters (i.e. the indicators of the days of the week) return to the same value (i.e. day of the week) after seven years« (*eo quod per septem annorum circulum in semet revolvuntur* [sc. *litterae*]).

54 Abbo of Fleury, *Miscellanea de computo*, ed. Lohr, 18 (tables), 19 (explanation), commentary in the introduction on p. LII.

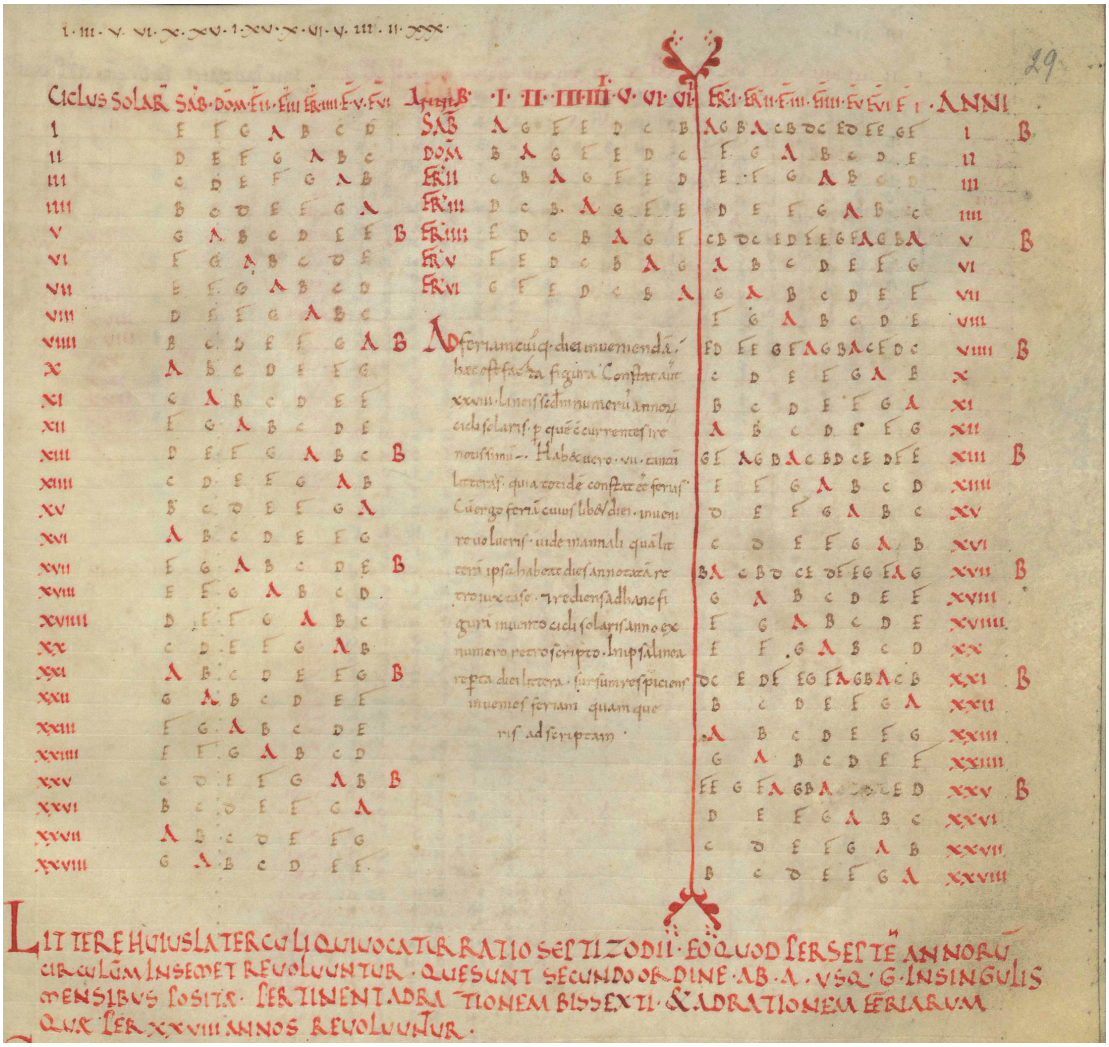


Figure 15: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 29r: list indicating the weekday for each date (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

(5) Horologium: Length of a Shadow in the First Six Hours on a Sundial

The appendix to Maximus the Confessor's *Brevis enarratio* also includes a useful sundial that indicates the length of the shadow in feet (πόδες) and helps measure the time in each month (**figure 16**). It displays the first six hours of each day of the month, which correspond with the hours after high noon (and recur in the same month after the midpoint of the year, i.e. January and December, etc.). In Greek manuscripts, the sundial is depicted as a circle, divided into twelve segments.[55] Abbo of Fleury also incorporates a sundial in his Berlin computus

55 A critical edition of the length of the shadow at each date (for the first eleven hours), measured in feet, can be found in *Catalogus* 5/3, ed. Heeg, 76-78 (from the manuscripts Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr. 1056 [*Diktyon* 67687], fols. 44v and 65r, 14th c. [as treatise by Dionysius to King Philipp] – Milan, Biblioteca

companion on fol. 38v.[56] Like the Greek manuscript, it shows the length of the respective shadows in feet (*horologium, quod contra unumquemque mensem habet ad umbram humani corporis pedes singularum horarum diei*). However, here it appears as a semicircle and the data are also presented in a table[57] (since the shadow lengths recur in the second half of the year, the respective months are combined) (**figure 17**).

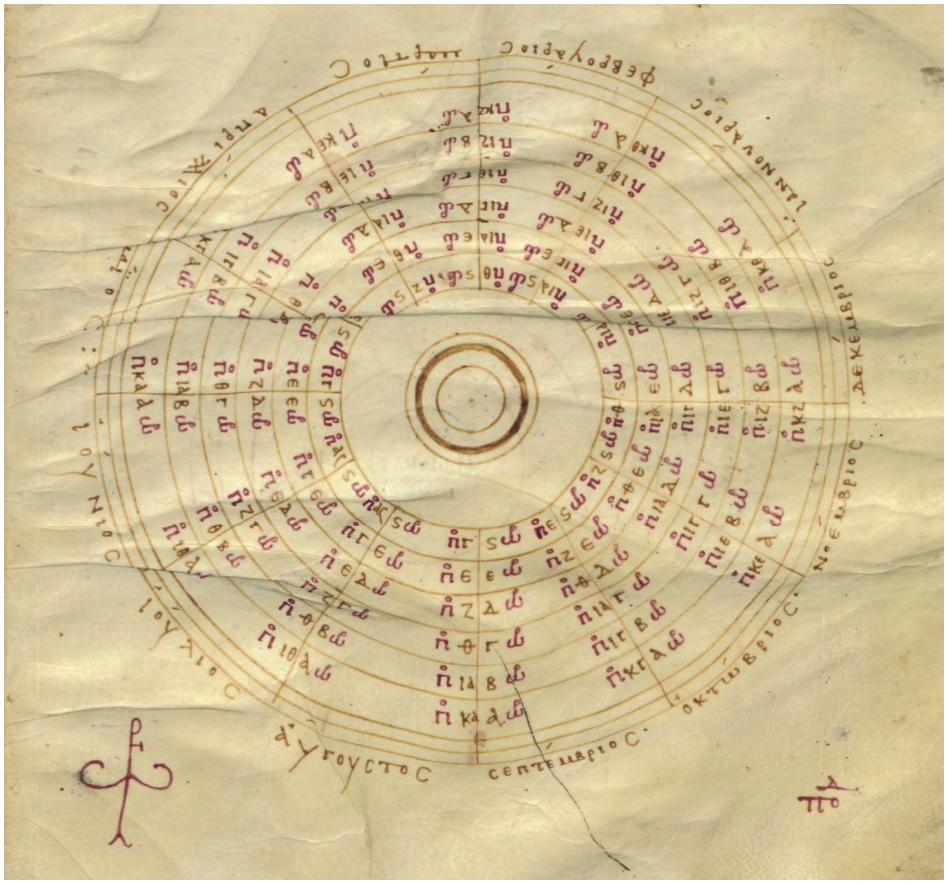


Figure 16: Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 33, fol. 26r: scheme of a sundial (Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, SCA 33, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

Ambrosiana, F.12. sup. [*Diktyon* 42736], fols. 304r-305v, 10th c. [as treatise by Theodorus to Theophilus] – Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 854 [*Diktyon* 50441], fols. 196v-197r, 13th c. [abbreviated version, Theodorus to Theophilus]). To add: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr. 341 (*Diktyon* 66972), fols. 11v-12v, dated 1021 (Theodorus to Theophilus); see furthermore Sekstos ὁ ὡροκράτωρ to King Philipp (the lenght of the shadow for each of the twelve hours in all twelve signs of the zodiac; edition: *Catalogus* 7, ed. Boll, 188-189 (from Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1577 [*Diktyon* 9478], fols. 117r-118v, 15th c.).

56 Abbo of Fleury, *Miscellanea de computo*, ed. Lohr, 60 (table), commentary in the introduction on p. LIX; see also Obrist, Tables et figures abboniennes, 178-182.

57 The following manuscript contains an explanation of the table: Bern, Burgerbibliothek, 250, fol. 14v. This also originates from Abbo's school; see Barbara Obrist in the introduction of Abbo of Fleury, *Miscellanea de computo*, ed. Lohr, XXXVII, XL. The text is edited in Lohr, 151, l. 26-152, l. 50; for the Bern manuscript, see also the introduction on p. LXV, as well as Cordoliani, Manuscrits 135-146.

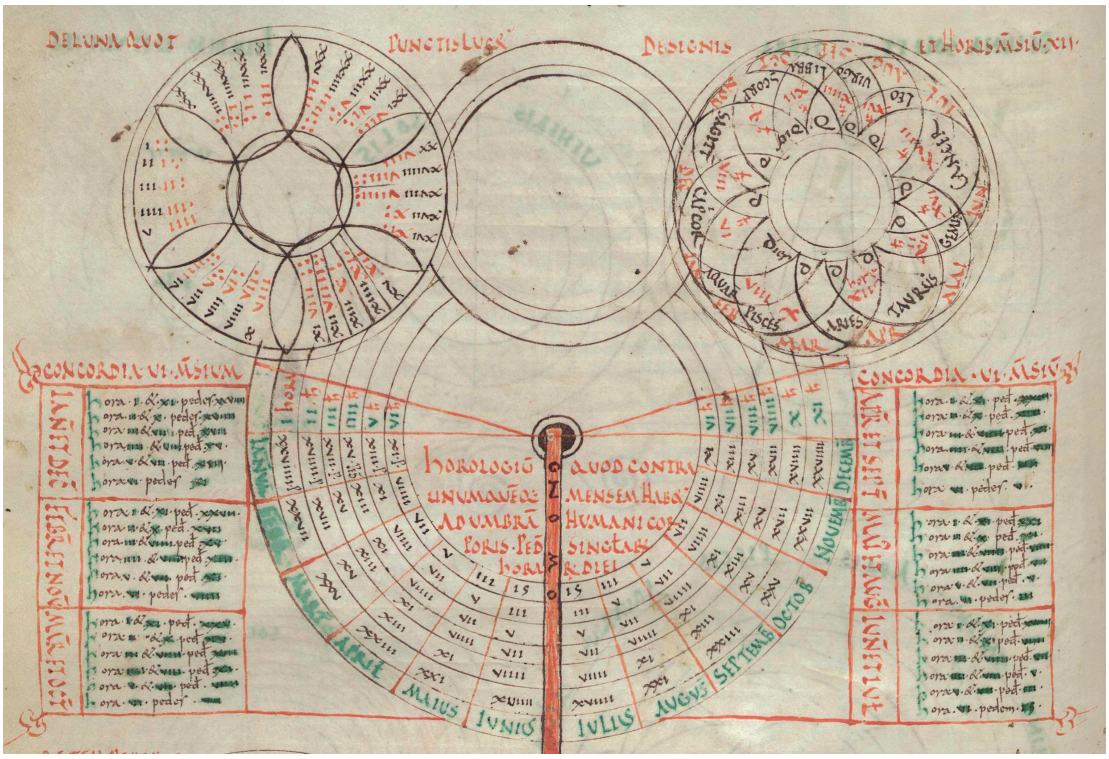


Figure 17: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 38v: scheme of a sundial (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

Text 1: Letter from Petosiris to King Nechepso

This treatise, which was very popular in medieval times, explains what outcome a person can expect when facing threating events such as serious illness, fugitive status, single combat or duelling.[58] This method is based on the letters of a person's name, which also have a numer-

58 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to two similar texts in the magical papyri from the late antiquity period: »Sphere of Democritus«: *Papyri Graecae Magicae* 2, ed. Preisendanz and Henrichts, 81 no. XII 351-364 (English translation and commentary in: Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies 1, ed. Faraone and Torallas Tovar, 112-113, no. 15.400-418): The basic numbers are the lunar day on which someone fell ill and their name (each letter has a numerical value). The sum is then divided by 30, as a lunar month has 30 days, and the remainder below 30 is checked against a schema in which the 30 numerals are arranged above and below a centre line. If the number matches one of the numerals above the center line, the sick person will survive; if it matches one of the numerals below the center line, the sick person will die. The second text is edited in *Papyri Graecae Magicae* 2, ed. Preisendanz and Henrichts, 194, no. LXII 48-52: 612 (= the numerical value of the name Zeus [ζ = 7, ε = 5, υ = 400, ς = 200]) is added to a random number (obtained by rolling dice) and 353 (the numerical value of the name Hermes [ἑ = 5, ρ = 100, μ = 40, η = 8, ς = 200]) is subtracted. If the result is an even number, the person will survive; otherwise, the person will die. Furthermore, instructions for prognostication based on the numerical value of a name are ascribed to Pythagoras; see Tannery, Notice, 255-260. The *Pinakes* database, maintained by the CNRS, IRHT, Paris, lists these manuscripts under *Pythagoras philosophus, works: computus, tabulae cabalisticae and epistula ad Telaugem*; see for example the Florence manuscript, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 86.14 (*Diktyon*

ical value in Greek, and the day of the moon, to which a numerical value is attributed in an accompanying concordance. The treatise explains how to calculate and interpret the final value. Finally, the user must consult a circle diagram in which the possible final values are assigned to one of the four quadrants (*megale zoe, mikra zoe, megas thanatos, mikros thanatos* – μεγάλη ζωή, μικρὰ ζωή, μέγας θάνατος, μικρὸς θάνατος) or a border zone (*mese zoe*, *mesos thanatos* – μέση ζωή, μέσος θάνατος).

A classic example is the battle between Achilles and Hector:[59] the sums calculated prove the outcome as recounted in mythology (Achilles emerges victorious). The mathematical process is as follows: First, the numbers in the person's name are added together. In the Greek version this is simply calculated by using the numerical value of each letter. For example, the name Achilles (Ἀχιλλεύς) is calculated as follows: 1 (Α) + 600 (χ) + 10 (ι) + λλ (2 × 30 = 60) + 5 (ε) + 400 (υ) + 200 (ς = σ), adding up to 1276. Next, the lunar day is required (here, the day of the fight). Each of the 30 possible days is equated with a particular number taken from the concordance (1st lunar day = 1585 [or another number], 2nd = 1116, 3rd = 1019, 4th = 1315, 5th = 814 etc.). The 17th lunar day corresponds to number 893 in the list. When this sum (1276 + 893 = 2169) is divided by 29, the remainder is 23 (2169 mod 29). In the diagram, this numeral can be found in the μεγάλη ζωή quadrant. However, the manuscripts vary in how they distribute the 29 numerals to the quadrants.

The problem with this list is that the attributed numbers vary in the manuscripts due to scribal errors. The next step is to divide the sum of the added numbers by 29, the number of a hollow lunar month, and to search for the remainder in one of the quadrants of the circle diagram. A good outcome is expected from numerals in the life part (*megale zoe* – μεγάλη ζωή) and a bad outcome from the numerals in the death part (*megas thanatos* – μέγας θάνατος).

However, there is also another method: one must take the sum of the letters in a person's name and divide the result by 29, take the respective lunar day, and check both numbers on the circle diagram. In this case, the two hemispheres are important: the parts above and below the horizon, known as *hypergeion* (ὑπέργειον) and *hypogeion* (ὑπόγειον) respectively. If the remainder of the sum of a person's letters is attributed to the *hypogeion* (the bad half) and the lunar day coincides with a numeral in the *hypergeion* (the good half), the person has a chance of being saved. Conversely, if both numbers coincide with a *hypogeion* numeral, the person has no chance.

In Greek manuscripts, the circle diagram is divided so that the two life parts (*megale zoe, mikra zoe* – μεγάλη ζωή, μικρὰ ζωή) are in the two upper quadrants, while the two death

16800), fols. 37r-39v, 15th c. (on fol. 39v is a table divided into *hypergeion* [the space above the earth] and *hypogeion* [the subterranean space]; accessed on 27 May 2026: https://tecabml.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/plutei/id/1014844). Manuscripts linked to the teaching of Abbo of Fleury also contain the *ratio spere Pitagorae, quam Apuleius descripsit*, which predicts the fate of the sick and warriors; see Juste, Comput, 107-114 and 122-125. There are some very unusal calculation methods in *Catalogus* 11/2, ed. Zuretti, 139-152 (cod. 34 of this volume; from Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, 4616 [*Diktyon* 40096], fols. 82v-89r). For the texts attributed to Pythagoras, Petosiris and Hermes Trismegistos, see also Neugebauer and Saliva, On Greek numerology.

59 Even »more pragmatic« prognostics were used, such as predicting who in a couple would die first, depending on the sum of the syllables of their names, see *Catalogus* 10, ed. Delatte, 243.

parts (*megas thanatos, mikros thanatos* – μέγας θάνατος, μικρὸς θάνατος) are in the lower ones. This illustrates the promising *hypergeion* and the fatal *hypogeion.*[60] However, the sequence may differ: In scheme 1, moving anticlockwise from the right, the order is: μικρὰ ζωή, μεγάλη ζωή (in the upper semicircle), μέγας θάνατος, μικρὸς θάνατος (continued in the lower semicircle; see **fig. 19**). In scheme 2, moving anticlockwise from the right, the order is: μεγάλη ζωή, μικρὰ ζωή (in the upper semicircle), μέγας θάνατος, μικρὸς θάνατος (continued in the lower semicircle; see **fig. 20**). In some circle diagrams, the area between the two life and death zones is designated the middle zone (*mese zoe*, *mesos thanatos* – μέση ζωή, μέσος θάνατος), which includes some numerals. This zone indicates an outcome that is neither quick nor long-lasting and that is positive in the life part or negative in the death part.[61]

There were slightly different Greek versions of the text and its illustrating diagram in circulation, namely as to the concordance of the letters and the diagram of the four quadrants.[62] One modification concerned the chosen names: Achilles and Hector were replaced by David (fighting Goliath) or Leon[63].

Such prognostics also attracted the interest of the West,[64] and so Latin translations began to circulate in manuscripts from the 9th century onwards. I am referring to the text and diagram transmitted in the computus companion of the School of Fleury, Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1883, fols. 53v-54r[65] (**figure 18**). The diagram's explanation includes the mid zone (*media vita*, *meso zoe* and *media mors, meso thanathos*; fol. 53v), but the mid zones are not inscribed with their numerals in the circle diagram, as they are in some Greek diagrams. However, the accompanying descriptions of such Greek diagrams only rarely refer to the mid zones (e.g. the Parisinus suppl. grec 446 [*Diktyon* 50020], see below). Another peculiarity of the Latin version is that the circle has been rotated 90 degrees to the left. This means that the life quadrants now correspond to the two left quadrants, and the death quadrants correspond to the two right ones (according to scheme 2, see **figure 20**). Due to this rotation, the *hypogeion* and *hypergeion* areas, which should correspond to the lower or

60 In the Madrid manuscript (see fig. 20) it is described as follows: The entire upper (half of the circle) is illuminated, while the entire lower (part) is dark.

61 See the illustration in Berthelot and Ruelle, *Collection* 1, 88 (taken from Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 2419 [*Diktyon* 52051], fol. 32r).

62 See *Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, ed. Riess, 382-388; a longer version from Modena, Biblioteca Estense universitaria, α.V.7.6 (Puntoni 174) (*Diktyon* 43508), fol. 262r, is published in *Catalogus* 4, ed. Oliveri, 120-121 (see also 34-35, under no. 13; furthermore Neugebauer and Saliva, On Greek numerology).

63 It is highly probable that this Leon refers to Emperor Leo VI, the »Wise«, who, over time, attained the status of a prophet in the 12th century and beyond; see Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit (PmbZ), #24311, accessed on 27 May 1026: www.degruyterbrill.com/database/PMBZ/entry/PMBZ26465/html. – These recensions, along with their respective calculation methods, have already been edited. For editions, see the list of the Greek manuscripts below.

64 For the vast influence of prognostics in the Middle Ages, see Heiduk, Herbers, and Lehner, *Prognostication*. For the Greek area in particular: Lempire, Calendrical Calculations.

65 Fol. 53v (diagram) (Abbo of Fleury, *Miscellanea de computo*, ed. Lohr, 121); Letter from Petosiris: fols. 53v-54r (ed. Lohr 123-124); see also the introduction in Lohr, LXIII. For the Latin tradition of the Letter from Petosiris, see Wickersheimer, Figures médio-astrologiques, 166-167; Van de Vyver, Les plus anciennes traductions latines, 674-676 (676: transmission from late antiqutity to medieval time); Tolles, Latin tradition; Engelen, *Zeit, Zahl und Bild*, 108-111; Juste, Comput, 101-107, 114-117, 119-121 (critical edition).

upper semicircle, are instead ascribed to *zoe megale / vita maior* + *tanatos micra* (sic) / *mors minor* (for the *ypergeia*, from left to right) and *zoe micra / vita minor* + *tanatos megale* (sic) / *mors maior* (for the *ypogeia*, from left to right), which makes no sense. A possible reason for the rotation of the circle is the additional inscription of the four cardinal directions in some Greek diagrams. According to this, the right-hand section (in the Greek circle) indicates south, while the left indicates north. Therefore, if a user wishes to adjust the circle to the usual compass, it must be turned as in the Latin circle diagram.[66]

A text version that is very similar to, but not identical with that of the Berlin companion is preserved in the manuscript Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España 4616 (*Diktyon* 40096), fols. 89r-90r[67] (**figures 20, 21**). However, as previously demonstrated, the Berlin manuscript also refers to the border zones, the μέση ζωή and μέσος θάνατος which are omitted in the Madrid version. For comparison, a version describing the three areas of life and death is included here (as preserved in the earliest manuscript of the Petosiris letter, the manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, suppl. grec 446[68], **figure 19**). Minor orthographic errors of the Greek texts have been tacitly corrected. The Paris manuscript uses majuscule letters for numerals, whereas the Madrid manuscript uses minuscule letters; I have followed their respective practices.

66 For a Greek example, see the inscription of the four cardinal directions in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 2419 (*Diktyon* 52051), fol. 156r, or suppl. grec 637 (*Diktyon* 53372), fol. 58v.

67 The text (without diagram and inscriptions) is edited in *Regiae Bibliothecae Matritensis Codices Graeci* 1, ed. Iriarte, 338-339 (no 84); for the astronomical content, see *Catalogus* 11/2, ed. Zuretti, 53-71 (cod. 34) and 152-154 (edition); accessed on 27 May 2026: http://bdh.bne.es/bnesearch/detalle/bdh0000247036. The Madrid version has also been published by Ernst Riess (Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta, ed. Riess, 385-386).

68 Accessed on 27 May 2026: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b11004080k.

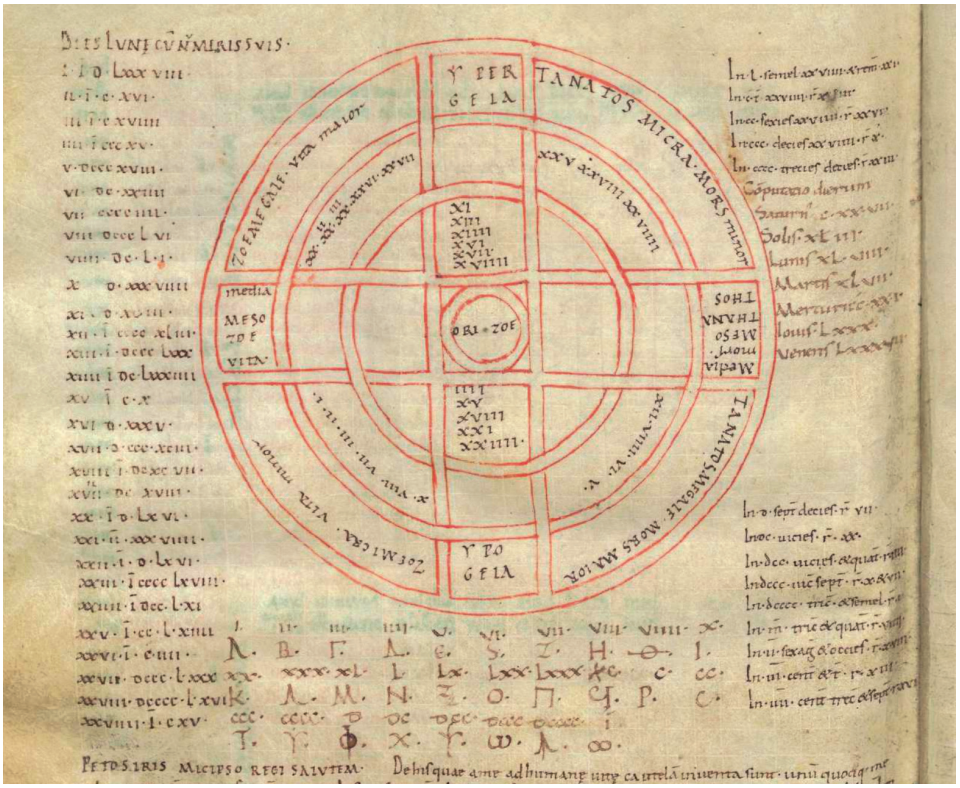


Figure 18: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 53v: illustration to the letter from Petosiris (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)



Figure 19: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, suppl. grec 446, fol. 44r: illustration to the letter from Petosiris (© gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France)

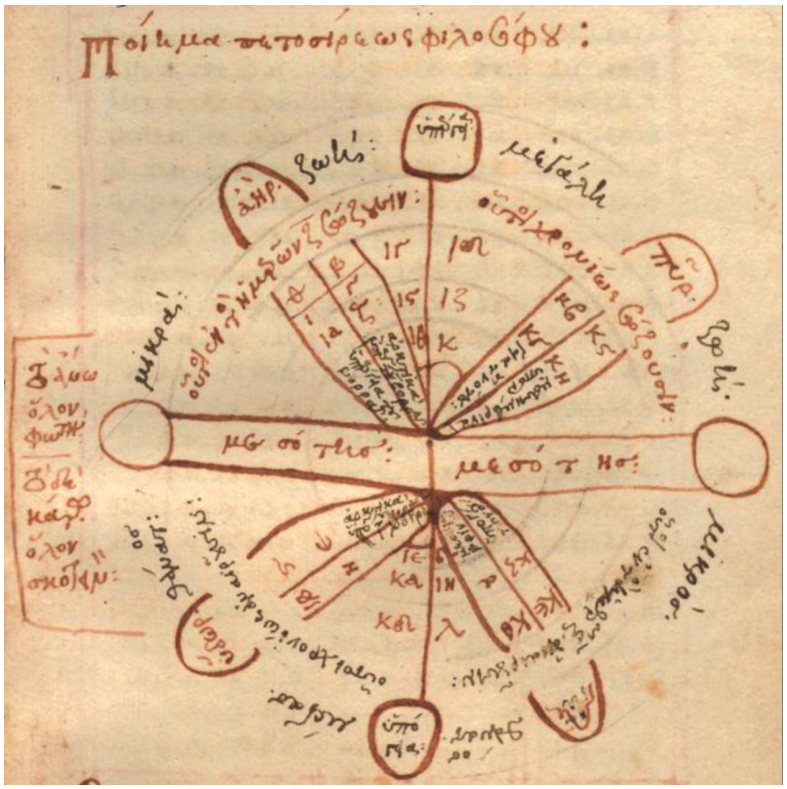


Figure 20: Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, 4616, fol. 90r: illustration to the letter from Petosiris (© image taken from the holdings of the Biblioteca Nacional de España, CC BY 4.0)



Figure 21: Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, 4616, fol. 89v: concordance of lunar days and respective calculation number (© image taken from the holdings of the Biblioteca Nacional de España, CC BY 4.0)

As there is still no overview of the Greek manuscripts, I will start by compiling a list from the references in the *Catalogi Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum* (CCAG), the database *Pinakes* and checks in digital manuscript libraries.

Greek Manuscripts until the End of the 15th Century as far as Known[69]

1. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, suppl. grec 446 (*Diktyon* 53179), fols. 43v-44r, 10th c. (with circle diagram, fol. 44r: ἡμικύκλιον ἀναστάσεως, ζωῆς, πράξεως καὶ εὑρέσεως), inc.: ὄργανον ἀστρονομικόν, ἐπιστολὴ Πετοσιρεως πρὸς Νεχεψῶ βασιλέα Ἀσυρίων. – ψῆφος σεληνιακή, δι᾽ ἧς (ex σελινιακὸς δι᾽ οὗ u.v. corr.) ἐστὶν τὸν ἐπισκεπτόμενον τοὺς νοσοῦντας ἄπτεστον (sic) εἶναι περὶ ζωῆς καὶ θανάτου καὶ περὶ μονομάχον (sic) καὶ πράξεων καὶ περὶ πόλεως ἢ στεφάνου ἢ πρακτῆρος ἢ πλοκῆς καὶ ἀποδρασμοῦ καὶ εὑρέσεως καὶ τὰ τοιούτοις ὅμοια [...] expl.: ἐλθὲ οὖν ἐν τῷ ὑποκειμένῳ ὀργάνῳ καὶ εὑρήσεις, ὅτι νικᾷ Δαβὶδ τὸν Γολιάθ (*Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, no. 40, ed. Riess, 386; *Catalogus* 8/3, ed. Boudreaux, 75 [cod. 55 of this volume]; example: David [and Goliath]; numerical concordance of the lunar days: α = 1589, β = 1116, γ = 1019, δ = 1315, ε = 814, ς = 634, ζ = 430, etc.).
2. Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr. 432 (*Diktyon* 67063), fol. 138v, 14th c. (with two circle diagrams, ὄργανον κανονικὸν ἤτοι πυθαγορικόν, for the *hypergaion* [ταχεῖα ζωή and μακρὰ ζωή] and the *hypogaion* [ταχὺς θάνατος and μακρὸς θάνατος], fol. 138v; the text is ascribed to a priest and βιβλίων ἐπισφραγιστής named Florentinus [Florentinus is also the author of a letter to Ptolemy, see Vatican, BAV, gr. 509 [*Diktyon* 67140], fols. 311v-312r), inc.: ἐπέταξά σοι ὄργανον κανονικόν, ὃ διασκεπτόμενος ἀεὶ ἀδιάπτωτος ἔσῃ, τὸ δὲ αὐτὸ ἐπὶ νίκης μονομάχων, πραγμάτων καὶ ἀποδιδρασκόντων καὶ τῶν ὁμοίων. σκέπτου δὲ οὕτως· δέξαι τοῦ κατακλιθέντος ἢ τοῦ φυγόντος ἢ τοῦ ἀντιδίκου ἢ τῶν τούτοις ὁμοίων τὸ ὄνομα [...] expl.: λέγομεν τὸν Ἀχιλλέα νικᾶν, τὸν δὲ Ἕκτορα νικᾶσθαι, ἐπειδὴ εὑρέθη ἐν τῷ ὀργάνῳ καταλελειμμένη α΄, ἔνθα ὁ μικρὸς θάνατος (*Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, no. 38, ed. Riess, 384, l. 14-385, 45; *Catalogus* 5/4, ed. Weinstock, 6-7 [cod. 34 of this volume]; examples: Achilles [and Hector]; numerical concordance of the lunar days: α = 1589, β = 1110, γ = 1119, δ = 1315, ε = 1408, ς = 634, ζ = 804, etc.).
3. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea, Plut. 86.17 (*Diktyon* 16803), fols. 176v-177v, 15th c. (with circle diagram, fol. 176r: κύκλος τοῦ Πετόσιρι), inc.: Πετόσιρις Νεχψὼ (sic) τῷ τιμιωτάτῳ βασιλεῖ χαίρειν. περὶ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου τῶν ὑπ᾽ ἐμοῦ εὑρισκομένων πρὸς τὸν ἀνθρώπινον βιὸν ἐξακριβωσάμενος διαπέμψασθαί σοι οὐκ ὤκνησα καὶ σὺ δὲ τῇ θεοπνεύστῳ σου προνοίᾳ ἐνέργεει τοῖς ὑπ᾽ ἐμοῦ σοι γραφομένοις, ἀναγκαίου γὰρ ὄντος τῆς τῶν καταπερικλινομένων ἀνθρώπων συνθέσεως ἢ νοσούντων ἐπίστασθαι, πότερον ὑγιαίνουσιν ἢ οὔ, ὑπέταξά σοι ὄργανον κανονικόν, δι᾽ οὗ ἐπισκεπτόμενος ἀεὶ ἀδιάπτωτος ἔσῃ· τὸ δὲ αὐτὸ καὶ ἐπὶ νίκης καὶ μοναχῶν (sic) καὶ πραγμάτων, ἀποδιδρασκόντων καὶ τῶν τοιούτοις ὁμοίων, σκέπτου δὲ οὕτως [...] expl.: εἰ δὲ ἀναμεμιγμέναι ἐκ τῆς παροχῆς γινώσκουσι, πότερον πολλοὺς χρόνους αἱ νόσοι ἢ οὔ καὶ εἰ φευκτέος ὁ κίνδυνος ἢ οὔ (cf. *Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, no. 39, ed. Riess; example: Leon, in the calculation a *kanon* is referred to, but this concordance is not

69 See also the overview in Pinakes, accessed on 27 May 2026: https://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr/notices/oeuvre/5262/.

included in the diagrams on fol. 178r, they only contain the numerals 1-30 distributed in the *hypergeion* and *hypogeion* diagram).

4. Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Voss. gr. F° 59 (*Diktyon* 38069), fols. 279v-280r, 15th c. (with circle diagram), inc. (without name of the author) ὄργανον προγνωστικὸν βιωφελὲς χρήσιμον ἐξ αἰγυπτιακῆς βιβλίου ἡκριβόμενον (sic) ἀντιγραφέν, σκεπτέον δὲ οὕτως [...] expl.: ἔνθα ἦν ὁ μικρὸς θάνατος (= *Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, no. 38, ed. Riess, 384, 17-385, 45; de Meyier, Codices Vossiani graeci, 69 [he refers to Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 2184 (*Diktyon* 51813), fol. 211rv, second half of the 15th c., see *Catalogus* 8/4, ed. Boudreaux, 12 (cod. 73 of this volume) and below, no. 10]; the Paris manuscript has no circle diagram, but a list [ὄργανον] of concordance indicating the remainders and the respective quadrant [f. 211v]; examples: Achilles and Hector; numerical concordance of the lunar days: α = 1585, β = 1116, γ = 1019, δ = 1315, ε = 814, ς = 634, ζ = 430, etc.).

5. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 637 (*Diktyon* 53372), fol. 59r, 15th c. (with circle diagram, fol. 58v), inc.: προγνωστικὸν ἡκριβωμένον βιωφελὲς καὶ χρήσιμον ἀντι[γραφὲν ἐξ] αἰγυπτιακῆς παλαιᾶς βίβλου Πετώσιρις Νεχεψὼ τῷ τιμιωτάτῳ βασιλεῖ χαίρειν. ἐπειδὴ βεβάρηται σου ἡ θεία ψυχή, σοφώτατε βασιλεῦ, πολυπραγμονεῖν ἐν ταῖς τῶν ἄστρων κινήσεσι, ζητοῦσα τῶν ἐσομένων τὴν ἔκβασιν—πολυσχεδὴς γὰρ καὶ δυσκατάληπτος [...] expl.: ἐν τῷ ὀργάνῳ καταλελει<μ>μένος α΄, ἔνθα ἦν ὁ μικρὸς θάνατος (= *Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, no. 38, ed. Riess, 384-385, l. 45; examples: Achilles and Hector; the numerical concordance of the lunar days is missing; on fol. 58r a later hand added a calculation example for the name Leon).

6. Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr. 952 (*Diktyon* 67583), fol. 185rv, first half of the 15th c. (with table, fol. 185v), inc.: ἡ δὲ Πετοσύρεως προσενεχθεῖσα τῷ βασιλεῖ Νεχεψῶ μέθοδος, ᾗ καὶ Πυθαγόρας ἔχρητο· ἔστιν αὕτη· ἀρίθμει, φησί, τὸ ἰθυγενὲς ὄνομα τοῦ κάμνοντος ἢ τοῦ παλαίοντος ἢ τοῦ ἀποδράντος ἢ ἑτέρου τινὸς τοιούτου, ἄριθμει δὲ καὶ τὸ ὄνομα τῆς σελήνης [...] expl.: καὶ σπουδάζεις προγνῶναι τὸ ἐσόμενον. τινὲς δὲ ἐφεξῆς τῶν τριῶν ἡμερῶν ἀπὸ τῆς κατακλίσεως τὰς ψήφους λαμβάνουσι, καὶ ἐὰν εὑρεθῶσι σύμφωνοι, βεβαίτερον ἀποφαίνονται· ἐὰν δὲ ἀναμεγμιγμέναι, ἐκ τῆς ὑπεροχῆς γινώσκουσι, πότερον πολυχρόνιον ἡ νόσος ἢ οὒ καὶ εἰ ἐκφευκτέος ὁ κίνδυνος ἢ οὔ (Catalogus 5/4, ed. Weinstock, 11-12 [cod. 39 of this volume]; example: Leon; numerical concordance of the lunar days on fol. 186r: α = 1589 = 1288 + 301 [numerical value of the name σελήνη; added until full moon], β = 1123 = 822 [cod. 815] + 301, γ = 1019 = 718 + 301, δ = 1315 = 1014 + 301, ε = 814 = 513 [cod. 518] + 301, ς = 634 = 333 + 301, ζ = 430 = 129 + 301, etc.).

7. Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ross. 986 (*Diktyon* 66453), fol. 388v, mid 15th c. (with circle diagram, fol. 388v), inc.: περισσότερος (sic) φιλοσόφου. περὶ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου τῶν ὑπ΄ ἐμοῦ εὑρισκομένων πρὸς τὸν ἀνθρώπινον βίον διαπέμψασθαι ἐξακριβευσάμενος οὐκ ὤκνησα [...] expl.: λέγομεν τὸν μὲν Ἀχιλλέα νικᾷν, τὸ δὲ ἕκτορα νικᾶσθαι, ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ εὑρέθη ἐν τῷ ὀργάνῳ καταλελυμμένον (sic) α΄, ἔνθα ἔστιν ἡ μία μικρὸς θάνατος (= *Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, no. 39, ed. Riess, 385-386; examples: Achilles and Hector; numerical concordance of the lunar days on fol. 389r: α = 1589, β = 1116, γ = 1119, δ = 1315, ε = 818, ς = 634, ζ = 804, etc.).

8. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Barocci 70 (*Diktyon* 47357), fols. 379r-380r, second half of the 15th c., inc.: προγνωστικὸν βιωφελὲς καὶ χρήσιμον, ἀντιγραφὲν ἐξ αἰγυπτιακῆς παλαιᾶς βίβλου· Πετωσιρὲς Νεχεψὼ τιμιωτάτῳ βασιλεῖ χαίρειν. ἐπειδὴ βεβάρηταί σου ἡ θεία ψυχή, σοφώτατε βασιλεῦ, πολυπραγμονεῖν ἐν τοῖς τῶν ἄστρων κινήσεσι, ζητοῦσα τῶν ἐσομένων τὴν ἔκβασιν

– πολυσχεδὴς γὰρ καὶ δυσκατάληπτος [...] expl.: τὸν Ἀχιλλέα νικᾷν, τὸν δὲ Ἕκτωρα ἠττᾶσθαι, ἐπειδὴ εὐρέθη ἐν τῷ ὀργάνῳ καταλελε<μ>μένος α΄, ἔνθεν ἦν ὁ μικρὸς θάνατος (= *Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, no. 38, ed. Riess, 384-385, l. 45; Catalogus 9/1, ed. Weinstock, 4 [cod. 3 of this volume]; examples: Achilles and Hector; no circle diagram, but a list [ὄργανον] of concordance indicating the remainders and the respective quadrant [f. 381r]; numerical concordance of the lunar days [see no. 18]: α = 1585, β = 1[116], γ = 1[119], δ = 1315, ε = 814, ς = 634, ζ = 430, etc.).

9. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 2184 (*Diktyon* 51813), fol. 211rv, written by Georgios Gregoropulos in the second half of the 15th c. (Catalogus 8/4, ed. Boudreaux, 12 [cod. 73 of this volume]), see no. 4, Leiden, Voss. gr. F° 59.

10. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 2419 (*Diktyon* 52051), fol. 32r, written by Georgios Meidiates in the second half of the 15th c. (with circle diagram, fol. 32r), with many orthographical mistakes, inc.: Πετοσίρου μαθηματικοῦ πρὸς Νεχεψῶ τῷ βασιλεῖ. περὶ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου τῶν ὑπ΄ ἐμοῦ εὑρισκομένων πρὸς των ἀνθρωπίνων βίων ἐξὰκρηβευσάμενος διαπέμψασθέ σου οὐκ ὁκνισα, σὺ δὲ τη θεοπνεύστο σου προνίᾳ ἐν ἔργοῖς ὑπ΄ ἐμοῦ συνγραφαμένος μη ὁκνει, ἀναγκαίου γὰρ ὄντος των καταπερικληνομένων ἀνθρώπων συνθέσεως ἢ νοσούντων ὑγειἔνωσιν ἢ οὗ, ὑπέταξά σοι ὄργανον κανονικὸν δι΄ οὗ σκεπτόμενος ἀεῖ ἀδιάπτοτος ἔσει [...] expl.: καὶ σπουδάζων προγνώναι τὸ ζητούμενον κἂν τε ἀγαθὸν κἄν τε ἐναντίον καὶ τούτῳ ποιῶν οὐχ ἀμαρτήσεις σὺν θεῷ ἀγίῳ (cf. *Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, no. 39, ed. Riess, 385-386; for the end cf. no. 15, Florence, Plut. 86.14, fol. 95v; example: Leon; numerical concordance of the lunar days: α = 1585, β = 1123, γ = 1019, δ = 1315, ε = 814, ς = 634, ζ = 430, etc.). fols. 155v-156r (with circle diagram, fol. 156r, minor errors are corrected) Πετοσύρου Νεχεψῶ τημιωτάτῳ (sic) βασιλεῖ χαίρειν· περὶ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου τῶν ὑπ΄ ἐμοῦ εὑρισκομένων πρὸς τὸν ἀνθρώπινον βίον ἐξακριβευσάμενος [...] des.: καὶ σπουδάζει προγνῶναι τὸ ἐσόμενον, τινὲς δὲ ἑφεξῆς τῶν τριῶν ἡμερῶν ἀπὸ τῆς κατακλίσεως τοὺς ψήφους λαμβάνουσιν καί, ἐὰν εὑρεθῶσιν σύμφωνα, βέβαιοι τῷ (sic) ἀποφαίνονται. εἰ δὲ ἀναμεμιγμένοι, ἐκ τῆς παροχῆς γινώσκουσιν, πότερον πολλοὺς χρόνους οἱ νόσοι ἢ οὔ καὶ εἰ φευκτέος ὁ κίνδυνος ἢ οὔ (cf. *Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, no. 39, ed. Riess; example: Leon; the *kanon* is referred to, but not copied to this text, cf. Florence, Plut. 86.14).

11. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 2992 (*Diktyon* 52635), fol. 372rv, written by Ioannes Plusiadenos in the second half of the 15th c., inc.: ὄργανον προγνωστικὸν βιωφελὲς χρήσιμον ἐξ αἰγυπτιακῆς βίβλου ἠκριβωμένον ἀντιγραφέν. σκεπτέον δὲ οὕτως· δέξαι τοῦ κατακλιθέντος ἢ τοῦ φυγόντος ἢ τοῦ ἀντιδίκου τὸ ὄνομα [...] expl.: καὶ λέγομεν τὸν Ἀχιλλέα νικᾶν, τὸν δὲ Ἕκτορα ἠττᾶσθαι, ἐπειδὴ εὐρέθη ἐν τῷ ὀργάνῳ μία καταλελει<μ>μένος, ἔνθα ἦν ὁ μικρὸς θάνατος (= *Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, no. 38, ed. Riess, 384, l. 17-385, l. 45; Catalogus 8/4, ed. Boudreux, 73-74 [cod. 95 of this volume]; examples: Achilles and Hector, numerical concordance of the lunar days on fol. 373r [ἰδοὺ καὶ τὸ κανόνιον]: α = 1585, β = 1116, γ = 1019, δ = 1315, ε = 814, ς = 634, ζ = 430, etc.).

12. Madrid, Biblioteca nacional de España, 4616 (*Diktyon* 40096), fol. 89rv, second half of the 15th c. (with circle diagram, fol. 90r), inc.: Πετοσίρεως ἑτέρα γνῶσις· περὶ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου τῶν ὑπ΄ ἐμοῦ εὑρισκομένων πρὸς τὸν ἀνθρώπινον βίον διαπέμψασθαί σοι ἐξακριβευσάμενος, οὐκ ὤκνησα, σὺ δὲ <διὰ> τῆς θεοπνεύστου προνοίας ἐνέργει τοῖς ὑπ΄ ἐμοῦ σοι γραφομένοις. ἀναγκαίας γὰρ οὔσης τῆς περὶ τῶν κατακλινομένων ἀνθρώπων συνθέσεως ἐπίστασθαι πρότερον, πότε ὑγιαίνουσιν ἢ οὔ [...] τὸ αὐτὸ ἐπὶ νίκης μονομάχων [...] expl.: ἐπειδὴ εὐρέθη ἐν τῷ ὀργάνῳ καταλέλει<μ>μένη ἡ μία, ἔνθα ἡ μία μικρὸς θάνατος (= *Nechepsonis et*

Petosiridis fragmenta, no. 39, ed. Riess, 385-386; *Catalogus* 11/2, ed. Zuretti, 61 [cod. 34 of this volume]; edition: 152-154; examples: Achilles [and Hector]; numerical concordance of the lunar days: α = 1585, β = 1116, γ = 1019, δ = 1315, ε = 814, ς = 634, ζ = 430, etc.). fol. 130v (with circle diagram, fol. 131r), inc.: ὄργανον ἀστρονομικὸν Πετοσίρεως πρὸς Νεχεψὼ βασιλέα Ἀσυρίων. ψῆφος σεληνιακός, δι᾽ οὗ ἐστι τὸν ἐπισκεπτόμενον τοὺς νοσοῦντας ἄπταιστον εἶναι περὶ ζωῆς καὶ θανάτου καὶ περὶ μονομάχων καὶ πράξεων καὶ περὶ πόλεως ἢ στεφάνου ἢ πρακτῆρος ἢ πλοκῆς καὶ ἀποδρασμοῦ καὶ εὑρέσεως καὶ τὰ τούτοις ὅμοια. ὑπετάξαμεν δὲ καὶ τὸ ὄργανον, ψήφισον τὸ ποσὸν τῆς σελήνης καὶ βλέπε εἰς τὸ ὄργανον τὸν ἀριθμὸν καὶ ψήφισον τὸ ὄνομα, ὃ βούλει [...] expl.: ταύτας σύναψον ὁμοῦ καὶ ὑφαίρεσον (sic) εἰς κθ΄ καὶ περιττεύει ψῆφος α΄. ἐλθὲ οὖν ἐν τῷ ὑποκειμένῳ ὀργάνῳ καὶ εὑρήσεις, ὅτι νικᾷ Δαβὶδ τὸν Γολιάθ (cf. *Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, no. 40, ed. Riess, 386-387; example: David [and Goliath]; numerical concordance of the lunar days: α = 1589, β = 1116, γ = 1019, δ = 1315, ε = 814, ς = 431?, ζ = 430, etc.; *Catalogus* 11/2, ed. Zuretti, 163-164).

13. Modena, Biblioteca Estense universitaria, α.V.7.6 (Puntoni 174) (*Diktyon* 43508), fol. 262rv, written by Giorgio Valla in 1488 (edited in *Catalogus* 4, ed. Oliveri, 120-121 [cod. 13 of this volume]), inc.: ἐπιστολὴ Πετοσίρεως φιλοσόφου πρὸς Νεκεψὼ βασιλέα. περὶ τῶν κατακλινομέωνων ἐν ἀρρωστίαις, εἰ ῥύσονται ἢ τενήξονται, καὶ περὶ τῶν νικώντων ἐν μονομαχίαις καὶ πράγμασιν εἰς τιμὴν καὶ τῶν ἀποδιδρασκόντων καὶ λοιπῶν τῶν τούτοις ὁμοίων. περὶ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου τῶν ὑπ΄ ἐμοῦ εὑρημένων εἰς τὸν ἀνθρώπινον βίον ἐξακριβωσάμενος διαπέμψασθαί σοι οὐκ ὤκνησα, ὑπέταξα δέ σοι ὄργανον κανονικόν, ὅπερ ἐπισκεπτόμενος ἀεὶ ἀδιαπτώτως ἔσῃ. τὸ δ΄αὐτὸ καὶ ἐπὶ νίκης μονομαχιῶν καὶ πραγμάτων καὶ τῶν ἀποδιδρασκόντων καὶ τῶν τοιούτων ὁμοίων, σκόπει δὲ [...] expl.: εὑρήσεις ἠττωμένον τὸν Ἕκτορα (cf. *Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, no. 39, ed. Riess, 385-386, examples: Achilles and Hector; numerical concordance of the lunar days: α = 1589, β = 1116, [γ = 1019], δ = 1315, ε = 814, ς = 634, ζ = 828, etc.).

14. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea, Plut. 86.14 (*Diktyon* 16800), fol. 95rv, written by Lorenzo di Zanobi Ciatti at the end of the 15th c. (with circle diagram, fol. 94v[70]), inc: Πετόσιρις Νεχψὼ τῷ τιμιωτάτῳ βασιλεῖ χαίρειν. περὶ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου [...] πότερον πολλοὺς χρόνους αἱ νόσοι ἢ οὔ καὶ εἰ φευκτέος ὁ κίνδυνος ἢ οὔ (cf. *Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, no. 39, ed. Riess, 385-386; example: {Ma}Leon[71] = 30 +5 + 800 + 50 = 885; in the calculation a *kanon* is referred to, but this concordance is not included; see Florence, Plut 86.17).

15. Naples, Biblioteca nazionale Vittorio Emanuele III, II C 33 (*Diktyon* 46079), fols. 307v-308v, end of the 15th c. (with circle diagram, fol. 309r), inc.: Πετοσίρεως φιλοσόφου. περὶ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου τῶν ὑπ΄ ἐμοῦ εὑρισκομένων [...] expl.: μικρὸς θάνατος ταχέως τελευτήσει (cf. *Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, no. 39, ed. Riess, 385-386; *Catalogus* 4, ed. Bassi and Martini, 55-56 [cod. 19 of this volume]; according to Mioni, *Catalogus* I/1, 232, the text greatly differs from the edited versions).

70 Rapisarda and Calcagno, Manoscritto Plut. 86.14.

71 The error of the name Maleon stems from the incorrect reduplication of the syllable μα: ἐχέτω τις ὄνομα {Μα} Λέων.

16. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Barocci 166 (*Diktyon* 47453), fols. 163v-164r, end of the 15th c., inc.: προγνωστικὸν βιωφελὲς καὶ χρήσιμον, ἀντιγραφὲν ἐξ αἰγυπτιακῆς παλαιᾶς βίβλου Πετωσιρες (sic) Νεχεψὼ τιμιωτάτῳ βασιλεῖ χαίρειν. ἐπειδὴ βεβάρηταί σου ἡ θεία ψυχή, σοφώτατε βασιλεῦ, πολυπραγμονεῖν ἐν τοῖς τῶν ἄστρων κινήσεσι, ζητοῦσα τῶν ἐσομένων τὴν ἔκβασιν – πολυσχεδὴς γὰρ καὶ δυσκατάληπτος – […] expl.: τὸν Ἀχιλλέα νικᾷν, τὸν δὲ Ἕκτωρα ἠττᾶσθαι, ἐπειδὴ εὐρέθη ἐν τῷ ὀργάνῳ καταλελει<μ>μένος α΄, ἔνθεν ἦν ὁ μικρὸς θάνατος (= *Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta*, no. 38, ed. Riess, 384-385, l. 45; Catalogus 9/1, ed. Weinstock, 19 [cod. 9 of this volume]; examples: Achilles and Hector; no circle diagram, but the same list [ὄργανον] of concordance indicating the remainders and the respective quadrant [fol. 165r] as in Barocci 70 [no. 8]; numerical concordance of the lunar days: α = 1585, β = 1116, γ = 1119, δ = 1315, ε = 814, ς = 634, ζ = 430, etc.).

17. Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr. 1379 (*Diktyon* 68011), fol. 111rv, end of the 15th century[72] (with four circle diagrams, fol. 114rv), inc.: ἐπιστολὴ Πετοσίρεως φιλοσόφου πρὸς τὸν Νεχεψὼ βασιλέα. περὶ τῶν κατακλινομένων ἐν ἀρρωστίαις εἰ ῥύσονται (cod. ῥήσονται) ἢ τεθνήξονται καὶ περὶ τῶν νικώντων ἐν μονομαχίαις καὶ πράγμασι εἰς (cod. ἔγε) τιμὴν καὶ τῶν ἀποδιδρασκόντων καὶ λοιπῶν τῶν τούτοις ὁμοίων περὶ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου τῶν ὑπ΄ ἐμοῦ εὑρημένων εἰς τὸν ἀνθρώπινον βιὸν […] τὸ δ΄ αὐτὸ καὶ ἐπὶ νίκης μονομαχιῶν καὶ πραγμάτων καὶ τῶν ἀποδιδρασκόντων καὶ τῶν τοιούτων ὁμοίων […] expl.: καὶ εὑρήσεις νικῶντα τὸν Ἀχιλλέα καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ ια΄ εἰσὶν ἐν τῷ ὑπεργείῳ, μία δὲ ἐν τῷ ὑπογείῳ εὑρήσεις ἠττόμενον (ἠπτ- cod.) τὸν Ἕκτορα (cf. no. 13, Modena, Biblioteca Estense universitaria, α.V.7.6; Catalogus 5/3, ed. Heeg, 71 [cod. 24 of this volume]; examples: Achilles and Hector, the following paragraphs on fols. 111v-112r refer to the four tables [πλινθίον]).

I will also include the concordance list of the lunar days and their respective numerical values at the end of the edition. The three parallel lists demonstrate how scribal errors have contributed to many discrepancies. In column 3, a further witness is quoted (within brackets) under L_{Λ} and $L_{K\Theta}$: two concordances with 30 and 29 lunar days, written in Greek letters, from the 9th century manuscript Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 38, fol. 4v.[73]

72 For the scribe, see Speranzi, Scritura 50 and note 64.

73 For the manuscript, see Juste, Comput, 106, 126. The manuscript is online, accessed on 27 May 2026: http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:882068.

Text

Riess 38 (Madrid, BnE 4616, fol. 89rv)	**Paris, BnF, suppl. gr. 446, fols. 43v-44r**	**Lohr 123-124 (Berlin, SB, Phillipps 1833, fols. 53v-54r)**
1. Πετοσίρεως ἑτέρα γνῶσις	Ὄργανον ἀστρονομικόν. Ἐπιστολὴ Πετοσίρεως πρὸς Νεχεψῶ βασιλέα Ἀσυρίων	Petosiris Micipso regi salutem
	Ψῆφος σεληνιακή, δι᾽ ἧς ἐστὶν τὸν ἐπισκεπτόμενον τοὺς νοσοῦντας ἄπταιστον[74] εἶναι περὶ ζωῆς καὶ θανάτου καὶ περὶ μονομάχων[75] καὶ πράξεων καὶ περὶ πόλεως ἢ στεφάνου ἢ πρακτῆρος ἢ πλοκῆς καὶ ἀποδρασμοῦ καὶ εὑρέσεως καὶ τὰ τούτοις ὅμοια,	
2. Περὶ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου τῶν ὑπ᾽ ἐμοῦ εὑριρσκομένων πρὸς τὸν ἀνθρώπινον βίον διαπέμψασθαί σοι ἐξακριβευσάμενος οὐκ ὤκνησα, σὺ δὲ <διὰ> τῆς θεοπνεύστου σοι προνοίας ἐνέργει τοῖς ὑπ᾽ ἐμοῦ σοι γραφομένοις. ἀναγκαίας γὰρ οὔσης τῆς περὶ τῶν κατακλινομένων ἀνθρώπων συνθέσεως ἐπίστασθαι, πότερον ποτε ὑγιαίνουσιν ἢ οὔ, ὑπέταξά σοι ὅργανον κανονικόν, δι᾽ οὗ ἐπισκεπτόμενος ἀεὶ ἀδιάπτωτος ἔσῃ· τὸ αὐτὸ ἐπὶ νίκης μονομάχων καὶ πραγμάτων καὶ ἀποδιδρασκόντων καὶ τῶν τοιούτων ὁμοίων.	ὑπετάξαμεν δὲ καὶ τὸ ὅργανον.	De his, quae a me ad humanę vitę cautelam inventa sunt, unumquodque me tibi mittere non piguit. Superest, ut tu in his per inspiratam tibi divinitus prudentiam operando laborem inpendas certus, quod decumbentium vel fugitivorum vel monomachorum vel aliorum similium eventibus non fallacem poteris capere prescientiam, si argumentum regulare, quod huic scripturae subieci, diligenter inspexeris.

74 ἄπτεστον *cod.*

75 μονομάχον *(incertain accent) cod.*

Riess 38 (Madrid, BnE 4616, fol. 89rv)	**Paris, BnF, suppl. gr. 446, fols. 43v-44r**	**Lohr 123-124 (Berlin, SB, Phillipps 1833, fols. 53v-54r)**
3. Σκέπτου δὲ οὕτως· δέξαι τοῦ κατακλιθέντος ἢ τοῦ φυγόντος ἢ τοῦ ἀντιδίκου ἢ τῶν τούτοις ὁμοίων τὸ ὄνομα καὶ ἀρίθμει ἐπιμελῶς καὶ πρόσβαλε αὐτῷ τὸν παρακείμενον ἀριθμὸν ἐκείνης τῆς ἡμέρας τῆς σελήνης, καὶ μέριζε παρὰ τῶν κθ΄ καὶ τὰ κατα [**fol. 89v**] λιμπανόμενα ἐπιθεώρει ἐν τῷ ὁργάνῳ· καὶ εἰ μὲν εὕρῃς ἐν τῇ μεγάλῃ ζωῇ, χρονίσει[76]. ἐὰν δὲ εὑρεθῇ, ὅπου λέγει μέγας θάνατος, χρονίσει καὶ τελευτήσει.	Ψήφισον τὸ ποσὸν τῆς σελήνης καὶ βλέπε εἰς τὸ ὄργανον τὸν ἀριθμὸν καὶ ψήφισον τὸ ὄνομα, ὃ βούλει[77], καὶ θὲς ὁμοῦ καὶ ὐφαίρεσον εἰς κθ΄, ἕως ὑπολῃφθῶσιν κθ΄ ἢ ἐλάσσω, καὶ τὸν ὑπολῃφθέντα[78] ἀριθμὸν θεώρει ἐν τῷ ὁργάνῳ· καὶ ἐὰν εὕρῃς αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ μεγάλῃ ζωῇ, ταχέως ἐγερθήσεται. εἰ δὲ ἐν τῇ μέσῃ ζωῇ, πλείους ἡμέρας ἀσθενήσας ἐγερθή-[σ]εται· εἰ δ΄ ἐν τῇ μικρᾷ [ζ]ωῇ, χρόνον ἀσθενήσας [ἐγερ]θήσεται. ἐὰν δὲ ἐν τῷ μεγάλῳ θανάτῳ ἡ ψῆφος εὑρεθῇ, ταχέως τελευτήσει· ἐὰν δὲ ἐν τῷ μέσῳ θανάτῳ, πλείους ἡμέρας ἀσθενήσας τελευτήσει. ἐὰν δὲ ἐν τῷ μικρῷ θανάτῳ, χρόνον ἀσθενήσας τελευτήσει.	Consulturus igitur sic facito: Sume nomen vel dicumbentis vel in fugam lapsi vel depugnaturi vel alterius cuiuslibet, de quo inquiris, et collige num<e>rum eius. Deinde lunam considera, quota fuerit ea die, qua vel ęger decubuit vel fugitivus elapsus est vel quota futura sit, cum monomachus depugnaturus est, et cetera huiusmodi, numerumque regularem, qui ei lunae asscriptus est, numero nominis adiunge. Tum summam, que ex his conficitur, per XXVIIII divide et numerum, qui superfuerit, collige inspectaque figura, quo in loco idem numerus sit positus, inquire. Si eum inveneris in **ΖΟΗ ΜΗΓΑΛΙ** et de egro agitur, cito convalescet; si de fugitivo, cito revertetur; si de gladiatore, vincet. Si autem in **MESO ZOE**, omnia hęc difficilius evenient. Si autem in **ΖΟΗ ΜΙΚΡΑ**, licet prosperum, difficilem tamen exitum habitura. Quodsi in eo loco fuerit, **ΤΑΝΑΤΟΣ ΜΗΓΡΑ** inscriptus, ęger post longam infirmitatem morietur, fugitivus diu quesitus non invenietur, gladiator tamen difficile superabitur. Eadem in **ΜΗΣΟ ΘΑΝΑΤΟ** celeriora fiunt et in **ΜΙΚΡΟ ΘΑΝΑΤΟ** celerrima.

76 This seems to be a mistake of the scribe, see e.g. Vat. Ross. 986, fol. 388v, ll. 11-12: ταχέως ἐγερθήσεται.

77 βούλη *cod. (maybe* βούλῃ *should be preferred?)*

78 ὑπολειφθέντα *cod.*

Riess 38 (Madrid, BnE 4616, fol. 89rv)	Paris, BnF, suppl. gr. 446, fols. 43v-44r	Lohr 123-124 (Berlin, SB, Phillipps 1833, fols. 53v-54r)
4. Ἐὰν δε ὸ τῆς σελήνης ἀριθμὸς εὑρεθῇ ἐν τῷ ὑπεργείῳ, ὸ δὲ τοῦ κάμνοντος ἐν τῷ ὑπογείῳ, ἐγγὺς μὲν κινδύνου γενήσεται, σωθήσεται δέ. ἐὰν δὲ ὸ τοῦ κάμνοντος εὑρεθῇ ἐν τῷ ὑπεργείῳ, ὸ δὲ τῆς σελήνης ἐν τῷ ὑπογείῳ, ὀχληθεὶς σωθήσεται. ἐὰν δὲ ἀμφότερα ἐν τῷ ὑπογείῳ συνέλθωσι, τελευτᾷ	Ὑποδείγματος[79] δὲ χάριν ψήφισον τὸ ποσὸν τῆς σελήνης <ἑκ τῆς ἡμέρας, ᾗ, cf. Catalogus 11/2, ed. Zuretti, 148, 31> κατεκλίθη, καὶ ἰδὲ[80] εἰς τὸν ἀριθμὸν τοῦ μέσου καί, ἐὰν εὑρεθῇ ἐν τῷ ὑπεργείῳ[81], ὁμοίως καὶ τοῦ κάμνοντος ψήφισον τὸ ὄνομα· καὶ ἐὰν εὑρεθῇ ἐν τῷ ὑπογείῳ, κινδυνεύσει μέν, οὐ θνήσεται[82] δέ. ἐὰν δὲ ὸ τῆς σελήνης κύκλος εὑρεθῇ ἐν τῷ ὑπογείῳ, ὸ δὲ τοῦ κάμνοντος ἐν τῷ ὑπεργείῳ εὑρεθῇ, ὀχληθεὶς σωθήσεται· ἐὰν δὲ ὸ τῆς σελήνης καὶ ὸ τοῦ κάμνοντος εὑρεθῇ ἐν τῷ ὑπογείῳ, τελευτᾷ.	
5. Ὑπόδειγμα· ἐν τῷ εἶναι τὴν σελήνην ἡμερῶν ιζ΄ ἔχει τὸν παρακείμενον ἀριθμὸν ωϟγ΄ καὶ τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ δικαζομένου Ἀχιλλεύς[83], ,ασος΄. μίγνυμεν τὰς τοῦ ὀνόματος καὶ τὰς παρακείμενας τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῆς σελήνης, καὶ γίνονται ,βρξθ΄, καὶ ταῦτα μερίζομεν παρὰ τῶν κθ΄ καὶ καταλιπόντες κγ΄ εἰσάγομεν ταύτας ἐν τῷ ὀργάνῳ, καὶ εὑρίσκοντες αὐτὰ ἐν τῇ μεγάλῃ ζωῇ λέγομεν τὸν μὲν Ἀχιλλέα νικᾶν, τὸν δὲ Ἕκτορα[84] νικᾶσθαι, ἐπειδὴ εὑρέθη ἐν τῷ ὀργάνῳ καταλελειμ<μ>ένη ἡ μία, ἔνθα ἡ μία[85] μικρὸς θάνατος.	Ἡ δὲ ὑπόδειξις[86] τῆς ψήφου ἔστιν οὕτως, ὥστε ἔχειν τὴν σελήνην α΄· καὶ βλέπε τὸν παρακείμενον ἀριθμὸν, ὅτι ἔχει ψήφους ,αφπθ΄, καὶ Δαυὶδ ἔχει ψήφους υιθ΄[87], γίνονται ὁμοῦ ,βη΄. ὐφαίρεσον εἰς κθ΄ καὶ περιττεύουσι ψῆφοι ζ΄. πάλιν τῆς σελήνης α΄ γίνονται ψῆφοι ,αφπθ΄, καὶ Γολιὰθ[88] ἔχει ψῆφους ρκγ΄ (44r), {γίνονται ὁμοῦ ,αψιβ΄}. ταύτας σύναψον ὁμοῦ καὶ ὐφαίρεσον εἰς κθ΄, καὶ περιττεύει ψῆφος α΄. ἐλθὲ οὖν ἐν τῷ ὑποκειμένῳ ὀργάνῳ καὶ εὑρήσεις, ὅτι νικᾷ Δαυὶδ τὸν Γολιάθ.	Ponatur exempli gratia pugna Hectoris et [**fol. 54r**] Achillis. Luna erit XVII, que habet numerum regularem DCCCXCIII, Achillei nomen habet MCCLXXVI. Qui simul iuncti faciunt IICLXVIIII. Hos partire per XXVIIII et, quod superfuerit, id est XXIII, quere in forma regulari. Et invenies illud in eo loco, ubi scribitur **ZOH MHΓAΛH**. Si idem de Hectore feceris, invenies residuum numerum in **MIKPO ΘANATO**. Quę positio numerorum victorem Achillem et Hectorem victum significat absque ambiguitate.

79 ὑποδήγματος *cod.*

80 εἰδέ *cod.* (added in the margin).

81 ὑπογείῳ *cod.*, correction according to meaning and other versions.

82 θνίζεται *cod*. (as it seems).

83 Α = 1 + χ = 600 + ι = 10 + λ = 30 + λ = 30 + ε = 5 + υ = 400 + σ = 200 = ,ασος΄ = 1276.

84 Ἕκτωρ = 5 + 20 + 300 + 800 + 100 = 1225.

85 1225 (mod 29) = 1.

86 ὑπόδιξις *cod.*

87 Δ = 4 + α = 1 + υ = 500 + ι = 10 + δ = 4 = υιθ΄ = 519.

88 γ = 3 + ο = 70 + λ = 30 + ι = 10 + α = 1 + 1 = 0 = ρκγ΄ = 123.

Riess 38 (Madrid, BnE 4616, fol. 89rv)	**Paris, BnF, suppl. gr. 446, fols. 43v-44r**	**Lohr 123-124 (Berlin, SB, Phillipps 1833, fols. 53v-54r)**
see chapter 4 ←	see chapter 4 ←	Est et alius modus: Si numerus lunae fuerit in **ypogio** et numerus hominis in **ypergio**, periclitabitur quidem homo, evadet tamen. E contrario, si hominis numerus in **ypogio**, lunae vero fuerit in **ypergio**, sub specie prosperorum adversa contingent. At vero, si uterque numerus hominis videlicet ac lunę supra orizontem fuerit inventus, procul dubio prospera pollicentur. Sed si ambos infra orizontem esse constiterit, adversa omnia provenient.
(6.) (paratext on **fol. 89v** to the diagram) τὰ παρακείμενα τῶν ἡμερῶν τῆς σελήνης, ἡμέραι καὶ ἀριθμοί	(paratext on **fol. 44r** to the diagram)	(paratext on **fol. 53v** to the diagram) Dies lunae cum numeris suis:
α΄ ,αφπε΄ (1585)	Α΄ ,ΑΦΠΘ΄ (1589)	I. ĪDLXXXVIII (1588) (L_{Λ}: A ĪDLXXXIX, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ A ĪDCXXXIX)
β΄ ,αρις΄ (1116)	Β΄ ,APIS΄	II. ĪCXVI (1116) (L_{Λ}: B ĪCXVI, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ B ĪCXVI)
γ΄ ,αιθ΄ (1019)	Γ΄ ,ΑΙΘ΄	III. ĪCXVIIII (1119) (L_{Λ}: Γ ĪXIX, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ Γ ĪCXIX)
δ΄ ,ατιε΄ (1315)	Δ΄ ,ΑΤΙΕ΄	IIII. ĪCCCXV (1315) (L_{Λ}: Δ ĪCCCXV, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ Δ ĪCCCXV)
ε΄ ωιδ΄ (814)	Ε΄ ΩΙΔ΄	V. DCCCXVIII (818) (L_{Λ}: E DCCCXIIII, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ E DCCCXVIII)
ς΄ χλδ΄ (634)	S΄ ΥΛΑ΄ (431)	VI. DCXXIIII (624) (L_{Λ}: S DCXXXIIII, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ S DCXXXIIII)
ζ΄ υλ΄ (430)	Ζ΄ ΥΛ΄	VII. CCCCIIII (404) (L_{Λ}: Z CCCCXXX, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ Z CCCCIIII)
η΄ ωνς΄ (856)	Η΄ ΥNS΄ (456)	VIII. DCCCLVI (856) (L_{Λ}: H CCCCLVI, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ H DCCCLVI)
θ΄ χξε΄ (665)	Θ΄ ΥΝΔ΄ (454)	VIIII. DCLI (651) (L_{Λ}: Θ DCCXV, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ Θ DCLXI)
ι΄ χλθ΄ (639)	Ι΄ ΧΛΘ΄	X. DXXXVIIII (539) (L_{Λ}: I DCXXXIX, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ S DCXXXIX)
ια΄ χ҂δ΄ (694)	ΙΑ΄ ϞΠΔ΄ (984)	XI. DXCIII (593) (L_{Λ}: IA DCXVIIII, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ IA DCXCIIII)
ιβ΄ ,αυμγ΄ (1443)	ΙΒ΄ ΥΜΒ΄ (442)	XII. ĪCCCCXLIII (1443) (L_{Λ}: IB DCCXIII, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ IB ĪCCCCXLIIII)
ιγ΄ ,ασπ΄ (1280)	ΙΓ΄ ,ΑΧΠ΄ (1680)	XIII. ĪDCCCLXXX (1880) (L_{Λ}: IΓ ĪCCLXXIIII, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ IΓ ĪDCCCLXXX)
ιδ΄ ,αχπα΄ (1681)	ΙΔ΄ ,ΑΧΟ΄ (1670)	XIIII. ĪDCLXXXIIII (1684) (L_{Λ}: IΔ ĪDCLXXX, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ IΔ ĪDCLXXXIIII)
ιε΄ ,αρι΄ (1110)	ΙΕ΄ ,ΑΡΙ΄	XV. ĪCX (1110) (L_{Λ}: IE ĪCIIII, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ IE ĪCX)
ις΄ ψλε΄ (735)	IS΄ ΦΠ΄ (580)	XVI. DXXXV (535) (L_{Λ}: IS DCCCXXIX, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ IS DXXXV)

Riess 38 (Madrid, BnE 4616, fol. 89rv)	Paris, BnF, suppl. gr. 446, fols. 43v-44r	Lohr 123-124 (Berlin, SB, Phillipps 1833, fols. 53v-54r)
ιζ΄ ωϟγ΄ (893)	ΙΖ΄ ΩΠΓ΄ (883)	XVII. DCCCXCIII (893) (L_{Λ}: IZ ĪL, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ IZ DCCCXCIII)
ιη΄ ͵αωξ΄ (1860)	ΙΗ΄ ͵ΑϞΖ΄ (1697)	XVIII. ĪDCXCVII (1697) (L_{Λ}: IH ĪCXXIIII, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ IH ĪDCXCVII)
ιθ΄ ψλγ΄ (733)	ΙΘ΄ ͵ΑΙΗ΄ (1018)	XV^{II}II. DCXVIII (618) (L_{Λ}: IΘ DCCLXXV, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ IΘ ĪDCXVIII)
κ΄ ͵αφξς΄ (1566)	Κ΄ ΨΚΑ΄ (721)	XX. ĪDLXVI (1566) (L_{Λ}: K DCCCCXIIII, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ S ĪDCLVI)
κα΄ ͵βλθ΄ (2039)	ΚΑ΄ ͵ΒΡ΄ (2100)	XXI. ĪĪXXXVIIII (2039) (L_{Λ}: KA ĪĪCCII, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ KA ĪĪXXXIX)
κβ΄ ͵αφξς΄ (1566)	ΚΒ΄ ͵ΑΧΙ΄ (1610)	XXII. ĪDLXVI (1566) (L_{Λ}: KB ĪDCCXXIX, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ KB ĪDLXVI)
κγ΄ ͵αυξδ΄ (1464)	ΚΓ΄ ͵ΑΨΞΕ΄ (1765; ΧΨΞΕ cod.)	XXIII. ĪCCCCLXVIII (1468) (L_{Λ}: KΓ ĪDCXXXII, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ KΓ ĪCCCCLXIX)
κδ΄ ͵αψξα΄ (1761)	ΚΔ΄ ͵ΑΨΞΕ΄ (1765)	XXIIII. ĪDCCLXI (1761) (L_{Λ}: KΔ ĪDCCCCXXIX, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ KΔ ĪDCCLXI)
κε΄ ͵ασξδ΄ (1264)	ΚΕ΄ ͵ΑΣΞΓ΄ (1263)	XXV. ĪCCLXIIII (1264) (L_{Λ}: KE ĪCCCCXXVII, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ KE ĪCCLXIIII)
κς΄ ͵αρδ΄ (1104)	ΚS΄ ͵ΒΤΔ΄ (2304)	XXVI. ĪCIIII (1104) (L_{Λ}: KS ĪCCXLVII, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ KS ĪCIIII)
κζ΄ ωπ΄ (880)	ΚΖ΄ ΩΠ΄	XXVII. DCCCLXXX (880) (L_{Λ}: KZ ĪXLIII, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ KZ DCCCLXXX)
κη΄ ϡξς΄ (966)	ΚΗ΄ ϠS΄ (906)	XXVIII. DCCCCLXVI (966) (L_{Λ}: KH ĪLXVIIII, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ KH DCCCCLXVI)
κθ΄ ͵αριε΄ (1115)	ΚΘ΄ ͵ΑΣΙΕ΄ (1215)	XXVIIII. ĪCXV (1115) (L_{Λ}: KΘ ĪCCCXXVIII, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ KΘ ĪCXV)
λ΄ ͵αρμζ΄ (1147)	Λ΄ ͵ΑΡΛΔ΄ (1134, ΛΡΛΔ cod.)	(L_{Λ}: Λ ĪCCCX)

Translation

Riess 38 (Madrid, BnE 4616, fol. 89rv)	**Paris, BnF, suppl. gr. 446, fols. 43v-44r**	**Berlin, SB, Phillipps 1833, fols. 53v-54r**
1. Another insight from Petosiris	Astronomical work Letter from Petosiris to Nechepso, king of the Assyrians	Petosiris greets King Micipsus (sic)
	Calculation using the moon, through which it is possible for the person observing the sick to make no mistake regarding life and death, as well as duellists and actions, city or (victor's) wreath or tax collector or betrayal and escape and discovery and such similar things.	
2. I did not hesitate to write to you in detail about every single thing I discovered about human life. However, by virtue of your God-given power of providence, you prove effective in what I have written to you. Because it is necessary to know the condition of those lying (at the sickbed) and whether they will recover or not, I have included a canonical diagram (*organon*) for you, with which you as a viewer will always be error-free, when it comes to matters such as the victory of duellists, in (other) matters, and matters such as fleeing persons and similar issues.	We have also included the diagram (*organon*).	I am happy to send you everything I invented to protect human life. It is up to you to actively apply your God-inspired wisdom to this matter, with the secure (knowledge) that you gain infallible foresight regarding incidents involving the sick, fugitives, duellists and other similar matters if you carefully consider the set of rules that I have attached to this text.

Riess 38 (Madrid, BnE 4616, fol. 89rv)	Paris, BnF, suppl. gr. 446, fols. 43v-44r	Berlin, SB, Phillipps 1833, fols. 53v-54r
3. Consider it this way: Take the name of the sick person, the fugitive, the opponent or someone similar and count (the numbers of the name) exactly (together). Add the corresponding number of the lunar day to this, divide (the result) by 29, and check the remainder in the diagram (*organon*). If you find (the numeral) in the »great life« (*megale zoe*), he will grow old[89]; but if (the numeral) is found where it says »great death« (*megas thanatos*), he will die after some time (of illness).	Calculate what day of the moon it is and check the number in the diagram (*organon*), and calculate the name you want, and add (the numbers) together and divide (the result) by 29 until 29 or less remains, and check the remaining number in the diagram (*organon*). And if you find it in the »great life« (*megale zoe*), he will quickly get up (from his sickbed). But if (it is) in the »middle life« (*mese zoe*), he will get up (from his sickbed) after several days of illness; but if (it is) in the »little life« (*mikra zoe*), he will remain ill for a while and then get up (from his sickbed). If the numeral is found in the »great death« (*megas thanatos*), he will die quickly; if (it is found) in the »middle death« (*mesos thanatos*), he will remain ill for several days and then die; if (it is found) in the »little death« (*mikros thanatos*), he will remain ill for a while and then die.	Now, conduct the consultation as follows: Take the name of either a sick person, a fugitive, someone fighting a decisive battle, or anyone else you are investigating, and take the number (of letters in their names). Then consider the moon, what day it was when they fell ill or fled, or what day it will be when a duellist fights to the death, and other such matters. Add the regular number assigned to the moon (day) to the number of the name. Then divide the sum resulting from these (numbers) by 29 and take the remaining number, consult the diagram (below), and find where this numeral appears. If you find it in the »great life« (*zoe megale*) and it is a sick person, he will recover quickly; if it is a fugitive, he will return quickly; if it is a gladiator, he will be victorious. However, if the numeral is in the »middle life« (*meso zoe*), everything will be more difficult. If it is in the »little life« (*zoe mikra*), the outcome will be favourable but still difficult. If the numeral is in the place labelled »great death« (*tanatos megas*, here mistakenly labelled *megra*), the sick person will die after a long period of weakness, the fugitive will not be found after a long search, and the gladiator will still be defeated with difficulty. The same thing happens more quickly in the case of »middle death« (*mesos thanatos*) and most quickly in the case of »little death« (*mikros thanatos*).

89 Or according to the alternative (better) version: »He will quickly get up (from sick leave).«

Riess 38 (Madrid, BnE 4616, fol. 89rv)	Paris, BnF, suppl. gr. 446, fols. 43v-44r	Berlin, SB, Phillipps 1833, fols. 53v-54r
4. If the numeral of the moon is found in the space above the earth (*hypergeion*) and the (numeral) of the sick person (is found) in the subterranean space (*ypogeion*), he will approach a danger, but he will be rescued. However, if the (number) of the sick person is found in the space above the earth (*hypergeion*) and the (number) of the moon (is found) in the subterranean space (*ypogeion*), he will be threatened but saved. If both (numbers) meet in the subterranean space (*hypogeion*), he will die.	For example, calculate the lunar day number <from the day> someone fell ill, and look at its number of the horizon, and see if it is found in the space above the earth (*hypergeion*). Similarily, calculate the number of the sick person's name, and if it is in the subterranean space (*hypogeion*), he will be in danger, but he will not die. However, if the day of the lunar cycle is in the subterranean space (*hypogeion*) and the sick person's (number) is found in the space above the earth (*hypergeion*), he will be threatened, but he will be saved; but if both the lunar day and the sick person's (name) number are in the subterranean space (*hypogeion*), he will die.	
5. An example: When the moon is 17 days old, it has the corresponding number 893, and the name of the one demanding justice is Achilles, (which is) 1276. We add the number of the name and the number appended to the lunar day, and the sum is 2169; we divide this (sum) by 29, and we get 23 as the remainder and check the numeral in the diagram (*organon*) and, finding it in the »great life« (*megale zoe*), we thus say that Achilles wins, but Hector is defeated, because the remainder in the diagram (*organon*) is 1, where 1 is the »little death« (*mikros thanatos)*.	The calculation example is as follows: The moon has (the day) 1, and look at the corresponding number, which is 1589; and David has the number 419, which together makes 2008. Divide by 29, and the remainder is 7. Again, moon 1 has the number 1589, and Goliath has the number 123, {which together makes 1712}. Add these numbers together and divide them by 29, and the number 1 remains. Now go to the diagram (*organon*) below, and you will find that David defeats Goliath.	For example, let's take the battle between Hector and Achilles: It will take place on the 17th lunar day, which has the regular number 893. The name Achilles has the (total) number 1276. When added together, this makes 2169. Divide this by 29, and what remains, that is 23, check (below) in the regular diagram. And you will find it in the place where »great life« (*zoe megale*) is written. If you do the same for Hector, you will find the remainder in »little death« (*mikros thanatos*). This position of the numerals undoubtedly indicates Achilles as the victor and Hector as the defeated.

Riess 38 (Madrid, BnE 4616, fol. 89rv)	**Paris, BnF, suppl. gr. 446, fols. 43v-44r**	**Berlin, SB, Phillipps 1833, fols. 53v-54r**
see chapter 4 ←	see chapter 4 ←	There is also another method (of calculating): If the moon's numeral (= lunar day) is in the *ypogium* and the person's numeral (is) in the *ypergium*, then the person is indeed in danger, but nevertheless escapes. Conversely, if the person's numeral is in the *ypogium* and the moon's (numeral) is in the *ypergium*, then adverse events will occur under the guise of favourable ones. However, if both numerals, namely those of the person and the moon, are found above the horizon, they undoubtedly promise favorable outcomes. If both are certain to be below the horizon, everything will turn out adversely.
(7.) (paratext on **fol. 89v** relating to the diagram) The corresponding (numbers) of lunar days: days and numerals	(paratext on **fol. 44r** relating to the diagram)	(paratext on **fol. 53v** relating to the diagram) Lunar days with their numbers:
1: 1585	1: 1589	1: 1588 (L_{Λ}: 1589, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 1639)
2: 1116	2: 1116	2: 1116 (= L_{Λ} and $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$)
3: 1019	3: 1019	3: 1119 (L_{Λ}: 1019, Γ, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 1119)
4: 1315	4: 1315	4: 1315 (= L_{Λ} and $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ Δ)
5: 814	5: 814	5: 818 (L_{Λ}: 814, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 818)
6: 634	6: 431	6: 624 (L_{Λ}: 634, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 634)
7: 430	7: 430	7: 404 (L_{Λ}: 430, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 404)
8: 856	8: 456	8: 856 (L_{Λ}: 456, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 856)
9: 665	9: 454	9: 651 (L_{Λ}: 715, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 661)
10: 639	10: 639	10: 539 (L_{Λ} and $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 639)
11: 694	11: 984	11: 518 (L_{Λ}: 619, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 694)
12: 1443	12: 442	12: 1443 (L_{Λ}: 713, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 1444)
13: 1280	13: 1680	13: 1880 (L_{Λ}: 1274, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 1880)
14: 1681	14: 1670	14: 1684 (L_{Λ}: 1680, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 1684)
15: 1110	15: 1110	15: 1110 (L_{Λ}: 1104, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 1110)

Riess 38 (Madrid, BnE 4616, fol. 89rv)	Paris, BnF, suppl. gr. 446, fols. 43v-44r	Berlin, SB, Phillipps 1833, fols. 53v-54r
16: 735	16: 580	16: 535 (L_{Λ}: 829, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 535)
17: 893	17: 883	17: 893 (L_{Λ}: 1050, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 893)
18: 1860	18: 1697	18: 1697 (L_{Λ}: 1124, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 1697)
19: 733	19: 1018	19: 618 (L_{Λ}: 775, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 1618)
20: 1566	20: 721	20: 1566 (L_{Λ}: 914, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ S: 1656)
21: 2039	21: 2100	21: 2039 (L_{Λ}: 2202, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$ KA: 2039)
22: 1566	22: 1610	22: 1566 (L_{Λ}: 1729, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 1566)
23: 1464	23: 1765	23: 1468 (L_{Λ}: 1632, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 1469)
24: 1761	24: 1765	24: 1761 (L_{Λ}: 1929, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 1761)
25: 1264	25: 1263	25: 1264 (L_{Λ}: 1427, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 1264)
26: 1104	26: 2304	26: 1104 (L_{Λ}: 1247, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 1104)
27: 880	27: 880	27: 880 (L_{Λ}: 1043, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 880)
28: 966	28: 906	28: 966 (L_{Λ}: 1069, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 966)
29: 1115	29: 1215	29: 1115 (L_{Λ}: 1328, $\Lambda_{K\Theta}$: 1115)
30: 1147	30: 1134	(L_{Λ}: 30: 1310)

Text 2: Useful Psalms

The number of Latins in Constantinople increased in the 12th century due to the arrival of Crusaders. Latin scholars and theologians also arrived in the capital and took part in translation projects or were engaged as translators, even by the Byzantine emperor in his chancery for documents addressed to the West.[90] The Greek texts that sparked interest in Latin translation were primarily theological, though some were also related to popular medicine, astronomy and magic. Examples include the Cyranides, a late antique collection of four books of medical-magical texts,[91] and the Dream Book (*Oneirokritikon*), which circulated under the name of Ahmet (ben Sirin), but was actually composed by a Greek Christian between 813 and the early 11th century. The latter was translated by Leo Tuscus. He was employed by Emperor

90 See, e.g., Haskins, *Studies*, 194-222 (North-Italian translators); Dondaine, Hugues Ethérien et Léon Toscan; Classen, Konzil von Konstantinopel 1166; Dondaine, Hugues Éthérien et le concile; Berschin, *Griechisch-Lateinisches Mittelalter*, 259-271; Kapriev, *Lateinische Rivalen*; Møller Jensen, Hugo Eterianus; Podolak and Zago, Ugo Eteriano e la controversia; Hugo Eterianus, *De sancto et immortali Deo, Compendiosa expositio, Fragmenta Graeca*, ed. Podolak and Zago.

91 See Delatte, *Textes.*

Manuel I Comnenus as his personal translator in the period from 1166 to 1182.[92] A certain Pascalis Romanus is known to have compiled a dream book, titled *Liber Thesauri Occulti*, which he completed in Constantinople in 1165.[93] In the preface he writes about the sources as follows: *collectus autem est liber iste ex divina et humana scriptura tam ex usu experimenti quam ex ratione rei de Latinis et Grecis et Caldaicis et Persis et Pharaonis et Nabugodonosor annalibus, in quibus multipharie sompnia eorum sunt exposita.*[94] It has been suggested that Pascalis Romanus, who began translating theological texts in 1163,[95] was also the translator of the Latin Cyranides[96] (which, according to the preface, were completed in 1169; Haskins interprets the cryptic initial »Pa.« in the Palatinus latinus 1273 manuscript as the name of the addressor Pascalis of the dedicatory letter).[97]

As far as is known, this text about useful psalms is published here for the first time. It is found in the manuscript Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Palatino 998 (a collection of medical and alchemical texts comprising quires of various sizes written by different hands) on fols. 75r-77v,[98] without an author's name or title (*Catalogue*, ed. Thorndike and Kibre, 1457).[99] It provides guidance on situations in which verses of the Psalms, when written down or read aloud, can offer assistance.[100] This version appears to have been damaged during its transmission, as there is a gap between Psalms 16 and 142 (at the transition to a new sheet, i.e. 77r).

Its colophon provides the date and place of translation: 1151 in Constantinople. According to this note, the text itself had already been translated from Arabic into Greek the previous year in Alexandria. However, as the text also indicates the indiction (i.e. 9), the year as it appears in the corrected manuscript, cannot be correct. Indiction 9, however, corresponds to the year 1161, which would bring this text closer to the dated translations by Pascalis Romanus in the 1160s. The content of this short treatise is consistent with his evident interest in Greek popular science.

Neither the Arabic nor the Greek versions of the text appear to exist, or at least they have not yet been discovered. A similar guide to the practical use of the Psalms in Greek can be found in two manuscripts that once formed a unit: Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, hist. gr. 129, fol. 12rv, and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 2236, fols. 44r-45r.

92 See Haskins, *Studies*, 215-218; Haskins, Leo Tuscus; Rigo, Leone Toscano.

93 See Haskins, Pascalis Romanus; Collin-Roset, *Liber thesauri occulti*; Montecini, Infiniment grand.

94 Collin-Roset, *Liber thesauri occulti*, 147.

95 See Franceschini, *Studi e note*, 109-128 (Il περὶ τοῦ βίου τῆς ὑπεραγίας Θεοτόκου di Epifanio nella versione Latina medievale di Pasquale Romano); Collin-Roset, *Liber thesauri occulti*, 114; Dahan, Paschalis Romanus; Berschin, *Griechisch-Lateinisches Mittelalter,* 263.

96 Delatte, *Textes*; see also Lucentini and Perrone Compagni, *Testi e codici*, 34-37; Lucentini and Perrone, Manoscritti, 723-724.

97 Haskins, *Studies*, 219-221; see also the comment in Collin-Roset, Liber thesauri occulti, 116.

98 A *kalandologion*, dated 1374, follows fols. 77v-78v , and a short guide to the *periculosi et infelices dies* of each month follows fols. 78v-79r.

99 I would like to thank David Speranzi for providing me with photographs of the relevant pages.

100 For the topic, see Zellmann-Rohrer, Psalms useful for everything; Zellmann-Rohrer, The usefulness of the Psalms; Zellmann-Rohrer, Further useful Psalms.

Both date from the 15th century[101] (the Paris manuscript continues the Vienna part, which was written by the same scribe). Michael Zellmann-Rohrer found further examples of such instructions for using the Psalms from the post-Byzantine period[102] and also investigated the Jewish and Christian origins of inscribing or amuleting psalms. He is undoubtedly correct to reconsider the term »magical« in relation to this practice as understood by Byzantine users.[103] However, none of the published Greek texts correspond with the Latin instructions. Georg Graf[104] outlined similar Arabic texts describing the magical use of the Psalms; the manuscripts he references date from the 14th century onwards.

The biblical quotations in the Florentine manuscript have been adapted by the translator to align with the Latin Vulgate. Where the Septuagint differs slightly from the Vulgate, the translator has stuck to the standard Latin wording. This suggests that the translator was a Latin scholar with a strong grasp of the Latin Vulgate (I provide the Septuagint version of these phrases in the footnotes). Phrases displaying minimal modifications are compared with the standard Vulgate version in the footnotes. However, these passages never refer back to the corresponding Septuagint version.

Manuscript

Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Palatino 998, fols. 75r-77v[105] (linguistic peculiarities have largely been retained; obvious errors are corrected)

Text and Translation

fol. 75r

Beatus vir [Ps 1:1 = Vulgata]

> Si qua mulier non continet fetum[106], scribe hunc psalmum usque ad *folium eius non defluet* [Ps 1:3 = Vulgata] et continebit. prodest autem et arbori non continenti fructum suum. scribe s(cilicet) hunc f psalmum et pone in ollam novam et sub terra pone ad radicem arboris.

101 See the description and edition in Zellmann-Rohrer, Psalms useful for everything, 113-114 and 121-130 (edition).

102 Zellmann-Rohrer, Psalms useful for everything, 114-149 (editions).

103 Zellmann-Rohrer, Psalms useful for everything, 116-119, in part. 117: »On balance, however, the classification as magical is one that the contemporary users of the treatises would have vigorously resisted […]. There is little doubt that these users would have identified as anything but Orthodox Christians. Indeed the recipes explicitly align themselves against what they term ›magical‹ … in offering solutions to afflictions caused thereby […] and deploy other mainstays of Byzantine Christian practice such as the sign of the cross and cult of the saints […].«

104 Graf, *Geschichte der arabischen christlichen Literatur* 2, 468-469 (appendix, 145, biblical texts).

105 Description on the homepage of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence, accessed on 27 May 2026: https://manus.iccu.sbn.it/risultati-ricerca-manoscritti/-/manus-search/detail/681160; see also the catalogue by Gentile, *Indice e cataloghi* 4/2/1, 473-475.

106 -um *ex corr.*

If a woman cannot have children, write this psalm up to *folium eius non defluet* and she will have [children]. It is also useful for a tree that bears no fruit. So, write this psalm, put it in a new pot and place it underground next to the root of a tree.

Quare fremuerunt [Ps 2:1 = Vulgata]

> Si quis repletionem[107] malorum humorum <patitur>, lege hunc psalmum usque *hodie genui te* [Ps 2:7 = Vulgata] super oleum ter et unge infirmum et sanabitur, et lava predicto oleo faciem tuam et bene eris receptus a principibus. si autem vasa figuli vis frangere, scribe hunc psalmum usque *tanquam vas ~~frigo~~ figuli confringe eos*[108] [Ps 2:9] in testam novam et proice in camino[109] et a<m>miraberis.

If someone suffers from an increase in bad fluids, read this psalm three times up to *hodie genui te* over oil, rub the sick person [with the oil], and he will recover; and wash your face with this oil and you will be well received by rulers. However, if you want to smash some pottery, write this psalm until *tanquam vas figuli confringe eos* on a new shard, throw it in the fireplace and you will be amazed.

Domine, quid multiplichati sunt [Ps 3:2 = Vulgata]

> Si quis patitur in capite, scribe hunc psalmum usque *et esalta~~bis tus~~*[110] *capud meum*[111] [Ps 3:4] et liga in capite eius et sanabitur.

If someone has a headache, write this psalm up to *et esalta tu et capud meum,* tie it to their head and they will be cured.

Cum invocarem [Ps 4:2 = Vulgata]

> Scribe hunc psalmum in testa usque *dum clamavero ad eum*[112] [Ps 4:4] et pone sub capite cuiusvis et dormiet. et si vis intrare ad regem vel principem vel potestatem, lege hunc[113] psalmum super oleum roseum et unge faciem[114] tuam et habebis magnam laudem ab eis vel ab eo.

Write this psalm on a shard up to *dum clamavero ad eum*, place it under the head of anyone, and they will fall asleep; and if you wish to enter [the court] of a king, ruler, or potentate, read this psalm over rose oil, rub [the oil] on your face, and you will receive great praise from them or from him.

---

107 repletionen *cod.*

108 ὡς σκεῦος κεραμέως συντρίψεις αὐτούς *LXX*, tamquam vas figuli confringes eos *Vulgata.*

109 canmino *cod.*

110 *The scribe first wrote* exaltabis tu*, then he cancelled the letters until* t, *understood the letter* u *as* n *and added the letter* s *at the end.*

111 καὶ ὑψῶν τὴν κεφαλήν μου *LXX*; et exaltans caput meum *Vulgata.*

112 eam *cod.*; ἐν τῷ κεκραγέναι με πρὸς αὐτόν *LXX*; cum clamavero ad eum *Vulgata.*

113 humc *(sic) ex* humo *corr. cod.*

114 facien *cod.*

fol. 75v

Verba mea [Ps 5:2 = Vulgata]

> Si vis mutuum accipere ab aliquo, lege hunc psalmum super oleum bonum ter usque in finem et unge faciem tuam.

If you want to receive a loan from someone, read this psalm three times to the end over good oil und rub your face [with the oil].

Domine, ne in furore{m} ~~*tuo*~~[115] [Ps 6:2]

> Si quis dolorem habet in oculis, scribe hunc psalmum usque *turbatus est pre ira*[116] *a furore oculus meus* [Ps 6:8] et liga in capite.

If someone has pain in their eyes, write this psalm up to *turbatus est pre ira a furore oculus meus* and tie it to their head.

Confiteor tibi ~~*domine*~~ [Ps 9:2 = Vulgata]

> Si vis honorari a rege vel a principe et, ut recipiant te bene et honorifice, scribe hunc <p>salmum totum in lamina vitrea et dilue eum[117] oleo roseo et faciem tuam unge.

If you want to be honored by a king or ruler and if you want them to welcome you well and respectfully, write this entire psalm on a pane of glass, dissolve [the writing] with rose oil und rub your face [with the oil].

Salvum me fac, domine, quoniam de(*fecit*) *s*(*anctus*) [Ps 11:2 = Vulgata]

> Si habes inimicitiam contra aliquem et ipse loquatur adversum te mala, lege hunc psalmum super aquam et efunde illam in portam inimici.

If you are at odds with someone and he speaks ill of you, read this psalm over water und pour the water at the enemy's door.

Usque quo, domine, ob{b}livisceris me [Ps 12:1 = Vulgata]

> Si latrones insidias posuerint et times eos, dic ps(almum) istum ter et fugient[118] a te. si autem dormieris in desertum locum, lege eum usque *ne* ~~*quandi*~~ *quando dicat i*(*nimicus*) *meus p*(*revalui*) *a*(*dversus*) *eum* [Ps 12:5 = Vulgata] ter et non timebis furem n(eque) latronem adiutorio Dey.

If robbers will set an ambush and you are afraid of them, say this psalm three times and they will flee from you. But if you are sleep in a deserted place, read it up to *ne quando dicat inimicus meus prevalui adversus eum* three times and, with God's help, you will not fear any thief or robber.

---

115 κύριε, μὴ τῷ θυμῷ σου *LXX*; δomine, ne in furore tuo *Vulgata.*

116 pre ira *varia lectio or an alternative translation (for* ἀπὸ θυμοῦ*)*; ἐταράχθη ἀπὸ θυμοῦ ὁ ὀφθαλμός μου *LXX*; turbatus est a furore oculus meus *Vulgata.*

117 eam *cod. (but the pronoun refers to the psalm, not to* lamina*).*

118 fucient *cod.*

Dixit insipiens [Ps 13:1 = Vulgata]

> Si vis alicui apparere magnus et honorari ab illo, lege ~~hunc~~ hunc psalmum super aquam mundam et salem usque *quoniam dominus in ge*(*neratione*) *i*(*u*)*sta est*[119] [Ps 13:6] et scribe psalmum istum in tabula et lava eam [**fol. 76r**] cum predicta aqua et efunde in portam cuiusvis. dices autem eum ~~p(rese)ns~~ ps(almum), ambulante[120] te incipiens et secundum, scilicet *quare fremuerunt* [Ps 2:1 = Vulgata] usque *tunc loquatur ad eos in ira sua*[121] [Ps 2:5].

If you want to appear important to someone and be honoured by them, read this psalm over clean water and salt up to *quoniam dominus in generatione iusta est*, write this psalm on a tablet, wash it [the tablet] with the aforementioned water and pour it at the door of any person. But you will also recite the psalm, and as you walk around also begin the second [psalm], namely *quare fremuerunt* up to *tunc loquatur ad eos in ira sua*.

In the lower margin of **fol. 75v** another scribe added:

Domine, dominus noster [Ps 8:2 = Vulgata]

> Si infans[122] plangit multum et non dormit, scribe hunc <p>salmum et liga in brachio infantuli.

If a child cries a lot and does not sleep, write this psalm and tie it to the child's arm.

fol. 76r cont.

Domine, quis <h>abitabit tab(*ernaculo*)[123] [Ps 14:1]

> Si vis ingredi in aliquam civitatem aut ad principem, lege hunc <p>salmum te ~~in~~ggrediente.

If you wish to enter a city or [the court] of a ruler, read this psalm as you enter.

Conserva me, domine [Ps 15:1 = Vulgata]

> Si tim<u>eris, ne faxinatio malorum oculorum apprehendat[124] te et noceat tibi, scribe hunc psalmum et porta tecum.

If you are afraid of being bewitched by evil eyes and that it will harm you, write this psalm und carry [it] with you.

Exaudi, domine [Ps 16:1 = Vulgata]

---

119 ὅτι ὁ θεὸς ἐν γενεᾷ δικαίᾳ. βουλὴν πτωχοῦ κατῃσχύνατε, ὅτι κύριος ἐλπὶς αὐτοῦ ἐστιν *LXX*; quoniam deus in generatione iusta, consilium inopis confudistis, quoniam dominus spes eius est *Vulgata*.

120 anbulante *cod.*

121 τότε λαλήσει πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἐν ὀργῇ αὐτοῦ *LXX*; tunc loquetur ad eos in ira sua *Vulgata.*

122 imfans *cod.*

123 κύριε, τίς παροικήσει ἐν τῷ σκηνώματι *LXX*; domine, quis habitabit in tabernaculo *Vulgata*.

124 apprehend'at (= apprehenderat) *cod. (an* apprehenderit *scribere voluit?).*

> Si vis evadere[125] scandalum et discordiam[126], lege hunc psalmum usque ad *animam meam ab inpiis*[127] [Ps 16:13] secties et scribe eum in carta et porta tecum.

If you want to escape scandal and discord, read this psalm up to *animam meam ab inpiis* six times, write it on paper and carry [the paper] with you.

Dilligam te, domine [Ps 17:2 = Vulgata]

> Si in aliqua domo sunt infirmi, accipe ollam novam et inple eam aqua munda et lege totum ~~i~~ psalmum[128] super aquam i<l>lam septies aspergesque in circuitu domus et in angulis.

If there are sick people in the house, take a new pot, fill it with clean water und read the entire psalm seven times over this water, and you will sprinkle [the water] around the house and in the corners.

Celi enarrant [Ps 18:2 = Vulgata]

> Si qua mulier dolorem patitur et parere non potest, scribe hunc <p>salmum usque *exaltabit ut ~~g~~gigans ad currendam*[129] *viam*[130] [Ps 18:6] in testam novam et pone sub destro [eius] ~~el~~ pede statimque pariet.

If a woman suffers from pain and is unable to give birth, write this psalm up to *exaltabit ut gigans ad currendam viam* on a new shard, place it under her right foot and she will give birth immediately.

Exaudiat te in die tribulationis[131] [Ps 19:2]

> Si legeris hunc <p>salmum cotidie mane ter, invenies benedictionem a domino. quodsi legeris hunc psalmum super hominem, qui infirmitatur velut ad mortem, si vivere debet, inveniet [**fol. 76v**] requiem; sin autem moriturus est, statim mori[e]tur.

If you read this psalm three times every morning, you will find blessing from the Lord. If you read this psalm over a person who is ill almost to the point of death and if the person must live, the person will find peace; but if the person is to die, the person will die immediately.

Domine in virtute tua [Ps 20:2 = Vulgata]

> Si vis, ut bene recipiaris ab omni homine, cuiuscumque {h}ordinis sit vel ~~qua~~ dignitatis, dic hunc psalmum super oleum roseum septies et unge ex predicto oleo faciem tuam et ~~hēbis~~ habebis honorem magnum.

If you want to be well received by everyone regardless of rank and dignity, recite this psalm seven times over rose oil, rub your face with this oil and you will be greatly honored.

---

125 evadare *cod.*

126 discordian *cod.*

127 τὴν ψυχήν μου ἀπὸ ἀσεβοῦς *LXX*; animam meam ab impio *Vulgata.*

128 p *corrected in the cod.*

129 currendum *cod.*

130 ἀγαλλιάσεται ὡς γίγας δραμεῖν ὁδὸν αὐτοῦ *LXX*; exultavit ut gigans ad currendam viam *Vulgata.*

131 ἐπακούσαι σου κύριος ἐν ἡμέρᾳ θλίψεως *LXX*; exaudiat te dominus in die tribulationis *Vulgata.*

Deus deus meus, respice in me[132] [Ps 21:2]

> Si incideris in manus inimichorum[133] hominum et timueris malitiam eorum, dic hunc psalmum VII et salvaberis ab eis.

If you fall into the hands of enemies and fear their wickedness, recite this psalm seven times, and you will be saved from them.

Dominus regit me[134] [Ps 22:1]

> Si quis peregre profici[sci]tur aut quacumque via ierit et legerit hunc psalmum septies, non detinebunt eum inimici eius, et si erraverit ab[135] via, legat ipsum super oleum bonum et faciem suam ungat et viam reinveniet.

If someone travels abroad or whichever road he takes and reads this psalm seven times, his enemies will not capture him; and if he strays from the road, he should read it over good oil, rub [the oil] on his face and he will find the road again.

Ad amorem
For love

Domini est terra [Ps 23:1 = Vulgata]

> Scribe hunc <p>salmum usque *introibit rex glorie* [Ps 23:7 vel 9 = Vulgata] et portet.

Write this psalm up to *introbit rex glorie*, and he should carry [it with him].

Ad te, domine, levavi animam meam [Ps 24:1 = Vulgata]

> Si quis infirmus non dormit, scribe hunc <p>salmum et pone ad capud eius et dormiet.

If a sick person cannot sleep, write this psalm, place it by the person's head, and the person will sleep.

Iudica me, domine, quoniam [Ps 25:1 = Vulgata]

> Si vis solvere opera incantatoris[136] et fantasie, dic hunc <p>salmum et nichil poterit facere incantator. et si dixerit[137] in medio inimicorum hominum, liberab<er>is ab eis et non poterunt noscere ŧ tibi.

If you want to render the work of a sorcerer or an illusion ineffective, recite this psalm, and the sorcerer will not be able to do anything. And if he speaks right in the middle of enemies,[138] you will be freed from them, and they will be unable to harm you.

---

132 ὸ θεὸς ὸ θεός μου, πρόσχες μοι *LXX*; deus, deus meus respice me (in me *varia lectio*) *Vulgata*.

133 *I thank the anonymus reviewer for correcting my reading of this word.*

134 κύριος ποιμαίνει με *LXX*; dominus reget (regit *varia lectio*) me *Vulgata*.

135 ad *cod*.

136 *Corrected from* incantationis.

137 *See the next note.*

138 dixerit *should probably be corrected to dixeris. This alters the meaning as follows:* »If you recite it (the psalm) while surrounded by enemies, …«

Dominus illuminatio [Ps 26:1 = Vulgata]

> Si vis plantare vineam, scribe hunc psalmum in initio lune et dilue eum in fonte[139], de quo adaquatur vinea, et salvabitur.

If you want to plant a vineyard, write this psalm at the start of the lunar [month], and dissolve it [the writing] at the source from which the vineyard is irrigated, and [the vineyard] will be saved.

fol. 77r

> Ad partum d(e)c(im)us psalmus. scribe etiam eum similiter CXLII ps(almum) et liga in coxa mulieris et salvabitur. et si navis inciderit in procella tempestatis[140], scribe hunc psalmum usque *libera me de aquis multis*[141] [Ps 143:7 = Vulgata] et liberaberis.

For childbirth Psalm 10. You should also write Psalm 142 in similar way and tie [it] to the woman's hip, and she will be cured. And if a ship gets caught in a hurricane, write this psalm up to *libera me de aquis multis* and you will be freed [from the storm].

~~Exaltabo te, deus meus rex~~ [Ps 144:1] ~~S~~
Ad convertendum cor viri ad uxorem

Exaltabo ~~teus~~ te, deus meus rex [Ps 144:1 = Vulgata]

> Si quis {h}odio abie<c>erit (?) uxorem suam a<b>sque causa, legat hunc psalmum septies super oleum bonum et ł ungat capud mulieris et scribat eum et subterret eum ante portam mulieris, et revertetur vir eius ad eam. et si legeris eum super oleum bonum VII et faciem infirmi un<g>seris[142], sanabitur.

To win a man's heart for a woman.

If someone abandons his wife out of hatred [and] without reason, [one] should read this psalm seven times over good oil, rub the woman's head [with this oil], write it [the psalm] und bury it in front of the woman's door; and her husband will return to her. And if you read it [the psalm] seven times over good oil and rub [the oil] on a sick person's face, the person will be cured.

Lauda, anima mea, dominum [Ps 145:2 = Vulgata]

> Lege hunc psalmum super oleum et mur{n}iam VII usque *dominus erigit elisos*[143] [Ps 145:8] et unge fracta ossa et sanabitur.

Read this psalm seven times over oil and salt water up to *dominus erigit elisos*, rub [the fluid] over the broken bones, and [the person] will be cured.

---

139 funte *cod.*

140 tenpestatis *cod.*

141 ῥῦσαί με ἐξ ὑδάτων πολλῶν *LXX.*

142 uns(er)it *cod.*

143 κύριος ἀνορθοῖ κατερραγμένους *LXX*; dominus erigit adlisos (elisos *varia lectio*) *Vulgata.*

Laudate dominum, quoniam bonus est[144] [Ps 146:1]

> Lege hunc psalmum cum supradicto psalmo usque *et alligat contriciones eorum*[145] [Ps 146:3] super oleum et mur{n}iam et unge infirmum et sanabitur. et si vis aliquid dividere cum aliquo, dic hunc psalmum et erit portio tua bona.

Read this psalm alongside the aforementioned psalm up to *et alligat contriciones eorum* over oil and salt water, rub the [fluid] onto the sick person, and the person will be cured. And if you want to share something with someone, recite this psalm and your share will be good.

Lauda, Ierusalem [Ps 147:12 = Vulgata]

> Si domum vel edificium vis edificare, scribe hunc psalmum cum croco et aqua ~~rosea~~ ros(ea) et su<f>fumiga cum ligno aloe et subterra in domo edificii et edificare (*sic*) super et erit benedicto Dei in ea.

If you want to build a house or a building, write this psalm with saffron and rose water, smoke it with [lign-]aloes wood, bury it in the house of the building, build [the house] on top and God's blessing will be upon it.

Laudate dominum de celis[146] [Ps 148:1 = Vulgata]

> Si quis legerit hunc psalmum cotidie vespere et mane VII in domo [**fol. 77v**] sua, discedet diabolus ab ea et erit ibi benedictio Dei.

If someone reads this psalm seven times a day, evening and morning, in their house, the devil will leave this house and God's blessing will be there.

Cantate domino [Ps 149:1 = Vulgata]

> Si qua mulier infirmatur, dic hunc psalmum VII super oleum bonum et unge et sanabitur.

If a woman falls ill, recite this psalm seven times over good oil, rub [the oil into her], and she will be cured.

Laudate dominum in sanctis eius [Ps 150:1 = Vulgata]

> Si habes arotum[147] vel <h>ortum, dic hunc psalmum ibi secties (*sic*) et multiplichabuntur bona in eis et benedictio Dei erit in illo loco.

If you have land to plough or a garden, recite this psalm there seven times, and the goods within will increase, and God's blessing will be upon this place.

> Explicit. liber iste de virtutibus psalmorum translatum (*sic*) Constantinopoli anno domini ~~m~~ millesimo ~~CLH~~ CL<X>I[148] indictione VIIII de greco in latinum et Alessandrie de saraceno in ~~creco~~ greco preterito anno fuerat. Deo gratias.

---

144 αἰνεῖτε τὸν κύριον, ὅτι ἀγαθὸν *LXX*; laudate dominum, quoniam bonum (bonus *varia lectio*) *Vulgata*.

145 δεσμεύων τὰ συντρίμματα αὐτῶν *LXX*; alligat contritiones illorum *Vulgata*.

146 αἰνεῖτε τὸν κύριον ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν *LXX*.

147 *Verbatim translation from the Greek word* ἀροτόν.

148 *For the corrected year with regard to the indiction, see p. 51 in the introduction to Text 2.*

End. This book about the power of the Psalms was translated from Greek into Latin in Constantinople in 1161 during the 8th indiction and from Arabic into Greek in Alexandria the previous year. I thank God.

Some Conclusions

This contribution aimed to shift the focus of medieval translation literature (from Greek into Latin) from literary works to shorter »technical« texts. This opens up a field of research into influences that go beyond the previously favored literary texts. The influence of astrological texts and »guides for daily life« is notable, and indeed understandable. The advantage of such shorter texts is that they require less vocabulary and language knowledge to translate. The second example, a text about the use of psalms, is an interesting case of a double translation from the original language to the target language via a mediating language, in this case from Arabic into Latin via Greek. This text should caution us against assuming that an identified source is the origin of a Latin text when a third language may have acted as an intermediary.

Interest in such »useful texts« could arise whenever representatives of one cultural zone came into contact with those of another, or in a contact zone more generally. Constantinople, the capital, with its »Latin quarters«, is a good example of this, as are the Greek settlements in Southern Italy. Astrological and astronomical texts have always attracted great interest, particularly prognostics and simple methods of predicting the future. The problem with these texts is that they are open texts and that they have changed over time within the textual tradition. As can be seen in the first example (text 1), even the basic numbers used for calculations were subject to scribal errors, thereby altering the numerical framework. Consequently, it is almost impossible to identify the exact original version of these »living texts«.

Minor texts, such as the translations presented in this paper, provide further insight into medieval society, which adopted foreign cultural heritage despite national and linguistic boundaries. This is often only recognizable to us in written form, as well as in how it was received within the new cultural circle. To introduce the topic, I have used short astronomical texts and diagrams that play an important role in computistics as illustrative examples. Comparing the Latin and Greek computistic texts reveals both their mutual influence and reception, enabling us to fill existing gaps through the parallel tradition.

In conclusion, one *desideratum* remains, which is to create an overview of all these minor texts through comparative analysis.

References

Abbreviations

cod. = codex
ex corr. = ex correctione
gr. = graecus/um
LXX = Septuaginta
PG = Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris 1857-1891)
PL = Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris 1844-1890)

Manuscripts

Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1577.
Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1832.
Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833.
Cambridge, University Library, Gg.5.35.
Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 28.26.
Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 86.14.
Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 86.17.
Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Palatino 998.
Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 33.
Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 38.
Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Voss. gr. F° 59.
Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, 4616.
Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, F.12. sup.
Modena, Biblioteca Estense Universitaria, α.V.7.6 (Puntoni 174).
Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele III, II C 33.
Oxford, Bodleian Library, Barocci 70.
Oxford, Bodleian Library, Barocci 166.
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 637.
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 854.
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 2184.
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 2236.
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 2419.
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 2992.
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, suppl. grec 446.
St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, 453.
Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr. 341.
Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr. 432.
Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr. 505.
Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr. 952.
Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr. 1056.
Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr. 1379.
Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ross. 986.
Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, hist. gr. 129.

Abbo of Fleury, *Miscellanea de computo, de astronomia et de cosmographia secundum codicem Berolinensem Phill. 1833*, ed. Alfred Lohr, introductionem historicam addidit Barbara Obrist, Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis 300 (Turnhout, 2019).

Beda Venerabilis, *De temporum ratione*, ed. Charles W. Jones, *Bedae Venerabilis Opera, Pars 6: Opera didascalica 2*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 123 B (Turnhout, 1977), 263-544.

Berschin, Walter, Declinationes Graecorum. Die karolingische Schulgrammatik, in: Berschin, *Mittellateinische Studien* III, 133-168.

Berschin, Walter, Der griechische Septuagintapsalter in abendländischen Bibliotheken der Spätantike und des Mittelalters, in: Walter Berschin, *Mittelalteinische Studien* III (Heidelberg, 2017) 11-22.

Berschin, Walter, Die griechisch-lateinische Paulus-Handschrift der Reichenau »Codex Paulinus Augiensis« (Cambridge, Trinity College B.17.1), in: Walter Berschin, *Mittellateinische Studien* II (Heidelberg, 2010) 63-78.

Berschin, Walter, Greek elements in medieval Latin manuscripts, in: Michael W. Herren (ed.), *The Sacred Nectar of the Greeks. The Study of Greek in the West in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1988) 85-104.

Berschin, Walter, Griechisches bei den Iren, in: Heinz Löwe (ed.), *Die Iren in Europa im frühen Mittelalter* 1 (Stuttgart, 1982) 501-510.

Berschin, Walter, Griechisches im karolingischen und ottonischen Fulda, in: Walter Berschin, *Mittellateinische Studien* III (Heidelberg, 2017) 181-192.

Berschin, Walter, Griechisches in der Domschule von Verona, in: Walter Berschin, *Mittelalteinische Studien* I (Heidelberg, 2005) 17-28.

Berschin, Walter, Griechisches in der Klosterschule des alten St. Gallen, in: Walter Berschin, *Mittellateinische Studien* I (Heidelberg, 2005) 179-192.

Berschin, Walter, *Griechisch-lateinisches Mittelalter. Von Hieronymus zu Nikolaus von Kues* (Bern, 1980); English translation: *Greek Letters and the Latin Middle Ages. From Jerome to Nicholas of Cusa*, translated from German by Jerold C. Frakes (Washington D.C., 1988)

Berschin, Walter, Salerno um 1100. Die Übersetzungen aus dem Griechischen und ihr byzantinisch-liturgischer Hintergrund, in: Walter Berschin, *Mittellateinische Studien* I (Heidelberg, 2005) 317-322.

Berthelot, Marcelin and Charles-Emile Ruelle, *Collection des anciens alchemistes grecs* I (Paris, 1887).

Bianconi, Daniele, Il Laur. Plut. 28.26 ovvero la storia di Bisanzio nella storia di un codice, in: Marco D'Agostino (ed.), *Alethes Philia. Studi in onore di Giancarlo Prato*, Collectanea 23 (Spoleto, 2010) 39-63.

de Bourdellès, Hubert, *L'Aratus Latinus. Études sur la culture et la langue latine dans le nord de la France au VIIIe siècle* (Lille, 1985).

Carmina Cantabrigiensia. Il canzoniere di Cambridge, edizione criticamente riveduta con introduzione, traduzione e note di commento, ed. Francesco Lo Monaco (Ospedaletto, 2009).

A Catalogue of Incipits and Mediaeval Scientific Writings in Latin, ed. Lynn Thorndike and Pearl Kibre (London, 1963).

Catalogue des manuscrits alchimiques latins, ed. James Corbet, vol. 1: *Manuscrits des bibliothèques publiques de Paris antérieurs au XVIIe siècle*, vol.2: *Manuscrits des bibliothèques publiques des départments français antérieurs au XVIIe siècle* (Brussels 1939, 1951).

Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum 3, ed. Emidio Martini and Domenico Bassi, *Codices Mediolanenses* (Brussels, 1901).

Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum 4, ed. Emidio Martini, Domenico Bassi and Alessandro Oliveri, *Codices Italici praeter Florentinos*, *Venetos*, *Mediolanenses*, *Romanos* (Brussels, 1903).
Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum 5/3, *Codicum Romanorum tertia pars*, ed. Josef Heeg (Brussels, 1910).
Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum 5/4, ed. Stefan Weinstock, *Codicum Romanorum pars quarta* (Brussels, 1940).
Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum 6, ed. Wilhelm Kroll, *Codices Vindobonenses* (Brussels, 1903).
Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum 7, ed. Franz Boll, *Codices Germanici* (Brussels, 1908).
Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum 8/3, *Codicum Parisinorum pars tertia*, ed. Pierre Boudreaux (Brussels, 1912).
Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum 8/4, *Codicum Parisinorum pars quarta*, ed. Pierre Boudreaux (Brussels, 1921).
Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum 9/2, ed. Stefan Weinstock, *Codices Britannici*, *pars altera*: *Codices Londinenses*, *Catabrigienses*, *Bibliothecarum minorum* (Brussels, 1953).
Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum 10, ed. Armand Delatte, *Codices Athenienses* (Brussels, 1924).
Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum 11/1, ed. Carlo Oreste Zuretti, *Codices Hispanienses*, *pars prior*, *Codices Scorialenses* (Brussels, 1932).
Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum 11/2, ed. Carlo Oreste Zuretti, *Codices Hispanienses*, *pars altera*, *Codices Scorialenses*, *Matritenses*, *Caesaraugustani* (Brussels, 1934).
Classen, Peter, Das Konzil von Konstantinopel 1166 und die Lateiner, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 48 (1955) 339-368.
Collin-Roset, Simone, Le *Liber thesauri occulti* de Pascalis Romanus. Un traité d'interprétation des songes du XIIe siècle, *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 30 (1963) 111-198.
Contreni, John J., Bede's scientific works in the Carolingian age, in: Stéphanie Lebecq, Michel Perrin, and Olivier Szerwiniak (eds.), *Bède le Vénérable entre tradition et posterité. The Venerable Bede. Tradition and Posterity*, Histoire et littérature du Septentrion (IRHiS) 34 (Villeneuve d'Ascq, 2005) 247-259, accessed on 27 May 2026: https://books.openedition.org/irhis/292.
Cordoliani, Alfred, Les manuscrits de la bibliothèque de Berne provenant de Fleury au XI[e] siècle : le comput d'Abbon, *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique suisse* 52 (1958) 135-151.
Dahan, Gilbert, Paschalis Romanus, *Disputatio contra Judaeos*, *Recherches Augustiniennes* 11 (1976) 161-213.
Delatte, Louis, *Textes latins et vieux français relatifs aux Cyranides, Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres de l'Université de Liège 93 (Paris, 1942).*
Dondaine, Antoine, Hugues Éthérien et le concile de Constantinople de 1166, *Historisches Jahrbuch* 77 (1958) 473-483.
Dondaine, Antoine, Hugues Ethérien and Léon Toscan, *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 19 (1952) 67-134.
Durling, Richard, *Burgundio of Pisa's Translation of Galen's Περὶ κράσεων*, *De complexionibus*, Galenus Latinus I (Berlin, 1976).
Durling, Richard, *Burgundio of Pisa's Translation of Galen's Περὶ πεπονθότων τόπων*, *De interioribus*, Galenus Latinus II (Stuttgart, 1992).

Engelen, Eva-Maria, *Zeit, Zahl und Bild. Studien zur Verbindung von Philosophie und Wissenschaft bei Abbo von Fleury*, Philosophie und Wissenschaft, Transdiziplinäre Studien 2 (Berlin, 1993).

Fortuna, Stefania, La nuova versione del catalogo elettronico Galeno latino e gli studi sulla tradizione latina di Galeno nell'ultimo decennio, Classica Vox, *Rivista di Studi Umanistici* 3 (2021) 197-207.

Franceschini, Ezio, *Studi e note di filologia latinae medievale*, Pubblicazioni della Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 4th ser., Scienze filologiche 30 (Milan, 1938).

Gastgeber, Christian, Die Ostertabelle des Dionysius Exiguus in griechischer Anwendung. Ein 532-Jahre-Zyklus süditalienischer Provenienz, *Journal of Byzantine Studies* 72 (2022) 193-274.

Clavis Patrum Graecorum, vol. 3: *a Cyrillo Alexandrino ad Iohannem Damascenum*, ed. Maurice Geerard (Turnhout, 1979).

Gentile, Luigi, *Indice e cataloghi* 4: *I codici Palatini della R. Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze*, vol. 2, 1 (Rome, 1890).

Graf, Georg, *Geschichte der arabischen christlichen Literatur*, vol. 2: *Die Schriftsteller bis zur Mitte des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Studi e Testi 133 (Vatican City, 1947).

Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies: Text and Translation, vol. 1, ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Sofia Torallas Tovar (Berkeley, California 2022).

Greek Medical Manuscripts – Diels' Catalogue, vols. 1-5, ed. Alain Touwaide, Series Medical Traditions 2/1-2/5 (Berlin, 2021).

Grotefend, Hermann, *Taschenbuch der Zeitrechnung des deutschen Mittelalters und der Neuzeit*. Hannover, 1898 (fourteenth edition) (Hannover, 2007).

Die Handschriften der antiken Ärzte, 1. Teil: *Hippokrates und Galenos*, ed. Hermann Diels (Berlin, 1905); 2. Teil: *Die übrigen griechischen Ärzte außer Hippokrates und Galenos*, ed. Hermann Diels (Berlin, 1906).

Haskins, Charles Homer, Leo Tuscus, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 24 (1924) 43-47.

Haskins, Charles Homer, Pascalis Romanus; Petrus Chrysolanus, *Byzantion* 2 (1925) 231-236.

Haskins, Charles Homer, *Studies in the History of Mediaeval Science* (Cambridge, 1924).

Heiduk, Matthias, Klaus Herbers and Hans-Christian Lehner, *Prognostication in the Medieval World. A Handbook*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 2021).

Herren, Michael M., Pelasgian fountains: Learning Greek in the early Middle Ages, in: Elizabeth P. Archibald, William Brockliss, and Jonathan Gnoz (eds.), *Learning Latin and Greek from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, 2015) 65-82.

Herren, Michael W., *The Hisperica Famina*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Studies and Texts, 31, 85 (Toronto, 1974, 1987).

Herren, Michael W. (ed.), *The Sacred Nectar of the Greeks. The Study of Greek in the West in the Early Middle Ages*, King's College London Medieval Studies 2 (London, 1988).

Herren, Michael W., The study of Greek in Ireland in the early Middle Ages, in: *L'Irlanda e gli Irlandesi nell'alto medioevo*, Spoleto, 16-21 aprile 2009, Atti delle settimane 57 (Spoleto, 2010) 511-528.

Hugo Eterianus, *De sancto et immortali Deo*, *Compendiosa expositio*, *Fragmenta Graeca*, ed. Pietro Podolak and Anna Zago, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis 298 (Turnhout, 2020).

Jones, Charles W., *Bedae Pseudepigrapha: Scientific Writings Falsely Attributed to Bede* (Ithaca, 1939).

Jones, Charles W., *Bede, the School and the 'Computus'*, Variorum Collected Studies Series CS436 (Aldershot, 1994).

Jones, Charles W., Polemius Silvius, Bede, and the names of the months, *Speculum* 9 (1934) 50-56.

Juste, Davis, *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Latinorum,* vol. 1: *Les manuscrits astrologiques latins conserves à la Bayerische Staatsbibliothek de Munich* (Paris, 2011).

Juste, Davis, *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Latinorum,* vol. 2: *Les manuscrits astrologiques latins conserves à la Bibliothèque nationale de France à Paris* (Paris, 2011).

Juste, David, Comput et divination chez Abbon de Fleury, in: Barbara Obrist (ed.), *Abbon de Fleury: philosophie, sciences et comput autour de l'an mil. Actes des journées organisées par le Centre d'histoire des sciences et des philosophies arabes et médiévales, CNRS, EPHE, Université Paris 7* [*avril 2002*], Paris et Villejuif, Cahiers du centre d'histoire des sciences et des philosophies arabes et médiévales, Oriens Occidens 6 (second edition), (Villejuif, 2006) 95-127.

Juste, David, Ptolemy, Handy Tables (Greek) (update: 11 May 2025) in: *Ptolemaeus Arabus et Latinus. Works*, accessed on 27 May 2026: http://ptolemaeus.badw.de/work/153.

Juste, David, Ptolemy, *Preceptum canonis Ptolomei* (tr. before c. 1000) (update: 06 October 2025) in: *Ptolemaeus Arabus et Latinus. Works*, accessed on 27 May 2026: http://ptolemaeus.badw.de/work/52.

Kaczynski, Bernice M., *Greek in the Carolingian Age. The St. Gall Manuscripts*, Speculum Anniversary Monographs 13 (Cambridge, 1988).

Kapriev, Georgi, *Lateinische Rivalen in Konstantinopel: Anselm von Havelberg und Hugo Eterianus*, Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales, Biblioteca 15 (Leuven, 2018).

Kibre, Pearl, Hippocrates latinus, repertorium of Hippocratic writings in the Latin Middle Ages (I), *Traditio* 31 (1975) 99-126; (II), *Traditio* 32 (1976) 257-292; (III), *Traditio* 33 (1977) 253-295; (IV), *Traditio* 34 (1978) 193-226; (V), *Traditio* 35 (1979) 273-302; (VI), *Traditio* 36 (1980) 347-372; (VII), *Traditio* 37 (1981) 267-293; (VIII), *Traditio* 38 (1982) 165-192.

Kubitschek, Wilhelm, *Die Kalenderbücher von Florenz, Rom und Leyden*, Denkschriften der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, Philosophisch-historische Klasse 57/3 (Vienna, 1915).

Lamberz, Erich, Das Geschenk des Kaisers Manuel II. an das Kloster Saint-Denis und der »Metochites-Schreiber« Michael Klostomalles, in: Birgit Borkopp and Thomas Steppan (eds.), *ΛΙΘΟΣΤΡΩΤΟΝ. Studien zur byzantinischen Kunst und Geschichte. Festschrift für Marcell Restle* (Stuttgart, 2000) 155-165.

Lamberz, Erich, Georgios Bullotes, Michael Klostomalles und die byzantinische Kaiserkanzlei unter Andronikos II. und Andronikos III. in den Jahren 1298-1329, in: Brigitte Mondrain (ed.), Lire et écrire à Byzance, Collège de France – CNRS, Centre de Recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, Monographie 19 (Paris, 2006) 33-48.

Latin Ptolemaic Writings on Astronomy and Astrology up to AD 1700. A Comprehensive Survey of the Works, Manuscripts and Early Printed Editions, 2 vols., ed. David Juste (Turnhout 2026).

Lempire, Jean, Calendrical calculations, traditions and practices in the medieval eastern Christian world, in: Matthias Heiduk, Klaus Herbers and Hans-Christian Lehner, *Prognostication in the Medieval World. A Handbook* 1 (Berlin, 2021) 619-632.

Lempire, Jean, Le calcul de la date de Pâques dans les traités de S. Maxime le Confesseur et de Georges, moine et prêtre, *Byzantion* 77 (2007) 267-304.

Lucentini, Paolo and Vittoria Perrone Compagni, *I testi e i codici di Ermete nel Medioevo* (Florence, 2001).

Lucentini, Paolo and Vittoria Perrone Compagni, I manoscritti dei testi ermetici latini, in: Lucentini, Paolo, Ilaria Parri and Vittoria Perrone Compagni (eds.), *Hermetism from Late*

Antiquity to Humanism. *La tradizione ermetica dal mondo tardo-antico all'umanesimo*, Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia 40 (Turnhout, 2003) 715-745.

Maximus the Confessor, *Brevis enarratio Christiani paschatis*, PG 19, cols. 1217-1280.

Mercati, Giovanni, *Note di letteratura biblica e cristiana antica*, Studi e Testi 5 (Rome, 1901).

Meyier, Karel Adriaan de, *Bibliotheca Universitatis Leidensis*. *Codices manuscripti* 6: *Codices Vossiani graeci et Miscellenaei* (Leiden, 1955).

Mioni, Elpidio, *Catalogus Codicum Graecorum Bibliothecae Nationalis Neapolitanae*, vol. I/1 (Rome, 1992).

Møller Jensen, Brian, Hugo Eterianus and his two treatises in the Demetrius of Lampe affair, in: Denis Selby (ed.), *Never the Twain Shall Meet? Latins and Greeks Learning from Each Other in Byzantium* (Berlin, 2017) 197-205.

Montecini, Francesco, L'infiniment grand, l'infiniment petit. Astronomie et oniromancie dans le Liber Thesauri Occulti de Romanus Pascalis, *Revue des études sud-est européennes* 55 (2017) 41-58.

Mountford, James Frederick, De mensium nominibus, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 43 (1923) 102-116.

Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta magica, ed. Ernst Riess, Philologus, Supplementband 6/1 (Göttingen, 1892).

Neugebauer, Otto and George Saliva, On Greek numerology, *Centaurus* 31 (1988) 189-206.

Obrist, Barbara, Les tables et figures abboniennes dans l'histoire de l'iconographie des recueils de comput, in: Barbara Obrist (ed.), *Abbon de Fleury: Philosophie, science et comput autour de l'an mil*, Actes des journées organisées par le Centre d'histoire des sciences et des philosophies arabes et médiévales, CNRS, EPHE, Université Paris 7, Oriens – Occidens 6 (second edition), (Paris, 2006) 141-186.

Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri, vol. 2, ed. Karl Preisendanz and Albert Henrichts (second corrected edition), (Munich, 2001).

Podolak, Pietro and Anna Zago, Ugo Eteriano e la contoversia cristologica del 1166: edizione dell'opuscolo »De minoritate«. Appendice: edizione della lettera ad Alessio, *Revue des Études Byzantines* 74 (2016) 77-170.

Ps.Beda Venerabilis, *Prognostica temporum*, PL 90, 951.

Radiciotti, Paolo, Manoscritti digrafici grecolatini e latinogreci nell'Alto Medioevo, *Römische Historische Mitteilungen* 40 (1998) 49-118.

Radiciotti, Paolo, Scrivere e leggere il greco fuori dai confini temporali del mondo antico: il medioevo latino, in: Mario Capasso (ed.), *Leggere greco e latino fuori dai confini nel mondo antico*. Atti del I congresso nazionale dell'Associzione italiana di cultura classica, Lecce, 10-11 maggio 2008, I quaderni di Atene e Roma 1 (Lecce, 2010) 175-191.

Rapisarda, Stefano and Agata Calcagno, Il Manoscritto Plut. 86.14 della Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana di Firenze, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 109 (2016) 151-178.

Regiae Bibliothecae Matritensis Codices Graeci mss., ed. Juan Iriarte, vol. 1 (Madrid, 1769).

Rigo, Antonio, Leone Toscano, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 64 (2005) 557-560. Accessed on 27 May 2026: https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/leone-toscano_(Dizionario-Biografico)/.

Schreiner, Peter, Der Kreis um Liutprand von Cremona, *Römische-Historische Mitteilungen* 45 (2003) 305-317; reprinted in: Peter Schreiner, *Orbis Romanus, Byzanz und seine Nachbarn* (Bucharest, 2013) 21-38.

Schreiner, Peter, Die Begegnung von Orient und Okzident in der Schrift, in: Erika Juhász (ed.), *Byzanz und das Abendland. Begegnungen zwischen Ost und West*, Antiquitas, Byzantium, Renascentia. Bibliotheca byzantina 1 (Budapest, 2013) 11-42

Scimone, Alessandra, *Galenus Latinus: la traduzione di Burgundio da Pisa del De causis pulsuum*. Unpublished doctoral thesis (University of Salerno, 2019).

Singer, Dorothea Waley, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts in Great Britain and Ireland Dating from before the XVI Century*, 3 vols. (Brussels, 1928-1931).

Speranzi, David, La scrittura di Aldo e il suo ultimo carattere greco (con uno sconosciuto esemplare di tipografia), in: Natale Vacalebre (ed.), *Five Centuries Later. Aldus Manutius: Culture, Typography and Philology* (Florence, 2018) 29-60.

Tannery, Paul, Notice sur des fragments d'onomatomancir arithmétique, *Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la bibliothèque nationale et autres bibliothèques* 31 (1886) 231-269.

Thorndike, Lynn, *A History of the Magic and Experimental Science during the First Thirteen Centuries of Our Era*, vol. 2 (New York, 1923).

Tihon, Anne, *Le "Petit Commentaire" de Théon d'Alexandrie aux Tables faciles de Ptolémée (histoire du texte, édition critique, traduction)*, Studi e Testi 282 (Vatican City, 1978).

Tihon, Anne, Les *Tables Faciles* de Ptolémée dans les manuscrits en onciale (IX^{e}-X^{e} siècles), *Revue d'Histoire des Textes* 22 (1992) 47-87

Tolles, Thomas G., The Latin tradition of the *Epistola Petosiridis*, *Manuscripta* 26 (1982) 50-60.

Les Alchimistes grecs, tome IX, 1re partie: Traités des arts et métiers, ed. Robert Halleux and Blanche El Gammal (Paris, 2021).

Van de Vyver, André, Les plus anciennes traductions latines médiévales (X^{e}-XI^{e} siècles) de Traités d'Astronomie et d'astrologie, *Osiris* 1 (1935) 658-691.

Verbist, Peter, *Duelling with the Past. Medieval Authors and the Problem of the Christian Era, c. 990-1135*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages 21 (Turnhout, 2010).

Wickersheimer, Ernst, Figures médio-astrologiques des IX^{e}, X^{e} et XI^{e} siècles, *Janus* 19 (1914) 157-177.

Wilson, William Jerome, Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts in the United States and Canada, *Osiris* 6 (1939) 1-836.

Zellmann-Rohrer, Michael, Further useful Psalms, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 115 (2022) 1115-1123.

Zellmann-Rohrer, Michael, »Psalms useful for everything.« Byzantine and Post-Byzantine manuals for the amuletic use of the Psalter, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 72 (2018) 113-168.

Zellmann-Rohrer, Michael, The usefulness of the Psalms. Byzantine manuals for the ritual exploitation of the Psalter, in: Ida Frölich, Nóra Dávid and Gerhard Langer (eds.), *You who live in the shelter of the most high (Ps. 91:1). The Use of Psalms in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Poetics, Exegesis and Narrative. Studies in Jewish Literature and Art 16 (Vienna, 2021) 127-145.

Websites (all accessed on 27 May 2026)

Aristoteles Latinus and Aristoteles Semitico-Latinus:
https://hiw.kuleuven.be/dwmc/research/al/

Corpus des Astronomes Byzantins:
https://www.uclouvain.be/fr/instituts-recherche/incal/ciol/ecab

Galenus Latinus: https://www.galenolatino.com/

Manuscript Berlin, Phillipps 1833:
http://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/SBB0001A74A00000000

Manuscript Cambridge University Library, MS Gg.5.35:
https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-GG-00005-00035/1

Manuscript Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Palatino 998:
https://manus.iccu.sbn.it/risultati-ricerca-manoscritti/-/manus-search/detail/681160

Manuscript Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 28.26 (*Diktyon* 16207): https://tecabml.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/plutei/id/475232
Manuscript Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 86.14 (*Diktyon* 16800): https://tecabml.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/plutei/id/1014844
Manuscript Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 33 (*Diktyon* 37986): http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:1560058
Manuscript Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 38: http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:882068
Manuscript Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España 4616 (*Diktyon* 40096): http://bdh.bne.es/bnesearch/detalle/bdh0000247036
Manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, suppl. grec 446 (*Diktyon* 50020): https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b11004080k
Manuscript St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, 453: https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/de/list/one/csg/0453 and http://dx.doi.org/10.5076/e-codices-csg-0453
Manuscript Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr. 505 (*Diktyon* 67136): https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.505
Pinakes and Diktyon reference number: https://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr/
Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit (PmbZ): https://www.degruyterbrill.com/de/database/pmbz/html
Ptolemaeus Arabus et Latinus. http://ptolemaeus.badw.de/start

List of Figures

Figure 1: Cambridge, University Library, Gg.5.35, fol. 420v: Greek numerals and their names as well as diphthongs (© traced from the original by the author)
Figure 2: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 55r: Greek numerals and their names (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)
Figure 3: Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 28.26, fol. 45r: hemerologion for January (© Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Digital Repository, https://tecabml.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/plutei/id/475232, CC BY-NC-SA)
Figure 4: Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 33, fol. 20r: calendar concordance (Roman, Greek, Egyptian) (Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, SCA 33, Public Domain Mark 1.0)
Figure 5a: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1832, fol. 25r: Egyptian months in Greek letters (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)
Figure 5b: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1832, fol. 27r: Roman and Greek months in Greek letters (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)
Figure 6: St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, 453, p. 207: *De nominibus mensium secundum Latinos, Hebreos, Egyptios, Grecos* (© St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 453; CC BY NC 4.0 [https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/de/list/one/csg/0453])
Figure 7: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 31v: list of Roman and Greek month names (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)
Figure 8: Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 28.26, fol. 43v: κανὼν σελήνης ἐκ συνόδου, additional material to Ptolemy's *Handy Tables* (© Florence, Biblioteca Medicea

Laurenziana, Digital Repository, https://tecabml.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/plutei/id/475232, CC BY-NC-SA)

Figure 9: Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 33, fol. 25v: σελήνης ἡμέραι and the zodiac signs in the appendix to Maximus the Confessor's *Brevis ennarratio* (Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, SCA 33, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

Figure 10: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 39r: computus companion by Abbo of Fleury (mistake of the scribe at the transition von lunar days 7 to 8; the direction of the inscription is not alternated) (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

Figure 11: Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 28.26, fol. 44r: ἡμέραι κατὰ σελήνην: the days of the moon and the epacts, in the appendix to Ptolemy's *Handy Tables* (refers to the last column in the model calendar: 45r-50v) (© Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Digital Repository, https://tecabml.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/plutei/id/475232, CC BY-NC-SA)

Figure 12: Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 33, fol. 25r: list indicating the lunar day for each date (with some faults, refers to the moon column of each month in the model calendar on fols. 23v-24r) (Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, SCA 33, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

Figures 13: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 45r list indicating the lunar day for each date (reference calendar on fol. 44v; similar tables on fol. 32r und 32v referring to the complexe *annale* on fols. 22r-29r) (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

Figure 14: Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 33, fol. 24v: list indicating the weekday for each date (Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, SCA 33, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

Figure 15: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 29r: list indicating the weekday for each date (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

Figure 16: Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, Scaliger 33, fol. 26r: scheme of a sundial (Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken, SCA 33, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

Figure 17: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 38v: scheme of a sundial (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

Figure 18: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Phillipps 1833, fol. 53v: illustration to the letter from Petosiris (© Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany, Public Domain Mark 1.0)

Figure 19: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, suppl. grec 446, fol. 44r: illustration to the letter from Petosiris (© gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Figure 20: Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, 4616, fol. 90r: illustration to the letter from Petosiris (© image taken from the holdings of the Biblioteca Nacional de España, CC BY 4.0)

Figure 21: Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, 4616, fol. 89v: concordance of the lunar days and the calculation number (© image taken from the holdings of the Biblioteca Nacional de España, CC BY 4.0)

Origin Myths: Challenges of Interpretation

Walter Pohl, Pavlína Rychterová and Helmut Reimitz*

Since the 1980s, early medieval historiography has undergone a wave of deconstruction, being credited with little credibility as historical sources. Even more, origin myths have been dismissed not only for their factual information, but also as indirect witnesses of indigenous constructions of identity. The article reopens the debate acknowledging the inspiring challenge of constructivism, but also questioning the new ontology that has spread in its simplifying reception. Using a number of methodological and philosophical approaches, it raises the question to what extent the past is only accessible as a construct, and who are the constructors. Referring to Waldenfels' phenomenology, it argues that »the other« is not simply a construct of the sovereign self, but that the challenge of the alien is prior to its construction. That may also explain that many origin myths hardly offer positive models of identification, but are full of conflicts, failures and ambivalent figures. Foreignness and diversity are not only constructions of the self, but they are also deep experiences of a foregoing reality. Epistemologically, past diversity that we study is indeed always constructed, and all written sources are already the result of such constructions. Methodologically, therefore, the constructivist perspective needs to be maintained. As the article argues, we just have to avoid ontologising it. The ontological basis is human diversity. The epistemological goal is to understand how people deal with that challenge, and how identities and differences keep changing as a result.

Keywords: Early Middle Ages, origin myths, historiography, constructivism, deconstruction, phenomenology, ontology, diversity, identity, social memory

Whether origin narratives had an origin is difficult to say. Their creation seems to have happened everywhere, and they are indeed quite well preserved from relatively early on in human history. Taken together they provide us with a rich variety of how different societies and cultures reflected on the questions of what made them belong together. It seems as impossible to reconstruct the origin of origin myths or stories as one a coherent history, just as it seems

* Correspondence details: Walter Pohl, Institute for Medieval Research, Austrian Academy of Sciences, walter.pohl@oeaw.ac.at; Pavlína Rychterová, Institute for Medieval Research, Austrian Academy of Sciences, pavlina.rychterova@oeaw.ac.at; Helmut Reimitz, Institute of Austrian Historical Research, University of Vienna, helmut.reimitz@univie.ac.at.

This is the introductory article to the thematic section *Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasian Comparison*, guest editor: Reinier Langelaar. To read all related articles, please access https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026.

eISSN-Nr. 2412-3196
DOI 10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026s86

impossible not to explore them as constitutive elements of human societies. In many cases such narratives concern not only the origin of a specific group, people, kingdom empire, or religion, but also the origins of mankind itself. In doing so, they tend to define humanity by what it is not – by its distinction from the non-human, the inhuman, the divine, the worlds of animals, plant life, or machines and so forth.

In Greek mythology, Prometheus creates mankind from mud and water, setting them apart from animals in giving them an upright posture to be able to look to heaven. In the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh, the first human, Enkidu, is created from clay but lives among and like beasts before his real humanization through a six-day period of intimacy with the temple prostitute Shamat.[1] In Chinese anthropogonic myths, the creation of mankind also addresses the origins of social stratification. In the Chinese story of Nuwa's creation of human beings, for instance, she too created humans by forming figures with her own hands from yellow clay. Since shaping them by hand was too time-consuming, she dipped a vine into the mud and splashed droplets onto the ground. Each droplet turned into a person, and while the figures carefully shaped by hand became the nobility, the people formed from the mud splashes turned into the lower strata of society.[2] In a popular Tibetan origin myth, a monkey pairs up with a lustful rock-demoness, and their offspring eventually develops into humans – the Tibetans.[3] Many anthropogonic narratives are similarly further developed into reflections about the specific humanity of particular communities allowing to distinguish one from the other.[4] In doing so, universal origins are always shaped or at least inflected by specific historical circumstances and power relations, and by their corresponding boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.[5] This, however, is not only true for the various narratives themselves but also for their further study and reflections about these origin stories up to modern historiography.

The historiography of our own research field, the late antique and medieval West, from the heydays of modern nationalism in the 19th century onwards provides particularly illustrative examples for how origin myths continue to stay connected to processes of identification as well as reflections about them. From the beginning of history as a professional discipline in Europe, the study of origin myths was closely connected to efforts to reconstruct the continuity of early medieval communities such as the Goths, Franks, or Longobards, whose kingdoms were established as more or less ethnically defined realms on the territories of the former

1 *Epic of Gilgamesh*, tables 1-2., trans.George,1-21.

2 Goldin, The myth that China has no creation myth, 11 and references to other translations, n. 45. I would like to thank Xin Wen, Princeton, and Trenton Wilson, Princeton, for advice.

3 Langelaar, Chasing the colours of the rainbow.

4 Leeming*, Dictionary of Creation Myths.*

5 The inbuilt contradiction or aporia of reflections on humanity between its constitution as universal and distinctive at the same time and its relation to the production of anthropological differences is one of the main themes in the work of Étienne Balibar; for a recent introduction to his work see see Stoler, Gourgouris and Lezra (eds.), *Thinking with Balibar*for a recent discussion by Balibar himself, *On universals. Constructing and deconstructing community*; *idem*, *Rasse, Geschlecht, Gattung*; and *idem*, The genealogical scheme.

Western Roman Empire, with the modern European nations.[6] Early medieval origin myths that have come down to us from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages were interpreted as representing the ethnic mentality of early medieval peoples that came to replace the constitutionalism of the Roman empire. Hence, the interpretation of medieval origin stories in Europe became closely linked to the often-controversial debates about the role of ethnicity and identity in the formation of the post-Roman kingdoms. Did origin myths matter for ethnic identities, and did ethnicity matter for the people concerned? In the context of such questions, the role of ethnic origin narratives in early medieval Europe has again received considerable interest since the turn of the millennium.[7]

The more recent and increasingly post-modern critique of the modern »myths of nations« [8] has gone so far as to disconnect these stories from any historical reality, pushing them into the sphere of solely speculative reflection, ahistorical reproduction of literary or ethnographic tropes, or fiction. Our position is different. While we agree with the necessity of the critique and deconstruction of older and newer nationalist or racist appropriations of early medieval origin myths, we would rather suggest to ask how origin stories arise and why. Pursuing such questions must, to a certain extent, leave the field of classical historiographical methods. Despite all the tools adopted from linguistics, sociology, and literary studies, the historiographical methods remain at the level of source description, no matter how sophisticated this may be. These sources are evidence of individual and collective mental operations that produce ultimate meaning-giving concepts of the world. »Collective identities« is one of these concepts, and a very important, ubiquitous and persistent one, although the term is a modern one.

The question of the formation of origin stories is therefore a question of the origin of precisely such meaning-giving mental and social operations. Hence, the question of the origins of origin stories will lead us not only to questions of historical text or source critique. They were and are also connected to fundamental epistemological, philosophical and anthropological issues such as the question what distinguishes the human from the non-human, which could also provide a matrix that allowed to distinguish between humans, and to assess where they belonged. Without considering this ensemble of questions, our historical critique would not be able to match the historical complexities of the production, reproduction and dissemination of origin myths. To do so seems to us even more important in a time of resurfacing nationalism, race making, and the (re-)naturalization of cultural, religious and gender boundaries, whose success builds on the seeming familiarity of older and long-held assumptions. The long history of such assumptions in European medieval historiography may well make

6 Historiography: Wood, *The Modern Origins*; for the history, Pohl, *Völkerwanderung*; Halsall, *Barbarian migrations*, Wood, *Transformation*; and the discussion in: Pohl and Wieser, Introduction: The Emergence of New Polities .

7 For instance, Christensen, *Cassiodorus, Jordanes and the History of the Goths* (2002); Pohl (ed.), *Suche nach den Ursprüngen* (2004); Plassmann, *Origo gentis* (2006); Geary, *Women at the Beginning* (2006); Coumert, *Origines des peuples* (2007); Bernsen, Becher and Brüggen (eds.), *Gründungsmythen Europas* (2013); Ghosh, *Writing the Barbarian Past* (2015); Pohl and Mahoney (eds.), *Narratives of Ethnic and Tribal Origins* (2018); Brady and Wadden (eds.), *Origin Legends in Early Medieval Western Europe* (2022); Brady, *The Origin Legends* (2022).

8 Geary, *Myths of Nations*.

such trends more virulent and influential. It may therefore be useful for readers of this collection of essays on Eurasian origin myths who are not acquainted with the debates on origin myths in European history to give a brief outline of the historiography as the background for the more general methodological aspects of the study of origin myths that we would like to outline in this introduction.

Historiography: Ontologies and Their Deconstructions

For a long time, debates focused on binary alternatives; and the different axes of analysis were rarely distinguished: »Authentic« and indigenous myth vs. erudite fabrication and outside perception; emic vs. etic production of a story; oral vs. written transmission, codified vs. flexible texts; and relevance of these texts for self-identification of a group vs. their dubious, purely literary character disconnected of the political reality of the community. The problem with these axes is twofold: For a long time, debates focused on binary alternatives; and the different axes of analysis were rarely distinguished.

The traditional position of *Germanische Altertumskunde* (Studies in Germanic Antiquity) aimed for the reconstruction of authentic Germanic myths, which represented orally transmitted, essentially unchanging traditions that came directly from the soul of the Germanic people and expressed their innermost feeling of belonging.[9] The elements of this authentic mythology had to be washed out of the texts like golden nuggets. They could be verified and contextualised in the much wider mythology of the Icelandic sagas which were transmitted more than half a millennium later, in the 12th and 13th centuries.[10] There are indeed obvious parallels. For instance, the Longobards were supposed to have received their names from Wodan and Frea, who can be identified with the Nordic gods Odin and Freya or Frigga.[11] Furthermore, this story about the Longobards can be connected to old Norse texts that attribute a long beard to Odin, who occasionally receives the epithets *Síðskeggr* or *Langbarðr*. On the other hand, the connection could also be reversed; the Nordic authors of the period may have had a good Latin education, could have read Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum* (used, among others, in the Danish history by Saxo Grammaticus in c. 1200), and may have included *Langbarðr* in the long list of epithets of Odin, as Robert Nedoma suggested.[12] The grandiose edifice of *Germanische Altertumskunde* was, in any case, built on patchy evidence.

These debates had both an ideological and a paradigmatic context. Since the 19th century German nationalism had laid much weight on the Germanic origins of the nation, and on the heroic past of the migration period. The wide-ranging migrations of Goths and Longobards could serve as a model for expansive politics and for the presumptions of racial superiority of the Germanic/Nordic race, culminating in the Nazi period. This nationalistic discourse relied on an essentialist and naturalist paradigm: Which ethnic group or nation one belonged to was

9 Klaus von See, *Deutsche Germanenideologie*.

10 Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*.

11 *Origo gentis Langobardorum* 1, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 2; Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 7-9; *ibid*. 52; see the article by Walter Pohl and Pavlína Rychterová, in this volume.

12 Nedoma, Der altisländische Odinsname.

determined by biology and/or by a shared »Volksseele« (soul of the people).[13] After 1945, this ideology and its points of reference in history were gradually dismantled, not least by historians writing in German.[14] The first wave of critique mainly addressed the racist ideologies as the foundation of previous Germanic studies. That was mainly the achievement of Reinhard Wenskus in the 1960s, who showed that the late antique and early medieval evidence does not warrant any racial or biological definition of Germanic tribes (he avoided the term *Volk* that was central in Nazi propaganda). In his view, a small, influential core group of a distinct society (*Traditionskern*, kernel of tradition) which preserved ancient norms and narratives could act as a catalyst for the formation of an ethnic group.[15] This model maintained some weaknesses of older research, for instance, assuming strong textual continuity of key oral traditions, ascribing agency to a narrow male elite, and regarding this process as a characteristically Germanic form of »gentile«, ethnic consciousness. At the time, however, it opened new avenues for research. Building on this model, Herwig Wolfram showed the dynamic character of »ethnogenesis«, and its Roman, not only Germanic context.[16]

How far the demolition of »the Germanic« should go, however, remained controversial. Many scholars pushed toward the other end of the spectrum: The texts in question were regarded as literary fiction written by Romans only, without any basis in actual oral lore, completely malleable to the intentions of the authors and without any visible impact on ethnic identities. To some, speaking of »tradition« or »ethnicity« in the context of post-Roman kingdoms already perpetuated nationalist and racist ideologies.[17] Several authors have therefore denied that these texts contain any traces of indigenous legends, or that they mattered at all for identity formation.[18] Patrick Amory, for instance, claimed that the well-attested use of the ethnonym »Goths« in Ostrogothic Italy was not an ethnic identification, but just an »ethnographic ideology« which did not create community, it created political opportunity. No-one in Ostrogothic Italy attaches a belief in common descent to the words Goths and Romans.«[19] As usual with such clamorous deconstructions of ethnic identities, this argument only works if you define a »real« people by its common blood. Yet this case shows well that the outdated essentialist definition of ethnicity makes no sense: If Goths consistently act and represent themselves as Goths and are regarded as such by Romans and others, they are an ethnic group regardless of their genetic ancestry, i.e. »blood«.[20] It is far-fetched to argue that an origin narrative of an ethnic group was irrelevant to that group's identity, and

13 Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe*.

14 Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfasung*; Beck (ed.), *Germanenprobleme*; Pohl, *Germanen*.

15 Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*.

16 Wolfram, *Goten*.

17 Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*. Even Ghosh, *Writing the Barbarian Past*, who shows (against Goffart) that »barbarian« historiography in Latin has a lot in common with vernacular epic, shies away from allowing for its relevance for identity.

18 Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*; Gillett (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity*.

19 Amory, *People and Identity*, 316-317.

20 Pohl, Gotische Identitäten; Pohl, Strategies of Identification.

it contradicts much of recent research on cultural memory.[21] To an extent, however, it was still the critique and fear of Nazi ideology that triggered an attempt to remove all possible historical arguments which could be misused for it once and forever.

The essentialist paradigm was not only criticised by ancient and early medieval historians. On a theoretical level and in the Social Sciences, constructivism offered an alternative that has eventually become mainstream in Humanities research.[22] It argued that ethnic and other large social groups had to be imagined at first to become real.[23] This approach was radicalized by postmodern deconstructionism, claiming that ultimately there was no reality outside the text.[24] That created a powerful impulse to deconstruct former concepts and terminologies, and undermine established master narratives. It helped to realise that scholars had taken many things for granted that were in fact modern projections not based on the sources. Yet it gradually turned into a new routine that placed more trust in its theoretical models than in the source texts. By blurring the distinction between historical reality and social memory, it had become difficult to historicize either of them, because the first had become inaccessible, and the second was locked in its presentist and intertextual dimensions.[25]

In Medieval History, this deconstructive spin was strangely coupled with traditional positivist scepticism in denying that narrative sources could tell us much about past realities. The refusal to acknowledge any indigenous element or form of ethnic identification in origin narratives derived much of its impact from this deconstructivist spin: Not only origin myths, but early medieval historiography as a whole had largely been written to deceive. And textual traces of ethnic identities were regarded as particularly deceptive.[26] In fact, as the sociologist Andreas Wimmer noted, »Constructivism as an epistemological stance (…) is sometimes confounded with an ontological statement about the nature of empirical reality: that ethnicity is inherently ephemeral and unstable.«[27] The ontological claim that all groups and identities are necessarily fluid is usually connected to the assumption that what is fluid can never be »real«. In this way, Benedict Anderson's constructivist approach – that communities had to be imagined to become real – was mistaken for an ontological statement that ethnic and other communities were only imaginary.[28] This was in a sense a paradox intellectual development because postmodernism had entered the scene as a critique of Western ontology (or ontologies), of the conceptual foundations of modernity. However, it was Jacques Derrida himself who had boldly stated that there was no reality outside the text.[29] He may not have understood this as an ontological affirmation, but as a play of »*différances*«, continuous shifts of differences. Yet in its reception by historians, this assertion clearly acquired an ontological

21 Assmann, *Cultural Memory*.

22 Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*.

23 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

24 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

25 For a recent critique, see Schaub, *Le passé ne s'invente pas*.

26 Cf. Pohl, Debating ethnicity.

27 Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making*, 3.

28 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Pohl, Ethnicity, race and genetic ancestry.

29 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

value: communities, identities, ethnicity only existed in texts. In contemporary Western society, in which intellectuals enjoy considerable freedom of expression but have limited access to power and resources, such an approach offered the seductive illusion that by producing texts we intellectuals did not only construct reality, but were in fact the ones who had a share in the »real world« of texts, and could shape discourses that could change the course of history. The power of words would, for instance, deprive atavistic ethnic, national and racial divisions of their incidence. Unfortunately, we can already observe that this was a noble illusion.

Epistemologies and Their Constructions

However that may be: As an ontological paradigm, insisting that social reality does not »really« exist may make sense in Buddhist philosophy, but not as a guideline to historical method, and in fact few scholars have explicitly tried to establish it as such. The arguments were rarely ontological but epistemological; written sources were classed as »opaque barriers« between us and the past, about which they could not provide verifiable evidence. For such claims, it was often sufficient to find some bias or mistake in a text to dismiss it as unreliable. In a next step, that supposed lack of evidence could then be used for ontological statements about the past, for instance, that ethnicity did not exist or did not matter in the past society in consideration. Those were conclusions about which progressive deconstructionists and traditional positivists could agree.

What came closest to a general methodological approach was Hayden White's critique of historical writing, past or present, which he regarded as mere »fiction of fact«.[30] That was a useful point of departure for a literary analysis of historical texts and the ways in which they could achieve credibility, and it offered some additional refinement to historical source critique. As a paradigm for historical research, however, it rather replaced than refined the systematic critique of the sources. It did not go beyond the rather crude positivist distinction between intrinsically unreliable narrative texts and reliable documentary sources. Such an approach fell far behind Foucault's discourse analysis, which incorporated both within inclusive discourse formations, still one of the lasting achievements of poststructuralism.[31]

The frequent misunderstandings of constructivism and its unreflected ontological uses do not warrant abandoning it as a paradigmatic approach in the study of past societies.[32] Yet it should be restored to an ontology which assumes that the result of construction was social reality. In this form, deconstructionism as a critical method also remains valid as a tool for dismantling essentialising concepts and master narratives. However, the ontological basis requires further discussion. A fundamental question is whether and under which conditions social reality exists prior to and without construction, and how exactly we conceive of the process of construction. Who constructs? Critical uses of constructivism often assume that »the elites«, whether of power or knowledge, construct and impose the reality under which

30 White, *Content of the Form*.

31 Foucault, *L'ordre du discours*.

32 For a more radical refutation of constructivism see Hoeres, Perspektiven für eine postkonstruktivistische Geschichtswissenschaft, who advocates the return to what he calls a »postconstructivist« methodology. On this discussion, see also Haas and Wischermann (eds.), *Wirklichkeit der Geschichte*.

the subaltern masses (i.e. individuals sharing an inability to differentiate and reflect on their daily experience) live, whether or not this construction was actually pervasive enough to determine their lives completely. This may be an important tool in the critique of power relations. On the other hand, as Foucault assumed, power relations and the production of discourse involve all levels of society. Male or white dominance is not simply an elite phenomenon. To what extent do people construct themselves, and only exist through this construction? What is imposed by dominant forces, by contingency or by environmental conditions? It seems that in historical research we need an ontology that allows for realities that are not just constructions, although we also need an epistemology that acknowledges that the story-worlds of all our written sources inevitably have been constructed.

That is not a new debate. In Latin Europe during the Middle Ages, for example, among the circles of the ecclesiastical elite, the perception of the world as a construct of human consciousness in relation to divine truth and plan was a key intellectual issue.[33] Philosophical and theological systems of the major religions of the pre-modern era all focused on the question of the relationship between human consciousness and the »real« world. Modern historiography should acknowledge this and incorporate the ability of contemporaries to theorize the relationship between perception and reality into its own reflections on social constructions. This is particularly true for the social constructions of identities, because these drew on the entire philosophical and theological repertoire available to contemporaries in the individual cultures. Historiography would therefore do well to incorporate its own epistemological presuppositions, i.e., philosophical-theoretical concepts, into its analytical approaches on a (self-)reflective level.

A further problem is that the ontology that is constitutive of our research, and shapes our epistemologies, is Western, and has developed not only in the context of enlightenment, but also of colonialism and racial thinking. Postcolonial Theory[34], Decolonialism[35] and Critical Premodern Race Studies[36] have provided an impulse for giving different epistemologies (for instance, indigenous ones) a voice. In archaeology, inspired by recent debates in anthropology, the »ontological turn« advocates opening up the interpretation of the archaeological record to indigenous ontologies, and exploring different »theories and experiences of what exists«.[37] This is an approach that may also be useful for research on origin myths. Modern Western ontology relies on the assumption that human beings cannot be descended from wolves or monkeys (as the Turkic resp. Tibetan origin myths claim), and that a god of war

33 From Augustine of Hippo's reception of Platonic philosophy to later Christian theology, through Boethius to Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa, medieval theology grappled with the question of the relationship between human consciousness, God, and the world. The extensive secondary literature on the individual questions of this theological and philosophical discourse cannot be discussed in detail here.

34 Spivak, Can the Subaltern Speak?; Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments*; Whitaker, *Black Metaphors*; Hahn (ed.), *Cultural History of Race*.

35 Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*; Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*.

36 Heng, *Invention of Race*.

37 Henare, Holbraad and Wastell, Introduction: Thinking through things; Paleček and Risjoord, Relativism and the ontological turn; Harris, and Cipolla, *Archaeological Theory*, 182.

such as Wodan cannot give victory in battle.[38] We should acknowledge that people in the past followed different ontologies, and that can tell us something about their mindset and motivations. Trust in Wodan may indeed be a valuable asset when risking one's life in battle. That also implies being aware of the historical context and limitations of our own scientific ontology; but it does not mean abandoning or de-legitimising it, because it offers the rare opportunity to critically monitor our own mindset and methodology.

Constructions of Identity: Process, Agency and Relation

What does that mean for origin myths and their role in the construction of identities? The first step should be to abandon the a-priori assumption that modes of identification such as ethnicity, race or religion do not exist but are »just« constructed, and return to the constructivist model by which social construction leads (or can lead) to social realities. Rogers Brubaker's critique of »groupism«, the tendency of taking social groups for granted and reifying them as fixed entities with collective agency in the social field, should be taken seriously, but not read as an axiom that groups do not »really« exist. Brubaker's definition is much more precise: »groupism« is »the tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis.«[39] In research, we can depart from the assumption that social groups are moving targets, they do not stay the same over an extended period of time: »Franks« could mean rather different things in the course of their history, and during their transition to »the French«.[40] Tracing the dynamic of their construction is a key task of identity research. To whom did it matter to be a Frank, when, and how much? It often conferred access to resources and privilege. If a Frank was killed, his relatives received twice the compensation as for a dead Roman, so it made a difference.[41]

This leads to a further issue with constructivism as used in historical studies. On the one hand, constructivism is especially suited for studying history because there can be little doubt that all our written sources represent constructions of the realities they describe; they are only »real« as texts and in their material existence as manuscripts or inscriptions. However, does that mean that (for instance) identities have to be constructed before they come into existence? Benedict Anderson's argument was that social groups that stretch beyond the everyday reality of a face-to-face group needed to be imagined to become real, and empirical observations about the formation of nations (his topic) surely support this view.[42] However, the constructions historians work with are invariably posterior, retrospective. Whether or not what our sources report actually happened, was successively rehashed or an outright invention, it is always a thing in the past. In the case of origin narratives, it happened long ago. That does not only raise the question whether narratives go back to the time of writing,

38 See the contributions by Pohl and Rychterová and by Wabnitz, in this volume, and Langelaar, Chasing the colours of the rainbow.

39 Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups*, 164.

40 Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing.*

41 Esders, Roman law.

42 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

or to a more distant past (which has been discussed at length in recent historiography). It also poses the problem whether the identities they project were posterior to the construction of the narrative. Do identifications of groups as such and of individuals with groups originate simultaneously? What is the constitutive act that starts the process of identifications and thereby initiates the hermeneutic spiral? Is this constitutive act intentional, in the sense of a meaning given by an active subject, or not, and if yes, to what degree? If we reopen the question whether the construction is always there before the social reality, how can we avoid to slip back to the concept of a reality that is essential, unchangeable, ever-present? There is, of course, no empirical answer to these questions, and different cases may differ in this respect. But we can reflect about the relationship between the process in which narratives of belonging were constructed, and the emergence of group identities.

First, this requires a processual understanding of identities, and here we can build on the profound scholarship of the study and conceptualization of identities in the last decades.[43] As has been shown, individuals and groups do not »have« an identity.[44] Its construction is part of a more complex process shaped by a reciprocal relationship between individuals and groups which is reproduced through verbal or symbolical statements of identification, and complemented by ascriptions of alterity.[45] With one of the pioneers in the intensified study of identities over the last decades, Stuart Hall, we may reconceptualize an older notion of identities as a processes of identification. As Hall put it:

> Identity, far from the simple thing we think it is, understood properly is always a structure that is split, it always has ambivalence within it. The story of identity is always a cover story. A cover story for making you think you have stayed in the same place while with another bit of your mind you know you have moved on. … We have now to reconceptualize identity as a process of identification, and that is a different matter. It is something that happens over time, that is never absolutely stable, that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference.[46]

In his article Stuart Hall focusses above all on the ambivalent and always split structure of identities. However, it is clear that the main driver of the split and ambivalent structure of identities is their history. Hence it is the historians who are prompted to explore the historical dimension of this process.

Second, this prompts the question who had agency in this process. Mainstream opinion in studies of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages currently focuses on the agency of literate outside observers in the construction of ethnic and religious identities of largely non-literate groups. However, in fact that risks ontologizing the Roman imperial perspective, and denying agency to indigenous groups. Identity construction is better understood as a circuit

43 For a recent overview and bibliography, see Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, and for some of the approaches in our own work, Pohl, Debating ethnicity.

44 Pohl, Strategies of identification.

45 See Gingrich, Conceptualizing identities.

46 Hall, Ethnicity: Identity and difference; see also the posthumously published: Hall, *Fateful Triangle*.

of communication and interaction that shapes and reshapes processes of identification. It is shaped by a reciprocal relationship between individuals and groups which is reproduced through verbal or symbolical statements of identification, and complemented by ascriptions of alterity. This includes self-identification of an individual or a group who want to demonstrate or claim their allegiance, by using a recognized set of symbolic representations in language, dress, hairstyle, religious affiliation etc. These claims can then be accepted, refused or negotiated by the ethnic, religious or other community or its representatives.[47] This community collectively identifies itself in joint agency, shared rituals, symbols or through its representatives. This may involve a common name, actual or notional common origin, a shared memory of the past, common territory, language, outward appearance and dress, customs, myths, norms, beliefs, codes of honour, religious creeds and practices. While these markers of identity are always culturally and contextually specific, they are only successful in processes of identification if they are not regarded as deliberate but as belonging to a social »deep structure«. And finally, these self-representations have to be recognized in some way by outsiders, whether in everyday practice, by using the name (or an equivalent), in formal or diplomatic exchanges, or in ethnographic discourses. Such outside identification may also be the starting point for identity construction, but it would be unrealistic to deny the incidence of self-identification altogether.

Third, we should therefore regard processes of identification as relational, always involving a plurality of actors. Here, ideas from the »relational sociology« of Harrison C. White can be helpful. He primarily focused on social networks, but also featured actors and their identities, and the attribution of actions in transpersonal transactions. »Having an identity in the common sense of that term requires continually reproducing a joint construction across distinct settings. This is better described as having a bundle of identities.«[48] Thus, identities are always defined in relation to other identities. The issue is to establish some control over these exchanges, and thereby generate meanings, which can also be condensed into narratives. The processes in which interpersonal relations evolve into networks can be seen at the same time as constructions, but also as realities; »networks are phenomenological realities a well as measurement constructs.«[49]

Constructivism and Phenomenology

This brings us from ontology and anthropology to phenomenology, and here we find it helpful to take stock of Bernhard Waldenfels' reformulation of Edmund Husserl's classical phenomenological approach. In Husserl it is consciousness that constitutes the meaningful world, i.e., it gives meaning to the physical world, while the physical environment merely provides the disordered material. Husserl understood the construction of meaning as an intentional act, i.e. that the subject is the source of meaning which moves from the subject towards the

47 Pohl, Debating ethnicity.

48 White, *Identity and Control*, esp. 5.

49 White, *Identity and Control*, 36; see also Preiser-Kapeller, Nodes, ties and theories, 7-8.

world.[50] The »Other« is in his approach constituted as an *alter ego*—another »I«, in analogy to the »me«. In this view, the meaning arises from the subject's intention and desire to give meaning to the encounter with the other »me«. According to Husserl this constitutes a *sinngebenden Akt* (an act of conferring meaning).[51] In relation to the moment of origin of individual and collective identity constructions, one can see how fruitful Husserl's approach is for understanding this concrete epistemological achievement: Indeed, identity construction is the exceptional achievement of consciousness in appropriating the foreign in an analogy to the self.

What we have to deal with here, however, is the static nature of this appropriation, its lack of flexibility, its finality. By concentrating on what is our own, the alien, in its otherness, slips out of reach, which means that our understanding of the construction of identity as a transformative process stops halfway. Here, the input of Husserl's successor, Bernhard Waldenfels, can be of crucial importance: his phenomenology of responsiveness can be understood both as a continuation and as a radical transformation of classical phenomenology. It proposes the following further developments of the central ideas concerning the constitutive, meaning-giving act of consciousness: Husserl puts the transcendental ego at the centre: The world »appears« to me because my consciousness constitutes it (constructs it as meaningful). Everything that exists is an object for a subject. The subject is the source of meaning. Waldenfels reverses this. It is not the subject (the »I«/consciousness) that first gives meaning to the world, but rather it is challenged by the other/alien (before »I« recognizes or acts, »I« responds to a claim that comes from outside, from the other/alien). The subject is no longer the »master of meaning,« but it responds.[52] The most important change, however, concerns the role of the other/the alien: [53] According to Waldenfels, Husserl's integration of the alien/

50 Intentionality, as defined by Husserl as a property of consciousness, was seen by Searle as a natural, biological property of the brain. Thus, their approaches are very similar, yet fundamentally different. Husserl's definition is taken as the starting point here. See on the very complicated problem of intentionality Barz, *Problem der Intentionalität*.

51 See Steinbach, *Gelebte Geschichte*. While Husserl writes about how meaning arises in consciousness, Steinbach shows that this meaning is only stabilised through narrative. Without the phenomenological order of time, however, there would be no material from which a narrative identity could be constructed.

52 Waldenfels, *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung,* 59: »Before any intentional orientation, the subject experiences itself as being addressed. The relationship to the world is therefore not due to the constitutive achievement of an ego, but rather to an always subsequent response: only in responding to what affects us [experience of the other in the sense of alien, PR] does what affects us come to light as such. … This response is therefore to be thought of entirely in terms of being affected, in the subsequentness of an action that begins not with oneself but with others. … There always is a gap between the demand and the response which is delayed and/or insufficient (it never may answer fully the demand). The delay can never be made up; in order to make it up, I would have to make up my own pre-existence, even though this is inextricably intertwined with alien influences.« [German quotes have been translated with the help of DeepL].

53 The term of »das Fremde« (the alien) as coined by Waldenfels is discussed by Springstübe, Responsivität, 47-56: »Waldenfels distinguishes between alienness/foreigness/strangeness and otherness. The »other« refers to a variant within an order, such as a species of animal in contrast to other species. The »alien/foreign« is a special case of the »other«; it arises through a process of inclusion and exclusion, as in the case of one's native language, whose normality renders all other languages foreign. Something appears as »foreign/strange/alien« when it lies beyond the familiar and thus eludes our grasp.« Waldenfels argues that the »alien« is truly radical. It is not just another version of me; it is something that disrupts my »sphere of ownness«. It is a »sting« or a »claim« that cannot be fully integrated into my existing system of meaning.

other into the self on the basis of analogy is an appropriation in which the alienness of the alien (otherness of the other) is not sufficiently taken into account. The other/alien cannot be completely translated into the logic of the self; in other words, consciousness (the subject, the self) can never fully comprehend the other/alien. Moreover: meaning is not constituted as a »free« act of consciousness, but as a response that is inherently delayed in relation to the demand/challenge.[54]

Waldenfels' further development of Husserl's phenomenology is crucial to the question of identity constructions because, on the one hand, it allows us to appreciate the other/alien in its uniqueness and, on the other hand, it helps us to understand the dynamics of the constant transformation of identity constructions. These identity constructions can, as response to the challenge posed by the other/alien, never fully appropriate the other/alien. The temporal distance between the challenge posed by the other/alien and the response of consciousness is the mental space in which the constant negotiation of identity takes place as a meaning-giving constitutive act of consciousness: The time lag means that the response never reacts to the actual other/alien, but to the other/alien that was already in the past at the moment of the response, i.e., at the moment of the meaning-giving act constitutive of consciousness. This implies that the challenge and response must start anew and continue in a hermeneutic spiral. In other words: Identification is not initiated by the subject, but is defined as the subject's reaction to its experience of the other-alien. This is all the more important because only when we understand the constitutive moment of identification as a reaction in response to an external stimulus are we able to comprehend its temporality and study its historicity.

For this we can turn to Waldenfels' proposal of the interrelationship between challenge (claim) and response which can be understood as analogous to Hans Georg Gadamer's definition of the hermeneutic spiral as a constant movement between pre-understanding and the »textual whole« (*das Textganze*).[55] Gadamer's revision of understanding after encountering the »text« (analogous to Waldenfels' »other/alien«) corresponds to that of Waldenfels – whether or not a common meaning can be worked out, as Gadamer assumed, is a question that is difficult to answer. The relationship of the subject to the other-alien, caused by the gap between the demand/challenge (*Anspruch*) and the response, which is always »too late« and therefore »not enough«, can never be completely rationalised or controlled. The claim of the other/alien is initially incomprehensible. It strikes the self/-consciousness before it can be classified. The experience is understood from its responsive entanglement and taken seriously in the sense that it never begins with a conscious decision of the subject. »The ego thus never begins with the self, but always begins elsewhere and experiences itself as permeated by alteritarian demands.«[56] Gadamer's »shared meaning« remains a promise that can never be fulfilled, his hermeneutic spiral, like Waldenfels' proposal of challenge and response, can help us understand the procedural nature of identity construction in its historical-temporal dimension.

54 On the relationship between Waldenfels' phenomenology of responsiveness and Husserl's concept of intentionality, see Flatscher, Antwort als Verantwortung, 109.

55 Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*.

56 Flatscher, Antwort als Verantwortung, 197.

One aspect of the process of constructing meaning must be given special attention with regard to the emergence of identifications: the other/alien has an effect on the subject/on consciousness before the subject is capable of perceiving and reflect it as such. The subject/consciousness, therefore, cannot be fully aware of their responses to the challenge resulting from encountering the other/alien. This assumption takes us beyond the field of Husserl's phenomenology, which deliberately excluded the question of the origin of consciousness because it was dispensable for the focus on the origin of meaning and the logic of the constitution of meaning, and because it conflicted with the strictly abstract definition of the central concepts of his approach. However, if we want to make use of phenomenological conclusions for research into the emergence of social identities, we must ask ourselves this question. Another question, also set aside by Husserl and his successors for the same reasons, is that of the relationship between individual and collective consciousness. The abstract category of consciousness, as defined by phenomenology, is to be regarded as individual. The collective occurs only in intersubjectivity, according to which the constitution of the meaningful world is a joint achievement of many individual subjects who accept the objectivity of the world in the expectation that other individual subjects also see it that way.

Research into the formation of identities operates with the concept of the collective (which can certainly be defined in Husserl's sense) and likewise with the concept of the unconscious, a concept from Leibniz's theory of perception (Leibniz, Schelling, Nietzsche), and popularized in Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, because it examines the question of the constitution of meaning in concrete historical dimensions, the tangible expression of which are origin stories.[57] How, then, can we define these origin stories, taking into account the phenomenological approach described above? If we consider the constitution of the meaningfulness of the world as (also) a collective and partly unconscious mental operation, origin stories would be a shared vehicle of the collective, partly unconscious experiences of the construction of meaning. This may be the underlying reason why they are handed down as myths that are beyond rational access and scrutiny. Their widespread acceptance in pre-modern societies would then not be due to a lack of ability on the part of these societies and their individuals to reflect on their own situation and to »observe« society, but to the fact that they express elements of the social production of meaning that are otherwise unobservable – which, of course, brings us directly to Lévi Strauss and his definition of myth as an expression of the deep structure of the human mind.[58] However, this does not detract from the matter at hand. In the encounter between the phenomenological and anthropological approaches, we must ultimately seek the logic of origin stories, of myths.

This is not to say that phenomenology must give way to anthropology here. An approach that moves in the same direction as Lévi Strauss, but with a different conceptual toolkit, can be found in Hans Blumenberg's works on the phenomenology of history, and in particular on metaphorology.[59] He offered new perspectives on our understanding of how humans perceive

57 Hendrix, *Unconscious Thought*.

58 Lévi Strauss, *Mythologiques 1*: »...les mythes se pensent dans les hommes, et sans qu'ils le sachent.«

59 Blumenberg, *Paradigmen der Metaphorologie*; *idem*, *Arbeit am Mythos*.

reality and use language. We can relate what Waldenfels defines as the radical challenge of other/alien to the concept of absoluteness of reality with which Blumenberg operates in order to emphasize the indispensable role of metaphor and myth in human interaction with the world. Blumenberg defines human beings as vulnerable creatures. If humans were to face the world directly and defenselessly – with all its indifference, unpredictability, and existential threats – they would be overwhelmed by the »absoluteness of reality«. Myths and metaphors enable humans to establish a protective distance. They cloak the unknown in familiar images to make the world livable and manageable. They represent the substructure of thought. Every precise philosophical or scientific term has a metaphorical history, but this does not mean that every metaphor, on its hypothetical journey from myth to logos, would necessarily give rise to a term or concept. The metaphor provides human beings with the intuitive overall framework within which they operate in the first place. When an era changes, its fundamental imagery usually changes first and with it, the entire perception of what is considered »real«.

Applying Blumenberg's approach the process of emergence and the character of the response, which necessarily turns out to be metaphorical, becomes clearer: The subject is struck by something it did not choose, and which transcends its existing categories. The absoluteness of reality (or Waldenfels' alien) »breaks in« before the self can organize it. It also becomes understandable why the symbolically, metaphorically and mythically expressed parts of identification narratives, i.e. origin stories, are particularly stable – so much so that they can give the impression of an »essential« core of identity: they represent absolute metaphors which actually never transform into terms/concepts – as epistemological categories they prove to be resistant to terminological challenge. In addition, metaphors have not only an epistemological, but also an ideological effect, because they present certain collective experiences and/or social conditions as natural and without alternative.

This is not to say that individuals or communities are incapable of consciously shaping their identities. However, even in such cases, most visibly in the case of a revolutionary group that breaks with the existing social order, as was the case with modern revolutions but also with medieval heterodox movements such as the Waldensians or the Hussites, some key identifications are shifted outside human agency and entrusted to transcendent authority, such as supernatural beings, transhistorical concepts or »history« itself – because they can only be handled symbolically.

Concluding Observations

The argument sketched here shows why classical communication theory and the phenomenology developed by Husserl cannot fully grasp processes of identification – they depart from the notion of the (at least modern) rational individual and their sovereign consciousness that is capable of constructing their environment. Post-modernism has sought to deconstruct the individual, the author and other notions of sovereignty; but paradoxically, its brilliant intellectuals succumbed to the temptation of acting as sovereign master thinkers who could stake strong claims and flag novel concepts that would change our perceptions of reality.[60] At least

60 Kristeva, *Les Samouraïs*.

in the reception of post-modernism, that sovereign gestus stuck. Understanding constructivism through the agency of a sovereign individual self, even though it is rarely formally defined that way, is a classical-modernist and/or liberal illusion. It tends to elide the dark sides of the self, the shortcomings of consciousness, and the misconceptions and misunderstandings in its interaction with the other/the alien.

To understand the limitations, it is perhaps worth returning for a moment to where the concept of identity was developed, which is in the social psychology of childhood and adolescence, of the formation of a personality.[61] In this process, the child is inevitably the passive recipient, not the sovereign individual that can conceptualise the encounter with others. It is a long and winding road in which the ego is constituted, and the process may fail and is never fully achieved. Its success or failure depends on the resources – education, competences, intellectual capacity, social position – that are available (or not available) to an individual. As a consequence, there is always an element of insecurity and misunderstanding in any except routine interactions. The encounter with an alien may always be overwhelming, frightening, aggressive or overly cautious. One always has to be on guard.

Here, our post-enlightenment perspective is confronted with »indigenous« epistemologies, which creates serious difficulties in placing them alongside our own, hegemonial epistemology. This observation is not intended as a call to abandon Western rationality, on the contrary. But it seeks to move away from the binary logic often connected with it. As the contribution by Pohl and Rychterovà in this volume argues in more detail, the Roman and the indigenous, »barbarian« view of origin myths essentially shared much of its ontological and epistemological basis. Similarly, our modern epistemology, at least in its wider social impact, is entangled with symbolical constructs, small and large. Again, that is not a reason to abandon modern rationality overall and succumb to a new wave of irrationalism and mythologization; but rather, to acknowledge that the way we think is rarely free from mythologies.

The approach sketched in this article has far-reaching methodological consequences. As shown above, Waldenfels' phenomenology focuses on the other as a condition for the construction of the ego, not vice versa: the »Other« also exists before othering. This seems to run counter to much recent theorizing. Since the 1980s, the Humanities have largely learnt to privilege the processual option: We have preferred »becoming« to »being«, »othering« to »the other«, »identification« to »identity«, »race-making« to »race«, and quite generally the ing-form to the noun. Where that did not work, as with »ethnicity«, which lacks its processual substitute »ethnification«, scholars have become very uncomfortable with using it.

Recently, »difference« has also been deconstructed under the label »doing difference«. This is the approach chosen, among others, by the sociologists Stefan Hirschauer and Tobias Boll, and now at the centre of a Mainz SFB (*Sonderforschungsbereich*). Their fundamental concept is »*Humandifferenzierung*«, as set out in an article (in German), entitled »Un/doing difference«. After a very lucid analysis of the methodological problems of research on differences between humans, they posit »that a difference can only be considered relevant in

61 Eriksen, *Childhood and Society*.

a sociological sense if it makes a difference in a practical sense«[62] – that is, if it is actually employed in assigning social positions and resources to a person, or to decide whether he/she belongs to this or that social group. In this sense, agency and a concept of difference are necessarily prior to the difference as such. This approach has the merit of focusing on interaction rather than on concepts. A professor is only a professor if »she is doing being a professor«.[63] The result is, in German, »*ein stets flüchtiger Schwebezustand*« – our translation programme rendered that as »an always fleeting state of floating«. Should we really assume that human beings are only different if they act or are being treated differently? And that their being different is always in flux?

That certainly helps to avoid reification and »naturalisation« of human differences, and we should indeed keep doing all we can to avoid a return to the essentialist paradigm. But the unavoidable ontological basis for this »floating« epistemology is the sovereign ego and the self-conscious agency of a society which can »do difference« before being exposed to it. Difference only exists in constructing, negotiating, becoming. That implies ontologising the fluidity of all identities and differences, as observed by Andreas Wimmer.[64] Is this empirically tenable, not only for the present, but also for the distant past? Or are we trying to project a postmodern myth into the past? Individuals that never »were«, but always only »became«? Are »fluidity«, »flexibility«, »malleability« only our concerns, or also those of the people who lived in the Early Middle Ages?

We argue that human diversity is one of the most precious heritages of humanity, and it exists without anybody »doing being diverse«.[65] As proposed above, we are diverse first and only learn to cope with that later, and these are experiences that may be traumatic or inspiring, challenging or uncomfortable. Epistemologically, past diversity that we study is indeed always constructed, and all historical written sources are already the result of such constructions. Methodologically, therefore, the constructivist perspective needs to be maintained. However, we have to avoid ontologising it. The two perspectives, being and becoming, being different and doing difference, are complementary; there is no need to decide which one of them is »right«. The ontological basis is human diversity. The epistemological goal is to understand how people deal with that challenge, and how identities and differences keep changing as a result.

Historiography, and especially mythic accounts are full of failed interaction, unresolved conflicts and ignoble deaths. When narratives give reasons for leaving one's former homeland, they are mostly negative: The future Longobards had to leave their country during a famine, when lots were drawn who had to depart. The Goths had to split because a bridge collapsed while they were crossing it. The Turks attacked the Rouran after the humiliation that their leader was denied a Rouran princess as a bride. The Czechs had to leave their homeland and their people because their founding father committed a murder. And the people who set out to settle Ireland had to return to their homeland at the first attempt, and the second group of

62 Hirschauer, Un/doing Differences. Die Kontingenz, 181.

63 Hirschauer and Boll, Un/doing Differences. Zur Theorie und Empirie, 11.

64 Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making*, 3 (see above 91 and n. 27).

65 A point also made by Graeber and Wengrow, *Dawn of Everything*.

immigrants were annihilated by a plague.[66] It may be surprising that so many ancestors are far from representing models to be proud of, heroes, wise men, successful rulers or virtuous and moral figures. Why was the banished helpless Roman parricide Brutus styled as ancestor of the Irish, the crippled boy Ashina saved by the she-wolf revered as the founder of the Türk Ashina dynasty, a monkey who mated with a lustful rock-demoness regarded as the first Tibetan?[67] Why was Troy after its destruction so much more popular as a place of origin than victorious Athens or Rome? Whatever »really« happened in these cases, the world was full of dangers, and identities were precarious. The world that the Icelandic sagas design is full of adverse creatures and forces of nature, and the gods are not benevolent like Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary.

The supernatural beings and weird heroes are symbols, metaphorical constructions, but the threatening and disquieting forces that they represent are not. These passages in origin narratives address levels of experience that are beyond construction. As texts they are constructed but often, from the point of view of today's reader, they seem artificial and devoid of narrative logic. Perhaps that is because the roots of individual identities go back to a response of individuals overwhelmed by their encounters with the alien world around which continued to require an explanation. The response to the challenge of foreignness is always delayed, and the individual is never able to fully comprehend the world in all its ever-changing complexity. The medieval origin narratives helped to come to terms with this strangeness; not least, with the group's own alien beginnings, mediated through narratives of supernatural agency and stories of migrations from far-away lands. Approaching the origins of the group through myth and metaphor was a productive epistemological choice, which allowed aligning the self with others in the construction of communities.

Acknowledgements

Work on this article was conducted in the context of the FWF Cluster of Excellence COE 8, »EurAsian Transformations« (Grant-DOI: 10.55776/COE8).

66 For these examples, see the article by Pohl and Rychterová, in this volume.

67 Langelaar, Chasing the colours of the rainbow, see also his concluding chapter to this volume. For ancient Turkic origin myths, see the contributions by Sandra Wabnitz and Joo-Yup Lee, in this volume, and Golden, Ethnognoic tales of the Türks.

References

Abbreviations

MGH Monumenta Germaniae Historica
RGA Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde

Amory, Patrick, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489-554* (Cambridge, 1997).
Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (second edition), (London, 1991).
Assmann, Jan, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge, 2011).
Balibar, Étienne, *On Universals. Constructing and Deconstructing Community* (New York, 2020).
Balibar, Étienne, *Rasse, Geschlecht, Gattung. Zur Frage der anthropologischen Differenzen* (Frankfurt a. Main, 2025).
Balibar, Étienne, The genealogical scheme: race or culture, *Transcript* 1/1 (2011) 1-9.
Barz, Wolfgang, *Das Problem der Intentionalität* (Leiden, 2004).
Beck, Heinrich (ed.), *Germanenprobleme in heutiger Sicht*, RGA Erg. Bd. 1 (Berlin, 1986).
Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York, 1966).
Bernsen, Michael, Matthias Becher and Elke Brüggen (eds.), *Gründungsmythen Europas im Mittelalter* (Bonn, 2013).
Blumenberg, Hans, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt, 1979).
Blumenberg, Hans, *Paradigmen der Metaphorologie* (Frankfurt, 1997)
Brady, Lindy and Patrick Wadden (eds.), *Origin Legends in Early Medieval Western Europe* (Leiden, 2022).
Brady, Lindy, *The Origin Legends of Early Medieval Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2022).
Brubaker, Rogers, *Ethnicity without groups* (Harvard, 2006).
Burke, Peter J. and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (second edition), (Oxford, 2023).
Chatterjee, Partha, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, 1993).
Christensen, Arne Søby. *Cassiodorus, Jordanes and the History of the Goths: Studies in a Migration Myth* (Copenhagen, 2002).
Coumert, Magali, *Origines des peuples: Les récits du Haut Moyen Âge occidental (550-850)* (Turnhout, 2007).
Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology*, translated from French by Gayatri Spivak (revised edition), (Baltimore, 2016).
The Epic of Gilgamesh: the Babylonian epic poem and other texts in Akkadian and Sumerian transl. by A. R George (London, 2003).
Eriksen, Erik H., *Childhood and Society* (New York, 1950).
Esders, Stefan, Roman law as an identity marker in post-Roman Gaul (5th-9th centuries), in: Clemens Gantner, Cinzia Grifoni, Walter Pohl and Marianne Pollheimer (eds.), *Transformations of Romanness in the Early Middle Ages: Regions and Identities* (Berlin, 2018) 325-344.
Flatscher, Matthias, Antwort als Verantwortung. Zur Dimension des Ethisch-Politischen in Waldenfels' Phänomenologie der Responsivität, *Ethics & Politics* 13 (2011) 99-133.
Foucault, Michel, *L'ordre du discours* (Paris, 1972).
Gadamer, Hans Georg, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen, 1960).

Geary, Patrick J., *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, 2003).
Geary, Patrick, *Women at the Beginning: Origin Myths from the Amazons to the Virgin Mary* (Princeton, 2006).
Ghosh, Shami, *Writing the Barbarian Past: Studies in Early Medieval Historical Narrative* (Leiden, 2015).
Gillett, Andrew (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity. Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2002).
Gingrich, Andre, Conceptualizing identities. Anthropological alternatives to essentialising difference and moralizing about othering, in: Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich (eds.), *Grammars of Identity/Alterity* (New York, 2004) 3-17.
Goffart, Walter, *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire* (Philadelphia, 2006).
Goffart, Walter, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800)* (Princeton, 1988)..
Golden, Peter B. The ethnogonic tales of the Türks, in: Pohl, Walter and Daniel Mahoney (eds.), *Narratives of Ethnic and Tribal Origins. Eurasian Perspectives, Special issue, Medieval History Journal* 21/2 (2018) 291-327.
Goldin, Paul R., The myth that China has no creation myth, *Monumenta Serica* 56 (2008) 1-22.
Graeber, David and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York, 2021).
Haas, Stefan and Clemens Wischermann (eds.), *Die Wirklichkeit der Geschichte. Wissenschaftstheoretische, mediale und lebensweltliche Aspekte eines (post-)konstruktivistischen Wirklichkeitsbegriffes in den Kulturwissenschaften* (Stuttgart, 2015).
Hahn, Thomas (ed.), *A Cultural History of Race in the Middle Ages* (London, 2023).
Hall, Stuart, Ethnicity: Identity and difference, *Radical America* 23/4 (1989) 9-20.
Hall, Stuart, *The Fateful Triangle. Race, Ethnicity and Nation* (Cambridge, MA, 2017).
Halsall, Guy, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376-568* (Cambridge, 2012).
Harris, Oliver J.T. and Craig N Cipolla, *Archaeological Theory in the New Millennium. Introducing Current Perspectives* (London, 2017).
Henare, Amiria, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell, Introduction: Thinking through things, in: A. Henare, M. Holbraad and S. Wastell (eds.),, *Thinking through Things. Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically* (London, 2007) 1-31.
Hendrix, John Shannon, *Unconscious Thought in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (London, 2015).
Heng, Geraldine, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2018).
Hirschauer, Stefan und Tobias Boll, Un/doing Differences. Zur Theorie und Empirie eines Forschungsprogramms, in: D. Dizdar, S. Hirschauer, J. Paulmann and G. Schabacher (eds.), *Humandifferenzierung. Disziplinäre Perspektiven und empirische Sondierungen* (Mainz, 2021) 7-26.
Hirschauer, Stefan, Un/doing Differences. Die Kontingenz sozialer Zugehörigkeiten, *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 43/3 (2014) 170-191.
Hoeres, Peter, Perspektiven für eine postkonstruktivistische Geschichtswissenschaft, *Historische Zeitschrift* 316 (2022) 601-628.
Kristeva, Julia, *Les Samouraïs* (Paris, 1990).
Langelaar, Reinier, Chasing the colours of the rainbow: Tibetan ethnogenealogies in flux, in: Walter Pohl and Daniel Mahoney (eds.), *Narratives of Ethnic and Tribal Origins, Eurasian Perspectives*, Special issue, *Medieval History Journal* 21/2 (2018) 328-364.
Leeming, David and Margaret, *A Dictionary of Creation Myths* (Oxford 1995; online edn. 2009).

Leerssen, Joep, *National Thought in Europe. A Cultural History* (Amsterdam, 2006).
Lévi Strauss, Claude, *Mythologiques 1. Le cru et le cuit* (Paris, 1964).
Nedoma, Robert, Der altisländische Odinsname *Langbardr*: Langbart und die Langobarden, in: Walter Pohl and Peter Erhart (eds.), *Die Langobarden: Herrschaft und Identität*, (Vienna, 2005) 439-444.
Origo gentis Langobardorum, ed. Ludwig Bethmann and Georg Waitz, MGH SS rer. Langob. (Hanover 1878) 2-6.
Paleček, M. and M. Risjoord, Relativism and the ontological turn within anthropology, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 43 (2012) 3-23
Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, ed. Ludwig Bethmann and Georg Waitz, MGH Scriptores rerum Langobardicarum. (Hanover, 1878) 12-187.
Plassmann, Alheydis, *Origo gentis: Identitäts- und Legitimitätsstiftung in früh- und hochmittelalterlichen Herkunftserzählungen* (Berlin, 2006).
Pohl, Ethnicity, race and genetic ancestry in early medieval Europe, in: Hannah Barker (ed.), *Ethnicity and Race in Medieval Europe, Africa, and the Middle East* (Bloomsbury, forthcoming).
Pohl, Walter, Gotische Identitäten, in: Hans-Urlich Wiemer (ed.), *Theoderich der Große und das gotische Königreich in Italien* (Berlin, 2021) 315-340.
Pohl, Walter, *Die Völkerwanderung. Eroberung und Integration* (third edition), (Stuttgart, 2026).
Pohl, Walter (ed.), *Die Suche nach den Ursprüngen. Von der Bedeutung des frühen Mittelalters*, Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 8, (Vienna, 2004).
Pohl, Walter and Veronika Wieser, Introduction: The Emergence of New Polities in the Shadows of Empires, in: Walter Pohl and Veronika Wieser (eds.), *Emerging Powers in Eurasian Comparison, 200-1100: Shadows of Empire* (Leiden 2023) 1-49.
Pohl, Walter and Daniel Mahoney (eds.), *Narratives of Ethnic and Tribal Origins, Eurasian Perspectives*, Special issue, *Medieval History Journal* 21/2 (2018).
Pohl, Walter, Introduction: Strategies of identification: A methodological profile, in: *idem* and Gerda Heydemann (eds.), *Strategies of Identification: Ethnicity and Religion in Early Medieval Europe* (Turnhout, 2013) 1-64.
Pohl, Walter and Gerda Heydemann (eds.), *Strategies of Identification: Ethnicity and Religion in Early Medieval Europe* (Turnhout, 2013).
Pohl, Walter, Debating ethnicity in post-Roman historiography, in: Gerda Heydemann and Helmut Reimitz (eds.), *Historiography & Identity 2: Post-Roman Multiplicity and New Political Identities* (Turnhout, 2020) 27-70.
Pohl, Walter, *Die Germanen* (Munich, 2000).
Preiser-Kapeller, Johannes, Nodes, ties and theories: some considerations on the correlation between historical network models and the social complexity of the medieval past, *Historical Studies on Central Europe* 5/2 (2025) 4-30.
Reimitz, Helmut, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550-850* (Cambridge, 2015).
Schaub, Jean Frédéric, *Le passé ne s'invente pas* (Paris, 2026).
See, Klaus von, *Deutsche Germanenideologie vom Humanismus bis zur Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main, 1970).
Simek, Rudolf, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie* (third edition), (Stuttgart, 2006).
Smith, Linda Tuhiwai, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (second edition), (London, 2012)

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, Can the Subaltern Speak?, in: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke, 1988) 271-313.
Springstübe, Darja, Responsivität. Eine Antwort zur Herausforderung des Fremden, in: Klara Deecke and Alexander Drost (eds.), *Liebe zum Fremden. Xenophilie aus geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlicher* (Cologne, 2010) 47-56.
Steinbach, Tim-Florian, *Gelebte Geschichte, narrative Identität. Zur Hermeneutik zwischen Rhetorik und Poetik bei Hans Blumenberg und Paul Ricoeur* (Baden-Baden, 2021).
Stoler, Ann Laura, Stathis Gourgouris and Jacques Lezra (eds.), *Thinking with Balibar. A lexicon of conceptual practice* (New York, 2020).
Vallega, Alejandro A., *Latin American Philosophy: From Identity to Radical Exteriority* (Bloomington, ID, 2015).
Waldenfels, Bernhard, *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung. Phänomenologie. Psychoanalyse. Phänomenotechnik* (Frankfurt am Main, 2002).
Wenskus, Reinhard, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung: Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen Gentes* (Cologne, 1961).
Whitaker, Cord J., *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking* (Philadelphia, 2019)
White, Harrison C., *Identity and Control. How Social Formations Emerge* (Princeton, 2008).
White, Hayden, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD, 1987).
Wimmer, Andreas*, Ethnic Boundary Making* 3 (Oxford, 2013).
Wolfram, Herwig. *Die Goten: Von den Anfängen bis zur Mitte des sechsten Jahrhunderts* (fifth edition), (Munich, 2009).
Wood, Ian N., *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2013).
Wood, Ian N., *The Transformation of the Roman West* (Cambridge, 2021).

Deities of Heaven, deities of Earth, and two aspects of foreignness in Japanese origin myths

Bernhard Scheid*

This essay addresses some narrative strategies of the earliest Japanese texts (eighth century CE), which explain the origins and history of the ruling dynasty. I argue that these texts, which combine an annalistic style borrowed from China with what we now call »mythology«, employ a sophisticated, Janus-faced concept of foreignness. In the mythological episodes situated before the eventual establishment of the political order, both people and objects of foreign, continental origin are awarded exalted status by replacing the continent with »Heaven«. This strategy primarily serves to legitimize the rule of the ancestors of the Tennō Dynasty and its court, who are styled as the descendants of »heavenly deities«. Conversely, local leaders outside this ruling elite are associated with »Earth«, which implies a vernacular and »unruly« cultural tradition and thus a lower status. Foreigners who appear after the supposed (mythical) inception of Tennō rule, however, are no longer associated with heavenly origins but with concrete and often hostile neighboring countries. In this context, foreignness, though still associated with advanced culture, is depreciated in social value. By comparing key episodes from the annals with similar stories in local gazetteers, I argue that this double standard of foreignness was a novel feature of Japanese mythology that originated from narrative strategies in the context of early state formation.

Keywords: mythology, narratology, state-formation, foreignness, dualism of Heaven and Earth

> The god Omizunu looked at the cape of white Shiragi in search of spare land, and saw that Shiragi had an overabundance of land. Thereupon he took a spade, thrust it into the land, shook it, and broke off a piece. Then he looped a rope around the land and began to pull it. Thus, he added to Izumo the portion of land called Cape Kizuki.[1]

This is the beginning of an origin story of Izumo, an old province in Western Japan, which has a particularly strong local tradition and had been an autonomous political entity in prehistoric Japan.[2] The protagonist, a creator god whose name links him to the region's Hi (or Hii)

* Correspondence details: Dr. Bernhard Scheid, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia (IKGA); Dominikanerbastei 16, 1010 Vienna, Austria; tel.: +43-1-51581-6400; email: bernhard.scheid@oeaw.ac.at

This article is part of the thematic section *Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasian Comparison*, guest editor: Reinier Langelaar. To read all related articles, please access https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026.

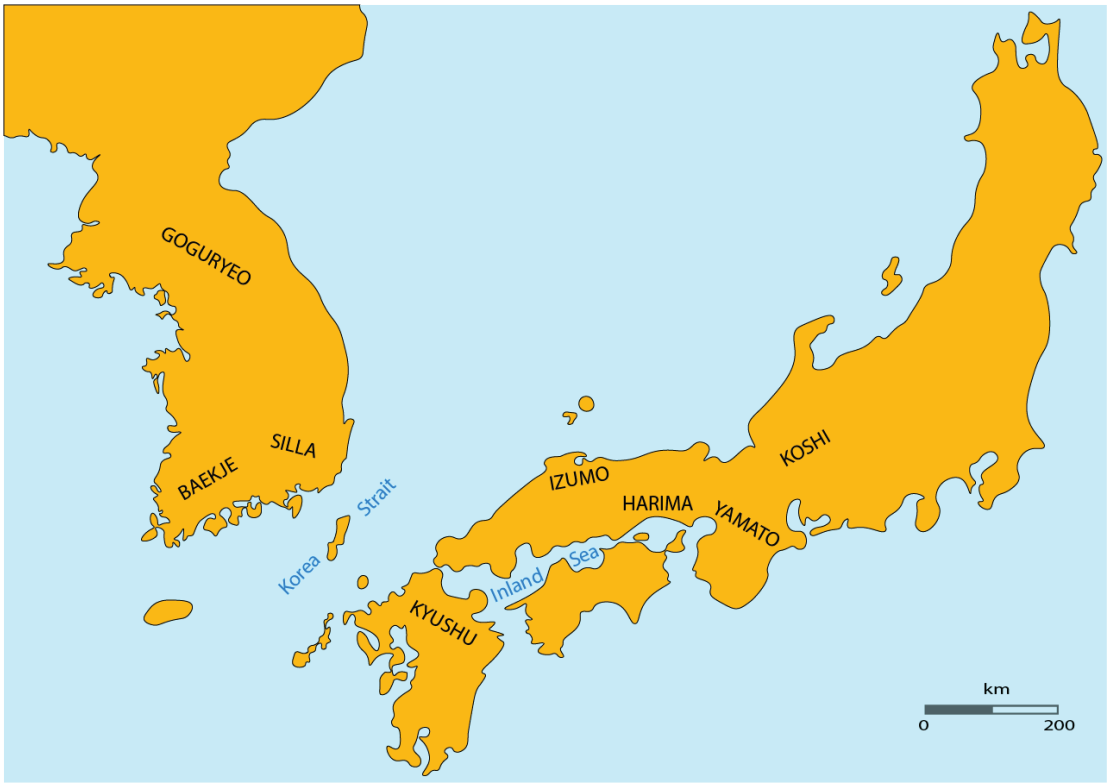
1 *Izumo no kuni fudoki*, translation adapted from Aoki, *Records of Wind and Earth*, 80.

2 On the prehistory of Izumo, see Piggott, Sacral kingship; Torrance, Izumo.

eISSN-Nr. 2412-3196
DOI 10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026s108

River, repeats his land-pulling action four times, until the country finally takes its present shape. Interestingly, the land from where Omizunu drags the new parts of his country is none other than the Korean Peninsula, situated some 300 km to the west of Izumo on the other side of the Korean Strait. Therefore, scholars have taken the story as an indication of a strong influence by the ancient Korean kingdom of Silla (Shiragi, in ancient Japanese)[3] on this particular region.

Another ancient province, Harima, situated between Izumo and Yamato in central Japan, has an origin myth that features a culture hero called Ame no Hiboko (Sun Halberd of Heaven) from Silla. Although we will elaborate upon his story later, it is important to emphasize that this specific legend features a cultural hero from abroad as its main protagonist.



Map 1: Korea and Japan around the early 7th century CE

Both provincial origin stories are known to us from local chronicles or »gazetteers« (Jap. *fudoki*) compiled in the eighth century. They are thus roughly contemporary with the much better-known chronicles compiled by members of the Imperial Court, the *Kojiki* (*Records of Ancient Matters*, 712 CE) and the *Nihon shoki (Chronicles of Japan*, 720 CE). While this essay will primarily focus on the origin stories of these latter sources, which reflect the political ideology

3 Before the political unification of the Korean Peninsula by Silla in 668, the region was governed by three kingdoms: Goguryeo in the north, Baekje in the southwest, and Silla in the southeast.

of the ruling dynasty, beginning the essay with local histories helps demonstrate that mythical narrative traditions in eighth-century Japan by no means excluded the notion of Korea or continental culture. Rather, the local traditions of Izumo and Harima seem to be based on a desire to connect local culture with the continent and to participate in the prestige of advanced technological and civilizational progress coming from outside their regional sphere.

As we will see, origin stories in the imperial chronicles took a different stance. At least in the descriptions of the mythical »Age of the Gods«, when the ancestors of the ruling dynasty and its court descended from Heaven, countries outside the Japanese archipelago are virtually non-existent. Starting from this observation, the objective of this essay is to demonstrate that two different interpretations of foreign origins were present in the earliest Japanese texts. These different approaches can be further related to different strategies employed to legitimize rulership.

In addressing these questions, I see myself as part of a German research tradition that originated with the pioneering translations of mythological texts by Karl Florenz (1865–1939). Florenz' research was driven by his interest in comparative mythology – a field that became increasingly important in postwar Japanese Studies with the contributions of Nelly Naumann (1922-2000), Klaus Antoni, and others.[4] While this rather anthropological approach shaped my preunderstanding of Japanese mythology, I am also indebted to recent studies by Raji Steineck,[5] Robert Wittkamp,[6] and David Weiss.[7] These authors integrate and discuss a Japanese approach known as *sakuhin ron* ([literary] work analysis), which is of a more literary-historical nature and is represented by, among others, the studies of Kōnoshi Takamitsu (born 1946).[8] In the anglophone world, the *sakuhin* approach has also led to a reevaluation of Japanese mythology and ancient history, to which this essay is indebted.[9] While Kōnoshi has insisted that mytho-historical classics *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* be treated as independent works with different cosmological outlooks, my own reading has more in common with a recent approach that focuses on genealogy, represented by scholars such as Mizuguchi Mutsuko (1931–2021), Saijō Tsutomu, or, most recently, Suzuki Masanobu.[10] According to their findings, the classics share a common goal; namely, integrating originally disparate origin stories into one master narrative that presents the Japanese elites as belonging to one huge extended family. This endeavor can be also detected in a number of ancient family genealogies such

4 Naumann is often dubbed »the grande dame of Japanese mythology« within the German-speaking realm. Her studies include Naumann, *Einheimische Religion Japans. Teil 1*; or Naumann, *Mythen des alten Japan*. Her student, Klaus Antoni, started from her comparative approach but also deals with the political instrumentalization of mythology and Shinto in modernity. See Antoni, *Weiße Hase*; Antoni, *Shintō*; *Kojiki*, trans. Antoni. Both authors have been somewhat influenced by Japanese cultural anthropologists such as Oka Masao (1898-1982) and Ōbayashi Taryō (1929-2001).

5 Steineck, *Kritik*.

6 Wittkamp, *Arbeit am Text*.

7 Weiss, *The God Susanoo*.

8 Kōnoshi, *Kojiki no sekaikan*.

9 See, for instance, Ooms, *Tenmu Dynasty*; Como, *Weaving and Binding*; Lurie, *Realms of Literacy*; Duthie, Jinshin Rebellion; Kanagawa, *Making the Realm*.

10 Mizoguchi, *Nihon kodai shizoku*; Saijō, *Kojiki to ōke*; Suzuki, *Methodology*.

as *Awaga Daimyōjin ganki*, a fragmentary genealogy of shrine priests said to date back to the year 708. However, integrating these genealogies into a history of nation building puts the imperial mytho-histories into a category of their own when compared, for instance, to other early texts such as the aforementioned *fudoki*.

The Historical Context of Japanese Origin Myths

Japanese origin myths were codified at a time when political and ethnic diversity was still a living memory on the archipelago – or was even still being experienced directly in battles with non-Japonic ethnicities in the east (starting from the regions east of modern Kyoto) and the southwest (southern Kyushu). The technologically most advanced regions in the Yamato Basin (now Nara Prefecture), which formed the coalescent core of the state,[11] drew advantage from a constant flux of immigrants from Korea and China, who supported the regime as experts of metallurgy, writing, and even religion (especially in the field of Buddhism). Around 700, a state had formed that called itself Nihon (Japan), lit. [land of the] origin of the sun. This alludes to the fact that the island empire lay to the east of China, which was acknowledged as the »central empire«. This central empire not only served as a model for Japan, but for the entire East and Central Asian regions. In this sphere, the emerging Japanese state was in many respects the last recipient of Chinese cultural innovations, which it usually imported from Korea. However, for reasons that lie beyond the scope of this article, the adoption of Chinese civilization in Japan proceeded with surprising speed and efficacy.

The Codification of Mytho-History

In the late seventh century, the court put all its efforts into what Steineck calls the »legal administration of time and space«,[12] which eventually led to a first consistent calendar based on Chinese models (701), a permanent capital (Nara, 710),[13] a population register (from 690 onward), and regional administrative units (provinces) that were given a legally fixed form. These institutions were held together by a civic and a penal legal code now known as the *ritsuryō* system, which was adopted from the Tang Dynasty (617-907). Finally, the dynastic history was codified in the aforementioned chronicles, *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*. The fact that these texts constitute the oldest extant examples of Japanese literature testifies to their continuous importance for the self-representation of the imperial institution.

These chronicles follow a Chinese model of »national histories« (Chin. *guoshi*) in that they use the reigns of »emperors«, no matter whether their reigns were long or short, turbulent or peaceful, as the basic unit of historical periodization. The figure of the emperor is »the organizing subject that defines […] the geographical and temporal frames of the historical narrative and the types of information that it includes or excludes«.[14] The *Nihon shoki* even meticulously dates the imperial reigns according to the Chinese lunisolar calendar, which must

11 Piggott, *Emergence of Japanese Kingship*.

12 Steineck, *Kritik*, 91.

13 Some historians may identify the first capital as Fujiwara-kyō, established in 694 and constructed in line with Chinese models, which served as the imperial headquarters for only 16 years.

14 Duthie, Jinshin Rebellion, 299.

have involved sophisticated retrospective calculations of largely imaginary historic events for a period of more than a thousand years.[15] In contrast to China, however, the Japanese chronicles contain origin stories about the divine ancestors of the Imperial House that reach back to the beginning of the universe. In this sense, the chronicles can also be referred to as mytho-histories.

In tracing the ruling elite back to Heaven, Japan's mytho-genealogy explained and legitimized a hereditary status system that determined the ranks and the administrative tasks of all aristocratic families. Therefore, the imperial chronicles were comparable in authority to a code of law.[16] Their compilation was a huge stately project, which probably started in 681[17] and lasted until the completion of the *Nihon shoki* in 720.[18] In 712, a first version of the mytho-history was published under the title *Kojiki*.[19] While both texts follow essentially the same storyline, an important formal difference lies in the fact that the *Nihon shoki* provides a plethora of variant stories for each episode, especially in its fascicles on the »Age of the Gods« that we now classify as »mythology«. Indeed, the *Kojiki* may be regarded as merely another variant alongside those presented in the *Nihon shoki*. Nevertheless, the *Nihon shoki* came to be regarded as Japan's first »national history« (*kokushi*) and thus held much greater authority than its predecessor.

Serving as a kind of »constitution« for hereditary status rights, the mytho-chronicles complemented the *ritsuryō* legal code, which had been adopted from China. In a sense, they represented a conservative element within the rapid »modernization« of 8th-century Japan. At the same time, they formed a frame of reference that served as the foundation for all legal texts dealing with issues of social class. This type of law-making by narratological precedent was also extended to the provinces. In an edict of 713, the court stipulated that the governors of the sixty-plus newly established provinces[20] should supply information on their respective domains. While the edict emphasized provincial products and geography, governors should also »record and report the old legends transmitted by the elders«.[21] This resulted in the compilation of the previously mentioned local gazetteers (*fudoki*), five of which are still extant from the eighth century. The origin myth of Izumo cited above is known to us from these texts.[22] While the information thus gathered certainly reflected local customs and beliefs, it was not free from central influence, since the governors were not local people, but bureaucrats from the Yamato court. Nevertheless, the local gazetteers often show remarkable differences to the

15 Steineck, *Kritik*, 227-229.

16 Scheid, Mythology and genealogy.

17 *Nihon shoki*, Tenmu 10 (681)/3/16; *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 350.

18 Translations from this text are taken from *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, originally published in 1896.

19 Translations are usually taken from Heldt's *Kojiki* (2014), but I also refer to Antoni's *Kojiki* (2012), since the latter maintains the original names of places and deities, in accordance with common conventions.

20 In the seventh and eighth centuries, the number of Japanese provinces shifted between 58 and 69, until it was settled at 66 in 824 (*Records of Wind and Earth*, trans. Aoki, 4).

21 The edict is cited in the *Shoku Nihongi*, a compilation of annals completed in 797, under the entry of »Third year of Wado (713), 5th month, 2nd day« (*Records of Wind and Earth,* trans. Aoki, 1).

22 The *Harima fudoki* is believed to be from 715; the *Izumo fudoki* mentions its compilation in 733.

official mytho-history. Hence, they provide glimpses of the mythical worldviews outside the imperial court, which was at the same time the raw material of the official annals.

Social Stratification

In the imperial chronicles, the mytho-genealogical stratification was based on the categories of »heavenly deities« and »earthly deities«. As will be demonstrated in greater detail later, we can interpret this distinction as a hierarchy between culturally dominant »outsiders« and »natives« of perceived inferior rank. This interpretation is consistent with recent theories on social stratification and ethnic conflicts during the formative period of the Japanese state. Joan Piggott has convincingly summarized archeological findings, which show a dominant coalescent core that was either of continental origin or had close contacts with continental culture bearers and benefitted from privileged access to continental technology.[23]

Interestingly, the elevation of foreign groups seems to have reached its conclusion when social stratification was fixed in relation to a ruling dynasty at the center of the nascent Japanese state. From that time onward, a significant proportion of noble families traced their ancestry to the continent, yet they were classified into a social category that ranked below the supposedly indigenous descendants of the »gods of Heaven and Earth«. This can be seen from a register of noble families, the *Shinsen shōjiroku* (*New Selection of Names and Titles*), which was compiled in 815 by a team of courtiers and members of the imperial house. According to its preface, one of the reasons for this register's compilation was the need to clarify foreign names in order to prevent the fraudulent assumption of status. During the eighth century, this had become a problem, since »common people everywhere connected themselves to branches of the nobility, and foreign guests from the Korean Peninsula called themselves the descendants of Yamato deities«.[24] Thus, the register lists 1,182 families in and around the capital and distinguishes them according to their purported origin.

As Nadia Kanagawa has shown, this attempt to restrict social mobility through state-sanctioned genealogical tables draws on models from the Tang dynasty. However, the *Shinsen shōjiroku* grouped the Japanese nobility into a set of three main categories that is unique to Japan: »royal lines« (*kōbetsu*), »divine lines« (*shinbetsu*), and »various foreigners« (*shoban*) of Korean or Chinese origin. The second category is again subdivided into three sets: »heavenly deities« (*tenjin*), »heavenly grandsons« (*tenson*, here referring to heavenly collateral lines of the imperial house), and »earthly deities« (*chigi*). One would expect that families related to the »earthly deities«, i.e., indigenous tribes who submitted to Yamato rule, would have constituted the vast majority. However, as Mizoguchi has pointed out, only 26 families among the total of 404 families from the *shinbetsu* faction actually related themselves to autochthon gods such as Ōkuninushi.[25] This indicates a substantial degree of genealogic flexibility, which, as the preface of the *Shinsen shōjiroki* frankly acknowledges, resulted in an inflation of heavenly ancestors. While some »foreign« families may also have switched to native ancestors,

23 Piggott, *Emergence of Japanese Kingship*. For a study of immigration in ancient Japan, see also Kanagawa, *Making the Realm*.

24 *Shinsen shōjiroku*, preface, transl. Kanagawa, *Making the Realm*, 257-258. See also Kiley, Surnames, 178.

25 Mizoguchi, *Ōken shinwa*, 38-40; Wittkamp, Arbeit am Text, 104.

this group was probably more stable. Some of them had resided in Japan for centuries, while others came to Japan as refugees in the seventh and eighth centuries. Together, they constitute about one third of the families mentioned in the register.

What is relevant to our case is the fact that all social categories (whether applied accurately or not) relate themselves to the mythology of *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, which are referenced as major sources in *Shinsen shōjiroku*. The only exception is the group of »various foreigners«, which is not explicitly mentioned in these earlier texts. Kanagawa relates their inclusion in a specific category to a new policy concerning foreigners in the early ninth century.[26] I would argue, however, that the category reflects an ideological divide between strangers from Heaven and foreigners from the continent, which is already present in the chronicles, as detailed below. Nevertheless, the *Shinsen shōjiroku* demonstrates the success and the continuous authority of the imperial mythology as a canonical source of family status.

Mytho-Geography

In both chronicles, the first section about the »Age of the Gods«[27] explains the spontaneous creation of Heaven and Earth,[28] followed by the »birth« of the Japanese islands via the sexual communion of a primordial couple (Izanaki and Izanami). In the next generation, the narrative turns to the High Plains of Heaven, ruled by the sun goddess, Amaterasu. We then follow her brother and antagonist Susanoo into his exile on Earth where he fathers a new dynasty of earthly rulers. His descendant, Ōkuninushi, emerges as the ruler of all earthly deities (*kuni tsu kami*). The deities in Heaven (*ama tsu kami*) regard this rule as chaotic and decide to replace Ōkuninushi with Amaterasu's grandson, Ho no Ninigi. The latter descends to Earth, but settles in a remote mountain region in Kyushu. Only Ho no Ninigi's great-grandson, posthumously named Jinmu Tennō, manages to conquer central Japan (the Yamato heartland) and becomes the inaugural »heavenly ruler« (*tennō* or *ame no sumera*). The foundation of his empire, which the *Nihon shoki* pseudohistorically dates back to a year in the Chinese calendar corresponding to 660 BCE, marks the conclusion of the Age of the Gods.

As this synopsis shows, the mytho-historical compilers took care to include a number of important regional centers in the Imperial House's foundation narrative. In particular, Izumo and Kyushu receive special attention in order to explain their integration into the early Yamato state. Conversely, references to countries beyond the Japanese islands are virtually non-existent. The empires on the continent only begin to emerge in the records of »human« rulers after Jinmu, whose accounts gradually take on a degree of historical veracity.

The inherent exclusivism of this narrative layout may appear to be the result of a »natural ethnocentrism«, if we believe the claim of the *Kojiki*'s preface that this text was the faithful transcription of stories transmitted orally since times immemorial. However, as many scholars have noted, there are reasons to doubt this claim. The compilers of *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*

26 Kanagawa, *Making the Realm*, chap. 3.

27 The expression »Age of the Gods« (*jindai* or *kami no yo*) derives from the first two chapters or fascicles of the *Nihon Shoki*, which correspond to the first fascicle of the *Kojiki*.

28 In the *Kojiki*, cosmogonic explanations based on Chinese nature philosophy are part of the preface; in the *Nihon Shoki*, they are part of the main text.

possessed not only familiarity with the Chinese writing system – the sole medium for recording native texts – but also with Chinese literature, history, and philosophy. They introduced Chinese concepts such as Yin and Yang into notions of time and space, as if Chinese nature philosophy had always been part of Japanese traditions. In fact, even the conceptional split between deities of Heaven (associated with Yang) and deities of Earth (associated with Yin) seems to be derived from Chinese cosmology. Japanese chroniclers thus enriched local storytelling traditions with abstract concepts of foreign origin in order to lend them authority and credibility. This raises the question of why they did not also refer to places and legends in China or Korea. In order to answer this question, a closer examination of ethnic diversity as mirrored in some mythological key episodes is necessary.

Foreigners in the Mytho-Historyy

Susanoo and the Aboriginal Deities

The imperial chronicles do not explain in detail how the first humans came into existence, but occasionally use the expression »human grass« (*hito kusa*).[29] This term seems to refer to an aboriginal population who came into existence on Earth when the original couple created the first islands. The plant-like humans only begin to assume a distinct role in the narrative when Susanoo descends from Heaven and liberates them from a giant serpent/dragon with a particular appetite for young girls. A first ruling dynasty takes shape after Susanoo kills this monster and is granted the girl he saved as wife. The descendants of Susanoo, as well as supporting figures such as a mountain deity (who must have existed prior to his appearance), are designated as »deities of Earth«. This classification distinguishes them from the »deities of Heaven« while also identifying them as a distinct ruling class on Earth.

The story of Susanoo incorporates a number of motifs known from mythical complexes all around the world (including the dragon-slaying motif).[30] This has led to a longstanding debate within the field of comparative mythology concerning Susanoo's fundamental mythological nature. He has been variously interpreted as a »storm god«, a »moon god«, or simply a classical »trickster«.[31] The problem with these explanations is that they treat Susanoo as an archetypical figure and a key protagonist in mythological storytelling on the archipelago since time immemorial. Yet, there are reasons to doubt the archaic nature of the Susanoo episodes. Since Susanoo's major deed on Earth – the slaying of the serpent – is consistently situated at the »upper reaches of the river Hi in Izumo«, we would assume that this story is derived from Izumo and should be also present in the local mythology of this region. However, it is absent in the *Izumo fudoki*. This text only mentions Susanoo in the context of a township in Izumo

29 In the *Kojiki*, this expression first appears in the narrative about the original couple, when Izanami, the future ruler of the realm of the dead, vows to »strangle to death one thousand of your land's green-grass mortals each and every day« (*Kojiki*, trans. Heldt, 16).

30 On the dragon slaying motif in comparative mythology, see, for instance, Witzel, *Origins*, 148-154.

31 On the different aspects and recent interpretations of Susanoo, see Weiss, Japanese trickster. For a classic comparative interpretation of Susanoo, see Naumann, Sakahagi.

known as Susa[32] and identifies several lesser local deities as his offspring. Thus, Susanoo, literally »the man from Susa«, is depicted as a supporting character in the *Izumo fudoki*, devoid of a clearly delineated narrative function.[33]

I suspect, therefore, that Susanoo as he appears in the imperial chronicles is actually a very novel narrative figure, probably invented or at least reassembled by the compilers in the late seventh or early eighth century. His ambivalent nature corresponds to the location of his actions: While in Heaven, he is given the role of a villain who damages the sun goddess's palace, drives her into the famous Heavenly Grotto, and is therefore banished from her realm. In these episodes, he serves as a wicked foil to emphasize the positive qualities of the sun goddess, as David Weiss has pointed out.[34] As soon as Susanoo appears on Earth, on the other hand, he is associated with positive stories like the slaying of a dragon. Subsequently, he becomes the progenitor of several earthly deities, introducing a first dynastic order and thus acting as a vanguard of the celestial regime. I regard these different roles as a result of the fact that the compilers used Susanoo for a double purpose: On the one hand, as the heroic ancestor of various local rulers who may have claimed celestial origins themselves; on the other hand, as the villain whose evil nature justified the subordination of his descendants to an even higher »heavenly ruler«. This is not to deny the existence of previous trickster figures in Japanese mythology, which may be recognizable in the figure of Susanoo, as Weiss[35] argues. However, I suggest that the ambivalence of the trickster gained a new function in the case of Susanoo, namely to define and to rank the category of »earthly deities« in a privileged yet ultimately subordinate position.

Korea-Related Subtexts

As noted above, the mythological sections of the Japanese chronicles are largely confined to the Japanese islands. Nevertheless, hints at the existence of Korea surface, occasionally even in these initial parts of the imperial mytho-history. As recently pointed out by Weiss, these hints are most evident in Susanoo's exile story, which is set in Izumo. One variant story in the *Nihon shoki* identifies the sword with which Susanoo slays the monster as the »serpent blade from Kara« (Orochi no Kara-sai no Tsurugi).[36] Kara is the ancient Japanese name given to the Korean Peninsula, but can also refer to the continent as a whole – including China. Here, the mention of Kara suggests that Susanoo uses an excellent sword made of Korean ironware,

32 *Records of Wind and Earth*, trans. Aoki, 140. In the imperial chronicles, Susanoo chooses a place in Izumo called Suga (»refreshed«) as his headquarters (*Kojiki*, trans. Antoni, 44; *Kojiki,* trans. Heldt, 27; *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 53). Today, a Suga Shrine and a Susa Shrine exist in the Izumo region, both of which are traced back to Susanoo.

33 In the *Bingo fudoki*, a gazetteer from a western province only known from later fragments, Susanoo is identified as a god of epidemics (Florenz, *Japanische Mythologie*, 302-303). While this role is hardly recognizable from the classical chronicles, it is consistent with the idea of this deity in the lore of many Shinto shrines and may be closer to his original character.

34 Weiss, *The God Susanoo*, chap. 2.

35 Weiss, Japanese trickster; *idem*, *The God Susanoo*.

36 Weiss, *The God Susanoo*, 91; *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 57.

which was once a highly sought-after commodity in the early Japanese state.[37] Another variant story claims that Susanoo actually visited the kingdom of Silla in Korea before he arrived in Izumo:

> [After being banished from Heaven], Susanoo no Mikoto, accompanied by his son Itakeru no Kami,[38] descended to the land of Silla and lived at the place Soshimori. Then he raised his voice and said: »I do not want to stay in this land.« Finally, he took clay and built a boat with it, boarded it and crossed over to the east until he reached the mountain peak Torikami, which is located at the headwaters of the Hi River in the land of Izumo.[39]

In fact, this is the only exception to the general exclusion of foreign countries in the *Nihon shoki*'s section on the Age of the Gods. This version's basic storyline is about a deity from Heaven who comes to Japan via Korea and becomes a local power. In the *Nihon shoki*, this is the fifth variant story of Susanoo's exile and therefore does not occupy a particularly prominent place. However, the *Sendai kuji hongi*, a variant of the mytho-chronology from the early Heian period, adopts precisely this episode in its account of Susanoo, thereby highlighting the genealogical connections to Korea implied therein.[40] We will encounter this pattern again in the next section, in the case of Ame no Hiboko.

While the *Kojiki* is generally more xenophobic than the *Nihon shoki*, we also find similar Korean subtexts in the *Kojiki* version of Susanoo's story: Here, three of his grandchildren bear names that suggest Korean origins. The first is Kara no Kami, lit. deity from Kara (Korea); the second is Sohori no Kami, which may allude to the Silla word for capital *sŏbŏl*; the third is Shirahi no Kami, which is close to Shiragi, the Japanese name of Silla.[41]

A final Korean subtext from a much later episode may be added here: According to the *Kojiki*, the Kyushu region where the Heavenly Grandson Ho no Ninigi descended to Earth (Mt. Takachiho) is »a land facing Kara«[42] (mentioned here for the first time in the *Kojiki*). This alludes to the proximity of Kyushu to the continent, which makes this region an »exceedingly good place«[43] for the arrival of the celestial deities. But why Kyushu? The explanation remains mysterious until we reinterpret Heaven, the place where the deities come from, as Korea. This is substantiated by the description of Korea in the historical part of the *Nihon shoki* as a country »outstretched like a reflection of Heaven in the water«.[44] In other words, it is conceivable that Korea was once more closely associated with Heaven, which might provide a rationale for why Kyushu, the region closest to the peninsula, was considered a fitting landing spot for heavenly »deities«.

37 Barnes, *State Formation in Japan*, 35.

38 Also known as Isotakeru, known from elsewhere as a god of trees.

39 Weiss, *The God Susanoo*, 91; see also *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 57.

40 Weiss, *The God Susanoo*, 93-95.

41 Weiss, *The God Susanoo*, 89-90; *Kojiki*, trans. Heldt, 40; *Kojiki*, trans. Antoni, 66.

42 *Kojiki*, trans. Heldt, 50; *Kojiki*, trans. Antoni, 80.

43 *Ko-Ji-Ki*, trans. Chamberlain, 135. See also *Kojiki*, trans. Heldt, 50; *Kojiki*, trans. Antoni, 80.

44 *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 221.

Taken together, the Korean subtexts in the mythological sections of the chronicles reveal that there must have been an awareness of foreign countries in the Japanese mythology before its scriptural codification. This may be taken as a piece of evidence that Heaven can be actually read as a cipher for the continent. In the next section, I will further substantiate this claim by tracing the transformation of a Korea-related episode into a myth of universal dimensions.

Ōkuninushi and Ame no Hiboko

The episodes starting with Susanoo's exile and ending with his descendant Ōkuninushi can be regarded as a (largely fictitious) dynastic history of the rulers of Izumo who govern the people on Earth before the advent of the Tennō dynasty. Especially in the *Kojiki*, Ōkuninushi retains the characteristics of a creator god who performs tasks similar to those of the original couple, transforming the world into a place fit for human habitation. Ōkuninushi is identified by his very name as the »Great Lord of the Land/Earth«. However, he is also represented by a number of different names (e.g., Ōanamuchi, Ōmononushi) or titles that may have originally referred to similar, but geographically separated, creator gods. In most episodes, Ōkuninushi is portrayed as a very positive figure. Nevertheless, his ultimate role is to transfer his rule to the heavenly deities, ostensibly because his subjects on earth are »unruly« as described in »the yielding-of-land« episode (*kuni yuzuri*):

> But in that land there were numerous deities which shone with a lustre like that of fireflies, and evil deities which buzzed like flies. There were also trees and herbs all of which could speak.[45]

In other words, Ōkuninushi's realm is depicted as a world of chaos with no clear distinction between gods, humans, animals, and plants. In due consequence, the heavenly deities dispatch two mighty »sword gods« as their vanguard tasked with convincing the Great Lord of the Land to yield his country to them.[46] As soon as they encounter Ōkuninushi, they draw their ten-span swords, stick them upside down in the earth, take seats on the tips of the swords, and question the earthly ruler.[47] According to the *Kojiki*, the two gods perform an even more impressive show when they stick their swords »upside down on the crest of the waves, sat cross-legged on their points, and questioned [Okuninushi]«.[48] This demonstration of power initiates a series of negotiations that eventually leads to Ōkuninushi's peaceful surrender.

The *Harima fudoki*, the gazetteer of the province of Harima mentioned above, comprises a scene bearing striking parallels to Ōkuninushi's story. Here, we encounter a culture hero

45 *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 64. This is also paraphrased in an ancient ritual prayer (*norito*), the Great Purification, which states that the heavenly deities expelled the unruly deities of Earth and »silenced to the last leaf the rocks and the stumps of the trees, which had been able to speak« (*Norito*, trans. Philippi, 45).

46 *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* list slightly different gods here: Take Mikazuchi (»Brave Mighty Thunderbolt« in Heldt's translation) and Ame no Torifune (»Bird Boat of Heaven«) as his assistant, according to the *Kojiki* (*Kojiki*, trans. Heldt, 45.); and Futsunushi (Sword? Master) assisted by Take Mikazuchi, according to the *Nihon shoki* (*Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 67-68). Take Mikazuchi, who is present in both variants, origins from a sword.

47 *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 68.

48 *Kojiki*, trans. Heldt, 45.

called Ame no Hiboko (Sun Halberd of Heaven). Coming from Kara (Korea, or the continent), he settles in the land of a native deity/lord known by the name of Ugly Man of the Reed Plains, Ashihara no Shikoo. The text reads:

> When he arrived from Kara, His Highness[49] Ame no Hiboko asked His Highness Ashihara no Shikoo to give him shelter at the mouth of the Uzu River [...] However, Ugly Man did not allow him to come ashore. Thereupon, the foreign god [*marebito no kami*] stirred the sea with his sword to form a whirlpool and sat on top of it. After witnessing this valorous feat, the landholder god [*aruji no kami*] became afraid of the foreign god.[50]

This episode seems to reflect quite realistically ethnic conflicts between an original population without technically advanced weapons and immigrants in possession of Korean ironware, who came to dominate the province. A notable parallel to the land-yielding episode of the imperial chronicles is the use of a spectacular, highly unusual kind of sword magic. This suggests a common motif that could be applied to a variety of similar settings. In Harima, a god/lord from Korea intimidates a local leader with this swordplay and ultimately takes away some of his land, while in Izumo, the messengers of Heaven use sword magic to force the leader of the earthly deities to abdicate.

Yet, even the Harima episode contains elements that point beyond a purely local event. Ame no Hiboko is described as coming from Kara; at the same time, his name seems to conflate two aspects of superior foreign status, namely descent from Heaven (*ame no*) and the possession of iron weapons (*hiboko*, »Sun Halberd«). The name »Ugly Man of the Reed Plains«, on the other hand, indicates »that this deity was not on the side of the eventual victors in the political strife that prevailed during the formative years of Japanese society«.[51] While »reed plains« is a common epithet of Japan in many ancient origin stories,[52] »ugly man« is definitely a pejorative term. However, the name is not specific to the *Harima fudoki*, but is also mentioned in the imperial chronicles as a nickname for Ōkuninushi.[53] This suggests that the parallels between the two stories are by no means coincidental. The Harima version may indeed represent the raw material, from which the yielding-of-land episode drew its inspiration. However, while the Harima account retained comparatively realistic elements, the land-yielding story turned the encounter into a myth of cosmological dimensions. Thus, Korea became Heaven and the local region became the entire Earth.

Interestingly, the figure of Ame no Hiboko also appears in the later parts of the chronicles that are no longer part of the Age of the Gods (or, the »mythology«) and describe the reigns

---

49 Highness (*mikoto*) can be used as a title of both divine beings and human rulers.

50 *Harima no kuni fudoki*, Iibo District (*Fudoki*, ed. Akimoto 304-305). Translation modified after *Records of Wind and Earth*, trans. Aoki, 201.

51 *Records of Wind and Earth*, trans. Aoki, 17.

52 The name may refer to a wetland suited for rice cultivation and, by extension, to a territory that is yet to be cultivated/civilized. (Saijō, *Kojiki to ōke no keifugaku*; Wittkamp, *Arbeit am Text*, 163.)

53 According to the *Kojiki*, Ōkuninushi meets his ancestor Susanoo in the otherworld, Ne no Kuni, where Susanoo addresses him first as »ugly man« and finally, after a number of tests, as »great lord of the land«. (*Kojiki*, trans. Heldt, 30.) The name Ashihara no Shikoo is also mentioned without explanation in the *Nihon shoki* (*Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 59.)

of subsequent emperors in a more »historical« style, providing concrete (if largely fictitious) dates. According to the *Nihon shoki*, in the era of Emperor Suinin (trad. dates, 60 BCE-70 CE), a prince from Silla named Hiboko sought exile in Japan and was indeed granted some land by the emperor in Harima and in the neighboring region of Tajima.[54] In exchange, the prince brought precious treasures from his country.

Finally, Ame no Hiboko is also present in the origin story of a female shrine deity[55] that starts in Korea (and may originally be taken from there). The legend is contained in both the *Nihon shoki* (annals of Emperor Suinin)[56] and the *Kojiki* (annals of Emperor Ōjin). The female deity was born from a sunray, turned into a radiant beauty, and became the wife of Ame no Hiboko according to the *Kojiki*, or – in the *Nihon shoki* version – of Tsunoga Arashito, a different Korean prince, who was adorned with horns. As a daughter of the sun, the woman secretly went to Japan (the land of the rising sun) and eventually turned into a shrine deity. Her husband, however, followed her without ever finding her. According to the *Kojiki*, he was given land in compensation, while according to the *Nihon shoki*, he returned to Korea and founded the Kingdom of Mimana. None of these shrine legends contain the elements of conflict with locals or sword magic, but both point to the existence of a mythology where Korean princes and princesses play a significant role.

This web of stories suggests that Ame no Hiboko was a prototypical foreign prince, on whom several Korea-related motifs were projected. Judging from his name, Sun Halberd of Heaven, he was conceived as a figure of ultimately heavenly origin associated with the sun and with iron weapons. In the Harima legend, he intimidates a local »god« who is known as Ugly Man of the Reed Plains, also used as a nickname for Ōkuninushi. This suggests a strong relation between Ame no Hiboko and the two sword gods who intimidate Ōkuninushi in the land-yielding episode. From this, we can infer that the body of legends surrounding Ame no Hiboko became part of the myth of Ōkuninushi's surrender.

Still, the Korean culture hero was attractive enough to mention him also in the historical sections of the classics, where the narrative seems realistic, although the conflict between foreigners and locals is ignored. Here, I would like to emphasize the mythical journey of the main protagonist, which is either »from Heaven to Japan« (heavenly sword gods) or »from Heaven to Korea to Japan« (Ame no Hiboko). The difference relates to the narrative time, »mythical« or »historical«, in which the protagonists are active.

The Conquest of Yamato

After the story of Ōkuninushi's surrender, the imperial mytho-history returns to the heavenly realm, starting with a lengthy description of Ninigi's inauguration as future ruler on Earth, which is followed by his descent in a pompous procession. While we would assume that he proceeds to Izumo where Ōkuninushi resided, or to the Yamato Basin where the Japanese state took shape, Ninigi instead descends to the remote region of Takachiho in central Kyushu.

54 *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 168-169.

55 In all versions, the deity is identified as Akaru-hime, who is venerated at the Himegoso Shrine in the region of present-day Ōsaka.

56 *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 166-167.

Thus, he never meets Ōkuninushi, and his mission to govern »All Under Heaven« temporarily disappears from the narrative. Instead, a son and a grandson of Ninigi establish marriage relations with the deities of the sea. The political breakthrough of the Sun Dynasty does not occur until the next generation, when Ninigi's great-grandson, Jinmu, embarks on a military campaign to conquer the east, more specifically the Yamato region.

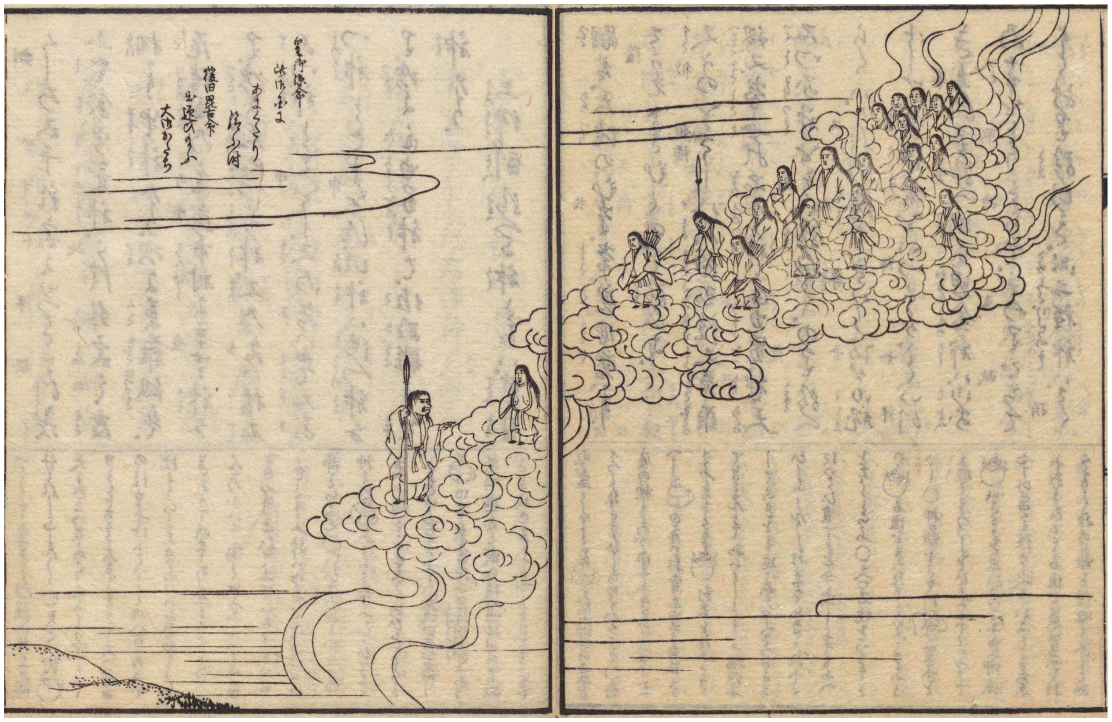


Figure 1: Ho no Ninigi and his entourage of Heavenly Deities travel from Heaven to Earth. Book illustration by Hosoda Tominobu, Kamiyo no masagoto *(*True words of the Divine Age*) vol. 3, published 1827. National Archives of Japan Digital Archive, public domain (https://www.digital.archives.go.jp/file/en/1248527, accessed 26.06.2026)*



Map 2: Jinmu's conquest as described in the Nihon shoki

Interestingly, according to the *Nihon shoki*, one reason for this military endeavor is the fact that a distant relative who »came down from Heaven in a rock boat«[57] had already established his rule in Yamato. When Jinmu and his army arrive in the region, they meet a fierce counterattack. Only after a long detour and massive divine intervention is Jinmu able to defeat the military leader of the Yamato people and make the region the center of his future empire. The battle is described in surprising detail, especially in the *Nihon shoki*. According to one theory, details of a dynastic conflict in the late seventh century, the Jinshin War (672), were woven into the story in order to conflate the image of Jinmu with a historical ruler, Tenmu Tennō (r. 673-686),[58] whose edict of 681 initiated the compilation of the imperial chronicles.

What is interesting in the Jinmu narrative is the mention of another clan of »heavenly deities«. The leader of that clan, a certain Nigihayahi, once married a local goddess and made his brother-in-law his general. It is actually this terrestrial brother-in-law who leads the army against Jinmu and offers stubborn resistance. Nigihayahi, on the other hand, submits to Jinmu's rule as soon as he recognizes him as a »relative« from Heaven.[59] Eventually, Nigihayahi's regime in Yamato is presented as a preparation of Jinmu's rule. As a reward for his submission, his descendants, the Mononobe, later become the most trusted vassals at the early Yamato court.

Thus, the conquest of Jinmu presents a more complex picture than the simple opposition of earthly and heavenly deities. We learn of the existence of heavenly descendants who are different from the imperial lineage and who intermarried with some earthly deities. Likewise, there is cultural and political diversity among the earthly deities, including savage groups of »earth spiders« who are hostile by definition, groups that willingly submit to Ninigi, and finally, respected opponents. Nevertheless, the implicit hierarchical gap between a mobile group of foreigners from »Heaven« and an immobile local population remains the same as in the land-yielding episode.

The implicit preference for mobile outsiders ends as soon as the narrative takes on a »historical« character from the reign of Jinmu Tennō onwards. This shift is marked by several narrative and paratextual changes, which indicate that ideas comparable to modern concepts of »mythology« and »history« existed in the minds of the ancient compilers. In both chronicles, the Age-of -the-Gods episodes, form a narrative of their own contained in the first (or first two) fascicles. The following fascicles begin to structure the narrative according to the reigns of »heavenly sovereigns« in the style of Chinese annals. Even if not much more than a sovereign's name is rendered during some of these reigns, the texts take pains to present an uninterrupted line of dynastic rulers. As mentioned, the *Nihon shoki* even provides exact dates for each rule. Moreover, neighboring countries are also explicitly mentioned. Thus, a seemingly objective, »historiographical« depiction of time and space replaces the ambiguous, »mythic« spatial and temporal dimensions of the Age of the Gods. In the *Kojiki*, these differences are reflected by the usage of different names for the realm of Earth (Japan): In the Age-of-the-Gods fascicle, the text speaks of the »Middle Land of the Abundant Reed Plains« (Toyo Ashihara no Naka tsu Kuni), implying a rich, but as-yet-uncultivated piece of land. After the Sun Dynasty

57 *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 128.

58 Duthie, Jinshin Rebellion.

59 According to the *Sendai kuji hongi*, it was Nigihayahi's son, who finalized peace with Jinmu.

takes power, however, the same area is referred to as »All Under Heaven« (*ame no shita*; *tenka*), originally a Chinese term for the politically ordered realm of the heavenly ruler.[60]

In this regard, the narrative after Jinmu's conquest takes on a »historical« character, despite the fact that the accounts of individual emperors remain replete with details that appear phantasmagorical or »mythical« to the modern reader. The distinction in the mindset of ancient storytellers can be chiefly attributed to the manner in which humans and deities engage with one another. Within the »mythical« narrative, the distinction between gods and men is frequently blurred; even when they appear as different groups, there is ample interaction between them. In »historical« times, humans inhabit the »visible realm«, while deities are considered to be imperceptible and can only be accessed through the use of magic or ritual.

The Conquest of Korea

One of the mythical episodes in the »historical« parts of the chronicles recounts the conquest of Korea during the reigns of the 14th heavenly sovereign, posthumously called Chūai Tennō (trad. dates 149-200 CE), and his wife, Empress Jingū (trad. dates 169-269). The story starts with a campaign by Chūai against the Kumaso, a population of »rebels« in the southern parts of Kyushu. When he and Jingū arrive in Kyushu, Jingū is possessed by several deities who demand, speaking through her mouth, that Chūai direct his campaign to »a better land of treasures [where there are] gold and silver and bright colors in plenty«,[61] namely the land of Silla. Thereupon, Chūai ascends a hill and looks at the ocean, yet does not see any land. Although the gods (who later turn out to include Amaterasu) insist that there is a country »outstretched like a reflection of Heaven in the water«, the emperor does not believe them. By way of divine retaliation, Chūai dies, and Jingū takes over the task of fulfilling the divine command. Aided by maritime deities, Jingū assembles a naval force and traverses the Korean Strait. According to the *Nihon shoki*, the sight of Jingū's armada is enough to make the king of Silla submit, recognizing Japan as a »divine country«. He sends eighty ships full of treasures to Japan and promises to continue sending regular tribute. The sovereigns of the two other kingdoms on the peninsula, Goguryeo and Baekje, follow his example. In doing so, Jingū establishes a permanent vassal state relationship with the Korean countries.

According to both chronicles, the reign of Jingū's son, Ōjin Tennō (trad. dates 200-310), marked a peaceful era, which saw – among other things – the introduction of writing by a certain Wani clan from China. Modern scholars attribute a certain historical credibility to this report. However, the annals of Ōjin show no trace of the purported treaty between the Korean kings and his mother, nor are Ōjin and his mother associated with Korea in the Harima gazetteer, despite their relative prominence in this text. Thus, there seems little doubt that the conquest story is a fairly young »invented tradition« probably dating from the later seventh century shortly before the time when the imperial mytho-history was fixed in written form. At that time, Japan did indeed embark on a naval campaign to prevent Silla from assuming control of the other kingdoms on the peninsula. The battle was fought in the name of Empress Saimei (r. 655-661), who reigned to ensure the succession of her son after her

60 Kōnoshi, *Kojiki no sekaikan*; Wittkamp, *Arbeit am Text*, 163-166.

61 *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 221.

husband's death. With the assistance of Tang China, Silla mounted a counteroffensive, resulting in a crushing defeat of the Japanese fleet in 663. Some Japanese historians such as Ōyama Seiichi proposed that the mythical conquest of Korea by an imperial consort was in fact a conscious reversal of these historical facts.[62] The xenophobic exclusion of mainland East Asia from the chapters on the Age of the Gods may also be attributed to this foreign policy setback.

Despite its mythological features, the conquest of Korea was widely accepted as historical fact in later centuries and became the foundation for various forms of anti-Korean propaganda in premodern as well as in modern historical contexts. The episode demonstrates that the mention of foreign countries in the »historical« parts of the imperial mytho-history was oftentimes accompanied by a sense of cultural superiority. Once more, I would like to emphasize that this was not the case in the contemporary *fudoki* genre.

Concluding Discussion

In this essay, I have tried to demonstrate that *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* – despite their ideological differences highlighted by *sakuhin-ron* scholars – share a common feature, namely the replacement of continental origins with heavenly ones. This is in stark contrast to the *fudoki*, in which both continental and celestial origins can serve as hallmarks of the rulers. This discrepancy in mythological-historical sources, which were produced around the same time, is the starting point of my analysis. It suggests that the imperial chronicles cannot (or cannot solely) be understood as ancient narrative traditions; rather, they were shaped by the political agenda of the time when the mythology was codified in written form. In conclusion, I will summarize this process more generally:

Among other things, this was a time of competing explanations of the world. The Japanese intellectual elite had come to regard their country as a member of Chinese civilization, yet from a Sinocentric position, Japan was considered a barbarian tribute state. The introduction of Buddhism, which coincided with the formation of the ancient Japanese state, presented India as yet another ideal country outside Japan. This must have led to fissures in Japan's self-imagination.

On the other hand, seventh-century *realpolitik* demonstrated the continent to be a source of danger, when Chinese intervention led to the unification of the Korean Peninsula under the regime of Silla despite Japanese military efforts to the contrary. Consequently, China and Korea ceased to simply be models of civilization, but also became a political threat. Japanese mythmakers responded by ignoring and denying the local dynasty's ethnic and cultural links to the continent, instead shifting real and imagined sites of foreign origin into the realm of the deities. In this sense, the Japanese annals may be regarded as a nostalgic effort to regain cultural independence from the continent.

This does not imply that the imperial mytho-history invented legends such as the dynasty's descent from Heaven from scratch. Comparative mythology has pointed out that this motif can be found all over Eurasia. Michael Witzel, for instance, discusses surprising parallels between Ninigi and the Indian demigod, Purūravas.[63] The motif of heavenly descent (both

62 Ōyama, *Shōtoku Taishi*.

63 In both cases, the establishment of a dynasty is made possible by the marriage between a male deity from Heaven to an earthly female (Witzel, *Origins*, 174-175). Elsewhere, Witzel also points out surprising parallels

spatial and dynastic) is also present in Korean origin stories, most notably in the Dangun myth.[64] However, it seems to be lacking from Chinese annals that served as models of ancient Japanese historiography. Thus, scholars like Mizoguchi Mutsuko attribute the descent story to a »Northern« mythology that reached Japan relatively late, but was the foundation of the Tennō dynasty's myth of origin.[65]

In any case, it is clear that descent from Heaven to an aboriginal population on Earth was a shared commodity of many Eurasian cultures and was used in all kinds of dynastic foundation stories. Nevertheless, the distinctive feature of the Ninigi story is that the target of his descent is situated within the confines of the Japanese empire, ignoring external geography. This may seem natural, but regional sources reveal that a more complex pattern of descent from Heaven to Korea and then to Japan existed. One of these examples, the legend of Ame no Hiboko in the local gazetteer of Harima, reveals striking parallels with the land-yielding episode in the imperial chronicles, suggesting a common source. However, the omission of Korea in the Age-of-the-Gods narrative indicates a consistent revision of the original material. Thus, the local community in the Harima version turned into the aborigines on Earth and the continental conqueror into a messenger from Heaven. Similarly, the imperial chronicles also reinterpreted the origin of Susanoo and other figures.

Another universal motif embedded in the Japanese mytho-history is the concept of chaos preceding a golden age. In the Japanese case, this corresponds to the mythic era between the creation of the world and the time of Ho no Ninigi. As the chronicles maintain, this was a time when »evil deities buzzed like flies« and »trees and herbs all of which could speak«.[66] This mythic chaos is associated with the mythic space of the Middle Land of Abundant Reed Plains and an initial independence from Heaven. The surrender of Ōkuninushi and Ho no Ninigi's subsequent descent are recounted in a way as if chaos on Earth will be defeated thereafter. However, Ninigi's descent initiates a time of transition, marked by diplomatic negotiations and marriage relations. Ninigi's task is only completed by Jinmu's decisive battle, which finally leads to an explicit political stratification below a single ruler on Earth (Japan). While the narrative does not emphasize other aspects of civilizational »advancement«, it seems obvious that the dynasty from Heaven also familiarized people on Earth with iron weapons, mirrors, or silk weaving. In this sense, the Age-of-the-Gods narrative not only functions as a dynastic origin story, but also employs mythical elements to describe the advent of continental civilization, albeit without ever mentioning the continent itself. The distinction between the mythic chaos and the time of civilizational order after Jinmu is also emphasized by paratextual devices: The Age-of-the-Gods narrative employs »mythical« concepts of time and

in the conquest of the East, which, in both ancient Indian and in Japanese mythology, occurs in the same lineage as the descent from Heaven. According to his interpretation, the motif can be interpreted as a search for the origin of the sun/fire (Witzel, Marching east).

64 In the *Samguk yusa* of Ilyeon (1206-1289), Dangun appears as an ancestor of the kingdom of Goguryeo (Ilyeon, *Samguk Yusa*, 49). It was only in later sources that he was presented as the founding figure of »Old Joseon«, the first mythical kingdom on the Korean peninsula. There, he features as the son of a deity from heaven and a bear woman from earth.

65 Mizoguchi, *Ōken shinwa*.

66 See above, fn 45.

space that defy any kind of measurement. From Jinmu's reign onward, however, the narrative adopts formal standards derived from Chinese historiography, such as the precise dating of individual reigns (*Nihon shoki*) or a kind of »fast facts profile« of the ruler at the beginning of each reign (*Kojiki*). There are no longer any gods who transcend the boundaries of heaven and earth: only overseas contacts between inhabitants of different countries.

It therefore appears that in the fascicles on the Age of the Gods, Heaven, and Earth embody a clear dichotomy that grants foreigners (the heavenly deities) the right to rule over locals (the earthly deities). The difference, however, is actually a gradual one: Susanoo, the »heavenly« ancestor of the earthly deities, is the pivotal figure here. His ambivalent nature enables the imperial compilers to construe a genealogical relationship between the deities of Heaven and Earth, while simultaneously justifying the submission of the latter. As descendants of Susanoo, the earthy deities are ultimately of »celestial« origin, but they are »terrestrial« in relation to the descendants of Ho no Ninigi, who descended from Heaven at a later point in time to replace Susanoo's lineage. Thus, to establish a hierarchy among the various descending deities, a principle is applied according to which the newcomer takes all. In other words, the longer a dynasty exists on Earth, the more susceptible it is to »unruly« disruptive forces that ultimately necessitate the establishment of a new regime from Heaven.[67]

This implicit legitimation of dynastic change ends when the heavenly dynasty establishes its supposedly ideal rule. From that point onward, foreigners no longer originate from Heaven, but only from the continent. Although they are often portrayed as possessing superior knowledge (such as writing) and are treated with due respect, they are by definition subject to the rule of the Sun Lineage (Yamato). At least in theory, they maintained their status as »foreigners« over generations (as the *Shinsen shōjiroku* reveals), implying that they were always of lesser status than families of divine origin. In this regard, the bearers of continental civilization – the Tennō dynasty and its court – could claim an elevated status in comparison to the local culture bearers, while simultaneously denying that status for »new« foreign arrivals following the purported establishment of the dynasty.

This double conceptualization of foreignness was a discursive strategy specific to the imperial chronicles. As we have seen, the regional myths from Izumo and Harima contain a positive image of Silla and express a desire to prove these areas' close relationship to that Korean region. In these legends, we recognize the peninsula in its true historical role as a hub of continental culture. By the eighth century, however, the self-esteem of the Japanese court had become strong enough to create a powerful counternarrative, using similar material as the regional gazetteers in a different narrative framing. The »mythological« Age-of-the-Gods sections of the imperial chronicles must therefore be seen as the ideologically most important and, at the same time, the youngest parts of these texts. These are myths of new social and geopolitical visions from the very period when the history of Japan's ruling dynasty was first recorded in writing.

67 This may, in fact, reflect Chinese conceptualizations of the »mandate of Heaven« (*tianming*), which elucidates the historical transitions from one dynasty to another as a form of divine retribution for moral deficiencies.

References

Primary sources

Fudoki vol. 2., ed. Akimoto Kichirō (Tokyo 1958).

Florenz, Karl, *Japanische Mythologie. Nihongi, „Zeitalter der Götter". Nebst Ergänzungen aus andern alten Quellenwerken* (Tokyo, 1901).

Ilyeon, *Samguk Yusa: Legenden und Wundergeschichten aus den Drei Königreichen Koreas* (Hamburg, 2008).

The Kojiki: An Account of Ancient Matters, trans. Gustav Heldt (New York, 2014).

Kojiki: Aufzeichnungen alter Begebenheiten, trans. Klaus Antoni (Berlin, 2012).

Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A. D. 697 trans. William George Aston [1896] (Rutland, Vt., 1972).

Norito: A Translation of the Ancient Japanese Prayers trans. Donald L. Philippi [1959] (Princeton, 1990)

Records of Wind and Earth: A Translation of Fudoki with Introduction and Commentaries, trans. Aoki, Michiko Y. (Ann Arbor, 1997).

Translation of Ko-Ji-Ki or Records of Ancient Matters trans. Basil Hall Chamberlain [1919] (Kobe, 1932).

Secondary literature

Antoni, Klaus, *Der weiße Hase von Inaba: Vom Mythos zum Märchen. Analyse eines japanischen "Mythos der ewigen Wiederkehr" vor dem Hintergrund altchinesischen und zirkumpazifischen Denkens* (Wiesbaden, 1982).

Antoni, Klaus, *Shintō und die Konzeption des japanischen Nationalwesens (kokutai)* (Leiden, 1998).

Barnes, Gina, *State Formation in Japan: Emergence of a 4th-Century Ruling Elite* (London, 2007).

Como, Michael, *Weaving and Binding: Immigrant Gods and Female Immortals in Ancient Japan* (Honolulu, 2009).

Duthie, Torquil, The Jinshin Rebellion and the politics of historical narrative in early Japan. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 133/2 (2013) 295-320.

Kanagawa, Nadia, *Making the Realm, Transforming the People: Foreign Subjects in Seventh- Through Ninth-Century Japan*. Unpublished PhD thesis (University of Southern California, 2019).

Kiley, Cornelius J., A note on the surnames of immigrant officials in Nara Japan, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 29 (1969) 177-189.

Kōnoshi, Takamitsu, *Kojiki no sekaikan* [World view of the *Kojiki*] (Tokyo, 2008 [1986]).

Lurie, David B., *Realms of Literacy: Early Japan and the History of Writing* (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

Naumann, Nelly, *Sakahagi*: The ›reverse flaying‹ of the heavenly piebald horse, *Asian Folklore Studies* 41/1 (1982) 7-38.

Naumann, Nelly, *Die einheimische Religion Japans, Teil 1: Bis zum Ende der Heian–Zeit*. (Leiden, 1988).

Naumann, Nelly, *Die Mythen des alten Japan* (München, 1996).

Mizoguchi, Mutsuko, *Nihon kodai shizoku no keifu* [Genealogies of the ancient Japanese nobility] (Tokyo, 1987).

Mizoguchi, Mutsuko, *Ōken shinwa no nigen kōzō: Takami Musuhi to Amaterasu* [The dual structure of the royal myths: Takami Musuhi and Amaterasu] (Tokyo, 2000).
Ooms, Herman, *Imperial Politics and Symbolics in Ancient Japan: The Tenmu Dynasty, 650-800* (Honolulu, 2009).
Ōyama, Seiichi, *'Shōtoku Taishi' no tanjō* [The birth of ›Shōtoku Taishi‹] (Tokyo, 1999).
Piggott, Joan R., Sacral kingship and confederacy in early Izumo, *Monumenta Nipponica* 44/1 (1989) 45-74.
Piggott, Joan R., *The Emergence of Japanese Kingship* (Stanford, CA, 1997).
Saijō, Tsutomu, *Kojiki to ōke no keifugaku* [*Kojiki* and royal genealogy] (Tokyo, 2005).
Scheid, Bernhard, Mythology and genealogy in the canonical sources of Japanese history, in: Walter Pohl and Daniel Mahoney (eds.), *Historiography and Identity IV: Writing History Across Medieval Eurasia* (Turnhout, 2021) 83-99.
Steineck, Raji, *Kritik der symbolischen Formen II: Zur Konfiguration altjapanischer Mythologien* (Stuttgart, 2017).
Suzuki, Masanobu, Methodology for analyzing the genealogy of ancient Japanese clans, *Waseda Daigaku Kōtōkenkyūjo Kiyō* 7 (2015) 17-27.
Torrance, Richard, The infrastructure of the gods: Izumo in the Yayoi and Kofun periods, *Japan Review* 29 (2016) 3-38.
Weiss, David, The Japanese trickster and his connection to metallurgy, in: Klaus Antoni and David Weiss (eds.), *Sources of Mythology: Ancient and Contemporary Myths* (Münster, 2014) 337-347.
Weiss, David, *The God Susanoo and Korea in Japan's Cultural Memory: Ancient Myths and Modern Empire* (London, 2022).
Wittkamp, Robert F., *Arbeit am Text: Zur postmodernen Erforschung der Kojiki-Mythen* (Gossenberg, 2018).
Witzel, Michael, *The Origins of the World's Mythologies* (Oxford, 2012).
Witzel, Michael, Marching east with a detour: the cases of Jinmu, Videgha Māthava and Moses, in: Klaus Antoni and David Weiss (eds.), *Sources of Mythology: Ancient and Contemporary Myths* (Münster, 2014) 349-372.

List of Figures

Map 1: Korea and Japan around the early 7th century CE
Map 2: Jinmu's conquest as described in the *Nihon shoki*
Figure 1: Ho no Ninigi and his entourage of Heavenly Deities travel from Heaven to Earth. Book illustration by Hosoda Tominobu, *Kamiyo no masagoto* (*True words of the Divine Age*) vol. 3, published 1827. National Archives of Japan Digital Archive, public domain (https://www.digital.archives.go.jp/file/en/1248527, accessed 26.06.2026)

Ethnic Origin Narratives in Early Medieval Europe

Walter Pohl and Pavlína Rychterová*

In the first part, this article presents a concise overview of brief or longer passages in early and high medieval historiography that deal with ethnic origins, and their context, ranging from the relatively extensive accounts in Jordanes' *Getica* and the *Origo gentis Langobardorum* or the Frankish myth of Trojan ancestry, to the scattered brief references about Burgundian origins, the different versions of Anglo-Saxon and Irish migration legends, and to Cosmas on the Bohemians and other accounts of the origins of the new kingdoms of eastern Europe. It then addresses some of the key questions of the often-controversial debates in recent research: Were these narratives mainly based on classical ethnography, and thus products of outside perceptions? To what degree could they reflect indigenous traditions? And what impact did they have on the cohesion of a group, a community, a people? The article argues that these legends should not be dismissed altogether as Roman literary fictions, but assessed individually for the amount of non-ethnographic elements they contain. Instead, it proposes not to place their creation into a binary between Roman literary fiction and authentic indigenous tradition. To a considerable extent, Romans and »barbarians« shared an ontology and an epistemology that relied on supernatural agency, genealogies including divine ancestors, and animal spirits. It was only Christianity that changed some of these paradigms. Therefore, what we can observe over time is a tendency by Christian writers to distance themselves, subvert or omit »barbarian« ontologies now considered as pagan. Still, even Christian clerics such as Paul the Deacon did include »ridiculous fables« about Germanic divinities in their texts, so they must have mattered to their audience.

Keywords: Early Middle Ages, origin myths, historiography, Goths, Longobards, Romans, ethnography, epistemology, ontology, identity

This thematic section of Medieval Worlds addresses a wide range of examples from all over Eurasia from the ancient world to early modern societies. This exciting diversity may help us to put the much-discussed origin myths of early medieval peoples of Europe into perspective. Their meaning has often been overdetermined due to their importance for the creation of

* Correspondence details: Walter Pohl, Institute for Medieval Research, Austrian Academy of Sciences, walter.pohl@oeaw.ac.at; Pavlína Rychterová, Institute for Medieval Research, Austrian Academy of Sciences, pavlina.rychterova@oeaw.ac.at.

This article is part of the thematic section *Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasian Comparison*, guest editor: Reinier Langelaar. To read all related articles, please access https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026.

eISSN-Nr. 2412-3196
DOI 10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026s129

›myths of nations‹ in the heydays of modern European nationalisms in the 19th and 20th centuries, and by the ensuing debates and polemics.[1] The source material collected in this volume will offer the reader examples not only for the diversity of their stories and themes, poetics and styles, mythologies and beliefs, but also for the multiplicity of scholarly approaches and the many angles from which they could be used and can be studied.

In the medieval European context, we seem to have a rather limited repertoire of narrative elements: first ancestors and their reproductive partners, divine interventions, emblematic animals, flight or expulsion from a land of origin, the crossing of seas or rivers, migrations and the search for a new homeland, divisions and mergers, primordial deeds, internal and external conflict, the achievements of wise women and the raising of kings.[2] These European origin stories often lead us far back into putative histories of particular communities, and prompt the question how far their elements can be assessed for their possible factual basis. Did the people in question ›really‹ come from their supposed original homeland? Did women have a more prominent place in political life in times of old? [3] Similar questions concern the search for traces of ancient beliefs and identifications that may have been current at the time when the respective origin stories were put into writing. Were these narratives mainly based on classical ethnography and thus products of outside perceptions?[4] To what degree could they reflect indigenous traditions? And what impact did they have on the cohesion of a group, a community, a people?

In the historiography of medieval Europe, this was one the of the main foci of the interpretation of origin myths of early medieval communities such as the Goths, Franks, or Longobards, whose kingdoms were established as more or less ethnically defined realms on the territories of the former Western Roman Empire.[5] For a long time, they were interpreted in modern research as representing an ethnic mentality that came to replace the constitutionalism of the Roman empire, and as representing the beginning of the long history of European nations. Hence, the interpretation of medieval origin stories in Europe became closely linked to the often-controversial debates about the role of ethnicity and identity in the formation of the post-Roman kingdoms. Did origin myths matter for ethnic identities, and did ethnicity matter for the people concerned?

These big issues were raised on the basis of a relatively small body of mostly short texts or brief passages that address the question how ethnic groups originated, and where they came from. Interest in origins was not limited to the origins of peoples, but also concerned the wider issue of the origin of mankind and of the world at large. Especially popular in Antiquity were urban foundation legends; Naoise MacSweeney has collected over 1000

1 Pohl, *Suche nach den Ursprüngen* (2004); Geary, *Myths of Nations*; Bernsen, Becher and Brüggen (eds.), *Gründungsmythen Europas* (2013); Pohl and Mahoney (eds.), *Narratives of Ethnic and Tribal Origins* (2018); Brady and Wadden (eds.), *Origin Legends in Early Medieval Western Europe* (2022).

2 Pohl, Narratives of Origin and Migration.

3 Geary, *Women at the Beginning*; Pohl, Gender and ethnicity.

4 Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians*; Maas, *Conqueror's Gift*.

5 Pohl and Wieser, Introduction: The Emergence of New Polities in the Shadows of Empires.

textual witnesses in her study of the origin myths of Greek cities.[6] Some myths cover many types of origins: The Hebrew Bible, and the Old Testament, included accounts of the origin of the world, of mankind, of all peoples of the earth (descended from the sons of Noah), of the different languages (after the confusion at the tower of Babylon), of the Jewish people in particular, its migration to the Holy Land, and the building of the temple in Jerusalem.[7] The fourth-century text called Origo gentis Romanae, building on earlier texts, addresses both the complex story of the formation of the Italians, of their gods, of the Latini and the Roman people, and of the foundation of the city of Rome.[8] The Tibetan origin narrative covers the origins of mankind, of the Tibetans, and also of the Chinese and the Mongols.[9]

Such inclusive narratives are rare in the early medieval West. Most of the ethnic origin myths were written down in Christianised societies, where the question of the origin of the world, mankind, and the emergence of the peoples and languages of the world already received elaborate answers in the Bible. Ethnic and genealogical origin narratives could thus be attached to the genealogy of Adam or of the sons of Noah without further explanation. Jordanes prefixed an extensive summary of Biblical history to his *De origine actibusque gentis Romanae*.[10] The *origines gentium*, describing the origins of peoples, have a long classical tradition, and were by no means limited to barbarians. The Romans were interested to know where all the peoples in the wider Roman world had come from, which also allowed inferences about their character.[11] This interest had its highs and lows, but became particularly relevant in the sixth century CE when the military elites of the post-Roman kingdoms sought to assert their difference from the majority population of their own kingdom and from the ruling groups of other ones, whereas educated representatives of the now mostly subaltern descendants of the Romans wanted to know more about their new rulers.[12]

The early medieval use of the term *origo gentis* was ambiguous. It could refer to an ancestor: Tacitus, in his Germania written in c. 100 CE, gives a brief genealogy of the Germani, and presents Mannus (›the man‹) as their first ancestor; he uses the term ›*origo gentis*‹ for Mannus.[13] The term could also describe the emergence of a people: Jordanes called his Gothic history *De origine actibusque Getarum*, and that means that the book contained both the ›origin‹ and the ›deeds‹ of the peoples. The title could also cover the entire history of a people: the seventh-century *Origo gentis Langobardorum* relates under this title, although briefly, the whole period up to the 7th-century kings Grimoald and Perctarit with whom the Origo ends. In scholarly usage, the terms ›origin narrative‹ or ›*origo gentis*‹ are often limited to texts or

6 See the contribution by Naoise MacSweeney, in this volume.

7 Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel*.

8 *Origo gentis Romanae*, ed. Sehlmeyer; Revell, *Ways of Being Roman*; Pohl, Introduction: Early Medieval Romanness.

9 Pohl, The Emergence of New Polities.

10 Jordanes, *Romana*. See Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, Introduction, 19-30.

11 Bickerman, Origines gentium; Fromentin and Gotteland (eds.), *Origines Gentium*, with the review by Eva Valvo, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2002/2002.07.12/ .

12 Anton *et al.*, Origo gentis. The new rulers might also underline their ancient relationship with the Romans, for instance in the Trojan origin myth of the Franks; cf. e.g. Kasperski, Some Considerations.

13 Tacitus, *Germania*, 2.

parts of text dealing with distant origins and migrations, previous to the arrival in the present homeland or the foundation of the present state. Alheydis Plassmann, in her influential monograph, has used them for the entire ›barbarian histories‹ by Jordanes, Paul the Deacon and others, far beyond the origin stories.[14]

Post-Roman Origin Narratives of the Continent, 6th-8th Centuries: A Brief Overview

Goths

The Gothic history (known as *Getica*; its full title is *De origine actibusque Getarum*, was written by Jordanes in the 550s.[15] It contains one of the most elaborate, but also of the most-debated medieval European origin narratives.[16] Jordanes was an educated citizen of the Eastern Roman (»Byzantine«) Empire and came, as he indicates, from a Gothic and Alan milieu; he writes at the end: »And that no one believes that I would have added anything in the favour of the people discussed above except the things I have read or learned, as happens when one draws one's origin from them.«[17] When he wrote, the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy, founded half a century before by King Theodoric, was finally on the threshold of succumbing to the Byzantine armies after a long and devastating war. Jordanes advocated an honourable and peaceful integration of these Goths into the Empire after its victory.[18] His history relied, to an extent that is still controversial, on a previous (and lost) Gothic history written by Cassiodorus: a leading Roman senator who had occupied the highest civil offices under King Theodoric.[19] From an opposite but similarly pro-Gothic perspective (a Roman serving Goths, instead of a Goth serving Romans) and in a rather different political situation, Cassiodorus had also supported Gothic integration on eye-level. For that purpose, he argued that the history of the Goths was at least as long and noble as that of the Romans, and that was what we also get in Jordanes.[20] The difference between them was that Cassiodorus endorsed the legitimacy of the Amals reigning in Italy, whereas Jordanes came from the Alan and Gothic environment of the mixed groups that had passed over into East Roman service after the death of Attila. They had chosen the path of Roman integration already a century ago, and that was what Jordanes supported by extolling their combination of noble and ancient history, military prowess and swift adoption of law and civilisation.[21]

14 Plassmann, *Origo gentis* (2006); ead., Origo gentis (2022). Of course, it makes sense to treat these histories, and their possible relevance for the legitimation of the kingdom and the identity of the people, in their entirety; but it makes more sense to limit our concept of ›origin narratives‹ to actual origins.

15 Jordanes, *Getica*, ed. Mommsen; trans. Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof.

16 Wolfram, *Goten*; Goffart, *Narrators*; Christensen, *Cassiodorus.*

17 Jordanes, *Getica* 60, ed. Mommsen, 316, trans. Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, 369. I find little reason to assume that Jordanes was instead of Roman origin.

18 Goffart, *The Narrators*, 95; Kasperski, Origin Legend. It does not follow from this intention that the arguments why the defeated Goths should remain in Roman lands were all invented, as Kasperski, Jordanes versus Procopius, assumes. For an extensive and balanced overview of the debates about the Getica, see Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, Introduction, 31-64.

19 Wolfram, *Goten*; Goffart, *The Narrators*; Gillett, The mirror of Jordanes; Christensen, *Cassidorus*.

20 Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 9.25, ed. Fridh 379.

21 Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, Introduction,

Jordanes's themes, as he states at the end of the *Getica*, were »the origin of the Getae, the nobility of the Amals and the deeds of brave men«.[22] Like other late antique historians, for instance Orosius, he begins his *Getica* with an extensive ethnographic panorama of the relevant regions, in this case for the wide-ranging Gothic migrations. The northern island Thule, Scandza/Scandinavia and Britannia are highlighted. He lists many peoples supposed to live in Scandinavia, some of them stock names of ancient ethnography, found already in Ptolemy's passage on Scandinavia.[23] Others names are otherwise unknown – information about them is attributed to a certain Roduulf, King of the Ranii, who had come to visit Theoderic, king of the Ostrogoths, some time ago. Scandinavia, Jordanes maintains according to an ancient ethnographic stereotype, is a place where many peoples originate, *quasi officina gentium aut certe velut vagina nationum*. Then the migration story begins:

> And thus from this island of Scandza, as from a workshop of peoples (*officina gentium*) or rather, like a scabbard of nations (*vagina nationum*), the Goths are said to have emerged at some point under a king called Berig. As soon as they left their ships and made landfall, they immediately gave a name to the place. For that place is still, so it is said, called Gothiscandza. Moving quickly onward from there to the land of the Ulmerugi, who then inhabited the shores of the Ocean, they pitched camp, started a battle, and drove the Ulmerugi from their homes. And then they also subdued the neighbours of this people, the Vandals, and thus added them to their conquests.[24]

The passage quoted above contains many elements that were to become characteristic of medieval ethnic origin narratives. Scandinavia and Scythia were two of the preferred countries of origin in migration narratives, along with Troy; sometimes Macedonia, Britain or Spain played a role.[25] These lands were mostly situated at the margins of Europe, lands known above all from legends and long reputed as places of emigration. It seems to have enhanced the prestige of a people (or a person) to have come from the »outmost boundaries of Europe (*de extremis finibus Europae*)«, as a poem composed around 700 in Italy says about the Longobards.[26] Migrants crossed the sea, defeated other peoples to assert their right of residence, and left their name on their new land. And they had a founder king, from whom much later kings could derive their legitimacy - although in the case of Jordanes, interestingly, the genealogy of Theodoric's Amal dynasty does not include the leader of the exodus from Scandza, King Berig, and other kings he mentions. A sixth-century invention streamlined to enhance the glory of the Amals would hardly have built in such a contradiction to Cassiodorus's claim that the Amals had »as many kings as ancestors« in their pedigree.[27]

---

22 Jordanes, *Getica,* 60, ed. Mommsen, 315, trans. Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, 368; Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, Introduction, 61.

23 Merrills, *History and Geography*, 147.

24 Jordanes, *Getica*, 4.25-26, ed. Mommsen, trans. Van Nuffelen 232-233; Wolfram, Origo gentis.

25 Reynolds, Medieval origines gentium.

26 *Carmen de synodo Ticinensi*, ed. Bethmann, 190: »ortus in finibus Europe«; Walahfrid, ed. Krusch, 280-337, 282, l. 30 – Saint Gallus arrives ›de extremis finibus orbis‹. Reimitz, Grenzen und Grenzüberschreitungen. See also Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, Introduction, 44-48.

27 Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 9, 25, 5, ed. Fridh, 379.

Berig's fifth successor Filimer led a part of the Goths on to Scythia, called Oium in Gothic. At this point, Jordanes blends the Scandinavian origin story of the Goths, for which he is the only source, smoothly into the rich material that classical ethnography and historiography offered about Scythia, the Scythians and other peoples who had lived in the lands north and west of the Black Sea.[28] This is not Jordanes', or rather, Cassiodorus' invention: »None of these identifications is without precedent«.[29] Since the Scythians had gradually vanished in the first centuries of the Common Era, »Scythians« had become an ethnographic category, and was applied to Sarmatians, Alans, Goths, Huns and many other peoples from the Eastern European steppes. Therefore, Jordanes could easily identify the Goths with the ancient Scythians who had lived north of the Black Sea a thousand years before, but also with the Getae (attested in the Balkans in the Hellenistic and early Roman period) and the Dacians (whom the Romans had fought north of the Danube in the 1st century CE). As the Scythians, the Goths are also linked with the mythical Amazons, who played an important part as terrifying but also attractive female warriors in the Greek and Roman imagination.[30] In a sense, Jordanes (and not unlikely, already Cassiodorus) put the ethnographic notion that all these peoples could be classed as Scythians on its head by claiming that they were all Goths. The origin story from Scandza/Scandinavia is added as a prequel to this grandiose construction.

From a late stage in the learned summary of the barbarian neighbours of Greece and Rome in the north-eastern steppes, the narrative switches once more to distant origins, and Jordanes introduces the genealogy of the dynasty of the Amals, the family of Theoderic. Jordanes remarks that the Goths regarded their Amal leaders, »whose fortune brought them victory, not as pure men, but as half-gods, that is, Ansis«.[31] The genealogy begins: »The first was Gapt, who begat Hulmul. Hulmul begat Augis: and Augis begat him, who was Amal, from whom the origin of the Amals proceeds«, and so on until Athalaric in the seventeenth generation. This was propaganda for the Amal family that ruled Italy until 536, and it can very plausibly be attributed to Cassiodorus. In a speech written for Theodoric's grandson Athalaric in the senate, Cassiodorus had boastfully mentioned that Athalaric was the seventeenth in a genealogy of as many kings as ancestors, in order to convince the senate that the new king's genealogy was at least as ancient and noble as theirs.[32] It was in this same speech that Athalaric thanked Cassiodorus for having written a history of the Goths.

Gothic history could be told quite differently, with little reference to ancient origins. Isidore of Seville's *History of the Goths*, written in the Visigothic kingdom in the early 7th century, only picks a few events from the period of (Visi-)Gothic migrations, and focuses on the history of the Visigothic kingdom in Spain.[33] He also identifies Goths and Scythians, but

28 Müller, *Geschichte der antiken Ethnographie*; Merrills, *History and Geography*; Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*; Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians*; Maas, *The Conqueror's Gift*.

29 Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, Introduction, 51.

30 Mayor, *The Amazons*; Pohl, Gender and ethnicity.

31 Jordanes, *Getica*, 13, ed. Mommsen, 78. Wolfram, *Gotische Studien,* 27-29.

32 Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 9, 25, 5, ed. Fridh, 379. Wolfram, *Goten* 16; id., *Gotische Studien*, 218, with further Roman and Biblical examples for 17 generations. Sceptical Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, Introduction, 61.

33 Isidore, *History of the Kings of the Goths*, 2.21, trans. Wolf.

only with the explanation that the two names are almost identical, if you simply removed the »S« in »Scythians«, and no further historical information. For Isidore, origins were best explained by the etymology of the word or name; his huge encyclopaedic work, the Etymologies, was therefore also called »Origines«.[34] Isidore of Seville was a pivotal figure in the efforts of the Iberian bishops to pacify the quarrelsome Gothic kings, and had no reason to remind those Goths of their pagan ancestors.[35]

Longobards

Another Scandinavian origin story is transmitted for the Longobards, in a text written down in the 660s/670s and called *Origo gentis Langobardorum* (Origin of the Longobard people).[36] In the late 8th century, the monk Paul the Deacon copied it quite faithfully into his *Longobard History*, although he warned his readers twice that it was a »ridiculous fable«.[37] He added further legendary elements of a Longobard migration story, especially about the later king Lamissio who was abandoned as a baby and found by a princess, like Moses, and later fought Amazons in a river.[38]

Just as the Goths, the Longobards were supposed to have come from Scandinavia, here in the version of the Origo gentis Langobardorum:

> There is an island called Scadanan, which is interpreted »destructions« (*excidia*), in the regions of the north, where many peoples dwell.[39] Among these there was a small people that was called the Winnili. And with them was a woman, Gambara by name, and she had two sons. Ybor was the name of one and Agio the name of the other. They, with their mother, Gambara by name, ruled over the Winnili. Then the leaders of the Vandals, that is, Ambri and Assi, moved with their army, and said to the Winnili: ›Either pay us tribute or prepare yourselves for battle and fight with us.‹[40]

The Winnili chose to fight. The Vandals asked Godan/Wodan (the Germanic god of war, but also of fore-knowledge) to give them victory, and Godan answered: »›Whom I shall first see at sunrise, to them will I give the victory.‹« Gambara, on the other hand, solicited help from Godan's wife, the goddess Frea.

> Then Frea gave counsel that at sunrise the Winnili should come, and that their women, with their hair let down around the face in the likeness of a beard, should also come with their husbands. Then when it became bright, while the sun was rising, Frea, the wife of Godan, turned around the bed where her husband was lying and put his face towards the east and

34 Isidore, *Etymologiae*. Henderson, *The Medieval World of Isidore*.

35 Wood, *The Politics of Identity*; Buchberger, Origin Legends.

36 *Origo gentis Langobardorum*, ed. Bethmann and Waitz; Pohl, Origo gentis Langobardorum; id., Historical writing; Coumert, *Origines des peuples*; Costambeys, Origin legends.

37 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 8, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 54-56; Pohl, Historical Writing.

38 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 1, 15-17, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 54-56.

39 The etymological remark that *Scadanan* was derived from Germanic *skaðan-* (damage, danger, German ›Schaden‹) occurs only in the Origo. Cf. Reichert, Skandia(e).

40 *Origo gentis Langobardorum* 1, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 2-3; in all quotes revised after the translation by Foulke, 315-316; cf. Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 1, 7, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 54-56

> awakened him. And he, looking at them, saw the Winnili and their women having their hair let down around the face. And he said, »Who are these Long-beards?« And Frea said to Godan, »As you have given them a name, give them also the victory.« He was now obliged to give them victory, and from that time the Winnili were called Langobards.[41]

The story is remarkable for many reasons. There is a strong element of female agency in it; two pairs of brothers with emblematic names appear; and two Germanic divinities play decisive roles in it.

The Frankish Fredegar Chronicle, terminated around the same time as the *Origo gentis Langobardorum*, also relates the story around the same time (c. 670) in modified form – Scandinavia is on the continent, and the battle is fought against the Huns – and openly condemns »these peoples« who believe that their god, »whom in a heathen manner (*fanatice*) they call Wodan«, had given them the name.[42] This parallel transmission supports the hypothesis that Queen Gundeperga or King Perctarit, who descended from the ancient Lething dynasty in the female line through Frankish marriages, may have commissioned the Origo.[43] That may explain the attention to female agency in the text, which untypically also features queens in its genealogy. The Longobard origin story is only purged of its pagan remnants in a Frankish-inspired version of c. 810 that introduces a Christian providential element instead: they migrated »not by necessity«, but »to attain salvation from above«.[44]

Further Continental Examples

By far the widest diffusion of origin stories in the course of the Middle Ages is attested for the Franks. Its earliest substantial transmission comes in the Fredegar Chronicle, compiled in several stages up to c. 670, and in the *Liber Historiae Francorum* of c. 715.[45] It adopts the Trojan origin story of the Romans, and adds a number of more topical bits of information. Among them, there is Fredegar's remarkable genealogy of eponymous founders of peoples that descended from the Trojan king Priamus: Priam's successor was Friga, ancestor of the Phrygians, from whom the Macedonians broke away; in the next generation, there was another division between Francio, the name-giver of the Franks, and Torcoth, from whom the Turks descended.[46] It is an unexpected selection of related *gentes*: there are no Germanic peoples among them; and there is no explicit mention of the Romans either. Another much-discussed element is the genealogy of the Frankish kings. Merovech, the eponymous founder of the Merovingian dynasty, was King Clovis's grandfather.[47] Fredegar sows some doubt

41 *Origo gentis Langobardorum* 1, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 2-3; Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Langobardorum*, 1, 7-10, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 52-53.

42 Fredegar, *Chronicle* 3.65, ed. Krusch 110.

43 Pohl, Origo gentis Langobardorum.

44 *Historia Langobardorum codicis Gothani* 1, ed. Bethmann and Waitz.

45 Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity*.

46 Fredegar, *Chronicle* 3.2, ed. Krusch, 93; 3.9, ed. Krusch, 95, underlines that the later kings of the Franks came »from the stock (*genus*) of Priamus, Friga and Francio«.

47 Fredegar, *Chronicle* 3.9, ed. Krusch, 95.

whether his father had actually been King Chlodio from the Trojan lineage, or a sea monster comparable to a »Quinotaurus« that Chlodio's wife had encountered on the beach.[48]

For other post-Roman *gentes*, no extensive texts exist before the ninth century, apart from mentions in Tacitus or other ethnographic texts of the imperial age. An etymological explanation for the name of the Burgundians is mentioned in Ammianus Marcellinus and later in Orosius: »In earlier times, when the interior of Germany had been subjugated by Drusus and Tiberius, the adopted sons of Caesar, the Burgundians were stationed at different frontier posts. Later they united to form a great people. They took their name from their stations, for the dwelling places at frequent intervals along the frontier are commonly called burgi.«[49] According to the eighth-century Pasion of St. Sigismund, the sanctified Burgundian king, the Burgundians originated on the island of Scanadavia, after which they had initially been called Scandinavians until the emperor Tiberius had settled them in forts, *burgus*, on the Rhine.«[50] From then on they were called *Burgundofarones* and later Burgundians.

Some notion of Scandinavian origins is also reported in the 6th century for the Heruls. Procopius tells the story that some Heruls migrated to Thule (which he obviously uses for Scandinavia[51]) after the defeat against the Longobards; and those who settled in southern Pannonia sent envoys there to get a king from their royal dynasty.[52] According to Jordanes' *Getica*, the Heruls were among the most prestigious people on the island of Scandinavia.[53] He also mentions Ostrogoths in Scandinavia, but no Winnili/Longobards. For other *gentes*, no origin story has been transmitted. The Vandals just received cameo appearances in early stages of the Gothic and Longobard origin stories, but no account of their own.[54] About the Gepids, we have Jordanes' assertion that their name was derived from *gepanta*, lazy, because they had arrived late when they crossed the Sea from Scandinavia together with the Goths.[55]

For the Huns, Priscus, Procopius and Jordanes all repeat the story of a doe that showed the Huns a passage across the Maeotis, the Sea of Azov, upon which they attacked the Goths.[56] As Sandra Wabnitz shows in her contribution, a story of a leading beast (here regarded as animal spirit) is also transmitted in the Chinese Weishu, the chronicle of the 5th/6th-

48 Fredegar, *Chronicle* 3.9, ed. Krusch, 95.

49 Ammianus Marcellinus, 28.5; Orosius, *Historiae Adversus Paganos*, 7.32; Anton. Origo gentis, 238

50 *Passio Sancti Sigismundi Regis* 1, ed. Krusch 333: Tempore Tyberii senioris Augusti […] egressa est gens de insula, quam mare Oceanum cingit, cuius vocabulum est Scanadavia, qui ex vocabulo quoque regionis Scanadavii nuncupati sunt. Cumque alia regna vel regiones mulieribus et prolis suis penetrassent et ad Renum fluvium pervenissent, ibi a iussione Tyberii imperatoris detenti, burgus ultra Renum fluvium per multorum annorum spacia custodire coacti sunt, unde et Burgundofarones nuncupati sunt et usque hodie Burgundiones vocantur.

51 Cf. Kasperski, The origin legend, 142: »Where Procopius places Thule, Jordanes places Scandinavia«.

52 Procopius, *Wars* 6.15, ed. Dewing, vol. 3, 414-425.

53 Jordanes, Getica 3.19-24, ed. Mommsen, 58-59; trans. Van Nuffelen/Van Hoof, 228-232.

54 There is a brief passage in Dexippos, fr. 29, ed. Martin; in which he »offers an account of the origins of the Vandals that is, quite frankly, incredible«, claiming that they had inhabited a region between the ocean and the Roman frontiers that was so huge that it needed a year to cross: David Potter, Dexippos' Gothic anthropology, 359.

55 Jordanes, Getica, ed. Mommsen.

56 Priscus, fr. 1, ed. Blockley, 223-25; Procopius, *Wars* 8, 5, 7-9; Jordanes, *Getica*, 121-26.

century Northern Wei dynasty, for the migration of the Tuoba branch of the Xianbei.[57] Jordanes offers an un-classical explanation for the origin of the Huns: Gothic witches, whom he calls *Haliurunnae*, were expelled and mated with unclean spirits from the steppe.[58] For the Avars, the Byzantines received information about their origins from diplomatic exchanges with the Turks. These contradicted the obvious explanation that the Avars were a part of the Rouran/Avars who had fled after having being defeated by the Turks, and claimed that they were only Pseudo-Avars, and in reality Ogur groups of Var and Chunni who had united and should therefore be called Varchonites.[59] The controversial discussion about this question now seems decided after archaeogenetic analysis has now found substantial east Asian ancestry in hundreds of Avar-period burials in Eastern Central Europe.[60] The spread of Bulgars across several parts of Europe in the seventh century is attributed in Byzantine chronicles to five brothers, each of whom went their separate ways, as discussed in Daniel Ziemann's contribution in the issue.[61]

These examples of people of the period lacking a more elaborate *origo gentis* proper demonstrate that even so, their origins could matter. They did not only concern Roman intellectuals, but also other peoples, for instance Goths (in the case of Huns and Gepids) or Turks (about the Avars).

Origin Legends in the British Isles

In Bede's Ecclesiastic History of the English People, written in the 730s, the main interest is, as the title says, in the conversion of the English and in the development of their Church. Their origin narrative is, therefore, much reduced:

> Then the people of the Angles, or Saxons, being invited by the aforesaid king (Vortigern), arrived in Britain with three long ships, and had a place assigned them to reside in by the same king, in the eastern part of the island, ostensibly to fight on behalf of their country, whilst their real intentions were to conquer it. (…) Those who came over were of three very powerful peoples of Germania – Saxons, Angles, and Jutes. (…) Their first leaders are said to have been two brothers, Hengist and Horsa. Horsa was afterwards killed in battle by the Britons, was buried in the eastern parts of Kent, where a monument, bearing his name, is still in existence. They were the sons of Wihtgisl, whose father was Witta, whose father was Wecta, son of Woden, from whose stock the royal stock of many provinces claimed their descent.[62]

This genealogy of the leaders of the Angles and Saxons goes back to Woden in just five generations; no divine nature or supernatural power is associated with him in Bede's account. The different versions of the migration story in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle/s are all based on the

57 *Weishu* 1.2. see the contribution by Sandra Wabnitz, in this volume

58 Jordanes, *Getica*, 24, ed. Mommsen, 121.

59 Theophylactus Simocatta, 7, 7-8, trans. Whitby; Pohl, *Avars;* Pohl, Kingdoms of the Eurasian Steppe.

60 Gnecchi-Ruscone *et al.*, Ancient Genomes Reveal Trans-Eurasian Connections; Wang, Tobias *et al.*, Ancient DNA Reveals Reproductive Barrier.

61 Nicephorus 21, ed. Mango; Theophanes a. 6171, trans. Mango and Scott, 358.

62 Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.15, ed. Colgrave and Mynors 150-51,

narrative of the arrival of Hengist and Horsa, but also supply further names and genealogies of groups arrived later who had become ancestors of regional dynasties of England: notably, Cerdic and Cynric (Cerdic's son) who came with five ships and founded the kingdom of the West Saxons.[63] As Bede remarks, the dynasties of many kingdoms had originated from Woden's lineage.[64] The god Saxnot, who had also been revered among the Saxons on the continent, featured at the beginning of the genealogies of the kings of Essex, where he was eventually made a son of Woden.[65] Asser's *Life of Alfred* starts with King Alfred's extensive genealogy ascending via Cerdic, Scyld, the founder of the Danish (Scylding) dynasty, Wodan and Geat to Noah and Adam.[66] Asser states that Geat had been venerated as a god by the pagans, but identifies him with Roman »comedy's absurd Geta«, an unusual strategy to neutralise supposedly divine ancestry. A second and briefer genealogy of Alfred's mother follows, with a claim that her grandfather »was descended from the Goths and Jutes«. The Biblical genealogy of the sons of Noah is prefixed to the, formerly pagan, divine descent of the dynasty.

Early medieval origin stories were also told of other peoples in the British Isles, the Britons, the Irish and also the Picts.[67] We have early attestations of origin narratives in British sources, Gildas who probably wrote in the 6th century and the Historia Brittonum, which originated in c. 830; and in several Irish texts, the earliest of about 700, »The Primer of the Poets«, Auraicept na nÉces, and the most inclusive, the 11th-century compilation of the Lebor Gabálae Érenn, »The Book of the Settlement of Ireland«. Many of these texts address the question of origins of several or all peoples in the British Isles (as Bede does). The origin of the Britons was usually attached to the Trojan origin myth of the Romans, and goes back to a certain Brutus, supposed to be a grandson of Aeneas. He was not the kind of eponymous hero to be proud of. As the Historia Brittonum relates, Aeneas had a wizard examine his pregnant daughter-in-law, and the wizard prophesized that this child would kill his mother and father, and be hateful to all men. After this devastating announcement, Aeneas's other son killed the wizard, the mother died in childbirth, and as a boy, Brutus killed his father by accident when he shot an arrow. As a consequence, he was banned from both Italy and Greece, and finally came to Britain which was as yet uninhabited.

The origin of the Irish in the Auraicept begins with the origin of the Irish language, set in the biblical story of the Tower of Babylon and the confusion of languages: »Fénius Farrsaid invented it at Nimrod's tower at the end of ten years after the dispersal from the tower, and it is every one speaking the same language that went from there to his territory and not every one of the same kindred.«[68] It is remarkable that here the criterium of identification explicitly

63 *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 2-5, trans. Swanton.

64 Hengist and Horsa erant autem filii Victigisili, cuius pater Vitta, cuius pater Vecta, cuius pater Voden, de cuius stirpe multarum provinciarum regium genus originem duxit. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.15, ed. Colgrave/Mynors, 50-51, cf. ibid. 2.5, ed. Colgrave/Mynors, 150-151; cf. Dumville, Kingship, Genealogies and Regnal Lists, 79.

65 Dumville, The West Saxon Genealogical Regnal List.

66 Asser, *Life of Alfred*, 1-2, trans. Keynes and Lapidge.

67 Brady, *The Origin Legends of Early Medieval Britain*; Charles-Edwards, Origin legends in Ireland.

68 Charles-Edwards, Origin legends in Ireland; Brady, *Origin Legends of Early Medieval Britain*, 123.

is not kinship and common origin, but the shared language. Most origin narratives that use Old Testament material derive their first ancestor from one of the sons of Noah in the story of the flood, which implies identification by common origin; here, it is language. Already Isidore, in his Etymologies, had connected the origins of the *gentes* with the division of languages, although he also linked them with the sons of Noah.[69]

A different version of Irish origins is first attested in some detail in the *Historia Brittonum*, in which the Irish come from Spain, and not without problems: »Partholon came first with a thousand, men and women, and they grew until they were four thousand, men and women, and a plague came upon them, and in one week they all died, and there remained not one of them. Nemet, son of Agnoman, came second to Ireland, and is said to have sailed over the sea for a year and a half, and then made port in Ireland, by shipwreck, and stayed there many years, and set sail again with his people, and returned to Spain …« At the third attempt, all the people on 30 ships were overwhelmed by the sea after landing, except one ship that had already been shipwrecked, but whose crew had survived. It was their offspring that gradually filled all Ireland, plus later arrivals from Spain.[70] Thomas Charles-Edwards has called this Spanish origin story the »Milesian legend« because in its Irish version the settlers are led by a man called Míl, or in Latin, *miles Hispaniae*, the soldier from Spain.[71]

A ninth-century poet, Máel Muru, produced an integrated version of the Auraicept and the Milesian story, which bridges the gap between the Tower of Babylon and the Spanish origins by extensive overseas travel; Thomas Charles-Edwards summarises it as follows: »When the people of Israel, led by Moses, escaped from Egypt to undertake their long migration across the desert to the land of Canaan, the kindred of Nél grandson of Fénius escaped from Egypt aboard ship, down the Red Sea ›past India, past Asia‹, back to Scythia from where Fénius had come. Subsequently they migrated again to Crete, Sicily, and then to Spain, ready for the final journey across the sea northwards, from Galicia to Ireland.«[72] In the 11th-century *Lebor gabála*, The Book of the Taking of Ireland, the Gaels (Scots) are presented as descendants of Noah's son Japhet and of the Scythians. They arrive in Ireland via the Iberian Peninsula, and encounter first a mysterious woman, who tells them she is also descended from Adam, which prompts further questions about the way she descends from Noah.[73] Among the erudite Irish clerics, the Old Testament and the classical tradition had already become the main resource to answer questions of origin, and to construct evermore complex routes of ancestral *peregrinatio*.

These British and Irish origin legends show that the origins of a people and the deeds of its ancestors did not have to be heroic. They could include long detours, fatal coincidences, terrible prophecies and even an outcast as name-giving ancestor. The Irish and British origin legends are no exception. Romulus, the founder of Rome, killed his own brother Remus when the latter broke the taboo and jumped over the city wall, perhaps an indication that a true

69 Isidore, *Etymologiae* 9.1-2, ed. Lindsay.

70 Brady, *Origin Legends of Early Medieval Britain*, 47.

71 Charles-Edwards, Origin legends in Ireland.

72 Charles-Edwards, Origin legends in Ireland.

73 See also Brady and Wadden, Introduction, 1; Brady, *Origin Legends of Early Medieval Britain,* 58-62.

Roman had to take the necessities of the Roman state more serious than his family bonds.[74] Such negative tones may be surprising because these legends were supposed to be fundamental for the construction of identities. But of course, these identities were most needed in times of hardship, and the stories certainly underlined that in all calamities the forefathers had shown tremendous perseverance and followed their leaders at all costs. The predominantly heroic and positive notes of the Gothic and the Longobard origin stories were not a given. Especially Jordanes, and Cassiodorus before him, were clearly intent to convince their Roman readers of the illustrious role of the Goths throughout history.

Later Origin Narratives

The origins of the Saxons on the continent are elaborated in Rudolf of Fulda's 9th-century *Translatio S. Alexandri* and in Widukind's *Deeds of the Saxons* (10th c.).[75] Rudolf maintains that the Saxons had come to the continent from England, and thus turns the actual migration of the Saxons to Britain on its head. In his narrative, the Saxons had landed on the continent in a place called Haduloha, and later defeated the Thuringians in an alliance with the Frankish king Theuderic to win their land. Widukind underlines that at his time, several opinions existed about Saxon origins: »Opinions about their origin differ, as some believe that the Saxons have their origins from Danes and Normans, but others think, as I have heard someone argue in my youth, that they came from the Greeks, because they say that the Saxons were the remains of the Macedonian army which had followed Alexander the Great, but after his untimely death had been dispersed across the whole world. (…) However, we know for sure that the Saxons have come to this region by ship and had first landed in a place that is still called Hadolaun today.«[76] Then follows the story of their victory over the Thuringians. A multiplicity of stories and variants is not unusual; Jordanes fiercely contradicts a derogatory story about Gothic origins in Britain, which indicates that many people must have believed it.

Later origin stories include the Norman histories by Dudo of Saint-Quentin and William of Jumièges, who derive the Danes from the Dacians = Goths. Dudo moreover equals them with the Danai, the Greeks, but believes that these were the Trojans: an impressive synthesis of the main migration narratives in previous origin stories.[77] In this case, the obvious Scandinavian origins clearly were not enough. Saxo Grammaticus, who wrote a history of the Danes around 1200, briefly mentions Dudo's identification with the Danai, but instead of migration stories, concentrates on genealogy: Humli was the father of Dan and

74 Livy 1,8; Dench, *Romulus' Asylum*.

75 Rudolf of Fulda, *Translatio S. Alexandri* 1, ed. Pertz, 674: Saxonum gens, sicut tradit antiquitas, ab Anglis Britanniae incolis egressa, per Oceanum navigans Germaniae litoribus studio et necessitate quaerendarum sedium appulsa est, in loco qui vocatur Haduloha, eo tempore quo Thiotricus rex Francorum contra Irminfridum generum suum, ducem Thuringorum, dimicans … quibus secum quasi iam pro libertate et patria fortiter dimicantibus, superavit adversarios, vastatisque indigenis et ad internitionem pene deletis, terram eorum iuxta pollicitationem suam victoribus delegavit.

76 Rudolf of Fulda, *Translatio S. Alexandri*, 1-3; Widukind, *Res gestae Saxonicae* 1.2-3, ed. Lohmann; Flierman, *Saxon Identities*.

77 Dudo, *De moribus et actis primorum Normanniae ducum*, 1.1-2: 129–30; see Plassmann, *Origo gentis*: 248-51; William of Jumièges, *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, 3-4, vol. 1: 14-17 (less interested in the Danai).

Angul, from whom Danes and English sprang, and grandfather of Skiold, name-giver of the Danish dynasty.[78]

In the 12th and 13th centuries, the origins of the new Christian polities in eastern Europe appear in histories whose authors knew a lot about biblical and/or classical and early medieval origin stories: Nestor in the *Primary Chronicle* of the Rus', Cosmas for the Czechs, Gallus for the Poles and the Anonymous Master P for the Hungarians.[79] The Primary Chronicle begins with one of the most extensive Old-Testament-based genealogies of peoples in medieval historiography. Then it claims that the Slavs came from Pannonia, which relies on the Lives of Constantine and Methodius who gave the impulse to Slavic literacy. Only then it switches to the Poljane and other Slavic tribes in the core area of the Kievan Rus'.[80]

Cosmas tells the story of a group of migrants, of unknown name, unknown origin, and unknown number, who arrive in an empty land of plenty, Bohemia, which is named after their leader about whom we hear little apart from his name.[81] It is remarkable that the author shows little interest in the origin of this people, let alone of the Slavs in general, or in telling a heroic story about migration and conquest. Cosmas was a cultured cleric educated in Flanders, with a deep admiration for the Roman Empire of his time, who had to represent the interests of the papal and imperial church in a less than stable polity on its border. The search for origins did not necessarily have to reach far back into the past, to Greeks, Trojans or Scandinavians – sometimes a simple »nobody knows anything« could end in a real success: The story that Cosmas created about the arrival of the nobodies from nowhere proved so powerful that it survived without any changes until the dawn of modernity in the duchy and later kingdom of Bohemia.

The first Polish Chronicle by the so-called Gallus Anonymus was even less interested in the origins of the Poles, but only in the beginnings of their dynasty.[82] To fill this gap, late medieval historiography reformulated Cosmas' story about the not-really-exciting conquest of Bohemia so that it could also provide a suitable origin story for neighbouring countries: according to this, Lech and Rus, two brothers of Bohemus/Czech, leader of the newcomers into pristine Bohemia, migrated further and occupied the areas north and east of Bohemia, Poland and Rus. The new Christian polities, Poland and Bohemia, also shared the second part of the origin story, about the beginnings of rule – both tell the story of a leader who, from the humblest of circumstances, rises to the highest dignity through the will of the people (which might build on the Gallus story in the Polish case). In the case of the first Bohemian duke, Przemysl, his claim is legitimised by his magical connection with nature, which identifies him as a hero – his name, translated from West Slavic-Czech into Latin, can mean Prometheus. So, Greek origins do appear after all, albeit only as a well-hidden linguistic joke. Cosmas,

78 Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 1, vol. 1: 18-21. Humli reminds one of Hulmul, son of Gapt, in Jordanes' Genalogy in the Getica.

79 Garipzanov (ed.), *Historical Narratives*. For this and the following, Pohl, Borri and Wieser (eds.), *Historiography & Identity* 5; Pohl, Historiography of the New Europe.

80 *Nestor Chronicle,* 1-27, ed. Müller 1-6; Tolochko, Creating Time; Ostrowski, The debate, 450-84.

81 Cosmas of Prague, *History of the Czechs*, 1.3-4; Wolverton, Cosmas; Rychterová, The Legenda Christiani.

82 Dalewski, Creating Dynastic Identity.

trained in Liège at one of the best cathedral schools in the Empire, found ways to display his literary skills.

Legendary origin narratives of the Hungarians from an outside perspective start, within years after their establishment in the Carpathian Basin (c. 900), in the *Chronicle* of Regino of Prüm, among others, with an etymological speculation deriving their name from the German word for hunger, because they had been forced to migrate by a famine.[83] At the tenth-century court in Constantinople, Constantine Porphyrogenitus collected rich material from the archives, including several origin narratives of Eastern European peoples, including Serbs, Croats, Chazars and, not least, the Hungarians, whom he calls Turks.[84] He mentions ancestral tribes, the names of former homelands and of early rulers, which may be based on recorded information. In Hungary itself, texts about origins are only transmitted from the 12th century in the *Deeds of the Hungarians* by the anonymous notary P, and sometime later, by Simon of Kéza.[85] These narratives mostly build on ancient legends about the arrival of the Scythians and Huns (led across the Sea of Azov by a doe), they may contain double immigration (Huns return east and come back as Hungarians), and include the identification with the apocalyptic riders of the Bible, Gog and Magog, as in Isidore's Gothic history. In the origin stories of the new Christian kingdoms, mostly written centuries after their foundation, adapting to biblical, classical and previous models of ethnic origin legends seems to have been the main concern. We may wonder whether pre-Christian myths about the origins of one's own community were not accessible, or of little value to most authors. Rather, these narratives represent transnational dialogues about the origins of a multiplicity of ethnic or regional groups, and the prestigious position that each of them could occupy in this varied world of *gentes* and kingdoms.

Shared Ontologies and Discursive Shifts in Origin Narratives

Conceptual Problems

Conceptualizing differences between our mindset and that of the people who told stories about ethnic origins as divergent »ontologies«, as sketched in the introduction, is a precarious enterprise. Yet as the introduction has argued, it could help us to overcome the juxtaposition between »authentic tradition« and »literary creation«. First, we need to differentiate. »Ontology« describes what a society regards as existent or non-existent, and thus also what can be regarded as possible elements in a narrative. »Epistemology« regards what we can and what we should know, and how we can find out whether it is true or at least credible. »Discourse« circumscribes all that is being said in a society, and how these statements or texts are related to each other. That can be categorised as a whole set of discourses in different social fields or textual genres. Discourses validate ontologies and epistemologies, but are also shaped on them, and depend on powers that control discourses – anything between

83 Cf. Regino of Prüm, *Chronicon*, a. 889.

84 Constantin Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio* 38, trans. Moravcsik and Jenkins, 170-75.

85 Anonymus, *The Deeds of the Hungarians*; Simon of Kéza, *Gesta Hungarorum*; Veszprémy, Christian Identity.

parents telling a child what not to say, and the Spanish inquisition that bans a whole set of discursive elements as heretical.

First of all, this distinction regards our own research: It makes a difference whether we doubt that we can make valid statements about things in the past, which is an epistemological question; or whether we deny that these things existed, which in an ontological assessment. It has become mainstream to assume that what origin narratives can tell us is only what those who wrote them believed, and nothing about the actual origins of a people.[86] That is a plausible epistemological doubt. Many also claim that these peoples did not really exist, but were only constructed; consequently, origin narratives cannot contain any meaningful knowledge or tradition. and not what those who had transmitted such narratives had known or thought about that. That is an ontological claim.[87] Tracing the uses of the past at the time of writing, and later during the transmission of the written text is indeed a valuable approach. But the texts we have are clearly multi-layered, and far from being consistent narratives that can be attributed to one author. For instance, Jordanes blends classical traditions about Scythians and Dacians and the topos of Scandinavian origins with a set of information unknown from previous written texts. Paul the Deacon couches the distinctively non-ethnographic story how the Longobards got their name into motifs from the Bible. According to Paul, King Lamissio had been abandoned as a baby, found and adopted at court, similar to Moses, and fights the Amazons taken from classical mythology).[88] Cosmas merges the Biblical story of Moses with Greek mythology in classical Latin disguise with local narratives. Such elements and changes in the texts can be traced in the manuscript transmission of a text, but also be made plausible through the analysis of a transmitted text.

What Herwig Wolfram defined as »pre-ethnographic« or »non-ethnographic« information, unattested in the rich body of classical ethnography, should not simply be dismissed.[89]

It is clear that the romantic and nationalistic reconstructions of »authentic« myths ignored the Roman and Christian framing of the transmitted texts, and they have been sufficiently disproven. However, Roman construction of »barbarian« origin narratives is not a sufficient hypothesis to explain all elements in them, Roman ethnography represents an imperial discourse of the »Other«, but it had to rely on discursive elements of these others (the same point could be made about Chinese perceptions of nomads).[90] We can understand some of the process in which these elements were integrated if we distinguish between the Roman ethnographic tradition, the Christian framing and the indigenous elements preserved in the Latin texts, without reifying these different backgrounds. The texts were written down in a context in which the despised »barbarians« had grabbed power, and they handled the balance between the divergent discourses in rather different ways. In a Christian and mostly post-Roman context, these narratives manoeuvred along a Roman-barbarian and a Christian-pagan axis.

86 Brady and Wadden, Introduction, 15.

87 Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making*.

88 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, 1, 9-10, ed. Bethmann and Waitz 54-55.

89 Wolfram, Origo gentis, 174.

90 Cf. Skaff, *Sui-Tang China*.

The Christian/pagan and the Roman/barbarian binaries represent the schemes of alterity in which perceived religious and cultural differences between humans were expressed in the period. There are many reasons why the actual diversity in these fields cannot be reduced to these binaries. After all, the authors were either descendants of barbarians who had received a thorough Roman education, or educated Romans who catered to the interests of a ruling elite of barbarian background. Therefore, these juxtapositions are unhelpful in an analysis of origin narratives. The reconstructions of authentic »Germanic« myth that older research proposed were inadequate not because these narratives were in fact Roman ethnographic fantasies, as recent researchers have believed, but because the assumption of an authentic layer of Germanic culture relied on the heavily-ideologised binary model of Romans vs. barbarians.[91] The same assumption was still at the basis of the positivist/deconstructionist critique, and was the reason why it sought to refute the entire complex of possibly »Germanic« and »ethnic« elements in these narratives and attributed it all to Roman ethnographic fantasy.[92] Pushing binary schemes to their extremes is unhelpful. It is a more productive approach to explore the entire range of differences in the origin stories. These narratives were not immutable traditions, but moving targets, and we can get glimpses of how they moved through time.

Shared Ontologies

If we adopt the criterion of differing ontologies, we note that many basic assumptions about what can be real and what cannot, are shared between Roman and non-Roman narratives. This observation has to be handled with care because Christian authors with classical education tended to regard non-Roman »paganism« through the lens of Graeco-Roman religion. However, they would hardly have been capable of inventing stories featuring Germanic names and divinities simply using concepts familiar from classical paganism, and it is unlikely that they would have wanted to, given that their intention was to keep such stories under control or get rid of them altogether. On the other hand, we should not underestimate the creativity of the individual authors. From the 11th and 12th centuries, we have evidence of a rather light-hearted approach to various »pagan« traditions. It is of course possible that this is due to the fact that it was already considered a distant past by many authors, which had completely lost its threatening potential in a fully Christianised Europe. Nevertheless, we should remain vigilant.

The shared ontological assumptions include the existence of supernatural beings in general and of a plurality of divinities in particular. These gods or divine entities are imagined as anthropomorphous and often behave like humans. The home story of Wodan and Frea in which she tricks him into giving victory to the Winnili is a case in point.[93] They have supernatural powers, can intervene in human affairs, for instance give victory or punish, but they are also prone to deception or failure of their designs. What was particular for ancient Western Eurasia was the extent to which local and regional deities were translatable into each other. That worked not only between Greek and Roman gods, but also included correspondences

91 Von See, *Deutsche Germanenideologie.*

92 Gillett (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity*; Pohl, Debating ethnicity.

93 *Origo gentis Langobardorum* 1, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 2.

with Celtic and Germanic deities, for instance, between Jupiter and Dolichenus or Thor, between Mercury and Wodan, or between Venus and Freya, as still evidenced in the names of the days of the week (Giovedí = Thursday, Venerdí = Friday).

Apart from gods populating Olympus or the Old-Norse Walhall, there was an intermediate sphere in which humans could be deified or divine beings become human or have human offspring, as in the genealogies of the Amals or of the Angles. In this supernatural twilight zone, »*semidei*« (half-gods) moved, such as the *ansis*, the Gothic ancestors presented by Jordanes, whose name corresponds to the divine kindred of the *Aesir* of Norse mythology.[94] This middle ground between gods and humans also allowed Christian authors to eventually demote »pagan« gods to humans. In the Fredegar Chronicle, a version of the story how the Longobards got their name contains a comment that it is impossible that humans (such as Wodan) can give victory.[95] This realm of supernatural beings on earth also includes witches (such as the Gothic *haliurunnae*), demons and evil spirits (with whom the Gothic witches mate), and white sorceresses who marry the chosen ruler and legitimize his new standing, as in Cosmas' story of Libussa. Yet the evidence of the continental origin myths hardly matches the great variety of giants, ogres, trolls, dwarves and other mostly unpleasant beings that the mythological ontology of the sagas offers.

Animals and human-animal beings also move in the supernatural sphere of which we get glimpses in the early medieval origin narratives. After the name-giving episode, Paul the Deacon inserts a story in which the Longobards pretend to have dog-headed *cynocephali* in their ranks, who drink the blood of their enemies.[96] Another case is the *bestia Neptuni*, some kind of Quinotaurus, a sea-monster that features as Merovech's possible father in the Fredegar Chronicle.[97] Both monsters are inspired by classical mythology, have (if garbled) Greek names and may be ethnographic ascriptions, although that was always debated. A Germanic folk etymology of the name Merovech could be »sea beast«, and the Fredegar story could well be read as an ironic defamation of the Merovingians.[98] Again, shared ontologies eased the mythological transfer. Animals could also behave like humans or interact with them in miraculous ways, for instance, leading animals such as the doe that led the Huns across the Maeotis.[99] Wolves feature a lot in origin stories, although we have no hints to humans born or reared by wolves, as in the Turkic and the Roman origin myths.[100] Paul the Deacon recounts how his ancestor was led out of Avar captivity by a wolf as a »god-given« guide; when he eventually tried to kill it, it disappeared, and was replaced by the vision of a (surely holy)

94 Simek, *Lexikon der nordischen Mythologie*; Wolfram, Origo and religio.

95 Fredegar, *Chronicle*, 3, 65, ed. Krusch, 110.

96 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 1, 11, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 53: Simulant, se in castris suis habere cynocephalos, id est canini capitis homines. Divulgant apud hostes, hos pertinaciter bella gerere, humanum sanguinem bibere.

97 Fredegar, *Chronicle,* 3,9, ed. Krusch 95.

98 Wood, Fredegar's fables; Murray, Post vocantur Merohingii.

99 See above, p. 17.

100 See the contribution by Sandra Wabnitz, in this issue.

man.[101] In the late Roman/early medieval period, »wolf« in personal names was particularly frequent both in Latin (Lupus) and in Germanic languages (names on -*wulf*).

Christian ontology coincided with the classical one in assuming supernatural agency and the possibility of interceding with the divine, but diverged in some important respects. The supernatural was now rigorously divided between the one God and his beneficial workings, directly or through angels and saints, and the wide range of satanic and demonic forces which could be ascribed to the devil. This strictly dualistic model meant that any supernatural agency by pagan divinities could only be due to demonic forces and diabolic deceit. An easier way to integrate pre-Christian gods into Christian ontology was to regard them as human beings that had falsely been regarded as divinities, which was convenient in genealogies. Christian authors, such as Fredegar or Asser, reminded their audience that Wodan or Geat had »*fanatice*« been venerated as gods.[102] As all early medieval authors who wrote down ethnic origin narratives since the sixth century were Christians, and often clerics, it is remarkable that traces of pre-Christian ontologies were transmitted at all.

Epistemological Tensions and Discursive Elements

On the level of epistemology, the issues are what we can know, how we can know it, and how knowledge can be structured. Characteristically, myth is assertive and follows a different kind of programme of truth which does not require proofs or arguments for its veracity.[103] In historiography, by contrast, debates about the truthfulness of an account were and are frequent, and »effects de verité« and attempts to enhance the credibility of a text are already frequent in ancient and medieval historiography.[104] Myths regarded as essential for self-identification and cultural habitus can be subjected to codification to guarantee their authenticity, such as the Hebrew Bible or the Bhagavad-Gita. In the early medieval *origines gentium*, at least in their written form, we can rather see modification at work. On the other hand, it is also remarkable that some clearly pre-Christian lore is transmitted intact. The story how the Longobards got their name may also have been codified because the text had been attached as a preamble to codices of Longobard law.[105]

In most cases, however, the mythical passages in the *origines gentium* were subjected to a different epistemology, or »regime of historicity«.[106] One of the issues here was the transition from oral to written transmission of texts and information, as we can gather from a number of comments, which represent a whole range of different attitudes to the reliability of oral information. »Early songs« of the Goths can support claims of reliability, but written information can also be preferable to »old womens« tales.[107] Mythological truth programmes

101 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 4, 37, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 131.

102 Fredegar, *Chronicle* 3.65, ed. Krusch, 110; Asser, *Life of Alfred*, 1-2.

103 Veyne, *Did the Greeks believe in their myths?*

104 Pohl, Historiography and Identity: Methodological Reflections.

105 Pohl, History in fragments; Dilcher, Mythischer Ursprung.

106 Hartog, *Régimes de l'historicité*.

107 Jordanes, *Getica,* 4.28, 5.38, ed. Mommsen, 61 and 64; see also 5.43, 14.79, ed. Mommsen, 65 and 76; Pohl, Narratives of Origin.

allowed for ambiguities and contradictions; but when the decision between alternatives mattered in a certain context, »fables« could easily be discredited.

The next question is how information was structured, and which type of knowledge was deemed important in the context of origin narratives. First, it was essential to know where a people had come from; hardly any of the passages in our source texts, however fragmentary they may be, do not mention any region of origin, with the notable exception of Cosmas of Prague who seems to play with the expectations of his audience, a handful of well-educated churchmen who knew very well what a proper origin story should look like, and which questions it should answer. Informed by centuries of historiographical narratives, they derived their pleasure from the intellectual game of persiflage. Otherwise, the interest in locating the country of origin seems to have been common ground between the Romans and the *gentes*, and information about it often came embedded in Roman geographical interests and information, or was substituted by it. The »topos *origo*«, as Dieter Timpe called it, addressed »where from« to disclose »who« someone was, and gave access to a rich body of geographically-structured ethnographic knowledge piled up since the day of Herodotus.[108] For instance, »Scythia« connected Goths or others with the ethnography of the Pontic steppes, and with an ethnographic umbrella category still called by the name of the ancient Scythians. »Scandinavia« conjured up images of a cold land with fertile inhabitants which made it a veritable source of new peoples. However, unlike for Scythia, there was no ethnic category of »Scandinavians« that would have been used for immigrants. There was a multitude of peoples in and from Scandinavia (as listed by Ptolemaeus or Jordanes, among others), but no umbrella term for them.[109]

The category of »Germani« had long been closely linked to the Germania, and Tacitus had remarked shortly after 100 CE that the Germani were autochthonous, because nobody would have wanted to migrate to their inhospitable country.[110] Yet since the fifth century, it was not used as an ethnographic umbrella term any more to describe the contemporary ethnic landscape; and the Germania of Tacitus was almost forgotten.[111] Considering that most peoples who settled in the Western Empire actually came from Germania, directly or indirectly, it is striking how rarely origin from there is explicitly stated in migration narratives. Even though sixth-century Greek authors (such as Procopius) often equated the Franks with the Germani of old, the Franks (or Western authors in general) never appropriated this obvious identification. Authors of the sixth to eighth centuries give them all more distant places of origin. Paul the Deacon says that the Longobards were descended from the Germani, but then identifies Scandinavia as their country of origin.[112] Ironically, Fredegar, in his summary of the Longobard name-giving story, locates Scandinavia »between the Danube and the Ocean«, that is in Germania, from where the Longobards entered Pannonia and defeated the Huns.[113]

---

108 Timpe, Ethnologische Begriffsbildung; Hartog, *Le miroir d'Hérodote*.

109 *Claudii Ptolemaei Geographia*, ed. Nobbe; Jordanes, *Getica* 4, 25.

110 Tacitus, *Germania* 2.

111 Jankuhn and Timpe, *Beiträge*; Pohl, *Germanen*, 2-7

112 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 1, 1, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 48.

113 Fredegar, *Chronicae*, 3, 65, ed. Krusch, 110: Scathanavia, que est inter Danuvium et mare Ocianum.

Geographical indications in Latin origin stories, then, clearly were or had become part of a Roman epistemology; and they only made sense in the context of a rather broad and detailed knowledge of geography and the ethnosphere that enveloped them in past and present, as transmitted in numerous lists and geographical digressions.[114] That does not mean that we could not find traces of a different epistemology in them. The *Origo gentis Langobardorum* contains several Germanic place names marking the stages of Longobard migrations (and Paul the Deacon adds a few more): from Scoringa and Mauringa via Anthaib, Bainaib and Burgundaib up to Rugiland and the *feld*, field.[115] The only name that we can locate both in space and time is the »land of the Rugians« north of the Danube in what is now Lower Austria, from where the Rugians had been expelled by Odoacer's army in 487.[116] Yet even if we cannot make sense of all the other names (are they references to the lands of the Antae, Boii/Baiuvarii and Burgundians?)[117], and probably Paul the Deacon could not locate them either, they must have made sense to somebody sometime, before they were incorporated into a Latin text. It is a precious fragment of an indigenous epistemology of migration, which would indicate that population movement was not understood as a transfer from an original homeland to a new permanent settlement area, but as a gradual process with many intermediate stages, or, alternatively, incorporating rather different ideas of where parts of the migrants had come from.

At the beginning of the Gothic and Longobard migration route as set out in the *Origo gentis Langobardorum*, there is Scandinavia, a well-known ethnographic term; this is why scholars, beginning with Rolf Hachmann, have mostly distrusted it.[118] However, a new type of evidence has reopened the question. Recent archaeogenetic surveys have found a substantial Scandinavian component that arrived in Pannonia around 500 CE.[119] We also have evidence of a Scandinavian component along the lower Vistula River in the first centuries of our era, where the Gutones were supposed to live.[120] This genetic element does not warrant the claim that »the« Longobards and »the« Goths came from Scandinavia. Notably, neither the archaeological nor the linguistic evidence point to a Scandinavian background for the sixth-century Longobards, and none of the hundreds of personal names known from Italy is typically old-Norse.[121] In the Longobard case, it is also as yet unclear whether the Scandinavian gene-flow had already arrived in southern Jutland and northern Saxony around the turn of the common era and moved on from there later, which would fit the historical sources about Longobards along the lower Elbe in the 1st century CE, or whether the genetic evidence rather pointed

114 Liccardo; *Old Names, New Peoples*; Merrills, *History and Geography*.

115 *Origo gentis Langobardorum* 2, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 2; Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 1, 13, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 54.

116 Eugippius, *Vita Severini* 44, ed. Nüsslein, 117-19.

117 Gerhard Köbler, Germanisches und gotisches Wörterbuch, translates langobard *aib as district, *pagus* (accessed on 26 Jan 2026: https://www.koeblergerhard.de/germ+got/germ+got17742abs20140325.htm),.

118 Hachmann, *Die Goten und Skandinavien*. But see Wolfram, *Goten*, 47-49, with the hypothesis that a Longobard core group had come from Scandinavia.

119 Tian, Koncz *et al.*, The role of emerging elites.

120 McColl, Kroonen *et al.*, Steppe ancestry in Western Eurasia.

121 Pohl, Migration, Ethnogenese, Archäogenetik.

to some Scandinavian influx to the continent in the 5th century CE. However that may be, it would be a strange coincidence that the two peoples for which we have a clear statement of Scandinavian origin in writing also happened to have a substantial Scandinavian component in the genome, attested in the genetic analysis of hundreds of samples, without any connection between the two types of evidence. Does that mean that the two origin myths actually preserved genuine cultural memories transmitted for over half a millennium in both cases? In the case of the Goths, Cassiodorus or Jordanes could have relied on information about the names of peoples inhabiting Scandinavia, among which Procopius lists Gauti and Jordanes Ostrogoths.[122] However, in neither of these quite extensive lists do we find the Longobards or Winnili, and it is unlikely that the author of the Latin *Origo gentis Langobardorum* had access to further written material. He could have had the idea from Jordanes; but Jordanes wrote *Scandza*, the Origo *Scadanan*, Fredegar *Scathanavia*, Paul the Deacon *Scadinavia*, whereas Procopius used *Thule* throughout, so that a common written source for these tales of Scandinavian origins seems unlikely.

The question when the primordial events happened features much less in the narratives. When it occurs, the chronology is clearly derived from Graeco-Roman epistemology.[123] Yet not even Paul the Deacon, author of a Roman history, connected the story of Longobard migration with the repeated mentions of Longobards in the early imperial age. The epistemology of myth does not require a transparent chronological frame. It accommodates floating gaps – and that also applies to the »Romanate« Trojan origins of the Franks, in which the more than 1500 years between the Priam and Clovis are bridged with very little pertinent information.

The main structural tools in the origin narratives (and in their wider textual environment) to develop a temporal dimension are king lists and genealogies. Both are also familiar in classical epistemology. Which of these two related instruments are used is also of interest. Traditional research assumed that genealogies were a Germanic form of social memory, whereas list of rulers or magistrates were a typically Roman concern.[124] However, it is more complicated than that. Early medieval genealogies abound in England and Ireland, and (in later transmission) in Scandinavia, and many of them contain the names of pagan divinities. As mentioned above, biblical pedigrees were attached before the pagan ones. In a similar manner, Snorri Sturlusson later projected the origin of the Norse gods back to the Creation and the Flood.[125] Connecting genealogies to the sons of Noah and the Old-Testament succession back to Adam was also current in Islam.[126] In Abu'l-Fazl's Akbarnama (the Life of Akbar),

122 Prokop, *Bella,* 6, 15, ed. Dewing, vol. 3, 414-425; Jordanes, *Getica* 3, 19-24, ed. Mommsen 58-59; trans. Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, 228-232.

123 Inserting the Scythian and Dacian prehistory into the Gothic origin narratives placed it within the tight temporal grid provided by the Eusebius-Jerome Chronicle. That corresponded with the explicit intention of Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 9.25, ed. Fridh 379, to «turn Gothic origins into Roman history«. The settlement of the Burgundians is dated under Tiberius, and Frankish encounters with the Romans also locate this stage of their supposed wanderings within a Roman imperial timeframe.

124 Scheibelreiter, Genealogie.

125 Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, Gylfaginning 8, trans. Byock 16-17.

126 Borst, *Turmbau von Babel*.

for instance, Türk was inserted as Japhet's eldest son, and Mughul Khan, the ancestor of the Mughal dynasty, appeared as his fifth descendant.[127]

We have only few long genealogies from the post-Roman kingdoms.[128] The most elaborate one is the 17-generation genealogy of Theodoric's dynasty, the Amals, as related by Jordanes.[129] A list of 17 Longobard kings also appears in the Prologue of King Rothari's Edict (issued in 643); the *Origo gentis Langobardorum* adds genealogical information, dynastic names and, quite untypically, names of royal consorts.[130] Interestingly, both Jordanes and Paul the Deacon, who relate Gothic/Longobard royal king lists/genealogies, also provide genealogical information about their own families.[131] Genealogies were, however, scarce in the Frankish kingdoms. The person in Merovingian Gaul about whose kin we know more than about anyone else's (apart from the Merovingians) is Bishop Gregory of Tours, who mentions his senatorial ancestry and was proud of the many bishops that had sprung from his kindred. Yet we have to reconstruct his genealogical knowledge from his writings.[132] A momentous change in family remembrance did happen in the late- and post-Roman world in the course of Christianisation: the ancestor cult that was the duty of each *pater familias* faded out, and eventually the memory of the deceased was delegated to monasteries and other Christian institutions. A second momentous change was the disappearance of the naming system of the *tria nomina*, the tripartite Roman personal names, in which the second was the name of the *gens*, the kin group (for instance, the *gens Iulia* in Gaius Iulius Caesar). In the 6th century, even high-status Romans in the Frankish kingdom were simply called Lupus or Mummolus in the sources. All that changed the epistemology of relatedness, and must have had an impact on personal identities.

The Franks seem to have adapted to this relatively low-key and informal representation of kinship and personal distinctions. The name of the Merovingian dynasty is mentioned only once in the Fredegar Chronicle (c. 670), and its king lists contain no genealogical information. The first, and relatively short genealogy of the Carolingian family was compiled by none other than Paul the Deacon in his history of the Bishops of Metz, for one of them had been an ancestor of Charlemagne.[133] The dynastonym appeared even later in the sources. What differed between the northern European and the less profuse continental genealogies was not the importance of noble families, but the importance of remembering all individual ancestors as far back as possible. Proof of ancient nobility was only one function of a long pedigree. In many societies it was more important that each ancestor could connect one's own kindred to another one, and shared ancestors might constitute or reinforce bonds between families, help mitigating conflicts and negotiating support and solidarity.

---

127 *The Akbar nama of Abu-l-Fazl*, trans. Beveridge, vol. 1, 168-170.

128 Pohl, Genealogy.

129 Jordanes, *Getica* 14.79-81, ed. Mommsen.

130 Pohl, Narratives of Origin.

131 Jordanes, *Getica,* 266, trans. Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, 345; Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 4, 37, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 131.

132 Wood, Individuality of Gregory of Tours.

133 Paulus Diaconus, *Liber de Episcopis Mettensibus*, ed. and transl. Kempf; Kempf, Introduction.

A further discursive element in at least some European origin narratives, and one that is largely absent from Roman discourses of origin, is female agency. In the Longobard origin story, the Winnili are led by a wise woman, Gambara, who appeals to Frea; the goddess is the one who can really grant victory by outwitting Wodan. The bearded warriors on the battlefield are in fact the women, whose appearance are the true reasons why a male sexual feature is chosen as an ethnonym. This is one instance of what Patrick Geary has called »women at the beginning«.[134] Another famous case is Libussa, the female leader of the first Czechs in the origin legend told by Cosmas of Prague.[135] Hers is a golden age, until the Czechs demand that Libussa should marry a man who would then become their duke. Scholars have often seen a faint memory of an early matriarchate in these narratives, but that may go too far. However, it is clear that female power and wisdom in ancient times must have seemed perfectly plausible to authors and audiences of these stories. Both Paul the Deacon's and Cosmas's accounts also contain passages of a later battle in which martial women were defeated by men, as the Amazons were by King Lamissio.[136]

Some Conclusions

The phenomenological approach developed by Waldenfels, set out in the introduction of this volume, enables us to formulate a paradox.[137] Seen from an enlightened scholarly perspective, supernatural origins, divine ancestors or animal agency can only be constructions because they do not belong to any demonstrable empirical reality. Our modern ontology forbids classing them as real. Seen from a premodern ontology, however, this part of origin narratives represents the ontological sphere to which human agency, rational construction and conscious formation of communities have no access. It explains what otherwise cannot be explained. If we want to follow Waldenfels, they express the confrontation with the alien that is prior to human purpose and understanding.[138] This is why myths are an interesting, but very difficult object of study. In modern times, myths have been most attractive as objects of study in periods of counter-enlightenment, irrationalism, and historicism – in the Romantic Age of the first half of the19th century, and in the reactionary movements of the first half of the 20th century. The early 21st century was still dominated by a contrary tendency, the effort to deconstruct myths, grand narratives and romantic fictions. But a new irrationalism already seems to be spreading, and not only on the far right. Irrationalism will not be stopped by embracing irrational epistemologies, but understanding them may help.

Why are the early medieval European origin myths interesting? Some of the Asian texts treated in this volume are more »mythological« and contain more material on religious beliefs (if we want to call them «religious«), supernatural beings and animal-spirits. In Europe, the rare supernatural traces occur in the early stages of the migration narratives or of genealogies. They are often accompanied by question marks or disclaimers: no facts, just fables; no

134 Cf. Geary, *Women at the Beginning*; Pohl, Gender and Ethnicity.

135 Cosmas, *Chronicle*, ed. Bak and Rychterová; Rychterová, The Legenda Christiani.

136 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 1, 15, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 55.

137 Pohl, Rychtervorá and Reimitz, Challenges of interpretation.

138 Waldenfels, *Bruchlinien*.

real cynocephali, just a bluff; no god in the genealogy, just a ridiculous figure from Roman comedy; and no real monster as ancestor, just an ironic slander. Still, the traces of non-Christian mythology in Christian texts were hardly made up by the people who wrote them down; rather, they point to cultural memories maintained by non-Christian or syncretistic milieus in which these stories mattered, so that many Latin authors would not leave them out even if they disagreed with the implications. It is perhaps no coincidence that the most consistent traces of indigenous beliefs are found in the Longobard kingdom, where in 613, King Agilulf still refused to convert; as Saint Columbanus wrote to the pope, the king had stated that he would believe if he knew for sure what to believe. Little wonder, because Catholics, Arians and Three-Chapter dissenters disagreed about the right creed.[139]

The origin myths do not only provide clues to the functions and meanings of origin narratives at the time when they were written down, but also allow reconstructing a process in which Christian ontology gradually marginalised pre-Christian, »pagan« motifs and narratives. Most likely, writing down the origin stories in Latin already represented an advanced stage in this process. We do not know what Agilulf believed instead of believing what Catholics wanted him to believe; most likely that was already a syncretistic mix. It is unlikely that the creeds and cults of his ancestors had completely vanished. Probably, Wodan played a role, perhaps assimilated to the Christian almighty god in a similar way as the Prose Edda had morphed Odin into the role of the All-Father, the »highest and oldest of the gods«, although that contradicts other information in the Edda about his late birth and vulnerability.[140] This contradiction points to a fundamental difference between Christian and »pagan« epistemology: Christianity propagated an absolute, revealed truth about god, and required firm belief in a detailed formula about his characteristics, as established at the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Wodan was much more elusive, a warrior, a priest and a prophet, a god or a man, descended from giants, a mortal hero, cunning and sometimes dangerous, at the centre of a wide range of stories. To fit into a Christian narrative, he can easily be pictured as a man, but his supernatural qualities remain a threat.

The extensive Nordic material, put into writing centuries after Christian conversion, is in contrast to what remains from indigenous myths in continental Europe. It is comprehensible that earlier scholars used second-millennium Old Norse mythology to reconstruct a first-millennium Germanic one. Some elements indeed coincide, and migration-period archaeological evidence (gold bracteates, animal style decorations, runic inscriptions) provides further indications.[141] But overall, the written traces are too few to re-establish a consistent Germanic religion or culture. In the origin stories, king lists and genealogies, almost all the names are Germanic, so they had a Germanic linguistic and cultural background. But as we have seen, a neat categorisation of »Germanic« vs. »Roman« cultural elements would be misleading. Roman and ancient Germanic creeds were based on shared ontologies and epistemologies from the start, they were to an extent translatable into each other and had been

139 Columbanus, Ep. 5, ed. Walker, 44: fertur enim dixisse, si certum sciret, et ipse crederet.

140 Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, Gylfaginning 3, trans. Byock, 11.

141 Hauck, Carmina Antiqua. In his many studies »Zur Ikonographie der Goldbrakteaten«, he interpreted their motifs in the light of the Icelandic sagas. See also *idem*, Bilddenkmäler zur Religion.

in dialogue and under mutual observation for centuries. This cultural continuum was only shattered by Christianisation, which devoted intensive efforts to imposing new ontologies of the supernatural. These efforts had a spectacular success in most contexts, and as a result, the traces of pre-Christian mythology are scarce on the European continent. Moreover, Christianity also offered alternative ways to legitimise ethnic identifications and the rule of *gentes* over the post-Roman kingdoms. The Old Testament provided a model for divine election of one people, whereas the New Testament required that the gospel should be taught to all *gentes*.[142] This could give a providential meaning to the fact that the Western Roman Empire had been replaced by a plurality of kingdoms with ethnic designations, and on the special grace of God to which each of them should aspire.

This was the context in which ethnic origin narratives were written down in early medieval Europe. Power had been transferred from the Roman Empire to post-Roman kingdoms governed by a military elite of barbarian origin. They employed a number of strategies of distinction to set themselves apart from similar elite groups, and from the majority population of former Roman provinces.[143] At the same time, a forceful process of Christianisation eliminated the public performance of what the Christians regarded as »pagan« cults and creeds. This created a complex field of tension in which the narratives were put into writing. What we could expect to find are narratives that explained the origins of the new ruling groups, and provided legitimising accounts of their distant origins, supernatural background, divine election, ancient lineages and military prowess. What we have is somewhat less than that: some of the kingdoms, the Ostrogoths and the Longobards, produced origin narratives that could tick several of these boxes, although the texts we have (Jordanes and Paul the Deacon) were only produced soon after the fall of the kingdoms. Some made do with a rather brief migration narrative supplemented by genealogies rooted in divine ancestors (Angles and Saxons). Some appropriated classical narratives blended with some additional elements (Franks and, again, Ostrogoths). Some reduced their early history to Biblical motifs (the Visigoths). Some could only rely on late speculations (Burgundians, continental Saxons), and for some, we have no early medieval origin narrative at all (Vandals, Alamans, Bavarians).

All these stories are transmitted in the tension field between indigenous myth, imperial ethnographic tradition and Christian ré-écriture. The present issue offers the opportunity of wide-range Eurasian comparison. The two contributions by Julia C. Schneider and Sandra Wabnitz raise the issue of an exclusively Chinese written transmission of the origin myths of Turks and Jurchen. The imperial-barbarian dichotomy also shapes (although not necessarily invalidate) our sources about barbarians as long as Roman authors wrote about barbarians. The imperial gaze at uncivilised neighbours did not disappear when barbarians came into power; but it created a new, more level playing-field in which different authors and texts reacted very differently with the situation. Perhaps that is more comparable to what the Wei-shu has to say about the Tuoba or the Qing emperors about the origins of the Manchu, although their control of the presentation of their »barbarian« past exceeded what western

142 Pohl, Disputed identifications.

143 Pohl, Strategies of distinction.

kingdoms could achieve. Christian authors in the West employed more subtle strategies to manoeuvre barbarian origin myths out of too conspicuously »pagan« assertions. The extent to which traces of indigenous motifs remained in the course of transmission can most plausibly be explained by the resilience of such non-Roman and pre-Christian elements.

Acknowledgements

Work on this article was conducted in the context of the FWF Cluster of Excellence COE 8 ›EurAsian Transformations‹ (Grant-DOI: 10.55776/COE8). We are grateful to Helmut Reimitz for feedback and suggestions.

References

Abbreviations

CCSL Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
MGH Monumenta Germaniae Historica
AA Auctores antiquissimi
SS Scriptores

Sources

The Akbar nama of Abu-l-Fazl, trans. from the Persian by Henry Beveridge, vol. 1 (Calcutta 1902).

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, trans. Michael Swanton (London, 2000).

Anonymus (Notary of King Béla). *The Deeds of the Hungarians*, ed. and trans. Martyn Rady and László Veszprémy (Budapest, 2010).

Asser's Life of King Alfred and other Contemporary Sources, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (London, 1983).

Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ed. and trans. Bernard Colgrave and Roger A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1992).

Bósa saga ok Herrauðs, transmitted in the 15th century: Bosi and Herraud, trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Two Viking Romances* (Harmondsworth, 1995).

Carmen de Synodo Ticinensi, ed. Ludwig Bethmann, MGH SS rerum Langobardicarum (Hanover, 1878) 189-191.

Cassiodorus, *Variae epistulae*, ed. Åke J. Fridh, CCSL 96 (Turnhout, 1973).

Columbanus, *Opera*, ed. by G.S.M. Walker, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae vol. 2 (Dublin, 1970).

Constantine Porphyrogenitus*, De administrando imperio: Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, Emperor of the East, 905–959*, ed. and trans. Gyula Moravcsik and Romilly James Heald Jenkins, 2 vols. (second edition), (Washington, 1967).

Cosmas of Prague, *The Chronicle of the Czechs*, ed. by János M. Bák and Pavlína Rychterová (Budapest, 2020).

Dexippos, Fragmente, ed. Gunther Martin, *Dexipp von Athen: Edition, Übersetzung und begleitende Studien* (Tübingen 2006).

Dudo, *De moribus et actis primorum Normanniae ducum*, ed. Jules Lair (Caen, 1865).

Eugippius, *Vita Sancti Severini*, ed. Theodor Nüsslein (Stuttgart, 1986).

Fredegar, *Chronicae*, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH rerum Merovingicarum 2 (Hanover, 1888) 18-193.

Historia Brittonum https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/nennius-full.asp (accessed 12 Dec. 2017).

Historia Langobardorum codicis Gothani. *Historia Langobardorum*, ed. Ludwig Bethmann and Georg Waitz, MGH SS rerum Langobardicarum (Hanover, 1878) 6-11.

Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. Wallace M. Lindsay (Oxford, 1911).

Isidore of Seville, *History of the Kings of the Goths*, trans. Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain* (second edition) (Liverpool, 1999) 79-109.

Jordanes. *Romana*, ed. Theodor Mommsen, MGH AA 5 (Berlin, 1882) 1-52; trans. Peter Van Nuffelen and Lieve Van Hoof, *Jordanes, Romana and Getica* (Liverpool, 2020) 107-220.

Jordanes. *Getica*, ed. Theodor Mommsen, MGH AA 5, 1 (Berlin, 1882) 53–138; trans. Peter Van Nuffelen and Leive Van Hoof, *Jordanes, Romana and Getica* (Liverpool, 2020) 221-370.

Nestor Chronicle, trans. Ludolf Müller, *Die Nestorchronik: Handbuch zur Nestorchronik* (Munich, 2001).
Nicephorus, *Chronica*, ed. Cyril Mango, *Nikephoros, Patriarch of Constantinople. Short History* (Washington, 1990).
Origo gentis Romanae, ed. Markus Sehlmeyer (Damstadt, 2004).
Origo gentis Langobardorum, ed. Ludwig Bethmann and Georg Waitz, MGH SS rerum Langobardicarum (Hanover 1878) 2-6; trans. in: Paul the Deacon, History of the Lombards, translated by William Dudley Foulke, ed. by Edward Peters (Philadelphia 1974) 315-21.
Passio Sancti Sigismundi Regis, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH rerum Merovingicarum 2 (Hannover, 1888) 329-340.
Paulus Diaconus. *Historia Langobardorum*, ed. Ludwig Bethmann and Georg Waitz, MGH SS rerum Langobardicarum (Hanover, 1878) 12-187; trans. William Dudley Foulke, Paul the Deacon, History of the Lombards, ed. Edward Peters (Philadelphia 1974).
Paulus Diaconus, *Liber de Episcopis Mettensibus*, ed. and transl. Damien Kempf (Paris, 2013).
Priscus Panita, *Fragments,* ed. and trans. R. C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire.* 2 vols. (Liverpool, 1983).
Procopius. *Wars*, ed. and trans. Henry B. Dewing, *Buildings, History of the Wars, and Secret History*, 7 vols. (Cambridge, MA 1914–40).
Claudii Ptolemaei *Geographia*, ed. Karl Friedrich August Nobbe, vol. 1. (Leipzig 1843).
Regino of Prüm, *Chronicon*, ed. Friedrich Kurze, MGH SS rer Germ 50 (Hanover 1890).
Rudolf of Fulda, *Translatio Sancti Alexandri*, ed. Heinrich Pertz, MGH SS 2 (Hannover 1829) 673-681.
Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum/Danmarkshistorien*, ed. and trans. Karsten Friis-Jensen and Peter Zeeberg, 2 vols. (Copenhagen, 2005).
Simon de Kéza, *The Deeds of the Hungarians*, ed. László Veszprémy and Frank Schaer (Budapest 1999).
Tacitus, *Germania*, ed. Michael Winterbottom (Oxford, 1975).
Theophanes, *Chronicon*, ed. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor. Byzantine and Near Eastern History A.D. 284–813* (Oxford, 1997).
Theophylactus Simocatta, ed. and trans. M. Whitby and M. Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta* (Oxford, 1986).
Translatio S. Alexandri. ed. Georg Heinrich Pertz, MGH SS 2 (Hanover, 1829) 674-681.
Walahfrid, *Vita Galli*, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH SS rer. Mer. 4 (Hanover, 1902) 280-337.
Widukindi monachi Corbeiensis rerum gestarum Saxonicarum libri tres, ed. Lohmann, MGH SS rerum Germanicarum 60 (Hanover, 1935).
The Gesta Normannorum Ducum of William of Jumièges, Orderic Vitalis and Robert of Torigni, ed. and trans. Elisabeth M. C. Van Houts (Oxford 1995).

Literature

Amory, Patrick, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489-554* (Cambridge, 1997).
Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (second edition), (London, 1991).
Anton, Hans Hubert, Origo gentis – Volksgeschichte. Zur Auseinandersetzung mit Walter Goffarts Werk »The Narrators of Barbarian History«, in: Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter (eds.), Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter (Vienna, 1994) 262-307.
Anton, Hans Hubert, Matthias Becher, Walter Pohl, Herwig Wolfram, Ian N. Wood, Origo gentis, in: *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 2nd ed. 22 (2003) 174-210.

Assmann, Jan, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge, 2011).

Bäuml, Franz H., Verschriftlichte Mündlichkeit und vermündlichte Schriftlichkeit, in: Ursula Schäfer (ed.), *Schriftlichkeit im frühen Mittelalter* (Tübingen, 1993) 254-266.

Beck, Heinrich (ed.), *Germanenprobleme in heutiger Sicht*, RGA Erg. Bd. 1 (Berlin, 1986).

Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York, 1966).

Bernsen, Michael, Matthias Becher and Elke Brüggen (eds.), *Gründungsmythen Europas im Mittelalter* (Bonn, 2013).

Bickerman, Elias J., Origines gentium, *Classical Philology* 47 (1952) 65-81.

Borst, Arno, *Der Turmbau von Babel. Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker* 1-5 (Stuttgart, 1957-1963).

Brady, Lindy, *The Origin Legends of Early Medieval Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2022).

Brady, Lindy and Patrick Wadden (eds.), *Origin Legends in Early Medieval Western Europe* (Leiden, 2022).

Brady, Lindy and Patrick Wadden, Introduction, in: iidem (eds.), *Origin Legends in Early Medieval Western Europe* (Leiden, 2022) 1-24.

Buchberger, Erica, Origin Legends of Visigothic Spain in Isidore of Seville's Writings, in: Brady and Wadden (eds.), *Origin Legends in Early Medieval Western Europe* (Leiden, 2022) 25-45.

Charles-Edwards, Thomas, Anglo-Saxon kinship revisited, in: John Hines (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective* (Woodbridge, 1997) 171-203.

Charles-Edwards, Thomas, Origin legends in Ireland and Celtic Britain, in: Lindy Brady and Patrick Wadden (eds.), *Origin Legends in Early Medieval Western Europe* (Leiden, 2022) 46-74.

Christensen, Arne Søby. *Cassiodorus, Jordanes and the History of the Goths: Studies in a Migration Myth* (Copenhagen, 2002).

Costambeys, Marios, Origin legends in Italy in the Early Middle Ages, in: Lindy Brady and Patrick Wadden (eds.), *Origin Legends in Early Medieval Western Europe* (Leiden, 2022) 75-108.

Coumert, Magali, *Origines des peuples: Les récits du Haut Moyen Âge occidental (550-850)* (Turnhout, 2007).

Dalewski, Zbigniew, Creating Dynastic Identity: Gallus Anonymous' Chronicle, in: Walter Pohl, Veronika Wieser and Francesco Borri (eds.), *Historiography and Identity V. The Energence of New Peoples and Polities in Europe, 1000-1300* (Turnhout, 2022) 231-250.

Dench, Emma, *Romulus' Asylum. Roman Identities from the Age of Alexander to the Age of Hadrian* (Oxford, 2005).

Dilcher, Gerhard. Mythischer Ursprung und historische Herkunft als Legitimation mittelalterlicher Rechtsaufzeichnungen zwischen Leges und Sachsenspiegel, in: Peter Wunderli (ed.), *Herkunft und Ursprung: Historische und mythische Formen der Legitimation* (Sigmaringen, 1994) 140-155.

Dumville, David, Historia Brittonum: An Insular History from the Carolingian Age, in *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter*, edited by Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter. (Vienna, 1994) 406-434.

David N. Dumville, Kingship, genealogies and regnal lists, in: Peter Hayes Sawyer and Ian N. Wood (eds.), *Early Medieval Kingship* (Leeds, 1977) 72-104.

David N. Dumville, The West Saxon genealogical regnal list and the Chronology of Early Wessex, *Peritia* 4 (1985) 21-66.
Flierman, Robert. *Saxon Identities, AD 150–850* (London, 2017).
Fromentin, Valérie, and Sophie Gotteland (eds.), *Origines Gentium* (Bordeaux, 2001).
Garipzanov, Ildar (ed.), *Historical Narratives and Christian Identity on a European Periphery: Early History Writing in Northern, East-Central, and Eastern Europe (c. 1070-1200)*. (Turnhout, 2011).
Geary, Patrick, *Women at the Beginning: Origin Myths from the Amazons to the Virgin Mary* (Princeton, 2006).
Ghosh, Shami, *Writing the Barbarian Past: Studies in Early Medieval Historical Narrative* (Leiden, 2015).
Gillett, Andrew (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity. Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2002).
Gillett, Andrew, The Mirror of Jordanes: Concepts of the Barbarian, Then and Now, in Philip Rousseau and Jutta Raithel (eds.), *A Companion to Late Antiquity* (Chichester, 2009) 392-408.
Gnecchi-Ruscone, Guido Alberto, Zsófia Rácz, Salvatore Liccardo, Walter Pohl, Johannes Krause *et al.*, Ancient Genomes Reveal Trans-Eurasian Connections between the European Huns and the Xiongnu Empire, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 122, no. 9 (March 2025): e2418485122. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2418485122.
Goffart, Walter, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800)* (Princeton, 1988).
Goffart, Walter, *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire* (Philadelphia, 2006).
Gruen, Erich S., *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ, 2010).
Hachmann, Rolf. *Die Goten und Skandinavien* (Berlin, 1970).
Harland, James M. and Matthias Friedrich, *Interrogating the 'Germanic'. A Category and its Use in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Berlin, 2020).
Hartog, François, *Le miroir d'Herodote* (third edition), (Paris, 2001).
Hartog, François, *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expérience du temps* (Paris, 2003).
Haubrichs, Wolfgang, Langobardic personal names: Given names and name-giving among the Langobards, in: Giorgio Ausenda, Paolo Delogu and Chris Wickham (eds.), *The Langobards before the Frankish Conquest: An Ethnographic Perspective* (Woodbridge, 2009) 195-251.
Hauck, Karl, Carmina Antiqua: Abstammungsglaube und Stammesbewußtsein, *Zeitschrift für Bayerische Landesgeschichte* 27/8 (1964) 1-33.
Hauck, Karl, Bilddenkmäler zur Religion. Bilddenkmäler zur Heldensage, in: *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, 2 (second edition), (1976) 577-598.
Henderson, John, *The Medieval World of Isidore of Seville: Truth from Words* (Cambridge, 2007).
Hoeres, Peter, Perspektiven für eine postkonstruktivistische Geschichtswissenschaft, *Historische Zeitschrift* 316 (2022) 602-628.
Kasperski, Robert, Jordanes versus Procopius of Caesarea: Considerations Concerning a Certain Historiographic Debate on How to Solve ›the Problem of the Goths‹, in: Viator 49, 1 (2018) 1-23.
Kasperski, Robert, Some considerations on barbarian ethnicity in Late Antiquity, in: Michael E. Stewart, Conor Whately, David Parnell (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook on Identity in Byzantium* (London-New York, 2022) 123-138.
Kasperski, Robert, The origin legend of the Goths in the Getica by Jordanes, in: Brady and Wadden (eds.), *Origin Legends in Early Medieval Western Europe* (Leiden, 2022) 135-155.

Kempf, Damien, Introduction, in: Paulus Diaconus, *Liber de Episcopis Mettensibus*, ed. and transl. Damien Kempf, (Paris, 2013) 1-39.

Langelaar, Reinier, Chasing the colours of the rainbow: Tibetan ethnogenealogies in flux, in: Walter Pohl and Daniel Mahoney (eds.), *Narratives of Ethnic and Tribal Origins*, special issue *The Medieval History Journal* 21/2 (2018) 328-364.

Liccardo, Salvatore, *Old Names, New Peoples. Listing Ethnonyms in Late Antiquity* (Leiden 2024).

Maas, Michael, *The Conqueror's Gift: Roman Ethnography and the End of Antiquity* (Princeton, 2025).

Mayor, A., *The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women across the Ancient World* (Princeton, 2014).

McColl, Hugh, Guus Kroonen *et al.*, Steppe ancestry in Western Eurasia and the spread of the Germanic languages, preprint in *bioRxiv* 2025, https://doi.org/10.1101/2024.03.13.584607.

Merrills, A.H., *History and Geography in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2005).

Müller, Klaus E., *Geschichte der antiken Ethnographie und ethnologischen Theoriebildung*, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden, 1980).

Murray, Alexander Callander, Post vocantur Merohingii: Fredegar, Merovech, and ›sacral kingship‹, in: Alexander Callander Murray (ed.), *After Rome's Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History* (Toronto, 1998) 121-152.

Nedoma, Robert, Der altisländische Odinsname *Langbardr*: Langbart und die Langobarden, in: Walter Pohl and Peter Erhart (eds.), *Die Langobarden: Herrschaft und Identität*, (Vienna, 2005) 439-444.

Ostrowski, Donald, Pagan past and Christian identity in the Primary Chronicle, in: Ildar H. Garipzanov (ed.), *Historical Narratives and Christian Identity on a European Periphery: Early History Writing in in Northern, East-Central and Eastern Europe (c. 1070-1200)* (Turnhout 2011) 229-253.

Plassmann, Alheydis, *Origo gentis: Identitäts- und Legitimitätsstiftung in früh- und hochmittelalterlichen Herkunftserzählungen* (Berlin, 2006).

Plassman, Alheydis, Origo gentis and the long shadow of Rome, in: Brady and Wadden (eds.), *Origin Legends in Early Medieval Western Europe* (Leiden, 2022) 405-423.

Pohl, Walter, *Die Germanen* (Munich, 2000).

Pohl, Walter, Gender and ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages, in: Leslie Brubaker and Julia Smith (eds.), *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West* (Cambridge, 2004) 23-43.

Pohl. Walter, Ethnicity, theory and tradition: A response, in: Andrew Gillett (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity – Critical Approaches to Ethnogenesis Theory* (Turnhout, 2002) 221-240.

Pohl, Walter (ed.), *Die Suche nach den Ursprüngen. Von der Bedeutung des frühen Mittelalters*, Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 8 (Vienna, 2004).

Pohl, Walter, History in fragments. Montecassino's politics of memory, *Early Medieval Europe* 10/3 (2001) 343-374.

Pohl, Walter, Origo gentis Langobardorum, in: Francesco Lo Monaco and Francesco Mores (eds.), *I Longobardi e la storia: Un percorso attraverso le fonti* (Rome, 2012) 105–21.

Pohl, Walter, Introduction: Strategies of Identification: A Methodological Profile, in: Walter Pohl and Gerda Heydemann (eds.), *Strategies of Identification: Ethnicity and Religion in Early Medieval Europe* (Turnhout, 2013) 1-64.

Pohl, Walter, Romanness – a multiple identity and its changes, *Early Medieval Europe* 22/4 (2014) 406-418.

Pohl, Walter, Genealogy: A Comparative Perspective from the Early Medieval West, in: Walter Pohl, Christina Lutter and Eirik Hovden (eds.), *Meanings of Community across Medieval Eurasia* (Leiden, 2016) 232-269.

Pohl, Walter, Narratives of origin and migration in early medieval Europe: Problems of interpretation, in: *Narratives of Ethnic and Tribal Origins. Eurasian Perspectives*, Special issue, *Medieval History Journal* 21/2 (2018) 192-221.

Pohl, Walter, Introduction: Early Medieval Romanness – a multiple identity, in: Clemens Gantner, Cinzia Grifoni, Walter Pohl and Marianne Pollheimer (eds.), *Transformations of Romanness in the Early Middle Ages: Regions and Identities* (Berlin, 2018) 3-39.

Pohl, Walter, The emergence of new polities in the break-up of the Western Roman Empire, in: Walter Pohl and Rutger Kramer (eds.), *Empires and Communities in the Post-Roman and Islamic World, c. 400-1000* (New York, 2021) 28-63, DOI 10.1093/oso/9780190067946.001.0001.

Pohl, Walter, Historiography and Identity – Methodological Perspectives, in: Walter Pohl and Veronika Wieser (eds.), *Historiography and Identity 1: Ancient and Early Christian Narratives of Community* (Turnhout, 2019) 7-50.

Pohl, Walter, Debating ethnicity in post-Roman historiography, in: Gerda Heydemann and Helmut Reimitz (eds.), *Historiography & Identity 2: Post-Roman Multiplicity and New Political Identities* (Turnhout, 2020) 27-70.

Pohl, Walter, Disputed identifications: The Jews and the use of biblical models in the barbarian kingdoms, in: Yitzhak Hen and Thomas F.X. Noble (eds.), *Barbarians and Jews. Jews and Judaism in the Early Medieval West* (Turnhout 2018) 11-28.

Pohl, Walter, Historical writing in the Lombard kingdom: from Secundus to Paul the Deacon, in: Gerda Heydemann and Helmut Reimitz (eds.), *Historiography & Identity 2: Post-Roman Multiplicity and New Political Identities* (Turnhout, 2020) 319-349.

Pohl, Walter, Historiography of the New Europe: Comparative Perspectives, in: Walter Pohl, Francesco Borri and Veronika Wieser (eds.), *Historiography & Identity 5: The Emergence of New Peoples and Polities, c. 1000-1300* (Turnhout 2022) 467-481.

Pohl, Walter, Migration, Ethnogenese, Archäogenetik: Neue Ergebnisse zur Geschichte der Langobarden, in: Hans-Werner Goetz and Matthias Becher (eds.), *Gedenkschrift für Jörg Jarnut* (forthcoming).

Pohl, Walter, Kingdoms of the Eurasian Steppe and the restructuring of the Danubian frontier: Sarmatians, Huns, Avars, and Slavs, in: Noel Lenski (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Roman World*, vol. 8 (Oxford, forthcoming).

Pohl, Walter and Paul Herold (eds.), *Vom Nutzen des Schreibens. Soziales Gedächtnis, Herrschaft und Besitz*, Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 5 (Vienna, 2003).

Pohl, Walter and Daniel Mahoney (eds.), *Narratives of Ethnic and Tribal Origins. Eurasian Perspectives*, Special issue, *Medieval History Journal* 21/2 (2018).

Pohl, Walter, and Veronika Wieser, Introduction: Historiography and identity in a comparative perspective, in: Walter Pohl and Daniel Mahoney (eds.), *Historiography and Identity 4: The Writing of History across Medieval Eurasia* (Turnhout 2021) 1-22, DOI 10.1484/M.CELAMA-EB.5.118670.

Pohl, Walter and Veronika Wieser, Introduction: the emergence of new polities in the shadows of empires, in: Walter Pohl and Veronika Wieser (eds.), *Emerging Powers in Eurasian Comparison, 200-1100: Shadows of Empire* (Leiden, 2023) 1-49.

Pohl, Walter, Francesco Borri and Veronika Wieser (eds.), *Historiography & Identity 5: The Emergence of New Peoples and Polities, c. 1000-1300* (Turnhout 2022).

Pohl, Walter, Pavlina Rychterová and Helmut Reimitz, Origin Myths: Challenges of Interpretation, Medieval Worlds 24 (2026) 86-107.

Potter, David, Dexippos' Gothic anthropology, in: Fritz Mitthof, Gunther Martin and Jana Grusková (eds.), *Empire in Crisis: Gothic Invasions and Roman Historiography* (Wien 2020) 357-368.

Reimitz, Helmut, Grenzen und Grenzüberschreitungen im karolingischen Mitteleuropa, in: Walter Pohl and Helmut Reimitz (eds.), *Grenze und Differenz im frühen Mittelalter*, Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 1 (Vienna, 2000) 105-166.

Reichert, Hermann, Skandia(e), Skandiai nesoi, Sconaowe, Scadanan, Scathanavia, Scatenauga und Ska[/nd/d/t]inavia, *Beiträge zur Namenforschung* 41 (2006) 141-157.

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

Revell, Louise. *Ways of Being Roman: Discourses of Identity in the Roman West* (Oxford, 2015).

Reynolds, Susan, Medieval origines gentium and the Community of the Realm, *History* 68 (1983) 375-90.

Rychterovà, Pavlína, The Legenda Christiani, the Chronica Bohemorum, and the Bohemian Slavs, in: Walter Pohl, Veronika Wieser and Francesco Borri (eds.), *Historiography and Identity V. The Energence of New Peoples and Polities in Europe, 1000-1300* (Turnhout 2022) 143-178.

Scheibelreiter, Georg, Genealogie, in: Heinrich Beck (ed.), *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* 11, 2nd rev. ed. (Berlin, 1998) 33-45.

See, Klaus von, *Deutsche Germanenideologie vom Humanismus bis zur Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main, 1970).

Simek, Rudolf, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie* (third edition), (Stuttgart, 2006).

Skaff, Jonathan, *Sui-Tang China and its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power and Connections, 580–800* (Oxford, 2012).

Stock, Brian, *Listening for the Text: on the Uses of the Past* (Philadelphia, 1996).

Tian, Yije, István Koncz *et al.*, The role of emerging elites in the formation and development of communities after the fall of the Roman Empire, in: *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 121/36 (2024) e2317868121.

Timpe, Dieter, Ethnologische Begriffsbildung in der Antike, in: Heinrich Beck (ed.), *Germanenprobleme in heutiger Sicht*, RGA Erg. Bd. 1 (Berlin, 1986) 22-40.

Tolochko, Oleksiy P., Creating Time, Forging Identity, Building a State: The Primary Chronicle of Rus, in: Walter Pohl, Veronika Wieser and Francesco Borri (eds.), *Historiography and Identity V. The Energence of New Peoples and Polities in Europe, 1000-1300* (Turnhout 2022) 449-466.

Van Nuffelen, Peter and Lieve Van Hoof, Introduction, in: *iidem*, *Jordanes, Romana and Getica* (Liverpool, 2020) 1-104.

Veszprémy, László Christian Identity versus Heathendom: Hungarian Chroniclers Facing the Pagan/Nomadic Past and the Present, in: Walter Pohl, Veronika Wieser and Francesco Borri (eds.), *Historiography and Identity V. The Energence of New Peoples and Polities in Europe, 1000-1300* (Turnhout 2022) 305-320.

Veyne, Paul, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay in the Constitutive Imagination* (Chicago, 1983).

Waldenfels, Bernhard, *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung. Phänomenologie. Psychoanalyse. Phänomenotechnik* (Frankfurt am Main, 2002).

Wang, Ke, Bendeguz Tobias, Doris Pany-Kucera, Zuzana Hofmanovà, Walter Pohl, Johannes Krause *et al.*, Ancient DNA Reveals Reproductive Barrier despite Shared

Avar-Period Culture, *Nature* 638/8052 (February 2025) 1007–14. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-08418-5.

Wenskus, Reinhard, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung: Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen Gentes* (Cologne, 1961).

Wimmer, Andreas*, Ethnic Boundary Making* (Oxford, 2013).

Wolfram, Herwig, Origo et religio: Ethnic traditions and literature in Early Medieval texts, *Early Medieval Europe* 3 (1994) 19-38.

Wolfram, Herwig, *Gotische Studien: Volk und Herrschaft im frühen Mittelalter* (Munich, 2005)

Wolfram, Herwig. *Die Goten: Von den Anfängen bis zur Mitte des sechsten Jahrhunderts* (fifth edition), (Munich, 2009).

Wolfram, Herwig, Walter Pohl, Hans-Hubert Anton, Ian Wood and Matthias Becher, Origio gentis, in: *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, 2nd edn, vol. 22 (Berlin, 2003) 174-210.

Wolverton, Lisa, *Cosmas of Prague: Narrative, Classicism, Politics* (Washington, DC, 2015).

Wood, Ian N., The Individuality of Gregory of Tours, in: Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (eds.), *The World of Gregory of Tours* (Leiden, 2002) 29-46.

Wood, Ian N., Deconstructing the Merovingian family, in: Richard Corradini, Max Diesenberger and Helmut Reimitz (eds.), *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages: Texts, Resources and Artefacts*, The Transformation of the Roman World 12 (Leiden, 2003) 149-172.

Wood, Ian N. Fredegar's Fables, in: Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter (eds.), *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter* (Vienna 1994) 356-366.

Wood, Jamie, *The Politics of Identity in Visigothic Spain: Religion and Power in the Histories of Isidore of Seville* (Leiden, 2012).

Woolf, Greg, *Tales of the Barbarians: Ethnography and Empire in the Roman West* (Chichester, 2014).

Bulgarian Origin Legends

Daniel Ziemann*

This contribution examines the origin legend of the First Bulgarian Empire, one of the most important early medieval polities in Southeast Europe, which existed between 681 and 1018. The legend seeks to explain the settlement of the Bulgars south of the Danube at the end of the seventh century. It recounts the story of a ruler named Kubrat, who lived in the region north of the Black Sea, and his five (in some versions three) sons. Despite his wish that they remain united after his death, the sons part ways and lead their respective groups to different regions. One of them is said to have founded the Bulgarian polity, while the son who remains is subdued by the Khazars. In contrast to many other origin legends of the period, this narrative is often treated as reflecting historical events, with both Kubrat's polity and the subsequent division of his sons frequently taken at face value.

The paper analyses different versions of the story as transmitted by authors such as Theophanes Confessor, Patriarch Nikephoros, and Michael the Syrian, among others. These versions differ in their dating of the events, the number of sons, and the routes taken during the migration. The paper also explores possible connections between these accounts. Notably, the motifs employed – such as the division of brothers and the geographical setting – appear frequently in other contexts, where they are associated with different periods, peoples, and events.

The paper argues that, rather than using the narrative to reconstruct historical events, it is more productive to reverse the perspective and interpret the story as an attempt to condense complex processes of migration and political transformation into a familiar and coherent narrative. In this sense, the legend can be understood as an explanatory framework designed to account for the appearance of similarly named groups, the Bulgars, across different regions of the Mediterranean and Eastern European world.

Keywords: Bulgars, Bulgarians, early medieval historiography, ethnogenesis, origin myths, Kubrat, Theophanes Confessor, Patriarch Nikephoros, Michael the Syrian, Asparuch

Introduction

The Bulgarian origin legends offer a fascinating glimpse into the early medieval narratives, as their historical accuracy is rarely questioned. While these accounts share common narrative structures typical of many origin stories, most scholars are convinced that the tales of Bulgaria's prehistory reflect actual historical events to a considerable extent.

---

* Correspondence details: Daniel Ziemann, Associate Professor, Department of Historical Studies, CEU Vienna, ZiemannD@ceu.edu.

This article is part of the thematic section *Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasian Comparison*, guest editor: Reinier Langelaar. To read all related articles, please access https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026.

In Bulgaria, as in many other nations, medieval history plays a pivotal role in shaping modern national identity. Theories about Bulgaria's origins abound, and these discussions extend far beyond academic circles.[1] The widely known accounts of Bulgarian origins thus play a vital role in shaping the nation's identity. Key figures from early Bulgarian history are omnipresent, appearing in the names of towns, streets, and even as brand names for products such as food and beverages.

The present contribution will first offer a brief overview of the history of the Bulgarians during the early Middle Ages, followed by an examination of the relevant origin stories and their transmission through various sources. I will also consider comparable origin stories from other sources of the same period and conclude with some thoughts for further discussion.

Bulgars and Bulgarians – The Historical Setting

Who exactly were the Bulgars, or Bulgarians, in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages? In English-language scholarship, »Bulgars« typically refers to the pagan period and a group from the steppe regions of Central Asia, or possibly the Pamir and Hindukush, depending on the theory one subscribes to, assuming this was indeed their place of origin.[2] This group is thought to have spoken a Turkic language, perhaps with Iranian or other influences.[3] These »Bulgars« are seen as the driving force behind the establishment of the First Bulgarian Empire in the region between the Danube and the Balkan Mountains in 680/681. Distinct from the Slavic groups who populated much of the Balkans, the Bulgars are considered the founders of this early state.[4]

»Bulgarians«, on the other hand, refers to the people of the Bulgarian Empire after the adoption of Christianity in 864/865.[5] The distinction between Slavs and Bulgars became less significant after the ninth century. By the end of that century, despite a certain continuity of the Proto-Bulgarian language in official titles and other sources, it can be assumed that the majority of the population spoke a Slavic language, known in its written form – primarily from theological and liturgical contexts – as Old Church Slavonic or Old Bulgarian, which was initially written in Glagolitic and later predominantly in Cyrillic script.[6] The historical sources themselves do not distinguish between »Bulgars« and »Bulgarians«. In Greek, the

1 Voynikov, Ancient Bulgarians; for the theory of an autochthonous origin: Tzenoff, *Abstammung der Bulgaren.*

2 For the English term »Bulgars«, other languages have different terms, like, e.g., »Protobulgaren« in German or »prabălgari« in Bulgarian. Beševliev, *Protobulgarische Periode;* Božilov and Dimitrov, Protobulgarica; Dimitrov, Prabălgarite; Văžarova, Slavjani i prabălgari; Vasil Zlatarski used the term »Hun-Bulgarians«: Zlatarski, *Istorija I, 1.*

3 Todorov-Bemberski, Prabălgarski ezik; Lakova, Za prabălgarite; Deleva-Granberg, Ezikovijat stroj; Pritsak, Bulgarische Fürstenliste; for a different approach, see Dobrev, Ezikăt na Asparuchovite; Dobrev, *Prabălgarite*

4 Rašev *et al.*, *Bălgarska nacionalna istorija tom 3*; Ziemann, *Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht, 161-179;* Božilov and Gjuzelev, *Istorija na srednovekovna Bălgarija,* 85-103*;* Angelov *et al.*: *Istorija na Bălgarija 2,* 97-108*;* Zlatarski, *Istorija I, 1*, 123-151*;* Rašev, *Bălgarskata ezičeska kultura.*

5 Concerning the adoption of Christianity: Ziemann, *Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht,* 356-396.

6 For further literature on the Cyrillic and Glagolitic script, see: von Erdmann, Die glagolitische Sprache; Ilčev, Glagolica; Dobrev, Kirilica.

term *Βούλγαροι* is used both for the groups that emerged at the end of the fifth century and for the inhabitants of the Bulgarian Empire in the tenth century.

This paper focuses on the origin stories of the First Bulgarian Empire, which was established in 681.[7] The subsequent centuries were characterised by a turbulent relationship with the Byzantine Empire, marked by frequent military conflicts, yet also by intense cultural exchange. By the early ninth century, the town of Pliska, near modern-day Shoumen in Northeastern Bulgaria, likely became one of the key residences – possibly even the primary residence – of the Bulgarian khan.[8] The early ninth century saw significant territorial expansion into Byzantine lands. In the mid-ninth century, Bulgaria underwent Christianisation. The early tenth century is characterised by the so-called Golden Age of Tsar Symeon, which refers to both military expansion as well as the cultural achievements of the so-called Preslav School.[9] The town of Preslav, on the Golyama Kamchiya River, became the administrative and political centre of Bulgaria.[10] However, in 969, Northern Bulgaria was first overrun by the Kievan Rus and then, in 971, by the Byzantines.[11]Under Tsar Samuil, Bulgaria regained strength, this time with a new centre in what is now Northern Macedonia, Northern Greece, and Southwestern Bulgaria. However, after a prolonged period of warfare, the Byzantine emperor Basil II finally conquered the remaining parts of Bulgaria in 1018, incorporating them into the Byzantine Empire.[12] Bulgaria's resurgence came at the end of the twelfth century, centred around the future capital of Veliko Tărnovo, located near the northern slopes of the Balkan Mountains. This »Second Bulgarian Empire« lasted until the late fourteenth century and identified itself as the continuation of the First Bulgarian Empire.[13]

The Origin Story: Old Great Bulgaria

Now, let us turn to the origin legends themselves. Two key texts are central in this context: the *Chronicle* of Theophanes the Confessor and the *History* by Patriarch Nikephoros, both written in the early 9th century.[14] These accounts present similar stories, likely drawn from a common source. Both recount political events concerning the Byzantine Empire, one of which involves a military conflict with invaders from north of the Danube, referred to as

7 Zlatarski, Istorija 1,1, 123-151; Angelov, Obrazuvane, 190-214; Angelov *et al.*, Istorija na Bălgarija 2, 95-106; Beševliev, Protobulgarische Periode, 173-190; Božilov and Gjuzelev, Istorija na srednovekovna Bălgarija, 85-103; Ziemann, Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht, 161-179; zum Jahr: Gregorio and Kresten, Ἔφέτος – »In diesem Jahr«.

8 Concerning Pliska: Georgiev, Pliska; Aladžov, Archeologičeska karta; Dimitrov and Rašev, Pliska; Dončeva-Petkova, Pliska i nejnata istorija, for earlier residences: Rašev, *Bălgarskata ezičeska kultura*.

9 Božilov, Car Simeon Veliki; for the Preslav School, see the journal »Preslavska knižovna škola« and Graševa and Slavova, Preslavsko knižovno središte.

10 Totev, *Veliki Preslav*; Milo *et al.*, Into the Tsar's residence.

11 Zlatarski, *Istorija* I,2, 587-632; Angelov *et al.*, *Istorija na Bălgarija 2*, 390-397; Božilov and Gjuzelev, *Istorija na srednovekovna Bălgarija*, 297-300.

12 Pirivatrić, *Samuilovata dăržava*; Săbotinov, *Bălgarija pri car Samuil*.

13 Madgearu, *The Asanids;* Božilov, *Familijata na Asenevci*; Zlatarski, *Istorija 3*.

14 *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. de Boor; transl. Mango and Scott; Nikephoros, Short History, ed. and transl. Mango, for general information about the authors, see the respective introduction.

»Bulgars« in Theophanes' chronicle. The event is recorded under the year 6171 from the creation of the world according to the Alexandrian era, corresponding to 678/679 CE. However, scholars generally agree that Theophanes' dating for this period is inaccurate, and the correct year should be 680/681. The account of the Bulgars follows a brief note on the death of Mauias, »caliph of the Saracenes«, succeeded by his son Izid.[15] Muʿāwiya (661-680), the fifth caliph and founder of the Umayyad dynasty, is the historical figure mentioned here.[16]

The passage then proceeds as follows:

»In this year, too, the people[17] of the Bulgars assailed Thrace. It is now necessary to relate the ancient history of the Ounnogoundour Bulgars and Kotragoi.«[18] The wording suggests a break in the narrative, possibly indicating the use of a new or different source. The common source of Theophanes and Nikephoros appears to have considered this material compatible with the existing account and incorporated it into the narrative. This new passage starts with a geographic description of the Maiotis, now known as the Sea of Azov:

> On the northern, that is the far side of the Euxine Sea, is the so-called Maeotid Lake, into which flows a huge river called Atel, which comes down from the Ocean through the land of the Sarmatians. The Atel is joined by the river Tanais, which also rises from the Iberian Gates that are in the mountains Caucasus. From the confluence of the Tanais and the Atel (it is above the aforementioned Maeotid Lake that the Atel splits off) flows the river called Kouphis which discharges into the far end of the Pontic Sea near Nekropela, by the promontory called Ram's Head. From the aforesaid lake is s stretch of sea like a river which joins the Euxine through the land of the Cimmerian Bosphorus, in which river are caught the so-called *mourzoulin* and similar fish. Now on the eastern side of the lake that lies above, in the direction of Phanagouria and of the Jews that live there, march a great many tribes; whereas, starting from the same lake in the direction of the river called Kouphis (where the Bulgarian fish *xyston* is caught), is the old Great Bulgaria and the so-called Kotragoi who are of the same stock as the Bulgars.[19]

This detailed geographical description is unexpected, given that it adds little to the military narrative that follows. It seems that the insertion from the respective source was taken over without abridging or cutting it.

Of particular interest is the mention of Jews in Phanagouria. The Khazars, one of the rare political entities in which Judaism appears to have spread through missionary efforts, probably possessed a notable Jewish element. This observation, however, offers no firm basis for dating the account, even though the Khazar conversion is usually placed before the ninth century.[20]

---

15 *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. de Boor*, 356;* transl. Mango and Scott, 497.

16 PmbZ 5185 (https://www.degruyterbrill.com/database/pmbz/entry/PMBZ16364/html).

17 The translation by Cyril Mango (*Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, transl. Mango and Scott, 497) has »tribe«, but in this case, the Greek term *ἔθνος* is more appropriately translated as »people«.

18 *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. de Boor, 356*;* the translation is from: *Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, transl. Mango and Scott, 497.

19 *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. de Boor, 356-357; transl. Mango and Scott, 497-498.

20 Dunlop, *Jewish Khazars*; Stampfer, Did the Khazars convert.

The narrative then moves on to the well-known passage concerning Old Great Bulgaria under Khan Kubrat:

> In the days of Constantine, who dwelt in the West, Krobatos, the chieftain of the aforesaid Bulgaria and of the Kotragoi, died leaving five sons, on whom he enjoined not to depart under any circumstances from their common life that they might prevail in every way and not be enslaved by another tribe. A short time after his demise, however, his five sons fell out and parted company, each with the host that was subject to him. The eldest son, called Batbaian, observed his father's command and has remained until this day in his ancestral land. His younger brother, called Kotragos, crossed the river Tanais and dwelt opposite his eldest brother. The fourth and fifth went over the river Istros, that is the Danube: the former became subject of the Chagan of the Avars in Avar Pannonia and remained there with his army, whereas the latter reached the Pentapolis, which is near Ravenna, and accepted allegiance to the Christian Empire. Coming after them, the third brother, called Asparouch, crossed the Danapris and Danastris (rivers that are farther north than the Danube) and, on reaching the Oglos, settled between the former and the latter, since he judged that place to be secure and impregnable on both sides: on the near side it is marshy, while on the far side it is encircled by the rivers. It just provided ample security from enemies to this tribe that had been weakened by its division. When they had thus divided into five parts and been reduced to a paltry estate, the great nation of the Chazars issued forth from the depths of Berzilia, that is from the First Sarmatia, and conquered all the country beyond the sea as far as the Sea of Pontos; and they subjugated the eldest brother Batbaian, chieftain of the First Bulgaria, from whom they exact tribute to this day.[21]

The narrative then returns to the events of 680/681, describing how Emperor Constantine IV's army was defeated by the Bulgars. Suffering from gout, the emperor withdrew to Mesembria to undergo therapeutic treatment in the baths there. Rumours that he had fled, however, spread among his troops, causing panic and prompting many of them to flee. When the Bulgars realised what was happening, they pursued the retreating soldiers, killing and wounding most of them. Constantine was forced to sue for peace, agreeing to pay an annual tribute to the Bulgars.

Patriarch Nikephoros offers a similar account of these events. To better understand Theophanes' version, we can compare it with Nikephoros' narrative:

> It is now time to speak of the dominion of the Huns (as they are called) and the Bulgarians and their affairs. In the area of the Maeotic lake, by the river Kophis, lies Great Bulgaria (as it was called in olden times) and [here lived] the so-called Kotragoi, who are also of the same stock [as the Bulgarians]. In the days of Constantine who died in the West, a certain man by the name Kobratos became master of these tribes. On his death he left five sons, upon whom he enjoined not to part company under any circumstances, so that their dominion might be preserved thanks to their mutual friendship. But they took little account of the paternal injunction and a short time thereafter they divided, each one of them taking his own share of their people. The eldest son, called Baianos, in accordance with his father's command, has remained until this day in his ancestral land. The second, called Kotragos, crossed the river Tanais and dwelled opposite the first; the fourth went over to the river

21 *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. de Boor, 357; transl. Mango and Scott, 498.

> Istros and settled in Pannonia, which is now under the Avars, becoming an ally of the local nation. The fifth established himself in the Pentapolis of Ravenna and became tributary to the Romans. The remaining third brother, called Asparuch, crossed the rivers Danapris and Danastris and settled near the Istros, where he found a suitable place for habitation (called Onglos in their language), which happened to be difficult [of access] and impregnable by the foe: for it is secure in the front because it is impassable and marshy, while at the back it is fenced by inaccessible cliffs. When this nation had thus divided and scattered, the tribe of the Chazars, [issuing] from the interior of the country called Bersilia, where they had lived next to the Sarmatians, invaded with complete impunity all the places that are beyond the Euxine Sea. Among others, they subjected Baianos to paying tribute to them.[22]

Nikephoros' account, like Theophanes', shifts back to the events of 680/681 and details the failed campaign of Emperor Constantine IV. From both accounts, it becomes clear that there are two distinct layers: the events of 680/681 and the legend of Khan Kubrat and his five sons. The year 681 is traditionally celebrated as the founding date of the First Bulgarian Empire, an anniversary commemorated with numerous events, conferences, publications, and monuments, notably in 1981.[23] The year is also confirmed by a note about a war »in Bulgaria« in the acts of the council in Constantinople in 681.[24]

Parallel Sources

Let us begin by examining certain inconsistencies in the Bulgar origin story. They appear concerning key figures such as Khan Kubrat. Patriarch Nikephoros refers to Kubrat in an earlier section of his chronicle, where he mentions a figure named Koubratos during the reign of Emperor Heraclius:

> At about the same time, Koubratos, the nephew of Organas and lord of the Onogundurs, rose up against the Chagan of the Avars, and after abusing the army he had from the latter, drove them out of his land. He sent an embassy to Herakleios and concluded a peace treaty which they observed until the end of their lives. [Heraclius] sent him gifts and honored him with the title of patrician.[25]

The mention of the Onogundurs strongly suggests this passage refers to the same Kubrat. However, the geographical reference poses a problem. In the accounts of Theophanes and Nikephoros, Kubrat's realm is placed near the Maeotian Lake (the Sea of Azov), a region where Avar control in the mid-seventh century seems improbable.[26]

Theophanes and Nikephoros are not the only sources concerning Kubrat. The Armenian geographer Anania Širakac'i, writing in the 7th century (though the dating of his work is debated), also provides valuable information. His text survives in manuscripts dating from as

22 Nikephoros, *Short History*, transl. Mango, [87-90].

23 Bužaški *et al* (eds.), *Bălgarija 1300. Institucii i dăržavna tradicija 1-3*.

24 ACO ser. II, vol. 2 (ed. Riedinger), pars 2, 694, line 24-27; Gregorio and Kresten, Ἐφέτος – »In diesem Jahr« Ziemann, Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht, 162, fn. 752; for the council: Ohme, *Das 6. Ökumenische Konzil.*

25 Nikephoros, *Short History*, transl. Mango, [70-71].

26 Pohl, *Avars,* 323-324.

late as the 12th century. Within his geographic description of Sarmatia, Širakac'i states that the Bulgarians were named after rivers: Kup'i-Bulgar, Duč'i-Bulgar, Ołchontor-Blkar, and Č'dar-Bolkar. He also mentions Kubrat, as known from Nikephoros and Theophanes:

> To the north are the Turks and the Bulgars, named after rivers: Kup'i Bulgars, Duč'i Bulgars, Ołxntor Bulgars, and Č'dar Bulgars, whose names are unknown to Ptolemy. The son of Kubrat fled from the Hippic mountains.[27]

Additionally, another passage speaks of the island of Peukê at the mouth of the Danube:

> On this island lives Asparuk, son of Kubrat, a fugitive from the Khazars, from the mountains of the Bulgars, who expelled the Avar nation and settled there.[28]

The parallels between Theophanes and the Armenian geography are clear. Both sources blend history with geography, emphasising rivers, mentioning Asparuch as Kubrat's son, and referencing the Khazar conquest. Notably, Asparuch only appears in Anania Širakac'i and in the story about Kubrat's five sons in Theophanes and Nikephoros. His name is absent from accounts of Emperor Constantine IV's campaigns against the Bulgars.[29]

Concerning chronology, Theophanes and Nikephoros situate these events in the reign of Emperor Constans II (641-668). As has already been noted, Anania's work is usually dated to the seventh century. Kubrat is also mentioned in the »Bulgarian Princes' List«.[30]

The story is also mentioned by Syriac sources, such as Michael the Syrian (12th century):

> A cette époque, trois frères [sortirent] de la Scythie intérieure, conduisant avec eux trente mille Scythes, et firent route pendant 60 jours, depuis les défilés du mont Imaeon. Ils firent route en hiver, afin de trouver de l'eau, et parvinrent jusqu'au fleuve Tanaïs, qui sort du lac Maeotis et se perd dans la mer du Pont. Lorsqu'ils arrivèrent aux frontières des Romains, l'un d'entre eux, appelé Bulgarios, prit dix mille hommes et se sépara de ses frères. Il franchit le fleuve Tanaïs dans la direction du Danube, qui lui aussi se perd dans la mer du Pont; et il fit demander à Maurici[us] de lui donner un pays pour s'y fixer et devenir les auxiliaires des Romains. L'empereur lui donna la Mœsie supérieure et inférieure, et la Dacie: pays florissants que le peuple des Avares avait dévastés depuis l'époque d'Anastas[ius]. Ils habitèrent là, et furent une garde pour les Romains. Ils furent appelés par ceux ci : Bulgares. Les deux autres frères scythes vinrent dans le pays d'Alân qu'on appelle Bersâlia, dont les villes avaient été bâties par les Romains, qui sont Qâspia, qu'on nomme Porte des Tourayê'. Les Bulgarayè et les Pougourayê, leurs habitants, se firent un jour chrétiens. Quand un peuple étranger régna sur ce pays, ils furent appelés Khazarayê, du nom du frère aîné qui se nommait Khazarig. Ce peuple devint puissant et prit de l'expansion.[31]

27 Anania Širakac'i, trans. Hewsen, 55.

28 Anania Širakac'i, trans. Hewsen, 48; Zlatarski, *Istorija I, 1,* 103-105; Beševliev, *Protobulgarische Periode*, 146; Marquart, *Chronologie*, 88-89; Ziemann, *Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht,* 150-152.

29 For Asparuch see PmbZ 654/corr. (Asparuch – Ἀσπαρούχ); Petrov, *Chan Asparuch*.

30 Mikkola, Chronologie, 1-15; Moravcsik, Byzantinoturcica II, 352-354; Imennik, ed. Bogdanov.

31 Michel le Syrien, vol 2/X, XXI, trans. Chabot, 363; Altheim and Stiehl, Michael der Syrer; for Michael the Syrian see Weltecke, *Description of the Times*.

Bar Hebraeus, a Syrian bishop (* 1226 - d. 1286), recounts a very similar story, likely sourced from the same source as Michael the Syrian:

> At this time there went forth from Inner Scythia three brothers with thirty thousand Scythians. And they came a journey of two months in the time of winter, for the discovery of water, that is to say [water] from the fords of Mount Amôn; and they arrived at the river Ṭânîs (Dônâ?), which goeth out from the lake of Mianṭîs and mingleth in the Sea of Pôntôs. And when they arrived at the frontier of the Rhômâyê, one of them whose name was Bûlgârîs took ten ships and crossed the river Ṭânîs and pitched his camp between the rivers Ṭânîs and Dûnbîr (Don and Dnieper?), which also mingles (i.e. flows into) the Sea of Pôntôs. And he sent to Mauricius [asking] him to give him land to dwell in, and [said that] he would become an ally of the Rhômâyê. And Mauricius gave him Upper and Lower Mysia, and they dwelt there, and they became a guard (i.e. a buffer garrison) for the Rhômâyê. Now, though they were Scythians the Rhômâyê call them ›Bulgarians‹. Then these two other brothers came to the country of ʾÂlân, which is Bar Sâlîâ, that is to say to the towns of the Caspian, which the Bulgarians and the Pangurians call the ›Gate of the Turks‹; they were once Christians and are now called ›Kazârâyê‹ after the name of the eldest brother.[32]

Unlike Theophanes and Nikephoros, Michael the Syrian and Bar Hebraeus assign these events – if they indeed refer to the same ones, namely the settlement of the Bulgars who later established the First Bulgarian Empire in the regions south of the Danube – to the reign of Emperor Maurice (582-602), thus more than half a century earlier. Most scholars accept the chronology given by Theophanes and Nikephoros and accordingly date the settlement of the these Bulgars to the late seventh century.[33] Franz Altheim and Ruth Stiehl, however, have argued for taking Michael the Syrian's version more seriously.[34] Central to this position is the question of the source from which Michael the Syrian derived the passage and whether it may be closer to the events than the tradition represented by Theophanes and Nikephoros. Giving greater weight to this version, by contrast, could lead to an earlier dating of the settlement of the (Danubian) Bulgars, placing it around the turn from the sixth to the seventh century. The question also arises whether the accounts of Nikephoros and Theophanes rely on earlier sources that may be related to Michael the Syrian and other Syriac traditions, and whether elements of these accounts were incorporated into their narrative of the five brothers. It is also conceivable that the different versions refer to different events, although the motif of the brothers suggests that they concern the same episode.

Among other sources, Michael the Syrian made use of the Chronicle of John of Ephesus (c. 507-588). Of John's *Ecclesiastical History*, only the third part – covering events up to 588 – has survived; the first two parts must be reconstructed from fragments and from later authors who drew upon John, such as Michael the Syrian himself or the *Chronicle of 1234*.[35] Even

32 The translation has been taken from Bar Hebraeus, transl. Budge, 84; on Bar Hebraeus see the introduction in Bar Hebraeus, Ecclesiastical Chronicle, trans. Wilmshurst, VII-XVI.

33 Zlatarski, Izvestieto, 51; Beševliev, *Protobulgarische Periode*, 188-190.

34 Altheim and Stiehl, Michael der Syrer, 105-106.

35 Johannes Ephesius, *Historiae*, trans. Brooks; van Ginkel, John of Ephesus; Hilken, The Anonymous Syriac Chronicle.

within the surviving third part, the final chapters of the sixth book (chapters 38-49) are lost and can only be reconstructed on the basis of abbreviated and reworked passages preserved in Michael the Syrian's chronicle.[36] This raises the question of whether the passage concerning the three brothers might have belonged to these lost final chapters of John of Ephesus' sixth book, perhaps even to its concluding chapter (49). According to the surviving table of contents, this chapter dealt with »laying waste of the city of Anchialus and concerning the warm baths there«.[37] Significantly, the passage in Michael the Syrian immediately preceding the account of the three Bulgar brothers is generally regarded as deriving from John of Ephesus and describes how the Avar khagan discovered the garments of Anastasia, the wife of Emperor Tiberius, in the recently conquered city of Anchialos on the Black Sea coast.[38] This episode is usually considered one of the final excerpts taken from John of Ephesus. The question, therefore, is whether the subsequent passage – reporting the settlement of Bulgars in Moesia during the reign of Emperor Maurice – might likewise originate from John of Ephesus. If so, this would have far-reaching consequences. Given John's chronological proximity to the events he describes, such an attribution would imply that Emperor Maurice had already permitted the Bulgars to settle in Moesia roughly a century earlier than the chronology presented by Theophanes and Nikephoros. In that case, the version transmitted by Theophanes and Nikephoros would represent a later reworking of the tradition, substantially postdating the Bulgar settlement. The implications would be considerable, as this would require a fundamental reassessment of early Bulgar history; however, such a view is not supported by other sources and has not been adopted by the majority of scholars.

There are, however, also strong arguments against giving priority to the versions of Michael the Syrian and Bar Hebraeus. There is no clear evidence that the passage in question derives from John of Ephesus, nor are there parallel sources that would support a Bulgar settlement as early as the late sixth century.

What does appear clear, by contrast, is that the motif of the three brothers – expanded to five in Theophanes and Nikephoros, who nevertheless name only three of them – points to a common source, or at least to a shared pool of narrative traditions. The Eastern sources underlying Theophanes' chronicle have already been discussed extensively in scholarship. The chronicle as a whole seems to have been composed on the basis of an »Eastern« source, probably compiled in one of the Palestinian monasteries. Theophilus of Edessa (ca. 695-785) has often been suggested as a possible author of such a chronicle, which may have served as one of Theophanes' sources.[39] Theophanes' chronicle itself has been identified as the work of George the Synkellos, who originated in the East, then under the control of the Arab Caliphate.[40] It is therefore quite plausible to assume that such a work could have served as the common source

36 van Ginkel, John of Ephesus, 240.

37 Altheim and Stiehl, Michael der Syrer, 106; Altheim, Geschichte der Hunnen 2, 29-30; Iohannis Johannes Ephesius, *Historiae*, trans. Brooks, XIV.

38 Michel de Syrien, vol 2/X, XXI, trans. Chabot, 362-363.

39 Brooks, The Sources of Theophanes; Pigulevskaja, Theophanes' Chronographia; Conrad, Theophanes and the Arabic; *Theophanis Chronographia*, transl. Mango and Scott, XLIII-XCI; Brandes, Der frühe Islam, 321-327.

40 Mango, Who wrote the Chronicle; Brandes, Der frühe Islam, 330-334.

for the story of the three – or five – brothers transmitted by Theophanes and Nikephoros on the one hand, and by Michael the Syrian and Bar Hebraeus on the other. The question that remains, however, is whether this source – possibly Theophilus of Edessa – situated the events in the reign of Emperor Maurice (582-602) or that of Constantine IV (668-685).

Even if this source dated the events to an earlier period, it remains entirely possible that the later chronology more accurately reflects historical realities, particularly in the absence of independent evidence supporting an earlier dating. What is crucial, therefore, is to acknowledge the precarious ground on which reconstructions based on these narrative traditions ultimately rest.

Another issue concerns the historicity of these narratives. As already noted, the story is usually understood as referring to historical events; nevertheless, a number of inconsistencies remain. One of these relates to the location of Kubrat's realm. As described by Theophanes and Nikephoros, his territory lay in the region of the Maiotis (the Sea of Azov), an area that was certainly not part of the Avar khaganate. In this light, the claim that Kubrat freed himself from Avar rule sits uneasily with the geographical framework of the narrative.[41] Further questions are raised by the richly furnished grave discovered at Malaja Pereščepina (Mala Pereščepina), which included a ring bearing a monogram interpreted by Joachim Werner as *Chobratou patrikiou*, indicating the conferral of the high dignity of *patrikios* by a Byzantine emperor.[42] If this reading – challenged by some scholars[43] – is accepted, it would corroborate Nikephoros' first mention of Kubrat as being on good terms with the Byzantine emperor. If the burial can indeed be identified as that of Kubrat, however, its location poses a further problem: it lies at a considerable distance from the Maiotis, the presumed core area of Kubrat's realm, as well as from the Avar khaganate from which he is said to have liberated himself.

Another source on Kubrat is John of Nikiu, bishop of the Egyptian town of Nikiu, who compiled a Coptic chronicle that survives in an Ethiopian translation of an Arabic version.[44] According to John of Nikiu, Kubrat was the nephew of a certain Organa,[45] was baptised as a child, and grew up at the court of Constantinople. Later, he enjoyed friendly relations with Emperor Heraklios (610-641).[46] Although the Ethiopian version presents the names as *Quetrādes* and *Kuernāka* rather than Kubrat and Organa, it is plausible to identify these figures with the historical Kubrat and Organa.[47] As Walter Pohl has observed, the surviving evidence allows for different reconstructions. One may adopt a »maximalist« Kubrat, merging all available sources into a single figure, or a »minimalist« version, positing a ruler who likely grew up in Constantinople, maintained good relations with Byzantium, and controlled a territory somewhere north of the Black Sea.[48]

41 Pohl, Avars, 323-324; Ziemann, vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht, 146.

42 Werner, Der Grabfund; Bálint, Zur Identifizierung; *idem*, Nochmals über die Identifizierung.

43 Haussig, Einige Bemerkungen.

44 Carile, Giovanni di Nikiu; Booth, Shades of Blues; Beševliev, Zur Chronik.

45 PmbZ #5663 (Organas)

46 John of Nikiu, *Chronicle*, chap. 120, ed. and trans. Zotenberg, 580; trans. Charles.

47 Marquart, Altbulgarische Ausdrücke, 7, fn. 5.; Pohl, Avars, 322.

48 Pohl, Avars, 321-322.

Who, then, of the five sons, who – except for the eldest, Batbayan – departed for different regions? As mentioned before, the second son, Kotragos, is said to have crossed the Tanais (probably the Don); the third, Asparuch, crossed the Danube; the fourth submitted to the Avars, and the fifth moved to Italy. Notably, in the versions of Theophanes and Nikephoros, only three of the five sons are named, suggesting that an earlier version of the story may have only featured three sons. This aligns more closely with the Syrian and Armenian traditions, implying that the additional two sons were later interpolations to update or expand the narrative.[49]

Indeed, historical context lends plausibility to the story with the five sons. There was a substantial Bulgar presence within the Avar khaganate, including Bulgars competing for the position of khagan.[50] We also know of Bulgar leaders such as Kuber[51] and Mauros,[52] who fled the Avar khaganate with mixed groups of Bulgars and Christian captives previously deported to the Avar heartland. These leaders attempted to seize Thessaloniki, and Mauros, for a time, enjoyed Byzantine recognition as *hypatos*, *patrikios*, and *archon*.[53]

The same historical context can be offered for the fifth son, who is said to have moved to Italy. A prominent example is the Bulgar leader Alzeco[54] mentioned by Paulus Diaconus. He is called *Vulgarum Dux* and reportedly offered his services, along with his army, to the Lombard king Grimoald (662-671). Grimoald, however, sent him to his son Romuald in Benevento, instructing him to grant Alzeco and his people land. Romuald complied, assigning them several settlements, including *Sepinum*, *Bovianum*, and *Isernum*. From that time onward, however, Alzeco was not permitted to bear the title of *dux* and was instead required to call himself *gastaldus*.[55]

It remains unclear whether this Alzeco is identical with a certain Bulgar named Alciocus mentioned by Fredegar. According to Fredegar, in the ninth year of King Dagobert's reign (631/632), fierce fighting broke out as an Avar and a Bulgar contended for succession. After the defeat of the Bulgars, approximately 90,000 people were expelled from the Avar Empire and fled to the Frankish kingdom, seeking King Dagobert's permission to settle. Dagobert allowed them to winter in Bavaria, but subsequently orchestrated a massacre. Only 700 families survived and under the leadership of a certain Alciocus fled to the *marca Vinedorum*, where they spent several years under the rule of Walluc, a dux of the Wends.[56]

Whether Alzeco and Alciocus are the same person or not, what matters here is that we have clear evidence of Bulgars being present both within the Avar khaganate and in Lombard Italy. This raises two possibilities when connecting this information to the story of Kubrat's five sons. One option is to read the narrative as reflecting historical events, identifying Kuber

49 Ziemann, Zwischen Geschichte und Mythos.

50 Pohl, Avars, 318-319; Ziemann, Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht, 103-141.

51 PmbZ #4165.

52 PmbZ #4911.

53 Pohl, Avars, 326-335; Ziemann, Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht, 136-141; the main source is the Miracles de saint Demetrius, I, ed. Lemerle, 227-234.

54 PmbZ # 203/corr.

55 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 5,29, ed. Waitz, 96-97; Pohl, Avars, 319-321; Ziemann, Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht, 131-134.

56 Fredegar, Chronicon IV, ed. Krusch, 72, 157; Pohl, Avars, 319-320; Ziemann, Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht, 131-132.

and Alzeco with the unnamed sons of Kubrat. The other is to interpret the addition of the sons who moved to the Avars and Italy as a later interpolation into a story that originally featured only three sons. Most scholars have followed the first option, completing the triad of Batbayan, Kotragos, and Asparuch with Kuber and Alzeco. I have previously argued in favour of the second option.[57] While it is certainly possible – and perhaps even likely – that such stories are rooted in real historical events, they undoubtedly condense and simplify complex processes. In my view, it is plausible that this is precisely what occurred in the narrative of Kubrat's sons. We may therefore turn to a brief discussion of the literary motifs and the preferred geographical settings that could support this interpretation.

The Literary Motif

Parallel sources offer limited help in resolving the question of historicity. The story bears some resemblance to a passage in Joseph Genesios – the conventional name for the otherwise anonymous Greek author of a tenth-century chronicle. Genesios' chronicle, composed between 945 and 959, continues the work of Theophanes.[58] He mentions a leader called *Bulgarios*, who led his people to Moesia:

> The ruler of the Bulgarians, a people descended from both Avars and Khazars who took their name from some lord named Bulgaros, had received from the Romans the land around Dorystolon and Mysia in which to dwell.[59]

The motif of migrating brothers, however, is by no means unique to the Bulgar narrative. Herodotus (4.6), for example, employs it to explain the origins of the Scythians, tracing four tribes to the sons of Targitaus:

> The Scythians say that their nation is the youngest in all the world, and that it came into being on this wise. There appeared in this country, being then desert, a man whose name was Targitaus. His parents, they say – for my part. I do not believe the tale, but it is told – were Zeus and a daughter of the river Borysthenes. Such (it is said) was Targitaus' lineage; and he had three sons, Lipoxaïs, Arpoxaïs, and Colaxaïs, youngest of the three. In the time of their rule (so the story goes) there fell down from the sky into Scythia certain implements, all of gold, namely, a plough, a yoke, a sword, and a flask. The eldest of them, seeing this, came near with intent to take them; but the gold began to burn as he came, and he ceased from his essay; then the second approached, and the gold did again as before; when these two had been driven away by the burning of the gold, last came the youngest brother, and the burning was quenched at his approach; so he took the gold to his own house. At this his elder brothers saw how matters stood and made over the whole royal power to the youngest.[60]

Apart from the motif of the three sons, the mention of the Borysthenes (Βορυσθένης), the Dnieper River, as the grandfather of Targitaus, demonstrates a blend of geography and legend

57 Ziemann, Zwischen Geschichte und Mythos.

58 Iosephi Genesii Libri quattuor, ed. Lesmüller-Werner and Thurn, IX-XVI.

59 Iosephi Genesii Libri quattuor, ed. Lesmüller-Werner and Thurn, 61; transl. Kaldellis, 77.

60 Herodotus, *Historiae*, vol. 1, ed. Rosén, 355-356; transl. Godley, vol 2, book IV, 5, 202-205; Tomaschek, Borysthenes

reminiscent of the account in Theophanes and Nikephoros. A similar narrative appears in Constantine Porphyrogennetos' *De Administrando Imperio*, where he recounts a tale of the Croats: five brothers (Klukas[61], Lobelos[62], Kosentzes[63], Muchlo[64], and Chrobatos[65]) and two sisters (Touga[66] and Bouga[67]) migrate to Dalmatia and subdue the Avars:

> But the Croats at that time were dwelling beyond Bavaria, where the Belocroats are now. From them split off a family of five brothers, Kloukas and Lobelos and Kosentzis and Mouchlo and Chrobatos, and two sisters, Touga and Bouga, who came with their folk to Dalmatia and found the Avars in possession of that land. After they had fought one another for some years, the Croats prevailed and killed some of the Avars and the remainder they compelled to be subject to them.[68]

This pivotal passage for early Croatian history has, unsurprisingly, attracted considerable scholarly attention. Most studies focus on the extent to which the narrative reflects condensed historical events, and on the geographical location of the »Belocroats« or White Croats.[69] Yet, the recurrence of these literary motifs also raises important questions about the historical reliability of such accounts. Do they preserve genuine events, or do they primarily reflect a convenient and familiar narrative framework used to explain the emergence of new peoples? And, if the latter, are there at least some elements that might plausibly be traced back to historical reality?

In any case, these parallels suggest that the narrative of migrating or competing brothers fits within a widespread literary motif, one that extends beyond the Bulgar context and into the broader historiographical and mythological traditions of antiquity and the early medieval world.

The Geographic Setting – The Maeotis

Theophanes and Nikephoros, as well as the Syrian versions of the story, place Old Great Bulgaria in the region of the Maeotian Lake. Curiously, this is the only instance in which the Maeotis is associated with the Bulgars, as most other references locate them elsewhere. Why, then, was this particular region chosen?

The Maeotis had long served as a traditional point of origin in earlier sources. Jordanes, drawing on Priscus, names it as the starting point for the Huns. While hunting a doe, Hun hunters supposedly reached the opposite bank of the Maeotis in Scythia. Enthused by the

61 PmbZ # 3662.
62 PmbZ # 4609.
63 PmbZ # 4064.
64 PmbZ # 5187.
65 PmbZ # 1147.
66 PmbZ # 8532.
67 PmbZ # 1046.
68 Constantine Porphyrogenitus, DAI, vol. I, ed. Moravcsik, trans. Jenkins, 142-143, l. 65; vol. II, trans. Jenkins, 116-117; Pohl, Avars, 312-313.
69 From the abundant literature, I will mention only a few of the more recent works: Borri, White Croatia; Živkovic, Izvor Konstantina; Džino, Local knowledge.

land, they reported back to their people, who soon set out and conquered it.[70] Procopius similarly identifies the Maeotis as the homeland of the Kutrigurs and Utigurs. According to him, these peoples crossed the Maeotis during a hunt, expelled the Goths, and divided the territory between them. A ruler with two sons – Utigur and Kutrigur – is mentioned; upon his death, the sons divided authority and their peoples accordingly. The Kutrigurs remained in the area, while the Utigurs, after spotting a doe during a hunt, crossed the water between the Maeotis and the Black Sea, attacking or driving out the Goths on the opposite shore before returning to their homeland.[71] Agathias, successor to Procopius, reports that the Huns once inhabited the region east of the Maeotis and north of the Don, along with other peoples who settled at the edge of the Imaion (Himaion) Mountains in Asia. These populations were formerly referred to as Scythians or Huns.[72]

This recurring use of Maeotis as the point of origin for nomadic peoples suggests the existence of a longstanding literary tradition.[73] Since Kubrat and his realm – according to all sources other than the story of the five sons – were likely not located near the Maeotis but rather closer to the Avars, further to the west, it seems plausible that the geographical setting was chosen precisely because many other origin stories located their protagonists there. The use of such widespread narrative patterns does not in itself undermine a source's historical value; rather, it necessitates a careful analysis of the various literary elements it contains in order to render it historically fruitful. The versions of the story found in Theophanes and Nikephoros present a familiar narrative pattern that very likely reflects historical events related to the names involved; yet, the story itself represents a highly condensed, modified, and distorted version of what may have actually occurred in the region.

Conclusion

Most scholars have relied on later sources to reconstruct the early history of the Bulgarians, even though these sources rarely preserve a coherent or internally consistent narrative. Rather, they tend to rework earlier traditions, incorporating elements that reflect contemporary political and cultural realities. The blending of literary motifs with historical references has produced simplified and familiar narratives, resulting in the early history of the First Bulgarian Empire being far less straightforward than is often assumed. A more nuanced understanding therefore requires a comparative approach that pays close attention to the specific contexts in which these narratives were produced.

This does not mean that such stories are useless for the reconstruction of historical events – quite the contrary. While they are shaped by widely shared literary patterns, they also reveal how the past was perceived, interpreted, and transmitted within learned milieus. All written sources for this period are literary texts that employ the conventions and techniques of literacy to convey their content. This does not diminish their value as historical evidence, but it

70 Iordanis Romana et Getica, XXIV, 123-127, ed. Mommsen, 89.

71 Prokop, De bellis libri, vol. V-VIII, VIII, 5, 1-13, ed. Haury and Wirth, 503-505.

72 Agathias, *Histories*, V, 11, 2-3, ed. Keydell, 176-177.

73 Marquart, Streifzüge, 529-530.

does require historians to analyse them from a literary as well as a historical perspective in order to assess their evidentiary weight.

Narratives of this kind serve multiple functions and pursue various aims; they were not composed to meet the expectations of modern historians of the early medieval world. Reading them as straightforward eyewitness reports risks obscuring the complexity of early medieval historiography. Instead, they demand careful interpretation and contextualisation. Such an approach will rarely yield unequivocal statements about past events, but rather degrees of probability and historically plausible scenarios.

At the same time, as the case of Bulgarian history illustrates, these texts possess their own histories of reception, repetition, and interpretation. They have become integral to processes of identity formation, particularly in the context of the modern nation state, where they serve to assert a shared past and to emphasise continuity with the medieval period. The texts discussed here have thus accumulated layers of meaning through successive readings and scholarly interpretations. Historians inevitably approach them through this dense interpretative framework, shaped by the work of earlier scholarship and its conclusions. This can make it more difficult to recover their original contexts, as well as to define both their limitations and their horizons within their own time.

Our very classification of these narratives as »origin stories« already situates them within a particular analytical framework that may not always do justice to their original function. Yet, we are equally compelled to read them from within our own conceptual worlds in order to make them intelligible and meaningful. Whatever the original reasons for which the story of Kubrat's sons was composed, transmitted, or reworked, we unavoidably read it as a story addressed to us. Whether it can open a window onto past events depends less on the nature of the information it conveys than on our ability to use it to construct careful, plausible, and critically grounded historical arguments.

References

Abbreviations

CFHB Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae
MGH Monumenta Germaniae Historica

Primary Sources

Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum, 2/2: Concilium universale Constantinopolitanum III/1-3, ed. Rudolf Riedinger (Berlin 1990/1992/1995).

Agathias, *Histories*, ed. Rudolf Keydell, *Agathiae Myrinaei Historiarum libri V*, CFHB 2 (Berlin 1967).

Anania Širakac'i, transl. Robert H. Hewsen, *The Geography of Ananias of Širak (Ašxarhac'uyc'). The Long and the Short Recensions. Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Wiesbaden 1992).

Bar Hebraeus, *Chronography*, trans. Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, vol. I (reprint), (Amsterdam, 1976).

Bar Hebraeus, *The Ecclesiastical Chronicle*, trans. David Wilmshurst, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 40 (Piscataway, 2016).

Constantine Porphyrogenitus *De administrando imperio* (DAI) Vol. I: Greek text, ed. Gyula Moravcsik, trans. Romilly James Heald Jenkins, CFHB 1 (Washington D.C., 1967).

Constantine Porphyrogenitus De administrando imperio Vol. II: Commentary, ed. Romilly James Heald Jenkins (London 1962).

Fredegar, *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii scholastici libri IV cum continuationibus*, ed. Bruno Krusch, *Fredegarii et aliorum chronica. Vitae sanctorum*, MGH Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum 2 (Hannover 1888) 1-214.

Herodotus, *Historiae* Vol. 1, ed. Haiim B. Rosén, Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Latinorum Teubneriana (Leipzig 1987); Englisch translation: Alfred Denis Godley, *Herodotus*, 4 vols, vol. II, books III and IV (Cambridge, MA, 1963).

Imennik na bālgarskite chanove. Kritično izdanie s komentar I objasnitelni beležki, ed. Ivan Bogdanov (Sofia 1981).

Iordanis Romana et Getica, ed. Theodor Mommsen, MGH Auctores antiquissimi 5/1 (Berlin 1882).

Iosephi Genesii Regum Libri quattuor, ed. Anni Lesmüller-Werner and Ioannes Thurn (CFHB Ser. Berol. 14) (Berlin 1978); English translation: Anthony Kaldellis, Genesios on the Reigns of the Emperors (Canberra, 1998).

Johannes, Ephesius, Historiae ecclesiasticae pars tertia, ed. Ernest W. Brooks, CSCO 106, Scriptores Syri 55 (Louvain 1936).

John of Nikiu, *Chronicle = Chronique de Jean, évêque de Nikiou, Texte éthopien*, ed. and trans. Hermann Zotenberg, *Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque nationale* XXIV1 (Paris 1883) 120-608; English translation: Robert H. Charles, *The Chronicle of John, Coptic Bishop of Nikiu Being a History of Egypt Before and During the Arab Conquest* (reprint), (Amsterdam, 1980).

Michel le Syrien, ed. and trans. Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche* I-IV (reprint), (Brussels, 1963).

Miracles de saint Demetrius, ed. Paul Lemerle, *Les plus anciens recueils des miracles de saint Demetrius et la pénétration des Slaves dans les Balkans I: le texte, II: commentaire* (Paris 1979/1981).

Nikephoros. Patriarch of Constantinople, ed. and trans. Cyril Mango, *Short History. Text, Translation and Commentary* (Washington, DC 1990).

Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum,* ed. Georg Waitz, MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum 48 (Hannover, 1878) (reprint 2005).

Prokop*, De bellis libri V-VIII,* ed. Jacob Haury and Gerhard Wirth, *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia, Vol. 2* (reprint), (Munich, 2001).

Theophanis Chronographia, ed. Karl de Boor, 2 vols (Leipzig, 1883-1885), vol. I: *Textum Graecum continens* (reprint), (Hildesheim, 1963); English translation: Cyril Mango and Roger Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor. Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284-813* (Oxford 1997).

Literature

Aladžov, A., Archeologičeska karta na Pliska (Sofia, 2014).

Altheim, Franz, Geschichte der Hunnen. Band 2. Die Hephthaliten in Iran (second edition), (Berlin, 1969).

Altheim, Franz and Ruth Stiehl, Michael der Syrer über das erste Auftreten der Bulgaren und Chazaren, *Byzantion 28 (1958)* 105-118.

Angelov, Dimităr S., *Obrazuvane na bălgarskata narodnost* (second edition), (Sofia, 1981).

Angelov, Dimităr, Borislav Primov and Petăr Petrov (eds.), *Istorija na Bălgarija. Bd. 2: Părva bălgarska dăržava* (Sofia, 1981).

Bálint, Csanád, Zur Identifizierung des Grabes von Kuvrat, *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* XXXVI (1984) 263-269.

Bálint, Csanád, Nochmals über die Identifizierung des Grabes von Kuvrat, *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* XLII (1988) 377-389.

Beševliev, Veselin, *Die protobulgarische Periode in der bulgarischen Geschichte* (Amsterdam, 1981).

Beševliev, Veselin I., Zur Chronik des Johannes von Nikiu CXX 46-49, *Byzantinobulgarica* 5 (1978) 229-236.

Booth, Phil., Shades of blues and greens in the Chronicle of John of Nikiu, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 104 (2011) 555-601.

Borri, Francesco, White Croatia and the arrival of the Croats: An interpretation of Constantine Porphyrogenitus on the oldest Dalmatian history, *Early Medieval Europe* 19 (2011) 204-231.

Božilov, Ivan, *Familijata na Asenevci (1186-1460). Genealogija i prosopografija* (second reprinted edition), (Sofia, 1994).

Božilov, Ivan, *Car Simeon Veliki (893-927). Zlatnijat vek na Srednovekovna Bălgarija* (Sofia, 1983).

Božilov, Ivan and Christo Dimitrov, Protobulgarica – Zametki po istorii protobulgar do seredny IX v., *Byzantinobulgarica* 9 (1995) 7-61.

Božilov, Ivan and Vasil Gjuzelev, *Istorija na srednovekovna Bălgarija, VII – XIV vek* (Sofia, 1999).

Brandes, Wolfram, Der frühe Islam in der byzantinischen Historiographie. Anmerkungen zur Quellenproblematik der *Chronographia* des Theophanes, in: Andreas Goltz, Hartmut Leppin and Heinrich Schlange-Schöningen (eds.), *Jenseits der Grenzen. Beiträge zur spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Geschichtsschreibung*, Millennium Studies 25 (Berlin, 2009) 313-344.

Brooks, Ernest W., The Sources of Theophanes and the Syriac Chroniclers, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 15 (1906) 578-587.

Bužaški, Evlogi *et al* (eds.), *Bălgarija 1300. Institucii i dăržavna tradicija, 1-3* (Sofia 1981-1983).

Carile, Antonio, Giovanni di Nikiu, cronista bizantino-copto del VII secolo, *Felix Ravenna 121/122 (1981)* 103-155; reprint: *Byzance, Hommage A.N. Stratos – Byzantium Tribute to Andrea N. Stratos* Vol. 1-2 (Athens, 1986) 353-398.

Conrad, Lawrence I., Theophanes and the Arabic historical tradition: Some indication of intercultural transmission, *Byzantinische Forschungen* 15 (1990) 1-44.

Deleva-Granberg, Antoaneta, Ezikovijat stroj na starobălgarskija ezik spored dannite na analiza na prabălgarskite zaemki v nego (fonetika, vokalna sistema), *Slavistični izsledvanija. Sbornik prosveten na XII meždunaroden kongres na slavistite 7* (Sofia, 2005) 29-40.

Dimitrov, Dimităr, *Prabălgarite po severnoto i zapadnoto černomore (kăm văprosa za tjachnoto prisăstvie i istorija v dnešnite ruski zemi i roljata im pri obrazuvaneto na bălgarskata dăržava)* (Varna, 1987).

Dimitrov, Janko and Rašo Rašev, *Pliska. 100 godini archeologičeski razkopki* (Šumen, 1999).

Dobrev, Ivan, Kirilica, in: Petăr Dinekov (ed.), *Kirilo-Metodievska enciklopedija* 2 (Sofia, 1995) 301-316.

Dobrev, Petăr, *Prabălgarite. Proizchod, ezik, kultura* (Nov pročit) (Sofia, 1991).

Dobrev, Petăr, *Ezikăt na Asparuchovite i Kuberovi bălgari* (Sofia, 1995).

Dončeva-Petkova, Ljudmila, Pliska i nejnata istorija, in: Ljudmila Dončeva-Petkova and Joachim Henning (eds.), *Părvoprestolna Pliska. 100 godini archeologičeski proučvanija* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999) 7-17.

Dunlop, Douglas M., *The History of the Jewish Khazars* (Princeton, 1954).

Džino, Danijel, Local knowledge and wider contexts: Stones of the arrival of the Croats *in De Administrando Imperio* in the past and present, in: Danijel Džino and Kenneth R. Parry (eds.), *Byzantium, Its Neighbours and Its Cultures* (Brisbane, 2017) 89-104.

von Erdmann, Elisabeth, Die glagolitische Sprache und Schrift (Glagoljica), in: Joachim Bahlcke, Stefan Rohdewald and Thomas Wünsch (eds.), *Religiöse Erinnerungsorte in Ostmitteleuropa. Konstitution und Konkurrenz im nationen- und epochenübergreifenden Zugriff* (Berlin, 2013) 241-250.

Georgiev, Pavel, Za stolicata na Asparuchova Bălgarija, in: *Istoričeski Pregled 58/ 5-6 (2003)* 208-227.

Georgiev, Pavel, Pliska – ezičeskoto središte na Bălgarija prez IX vek, in: Pavel Georgiev and Janko Dimitrov (eds.), *Pliska – Preslav tom 13*. V pamet na professor Totju Totev (1930-2015) (Sofia 2018) 21-79.

Graševa, Liljana and Tatjana Slavova, Preslavsko knižovno središte, in: Kirilo-Metodievska enciklopedija 3 (Sofia, 2003) 312-327.

Gregorio, Giuseppe de, Otto Kresten, Ἐφέτος – »In diesem Jahr«. Zur Datierung des Bulgarenfeldzugs des Kaisers Konstantínos IV. (Sommer/Herbst 680), *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici* 43 (2006) 21-56.

Haussig, Hans, Einige Bemerkungen zu der Arbeit von J. Werner über den Schatz von Malaja Pereščepina, *Materialia Turcica* 10 (1984) 1-30.

Hilkens, Andy, *The Anonymous Syriac Chronicle of 1234 and its sources*, Bibliothèque de Byzantion 18 (Leuven, 2018).

Ilčev, Petăr, Glagolica, in: *Kirilo-Metodievska enciklopedija* 1 (Sofia, 1985) 491-509.

Lakova, Meri, *Za prabălgarite i technija ezik* (Sofia, 2012).

Madgearu, Alexandru, *The Asanids. The Political and Military History of the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185-1280)* (Leiden, 2017).

Mango, Cyril, Who wrote the Chronicle of Theophanes? *Zbornik radova Vizantoloskog Instituta* 18 (1978) 9-17; reprint in: *idem*, *Byzantium and its Image* No. XI (London, 1984) 9-17.

Marquart, Josef, *Die Chronologie der alttürkischen Inschriften* (Leipzig, 1898).

Marquart, Josef, *Osteuropäische und ostasiatische Streifzüge. Ethnologische und historisch-topographische Stadien zur Geschichte des 9. und 10. Jahrhunderts (ca. 840-940)* (Leipzig, 1903).

Marquart, Josef, Die altbulgarischen Ausdrücke in der Inschrift von Čatalar und der bulgarischen Fürstenliste, in: *Izvestija na Russkago Archeologičeskago Instituta v Konstantinopol* (IRAIK) 15 (1911) 1-30.

Milo, Peter, Petăr Dimitrov, Mariya Manolova-Voykova, Tomáš Tencer, Beáta Milová and Michal Vágner, Into the Tsar's residence: geophysical survey of the early medieval Bulgarian capital of Veliki Preslav, *Antiquity* 97/391 (2023) 176-193.

Mikkola, Jooseppi Julius, Die Chronologie der türkischen Donaubulgaren, *Journal de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 30/33 (1913-1918) 1-25.

Moravcsik, Gyula, *Byzantinoturcica I: Die byzantinischen Quellen der Geschichte der Turkvölker, II: Sprachreste der Turkvölker in den byzantinischen Quellen*, BBA 10, 11 (Berlin 1958).

Ohme, Heinz. *Das 6. Ökumenische Konzil von Konstantinopel (680/681): Eine engelgleiche Versammlung?* (Berlin, 2025).

Petrov, Petăr, *Chan Asparuch. Osnovopoložnikăt na bălgarskata dăržava* (Sofia, 1994).

Pigulevskaja Nina, Theophanes' Chronographia and the Syrian Chronicles, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinischen Gesellschaft* 16 (1967) 55-60.

Pirivatrić, Srđan, *Samuilovata dăržava. Obchvat i charakter* (Sofia, 1997), Bulgarian translation of the Serbian edition by *idem*, *Samuilova država. Obim i karakter* (Belgrade, 1997).

Pohl, Walter, *The Avars. A Steppe Empire in Central Europe, 567-822* (Ithaca, NY, 2018).

Pritsak, Omeljan, *Die bulgarische Fürstenliste und die Sprache der Protobulgaren* (Wiesbaden, 1955).

PmbZ = Ralph-Johannes Lilie, Claudia Ludwig, Thomas Pratsch, Beate Zielke, *et al.* (eds.), *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit* (Berlin 1998-2002), accessed online on 15 May 2026: https://www.degruyterbrill.com/database/pmbz/html.

Rašev, Rašo: *Bălgarskata ezičeska kultura VII – IX vek* (Sofia, 2008).

Rašev, Rašo, Georgi Atanasov, Živko Vojnikov, Georgi Vladimorov, Nikolaj Chrisimov, *Bălgarska nacionalna istorija. Bd. 2: Drevnite Bălgari. Starata Velika Bălgarija i nejnite naslednici v iztočna Evropa prez srednovekovieto* (Veliko Tărnovo, 2013).

Săbotinov, Anton: *Bălgarija pri car Samuil i negovite naslednici. 976 – 1018 g. Izvori i literatura (opit za obobštenie)* vol. 1 (Sofia, 2008).

Stampfer, Shaul, Did the Khazars convert to Judaism?, *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, and Society n.s.* 19/3 (Spring/Summer 2013) 1-72.

Tomaschek, Wilhelm, Borysthenes, in: P*aulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* Bd. III/1 (1897) 736-739.

Todorov-Bemberski, Christo, Prabălgarski ezik. Osnovi na bălgarskata etnonimija (Sofia, 2020).

Totev, Totju, *Veliki Preslav* (Varna, 1993).

Tzenoff, Gantscho, *Die Abstammung der Bulgaren und die Urheimat der Slaven. Eine historisch-philologische Untersuchung über die Geschichte der alten Thrakoillyrier, Skythen, Goten, Hunnen, Kelten u. a.* (Berlin, 1930).

van Ginkel, Jan, *John of Ephesus: A Monophysite Historian in Sixth-Century Byzantium*. Unpublished PhD Thesis (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 1995).

Văžarova, Živka, *Slavjani i prabălgari (po danni na nekropolite ot 6 – 11 v. na teritorijata na Bălgarija)* (Sofia, 1976).

Voynikov, Živko, The ancient Bulgarians – who were they? A new look at the old question, *Bălgarija, bălgaritie i Evropa – mit, istorija, săvremie (Online)* 17/1 (2025) 9-47.

Weltecke, Dorothea, *The "Description of the Times" by Mōr Michael the Great (1126-1199). A Study on its Historical and its Historiographical Context.* Translated by Anthony Runia, revised by Dorothea Weltecke and Thomas Palmer, Eastern Christian Studies 27 (Leuven, 2021).

Werner, Joachim, *Der Grabfund von Malaja Pereščepina und Kuvrat, Kagan der Bulgaren* (München, 1984).

Ziemann, Daniel, *Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht. Die Entstehung Bulgariens im frühen Mittelalter (7.-9. Jh.)* (Köln, 2007).

Ziemann, Daniel, Zwischen Geschichte und Mythos–Großbulgarien unter Khan Kubrat (7. Jh.), *Bulgaria Mediaevalis* 1 (2010) 17-49.

Živkovic, Tibor D., Izvor Konstantina Porfirogeneta za najstariju povijest Hrvata i Srba (Sažetak), *Radovi. Zavod za Hrvatsku Povijest* 42 (2010) 117-131.

Zlatarski, Vasil, *Istorija na bălgarskata dăržava prez srednite vekove, tom I Părvo bălgarsko carstvo. I, 1: Epocha na huno-bălgarskoto nadmoštie (679-852)* (Sofia, 1918).

Zlatarski, Vasil, *Istorija na bălgarskata dăržava prez srednite vekove, tom I Părvo bălgarsko carstvo. I, 2: Ot slavjanizacijata na dăržavata do padaneto na părvoto carstvo (852-1018)* (Sofia, 1927).

Zlatarski, Vasil, *Istorija na bălgarskata dăržava prez srednite vekove* 3: Vtoroto Bălgarsko carstvo. Bălgarija pri Asenevci, 1187-1280 (reprint), (Sofia, 1994).

Zlatarski, Vasil, Izvestieto na Michaila Sirijski za preselenieto na bălgarite *Izvestija na Bălgarskoto Istoričesko Družestvo* (IBID) 4 (1915) 37-52; reprint in: *idem*, *Izbrani proizvedenija* 1 (Sofia, 1970) 52-67.

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them in the Eurasian Steppe: The Beast Motif in Origin Stories of Eurasian Steppe Peoples, 4th-9th Centuries

Sandra Wabnitz*

During the fourth to the ninth centuries, various peoples reached the western and eastern fringes of the Eurasian steppe, establishing their dominions as far as the Carpathian Basin and along the borders of Chinese territory. Here, the new neighbours of these peoples were confronted with a (semi-)nomadic culture in contrast to their own sedentary societies. Contemporary historiographers attempted to fit these mounted newcomers into their respective *Weltordnung* by explaining their cultures and beginnings, writing what modern scholarship now refers to as »origin stories«. Modern historiographical trends have demonstrated the various functions of these narratives in their religious, cultural and source contexts. However, few comparative, global studies have been attempted that analyse both Eastern and Western efforts to place steppe peoples' history and society within their frames of reference. This article interrogates the potential of such a comparative approach in the study of steppe peoples' origin stories to reveal both the interests of external authors as well as the traditions of the peoples from the Eurasian steppe. It focuses on the narratives that preface the majority of surviving ethnographic excursuses on steppe peoples in Latin, Byzantine and Chinese historiographies of the fourth to the ninth centuries, comparing them within a global setting to evaluate the contextual factors that shaped the sources such narratives are embedded within. While many common forms of motif exist within these sources, the comparison here focuses on the use of beasts as fantastical motifs. Through this methodology, this article endeavours to show that many of the key ingredients of these origin stories are not merely the author's inventions, motivated by the derogatory desire to Other their neighbours as barbaric, but were also significant for the steppe peoples themselves, transcending cultural boundaries across Eurasia.

Keywords: Eurasian Studies; Medieval Historiography; Comparative Studies; Mentalities; Social History; Cultural History; Eurasian Steppe Peoples.

---

* Correspondence details: Sandra Wabnitz, ifk Junior Fellow (Vienna, Austria), wabnitz@ifk.ac.at, sandra.wabnitz@univie.ac.at.

This article is part of the thematic section *Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasian Comparison*, guest editor: Reinier Langelaar. To read all related articles, please access https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026.

The topic of this article is part of a broader analysis of origin stories in the author's PhD project *Horse Lords of the Eurasian Steppe: A Historiographical Comparison, 4th-9th centuries*.

eISSN-Nr. 2412-3196
DOI 10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026s184

Introduction

> When the blue sky was created above and the brown earth was created below, humankind was created between them. Over the humans, my forefathers Bumın Kağan and Işтemi Kağan ascended the throne. Having become kağan, they established the Türk people's realm and laws, and organized them. [The people] in the four directions were all enemies. They campaigned and seized all the people in the four directions. They pacified all [those people]. They caused those who had heads to bow down and those who had knees to kneel down. They settled people in the east as far as the Kadırkan mountain forest and in the west as far as the Iron Gate. Thus, the completely unified Kök Türk people took up residence between the above two places. The kağans were wise and brave. Their ministers were wise and brave too. Their officials and people were impartial. Because of this, they founded such an empire. They established a realm and made laws.[1]

This text comes from the Orkhon inscriptions, two monuments erected in honour of the brothers Kül-Tegin and Bilge Khagan in 732 and 735, respectively, both of whom were members of the ruling Ashina family. It recounts the beginning of the world, the creation of humanity and the establishment of the Turkic polity, while legitimising the Heaven-given rule of the Turkic khagans, shaping the Turkic people's group identity and cementing their place in the *Weltordnung* alongside other peoples and polities.[2] This process of legitimation of rule as well as the statement and formation of a group identity was the primary aim of this type of narrative, which is referred to in modern scholarship as an »origin story«.[3]

This narrative from the Orkhon inscriptions, which can be dated to the Second Turkic Khaganate (682-744), is a rare example of an origin story provided first hand by a people of the Eurasian steppe, as the vast majority of steppe peoples of the ancient and medieval world left behind few, if any, written narratives of their origin.[4] However, through regular and protracted contact with sedentary cultures, such as the Latin West as well as the Byzantine and the Chinese empires, these peoples and their supposed origin stories found their way into numerous external historiographies.

In contrast to the aim of the internal narrative from the Orkhon inscriptions, external authors primarily explored the question of where these peoples came from and how they reached the locale wherein they encountered the authors' own Latin, Greek or Chinese-writing culture. The authors thus considered a migration narrative be an integral part of an origin story for fitting these »mounted peoples« into their established worldview.[5] It is also not uncommon to find different versions of an origin and migration narrative transmitted in the extant material, some of which include fantastical and otherworldly elements, such as

1 Chen, *History of the Second Türk Empire*, 199.

2 Golden, Ethnogonic Tales, 306.

3 Plassmann, *Origo gentis*, 12. Reynolds, Medieval origines gentium.

4 Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 30.

5 Plassmann, *Origo gentis*, 360-361.

deities, evil spirits, witches and beasts of a divine and spiritual nature.[6] However, the inclusion of these fantastical motifs should not be entirely dismissed as the external authors' invention. The role of the wolf in origin stories of Central Asian peoples has been well-discussed in numerous studies, the most recent being Joo-Yup Lee's article on the origin myths of the Turkic Peoples in this volume of *Medieval Worlds*, which have demonstrated the wolf as a significant part of these peoples' traditions, particularly in the surviving archaeological evidence (e.g. Bugut stele).[7] However, origin narratives include other fantastic beasts that have yet to be thoroughly interrogated in connection with the surviving archaeological evidence.

This article provides a comprehensive exploration of surviving records from Latin, Byzantine and Chinese historiographies between the fourth to the ninth centuries CE, a period where various steppe peoples from the Eurasian steppe reached its western and eastern fringes, in order to outline and explain key examples of the use of fantastic beasts in origin stories of steppe peoples. It does this by considering the roles of fantastic beasts in the origin stories of various peoples, first as mythical ancestors and second as catalysts for their migrations. While origin stories can exist within a wide variety of texts belonging to different genres, such as chronicles, genealogies and diplomatic texts, this article focuses on narratives included in ethnographic accounts, taking into account preceding historiographies that established recognisable *topoi* and functioned as contributions to the continued transmission of cultural memory.[8] This article thus builds upon the established concepts of ethnogenesis and cultural memory as developed by the scholars of the Vienna School, further expanding the discussion of »barbarian« cultures.[9]

Faced with the different culture of the peoples from the Eurasian steppe, the ethnographic reports that authors from the Latin West, Byzantine and Chinese empires included in their historiographies reflect the view of a sedentary people imposed onto a (semi-)nomadic culture. This parallel makes them well-suited for a comparative approach that, here, focuses on origin stories featuring a fantastic beast or animal motif.[10] Through this comparative analysis of surviving evidence, this article demonstrates that fantastic beast motifs were not merely inventions of external authors, motivated by the derogatory desire to emphasise Otherness

6 The origin narratives of steppe peoples have been the subject of several modern historical studies, most of which have not gone beyond focusing on specific steppe peoples. See e.g. Pohl, *Avars*, 33-47; Golden, Ethnogonic Tales; Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, 444-455. Ziemann, *Vom Wandervolk*, 31-43. In his monograph, Lee explores the origins of various Turkic peoples; Lee, *Turkic Peoples*.

7 See e.g. Lee, Origin myths; Drompp, Lone wolf; Golden, Ethnogonic Tales; Jila, Myths and traditional beliefs.

8 Wolfram, *et al*, Origo gentis, 1.

9 Pohl, Telling the difference; Pohl and Wood, Introduction.

10 Ford, *Rome, China, and the Barbarians*, 15. While the number of works using the method of historical comparison has increased in recent years, there are very few comparative studies of ethnographic representations of steppe peoples in a global context. The few examples include: Siep Stuurman analyses Herodotus' *Historiae* and Sima Qian's *Shiji*, and Randolph Ford compares the ethnographic writing in Rome with the Chinese empires. Stuurman, Herodotus and Sima Qian; Ford, *Rome, China, and the Barbarians*.

or dehumanise these peoples, but were based on well-established ideas transmitted both through textual memory and cultural exchange with the steppe peoples themselves.[11]

Mythical Ancestry

When authors of ethnographic texts set about exploring the origins of various steppe peoples in their works, it was common to outline the genealogy of a people or their ruling family by tracing them back to their (predominantly mythical) progenitors.[12] In some cases, these ancestors are of a bestial nature. One recurring fantastic beast motif shared by various steppe peoples that appears in Chinese accounts of this period is that of the wolf.[13] The origin stories of the Turks (known as the *Tujue* in Chinese sources), and another Turkic-speaking nomadic people called the Gaoche, are particularly prominent examples involving a fantastical wolf ancestor, which shall be examined here in more detail.[14]

Chinese sources transmit three different versions of the Turk's origin narrative, but only two mention their lupine origins, which Peter Golden refers to as »Wolf Tale I« and »Wolf Tale II«. »Wolf Tale I« is transmitted in three Chinese official histories, namely the seventh-century *Zhoushu*, *Suishu* and *Beishi*. The earliest account is recorded in the Z*houshu* as follows:[15]

> The ancestors of the Türks lived on the right bank of the Western Sea. […] They formed a tribe that was independent of the Xiongnu, but later were attacked by a neighbouring state and all were killed except for a ten-year old boy. When the enemy soldiers saw that he was so young, they did not have the heart to kill him, so they cut off his feet and threw him into a grass-covered swamp. Here, there was a she-wolf who fed the young boy meat. He grew up and had relations with the she-wolf, who became pregnant. When the king of the neighbouring state learned that the youth was still alive, he again sent men to kill him. When they saw a she-wolf beside the young man, they wanted to kill her too. The she-wolf fled to a mountain in the north in the state of Gaochang (Turfan). There was a cave in this mountain in which there was a broad plain with abundant grass. This plain, which stretched out for hundreds of li and was surrounded on all sides by mountains. The she-wolf hid in the mountains. Here, she gave birth to ten sons. When they grew up, they went out of the cave and married women from the outside. They brought many children into the world. Each of these descendants took a family name and one of them took the name Ashina. Their children and grandchildren increased until they constituted some hundreds of families. After some generations, they became subjects of the Ruru. In the period of the Great Yabğu their lines/families became stronger. They settled/lived in the southern slopes of the Jinshan (Altay Mountains) and worked as blacksmiths for the Ruru. Since the Jinshan

11 Pines, Beasts or humans; Goetz and Wood, Introduction.

12 Ford, *Rome, China, and the Barbarians*, 56-64.

13 Beyond the fourth and ninth centuries CE, the wolf also plays an important part in the origin narratives of other steppe peoples, such as the Wusun and the Mongols. See Jila, Myths and traditional beliefs; Drompp, Lone wolf; Golden, Ethnogonic Tales, 206-310.

14 Joo-Yup Lee's comparative study in this issue of *Medieval Worlds* provides an overview of the origin narratives of different Turkic-speaking groups from the pre- to post-Mongol period. This article focuses solely on the narrative of the Gaoche and the Turks (*Tujue*).

15 Golden, Ethnogonic Tales, 297.

had the appearance of a helmet (兜鍪 *doumou*); and they called a ›helmet‹ *tujue*, they called themselves *Tujue*.[16]

In the course of the narrative, the she-wolf takes on several different roles in support of the Turk's ancestor: as a nurse, she ensures his survival; as his sexual partner, she saves the boy's, and thereby the group's, genealogical line from extinction. With the boy's descendants' safety assured, the she-wolf disappears from the narrative, no doubt because she had fulfilled her roles as nursemaid, partner, mother and saviour. The she-wolf plays a »typical« female role in this origin stories, namely by giving birth to and protecting the progenitor or, in this case, the progenitors of a people, one of whom is especially emphasised and who turns out to be the ancestor of the ruling family, the Ashina.[17] While the nursing-wolf motif is used in various origin narratives in western and the eastern Eurasia, such as in the well-known story of Romulus and Remus or the origin narrative of the Wusun, the transition from nurse to sexual partner is far rarer.[18] Drompp suggests that »myths and folktales involving animals [sic] nurses may be sanitised versions of earlier tales in which animals are indeed the true, original ancestors of a given people«.[19]

The version of »Wolf Tale I« from the *Suishu* offers an intriguing distinction to the narrative from the *Zhoushu*. Despite the close proximity of the *Zhoushu* and the *Suishu* – the compilation of both works being completed at the Historiography Institute under emperor Taizong (r. 626-649) in the year 636 CE – a comparison reveals key differences between their accounts.[20] According to the *Zhoushu*, the animal fled to the mountain; however, the *Suishu* adds a divine flavour to the story and recounts how the wolf »seeming possessed, suddenly reached the west of the sea and stopped on the top of a mountain«.[21] By further emphasising the role of a divine power in the narrative, the text makes it clear that the Ashina family were supported by more than natural forces alone, as they also had a supernatural power on their side.[22]

Turning our attention to »Wolf Tale II«, which is transmitted in the *Zhoushu* and the *Beishi*, it is interesting that the lupine ancestry of the Ashina is only mentioned at the beginning of the narrative, which states:[23] »The leader of the group was called Abangbu, who had seventeen [*Beishi*: seventy brothers]. One of them was called Yizhi Nishidu, who was born of a wolf.«[24] In contrast to »Wolf Tale I«, only one of the brothers was descended from a she-wolf,

16 Linghu Defen, *Zhoushu* 50.907-908, trans. Golden, Ethnogonic Tales, 298-299. A slightly different version of »Wolf Tale I« can be found in the *Suishu* and the *Beishi*. Wei Zheng, *Suishu* 84.1863-1864; Li Yanshou, *Beishi* 99.3285. Golden, Ethnogonic Tales, 297-300.

17 Geary, *Women*, 3.

18 Drompp, Lone wolf, 524. The Turkic example is the only one in this period of which I am aware.

19 Drompp, Lone wolf, 525.

20 The *Beishi* merges these two versions of »Wolf Tale I« together. On the context of origin of the *Zhoushu*, the *Suishu* and the *Beishi*, see: Pearce, Zhou shu; Xiong, Sui shu; Graff, Bei shi.

21 »[…]其狼若爲神所憑，欻然至於海東，止於山上。« Wei Zheng, *Suishu* 84.1863, trans. Wabnitz.

22 Drompp, Lone wolf, 525.

23 Golden, Ethnogonic Tales, 300-304.

24 Linghu Defen, *Zhoushu* 50.908; Li Yanshou, *Beishi* 99.3286; For the English translation see Golden, Ethnogonic Tales, 301.

which implies that Abangbu's father had sexual intercourse with a wolf, who bore Abangbu's brother Yizhi Nishidu, while also having other female human partners. When reading further, it soon becomes obvious that, unlike his brothers, who are described as »dull-witted«, Yizhi Nishidu was extraordinary and possessed supernatural powers, which he most likely inherited from the wolf. Similar to »Wolf Tale I«, »Wolf Tale II« legitimises the authority of the ruling family, as Yizhi Nishidiu was the ancestor of Ashina and, though subtler, ties this legitimacy to the supernatural abilities of men with lupine ancestry.

Why, then, did the Chinese authors include these fantastical tales in their ethnographic accounts? Gerard Clauson argued that the Chinese historiographers aimed to depict the Turks as more bestial than human in emphasising their lupine origins.[25] However, his work was published before the Bugut stele was discovered in 1956, an archaeological find that suggests something more to the lupine origin than simple, dismissive Othering on the part of external authors. The sandstone stele, which was created by the Turks themselves, is the earliest source for the First Turkic Khaganate (mid-6th century-c. 603 CE) and includes an interesting depiction on the top of the stele, which seems to be a child beneath a wolf.[26] This archaeological evidence shows that this animal was an integral part of local Turkic culture and further suggests that »Wolf Tale I« and »Wolf Tale II« were not simply meant to degrade the Turks but perhaps captured something of their own origin legend.[27]

These historiographies were compiled in a period when the Tang empire was in direct and frequent contact with the Turks, which suggests that the information found in these narratives could have been based on oral traditions transmitted from the Turks themselves. That the Turks were proud of their lupine ancestry is further implied in the ethnographic reports from the *Zhoushu* and the *Suishu*, when mentioning the wolf-guard of the Turkic Khagan and reporting that their standards are crested with a wolf's head so they do not forget their origins.[28] While the Chinese historiographers may have deduced, and simultaneously denigrated, the lupine ancestry from the wolf banners when searching for an explanation for the depiction, this does not preclude a symbolic pride among the Turks for their association with the wolf, one which they intentionally presented, and which is also reflected in the Orkhon inscriptions when comparing Ilterish Khagan – the father of Bilge Khagan and Kül-Tegin – and his army to wolves and their enemies to sheep.[29]

The lupine origin of another steppe people, the Gaoche, differs interestingly from other wolf-featuring origin myths in that it reverses the genders of the wolf and the human ancestor.[30] The earliest version of this narrative appears in the sixth-century *Weishu* and recounts the Gaoche's mythical descent from a union between a Xiongnu princess and a wolf:

25 Clauson, Turks and wolves, 20.

26 Golden, Ethnogonic Tales, 307. For different interpretations of the depiction on top of the Bugut stele, see Stark, *Alttürkenzeit*, 71-73; and Drompp, Lone wolf, 520-524.

27 For other examples of archaeological evidence see, for example, Stark, *Alttürkenzeit*, 145.

28 Linghu Defen, *Zhoushu* 50.909; Wei Zheng, *Suishu* 84.1863. Golden, Ethnogonic Tales, 300.

29 Chen, *History of the Second Türk Empire*, 200.

30 Pulleyblank, High Carts, 21-22. Both well-established and more recent historiographical trends argue that the name »Gaoche« was commonly used in Chinese historiographies of the mid-fourth to the mid-sixth centuries

> People say that the Xiongnu *chanyu* had two daughters, with very beautiful appearance that all the people of the state considered them divine. The *chanyu* said: »I have these daughters, how can they marry a men? I shall I give them to Heaven.« Thereupon he constructed a high terrace in an uninhabited place in the north of his territory and placed his two daughters on it and he said: »Please Heaven accept them.« Three years passed by, and their mother wanted to take them back, the *chanyu* said: »It is not allowed, it is still not thoroughly completed.« Another year passed. Thereupon an old wolf warded the terrace day and night, howling and growling, thence he dug a hole underneath the terrace and did not leave for a while. The younger daughter said: »My father placed me here desiring to give me to heaven. Now a wolf came or may it be a divine creature [神物] sent by Heaven [天].« She was about to go down to him. The elder sister said in great surprise: »He is an animal. Do not disgrace our parents!« The younger sister did not obey and went down to the wolf. She became his wife and gave birth to a son. Later, they consequently multiplied and established a state. For this reason, the people are pleased with stretched sounds and long songs, which resemble the wolf's howl.[31]

In comparison to the she-wolf motif, a male wolf is a far rarer ancestor in narratives of a people's origin, as are women with active roles. Both sisters believe that they are acting according to their father's wishes while taking opposing positions: following the principle of filial piety, the older sister tries to prevent her younger sister from joining the wolf, while the younger sister sees the wolf as a sign from Heaven (*tiān* 天) and acts according to what she perceives as her father's desire. The younger princess, trusting in her own judgement and humble before the possibility of heavenly intervention, goes to the wolf. By contrast, the older sister, more concerned with familial honour, proudly refuses the possibility outright and remains on the terrace. Hence, by taking her faith into her own hands, the younger Xiongnu princess becomes the mother of a new people.

Despite the younger Xiongnu princess and her sister playing important parts in the narrative, neither are named throughout the whole story. This comes as no surprise, as female characters were usually not the focus of origin stories beyond the »typical« role of giving birth to the progenitor of the people or their ruling family.[32] More unexpected, however, is the fact that the Xiongnu *chanyu* also remains nameless, as does the progenitor of the Gaoche. The decision to leave all of the characters nameless inevitably leads to a vague genealogy, in stark contrast to the origin stories of other steppe peoples in Chinese accounts, which usually include a genealogy of the people or the ruling family with their names.[33]

A lack of information on the Gaoche beyond their ethnonym could be one possible explanation for the missing names, especially considering the imprecise geographical description

---

in reference to the Turkic-speaking Dingling. For the discussion on the terms Dingling, Gaoche and Tiele and their history see Pulleyblank, High Carts; Golden, *Introduction*, 93-95; Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 12-21.

31 Wei Shou, *Weishu* 103.2307, trans. Wabnitz. The same version can be found in the *Beishi*. Li Yanshou, *Beishi* 98.3270. See also Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 17.

32 Geary, *Women*, 3.

33 In addition to the origin story of the Turks, which is discussed in this article, the origin stories of the Rouran (Wei Shou, *Weishu* 103.2289) and the Tuyuhun (Wei Shou, *Weishu* 101.2233) follow the same pattern.

in this narrative.[34] However, the ethnographic report on the Gaoche that follows the origin story seems, according to Pulleyblank, »to be based on direct observation and goes beyond the usual *topoi* found in standard Chinese descriptions of nomadic people«.[35] Despite the existence of derogatory remarks about the Gaoche (e.g. »Their customs are unclean«[36]), a typical narrative strategy employed by Chinese authors to emphasise the uncivilised Other, the description of the Gaoche in the *Weishu* includes distinctive information not provided by other ethnographic reports, which further suggests the author had more immediate sources at their disposal.[37] The *Weishu*, the official history of the Northern Wei dynasty (386-534 CE), was compiled by the official Wei Shou under the Northern Qi dynasty (558-577 CE). The Northern Wei dynasty was the first non-Chinese imperial dynasty, also referred to as a »conquest dynasty«,[38] as it was founded by the Tuoba, a branch of the Xianbei steppe people. The Tuoba and the Gaoche had been military adversaries not long before the Tuoba founded their dynasty and it is reasonable to suggest that the Tuoba were interested in gathering information about their enemy's customs and origin.[39] As Wei Shou himself was a court official under the Northern Wei dynasty and participated in the writing of this dynasty's history, he would have had access to such first-hand information that was transmitted in the dynasty itself. Hence, his description of the Gaoche is likely to be the closest available reflection of their culture in the mid-fourth century.[40]

The ethnographic description provides another more probable explanation for the nature of the (lacking) genealogy, as it states at the beginning that »they [the Gaoche] are not led by a Great Leader; each group has a leader«[41]. Not only would this make a detailed genealogy unnecessary or even impracticable, the lack of detail also works in the Gaoche's favour as a malleable origin story that can easily be applied to all of their groups, however disparate. While origin stories from other steppe peoples (e.g. the Turks, Rouran, or Tuyuhun) are actually narratives of their leading families, the Gaoche's story recounts the royal, even »divine« origins of a whole people, whose songs – which are reminiscent of a wolf's howl – serve as a reminder of their beginnings, and make them a worthy enemy of the founders of the Northern Wei dynasty.[42]

34 It continues to be debated whether the origin of the name Gaoche, which literally means »High Carts«, is purely descriptive of their custom of using high-wheel waggons or whether, following James Hamilton's argument, it derived from a Turkish name. Pulleyblank, High Carts, 22.

35 Pulleyblank, High Carts, 24.

36 Wei Shou, *Weishu* 103.2308.

37 For example, the *Weishu* describes the marriage customs and marriage ceremony of the Gaoche, pointing out that they do not practice levirate marriage, unlike other steppe peoples, such as the Turks. Wei Shou, *Weishu* 103.2307.

38 Klein, Wei shu, 368. The Northern Wei dynasty united northern China for the first time after the disintegration of the Han dynasty (206 BCE-24 CE; 25-220 CE). For more details on the Tuoba and the Northern Wei dynasty, see e.g. Müller, Nomads; Pearce, *Northern Wei*.

39 Pulleyblank, High Carts, 22.

40 Klein, Wei shu, 368-369; Pulleyblank, High Carts, 23.

41 Wei Shou, *Weishu* 103.2307.

42 Lee notes that the Northern Wei ruling elite included some elements from the Tiele, one group of which, the Tiele Hetulin, intermarried with the ruling elite. This could further explain the detail of Wei Shou's ethnographic report. Lee, *Turkic peoples*, 15.

Taken alongside the archaeological evidence, the prevalence of the wolf motif outside singular historiographical traditions demonstrates that the wolf ancestor was not merely a derogatory invention of Chinese authors to depict various steppe peoples as an animalistic Other, but rather hints at a symbol that was significant to various steppe peoples. While the wolf undoubtedly had negative connotations within the cultures of sedentary societies, among the steppe peoples themselves, the wolf was seen as an admirable creature associated with the strength and vigour of the warrior-hunter.[43]

The association between the wolf and the warrior is also found in early medieval West-Eurasian texts; however, Christian authors tended to describe the wolf as an adversary of humans and even as a devilish beast, which can be traced back to biblical depictions of the wolf and the well-known phrase: »the good Christian as a sheep among the wolves«.[44] Furthermore, Bishop Isidore of Seville wrote in his influential seventh-century *Etymologies* that the wolf was »a violent beast, eager for gore«.[45] In contrast to his negative characterisation, some Christian authors also mention the »good« wolf as an instrument of God that demonstrates His divine power through which He changes the wolf's character.[46] The eighth-century historiographer Paul the Deacon, for example, mentions that his great-grandfather Lopichis was led by a wolf, sent by God, to show him the right path to Italy: a powerful statement of divine intervention but one that has more in common with an animal guide, a motif discussed in detail further below, than a lupine ancestor.[47] Nevertheless, while the wolf is mentioned in Western texts, there is no mention of the wolf in connection with steppe peoples – even in the case of the Western Turks – or their origin stories, unlike in Chinese historiography of that period.

While Latin and Byzantine historiographies use fantastical ancestors in origin stories of steppe peoples (e.g. the Huns' decent from evil spirits), animal ancestors are only mentioned in Chinese historiographies in this period. Several potential reasons for this difference present themselves: firstly, that those steppe peoples who reached the Western fringes of the Eurasian steppe did not have their own animal ancestor traditions; secondly, that authors from different areas either had access to different levels of information or were simply not interested in the same manner of detail. Building on the latter, a third explanation presents itself; namely, the aforementioned »sanitisation« of narratives. Whereas pre-Christian Europe had its zoo-sexual myths where human children had »animal parents« – such as the well-known stories of Zeus in animal form having sexual intercourse with human women – for Christian authors »bestiality« was a serious taboo, as outlined by Leviticus 18:23, and the resultant progeny of such a devilish act were nothing but monstrous creatures.[48] In Chinese

43 Drompp, Lone wolf, 524.

44 Marshall, *Wolves*, 7; 7, FN 44.

45 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologae* XII.II.24, trans. Barney, *et al*, 253.

46 Marshall, *Wolves*, 206.

47 Pohl, *Avars*, 247.

48 Stuhmiller, Introduction, 12-19. Line, *Humans*, 321-326; Lutterbach, *Sexualität*, 33-34;161-165. A recent volume edited by Jacqueline A. Stuhmiller explores the topic of bestiality and its complexity in medieval Christian European culture. Stuhmiller, *Animal Husbandry*.

folklore and mythology, the belief in the possibility of a sexual relationship and successful procreation between different species remained prevalent.[49] Such cultural distinctions undoubtedly had an impact on the type and style of information that the authors wished to record, as well as embellish, within their texts.

Spirit Guides and Mythical Adversaries

While they do not appear as ancestors in Latin and Greek accounts of steppe peoples' origins from the period, animals nevertheless regularly take on important fantastical and practical roles in these narratives as catalysts of movement, a motif that can also be observed in Chinese historiographies.

In their ethnographic reports on various steppe peoples, Latin, Byzantine and Chinese historiographers point out how these peoples lacked a place of permanent settlement, given their nature to constantly moved around, which stood in stark contrast to the authors' own sedentary lifestyles.[50] The idea that these peoples were constantly wandering, which was connected to the movement of animals – either following their herds, hunting animals or retreating from dangerous fellow predators – may have influenced the narratives and served as an explanation of how these peoples reached the respective realms wherein they encountered the authors' societies. Some of these migration stories, which are an inherent part of the origin narrative, shifted the role of animals towards the fantastical and cast them as spiritual guides or mythical adversaries that encouraged or enforced a peoples' migration; the second half of this article explores how and why these fantastical elements came to be included.

The animal guide is an important motif in these origin narratives; a trope that is by no means unique to the peoples of the Eurasian steppe that has been shared by various cultures and spread through different geographical spheres, with varying aims and contexts.[51] In the context of the steppe peoples' migration narratives, however, two examples reveal striking similarities: the report on the migration of the Huns in the sixth-century *Getica*, written by the historian Jordanes, and the migration of the Tuoba in the *Weishu*, as both groups followed a cervid-like creature to reach their respective new territories.

The *Weishu* recounts the migration of the Tuoba as follows:

> They [the Tuoba] moved into a hilly terrain with valleys, gorges, natural defences and passes. There they wanted to settle, but an animal spirit appeared. It was shaped like a horse and bellowed like an ox. It led them south for several years and then disappeared.[52]

49 Sterckx, *Animal and the Daemon*, 195; de Groot, *Religious Systems*, 253-271.

50 See e.g. Ammianus Marcellinus on the Huns: Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* XXXI.2.10, ed. and trans. Rolfe, 384, 385. Chinese sources often use the phrase »follow water and grass« (隨逐水草) to describe these peoples' nomadic way of life; see, for example, the *Suishu* on the Turks, Wei Zheng, *Suishu* 84.1864.

51 See above 192; Nick Allen, for example, explores the motif of the animal guide in the context of Himalayan foundations myths, Allen, Animal Guides.

52 Wei Shou, *Weishu* 1.6, trans. Holmgren, *Annals of Tai*, 52.

A similar version of this migration narrative is included in the chapter on the Spiritual World of the *Weishu*.[53] Both versions tell us that the Tuoba were led south by a spirit guide in form of a cervid-like creature, with the version in chapter on the Spiritual World clearly stating that they were led south to the »former lands of the Xiongnu«[54], i.e. the northwest of China, where the Tuoba were to subjugate various peoples and establish the Northern Wei dynasty in the following century.[55]

The *Getica* describes similar events when reporting on the migration of the Huns, though in a more derogatory tone:

> This wild nation, as the historian Priscus tells, inhabited the further bank of the Maeotic swamp and knew hunting alone and no other labour, except, when they had grown in numbers, to disturb the peace of nearby peoples with deceit and pillaging. And so, some hunters of this nation, as they were wont to do when they were looking for game on the bank of the interior Maeotic swamp, saw how a doe suddenly presented itself to them, entered the swamp and, now moving, then halting, offered itself as a guide to the way across. Following it, the hunters crossed the Maeotic swamp on foot, which, like the sea, they thought impossible to ford. Soon enough the land of Scythia, of which they had been ignorant, appeared to them and the doe disappeared. This, I believe, was the work of those spirits, from whom they derive their origin [...].[56]

This seemingly non-fantastical story of hunters following a doe, and thus discovering a path through the swamp, ends with a supernatural twist as the doe suddenly disappears. This fantastic turn of events upgrades the subsequent migration of the Huns from one of chance to the work of supernatural powers, which, in Jordanes' opinion, are the same spirits from whom the Huns had descended. Referring back to the origin narrative of this people, he writes:

> Filimer, the king of the Goths [...] entered the lands of the Scythians alongside his people, found among his subjects some sorceresses, whom he in his own language, called Haliurunnae. Holding them in suspicion, he expelled them from the midst of this people and forced them to wander in solitude, driven far away from his host. When unclean spirits saw these women wandering through the desert they embraced and had intercourse with them. They gave birth to this most ferocious people, who at first lived in swamps, dwarfs, hideous and feeble, only a semblance of humanity and distinguished by no other sound except that which marked an imitation of human speech. Born from such an origin, then, the Huns came to the frontiers of the Goths.[57]

Jordanes' aim is clear: he portrays the Huns as uncivilised and evil fiends who are more beast than human, placing them in stark contrast to his heroes, the Goths. By sending a spirit guide in the form of a doe, knowing that hunting was their primary food source, the

53 Wei Shou, *Weishu* 112b:2927.

54 Wei Shou, *Weishu* 112b:2927

55 See above, 191, fn 39.

56 Jordanes, *Getica* 24.123-124, ed. Mommsen, 89-70, trans. Van Nuffelen, *et al*, 280-281.

57 Jordanes, *Getica* 24.121-122, ed. Mommsen, 89, trans. Van Nuffelen, *et al*, 279-280.

Huns became instruments of these spirits to bring evil and chaos upon the different peoples of these new lands. This narrative strategy of depicting the Huns as messengers of evil can be found in various historiographies; already two centuries earlier, the fourth-century *Res Gestae* by Ammianus Marcellinus describes them as »the seed and origin of all the ruin and various disasters«[58] and in later texts Attila would become known as the »scourge of God«.[59]

Returning to the migration narrative of the Huns, it is notable that, at the beginning of the text, Jordanes highlights that this story is based on the fifth-century account written by the historian Priscus of Panium, who had been sent on a diplomatic mission to the court of Attila, the leader of the Huns, by the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II (408-450) in 448.[60] Priscus' account, of which only fragments survive in various historiographical texts, nevertheless provides a detailed description of his journey and of the events at Attila's court, as well as interesting insights into the customs of the Huns. Priscus' report therefore stands in contrast to the more demonising descriptions of this people. We can only speculate whether Priscus' account was influenced by stories or artistic depictions he had heard and seen during his diplomatic mission, or whether he explained the migration of a nomadic people by connecting it to their way of life. As there is no fragment of Priscus' work that recounts the origin story of the Huns, we cannot be sure if Priscus came to the same conclusion as Jordanes, who is convinced of the role of the evil spirits in this migration. The sixth-century Byzantine historiographer Procopius of Caesarea expresses a similar opinion to Jordanes when describing the migration of the Huns, whom he refers to as Cimmerians. Procopius, most likely aware of Priscus' report, also tells the story of the doe showing them the way through the Sea of Azov, also known as the Maeotic swamp. Unlike Jordanes, Procopius does not include the origin story of the coupling spirits and witches, but is of the same opinion that the migration was the work of evil forces.[61] Priscus was likely responsible for the basic elements of the story concerning the Hunnic hunters following the doe from the swamp to Scythia, while Jordanes and Procopius derogatorily emphasise that the doe was the instrument of evil spirits.[62]

The *Weishu*, the *Getica* and the *Wars* inform us about the migratory movements of these peoples as influenced by supernatural powers. While the former is more oblique, the Latin and Greek sources end on a more explicitly negative note when hinting at the work of evil spirits. In contrast to the demonisation of the Huns, the migration story of the Tuoba in the *Weishu* does not include any derogatory remarks. This is directly related to the aforementioned context of the *Weishu*, based as it was on the state history of the Northern Wei dynasty and compiled during their reign.[63] The emperors had direct oversight over these records and those

58 Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* XXXI.2.1., ed. and trans. Rolfe, 381.

59 For more details on the demonisation of the Huns in written sources, see Maenchen-Helfen, *World*, 2-5.

60 Hoffmann, Priscus, 1235.

61 Procopius, *Wars* VIII.5.7-10, trans. Dewing, 470.

62 Blockley suggests that since both Justinian's and Procopius' texts include this derogatory statement, it would have been probably found in Priscus' account as well. Priscus Panites, *Fragmenta*, ed. and trans. Blockley, 379, Note 1. However, there is no demonization of the Huns in the surviving portions of Priscus' account. Unlike Chinese historiographers who never include direct reference to their own opinion in their texts, Jordanes and Procopius both emphasise their opinion with the phrase »I think«, stressing their personal judgements.

63 Klein, Wei shu, 368-369.

that produced them, in one case even going so far as to execute an official whom they accused of emphasising »the primacy of Chinese institutions over Tuoba traditions«,[64] which further indicates that a spiritual guide in the form of a cervid-like creature was not taken as an offence. In his monograph, Chen states that the »cervids were, and still are, often considered sacred animals in Altaic cultures«.[65] The Tuoba were a significant example of this phenomenon, as they introduced and intertwined the symbol of the cervid, which for them bore martial characteristics, with the Chinese worship of the peaceful *qilin* (»unicorn«) during their rule as the Northern Wei dynasty.[66] Latin and Byzantine historiographers were probably also aware of the importance of the cervid in the Eurasian steppe peoples' culture, based on their knowledge of Scythian culture and art, while Priscus may well have come across cervid imagery during his time as an envoy to Attila's court. As such, the spiritual cervid guide was likely not only the product of external historiographers, but also held symbolic importance within steppe peoples' culture, considering the numerous surviving depictions in artistic and archaeological evidence.[67]

While these examples relate to spiritual guides who served to aid steppe peoples and were focal points of cultural symbolism, fantastic beasts do not always appear as allies in origin stories concerning steppe peoples, but also take the role of antagonists who compel peoples to retreat from them. One such example can be found in a story concerning the Avar migration, which has been attributed to Priscus and is transmitted in the *Suda Lexicon*, a late tenth-century Byzantine encyclopaedia. In contrast to the version of Priscus' text in the *Excerpta de legationibus*, which records that the Avars were driven off by other peoples living on the shore of the Black Sea, the text in the *Suda Lexicon* has a rather fantastical twist:[68]

> These Avars drove out the Sabinores having themselves been displaced by the tribes [sic] who lived by the shore of the Ocean. The latter had left their land on account of the mist which came from an inundation of the Ocean and because a flock of gryphons had appeared. It is said that they would not leave until they had eaten the whole race of men. Therefore, driven out by these evils, the ocean dwellers fell upon their neighbours, and since the attackers were more powerful, the Avars who could not resist their onset, were displaced.[69]

This version of Priscus' account was most likely influenced by the report from the *Histories* written by Herodotus in the fifth century CE, which is one of the earliest written sources mentioning a griffin.[70] It provides a geographical description of the griffin's homeland and thus establishes where these fantastic beasts can be encountered:

---

64 Klein, Wei shu, 368.

65 Chen, *Multicultural China*, 52.

66 Chen, *Multicultural China*, 52-53.

67 Archaeological evidence includes the finds from the Pazyryk site, see Huntington, *Range of the "Cosmic Deer"*.

68 Pohl, *Avars*, 38.

69 Priscus, frag. 40.1, ed. and trans. Blockley, 344; *Suidae Lexicon* A 18, ed. Ada Adler, vol 1, 4.

70 Although the earliest depictions of the griffin can be traced back to the Bronze Age, the earliest appearance of the fantastic beast in written sources dates back to the fifth century BCE. In addition to Herodotus' *Histories*, they are mentioned in the early-fifth-century tragedy *Prometheus Bound*, which has been ascribed to Aeschylus. For more details, see McClanan, *Griffinology*, 11-23.

> There is also a story related by Aristeas [...] This Aristeas, being then possessed by Phoebus, visited the Issedones; beyond these (he said) dwell the one-eyed Arimaspians, beyond whom are the griffins that guard gold, and beyond these again the Hyperboreans [...].[71]

Herodotus claims that the Greek poet Aristeas of Proconnesus provided this information in his, now-lost work *Arimaspea*, written in the seventh century BCE. On his travels searching for the sanctuary of Apollo, Aristeas met the Issedonians who told him about a realm where a one-eyed people called the Arimaspians dwelt, who regularly stole gold from monsters. According to Herodotus, Aristeas called these monsters griffins, or in Greek *gryps*, meaning »hooked«, which refers to their beak.[72] Later in the *Histories*, Herodotus points out that the Scythians were also familiar with the stories of Arimaspians fighting the gold-guarding griffin. Since the griffin-fighting Arimaspians were incorporated into Scythian art, as surviving archaeological evidence shows, Herodotus' report was likely based on observations or a reasonably widespread oral tradition rather than pure invention.[73] In addition to Scythian art, the Pazyryk tattoo and the felt fabric found in Noin Ula, the well-known Xiongnu burial site, provide further examples that the griffin or griffin-like motifs were widespread among the peoples of the Eurasian steppe.[74] In the eighth century, the griffin became a popular motif among the Avar community, which might have been a result of reciprocal influences between the cultures of the steppe and their sedentary neighbours.[75] Since the griffin was a well-known phenomenon among the peoples of the Eurasian steppe and the sedentary populations, the version of Priscus' account in the *Suda Lexicon* follows a motif already deeply-rooted in various forms of material culture and narrative to explain the migration of a people, which in turn caused a cascade of movement. The griffins as evil adversaries provided a credible explanation for contemporaries in accordance with their historiographical tradition as well as an excitingly frightening justification for the movement of peoples and its consequences.

Conclusion

This article has discussed just one aspect of many fantastical motifs that can be encountered in origin stories on steppe peoples within Latin, Greek and Chinese historiographical sources between the fourth and ninth centuries. Although the origin stories featuring a fantastic beast are not great in number, this motif appears in various origin and migration narratives from these sources, in which they take on various roles, ranging from ancestors to spirit guides. The comparative analysis demonstrates that Chinese sources were particularly preoccupied with animal ancestry in regard to steppe peoples, though (mythical) animals have important roles in the migration tales of both eastern and western sources. The difference could be related to opposing cultural and religious beliefs, as »bestiality« was a taboo in the

71 Herodotus, *Histories* IV.13, ed. and trans Godley, 212-215.

72 McClanan, *Griffinology*, 30-32; Mayor, *First Fossil Hunters*, 23.

73 Herodotus, *Histories* IV.27, ed. and trans. Godley, 226-227.

74 McClanan, *Griffinology*, 68-71; Duan, Legends, 28.

75 Pohl, *Avars*, 48, 347; Daim, Der awarische Greif. On the ongoing discussion on the origins of the griffin motif see Mayor, *First Fossil Hunters*; McClanan, *Griffinology*, in particular 33-35.

Christian West and animals bearing human children a more far-fetched proposition for Latin and Byzantine authors. By contrast, the possibility of procreation was more deeply rooted in Chinese intellectual culture, as reflected by the inclusion of animal ancestry – in particular, lupine – in origin narratives of various steppe peoples, such as the Turks and the Gaoche. Considering that Chinese authors mostly ascribed animal ancestry to Turkic-speaking groups, and taking archaeological evidence into account, the wolf seems to have played a significant part in these peoples' own traditions. A similar observation can be made in regard to the migration narrative: the historiographies from both sides of Eurasia mention spirit guides in the form of cervid-like creatures, who led peoples to new realms and opportunities. These narratives perhaps reflect the authors' understanding that these peoples' migrations were connected to the movement of animals, but, as archaeological and artistic evidence shows, the steppe peoples themselves also regarded the deer as an important and even sacred animal. The griffin, taking on the role of a mythical adversary in one migration narrative, was also a well-established and widespread motif in Eurasian art though, interestingly, Chinese texts do not mention this mythical beast in the context of steppe peoples. There is no doubt that the authors shaped their narratives according to the various concerns and interests of their intellectual culture. However, as this article has demonstrated through a contextual and comparative approach to our examples from Latin, Byzantine, and Chinese historiographies of the fourth to the ninth centuries, the inclusion of fantastic beast motifs were not merely derogatory inventions of external authors to depict the various steppe peoples simply as the bestial Other. While these authors may have looked down upon the steppe peoples as not part of their »civilised« culture, the textual and archaeological evidence reveals that fantastic beast motifs were familiar themes in both the authors' own cultures and the external cultures about which they wrote, providing a glimpse into what symbols and stories were significant to the steppe peoples themselves in explaining their origins.

References

Abbreviations

MGH Monumenta Germaniae Historica

Primary Sources

Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*, ed. and trans. John C. Rolfe, *Ammianus Marcellinus with an English Translation*, vol. 3 (Cambridge-Massachusetts, 1986).

Herodotus, *Historiae*, ed. and trans A.D. Godley, *Herodotus with an English translation*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA, 1982).

Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, trans. Stephen A. Barney, W.J. Lewis, J.A. Beach, Oliver Berghof with the collaboration of Muriel Hall, *The Etymologies of Isidor of Seville* (Cambridge, 2006).

Jordanes, *Getica,* ed. Theodor Mommsen, MGH Auctores Antiquissimi 5.1 (Berlin, 1882) 53-128; trans. Peter van Nuffelen and Lieuve van Hoof, *Jordanes: Romana and Getica* (Liverpool, 2020).

Li Yanshou, *Beishi* (Beijing, 1983).

Linghu Defen, *Zhoushu* (Beijing, 1974).

Priscus Panites, Fragmenta, ed. and trans. Roger C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1983) 221-400.

Procopius, *History of the Wars*, trans. H.B. Dewing, *The Wars of Justinian* (Indianapolis, 2014).

Suidae Lexicon, ed. Ada Adler, *Lexicographi Graeci*, vol. 1., (reprint), (München, 2001).

Wei Shou, *Weishu* (Beijing, 1974).

Wei Zheng, *Suishu* (Beijing, 1973).

Secondary Sources

Allen, Nick J., Animal guides and Himalayan foundation myths, in: Karmay Samten and Philippe Sagant (eds.), *Les habitants du toit du monde: études recueillies en hommage à Alexander W. Macdonald Karmay* (Nanterre, 1997) 375-390.

Chen, Hao, *A History of the Second Türk Empire (ca. 682–745 AD)* (Leiden, 2021).

Chen, Sanping, *Multicultural China in the Early Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2012).

Clauson, Gerard, Turks and wolves, *Studia Orientalia* 28/2 (1964) 3-22.

Daim, Falko, Der awarische Greif und die byzantinische Antike, in: Herwig Friesinger and Falko Daim (eds.), *Typen der Ethnogenese unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Bayern, Teil 2* (Wien, 1990) 273-303.

de Groot, J.J.M., *The Religious System of China: Volume IV: Book II: On the Soul and Ancestral Worship: Part I, The Soul in Philosophy and Folk-Conception* (Leiden, 1901).

Drompp, Michael R., The lone wolf in Inner Asia, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 131/4 (2011) 515-526.

Duan, Qing, Legends and ceremonies: Based on the observation of the Qu Shu collection at Xinjiang Lop museum, in: Xiao Li (ed.), *Non-Han Literature Along the Silk Road* (Singapore, 2020) 21-45.

Ford, Randolph B., *Rome, China, and the Barbarians: Ethnographic Traditions and the Transformation of Empire* (Cambridge, 2020).

Gardiner, K.H.J., Standard histories: Han to Sui, in: Donald D. Leslie, Colin Mackerras and Gungwu Wang (eds.) *Essays on the Sources for Chinese History* (Canberra 1973) 42–52.

Geary, Patrick J., *Women at the Beginning: Origin Myths from the Amazons to the Virgin Mary* (Princeton, 2016).

Goetz, Hans-Werner and Ian Wood, Introduction: The many facets and methodological problems of ›otherness‹, in: Hans-Werner Goetz and Ian Wood (eds.), *'Otherness' in the Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021).

Golden, Peter B., *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples: Ethnogenesis and State-Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and in the Middle East* (Wiesbaden, 1992).

Golden, Peter B., The Ethnogonic Tales of the Türks, *The Medieval History Journal* 21/2 (2018) 291-327.

Graff, David, Bei shi, in: Cynthia L. Chennault, Keith N. Knapp, Alan J. Berkowitz and Albert E. Dien (eds.), *Early Medieval Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley 2015) 18-23.

Hoffmann, Lars Martin, Priscus of Panium, in: *The Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle* (Leiden, 2010) 1235-1236.

Holmgren, Jennifer, *Annals of Tai: Early T'o-pa history according to the first chapter of the Wei-shu* (Canberra, 1982).

Jila, Namu, Myths and traditional beliefs about the wolf and the crow in Central Asia: Examples from the Turkic Wu-Sun and the Mongols, *Asian Folklore Studies* 65/2 (2006) 161-177.

Klein, Kenneth, Wei shu, in: Cynthia L. Chennault, Keith N. Knapp, Alan J. Berkowitz and Albert E. Dien (eds.), *Early Medieval Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley 2015) 368-372.

Lee, Joo-Yup, *The Turkic Peoples in World History: A Concise History* (New York, 2023).

Lee, Joo-Yup, The origin myths of the Turkic peoples: From the wolf tale of the Gaoche to the Kazakh legend of Alasha Khan, *Medieval Worlds* 24 (2026) 202-220.

Line, Philip, *Humans and Other Animals in the Middle Ages: An Introduction and Reader* (Leiden, 2025)

Lutterbach, Hubertus, *Sexualität im Mittelalter: Eine Kulturstudie anhand von Bußbüchern des 6. bis 12. Jahrhunderts* (Weimar, 1999).

Maenchen-Helfen, Otto J., *The World of the Huns: Studies in Their History and Culture*, edited by Max Knight (Berkeley, 1993).

Marshall, Elizabeth, *Wolves in Beowulf and other Old English Texts* (Cambridge, 2022).

Mayor, Adrienna, *The First Fossil Hunters: Dinosaurs, Mammoths, and Myth in Greek and Roman Times* (Princeton, 2011).

McClanan, A. L, *Griffinology: The Griffin's Place in Myth, History and Art* (London, 2024).

Müller, Shing, The nomads of the fifth century: The Tuoba Xianbei, in: Annette Juliano and Judith Lerner (eds.), *Nomads, Traders and Holy Men Along China's Silk Road: Papers Presented at a Symposium held at The Asia Society in New York, November 9-10, 2001* (Turnhout, 2002) 33-44.

Pearce, Scott, Zhou shu, in: Cynthia L. Chennault, Keith N. Knapp, Alan J. Berkowitz and Albert E. Dien (eds.), *Early Medieval Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley, 2015) 510-513.

Pearce, Scott, *Northern Wei (386-534): A New Form of Empire in East Asia* (Oxford, 2023).

Pines, Yuri, Beasts or humans: Pre-imperial origins of the »Sino-Barbarian« dichotomy, in: Reuven Amitai and Michael Biran (eds.), *Mongols, Turks and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World* (Leiden, 2005) 59-102.

Plassmann, Alheydis, *Origo gentis: Identitäts- und Legitimitätsstiftung in früh- und hochmittelalterlichen Herkunftserzählungen* (Berlin, 2006).

Poo, Mu-chou, H.A. Drake and Lisa Raphals (eds.), *Old Society, New Belief: Religious Transformation of China and Rome, ca. 1st-6th Centuries* (Oxford, 2017).

Pohl, Walter, Telling the difference: Signs of ethnic identity, in: Walter Pohl and Helmut Reimitz (eds.), *Strategies of Distinction* (Leiden, 1998) 17-69.

Pohl, Walter and Ian Wood, Introduction: Cultural memory and resources of the past, in: Clemens Gantner, Rosamond McKitterick and Sven Meeder, *The Resources of the Past in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 2015) 1-12.

Pohl, Walter, *The Avars: A Steppe Empire in Central Europe, 567-822*, translated from German by William Sayers/Walter Pohl (Ithaca, NY, 2018).

Pulleyblank, Edwin G., The »High Carts«: A Turkish-speaking people before the Türks, *Asia Major* 3/1 (1990) 21-26.

Reynolds, Susan, Medieval origines gentium and the community of realm, *History* 68/224 (1983) 375-390.

Schmidt-Glintzer, Helwig, *Geschichte der chinesischen Literatur: Die 3000jährige Entwicklung der poetischen, erzählenden und philosophisch-religiösen Literatur Chinas von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Bern, 1990).

Stark, Sören, *Die Alttürkenzeit in Mittel- und Zentralasien: Archäologische und historische Studien* (Wiesbaden, 2008).

Sterckx, Roel, *The Animal and the Daemon in Early China* (New York, 2002).

Stuhmiller, Jacqueline A. (ed.), *Animal Husbandry: Bestiality in Medieval Culture* (Leiden, 2025).

Stuhlmiller, Jacqueline A., Introduction: The stallion and the unicorn; or animal lovers, in: Jacqueline A. Stuhmiller, *Animal Husbandry: Bestiality in Medieval Culture* (Leiden, 2025) 1-25.

Stuurman, Siep, Herodotus and Sima Qian: History and the Anthropological Turn in Ancient Greece and Han China, *Journal of World History* 19/1 (2008) 1-40.

Wilkinson, Endymion, *Chinese History: A Manuel: Revised and Enlarged* (Cambridge-Massachusetts, 2000).

Wolfram, Herwig, Walter Pohl, Hans H. Anton, Ian N. Wood and Matthias Becher, Origo gentis, in: Sebastian Brather, Wilhelm Heizmann and Steffen Patzold (eds.), *Germanische Altertumskunde Online*, (Berlin, 2010). Accessed on 11. April 2023: https://www-degruyter-com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/database/GAO/entry/RGA_4152/html.

Wu, Huaiqi, *An Historical Sketch of Chinese Historiography* (Berlin 2018).

Xiong, Victor Cunrui, Sui shu, in: Cynthia L. Chennault, Keith N. Knapp, Alan J. Berkowitz and Albert E. Dien (eds.), *Early Medieval Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley 2015) 330-334.

Ziemann, Daniel, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht: Die Entstehung Bulgariens im frühen Mittelalter (7.-9. Jahrhundert)* (Köln, 2007).

Website

Huntington, John C., *The Range of the "Cosmic Deer": A Web Presentation for Future Discussions*. Accessed on 07. September 2025: https://huntingtonarchive.org/resources/downloads/webPresentations/deerPresentation.pdf

The Origin Myths of the Turkic Peoples: From the Wolf Tale of the Gaoche to the Kazakh Legend of Alasha Khan

Joo-Yup Lee*

The Turkic peoples have left behind numerous origin myths, ranging from the Gaoche/Tiele wolf legend to the Kazakh tale of Alasha Khan. This paper offers an overview and comparative study of these origin myths, classifying them into the narratives of three major Turkic groups: the early Turkic peoples of eastern Inner Eurasia, the medieval Turkic peoples of pre-Mongol Inner Eurasia, and the »Turko-Mongols« of the post-Mongol period. The comparative analysis shows that Turkic origin myths are marked by discontinuity, heterogeneity, historical oblivion, and external cultural influences. The famous wolf-descent origin myth of the early Türks, for example, was not inherited by later Turkic dynasties, demonstrating the absence of mythic continuity. Later dynastic narratives, influenced by Perso-Islamic and Mongol traditions, incorporated figures such as Afrāsiyāb, Dhū al-Qarnayn (Alexander the Great), Oghuz Khan, and Alan Qo'a – each emerging independently of one another. Ultimately, this study concludes that the »Turkic origin myth« should not be viewed as a single evolving mythological tradition but rather as a broad category encompassing the diverse and independent myths created by various Turkic-speaking peoples across time and space.

Keywords: Turko-Mongols, Timurids, Chinggisids, Japhethic tradition, Oghuz Khan narratives, Alan Qo'a myth, Afrāsiyāb

Introduction

The »Turks« founded the first Turkic empire, known as the Türk Qaghanate (552-745), in the mid-6th century CE, which came to dominate much of Inner Asia. Although the Türk Qaghanate collapsed in the mid-8th century CE, various Turkic peoples continued to establish numerous states and empires in the centuries that followed. Among these were empires such as the Uyghur Qaghanate (744-840), the Khazar Qaghanate (mid-7th c.-c. 969), the Seljuk Sultanate (c. 1037-1194), and the Ottoman empire (1299-1922), among others. During the post-Mongol period, the Turkicization of the Mongol elements residing across central and western Eurasia also led to the emergence of several new Turkic (or »Turko-Mongol«) peoples, who founded the Timurid empire and the Uzbek, Crimean Tatar, and Kazakh khanates.[1]

---

* Correspondence details: Joo-Yup Lee, sessional lecturer at the University of Toronto; jooyup.lee@mail.utoronto.ca

This article is part of the thematic section *Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasian Comparison*, guest editor: Reinier Langelaar. To read all related articles, please access https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026.

1 For an introduction to Turkic ethnogenesis and history, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*.

eISSN-Nr. 2412-3196
DOI 10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026s202

Importantly, the Turkic peoples have left behind numerous origin myths – narratives explaining the beginnings of peoples, dynasties, and states – ranging from the Gaoche/Tiele wolf legend to the Kazakh tale of Alasha Khan. This paper offers a broad study of these origin myths, classifying them into the narratives of three major Turkic groups: the early Turkic peoples of eastern Inner Eurasia, the medieval Turkic peoples of pre-Mongol Inner Eurasia, and the »Turko-Mongols« of the post-Mongol period. It aims to provide an overview of these myths, examining their continuities and discontinuities, as well as their shared and distinctive features. It also seeks to explore the possibility of formulating a working definition of »the Turkic origin myth«. This paper puts forward the thesis that the origin myths of the Turkic peoples do not constitute variations of a connected, unified mythological tradition; instead, they comprise distinct and largely unconnected narratives.

The Origin Myths of the Early Turkic Peoples of Eastern Inner Eurasia

The Wolf Motif Tale: The Origin Narrative of the Türks and Gaoche

The earliest Turkic peoples developed a wolf origin myth to explain their genesis. The Türks, who founded the Türk Qaghanate (552-745), believed themselves to be descended from a union of a she-wolf and a sole surviving boy. One of the origin tales of the Türks recorded in Chinese historical sources runs as follows:

> The ancestors of the Türks lived on the right bank of the Western Sea. The Türks are a separate tribe of the Xiongnu. Their family name is Ashina. They formed a tribe that was independent of the Xiongnu, but later were attacked by a neighbouring state and all were killed except for a ten-year-old boy. When the enemy soldiers saw that he was so young, they did not have the heart to kill him, so they cut off his feet and threw him into a grass-covered swamp. Here, there was a she-wolf who fed the young boy meat. He grew up and had relations with the she-wolf, who became pregnant. When the king of the neighbouring state learned that the youth was still alive, he again sent men to kill him. When they saw a she-wolf beside the young man, they wanted to kill her too. The she-wolf fled to a mountain in the north in the state of Gaochang (Turfan). There was a cave in this mountain in which there was a broad plain with abundant grass. This plain, which stretched out for hundreds of *li* and was surrounded on all sides by mountains. The she-wolf hid in the mountains. Here, she gave birth to ten sons. When they grew up, they went out of the cave and married women from the outside. They brought many children into the world. Each of these descendants took a family name and one of them took the name Ashina. Their children and grandchildren increased until they constituted some hundreds of families. After some generations, they became subjects of the Ruru. In the period of the Great Yabğu their lines/families became stronger. They settled/lived in the southern slopes of the Jinshan (Altay Mountains) and worked as blacksmiths for the Ruru. Since the Jinshan had the appearance of a helmet (兜鍪 *doumou*); and they called a ›helmet‹ *tujue*, they called themselves *Tujue*.[2]

2 Linghu Defen, *Zhoushu* [Book of the Zhou], 50:907-8. The English translation is from Golden, Ethnogonic tales, 298-299. The wolf-mother motif also found expression in imperial monuments. The Bugut inscription – a multilingual monument dedicated to Taspar (r. 572-581), the fourth Qaghan of the Türk Qaghanate – features at its top a depiction of a she-wolf suckling a child.

The wolf motif in Turkic mythology had earlier appeared in the origin myth of the Gaoche, a Tiele Turkic people who founded a state in Xinjiang in the 5th century CE.[3] According to the Gaoche myth recorded in Chinese sources,[4] the Gaoche were descended from a union of a he-wolf and a Xiongnu princess:

> It is said that the Xiongnu Chanyu [the title of the Xiongnu supreme ruler] had two daughters, who were so beautiful that all of the people of the country regarded them as mysterious beings. The Chanyu said: »I have daughters like these, how can they marry men? I will marry them to heavenly beings.« Then, in his country's uninhabited northern land, he built a high structure, and placed his two daughters on it and said: »May Heaven take them!« Three years passed. As their mother wanted to take them back, the Chanyu said: »This cannot be allowed. They have not had any relationship with Heaven yet.« Another year passed. An old wolf came and growled, guarding the tower day and night. It then dug a den beneath the tower and would not leave for a while. The younger daughter said: »My father left me here, wishing to wed me to Heaven. Now the wolf came. It may be a godly being or Heaven may have sent it to me.« Then she wanted to go down. Her elder sister was greatly surprised and said: »Are you going to disgrace your parents because of this old animal?« The younger sister did not listen and went down. She became the wolf's wife and gave birth to a son. Later, they eventually multiplied and established a state. This is why they like long songs, which sound like a wolf's howl.[5]

The dynastic wolf-descent origin myths, however, were not continued by subsequent Turkic dynasties in Inner Eurasia. While the wolf motif itself survived in Turkic myths after the mid-8th-century collapse of the Türks,[6] no other subsequent Turkic dynasties claimed descent from a wolf. Ironically, it was the Mongols, a non-Turkic people, who produced an origin myth claiming descent from the union of a he-wolf and a doe. This myth is preserved in the *Secret History of the Mongols*, a 13th-century Mongol history of Chinggis Khan and his ancestors:

---

3 On the formation and history of the Tiele, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 12-21.

4 The earliest record of the wolf motif in Inner Asia appears in connection with the royal myth of the Wusun, an ancient Indo-European-speaking nomadic people who occupied areas near the Ili River Valley (modern-day southeastern Kazakhstan and parts of Xinjiang, China) during the Xiongnu period. The *Shiji* [Records of the Grand Historian], the first universal history of China written by Sima Qian (c. 145-c. 86 BCE), records a miraculous survival story of the Wusun ruler Kunmo, who was abandoned in the wild as a baby but nursed by a she-wolf, as follows: »Kunmo's father had been the ruler of a small state on the western frontier of the Xiongnu. The Xiongnu attacked and killed his father. Kunmo was born and abandoned in the wilderness. A crow brought meat and flew above him, and a wolf came to nurse him. The Chanyu was astonished and regarded this as a divine sign, and thus took him in and raised him.« (昆莫之父, 匈奴西邊小國也。匈奴攻殺其父. 而昆莫生棄於野。烏嗛肉蜚其上, 狼往乳之。單于怪以為神, 而收長之). Sima Qian, *Shiji*, chapter 123, accessed on 10 October 2025: https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=906691.

5 Wei Shou, *Weishu* [Book of the Wei Dynasty], 103.2307. Here and below, unless indicated otherwise, the translations and bracketed insertions are mine.

6 For instance, a wolf appears as a divine guide – but not as a biological ancestor – in the pre-Islamic Oghuz Khan legend. The wolf theme across Inner Asia has been thoroughly discussed in Golden, Ethnogonic tales, 306-310. Golden also suggests that relics of the Türk wolf tradition may have remained among the Qaračay-Balqars of the North Caucasus. Golden, Tale of lupine origins, 160-163.

> At the beginning there was a blue-grey wolf, born with his destiny ordained by Heaven Above. His wife was a fallow doe … [7]

Non-Wolf Motif Origin Myths of the Turfan Uyghurs and the Qirghiz

The Uyghurs, a branch of the Tiele confederation, to which the Gaoche had also belonged, replaced the Türks as the dominant power in the Mongolian steppe and founded the Uyghur Qaghanate (744-840 CE) in the mid-8th century CE. The Qaghanate was destroyed by the Qirghiz, a Turkic or Turkicized people residing in the Yenisei region in 840 CE.[8] A group of Uyghurs subsequently migrated south and settled in the Turfan region, in what is now modern-day Xinjiang.[9]

According to the *Xin Tangshu* [New book of the Tang Dynasty], the Uyghurs of Mongolia possessed wolf-head banners (*langdao* 狼纛). It records that a Tang Chinese general was granted an audience with Bayan Chor (also known as El-Etmish Bilge Qaghan, r. 747-759), the second ruler of the Uyghur Qaghanate, »only after he had prostrated before the wolf-head banners.«[10] However, unlike the Gaoche/Tiele and the Türks, the Uyghurs of the Turfan region developed a non-wolf origin myth. Their dynastic origin legend is recorded in a genealogical memorial inscription of the Uyghur rulers, erected near Turfan in 1334.[11] It relates that their rulers were descended from a boy born from a tree, known as Bügü Khan. The inscription runs as follows:

> One evening, a heavenly light shone down upon a tree that was situated between two rivers. The people of the realm drew near and waited. The tree developed a swelling, as if a woman were pregnant. This light was continuously visible for nine months and ten days, and then the lump burst open. They were taken in and raised. The youngest among [the babies] was called Bügü Qaghan.[12]

The Yenisei Qirghiz also possessed a founding legend that was unrelated to the Türk wolf-descent origin myth. The *Youyang zazu* (酉陽雜俎), a 9th-century miscellany containing both Chinese and foreign legends, records that the Qirghiz regarded themselves as descended from the union of a god and a cow. The account runs as follows:

> The Jiankun (堅昆) [Qirghiz] tribe, [unlike the Türks], is not of wolf descent. Their ancestors were born in a cave located north of the Quman Mountain. They themselves say that in the

---

7 Anon., *Secret History*, trans. de Rachewiltz, 1:1.

8 On the origins and history of the Qirghiz, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 48-56.

9 On the Turfan Uyghurs, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 40-42.

10 »拜狼纛而後見.« Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi, *Xin Tangshu* [New book of the Tang Dynasty], 217a, accessed on 10 October 2025: https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hant/%E6%96%B0%E5%94%90%E6%9B%B8/%E5%8D%B7217%E4%B8%8A.

11 This inscription is titled »The Genealogical Memorial Inscription of the Idiqut, King of Gaochang« (亦都護高昌王世勳碑).

12 »一夕, 有天光降於樹, 在兩河之間, 國人即而候之.樹生癭, 若人妊身然. 自是光恆見者越九月又十日, 而癭裂, 得嬰兒五, 收養之. 其最稺者, 曰卜古可罕.« Yu Ji, *Gaochang wang shi xun bei* [The Genealogical Memorial Inscription of the Idiqut, King of Gaochang], vol. 2, 259-270.

> ancient times a deity mated with a cow in this cave. Their people have yellow hair, green eyes, and red beards.[13]

In sum, the Yenisei Qirghiz and the Turfan Uyghurs did not inherit the wolf-descent origin myths from the Gaoche/Tiele and the Türks. Moreover, their respective origin myths were unrelated to one another and shared no identifiable common elements that could be characterized as distinctly »Turkic« in a mythological sense.

The Origin Myths of the Medieval Turkic Peoples of Pre-Mongol Inner Eurasia

Turkic rule in the Mongolian steppe came to an end by the mid-9th century, when the Qirghiz, who inhabited the Yenisei River region in present-day southern Siberia, destroyed the Uyghur Qaghanate but did not relocate their political center to the Mongolian steppe. Nevertheless, the Turkic world continued to expand, as various other Turkic groups – including the Khazars, Bulghars, Oghuz, Qipchaqs, and Qarakhanid Türks, among others – established states in South Siberia, the central and western Inner Eurasian steppes, the Central Asian oases, and the Volga-Kama region, among other areas.[14] These Turkic peoples developed various non-wolf origin and founding myths; many of these traditions were influenced by Perso-Islamic cultural elements.

The Afrāsiyāb Tradition

Afrāsiyāb is a king and hero of Turan and Iran's archenemy in Iranian tradition.[15] In the *Shāhnāma* (*Book of Kings*), the monumental Persian epic poem written by Firdawsī and completed around 1010 CE, which recounts the mythical and historical past of Greater Iran up to the Arab conquest in the 7th century CE, Afrāsiyāb is portrayed as the principal adversary of Iranian champions (particularly Rustam and Kay Khusraw). Importantly, Afrāsiyāb was later claimed as an ancestral progenitor by the Qarakhanid Qaghanate (992-1212), a Türk successor state and the first Turkic Muslim polity in Central Asia. Although the Qarakhanid state itself left no dynastic origin myth in writing, the Qarakhanid philologist Maḥmūd al-Kāshgharī (fl. c. 1075), who was active in Baghdad and well-versed in the Turkic world of Central Asia, identified Afrāsiyāb with a legendary hero of the Turkic epic tradition, Alp Er Tonga, in his Turkic-Arabic dictionary *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* [Compendium of the Turkic Dialects].[16] Similarly, Yūsuf Khāṣṣ Ḥājib, an 11th-century Qarakhanid poet and court official best

---

13 »堅昆部落非狼種, 其先所生之窟在曲漫山北.自謂上代有神與牸牛交於此窟. 其人髮黃, 目綠, 赤髭髯.« Duan Chengshi, *Youyang zazu* [Miscellany of Youyang], chapter 4, accessed on 10 October 2025: https://archive.org/stream/06047413.cn#page/n120/mode/2up /.

14 On the origins and history of these Turkic peoples, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 56-89.

15 The mytho-geographical term *Tūrān* comes from *Tūr* + *-ān*, »the land of Tūr.« In Iranian epic tradition, Tūr was a son of Farīdūn, and his descendants became the enemies of *Īrān*, the land of Īraj, another son of Farīdūn. Afrāsiyāb was a descendant of Tūr in this tradition. *Tūrān* originally denoted the lands of Iran's nomadic enemies to the northeast, beyond the Oxus River (Amu Darya), but in later traditions it came to be identified with the lands of the Turkic nomads. However, it should be noted that in its earliest usage, »Tūrānians« referred to all the nomadic tribes residing north of the Amu Darya River, including Iranian nomads. On this point, see Kowalski, Turcs dans le *Shah-name*, 89-90.

16 al-Kāšġarī, *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects* 2, ed. and trans. Dankoff, 225.

known for his *Kutadgu Bilig* [Wisdom That Brings Happiness], also equated Alp Er Tonga with Afrāsiyāb.[17] Jamāl al-Qarshī, a 13th-century scholar from the former Qarakhanid realm based in Kashgar, likewise claimed that Afrāsiyāb was an ancestor of the Qarakhanid ruler Satūq Bughrā Khan (d. 955).[18] Accordingly, the Qarakhanids were referred to as *Āl-i Afrāsiyāb*, meaning »the House of Afrāsiyāb« by their contemporaries.

Some medieval Persian historians also regarded the Seljuks as descendants of Afrāsiyāb. Ibn Ḥassūl (d. 1058), for instance, connected the Seljuks to him.[19] However, it is not clear if the Seljuk rulers actually viewed themselves as descendants of Afrāsiyāb.[20] According to Osamu Otsuka, following the fall of the Seljuks, Persian historians prioritized the Seljuks' Afrāsiyāb lineage over their ancestry from Qiniq, a grandson of Oghuz Khan, aiming to link the Seljuks and other Persian dynasties to legendary figures in Iranian tradition.[21] Importantly, according to A. C. S. Peacock, the Qarakhanids, »who were identified with *Afrāsiyāb*«, were regarded by some contemporary historians as having greater prestige than the Seljuks.[22] That is, it was the Qarakhanids, not the Seljuks, who were primarily identified with Afrāsiyāb.

The Japhethic Tradition

In Islamic historiography, as in other Abrahamic traditions, the lineages descending from Noah's three sons, Shem (Sām), Ham (Hām), and Japheth (Yāfiṯh), were believed to have repopulated the Earth after the Flood. Within this framework, the Turkic peoples were regarded as descendants of Japheth. For instance, the Muslim historian and exegete al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE) mentions the genealogical connections of the world's peoples to Noah's three sons, according to which the Turks, Slavs, and other non-Semitic groups descend from Japheth, Shem is the ancestor of the Arabs, Hebrews, and other Semitic peoples, and Ham is associated with Africans and certain southern populations.[23]

This Japhethic tradition was clearly influential among the Muslim Turks of Islamic Central Asia. Notably, regarding the progenitor of the Turkic peoples, Maḥmūd al-Kāshgharī writes in his *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk*:

> The Turks are, in origin, twenty tribes. They all trace back to Turk, son of Japheth, son of Noah.[24]

17 Yūsuf Khāṣṣ Ḥājib, *Wisdom of Royal Glory*, trans. Dankoff, 48.

18 Jamāl al-Qarshī, *Mulḥaqāt bi-ṣ-ṣurāḥ*, ed. and trans. Abuseitova *et al.*, 101, cxlii (text). Describing Ögedei Khan's (r. 1229-1241) capital, Qaraqorum, located in the Orkhon valley, Jamāl al-Qarshī also writes: »His abode of dominion Qarā-Qurum was the abode of Afrāsiyāb's kingship (*kāna daru mulkihi Qarāqurum, dāru mulki Afrāsiyāb*).« *ibid.*, 119 (trans.), clxiv (text).

19 Frenkel, *Turkic Peoples in Arabic Writings*, 75.

20 Mecit, *The Rum Seljuqs*, 2.

21 Otsuka, Kinikushizoku to afurāsuiyābu [The Qiniq and Afrāsiyāb], 83-84.

22 Peacock, *Great Seljuk Empire*, 136, n61.

23 al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, 1:223; al-Tabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, trans. Brinner, 21.

24 al-Kāšġarī, *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects* 1, ed. and trans. Dankoff, 82.

The Japhethic tradition was also adopted by the Khazars, a nomadic Turkic people who founded the Khazar Qaghanate (mid-7th century-c. 968/969), a successor state to the Western Türk Qaghanate.[25] More specifically, the Khazar ruling elite, who converted to Judaism in the late 8th or early 9th century, saw Togarmah, grandson of Japheth, as the progenitor of the Khazars, Pechenegs, and Bulghars. In a letter known as the *Khazar Correspondence*, sent to Ḥasdāi b. Shaprūṭ (d. c. 970), the Jewish courtier of the Caliph of Córdoba, the mid-10th-century Khazar ruler Joseph enumerated his ancestors as follows:

> You ask us also in your epistle: »Of what people, of what family, and of what tribe are you?« Know that we are descended from Japhet, through his son [sic!] Togarmah. I have found in the genealogical books of my ancestors that Togarmah had ten sons. These are their names: the eldest was Ujur, the second Tauris, the third Avar, the fourth Uauz, the fifth Bizal, the sixth Tarna, the seventh Khazar, the eighth Janur, the ninth Bulgar, the tenth Sawir. I am a descendant of Khazar, the seventh son.[26]

Alexander-Related Legendary Traditions among the Volga Bulghars

The Volga Bulghars were a Turkic people who, after migrating north following their defeat by the Khazars, established a state in the Volga-Kama region that converted to Islam in the early 10th century.[27] In the Volga-Kama region, lying beyond the sphere of the »Turanian« world,[28] the Muslim Volga Bulghars adopted the Islamic Alexander legend, rather than that of the Turanian king and hero Afrāsiyāb. In Islamic literature, Alexander the Great is commonly identified with Dhū al-Qarnayn, the »Two-Horned One« mentioned in the Qur'an.[29] The Qur'an portrays this figure as a God-guided, just ruler who travels widely and builds a barrier to restrain Gog and Magog (*Yāʾjūj and Māʾjūj*).[30] Medieval Islamic sources, as cited by Allen J. Frank, associate the Volga Bulghars with Alexander the Great (identified with Dhū al-Qarnayn) in both dynastic and legendary contexts. Frank notes that Najīb al-Ḥamadānī reported that Bulghar rulers claimed descent from Alexander – an idea also reflected in pre-Mongol Persian poetic literature. The *Sikandar Nāma-yi Bārā*, for instance, portrays the Bulghar rulers as Alexander's descendants and notes that Alexander founded the city of Bulghar during his journey to the *diyār-i ẓulmat* (»land of darkness«).[31] In short, it appears

25 The Khazar Qaghanate became the dominant power in the Black Sea and Caspian steppes in the 8th century CE, stretching from the northern shores of the Black Sea in the west to the Aral Sea in the east and from the Middle Volga region in the north to the steppe of the North Caucasus in the south. On the ethnogenesis and history of the Khazars, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 56-64.

26 Marcus, *Jew in the Medieval World*, 229.

27 On the ethnogenesis and history of the Volga Bulghars, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 65-68.

28 The boundary between *Īrān* and *Tūrān* in the Perso-Islamic tradition was the Oxus River (*Amu Darya*). Therefore, *Tūrān* was mainly used to refer to the Transoxianan region (*Mā warāʾ al-nahr*), that is, the lands beyond the Oxus and the adjacent steppes.

29 For a general discussion of the Alexander tradition in the Islamicate tradition, see Doufikar-Aerts, Alexander in Medieval Arab Minds, 308-333.

30 See Qur'an 18:83-98 (Sūra alKahf), accessed 10 October 2025, https://quran.com/alkahf/8398.

31 Frank, Historical legends, 89-90. Najīb al-Ḥamadānī is a 12th-century Persian chronicler whose texts provide critical evidence for reconstructing the early history of the Volga Bulghars, among others. According

that medieval Volga Bulghar Muslims regarded Alexander the Great as an integral figure of their dynastic and mythic past.[32]

As demonstrated by the Afrāsiyāb and Japhethic traditions, as well as by the legends of the Volga-Ural Muslims concerning Alexander the Great (Dhū al-Qarnayn), the wolf motif was not dominant in the medieval Islamic Turkic world.[33] Importantly, these non-wolf traditions lacked direct genealogical or structural connections between them, nor did they share significant thematic similarities. Moreover, it should be noted that the memory of actual historical figures or dynastic founders had largely faded. The Qarakhanid writers, for example, make no mention of historical figures associated with the (Western) Türk Qaghanate, and the extant Bulghar traditions likewise fail to mention figures such as Qubrat (r. c. 632-c. 665), the founder of Great Bulgharia.

The Oghuz Khan Tradition

The Oghuz were a Turkic tribal confederation that nomadized across the Aral and Caspian steppes during the ninth and tenth centuries CE. After migrating south of the Syr Darya River, they came to be known in the Islamic world as the Turkmen.[34] They are historically significant because their descendants went on to establish such great Turkic empires as the Seljuk, Ottoman, and Safavid empires in western Eurasia. The Oghuz tribes developed an origin narrative that was distinct from the Afrāsiyāb and Japhethic traditions. Their prevalent origin myth was the Oghuz Khan narrative, which recounts the miraculous birth, heroic deeds, and conquests of Oghuz Khan, the legendary progenitor of the Oghuz people.[35]

The Oghuz Khan narrative exists in two different versions: the pre-Islamic (or pagan) version and the Islamic version. The former, written in Uyghur script, is believed to have been recorded in the 14th or 15th century.[36] According to this version, Oghuz Khan is born with supernatural features. He refuses milk, demands food, meat and wine, and begins to speak soon after birth. He starts walking after only forty days. His feet resemble those of an ox, his waist that of a wolf, his shoulders those of a sable, and his chest that of a bear. He later demonstrates heroic strength by slaying a fearsome monster. Oghuz marries two divine

to him, »in the city of Bulgar lived their padishah, who was one of the descendants of Zu-l-Qarnain.« This passage is cited in Kovalevskii, *Kniga Akhmeda ibn Fadlana*, 61, quoted in Stepanov, *Waiting for the End of the World*, 179.

32 Following the establishment of the Orenburg Spiritual Assembly in the late 18th century, Muslim scholars (ʿulamāʾ) of the Volga-Ural region fostered a sense of regional »Bulghar« identity. Within this »Bulgharist« historical tradition, narratives connected with Alexander the Great once again came to prominence. Frank, Islamic shrine catalogues, 265-286.

33 In his pioneering and insightful writing, Ron Sela argues that the Islamization of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia led them to abandon their ancient Turkic traditions and to adopt the Japhethic and Afrāsiyāb traditions. See Sela, Revisiting the origin myths (blog), accessed on 10 October 2025: https://rsela.wordpress.com/2013/04/24/revisiting-the-origin-myths-of-the-turks/.

34 On the ethnogenesis and history of the Oghuz, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 84-89.

35 For an introduction to this legend, see Binbaş, Oğuz Khan narratives, accessed on 10 October 2025: www.iranicaonline.org/articles/oguz-khan-narratives.

36 For a comprehensive study of the pre-Islamic version of the Oghuz tradition, including an English translation, see Danka, *"Pagan" Oγuz-nāmä*.

maidens – one from the sky and one from the earth – who bear him six sons: Sun (*Kün*), Moon (*Ay*), Star (*Yulduz*), Sky (*Kök*), Mountain (*Tağ*), and Sea (*Tängiz*). He dispatches envoys to the four quarters of the world with a message demanding submission. Guided by a sacred wolf, he conquers Urum (Rum) and leads extensive campaigns across vast lands. In the course of his conquests, he grants names to various tribes such as the Qipchaq, Qarluq, and Qangli. Oghuz Khan organizes his sons into two groups: the Broken (*Buzuqlar*), his three elder sons, to whom he gives a golden bow broken into three pieces; the Three Arrows (*Üč Oqlar*), his three younger sons, to whom he gives three silver arrows).[37]

The Islamic version of the Oghuz Khan narrative is preserved in the *Jāmiʿ al-Tavārīkh*, a universal history written by the Ilkhanid vizier and historian Rashīd al-Dīn (d. 1318). In this version, Oghuz's birth is also marked by extraordinary signs. He refuses to drink his mother's milk for three days and nights until she promises to believe in God. At the age of one, he asks his father, Qara Khan, to name him Oghuz. Later, Oghuz marries three of his cousins, but only loves the one who professes the oneness of God and believes in Him. When Qara Khan discovers his son's monotheism and plots to assassinate him during a hunting expedition, Oghuz, forewarned of the plot, acts first and slays his father in battle, seizing the khanship. Thereafter, he launches a series of military campaigns and emerges as a world conqueror. In the course of his conquests, much in line with the pre-Islamic narration, he names various tribes such as the Qipchaq, Qarluq, and Qangli. Oghuz Khan then organizes his sons, Gün, Ay, Yulduz, Gök, Taq, and Dengiz, into two groups: the *Buzuq*, his three elder sons, to whom he gives a golden bow, and the *Üč Oq*, his three younger sons, to whom he gives three golden arrows.[38] Importantly, the Islamic version of the Oghuz Khan narrative, unlike the pre-Islamic (or pagan) version, contains no reference to a wolf serving as a divine guide.

The Islamic version of the Oghuz Khan legend was later incorporated into the dynastic genealogies of not only the Ottoman empire and other Oghuz-speaking dynasties, but also of the non-Oghuz-speaking Timurid empire, as well as the Crimean Tatar and Uzbek khanates.

Turkic Origin Myths Uninfluenced by Persian or Islamic Traditions

The Qipchaqs were a Turkic tribal confederation that dominated the vast steppe region of Eurasia encompassing the Black Sea, Caspian, and Kazakh steppes – collectively known in the Islamic world as *Dasht-i Qipchāq*, or the Qipchaq Steppe – from the mid-11th to the early 13th centuries CE. Nothing is known about their own collective origin myths. According to an origin narrative concerning the Kimeks, recorded by the mid-11th-century Persian historian and geographer Gardīzī (d. c. 1061) in his *Zayn al-Akhbār* [The Ornament of Histories], the Qipchaqs were originally a tribe within the Kimek confederation,[39] which, in turn, was said to have been formed from a group of Tatar fugitives.

37 Danka, *"Pagan" Oγuz-nāmä*, chapter 3.

38 For the legend of Oghuz Khan, see Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmiʿ al-tavārīkh*, ed. Karīmī, 29-45; Rashiduddin, *Jami'u't-tawarikh* 1, trans. Thackston, 27-35.

39 The Kimeks were a Turkic confederation of tribes that inhabited the steppe zone around the Irtysh River prior to the emergence of Qipchaq power.

> The origin of the Kimeks had been that the chief of the Tatars died and left two sons. The elder son seized the kingship and the younger son became jealous of his brother. The name of this younger brother was Shad. He made an attempt to kill his elder brother but could not and became worried about himself. There was a slave girl and she was his lover. He took that girl and ran away from his brother. He arrived at a place where there were a great river, many trees, and abundant game. There he pitched his tent and settled down. Every day this man and girl, the two together, would hunt and eat the meat of the game and they would make garments from the skins of sables, grey squirrels, and ermine until seven persons from among the clients of the Tatars came near them. The first one was Īmī; the second, Īmāk; the third, Tatār; the fourth, Bayāndur; the fifth, Qipchaq (Khifchāq); the sixth, Lanīqāz; and the seventh, Ajlād … They stayed there until winter and because the snow came, they could not return. There was abundant grass in that place and they were all there. When spring arrived and the snow melted, they sent a person to the abode of the Tatars so that he may bring news of that tribe. When he arrived there, he saw that the whole area had been emptied. It became devoid of people because the enemy had come, plundered and killed all the people. The remnants, who had remained, came to him from the foot of the mountains. The man told of Shad and his own friends' situation. All the men headed for the Irtish. When they arrived there, they greeted Shad as their ruler and held him in respect. Other people who heard this news began to come. Seven hundred individuals gathered. For a long time, they stayed serving Shad. Later when they multiplied, they spread to those mountains and formed seven tribes named after these seven persons we have mentioned.[40]

Another unique Turkic origin myth, notably uninfluenced by Persian or Islamic traditions, was recorded by the Mamluk historian Ibn al-Dawādārī (d. after 1336), who claimed to have found it in a rare, centuries-old source originally composed in Turkic. In Ibn al-Dawādārī's account, the Alṭun Khāns, or »Golden Kings«, a Turkic dynasty that the author claims existed and was overthrown by Chinggis Khan, were descended from Ay Aṭām Kujukrī, the eldest son of Ay Aṭām (»Father Moon«). This progenitor, according to Ibn al-Dawādārī, came to life when the four elements – the life-giving sun, the wind, the primordial waters, and the dust – were mixed together within a cave on Mount Qarāṭāgh (the »Black Mountain«).[41]

Turkic Dynastic Origin Tales in Post-Mongol Inner Eurasia

The Combined Japhethic and Oghuz Traditions

The Mongol conquests and the resulting unification of various Mongolic and Turkic groups had a significant impact on ethnogenesis within the Turkic world. Some Turkic groups disintegrated, while others underwent significant ethnic transformations. New Turkic peoples also emerged, including the two »Turko-Mongol« groups – the Jochid and Chaghatayid *ulus*es

40 Gardīzī, *Tārīkh-i Gardīzī*, ed. Ḥabībī, 549-551; for another English translation, see Martinez, Gardīzī's two chapters on the Turks, 109-217.-

41 Frenkel, *Turkic Peoples in Arabic Writings*, 60-66. For a detailed study of the origin myth of the Alṭun Khāns, see Haarmann, Alṭun Ḫān und Čingiz Ḫān, 1-36. For a study examining the Mongol origin myth in Ibn al-Dawādārī's work, see van den Bent, Mongol origins, 37-67. (Interestingly, that Mongol origin tale claims that Chinggis Khan descended from a man named Alp Qarā Arslān Biljikī, meaning »Son of the Black Lion (*farḫ al-asad al-aswad*)«, who was raised by a lioness after being carried away by an eagle as a newborn, *ibid*., 45-47; Haarmann, Alṭun Ḫān und Čingiz Ḫān, 22-25).

(peoples)[42] – formed through the intermixing of the original Mongols with various Turkic and Mongolic populations.[43] Over time, the Jochid *ulus* fragmented into the Crimean and Kazan Tatars, the Kazakhs, and the Uzbeks, whereas the Chaghatayid *ulus* divided into the Timurids (Chaghatays) and the Moghuls.

In the post-Mongol Turkic world,[44] these »Turko-Mongol« peoples and the Oghuz Turkic peoples (the Turkmens) emerged as the two dominant Turkic ethnic groups, founding powerful states such as the Timurid and Ottoman empires. Importantly, most of them adopted the combined Japhethic and Oghuz traditions to legitimize their rule. Starting in the 15th century, Ottoman chroniclers began asserting that the Ottoman ruling house descended from the legendary Oghuz Khan and, through him, from Japheth, son of Noah.[45] In the late 15th and early 16th centuries, some Ottoman historians claimed that the Ottoman ruling house descended from Esau (son of Isaac), a descendant of Shem – not Japheth – thus asserting a Semitic or »prophetic« lineage. However, after the mid-16th century, the Japhetic tradition once again became dominant in Ottoman historiography.[46]

Beginning with the Timurids, the »Turko-Mongol« dynasties also adopted the Japhethic and Oghuz traditions.[47] Notably, the Timurid historian Sharaf al-Dīn ʿAlī Yazdī, in his *Ẓafarnāma* (the most comprehensive and influential chronicle of Temür's reign), expanded upon the Japhethic genealogy that had earlier been presented by the Ilkhanid historian Rashīd al-Dīn.[48] More specifically, Yazdī claimed that the Timurids and the Chinggisids were descended from Japheth's eldest son, Turk. He writes about Japheth and Turk as follows:

---

42 The Mongolian word *ulus* means »people« or »state«.

43 On the formation of these new Turkic peoples, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 109-113, 127, 140-141, 149-151.

44 The Sakha (Yakut) *Olonkho*, the Kyrgyz *Manas*, and the Oghuz *Dede Korkut* represent the major epic traditions of their respective peoples. The *Olonkho* consists of numerous tales featuring ancient warriors, deities, spirits, and animals. The *Dede Korkut* comprises twelve stories, each focusing on a particular hero and his family, while the *Manas* cycle recounts the life and heroic deeds of its eponymous hero, as well as those of his son and grandson. Since this paper focuses on the origin myths associated with specific peoples, dynasties, and states – rather than on heroic epics or cosmogonic myths – it does not examine these or other Turkic heroic epics. It should be noted that although wolves do appear in these narratives, they are not presented as ancestors of a dynasty or people. In the case of *Dede Korkut*, however, one of the heroes, Salur Kazan, mentions that his roots are growing from a lion, a »male wolf,« a falcon, and white rushes. *Book of Dede Korkut*, ed. and trans. Sümer *et al.*, 161. In the *Olonkho*, horses, not wolves, act as the main helpers. Kim, Yakut Gubi-seosasi »Ollongho«, 223. Also, wolves are associated with negative imagery: more specifically, tree stubs in the Lower World are likened to wolves. Lvova, Biomorphic images, 143.

45 Notably, see Aşık Paşazade, *Osmanoğullari'nin tarihi*, ed. Yavuz and Saraç, 53, 321. In the 15th century, the Oghuz narrative was employed to legitimize the Turkmen and Ottoman dynasties by attributing their origin to one of the twenty-four grandsons of Oghuz. Binbaş, Oğuz Khan narratives. The Aq Qoyunlu claimed dynastic descent from Bayundur Khan, son of Gün Khan, son of Oghuz Khan. For a discussion of the Aq Qoyunlu genealogy, see Woods, *Aqquyunlu*, 173-182.

46 On the rise and fall of the Esau origin myth in Ottoman historiography, see Ogasawara, Quest, 37-63; Binbaş, King's two lineages, 63-96.

47 In his pioneering and eye-opening article, Dobrovits examines the Chinggisid and Timurid dynastic genealogies contained in the Ilkhanid, Timurid, and Uzbek histories in detail. See Dobrovits, The Turco-Mongolian tradition of common origin.

48 The Japhethic tradition had been introduced earlier by Rashīd al-Dīn as an origin narrative of the Turkic peoples. In the *Jāmiʿ al-tavārīkh*, he presents Japheth (Yāfath), whom he claimed was also known as Abūlja Khan

> [After the Earth was repopulated following the Flood], Noah gave the land of Tūrān to Japheth (Yāfith), who was the eldest son, the land of Īrān to Sām, and Hindūstān [India] to Ḥām. And all human beings are the descendants of these three sons of Noah. Therefore, Japheth is called the Father of the Turks (*Abū al-Turk*), Sām the Father of the Persians (*Abū al-ʿAjam*), and Ḥām is called the Father of the Indians (*Abū al-Hind*) … [After his passing], the people reached a consensus and appointed Turk, son of Japheth, as their ruler, and they called him Yāfith Oghlān [meaning Son of Japheth].[49]

Yazdī also traced the descent of the Timurids and the Chinggisids through Oghuz Khan, who was himself presented as a descendant of Turk and Japheth. Crucially, Yazdī here depicted Oghuz Khan as a Mongol ruler, not as the eponymous founder of the Oghuz/Turkmen nomads. He included Oghuz Khan in the lineage of the ancient Mongols, namely as the third khan of the Mongol branch (*shaʿb-i Mughul*) that began with Mongol Khan, the purported progenitor of the Mongols.[50] In turn, Yazdī identified the Oghuz/Turkmens as descendants of Mansak (*Mīshak*), another son of Japheth, and thus formally excluded them from »the Turks,« who after all descend from Japheth's son Turk. In this framework, he describes a conflict between Turk, the ancestor of »the Turks«, to whom the Mongol Timurid and Chinggisid ancestors belonged, and Bayghur, grandson of Mansak and ancestor of the Turkmens. »From that day on,« he narrates, »enmity between the Turks and the Turkmens has persisted.«[51]

This Timurid account of origins – blending the Japhethic and Mongolized Oghuz traditions – became an established historical narrative that was widely repeated and disseminated across Mongol successor states. It was featured in other Timurid histories, such as Ulugh Beg's *Tārīkh-i arbaʿ ulūs*,[52] a history of the four Chinggisid *ulus*es (khanates), and Khvāndamīr's *Ḥabīb al-siyar*.[53] The narrative extended into the Timurid Mughal empire, appearing in Abū al-Faẓl's *Akbarnāma*.[54] It was also adopted by various Uzbek histories, including Ḥāfiẓ Tanish Bukhārī's *ʿAbdallāh-nāma* (*Sharaf-nāma-i shāhī*) and Abū al-Ghāzī Bahadur Khan's *Shajara-i Türk*.[55] Two early 18th-century Crimean Tatar chronicles, *Es-Sebu's-Seyyar fi Ahbar-ı Mulük-ü*

among the Inner Asian tribes, as ancestor of all the Turks. More specifically, he writes that the four sons of Dīb Bāqūy, son of Japheth, became the ancestors of all the nomadic Turks (*Atrāk-i ṣaḥrā-nishīn*). Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmiʿ al-tavārīkh*, ed. Karīmī, 25; Rashiduddin, *Jamiʿu't-tawarikh* 1, trans. Thackston, 25.

49 Yazdī, *Ẓafar-nāma*, ed. Ṣādiq, 85-86. The pagination is based on the electronic copy of this edition. All bracketed insertions are mine.

50 See Yazdī, *Ẓafar-nāma*, ed. Ṣādiq, 88-100.

51 See Yazdī, *Ẓafar-nāma*, ed. Ṣādiq, 86.

52 See *Shajarat al-Atrāk*, fols. 27-83; *Shajarat Ul Atrak*, trans. Miles, 22-58. The *Tārīkh-i arbaʿ ulūs* by Ulugh Beg, grandson of Temür, is no longer extant; the anonymous *Shajarat al-atrāk* is considered to be its abridged version.

53 See Khvāndamīr, *Tārīkh-i Ḥabīb al-siyar* 3, ed. Humāʾī, 4-6; Khwandamir, *Habibu's-siyar* 1, trans. Thackston, 1-3. Khvāndamīr (d. c. 1535) was a later Timurid historian.

54 See Abu-l-Fazl, *Akbar Nama* 1, trans. Beveridge, 167-185. Abū al-Faẓl (d. 1602) was a historian and statesman in the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605).

55 See Bukhārī, *Sharaf-nama*, ed. and trans. Salakhetdinova, fols. 10a-19b (text), 1: 47-65 (trans.). Ḥāfiẓ Tanish Bukhārī was court historian for the Chinggisid Uzbek ruler ʿAbdallāh Khan II (r. 1583-1598); Aboul-Ghâzi Béhâdour Khân, *Histoire*, ed. and trans. Desmaisons, 9-68 (text), 8-72 (trans.). Abū al-Ghāzī Bahādur Khan (r. 1644-1663) was a Chinggisid ruler of the ʿArabshāhid Uzbek dynasty, also known as the Khanate of Khiva.

Tatar by Sayyid Muḥammad Rezā and *ʿUmdat al-aḫbār* by ʿAbd al-Ghaffār Qırımī, also traced the origin of the Crimean Tatar dynasty to Japheth through the Mongol Oghuz Khan.[56]

The Tale of Alan Qo'a

Alan Qo'a was another mythical figure that featured prominently in the dynastic origin myths of the Turkic-speaking Chinggisid and Timurid dynasties in the post-Mongol period. She is presented as a mythical ancestress of Chinggis Khan and first appears in the 13th-century *Secret History of the Mongols*. According to the account, after the death of her husband, Dobun Mergen, Alan Qo'a was miraculously impregnated by sun rays and gave birth to three children, including Bodonchar, the ancestor of both the Chinggisids and the Barlas tribe (the Timurids):

> Every night, a resplendent yellow man entered by the light of the smoke-hole or the door top of the tent, he rubbed my belly and his radiance penetrated my womb. When he departed, he crept out on a moonbeam or a ray of sun in the guise of a yellow dog.[57]

Yazdī and other Timurid historians also incorporated the Mongolian mythical ancestress Alan Qo'a as an ancestor of Temür, presenting her as a progenitor of the Timurid lineage. Yazdī describes her miraculous conception by sun rays following the death of her husband as follows:

> When her husband died, she took charge of governance and raising her sons. And at that time, divine will so decreed that this peerless lady was lying asleep on her resting bed, when suddenly she saw a light that shone upon that dark room, and that bright light entered into her mouth. She found in herself a form of pregnancy, just as Mary, daughter of ʿImrān, became pregnant by the breath of Gabriel, without a father, and neither phenomenon is strange in the power of God.[58]

The aforementioned Timurid histories also included Alan Qo'a in Temür's ancestry.[59] Notably, Khalil Sultan (d. 1411), grandson of Temür, commissioned a genealogical tree made up of roundels that feature drawings of Temür's Mongol ancestors, including Alan Qo'a.[60] This mythical ancestress also figured as an important progenitor for the Timurid Mughals. Abū al-Faẓl (d. 1602), the court historian of Akbar, later reiterated Yazdī's account, reinforcing Alan Qo'a's importance in the imperial Mughal genealogy:

> One night this divinely radiant one was reposing on her bed, when suddenly a glorious light cast a ray into the tent and entered the mouth and throat of that fount of spiritual

56 See Riza, *Sem' planet*, ed. Abduzhemilev, vol. 1, 50; vol. 2, trans. Gibadullin, 39-40; Kyrymi, *Umdet al-Akhbar*, ed. Mirgaleyev, vol. 1, 22-23; vol. 2, trans. Karimovoy and Mirgaleyev, 13.

57 Anon., *Secret History*, trans. de Rachewiltz, 1: 4.

58 Yazdī, *Ẓafar-nāma*, ed. Ṣādiq, 96.

59 See *Shajarat al-Atrāk*, fols. 66-67; *Shajarat Ul Atrak*, trans. Miles, 46-47; Khvāndamīr, *Habīb al-siyar*, 3, ed. Humāʾī, 4-6; Khwandamir, 1, *Habibu's-siyar*, trans. Thackston, 1-3. Two Arabic inscriptions in Temür's mausoleum, the Gūr-i Amīr in Samarkand, attest to a genealogy linking him to Alan Qo'a. The first is engraved on the marble of Temür's tomb in the crypt, while the second appears on the stone of his cenotaph on the ground floor.

60 For a study of this Timurid genealogy included in the album (H2152) kept in Istanbul's Topkapı Palace Museum, see Sertkaya, Timürlü şeceresi, 241-259.

> knowledge and glory. The cupola of chastity became pregnant by that light in the same way as did her Majesty (Ḥaẓrat) Miryam (Mary), the daughter of ʿImrān (Amram).[61]

The tale of Alan Qo'a also functioned as a dynastic origin myth in the Turkicized Chinggisid dynasties, including the Uzbek and Crimean khanates. The aforementioned Uzbek and Crimean Tatar histories present Alan Qo'a as an ancestress of their dynasties.[62] The *ʿUmdat al-aḫbār* by ʿAbd al-Ghaffār Qırımī provides a slightly modified version of the legend:

> The aforementioned Alan Kuan Biyim Khatun, after the death of her husband, refused to remarry because of her pride and noble dignity, and continued to live proudly as a widow. One night she went out of the house to relieve herself and returned some time later, saying: »Since only the Moon is perfect, only the Moon is worthy to be my husband.« She proposed marriage to the Moon. When she informed her servants and relatives about the place of the supposed wedding, they confirmed and bore witness that it was not a human being. After that, three sons were born.[63]

The Kazakh khanate did not produce a written history containing a dynastic origin myth. However, Kazakh nomads preserved their own version of the Alan Qo'a tale through oral tradition. This narrative was recorded in the 19th century by Vasily V. Radlov under the title »The Origin of Kazakhs (*Qazaqtyń túbi*)«. In the Kazakh version, a khan's daughter, secretly confined because of her extraordinary beauty, becomes pregnant by the sun's rays – or more specifically, by the Eye of the Exalted God (*Alla Taǵalanyń közi*) – after a brief exposure to the outside world. In the face of her father's fury, her mother places her in a golden chest and sets it adrift on a river. The chest is discovered by the hunter Toktaghul Märgän (who corresponds to Dobun Mergen in the *Secret History of the Mongols*), who takes the princess as his wife. She then gives birth to a divinely conceived son, Chinggis, who grows to be so excellent and just that he is chosen by the people and successfully enthroned as their Khan.[64] Unlike the original Mongolian version, the Kazakh variant presents Chinggis Khan as her son rather than a later descendant, and the princess remains unnamed.[65]

A version of the Alan Qo'a legend closely resembling the Kazakh variant also existed among the Turkic nomads of the Volga region. In this version, recorded in the *Däftär-i Jingiz-nämä*, an anonymous chronicle narrating events in the territory of the Ulus of Jochi (also known as the Golden Horde) from the 13th to the 17th centuries,[66] Alan Qo'a (Alanġo) also appears as

61 Abu-l-Fazl, *Akbar Nama* 1, trans. Beveridge, 179.

62 See Aboul-Ghâzi Béhâdour Khân, *Histoire*, ed. and trans. Desmaisons, 50 (text), 52 (trans.); Bukhārī, *Sharaf-nama*, ed. and trans. Salakhetdinova, fols. 23a-23b (text), 1: 70-71 (trans.).

63 Riza, *Sem' planet*, vol. 1, ed. Abduzhemilev, 54; vol. 2, trans. Gibadullin, 48; Kyrymi, *Umdet al-Akhbar*, ed. Mirgaleyev, 23-24; vol. 2, trans. Karimovoy and Mirgaleyev, 14.

64 Radloff, *Proben der Volkslitteratur*, 3, *Kirgisische Mundarten*, bk. 1, 63-68 (Original Text) and bk. 2, 82-89 (German Translation) (St. Petersburg, 1870). See also Dobrovits, Maidens, towers and beasts, 51-52.

65 According to the *Secret History of the Mongols*, Alan Qo'a was impregnated by a radiant being and gave birth to three sons, including Bodonchar, from whom Chinggis Khan was descended. See Anon., *Secret History*, 1, trans. de Rachewiltz, 2-8.

66 The place and authorship of this work remain uncertain. For more on this work, see Ivanics, *Book of the Činggis Legend*, 1-16.

the mother of Chinggis Khan rather than as an ancestress. She gives birth to Chinggis Khan after being impregnated by her deceased husband, Duyïn Bayan, who »descends in the form of a ray of light and departs in the shape of a wolf«.[67]

The Kazakh Legend of Alasha Khan

The legend of Alasha Khan is an oral tradition that narrates the origins of the three Kazakh *jüze*s or hordes.[68] In most versions, the Kazakhs are said to have originated from a group of fugitives who selected Alasha, an outcast prince, as their first khan.[69] One of the most detailed accounts of this legend was recorded by the Kazakh historian Chokan Valikhanov (1835-1865):

> Very long, long ago, in Turan there was a king called Abdulla, but according to other [versions] Abdul-Azis-Khan. This king had a leprous son, thus named Alasha – »blotchy-faced«. His father, following an old tradition of ousting all those who are afflicted with contagious diseases, banished his son. At the same time, many of his subjects, dissatisfied with the cruelty of Abdulla and driven by hunger, went into the steppe, which lies north of the Syr River, to the deserts of Karakum and Bursuq, and started to live the life of *qazaqs* [»vagabonds, freebooters«] (*kazachestvovat*). The brave and bold *batyrs* [»heroes, warriors«] increased in number to three hundred and gained fame, power, and wealth in a short time … The steppe vagabonds (*vol'nitsa*) suffered hunger, and a lack of leadership and disagreement among the members of the brotherhood led them to disorder and internecine strife … they invited the leprous son of Abdulla, Alasha, and made him khan … the neighbors and Abdulla himself, still saw them as vagabonds-freebooters (*brodyag-razboynnikov*), and the name Qazaq (Kazakh) stayed with them.[70]

Historically, however, the first »Kazakh« state was founded by Jānībeg Khan and Girāy Khan, who were both descended from Jochi, the eldest son of Chinggis Khan.[71] This contrast between historical reality and the legendary accounts of Alasha Khan reveals that Kazakh nomads,

---

67 Ivanics, *Book of the Činggis Legend*, 24, 28-29 (text) 76-77, 83-84 (trans.). Duyïn Bayan corresponds to Dobun Mergen in the *Secret History of the Mongols*. In the *Däftär-i J̌ingiz-nāmä*, Duyïn Bayan appears as a son of a princess named ʿÜlämälik Körikli, who is confined in a stone tower forty fathoms high by her father, Altun Ḫān, the khan of Mālta, because of her extraordinary beauty. However, after being miraculously impregnated by a ray of sunlight, she is placed in a golden ship and sent to the North Sea. She then meets and marries Tumaul Märgän, *ibid*., 20-24 (text) 69-75 (trans.). In short, the story of Duyïn Bayan's mother, ʿÜlämälik Körikli, is virtually identical to that of the princess in the Kazakh variant.

68 The Kazakhs are divided into three *jüzes*, or hordes: the Ulu Jüz (the Senior or Great Horde), which occupy southern and southeastern Kazakhstan; the Orta Jüz (the Middle Horde), which inhabit central and northern Kazakhstan; and the Kishi Jüz (the Lesser or Junior Horde), which reside in western Kazakhstan. Because the origins of the three Kazakh *jüzes* are not documented, historians are unable to explain the origins of this tribal division or precisely date its formation.

69 For a detailed discussion of the legend, see Lee, *Formation of the Qazaqs*, 140-154.

70 Valikhanov, Kirgizskoye rodosloviye, 126-127.

71 Today, scholars consider Alasha Khan to have been a real historical figure. Scholars have proposed several candidates for his identity, including Urus Khan, the great-grandfather of Jānībeg Khan and Girāy Khan; Ḥaqq Naẓar Khan, grandson of Jānībeg Khan; and Jochi Khan, son of Chinggis Khan. See Lee, Legend of Alasha Khan; Sabitov, Alasha-khan mif i real'nost', 110-116; Karatayev, Ob Alasha khane, 241-255; Yerofeyeva, Alasha-khan, 268-272.

lacking a written historiographical tradition unlike the Timurids, Uzbeks, and Crimean Tatars, forgot the specific details of their own formative history.

Epilogue

This comparative study of Turkic origin myths demonstrates that they constitute a disparate body of narratives. They are characterized by discontinuity, heterogeneity, historical oblivion, and external (Perso-Islamic and Mongol) cultural influences as well.

First, the wolf origin myth illustrates discontinuity: it did not persist as a »dynastic« foundation myth among later Turkic dynasties after the fall of the Türk Qaghanate. Notably, neither the Uyghurs of the Turfan oasis nor the Qirghiz of the Yenisei region, who succeeded the Türks in eastern Inner Eurasia, developed a wolf origin myth.

Second, the dynastic origin myths of the Turkic peoples – spanning the wolf-motif narratives of the Türks and Gaoche/Tiele, the Perso-Islamic traditions of the Qarakhanids, and the Mongol-influenced dynastic accounts of the Turkicized Chinggisids and Timurids – display marked heterogeneity. Ancestral figures such as Afrāsiyāb, Alexander the Great (Dhū al-Qarnayn), Oghuz Khan, and Alan Qo'a are entirely unrelated, and the origin tales involving them evolved independently of one another.[72]

Third, a striking feature of the Turkic origin traditions is their historical oblivion. For example, the Qarakhanids did not recall the names of any historical Türks from whom they were descended, and similarly, Kazakh oral traditions failed to preserve the specifics of their formative history.

Finally, Turkic dynastic origin myths were influenced by external cultural traditions, particularly by elements from Perso-Islamic traditions, such as the Japhethic and Afrāsiyāb narratives, and from Mongol traditions, such as the story of Alan Qo'a.

In sum, one may conclude that the origin myths of the Turkic peoples do not constitute variations of a connected, unified mythological tradition. Rather, they consist of distinct and unconnected narratives that do not share a common lineage or form a coherent mythological continuum. Therefore, the most appropriate working definition of a »Turkic origin myth« may be expressed in the simplest terms as: »The origin myths created by the various Turkic-speaking peoples.«[73]

72 The cross-cultural practice of claiming external ancestry from powerful external figures for political legitimacy is discussed, among other topics, in the conclusion to this volume, Langelaar, Stranger-kings, animal guides, and sibling trios.

73 I view the highly distinctive nature of Turkic origin myths as the result of the heterogeneous origins of the Turkic peoples. There exists a popular belief that the Turkic peoples were and are a single, unbroken ethnolinguistic entity that originated from the Türks of the Türk Qaghanate and spread to the wider Eurasian world. However, the ethnogenesis of the Turkic-speaking peoples was a long process of amalgamation and integration, which involved the Turkicization of various Indo-European, Uralic, and Mongolic groups. For a comprehensive discussion on this historical process, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*.

References

Manuscripts

Shajarat al-Atrāk. MS, London, British Library, India Office, Ethé 172.

Aboul-Ghâzi Béhâdour Khân, *Histoire des Mongols et des Tatares par Aboul-Ghâzi Béhâdour Khân*, translated from Turkic by Petr I. Desmaisons (St. Petersburg, 1871-1874, reprinted: Amsterdam, 1970).

Abu-l-Fazl, *The Akbar Nama of Abu-l-Fazl*, trans. H. Beveridge (reprinted), (Delhi, 1998).

al-Kāšġarī, Maḥmūd, *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects (Dīwān Luġāt at-Turk)*, translated from Arabic by Robert Dankoff, in collaboration with James Kelly, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1982-1985).

al-Qarshī, Jamāl, *Mulḥaqāt bi-ṣ-ṣurāḥ*, trans. Sh. Kh. Vokhidova and B. B. Aminova, ed. A. K. Muminov (Almaty, 2005).

al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾ rīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk* (Leiden, 1879-1901).

al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 2, *Prophets and Patriarchs*, trans. William M. Brinner (Albany, 1987).

Anon., *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Igor de Rachewiltz, 2 vols. (second edition), (Leiden, 2006).

Aşık Paşazade, *Osmanoğullari'nin tarihi*, ed. Kemal Yavuz and M. A. Yekta Saraç (Istanbul, 2003).

van den Bent, Josephine, Mongol origins in Mamluk texts: an origo gentis, in: Ibn al-Dawādārī's Durar al-Tījān and Kanz al-Durar, *Mamlūk Studies Review* 24 (2021) 37-67.

Binbaş, İlker Evrim, Oğuz Khan Narratives, *Encyclopedia Iranica*. Accessed on 10 October 2025: www.iranicaonline.org/articles/oguz-khan-narratives.

Binbaş, İlker Evrim, The king's two lineages: Esau, Jacob, and the Ottoman mythical imagination in the Subhatu'l-Ahbar, in: Markus Friedrich and Jörg B. Quenzer (eds.), *Genealogical Manuscripts in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Berlin, 2025) 63-96.

The Book of Dede Korku: A Turkish Epic, trans. Faruk Sümer, Ahmet Edip Uysal, and Warren S. Walker (Austin, 1972).

Bukhārī, Ḥāfiẓ Tanish Amīr Muḥammad, *Sharaf-nama-ii shakhi: Kniga shakhskoy slavy*, trans. M. A. Salakhetdinova, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1983).

Danka, Balász, *The "Pagan" Oγuz-nämä. A Philological and Linguistic Analysis* (Wiesbaden, 2019).

Dobrovits, Mihály, Maidens, towers and beasts, in: Veronika Veit (ed.), *The Role of Women in the Altaic World: Permanent International Altaistic Conference, 44th Meeting, Walberberg, 26-31 August 2001* (Wiesbaden, 2007) 47-55.

Dobrovits, Mihály, The Turco-Mongolian tradition of common origin and the historiography in fifteenth century Central Asia, *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 48 (1994) 269-277.

Doufikar-Aerts, Faustina, Alexander in Medieval Arab minds: Archetype of kings, magnificent warrior, and custodian of philosophy and divine principles, in: Richard Stoneman (ed.), *A History of Alexander the Great in World Culture* (Cambridge, 2022) 308-333.

Duan Chengshi段成式, *You yang za zu* 酉陽雜俎 [Miscellany of Youyang], chapter 4. Accessed on 10 October 2025: https://archive.org/stream/06047413.cn#page/n120/mode/2up/.

Frank, Allen J., Historical legends of the Volga-Ural Muslims concerning Alexander the Great, the city of Yelabuga, and Bāchmān Khān, *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 89 (2000) 89-107.

Frank, Allen J., Islamic shrine catalogue and communal geography in the Volga-Ural Region: 1788-1917, *Journal of Islamic Studies* 7/2 (1996) 265-286.
Frenkel, Yehoshua, *The Turkic Peoples in Medieval Arabic Writings* (Abingdon, 2015).
Gardīzī, ʿAbd al-Ḥayy ibn Ẓaḥḥāk, *Tārīkh-i Gardīzī*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥayy Ḥabībī (Tehran, 1985).
Golden, Peter B., A Qaračay Nart tale of lupine origins: an echo of the Ašina tradition?, in: Mehmet Alpergu and Yücel Öztürk (eds.), *Omeljan Pritsak Armağanı: A Tribute to Omeljan Pritsak* (Sakarya, 2007) 149-165.
Golden, Peter B., The ethnogonic tales of the Türks, *The Medieval History Journal* 21/2 (2018) 291-327.
Haarmann, Ulrich, Alṭun Ḫān und Čingiz Ḫān bei den ägyptischen Mamluken, *Der Islam: Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur des Islamischen Orients* 51 (1974) 1-36.
Ivanics, Mária, *The Book of the Činggis Legend: A Critical Edition of a Seventeenth-Century Volga-Turkī Source* (Leiden, 2024).
Karatayev, Adilbek A., Ob Alasha khane i formirovanii ob«yedineniya «ALASH», *Edu.e-history.kz* 10/2 (2023) 241-255.
Khvāndamīr, Ghiyāṯ al-Dīn b. Humām al-Dīn, *Tārīkh-i Ḥabīb al-siyar fī akhbār-i afrād-i bashar*, ed. Jalāl al-Dīn Humā'ī, 4 vols. (third reprinted edition) (Tehran, 1984).
Khwandamir, *Habibu's-siyar: Tome Three*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston, 2 vols. Sources of Oriental Languages and Literatures 24 (Cambridge, MA, 1994).
Kim, Tschung-Sun, Yakut Gubi-seosasi »Ollongho« yeongu siron: »Yonggamhan Nyurugun Bootur'-reul jungsimeuro [A preliminary investigation on the oral epic *Olonkho* in Yakutia: Focusing on the analysis of *Nurgun Boutur the Swift*], *Bigyo Munhwa Yeongu* 43 (2016) 207-239.
Kovalevskii, Andrei, *Kniga Akhmeda ibn Fadlana o ego puteshestvii na Volgu v 921–922 gg*. (Kharkiv, 1956). Kowalski, Tadeusz, Les Turcs dans le *Shah-name*, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 15 (1939-49) 84-99.
Kyrymi, Abdulgaffar, *Umdet al-Akhbar*, vol. 1, *Transkrptsiya, facsimile*, ed. I. M. Mirgaleyev (Kazan, 2014); vol. 2, *Perevod*, ed. Yu. N. Karimovoy and I. M. Mirgaleyev (Kazan, 2018).
Langelaar, Reinier, Stranger-kings, animal guides, and sibling trios: Concluding reflections on medieval origin myths in Eurasia, Medieval Worlds 24 (2026) xx-xx.
Lee, Joo-Yup, The legend of Alasha Khan, in: *The Kazakh Khanate* (n.p., forthcoming [2026]).
Lee, Joo-Yup, *The Turkic Peoples in World History* (New York, 2024).
Lee, Joo-Yup, *Qazaqlïq, or Ambitious Brigandage, and the Formation of the Qazaqs: State and Identity in Post-Mongol Central Eurasia* (Leiden, 2016).
Linghu Defen, *Zhoushu* [Book of the Zhou] (Beijing, 2003).
Lvova, Sakhaya Danilovna, Biomorphic images of comparison in Yakut Olonkho and other Turkic epics of Siberia, *Agathos* 11/2 (21) (2020) 133-149.
Marcus, Jacob, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Sourcebook, 315-1791* (New York, 1938).
Martinez, Arsenio P., Gardīzī's two chapters on the Turks, *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 2 (1982) 109-217.
Mecit, Songül, *The Rum Seljuqs: Evolution of a Dynasty* (Abingdon, 2014).
Ogasawara, Hiroyuki, The quest for the Biblical ancestors: the legitimacy and identity of the Ottoman Dynasty in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, *Turcica* 48 (2017) 37-63.
Ouyang Xiu歐陽修 and Song Qi 宋祁, *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 [New book of the Tang Dynasty] (Beijing, 2003).
Otsuka, Osamu, Kinikushizoku to afurāsuiyābu: Perushiago fuhenshi jujutsu no tenkai to serujūkuchō no kigen [The Qiniq and Afrāsiyāb: The development of the Persian universal histories and the origin of the Seljuqs], *Oriento* 50/1 (2007) 80-105.

Peacock, Andrew C. S., *The Great Seljuk Empire* (Edinburgh, 2015).
Radloff, Wilhelm, *Proben der Volkslitteratur der türkischen Stämme Süd-Sibiriens* (St. Petersburg, 1870).
Rashīd al-Dīn Faẓlallāh Hamadānī, *Jāmiʿ al-tavārīkh*, ed. Bahman Karīmī (Tehran, 1988).
Rashiduddin Fazlullah, *Jamiʿuʾt-tawarikh (Compendium of Chronicles): A History of the Mongols*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1998-1999).
Riza, Seyid-Mukhammed, *Sem' planet v izvestiyakh o korolyakh tatarskikh*, vol. 1, *Transliteratsiya*, ed. R. R. Abduzhemilev (Kazan, 2019); vol. 2, *Perevod*, ed. I. R. Gibadullin (Kazan, 2023).
Sabitov, Zhaxylyk M., Alasha-khan mif i real'nost', *Izdenis – Poisk* (2007) 110-116.
Sela, Ron, Revisiting the origin myths of the Turks: Central Asia in a historical context (blog). Accessed on 10 October 2025: https://rsela.wordpress.com/2013/04/24/revisiting-the-origin-myths-of-the-turks/.
Sertkaya, Osman Fikri, Timürlü şeceresi (*Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, Hazine 2152*, v. 32-43), *Sanat Tarihi Yıllığı* 9-10 (1981) 241-259.
Shajarat Ul Atrak: Or Genealogical Tree of the Turks and Tatars, trans. William Miles (London, 1838, reprinted: Kessinger, 2007).
Sima Qian司馬遷, *Shiji*史記 [Records of the Grand Historian], chapter 123. Accessed on 10 October 2025: https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=906691.
Stepanov, Tsvetelin, *Waiting for the End of the World: European Dimensions, 950-1200*, translated from Bulgarian by Daria Manova (Leiden, 2019).
Valikhanov, Chokan, Kirgizskoye rodosloviye, in: S. F. Mazhitov and G. K. Anes (eds.), *Izbrannye proizvedeniya* (Almaty, 2009) 120-135.
Wei Shou魏收, *Weishu*魏書 [Book of the Wei Dynasty] (Beijing, 2003).
Woods, John E., *The Aqquyunlu: Clan, Confederation, Empire* (reprinted), (Salt Lake City, 1999).
Yazdī, Sharaf al-Dīn ʿAlī, *Ẓafar-nāma*, ed. Sayyīd Saīd Mīr Muḥammad Ṣādiq (Tehran, 2008-2009).
Yerofeyeva, Irina V., Znakovyy personazh kazakhskikh predaniy Alasha-khan: istoricheskaya lichnost' i mif, in: *Tyurkologicheskiy sbornik 2013-2014* (Moscow, 2016) 268-272.
Yu Ji虞集, *Gaochang wang shi xun bei*高昌王世勳碑 [The Genealogical Memorial Inscription of the Idiqut, King of Gaochang], in: Su Tianjue 蘇天爵 (ed.), *Guo chao wen lei*國朝文類, vol. 2 (Taipei, 1965) 259-270.
Yūsuf Khāṣṣ Ḥājib, *Wisdom of Royal Glory: A Turko-Islamic Mirror for Princes*, trans. Robert Dankoff (Chicago, 1983).

Southern Tungusic origin myths in Chinese and Manchu sources

Julia C. Schneider*

This article analyses and compares two sets of Tungusic origin myths for the first time: two versions of the origin narrative of the earlier Jurchen »Golden Khanate« (also Jin, 1115-1234 CE) and six variations of the origin myth of the later Jurchen »Golden Khanate« (also Later Jin, 1616-1636) and its successor, the Manchu »Great Warrior Khanate« (also Great Qing, 1636-1912). Although the textual sources that document these myths date from far-apart periods (the twelfth to thirteenth centuries and the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, respectively), the origin myths are related. While they are linked to other Asian myths, they share several motifs and elements of thematic structure that confirm their particularly close relation to each other. Such shared motifs are the miraculous birth, the stranger-king as progenitor, his integration into an existing clan, the prophecy of the birth of the king, three siblings as an ancestral set, and waters, rivers, and mountains as sacred places of origin and dwelling places of the clans. Furthermore, I identify five essential elements that connect the two sets of narratives, »Introduction of a Holy Mountain«, »Conception and Birth/Arrival of the Ancestor«, »Marriage between Ancestor and Woman from the Tribe (Ancestress)«, »Stating the Place of Residence of the Tribe« and finally, »Establishment of the People«/«Ancestor Is Admitted to the Tribe«. These commonalities suggest that the Jurchen-Manchus did not distance themselves from their Jurchen forefathers, as has been previously argued, but rather retained important connecting features in their origin myth. This implies that the relation between the earlier Jurchen and the later Jurchen-Manchus remained close even beyond the decline of the latter in 1912.

Keywords: Jurchen, Manchus, Jin dynasty, Qing dynasty, origin myths

Introduction

In this article, I compare origin myths[1] of two empires that are separated by nearly four centuries in time, though not so much by culture: the Jurchen »Golden Khanate«[2] (Jurchen *anchun*

* Correspondence details: Prof. Dr. Julia C. Schneider, University of Hamburg, Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 (IOst), 20146 Hamburg, Germany. Email: julia.schneider@uni-hamburg.de

This article is part of the thematic section *Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasian Comparison*, guest editor: Reinier Langelaar. To read all related articles, please access https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026.

1 I follow James Grayson's (*Myths from Korea*, 7) definition of myth, which stipulates that its »principal defining feature […] is that the central characters or actors in the narrative are spirits, gods, divine and semi-divine beings«.

2 I translate the Jurchen-Manchu term *gurun* as »khanate«. It is lexicalised as »country, state, land«, but additionally as »tribe, people« (Norman, *Comprehensive Manchu-English Dictionary*). This cluster of meaning is closely associated with the Chinggisid concept of statehood, where people(s) rather than territory are ruled

eISSN-Nr. 2412-3196
DOI 10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026s221

gurun), Chinese »Great Jin« (*Da-Jin* 大金, 1115-1234 CE) and the Manchu empire, which initially shared the same name, »Golden Khanate« (1616-1636), before being renamed the »Great Warrior Khanate« (Manchu *amba daicing gurun*) or literally »Great Clarity« in Chinese (*Da-Qing* 大清, 1636-1912). Both were founded by people later categorised as Southern Tungusic.[3] I analyse and compare their origin myths diachronically in order to trace changes and similarities in their thematic structures and motifs.[4] In doing so, I fill a gap in the research that so far has focused mainly on the Manchu origin myth and has, moreover, never compared it with the Jurchen Jin narrative, despite Manchu Qing emperors having stated their close relation to the Jurchen Jin emperors.[5]

»Tungus« is a loose designation of groups of people that is mainly based on modern linguistic identifiers: Peoples designated as Tunguses speak or used to speak Tungusic languages. Historically, Tunguses lived in North and Northeast Asia, particularly in Siberia and Manchuria. They were (and, to a certain degree, still are) people with highly diverse cultures, religions, ways of living, and languages, which inevitably limits the aforementioned linguistic identifier. This diversity is also related to the large territory Tunguses have historically inhabited.[6] The focus of this article lies diachronically on the Southern Tungusic peoples, namely Manchus, and southern branches of the Jurchen. The latter used to live on the shores and to the south of the Amur River. From the seventeenth century onwards, they migrated in larger numbers towards China proper. For reasons explained below, the name »Manchu« was only adopted around 1635 for southern Jurchen and other peoples.

Jurchen and Manchus

People referred to as »Jurchen« (*Nüzhi* 女直, *Nüzhen* 女真) first appear in written sources in tenth-century Chinese texts.[7] The Jurchen were a group of tribal federations, sometimes loosely and sometimes more closely linked, that had existed in northeast Asia for centuries, appearing in Chinese sources under different names. In the tenth century, their southern branches were under the control of the Khitan Liao Khanate (907-1125), or »Great Liao« (*Da-Liao* 大遼). In 1115, a Jurchen chieftain of the Wanyan clan, Aguda (1068-1123, reign 1115-1123), proclaimed his own »Golden Khanate«, or Jin Dynasty. From 1117 onwards, envoys from the Chinese Song Dynasty (960-1279) came to Aguda's court to seek his alliance against

(Munkh-Erdene, From people to territory). By using the term »khanate« for both polities, I intend to include that conceptual background. Moreover, Jurchen and Manchu rulers were referred to as »khans« (*han*, in Manchu), a title they had adopted from Mongolian *Khan*, which makes the term »khanate« even more suitable. *Khan* is an old Eurasian title for king of unclear etymological origin.

3 Müller, *Languages of the Seat of War*, 93; Shirokogoroff, *Social Organization of the Manchus*; Shirokogoroff, *Social Organization of the Northern Tungus*, 52. The problems caused by the categorisation of premodern peoples into ethnicities have been discussed at length by Pamela Crossley, Thinking about ethnicity.

4 I follow Grayson's (*Myths from Korea*, 5-6) definition of both terms. Grayson adopts his understanding of motif from Stith Thompson. A »Comparison of elements of thematic structure in the Jurchen and Manchu origin myths« analysed here can be found in the appendix, table 1.

5 Gaozong huangdi, »Xu« 序 (1777), 2b, in *Qinding Manzhou yuanliu kao*.

6 Shirokogoroff, *Social Organization of the Northern Tungus*, 1-3.

7 Franke, Chin Dynasty, 216.

the Khitan Liao. Finally, the Song and the Golden Khanate signed a treaty and together defeated the Khitan in 1124.

Soon after, the Golden Khanate began to threaten the Song. In 1127, the Song capital was sacked and the Song emperor kidnapped and killed, which caused an exodus of the Song court to the south.[8] By the late 1120s, the Jurchen had thus established themselves as the most powerful polity in Manchuria and Northern China, ruling over diverse populations of Jurchen, Northern Chinese, Khitan, and others.

This article seeks to answer, among other things, how the Jurchen explained their rise to power in their origin narrative. Therefore, their demise is of no further interest here. It suffices to say that in 1234, the Jurchen Golden Khanate was swept away by Ögedei Khan (c. 1186-1241, reign 1229-1241), Chinggis Khan's son and heir, who had entered an alliance with the Song.[9]

Several centuries later, in the late sixteenth century, the Jurchen chieftain Nurhaci (1559-1626, reign 1616-1626), of the Aisin or »golden« Gioro clan, had united a federation of diverse tribes under his leadership, most of them Jurchen, but also Southern (Khorchin) Mongols and Northern Chinese (also referred to as *nikan*[10]).[11] In 1616, in reminiscence of the Jurchen Golden Khanate, he declared the founding of a second »Golden Khanate« (Jin).[12]

By conquest and coercion, but also through building alliances and federations, Nurhaci and his ruling elites enlarged the later Golden Khanate over time. Nurhaci's son Hong Taiji (1592-1643, reign 1626-1643) continued this expansion. Importantly, Hong Taiji renamed both his subject people and the khanate. The ethnonym *manju*, by which Hong Taiji named most of his loyal subjects, first appears in writing around 1635. As mentioned, subjects of the later Golden Khanate included mostly Jurchen, but also northern Chinese and Mongols peoples. Furthermore, in 1636, Hong Taiji adopted a new name for the khanate, calling it »Great Warrior Khanate« (*Amba daicing gurun*) in Manchu and »great clarity« (*Da-Qing* 大清) in Chinese.[13]

In 1644, the Ming capital, Beijing, was sacked by Chinese rebels. When a Ming general asked the Manchus for help, Hong Taiji's successor used this to his advantage and conquered Beijing. The Ming imperial court fled south. Over the next century or more, the Qing dynasty established a huge pluri-cultural empire, which reached its greatest extent and power in the mid-eighteenth century, before declining from the mid-nineteenth century onward and collapsing in 1912.

8 *Songshi* 48:950, 187:4570, etc.

9 Franke, Chin Dynasty, 259-265.

10 Crossley, The Qianlong retrospect, 67-70 and throughout.

11 It should be stressed that these were not ethnic identities in a modern sense. For example, loyalty was an important aspect of identity that could supersede any ethnic markers such as common language, religion, tradition, way of life, and assumed descent (see footnote 3).

12 Gaozong huangdi, »Xu« 序 (1777), 2b, in *Qinding Manzhou yuanliu kao*.

13 *Daicing* is probably a loanword from Mongol *daicin* (Hauer, *Handwörterbuch der Mandschusprache*, 172). However, the origin and meaning of the Manchu and Chinese names have not been ultimately clarified.

Jurchen Origin Myths

In the eleventh century, a Jurchen script was developed from the Khitan »large script«, but only a few sources written in this script have survived, [14] and they do not contain any origin myths. Our only sources on Jurchen origin narratives, then, are in Chinese. Although based on materials written by officials of the Jurchen's Golden Khanate, the final texts were most likely written by Chinese literati, which is problematic: Not only is it less than ideal to rely only on translated and second-hand accounts, but Chinese literature about non-Chinese people also tends to be biased, usually portraying the latter as wild and uncivilised barbarians.[15] However, given the lack of alternative texts, we must make do with the sources we have.

The foremost sources regarding origin myths of the Jurchen Golden Khanate are, firstly, the first chapter in the official *History of the Jin* (*Jinshi* 金史, presented to the throne in 1345), and, secondly, an account contained in nearly identical versions in two sources. These two sources are the first chapter of *Eyewitness Account from Jimo*[16] (*Songmo jiwen* 松漠紀聞) by the Song envoy Hong Hao 洪皓 (1088-1155, *jinshi*[17] 1115), hereafter *Eyewitness Account* for short, and the third chapter in the *Collected Accounts of the Treaties with the North under Three Reigns*[18] (*Sanchao beimeng huibian* 三朝北盟會編, presented in 1194), hereafter *Collected Accounts* for short, a private history by the Song scholar-official Xu Mengxin 徐夢莘 (1126-1207, *jinshi* 1154).[19]

Hong Hao, the author of the *Eyewitness Account*, had been sent to the Golden Khanate as a Song envoy in 1129. The Jin emperor wanted him to serve his state, which Hong denied. He then lived in the Jin empire as a captive for fifteen years. After his return to the Song empire in 1144, Hong wrote down what he had learned about the Jurchen in his *Eyewitness Account*.[20] He burned this original draft later and reconstructed it from memory. This second version was also damaged and then partly reconstructed by one of Hong Hao's sons, Hong Zun 洪遵 (1120-1174). Today, there are two versions of Hong's *Eyewitness Account*.[21] Chapter one begins

14 Twitchett and Franke, Introduction, 31-32; Grube (*Die Sprache und Schrift der Jučen*, 105-144), for example, translates twenty Jurchen Jin memorials into Chinese and German; Kiyose (*A Study of the Jurchen Language*, 152-232) translates the same twenty memorials in addition to nine more into English.

15 Saussy, *Making of Barbarians*, 21, 94. From a traditional Chinese perspective, what separates a civilised people from barbarians is usually the presence of a script, following (Chinese) rituals and having proper (Ruist or Confucian) social rules.

16 The *Eyewitness Account* has survived in two slightly different versions: Hong Hao, *Songmo jiwen* [Gujin yishi] and Hong Hao, *Songmo jiwen* [Siku quanshu].

17 A *jinshi* degree-holder had passed the palace examinations.

18 The *Collected Accounts*, too, have survived in two versions: Xu Mengxin, *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Shanghai guji] and Xu Mengxin, *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Siku quanshu]. Based on a cursory assessment of chapter three, it seems that about 30 per cent of the text has been deleted in the Siku quanshu edition for censorship reasons.

19 I use my own translations here. Alternative translations of the relevant chapters in the *History of the Jin* and in the *Collected Accounts* can be found in Franke, Chinese Texts on the Jurchen and Franke, Chinese Texts on the Jurchen II.

20 Chang Fu-jui, Hung Hao.

21 See slightly different versions of the relevant passage in Hong Hao, *Songmo jiwen* [Gujin yishi] 1:2a and Hong Hao, *Songmo jiwen* [Siku quanshu] 1:2a.

with an outline of the regions occupied by the Jurchen Golden Khanate and then turns to its origin story. In the case of this origin myth, the two versions differ only slightly.

The author of the *Collected Accounts*, Xu Mengxin, was a Southern Song contemporary of the Jurchen Golden Khanate. When he presented his work to the throne in 1194, the khanate was still a powerful entity in the north. The book's 250 chapters cover the time from 1115 until 1162, chronologically telling the development of Jin-Song relations and including memorials and treaties as well as reports from envoys. Xu Mengxin based his book on official documents as well as eye-witness accounts of the Jin-Song wars in the 1120s.[22] The third chapter includes a brief account of the Jurchen Jin origin narrative, which seems to be copied from Hong Hao's *Eyewitness Account*. The relevant passage in the *Collected Accounts* differs only insofar from Hong's *Eyewitness Account* as it omits one longer sentence.

The *History of the Jin* was compiled by a team of 26 official historians during the reign of the Mongol Yuan, under the supervision of the Mongolian official and aristocrat Toqto'a (1314-1355) and was presented to the court more than a century after the Golden Khanate's demise.[23] The 135 chapters of the *History of the Jin* are based on the »veritable records« (*shilu* 實錄), records compiled by court scribes of the Golden Khanate, as well as private histories by Chinese scholar-officials. The first chapter covers Jurchen history before the founding of the Golden Khanate and includes an origin myth. A Manchu translation of the *History of the Jin* exists that is, however, not very helpful regarding the Jurchen origin myth. It follows the Chinese original closely and does not even use the Manchu version of place names for which Manchu names exist, but instead transcribes the Chinese names.[24]

All three sources contain ethno-genealogical, historical, or pseudo-historical information. Ethno-genealogies are a typical feature in imperial Chinese histories of non-Chinese dynasties and peoples, serving to ascertain under what names they had been referred to in earlier Chinese sources so as to trace their alleged origins. In the case of the Jurchen, imperial Chinese accounts usually trace them back to the Sushen 肅慎, an ethnonym mentioned in texts dating from before the third century BCE.[25] A chain of ethnonyms from the Sushen to the Jurchen and later the Manchus is then followed through history, a narrative pattern that is supported by the same chain being followed and extended over time in the twenty-four dynastic histories, beginning with the first, the *Grand Scribe's Records* (*Shiji* 史記, presented c. 91 BCE). The *Grand Scribe's Records* is the starting point, mentioning the »Mohe state« (*Mohe guo* 靺鞨國) as the Sushen's successors.[26]

22 Cheng Yu, Sanchao beimeng huibian.

23 Toqto'a was the Chief Compiler of Dynastic Histories who also oversaw the compilations of the Liao and Song histories. Among his team, ten are listed as Mongols and Turks, and the rest Chinese. The Chinese probably included Jurchen, who were regularly referred to as Chinese under the Mongol Yuan administration.

24 For example, the Black Water (*Heishui* 黑水), an old name for the Amur River, is transcribed as *hesui*, and not translated as *sahaliyan ula* (lit. Black River), the common name for the Amur in Manchu (see for example, *Aisin gurun i suduri bithe*, 1:1a-2a).

25 *Shangshu*, vol. 2, Zhouguan 周官, 4a; *Chunqiu Zuozhuan*, vol. 9, Zhaogong zhong: jiunian 昭公中: 九年 (Duke of Zhao, year nine), 1b.

26 *Shiji* 2:52.

In the seventh century, some sources claimed that the Mohe were a group of several tribes, including the »Black Water tribe« (*Heishui bu* 黑水部), the »Sunggari tribe« (*Sumo bu* 粟末部), and the »White Mountain tribe« (*Baishan bu* 白山部).[27] These three names, which appear frequently in the Jurchen and Manchu origin myths analysed below, reference specific geographical locations. The White Mountain, *Šanggiyan alin* (also *Šanyan alin*) in Manchu, is a mountain located on the contemporary border between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and North Korea. In Chinese, it is called the »Long White Mountain« (*Changbaishan* 長白山). The »Black Water« is the Amur, »Black River« (*Sahaliyan ula*) in Manchu, and »Black Dragon River« (*Heilongjiang* 黑龍江) in Chinese, parts of which constitute the current border between the Russian Federation and the PRC. Finally, the Sunggari River (*Sunggari ula, Songhuajiang* 松花江), which flows through northern Manchuria (see map 1), links the White Mountain and the Black Water, originating as it does from the former and flowing, as a major tributary, into the latter.

In early Tang times (618-907), as claimed by the *History of the Jin*, only two Mohe tribes were left: the Black Water tribe and the Sunggari tribe, both named after the rivers in whose vicinities they settled (see map 1).[28] The Sunggari tribe later supposedly changed its name to Bohai 渤海 (*Parhae*, in Korean) and founded a kingdom of that name (698-926); the Black Water Mohe were later called Jurchen (*Nüzhi* 女直, *Nüzhen* 女真).[29] By the time of the Khitan Liao, »those [Black Water Mohe tribes] living in the south were registered with the Khitan and were called ›cooked Jurchen‹. Those living in the north were not registered with the Khitan and were called ›raw Jurchen‹« (其在南者籍契丹，號熟女直；其在北者不在契丹籍，號生女直).[30] »Cooked« and »raw« were typical Chinese terms used to refer to non-Chinese peoples perceived as civilised and barbarian, respectively.[31] Both the »raw« and the »cooked« Jurchen were probably descendants of the Black Water tribe, the latter being descendants of families whom the Khitan Liao had forcibly resettled in the south (Liaoyang region) to break up powerful allies.[32]

27 *Beishi* 94:3124; *Suishu* 81:1821.

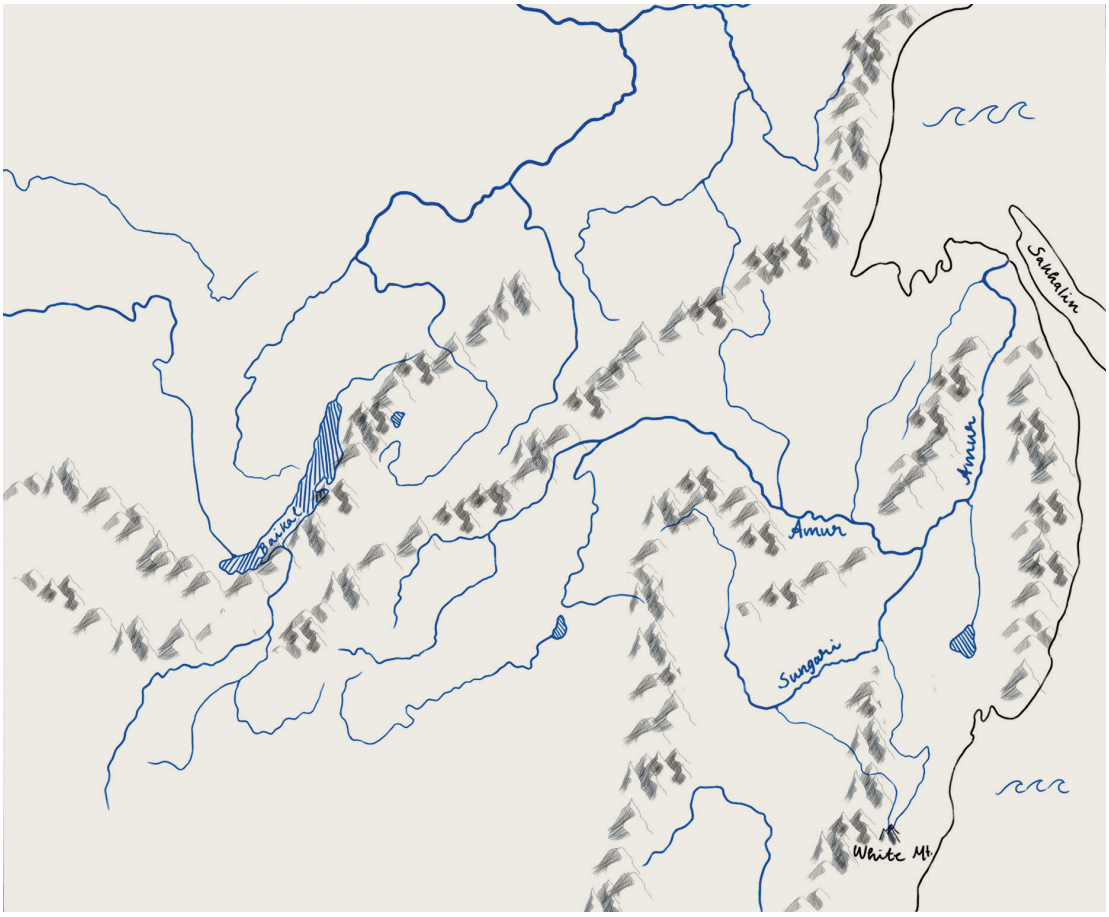
28 *Jinshi* 1:1.

29 *Jinshi* 1:1; *Songmo jiwen* [both editions] 1:1a. The different spelling of the second character of the Chinese ethnonym for the Jurchen derives from the fact that *zhen* 真 was a taboo character in Liao times, being the name of the seventh Liao emperor Yelü Zongzhen 耶律宗真 (*Songmo jiwen* [both editions] 1:1b).

30 *Jinshi* 1:2; see also *Songmo jiwen* [both editions] 1:1b. The *Collected Accounts* mention a third group that is »neither cooked nor raw« (非熟女真亦非生女真) (*Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Shanghai guji] 3:2b). Note that in the Siku quanshu edition of *Collected Accounts*, all references to »cooked« and »raw« Jurchen are deleted (*Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Siku quanshu] 3:2a-b).

31 Fiskesjö, On the »raw« and the »cooked« barbarians.

32 *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Shanghai guji] 3:2a-2b.



Map 1: The Jurchen-Manchu ancestral homeland with the White Mountain, Amur (Black Water), and Sunggari regions.[33]

The Wanyan Myth: Eyewitness Account from Jimo (twelfth cent.) and *Collected Accounts of the Treaties with the North* (1194)

Xu Mengxin begins the third chapter of his *Collected Accounts* with a largely historical, partly pseudo-historical, account of the Jurchen in pre-Jin times that cannot be found in this form in Hong Hao's *Eyewitness Account*.[34] Xu locates the Jurchen to »the east of Huntong River, at the Yalu River's source at the Long White Mountain« (混同江之東。長白山鴨緑水之源). The Yalu, thus Xu, »is also called Ashuhuo« (又名阿朮火), a transcription of the Jurchen term *anchun*, »gold«.[35] Three geographical landmarks are thus mentioned: the White Mountain,

33 I thank E.S. who drew the map for me, based on Shirokogoroff, *Social Organization of the Northern Tungus*, Map VI, *facing* 160.

34 *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Shanghai guji] 3:1a-2a. The *Eyewitness Account* includes a much shorter account of the Jurchen in pre-Jin times (*Songmi jiwen* [both editions] 1:1a-b).

35 *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Shanghai guji] 3:1a-b; not included in *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Siku quanshu].

the Huntong River (which is probably the Black River[36]), and the Golden River – the namesake of the Golden Khanate itself.

A couple of pages later, Xu briefly recounts the Jurchen origin myth. As mentioned before, this account is probably copied from Hong's *Eyewitness Account*. Alternatively, Xu and Hong used the same source. As the *Eyewitness Account* is slightly more elaborate, I use this as the master version, indicating which sentences are missing from the *Collected Accounts* (Shanghai guji edition) by highlighting them in italics:[37]

> At the beginning, the [Jurchen's] ruler was a man originating from Silla,[38] whose clan name was Wanyan. »Wanyan« is the same as »king« (*wang*) in Chinese. *The Jurchen made [the man from Silla] their leader when they realised that he was well-versed in [political] matters.* He and his elder and younger brothers were three. One became leader of the cooked Jurchen and obtained the title Myriarch, the other one went to another country. When Wanyan was over sixty years old, the Jurchen betrothed him to a woman who was also over sixty years old. She bore two sons. Their eldest son was Hulan [Hulai]. From this one, [chieftainship] passed on through three generation to »great master« Yingge. *He had no sons. Therefore, he adopted his nephew, Aguda's younger brother, posthumously called Wenlie, as his son. Later, Yingge did have a son, Dalan, and let Wenlie return to his family.*
>
> 女真之主乃新羅人[39]，號完顏氏，完顏猶漢言王。女真以其練事，後隨以首領讓之。[40]其兄弟三人，一為熟女真首[41]，領號萬戶，其一適他國，完顏年六十餘，女真妻之以女，亦六十餘，生二子。其長子即呼蘭[42]也。自此傳三人至英格太師[43]。無子，以其姪阿固達[44]之弟謚曰文烈者為子。其後英格生子達蘭[45]，乃令文烈歸宗[46]。[47]

In the *Eyewitness Account*, the full narrative stands in an individual paragraph, clearly separating it from the text before and after. The next paragraph lists the nine generations of chieftains before the first emperor of the Jurchen Golden Khanate, starting with the »ancestor« (*zu* 祖) Hanpu 函普 or Kanfu 龕福, respectively.[48] We will meet Hanpu again later on, his

36 »The Huntong River is also called Black Dragon River« (混同江亦號黑龍江) (*Jinshi* 1:2).

37 Differences between the two versions of the *Eyewitness Account* are indicated in footnotes. Sometimes, the Shanghai guji edition of the *Collected Accounts* uses slightly different terms that are also indicated in footnotes. As mentioned, the Siku quanshu edition of the *Collected Accounts* deletes up to thirty per cent of the original text. These deletions and other deviations of this edition are not indicated here.

38 The Korean Silla dynasty (668-935) controlled the southeastern part of the Korean Peninsula.

39 *Songmo jiwen* [Gujin yishi]: 女真酋長乃新羅人; *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Shanghai guji]: 其初酋長本新羅人.

40 This sentence is partly missing from *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Shanghai guji] and completely from *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Siku quanshu].

41 *Songmo jiwen* [Gujin yishi] and *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Shanghai guji]: 一為熟女酋長.

42 *Songmo jiwen* [Gujin yishi] and *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Shanghai guji]: Hulai 胡來.

43 *Songmo jiwen* [Gujin yishi] and *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Shanghai guji]: Yangge taishi 楊哥太師.

44 *Songmo jiwen* [Gujin yishi] and *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Shanghai guji]: Aguda 阿骨打.

45 *Songmo jiwen* [Gujin yishi]: Tala 闥辣.

46 These two sentences are missing in *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Shanghai guji].

47 *Songmo jiwen* [both editions] 1:2a; *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Shanghai guji] 3:9b; *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Siku quanshu] 3:8a-b.

48 *Songmo jiwen* [both editions] 1:2b; *Songmo jiwen* [Gujin yishi] 1:2a.

identity by then having changed. Xu's *Collected Accounts* take a different turn after Yingge has been introduced. He directly refers to Aguda as the next chieftain and begins describing his outer appearance.[49]

I refer to the myth as told in the two sources as the Wanyan myth, because the first chieftain's name is given as Wanyan. Neither accounts are particularly elaborate, perhaps because Hong Hao and Xu Mengxin did not know the myth well or did not find its details important. Still, some important motifs of the Jurchen origin myth are already mentioned here: firstly, the stranger-king who comes from the southern Korean Peninsula, presents himself as an able leader and is thus made chieftain; secondly, the miraculous births of two sons to over-age parents, thereby making the latter semi-divine. Both motifs are discussed in more detail below, as they reappear in the second and more detailed version of the Jurchen origin myth.

The Hanpu Myth: History of the Jin

The first chapter of the *History of the Jin* gives some general information as to where the Jurchen came from, starting with an ethno-genealogy. Unlike Xu, it clarifies that the dynastic founders were »raw« Jurchen:

> The territory of the raw Jurchen encompassed the Huntong River and the Long White Mountain, the Huntong River also being called »Black Dragon River«. These are the so-called »Black Water and White Mountain«.
>
> 生女直地有混同江、長白山。混同江亦號黑龍江，所謂「白山、黑水」是也。[50]

Elsewhere, the *History of the Jin* stresses the importance of the White Mountain, associating it with the homeland of the rulers of the Jurchen Golden Khanate:

> The Long White Mountain is in the region from where the kings rose, [and we should] gather there to perform rituals of honouring, establish a title of nobility, and build a temple.
>
> 長白山在興王之地，禮合尊崇，議封爵，建廟宇。[51]

The White Mountain also held an important position in origin myths in another northeast Asian tradition. The legendary founder of the first kingdom on the Korean Peninsula, Tangun 檀君, descended to the White Mountain, or »Great White Mountain« (*T'aebaek-san* 太白山), from Heaven.[52] As stranger-king and classical culture hero, he taught the people agriculture and other arts. The mountain lost its prominent position over time, only to be resurrected as a national symbol in the early twentieth century and was thereafter called »White-head

49 *Sanchao beimeng huibian* [Shanghai guji] 3:9b.

50 *Jinshi* 1:2. In the Manchu translation, the note about the Black Water and the White Mountain is missing, possibly because it would make no sense given that Manchu translation uses transcriptions of the Chinese pronunciation for proper names (*Aisin gurun i suduri bithe* 1:2a).

51 *Jinshi* 35:819.

52 *Samguk yusa*, 32; see Grayson (*Myths from Korea*, 42, 47, 50) for other versions of this myth, each of which containing the descent of Tangu to the White Mountain.

Mountain« (*Paektusan* 白頭山 in Korean).[53] It still holds an important position for North Korean political leaders today.[54]

The *History of the Jin* then turns towards the origin myth of the Golden Khanate:

> The personal name of the Golden [Khanate]'s First Ancestor was Hanpu. He originally came from Koryŏ[55] and was already over sixty years old. His elder brother Agunai loved the Buddha and remained in Koryŏ, unwilling to leave. [He] said [to Hanpu]: »Among [your] descendants in future generations there will certainly be someone who has the ability to reunite us, [but] I cannot go [with you].« [The First Ancestor] went alone, accompanied by his younger brother Baohuoli. The First Ancestor lived on the banks of the Pugan River among the Wanyan tribe, while Baohuoli lived at the Yelan [River]. […]
>
> After the First Ancestor had reached the Wanyan tribe, he lived among them for a long time. At one point, a man of the tribe killed a man from another clan. Therefore, the two clans hated each other, and their mutual fighting could not be ended. The people of the Wanyan tribe said to the First Ancestor: »If you can settle this hatred among the people of our tribe and prevent the two clans from killing each other, then a worthy woman in our tribe, who is sixty years old and not yet married, shall be married to you, and you will also become a member of the [Wanyan] tribe.« The First Ancestor replied: »Yes.«
>
> Thereupon, he personally went [to the clan whose member had been killed] and said: »Killing one man and not ending the fighting will result in even more casualties. If only the one leading rioter is executed, and the tribe compensates you with goods, then there will be no more fighting and, moreover, you will have some profit.« The victim's family agreed to this. […]
>
> After the compensation had been paid according to the agreement, the tribe's people had confidence in the First Ancestor and obeyed him […]. They allowed him to marry the sixty-year-old woman. […] Later, two sons were born. The elder was called Wulu, the younger Wolu. The first daughter was called Zhusiban. Thereafter, [the First Ancestor] became a member of the Wanyan tribe.

> 金之始祖函普，初從高麗來，年已六十餘矣。兄阿古迺好佛，留高麗不肯從，曰：「後世子孫必有能相聚者，吾不能去也。」獨與弟保活里俱。始祖居完顏部僕幹水之涯，保活里居耶懶。[…] 始祖至完顏部，居久之，其部人嘗殺它族之人，由是兩族交惡，鬨鬬不能解。完顏部人謂始祖曰：「若能為部人解此怨，使兩族不相殺，部有賢女，年六十而未嫁，當以相配，仍為同部。」始祖曰：「諾。」迺自往諭之曰：「殺一人而鬬不解，損傷益多。曷若止誅首亂者一人，部內以物納償汝，可以無鬬而且獲利焉。」怨家從之。[…] 既備償如約，部眾信服之 […]，并許歸六十之婦。[…] 後生二男，長曰烏魯，次曰斡魯，一女曰注思板，遂為完顏部人。[56]

53 Schmid, *Korea between Empires*, ch. 6; Grayson, *Myths from Korea*, 56-57.

54 Kim Jong Il (c. 1941-2011), the second »Eternal President« of North Korea was supposedly born there – although he was probably actually born in Primorsky Krai in the Russian Far East. His father, the first »Eternal President«, Kim Il Sung (1912-1994), who was born in Pyongyang, was allegedly also born close to the White-head Mountain (Grayson, *Myths from Korea*, 57).

55 Chinese *Gaoli* 高麗 refers to the Korean Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392), but can also be a generic reference to Korea as Koryŏ controlled the whole peninsula. It is thus less specific than »Silla« in the *Collected Accounts*.

56 *Jinshi* 1:2-3.

This narration of the Jurchen origin myth contains several widespread motifs. It starts with a migration myth: The First Ancestor came from the Korean Peninsula accompanied only by his younger brother, who goes elsewhere. The First Ancestor then settles as an individual stranger among the Wanyan tribe. His name is now given as Hanpu, and not as Wanyan as is the case in the Wanyan myth. In *Eyewitness Account*, Hanpu was only mentioned in the section after the origin myth, where he was introduced as the first ancestor of the rulers of the Golden Khanate. However, he was not identified as Wanyan, the stranger-king from Silla who became chieftain of the Jurchen. The *History of the Jin* now merges both accounts, stating that Hanpu and the first chieftain are one and the same person. The information that the first chieftain's name was Wanyan and that *wanyan* means »king« in Chinese, given in *Collected Accounts* and *Eyewitness Account*, is no longer mentioned. Because Wanyan was no longer used as his personal name, but instead as the name of the already-established tribe whom he joins, the explanation that *wanyan* meant »king« has become unfitting.

Secondly, through his ability to prevent an internal blood feud and bring peace to the tribe, the First Ancestor takes on features of a »stranger-king«.[57] A third element is that of prophecy. The First Ancestor's elder brother predicts that there will be a man among »the descendants« who will unite the Jurchen tribes, thus prophesying the Golden Khanate's founding. Finally, the fact that the First Ancestor and his nameless wife were already over sixty years old, yet still had several children, invokes the motif of miraculous births.[58] The name of the eldest son, which in *Collected Accounts* and *Eyewitness Account* was Hulan 呼蘭 or Hulai 胡來, is slightly changed, to Wulu 烏魯. Additionally, the other son is now also named, along with a daughter, unlike previous accounts.

Adding my own findings to Grayson's suggestions for elements of thematic structure in the Jurchen origin myth, I identify four fundamental elements of thematic structure: »Arrival of the Ancestor«; »Ancestor Establishes New Social Order«; »Marriage between Ancestor and Woman from the Tribe (Ancestress)«; »Ancestor Is Admitted to the Tribe«.[59] Although some elements are necessarily omitted here, these four cover most of the important episodes of the Jurchen origin myth. All appear in Hong Hao's *Eyewitness Account*, and all but the second in Xu's *Collected Accounts*, but in a superficial and marginal form. In the *History of the Jin*, they are preserved and strengthened.

The remainder of the narrative contains relevant motifs. Following the origin myth proper, the *History of the Jin* narrates the fates of the First Ancestor's descendants. The First Ancestor's great-grandson, the »Presenting Ancestor« (*Xianzu* 獻祖), permanently moved the tribe to »the vicinity of the Golden River« (安出虎水之側), where he taught them farming, craftmanship, and house-building.[60] Besides the motif of migration, the story thus also uses the motif of a culture hero, who brings »civilisation«, here in the form of houses and farming. We can assume that this interpretation was related to the Chinese compilers' view that

57 Lewis, *Stranger-Kings of Sikka*, ch. 6.

58 This is a common motif, for example, in the Bible with the well-known figures of Sara and Abraham.

59 I hereby follow, revise, and expand Grayson's (*Myths from Korea*, 126) suggestions of elements, which are »Arrival of the Hero«; »Hero Establishes New Social Order«; »Hero Marries«; »Hero's Sib Admitted to Tribe«.

60 *Jinshi* 1:3.

civilised life necessarily centred on sedentary farming, and that, in contrast, nomadism and tents were barbarian.

The First Ancestor's great-great-grandson, the »Illustrious Ancestor« (*Zhaozu* 昭祖), was also a culture hero, at least from a Ruist (Confucian) and Legalist perspective. »Because the raw Jurchen had no script and no discipline, they could not be controlled« (生女直無書契，無約束，不可檢制). When the Illustrious Ancestor wanted to established rules, the tribes fiercely objected and even wanted to murder him. In the end, however, he succeeded and consequently »the tribe became stronger and stronger« (部落寖強).[61]

Finally, Aguda, a seventh-generation descendant of the First Ancestor, achieved chieftainship and crowned himself emperor of the Golden Khanate, becoming the »Great Ancestor« (*Taizu* 太祖), a common Chinese designation for dynastic founders. In the second chapter of the *History of the Jin*, the wonders of Aguda's birth are told:

> During the time of Liao Daozong [1055-1101], five-coloured clouds and mists, which were as big as granaries for two thousand bushels of grain, repeatedly appeared in the east. The [Liao] Officer of Heaven,[62] Kong Zhihe [dates unknown], secretly told someone, »Beneath it, an extraordinary man will be born who will accomplish outstanding things. By this appearance, heaven tells us that no human's power can overcome him.« On the first day of the seventh month in the fourth year of Xianyong [1 August 1168], the Great Ancestor was born.
>
> 遼道宗時有五色雲氣屢出東方，大若二千斛困倉之狀。司天孔致和竊謂人曰：「其下當生異人，建非常之事。天以象告，非人力所能為也。」咸雍四年戊申，七月一日，太祖生。[63]

Aguda's birth story thus repeats the motif of the prophecy about a future leader, but no other motifs or elements. The rest of his biographical chapter is rather mundane.

Origin myths of the Manchu Qing

As mentioned, Hong Taiji changed the name of his empire from Golden Khanate to Great Warrior Khanate or Great Qing in 1636. Gertraude Roth Li argues that this served to distance »his state from the Chin [Golden Khanate] precedent«.[64] However, there are reasons to doubt this interpretation. The Manchu Qing emperors probably had other motives for this name change, for example, the five-agent system. Moreover, they notably retained the term »golden« in their own clan name Aisin, or »golden«, Gioro.[65] Furthermore, in the different versions of the Manchu origin myth, many motifs reappear that are clearly recognisable from the myths of the Jurchen Golden Khanate. We do see indications that the Manchu emperors wanted to stress their Manchuness by, for instance, deleting direct references to the Jurchen in their origin myth as time passed. At the same time, however, they strengthened references to the White Mountain, using it to replace the mountain that featured in the early versions of

61 *Jinshi*.:3-4.

62 *Sitian* 司天, which can also be translated as »Astronomer«.

63 *Jinshi* 2:19.

64 Roth Li, State building, 63.

65 The name was probably adopted in the 1610s when Nurhaci rose to power. Before, he was a member of the »ordinary« Gioro clan (Roth Li, State building, 28).

their origin myth, as we shall see. There were diverse reasons for these changes and revisions, which cannot easily be explained by the Manchus' alleged wish to deemphasise their Jurchen connection.

The Manchu Qing emperors had much more control over their own history-writing and narratives than the Jurchen emperors. The passage of time has necessarily wreaked more devastation on the literary heritage of the Golden Khanate, which dissolved nearly nine centuries ago, than on that of the Manchu Qing empire, which only ended in 1912. Moreover, the Golden Khanate only lasted about a century, whereas the Qing lasted nearly three, giving the Manchus more time to establish their script and literature. Finally, the Qing emperors were effective in controlling the Manchu origin myth. Due to the »formalization of the old culture« by the Qing emperors, »the documentation of descent, myth, clan history« became »visible, manageable, and standard«.[66]

In what follows, I refer to the oldest known versions of the myth as the »themes« and the later ones as »variations«. The themes probably date to 1635; the following four variations in Manchu were written down or printed in 1655, 1736, 1739, and 1819. The final variation was published in Chinese in 1928.[67] The following list gives an overview of the sources, including transliterations and translations, if available:

Themes: The Hūrha myth (1635)

Manchu text: *Jiu Manzhou dang* [1969] 9:4242.
Transliteration: *Jiu Manzhou dang* [1972], ed. Nobuo, Jun and Hidehiro, 124-125.
English translation: Durrant, Repetition in the Manchu origin myth, 76.
Chinese translation: Sun and Song, Cong Manwen wenxian, 49.
German translation: Stary, Mandschurische Reime, 77.

Themes: The Mount Bukūri myth (1635)

Manchu text: Uju nenehe [genggiyen] han i sain yabuha kooli uheri juwan nadan debtelin, (*Nei guoshiyuan dang* 內國史院檔, fasc. 2, pt. 1:1a-5b).[68]
Transliteration: Matsumura, Founding legend, 46-48.
English translation: Matsumura, Founding legend, 48-50.

Variation I: The tripartite White Mountain-Mount Bukūri-Fanca myth (1655)

Manchu text: *Daicing gurun i taidzu horonggo enduringge hūwangdi i yargiyan kooli* 1:1-10 [3-12].
Transliterations: Matsumura, Founding legend, 50-52; *Ubaliyambuha suhe gisun kamcibuha Manju i yargiyan kooli*, 1-6.

66 Crossley, *Manzhou yuanliu kao*, 761-762.

67 References can be found below in the respective sections of each version. I am indebted to Sun's (Writing an empire) account of four »stem versions«, even though I deviate from her list of sources and conclusions.

68 I did not have access to this manuscript, hold by the First Historical Archives in Beijing, myself.

Variation II: The bipartite Nurhaci/White Mountain-Bukūri Yongšon myth (1736)

Manchu text: Daicing gurun i taidzu dergi hūwangdi i da hergen i bithe dergi debtelin (*Manwen Taizu Gao huangdi benji* 滿文太祖高皇帝本紀), vol, 1, 1-4.[69]

Transliteration: Zhang, *"Jiu Manzhou dang" cihui*, 70-71.

Variation III: The tripartite Nurhaci/White Mountain-Bukūri Yongšon-Fanca myth (1739)

Manchu text: *Daicing gurun i taidzu dergi hūwangdi i yargiyan kooli* (ujui debtelin. sahahūn honin aniya ci niowanggiyan bonio aniya de isinahabi), 123-131 [1-9].

Transliteration: Sun and Song, Cong Manwen wenxian, 54-55.

Chinese translation: *Taizu Gao huangdi shilu* 1:1b-3b [21-22].

German translation: Hauer, Das mandschurische Kaiserhaus, 13-14.

Variation IV: The tripartite Nurhaci/White Mountain-Bukūri Yongšon-Fanca myth (1819)

Manchu text: Daicing gurun i taidzu dergi hūwangdi i da hergen i bithe dergi debtelin 1:[7b-10b].

Variation V: The tripartite Mount Bukūri-Fanca-Möngke Temür variation (1928)

Chinese text: *Qingshigao* 1:1.

Themes: The Hūrha myth and the Mount Bukūri myth (1635)

In 1635, two closely related myths, the Hūrha myth and the Mount Bukūri myth, were first written down – probably in that order. Both are in fact theme myths. The Jurchen Hūrha clan (*Hu'erha* 虎爾哈, in Chinese),[70] who lived close to the Black River, surrendered to Hong Taiji in 1635. In the same year, one of the surrenderers, Muksik (dates unknown), was brought to court, where he told the origin myth of his clan. It comprises the following few lines in the *Old Manchu Archives* (*Fe Manju dangse*, in Manchu, *Jiu Manzhou dang* 舊滿洲檔, in Chinese):

> For generations, my forefathers and fathers lived at Lake Bulhori[71] at Mount Bukūri. […] When three heavenly girls, Enggūlen, Jenggūlen, and Fekūlen, took a bath in said Lake Bulhori, a spirit magpie brought a red fruit to the youngest of the girls, Fekūlen. She took it into her mouth, and it entered her throat. She became pregnant and gave birth to Bokori Yongšon. His descendants are the Manchu people[72].[73]

69 I did not have access to this manuscript, hold by the National Palace Museum in Taipei, myself.

70 *Qingshigao* 1:6 and throughout. Sun and Song (Cong Manwen wenxian, 49) use the transcription 呼尔哈.

71 Later spelled Bulhūri. According to Walter Fuchs (Bulhuri Omo, 47), this »small lake« is situated »a two-days march to the east« of the White Mountain »in the middle of the untouched wilderness of the virgin forest«.

72 Here, *gurun* (here spelled *gūrun*) means people (see above, footnote 2).

73 Sun (Writing an empire, 105-106) claims that a Kangxi version (1686) of the myth would be another variation because it stressed for the first time that the name of the people had already been »Manchu« since Bukūri Yongšon's time. Sun, however, relies on the transliteration of the Mount Bukūri theme myth by Sun and Song (Cong Manwen wenxian, 50), which omits the final sentences that mention the Manchu people (Zhang, »Sansiannü« chuanshuo tanyuan, 113).

mini mafa ama jalan halame bukūri alin i dade bulhori omode banjiha, […] tere bulhori omode abkai ilan sargan jui enggūlen, jenggūlen, fekūlen ebišeme jifi, enduri saksaha benjihe fulgiyan tubihe be fiyanggū sargan jui fekūlen bahafi anggade ašufi bilgade dosifi beye de ofi bokori yongšon be banjiha, terei hūncihin manju gūrun inu.[74]

I identify the following structural elements: »Stating the Place of Residence of the Tribe«; »Conception and Birth of the Ancestor«; »Establishment of the Tribe« (see appendix, table 1).[75] As we shall see, all elements as well as several motifs reappear as part of the Mount Bukūri myth, the earliest written version of the Manchu origin myth.[76] The last sentence indicates that this Hūrha origin myth is actually a Manchu origin myth, too.[77] For reasons of clarity, I will continue to call it a Hūrha myth here .

The Mount Bukūri myth is the first written version of an imperial origin myth: not yet of the Manchu Qing (as those two names would only emerge in 1635 and the following year, as explained above), but of Nurhaci's and Hong Taiji's Golden Khanate. The Mount Bukūri myth is clearly related to the Hūrha myth. Gertraude Roth Li and Sun Lin assume that it was an adaptation of the Hūrha myth.[78] Giovanni Stary, on the other hand, argues that the basic motifs of the myth were widespread and can also be found in older Tungus, Korean, and Chinese origin myths. He assumes that similar myths had not only been orally transmitted by the Hūrha clan, but also by Nurhaci's clan, and were then further developed in written form.[79] Muksik supports the notion that myths were transmitted this way stating that »in our place, there is neither script nor scripture. Since ancient times, [the myth] has been told from mouth to mouth« (*mini bade bithe dangse akū, julgei banjiha be ulan ulan i gisureme jihengge*).[80] Indeed, some general motifs of the Hūrha myth appear in other myths from Northeast Asia, particularly those of the Southern Tungus.[81] However, as I show below, the Hūrha origin myth and the Mount Bukūri myth share more specific commonalities which indicate that they are more closely related.

74 *Jiu Manzhou dang* 9, ed. Guoli gugong bowuyuan, 4242. Note that the use of old Manchu involves some spelling peculiarities, mainly the use of the letter »ū« in proper names. For a transliteration, see *Jiu Manzhou dang* [1972], ed. Nobuo, Jun and Hidehiro, 124-125; for alternative translations, see Durrant, Repetition, 76; Sun and Song, Cong Manwen wenxian, 49; Stary, Mandschurische Reime, 77.

75 I identified the individual elements by following Grayson's suggestions for diverse northeast Asian myths and adding my own findings (Grayson, *Myths from Korea*, 124-143).

76 For a complete German translation, see Fuchs, Bulhuri Omo, 50-52.

77 Roth Li, State building, 64;

78 Sun, Writing an empire, 102; Roth Li, State building, 64.

79 Stary, Mandschurische Reime, 76.

80 *Jiu Manzhou dang* 9, Guoli gugong bowuyuan, 4242.

81 See, for example, the Nanai origin myth (Grayson, *Myths from Korea*, 140).

The Mount Bukūri myth dates to c. 1635[82] and was recorded in the *Documents of the Palace Historiographic Academy*[83] (*Nei guoshiyuan dang* 內國史院檔).[84] It is much longer than the Hūrha myth. Below, I paraphrase the entire theme narrative quoting key passages verbatim. with their translations. This enables me to point out how later variations deviate from the theme or »master narrative« without completely retelling each individual version.

> The three clans of the Jurchen people were competing for the throne of the people's leader and were constantly fighting each other.
>
> *jušen gurun i ilan halai niyalma, gurun de ejen tere soorin temšeme, inenggi dari becendure afandurebe*.

Therefore, »the Heavenly Khan« (*abkai han*) decided to send a »spirit« (*enduri*) to end the fighting and become their leader. He turned the spirit into a magpie (*saksaha*), which carried a »red fruit« (*fulgiyan tubihe*) to Lake Bulhūri (*bulhūri omo*) at the foot of Mount Bukūri (*bukūri alin*). At that time, »three girls« (*ilan sargan jui*) were bathing in the lake. Coming out of the water, the youngest found the red fruit lying on top of her clothes. »She put it in her mouth, and it went directly into her throat« (*ašuka tubihe bilgade šuwe dosika*). She became pregnant. Her two elder sisters left after assuring her, »We have all taken the drug of immortality, so you will not die! Do not worry« (*muse lingdan okto jeke, bucere kooli akūkai, si ume joboro*). Later, she gave birth to a boy who grew up within only a few years. His mother said to him:

> Heaven gave life to you to so that you bring order to the Jurchen people. You, son, must go to the Jurchen people. When the Jurchen people ask you where you come from, who your father and mother are, and what your family name is, you should say »I was born on Lake Bulhūri that is at the foot of Mount Bukūri. My first name is Bukūri Yongšon,[85] and my family name is Aisin Gioro [Golden Gioro] which descended from Heaven. I do not have a father. My mother is one of the three heavenly girls. The eldest is called Enggulen, the sec-

82 Matsumura (Founding legend, 41-46) explains why this date is plausible.

83 The Palace Historiographic Academy, also translated as »Inner Historical Office«, existed from 1635 to 1658 »in the top echelon of the early Ch'ing central government« and »[k]ept records, edited imperial pronouncements, [and] produced historical documents« (Hucker, *Dictionary of Official Titles*, 348, no. 4212).

84 I did not have access to the original or its facsimile. For a transliteration of the relevant part in the second fascicle titled »uju nenehe [genggiyen] han i sain yabuha kooli uheri juwan nadan debtelin« in the *Documents of the Palace Historiographic Academy* (fasc. 2, pt. 1:1a-5b) see Matsumura, Founding legend, 46-48, who also offers a complete translation (48-50). Fuchs (Bulhuri Omo, 50) claims that a 1635 version of the myth is also included in *Ubaliyambuha suhe gisun kamcibuha manju i yargiyan kooli* ed. Imanishi Shunjû, 2-6. However, this is a misunderstanding: he mistakes the year whose events are recorded (which is 1636, not 1635) for the year in which they were actually written down.

85 Bukūri Yongšon can be translated as »[Mount] Bukūri Hero«, *yongšon* being »a corruption of *yingxiong* [英雄]«, Chinese for »hero«. As this might not have been obvious to Manchu readers unfamiliar with Chinese, I keep the Manchu transcription as Bukūri Yongšon's name throughout and do not refer to him as Bukūri Hero. For more about the significance of the term »hero«, as derived from a Manchu-Mongolian honorific title, see Crossley, Introduction, 19. In the facsimile print of a Chinese manuscript of *Taizu Gao huangdi shilu* 太祖高皇帝實錄 [Veritable Records of the Qianlong Emperor], the term »hero« (英雄) has been crossed out and replaced with *yongchun* 雍純, a transliteration for »Yongšon« (*Taizu Gao huangdi shilu*, vol. 1:3b).

> ond Jenggulen, and the third Fekulen. I was born by Fekulen, so I am a spirit from Heaven above as well. The Heavenly Khan turned my soul into a red fruit, and another spirit in the form of a magpie was sent down and I was born [...].«
>
> *simbe jušen gurun de genefi banjikini seme abka fulinggai banjibuha, jui si jušen gurun de genefi banji, jušen gurun i niyalma, simbe ainaha niyalma, sini ama eme we, gebu hala ai seme fonjiha de bukūri alin i dade bulhūri omoi dalin de banjiha mini gebu bukūri yongšon, mini hala abka ci wasika aisin gioro, minde ama akū, mini eme abkai ilan sargan jui bihe, eyungge sargan jui gebu enggulen, jacin sargan jui gebu jenggulen, ilaci sargan jui gebu fekulen, fekulen de banjihangge bi inu bi abkai dergi enduri bihe, mini fayangga be, abkai han fulgiyan tubihe obufi emu enduri be saksahai beye obufi takūrafi unggifi, bi banjiha* [...].

Fekulen gave Bukūri Yongšon a »canoe« (*weihu*). Bukūri Yongšon boated down a river and finally went ashore. »He bent willow twigs, supported with aromatic herbs[86] to make a chair and sat on it [...]« (*burga be bukdafi suiha be sujafi mulan arafi, mulan i dele tefi* [...]). A man coming to fetch water saw him there. He went back to his people who were fighting with each other and said, »Stop fighting! At the ford of our river is a very beautiful, good boy. [...] This boy is not of our Jurchen people« (*suwe ubade becendurebe naka, musei muke gaijara dogon de dembei hojo sain emu haha jui jifi, [...] tere jui musei ere jušen gurun i niyalma waka*). The Jurchen tribes stopped fighting and went to see and question this boy. Bukūri Yongšon recounted his mother's words. Thereupon,

> everyone said, »This boy is someone who cannot go on foot.« Two men joined their hands and let him sit on them, carrying him [to their] home. The members of the three clans met for consultations [and said], »Let us stop fighting over [the position of] ruler of our people and let us elevate this one, make him our people's ruler, and give him our younger sister Beri Gege as a wife.« After they gave him the wife, he became the supreme leader of them all. Bukūri Yongšon, who came from Mount Bukūri and the shores of Bulhūri Lake, settled down in Odoli town in the lowlands of Omohoi and became the ruler of the unruly Manchu people.
>
> *tere geren niyalma hendume, ere jui be yafahan gamara jui waka seme gisurefi, juwe niyalmai gala be ishun joolame jafafi[,] galai dele tebufi[,] boo de gamafi, ilan halai niyalma acafi[,] hebdeme, muse gurun de ejen ojoro soorin* [*sorin*] *temšere be nakaki, erebe tukiyefi, musei gurun de beile obuki, musei non beri gege be, ede sargan buki seme gisurefi, sargan bufi ceni geren i dele terebe ejen obuha, bukori alin i dade, bulkori omoi dalinde banjiha bukori yongšon, omohoi bigan, odoli hecen de tefi, facuhūn manju gurun de beile ofi banjiha,*[87]

Thus ends the origin myth. I identify the following elements of thematic structure: »Conception and Birth of the Ancestor«; »Riverine Journey of the Ancestor«; »Marriage between Ancestor and Woman from the Tribe (Ancestress)«; »Ancestor is Elected Leader«; »Renewal of Social Order«, and »Stating the Place of Residence of the Tribe«. We see nearly

86 The term *suiha* can refer to mugwort, wormwood, and other aromatic herbs used for medicinal and spiritual purposes.

87 Zhang, »Sansiannü« chuanshuo tanyuan, 113.

all elements and motifs from the Hūrha myth reappearing, even if some of the proper names are spelled differently. The only missing element is »Establishment of the Tribe«.

We also see motifs from the Jurchen origin myths reappearing (see appendix, table 1). The first chieftain of the Wanyan myth (*Eyewitness Account* and *Collected Accounts*) or the First Ancestor of the Hanpu myth (*History of the Jin*), respectively, is replaced by Bukūri Yongšon, who is a stranger-king. Like the former, Bukūri Yongšon pacifies fighting clans and is betrothed to a woman from their midst. Similarly, the motif of a senior relative's prophecy that the stranger-king will pacify and lead a people reappears. Here, the prophet is Bukūri Yongšon's mother Fekulen, whereas in the Wanyan myth it was Agunai, the elder brother of the First Ancestor. We again encounter a set of three siblings – sisters this time – which echoes the Wanyan motif of three brothers, although the most important sibling here is the youngest, Fekulen, whose slightly different name compared to those of her sisters, Enggulen and Jenggulen, that are nearly identical, marks her as special.

The motif of the protagonist's integration into an existing clan is repeated prominently. In the Wanyan myth, Wanyan joins a nameless Jurchen clan; in the Hanpu myth, the First Ancestor joins the Wanyan clan and adopts its name. Here, Bukūri Yongšon pacifies the three Jurchen clans and introduces his own family name, Aisin Gioro, which repeats the motif of gold. Finally, we again see the motif of the miraculous birth. Fekulen bears Bukūri Yongšon without sexual intercourse – she eats a spirit fruit, wonderfully transformed by the Heavenly Khan and brought to her by a spirit magpie. Her impregnation could be described as a »virginal conception«, as Fekulen herself tells Bukūri Yongšon that he does not have a father.

Only one motif from the Wanyan and Hanpu myths, at least in my counting, disappears, which is the symbolical set of two. In the Wanyan and Hanpu myths, the first chieftain, or First Ancestor, has two sons; in the Hanpu myth, he pacifies two fighting clans. Yet, most of the earlier motifs make a direct or indirect reappearance in the Mount Bukūri myth. This suggests that more general elements and motifs – first ancestor, number three, rivers and mountains, and a miraculous birth – had already been common themes in the Wanyan myth or became common Tungusic motifs thereafter.

Some motifs in the Mount Bukūri myth have no direct equivalents in the Wanyan myth. Mount Bukūri and Lake Bulhūri, a mountain and a body of water, are introduced as sacred places only in the Hūrha and Mount Bukūri myths. The spirit magpie and the red fruit, too, make their first appearances in those two myths.

Birds and fruits, or eggs, appear frequently in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean origin myths.[88] Such myths, for example the one of the bird that lives in the sun,[89] commonly associate birds, and especially black birds, such as crows or magpies, with the sun. Waters, on the other hand, and particularly rivers, are associated with »›life‹ and ›giving birth‹« (»生命«,

88 Yang and An, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*, 148-149; Birell, *Chinese Mythology*, 115-127. In versions of the foundation myths of Koguryŏ from the seventh century onwards, the hero is born from an egg (Grayson, *Myths from Korea*, 68-94).

89 Yang and An, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*, 32, 95-96.

»生育«) among the peoples of Northeast Asia.[90] In his analysis of the origin myth of the Shang dynasty (trad. c. 1600-c. 1046 BCE), Yang Gongji stated that

> a sun deity (*feng* bird[91], dark-coloured bird, spirit magpie) and a river deity's daughter (also spirit bird, *huang* bird) married and then brought Shang[92] into being – he is a »man«, but he is also an entire people. Sun and river water were considered to be father and mother of humankind.
>
> 日神 (鳳、玄鳥、神鵲) 和河神的女兒 (也是神鳥、娥凰) 結婚，于是產生了商—是一个'人'，也是全族。 这說明在当时人的观念中，認为太陽和河水是人类的父親和母親。[93]

There are further parallels between the origin myth of the Shang 商 dynasty (traditionally c. 1600-1046 BCE) with the Mount Bukūri myth. The myth was first recorded in the Shiji by Sima Qian, the oldest Chinese history:

> As for Hsieh [Xie] of Yin, his mother was called Chien-ti [Jiandi]. [...] [One day when] she and two other women went out to bathe, she saw a black bird lay an egg. Chien-ti took it and swallowed it. For this reason, she became pregnant and gave birth to Hsieh.
>
> 殷契，母曰簡狄 [...]。三人行浴，見玄鳥墮其卵，簡狄取吞之，因孕生契。[94]

Instead of by the sun, Bukūri Yongšon is fathered by Heaven, though he is also embodied by a dark bird (magpie) and a red fruit, which features instead of the egg. He is borne by Fekulen, who bathes with two women (her sisters), just like Yin's mother Jiandi.

When we consider Fekulen sending her son downstream in a canoe, the specific embeddedness of the Mount Bukūri myth in northeast Asian mythology becomes clear. Although the motif of »the abandonment of the hero-child (›Moses motif‹)« can be found in many Asian and non-Asian myths,[95] the second motif of the »Riverine Journey of the Hero«[96] appears specifically in northeast Asian origin myths of the Khitan[97] and of the Southern Tungusic Nanai.[98]

Finally, two minor motifs appear, which have their parallels in other Asian myths. Firstly, the chair is introduced as the sign of a ruler, here built by the stranger-king himself, as well as the fact that he must be carried. In particular, the latter motif can also be found in Tibetan origin myths on the first king of Tibet. His name, gNya'-khri btsan-po, was later interpreted

90 Zhang, Yin-Shang, Gaogouli, Manzu, 51.

91 *Feng* 鳳 is a mythological male bird, often translated as »phoenix« in English, whose female counterpart is called *huang* 凰.

92 This refers to Xie of Yin 殷契, the first ancestor of the Shang dynasty.

93 Yang, *Zhongguo wenxue*, 94. Note that some characters had already been replaced by simplified ones, while others are still traditional.

94 *Shiji* 3:91; translated in *Grand Scribe's Records*, vol. I, ed. Nienhauser Jr., 41; see also Yang and An, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*, 148-149; Birell, *Chinese Mythology*, 115-116.

95 Durrant, Repetition, 74, fn 6.

96 Grayson (*Myths from Korea*, 153) uses the expression »Riverine Descent of the Hero«, which I revised for clarity.

97 *Liaoshi* 37:445-446; see also Grayson, *Myths from Korea*, 124. The Khitan are usually described as proto-Mongol. However, their origin myth ultimately puts them in close relation to the Southern Tunguses.

98 Lattimore, Gold Tribe, 11-12; see also Grayson, *Myths from Korea*, 140.

as meaning »neck-throne emperor«, because according to the origin myth, his new subjects carried him on their necks.[99] The parallels with gNya'-khri btsan-po continue: he, too, comes from Heaven, lands on a mountain, from where he descends (not by canoe), and is found by herdsmen who identify him as their ruler.[100] Secondly, the motif of Bukūri Yongšon »growing up before the [proper amount of] years were over« (*aniya goidahakū amban* [sic] *oho*)[101] can already be found in Buddhist texts about Gautama Buddha's birth. According to Buddhist tradition, Gautama walked seven steps northwards directly after being born. It also features in the pre-Islamic version of the origin myth of the Oghuz Turks, whose legendary ancestor, Oghuz Khan, »[a]fter forty days […] started to walk and play«.[102]

It is noteworthy that the Hūrha myth already introduces the »Manchu people« (*manju gurun*). Moreover, the Mount Bukūri myth refers to the »Jurchen people« (*jušen gurun*). In fact, it uses the two terms, Manchu and Jurchen, to refer to one and the same populace, albeit at different points in time. At first, the myth refers to the »unruly Jurchen people« (*facuhūn jušen gurun*) whom the Heavenly Khan intends to pacify by sending Bukūri Yongšon. In the end, Bukūri Yongšon becomes leader of the »unruly Manchu people« (*facuhūn manju gurun*), clearly referring to the same people.

Variation I: The Tripartite White Mountain-Mount Bukūri-Fanca Myth (1655)

Variation I, dated 1655, introduces new topics and fails to include old ones (see appendix, table 1).[103] Most importantly, it adds a new introductory part, new concluding sentences to the theme myth (which now becomes the second part), and a novel third part.

The new introduction concerns the White Mountain (*šanggiyan alin*), here also referred to as »Long White Mountain« (*golmin šanggiyan alin*). Already known from the historiography of the Jurchen Golden Khanate, it makes its first appearance here as part of the Manchu myth (see illustration 1).[104] The mountain is described in geographical terms, including a reference to its crater lake, »a lake called Tamun«[105] (*tamun i gebungge omo*), as well as the three rivers that originate from the mountain, Yalu, Hūntung, and Aihu.[106] Sun claims that the introduction of

99 *History of Buddhism*, 435, about the translation of the name, see 431, fn 1485; see also *Mirror (rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-long)* trans. Sørensen, 138-139; Zhang, »Sansiannü« chuanshuo tanyuan, 109-111, 120-121. I thank Reinier Langelaar for pointing out this parallel myth to me and for the reference.

100 *Mirror (rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-long)*, trans. Sørensen, 139.

101 Zhang, »Sansiannü« chuanshuo tanyuan, 112.

102 Doğruyol, Epic as a literary genre, 187. I am particularly grateful to Joo-Yup Lee, who pointed out this myth and provided references for it (Lee, Some remarks, 130, fn. 44). For an English translation of the whole myth in Uighur script (manuscript held by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris), see Doğruyol, Epic as a literary genre, 187-196.

103 *Daicing gurun i taidzu horonggo enduringge hūwangdi i yargiyan kooli* 1:1-10 [3-12]. A transliterated version can be found in Matsumura, Founding legend, 50-52 and in *Ubaliyambuha suhe gisun kamcibuha Manju i yargiyan kooli*, 1-6.

104 *Daicing gurun i taidzu horonggo enduringge hūwangdi i yargiyan kooli* 1:1 [3].

105 Today, Lake Tamun is called »Heaven Lake« (*Tianchi* 天池) in Chinese.

106 *Daicing gurun i taidzu horonggo enduringge hūwangdi i yargiyan kooli* 1:1 [3]. The Yalu River has kept its name, the Hūntung River is the Sunggari and the Aihu River (*Aihu* 愛乎, 爰滹 in Chinese) is the Tumen River (Matsumura, Qing Taizu shilu yanjiu, 25).

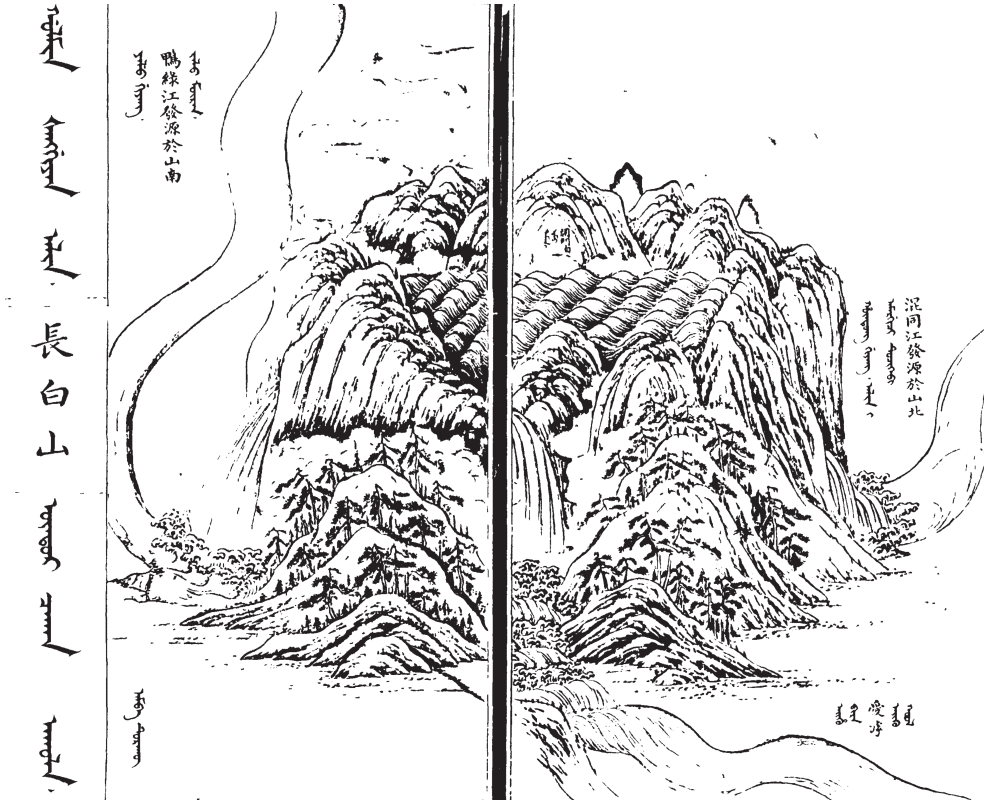


Illustration 1: The »Long White Mountain« and its three rivers[109]

the White Mountain »is clearly connected to the fact that the Manchus, having now left their homeland, felt an urgent need to establish a spiritual geographical basis«.[107] In view of the rather mundane way in which the White Mountain is introduced, however, it does not yet feature as a sacred place proper. It will only assume more sacredness in variation II in 1736.

In a transitional sentence, the text of variation I somewhat awkwardly attempts to link the White Mountain and the earliest attested version of the myth, which continues to be set at Mount Bukūri:

> Originally, the Manchu people came from the east of the Long White Mountain where a mountain called Bukūri rises with a lake called Bulhūri.
>
> *manju gurun i da, golmin šanggiyan alin i šun dekdere ergi bukūri gebungge alin, bulhūri gebungge omoci tucike,*[108]

107 Sun, Writing an empire, 103.

108 *Daicing gurun i taidzu horonggo enduringge hūwangdi i yargiyan kooli* 1:3 [5].

109 *Manju yargiyan kooli* 1:[1a-b]). The captions on the left give the mountain's name in Manchu, Chinese, and Mongolian. The small captions in the picture refer to the rivers originating from Lake Tamun. The captions in the upper left corner say »Yalu River« in Manchu, Chinese, and Mongol, explaining in Chinese that it »flows towards the south of the mountain«. The middle right notes in Manchu and Chinese say that »the Hūntung/Huntong River flows towards the north of the mountain«. The lower right reads »Aihu River« in

In doing so, the White Mountain is geographically tied to the Manchu origin myth, but why its description features as an introduction will only become clear later.

Unlike the theme myth, variation I does not mention the Jurchen. Sun assumes that the »Jurchen people« were replaced by »unruly people« (*facuhūn gurun*), and that this shows that the Shunzhi emperor »wished to minimize the association« between Manchus and Jurchen. In her opinion, this »marks the turning point between the ›inheritors of the Jin dynasty‹ and the making of the Manchus [...]«.[110]

The Heavenly Khan, who occupied a prominent position in the theme myth, largely disappears from variation I, too. It still mentions him in Fekulen's speech to her son, but this seems to be an accidental remnant from the theme myth, since the Heavenly Khan no longer features as the spiritus rector of the events.

Variation I then adds two new aspects at the end of the Bukūri Yongšon part:

> After Bukūri Yongšon had settled down in a town called Odoli in the lowlands called Omohui, to the east of the White Mountain, and pacified the unruly, he said that the name of the people was »Manchu«. This [man] was the first ancestor of the Manchu people.
>
> *bukūri yongšon šanggiyan alin i šun dekedere* [sic] *ergi omohoi gebungge bigan i odoli gebungge hecen de tefi, facuhūn be toktobufi, gurun i gebu be manju sehe, tere manju gurun i da mafan inu,*[111]

Like Mount Bukūri in the introduction, the town Odoli, Bukūri Yongšon's chosen place of settlement, is now also located in relation to the White Mountain. Furthermore, Bukūri Yongšon is now not only the ruler, but the »first ancestor of the Manchu people« (*manju gurun i da mafan*).

Subsequently, variation I introduces a new, third part: a »restorative« or »retriever« myth about a boy, Fanca (*Fancha* 凡察, in Chinese). His role follows the motif of the »sole survivor«, which shows him to be »a kingly figure«, in line with Indian and Tibetan tradition.[112] Fanca is a descendant of »Bukūri Yongšon's clan« (*bukūri yongšon i uksun mukūn*).[113] The story reports that the clan's heroic qualities had worn off over time, and the people had become disunited again. When the other clans rebelled, Bukūri Yongšon's clan was defeated and almost completely eradicated. Only Fanca managed to escape, helped by a »spirit magpie« (*enduri saksaha*), who settled on Fanca's head, which made his pursuers mistake him for a dead tree.[114] Consequently, Fanca was able to re-establish the clan.

Manchu, Chinese, and Mongol. Finally, the lower left says »great cascade« in Manchu, referring to the waterfall originating from Lake Tamun, which here seems to feed into the Aihu River, while it actually feeds into the Hūntung River, known today as Sunggari.

110 Sun, Writing an empire, 103-104.

111 *Daicing gurun i taidzu horonggo enduringge hūwangdi i yargiyan kooli* 1:7-8 [9-10].

112 Dotson, Theorising the king, 89-90. Tibetan myths inherited this motif from the two main Hindu epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*.

113 Note that the clan is not referred to as »Aisin Gioro« here. Note also that there was a historical Fanca (?-1451/1458), half-brother of Möngke Temür (see below) (Crossley, Introduction, 14, 14n2; Goodrich and Fang, *Ming Biography*, 1066; see also Roth Li (State building, 13, 20), who claims Fanca was Möngke Temür's son).

114 Trees generally seem to be rare topics in founding myths. There is a Uyghur origin myth that features trees giving birth to the first ancestor (Lee, Some remarks, 129-130, see also 129 fn. 42). I thank Joo-yup Lee for this reference.

> Therefore, later generations of the Manchu people all said that the magpie was their ancestor and abstained from killing it.
>
> *tuttu ofi manju gurun i amaga jalan i juse omosi gemu sakaha be mafa seme warakū bihe*.[115]

Apart from the new motifs, Fanca's story resembles the motif of the hero-child Bukūri Yongšon and reinforces the motif of the magpie, which now also embodies the people's ancestor. The origins of the Fanca myth and the reason for its inclusion are unknown.[116]

Compared to the theme myth, all six original elements of thematic structure are maintained. In addition, we find a new element at the beginning, »Introduction of a Holy Mountain«, which is not yet fully developed. There are three new postfixed elements: »Establishment of the People«, »Hero's Escape«, and »Reestablishment of the People«. However, not all of these elements are truly new, as we already know them from the Jurchen and Hūrha myths. In the appendix, table 1, I compare the elements of all myths, bringing parallels and discrepancies to the fore. Firstly, variation I shows all elements of the Jurchen myth if we ignore the fact that the mere arrival of the ancestor is replaced by his conception and birth (rows 2 and 3), and that the ancestor's admission to the tribe is replaced by his establishment as the ancestor of the Manchu people (rows 9 and 10). Secondly, variation I contains all elements of the Hūrha myth. Thirdly, variation I reintroduces already-known elements, the holy mountain (row 1) and the establishment of the people (row 9). Finally, the Jurchen and Hūrha myth share three elements if we accept what was said before for lines 2 and 3, and for lines 9 and 10. This indicates that the Hūrha myth might have been a transmitter from the Jurchen to the Manchu myth.

Variation II: The bipartite Nurhaci/White Mountain-Bukūri Yongšon myth (1736)

Variation II, perhaps written down in 1736,[117] is more neatly organised and features less repetition than the theme myth and variation I (see appendix, table 1). Apparently, it does not include the Fanca myth. However, I could only access a transcription by Zhang Huake, which might be incomplete.

Here, the White Mountain replaces Mount Bukūri. It is now the place of origin of both Nurhaci and the Aisin Gioro clan, as well as the main point of reference for locating other places. Mount Bukūri and Lake Bulhūri are only mentioned once at the very end of the first part, and only in relation to the White Mountain: »To the east of the [Long White] Mountain,

---

115 *Daicing gurun i taidzu horonggo enduringge hūwangdi iyargiyan kooli* 1:9 [11].

116 Sun (Writing an empire, 105-106) claims that a Kangxi version (1686) of the myth would be another variation, because, she believed, it stressed for the first time that the name of the people had already been »Manchu« since Bukūri Yongšon's time. Sun, however, relies on a transliteration of the Mount Bukūri theme myth, which omits the final sentences (Sun and Song, Cong Manwen wenxian, 50) that mention the Manchu people (Zhang, »Sansiannü« chuanshuo tanyuan, 113).

117 A transliteration can be found in Zhang, *"Jiu Manzhou dang" cihui*, 70-71. The variant stems from a manuscript held in the Palace Museum in Taipei which I could not access, Daicing gurun i taidzu dergi hūwangdi i da hergen i bithe dergi debtelin (*Manwen Taizu Gao huangdi benji* 滿文太祖高皇帝本紀), vol, 1, 1-4 (Zhang, *"Jiu Manzhou dang" cihui*, 71 n96). The document itself does not contain a date; 1736 is suggested by Chen (*Manwen Qing benji yanjiu*, 7-8).

where a mountain called Bukūri emerges, lies Lake Bulhūri« (*alin i šun dekdere ergi bukūri gebungge alin i da de bulhūri gebungge omo bi*).[118] At the end of the second part, the town Odoli, where Bukūri Yongšon settled down, is said to be situated »east of the Long White Mountain« (*golmin šanggiyan alin i šun*).[119] Although the ancestor's name remains Bukūri Yongšon, it loses part of its meaning because it is never explicitly stated that his mother conceived him at the lake at Mount Bukūri.

Nurhaci (here Nurgaci) himself is mentioned for the first time in the Manchu myth. Moreover, by including a prophecy, the White Mountain is now incorporated into the myth proper:

> The ancestors of Nurgaci of the Aisin Gioro clan emerged from the Long White Mountain. [...] There was a saying by a wise man who observed the skies[120], »At this place, a holy man will appear to whom all people will surrender.«
>
> *hala aisin gioro, gebu nurgaci nenehe jalan golmin šanggiyan alin ci hūturi be deribuhebi, [...] sukdun be tuwame bahanara niyalma i henduhengge, ubade enduringge niyalma tucifi geren gurun be dahabumbi seme gisurehe bihe,*[121]

The prophecy seems to reflect familiarity with content from the *History of the Jin*, already adduced above, »The Long White Mountain is in the region from where the kings rose«.[122] The prophecy here resembles the earlier prophecies concerning the Jurchen's First Ancestor and Bukūri Yongšon – like them, Nurhaci is predicted to become a ruler. In the earlier-dated sources, senior relatives (mother, elder brother) made the prophecies; here, they are replaced by a »wise man who observed the skies«.[123]

Variation III: The tripartite Nurhaci/White Mountain-Bukūri Yongšon-Fanca myth (1739)

Variation III was written down only slightly later than the second one, in 1739.[124] Written in Manchu and Chinese, it includes three parts, as does variation I. The first part resembles variation II, albeit with one important difference: it does not include the Nurhaci prophecy. In the second part, the »Heavenly Khan« has now completely disappeared. The third part on Fanca resembles variation I.

---

118 Zhang, *"Jiu Manzhou dang" cihui*, 70.

119 Zhang, *"Jiu Manzhou dang" cihui*, 71.

120 I translated *sukdun* somewhat freely as »skies« here. It literally means »vapour«, »spirit«, or »air«, among other things. However, *sukdun* can be found regularly in texts about divination and hence usually refers to the clouds and other phenomena in the sky which are interpreted for prophecies (see, for example, Manwen riyue xingchen zhan, [5-8] and throughout).

121 Zhang, *"Jiu Manzhou dang" cihui*, 70.

122 Above and *Jinshi* 35:819.

123 This figure might be a shaman, and is also reminiscent of the »officer of the Heaven« in the *History of the Jin*, who makes a prophecy about Aguda, the dynastic founder (*Jinshi* 2:19).

124 *Daicing gurun i taidzu dergi hūwangdi i yargiyan kooli* (ujui debtelin. sahahūn honin aniya ci niowanggiyan bonio aniya de isinahabi), 123-131 [1-9]; Transliteration: Sun and Song, Cong Manwen wenxian, 54-55 (contains spelling mistakes); Chinese version: *Taizu Gao huangdi shilu* 1:1b-3b [21-22]; German translation: Hauer, Das mandschurische Kaiserhaus, 13-14.

Variation IV: The tripartite Nurhaci/White Mountain-Bukūri Yongšon-Fanca myth (1819)

Variation IV, contained in a manuscript copy of the annals of the Qianlong emperor,[125] generally agrees with variation II in its first and second parts – including the Nurhaci prophecy. However, the third part deviates from it by excluding the notion that the magpie is the Manchus' ancestor.

Most importantly, variation IV carries the deletion of Mount Bukūri from the Manchu origin myth forward. Here, the ancestor still retains the name Bukūri Yongšon and the White Mountain has not yet replaced Mount Bukūri, but a nameless mountain remains part of the myth. In the first part, we read: »To the east of the [Long White] Mountain, where a mountain emerges, lies Lake Bulhūri, which is also called Lake Tamun« (*alin i šun dekdere ergi alin i dade, bulhūri gebungge omo bi, geli tamun omo sembi*).[126] This also prepares the way for Lake Bulhūri's exit from the myth, with Lake Tamun taking its place. Because Lake Tamun is the crater lake atop the White Mountain, it is strange to locate it to the mountain's east. However, this seems to be a compromise that keeps parts of the previous variations while simultaneously juxtaposing the mythological Mount Bukūri – here a nameless mountain – and Lake Bulhūri with the real White Mountain and Lake Tamun, thus bringing the myth closer to the Manchu home.

Variation V: The tripartite Mount Bukūri-Fanca-Möngke Temür Variation (1928)

Finally, variation V is a narrative found in the Chinese *Draft History of the Qing Dynasty* (*Qingshigao* 清史稿), compiled by Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽 (1844-1927) and first published in 1928. It is an impoverished version – it has lost nearly all mythological motifs and omits most of the myth. Simultaneously, it interweaves it with quasi-historical accounts, newly incorporating a historical figure, Möngke Temür (also Menggetimur, *Menggetiemu'er* 孟哥帖木兒, ?-1433):

> The clan name of the Great Ancestor (*Taizu*) [...] Emperor of Above (*Gao huangdi*) was Aisin Gioro, his personal name Nurhaci. His ancestors were of the Golden Khanate's (*Jin*) tribe. The First Ancestor (*Shizu*) Bukūri Yongšon's mother was Fekulen. Upon receiving a red fruit, she became pregnant. [Bukūri Yongšon] grew up in a short time. He pacified the chaos of the three clans, and the masses made him their leader. He lived in Odoli town in the wilderness of Omohoi to the east of the Long White Mountain and called his tribal people Manchu. The Manchu originated there. [...]
>
> After several generations, Bukūri Yongšon's clan could not pacify their masses, and the masses rebelled. The clan was defeated and only the boy Fanca escaped.
>
> After another several generations, there arrived Möngke Temür, who became Original Ancestor and Primary Emperor. He had a wise strategy, planned to restore [the tribe] and destroy his enemies and, moreover, established a territory. Thereupon, the Primary Ancestor moved to Hetu Ala at the shore of Suksuhu River.
>
> 太祖 [...] 高皇帝，姓愛新覺羅氏，諱努爾哈齊。其先蓋金遺部。始祖布庫里雍順，母曰佛庫倫，相傳感朱果而孕。稍長，定三姓之亂，眾奉為貝勒，居長白山東俄漠惠之野俄朵里城，號其部

125 Daicing gurun i taidzu dergi hūwangdi i da hergen i bithe dergi debtelin 1:[7b-10b].

126 Daicing gurun i taidzu dergi hūwangdi i da hergen i bithe dergi debtelin 1:[7b].

族曰滿洲。滿洲自此始。[...] 越數世，布庫里雍順之族不善撫其眾，眾叛，族被戕，幼子范察走免。又數世，至都督孟特穆，是為肇祖原皇帝，有智略，謀恢復，殲其仇，且責地焉。於是肇祖移居蘇克蘇滸河赫圖阿喇。[127]

We know all elements and motifs that appear here, although the story is short and many other familiar aspects are missing (see appendix, table 1): there is no Mount Bukūri, no lake, no Heaven, no magpie, etc. The only mythological aspects are Fekulen's impregnation and Bukūri Yongšon's swift coming of age. What is new is Möngke Temür, chieftain of the Jurchen Odoli tribe.[128] He was not related to the Aisin Gioro, but Nurhaci already claimed him as an ancestor for reasons of legitimacy.[129] According to Pamela Crossley, this »etiological tale« aims to »explain the rise to dominance of the Möngke Temür lineage in the ancestral region«.[130] Möngke Temür fits into the narrative tradition quite well: like Fanca before and Nurhaci after him, Möngke Temür is a retriever of the clan's power, further adding to the motif of the hero who restores order. Given the fact that variation V was compiled after the Qing dynasty's decline, it remains an open question where the Möngke Temür story came from as it had not been part of any previous variation.

In general, variation V in fact »de-mythologises« the origin myth, which seems to become a mere story. Still, we find four of six elements of the theme myth and all four additional elements of variation I (see appendix, table 1).

Conclusion

The comparison between the Southern Tungusic origin myths of the Jurchen Golden Khanate and of the Jurchen-Manchu Great Warrior Khanate, or Qing Empire brings many similarities to the fore (see appendix, table 1). These similarities persist despite the fact that the Manchu origin myths eventually shed the most obvious references to the Jurchen. As shown, many motifs of the Jurchen myth reappear in the Manchu narratives in either the same or modified form. Moreover, we also see certain thematic constructions reappear. Firstly, the ancestor or his mother, respectively, are one of three siblings in both myths. Secondly, the ancestor joins an already-established people – living at the shores of a river – from the outside as a stranger-king. Thirdly, in both cases, the people suffer from internal dispute, which the stranger-king resolves. This act convinces the people that he is their leader. Finally, the stranger-king is betrothed to a woman from the people, with whom he then forms the apical ancestral couple.

In addition to a comparison of the earlier Jurchen and the later Jurchen-Manchu origin myths, I have moreover embedded at least some elements of their thematic structure into the pool of origin myths in Northeast and Inner Asia. However, it goes beyond the scope of this paper to provide a more detailed embedding of and comparison to other origin myths

127 *Qingshigao* 1:1.

128 Goodrich and Fang, *Ming Biography*, 1065-1067; see also Roth Li, State building, 12.

129 Goodrich and Fang, *Ming Biography*, 1067; see also Crossley, Introduction, 14-15; Roth Li, State building, 27-28.

130 Crossley, Introduction, 14.

in Asia and even beyond. Nevertheless, I hope that my comparative analysis of Chinese and Manchu sources from the twelfth to the twentieth century has provided some useful material, on which further studies can be grounded: studies of how origin myths are used in discourses of political legitimation, integration, and dominance, as well as further comparative analyses on differences and similarities between Southern Tungusic and other origin myths.

As outlined above, the similarities between the Jurchen and the Manchu myths are particularly striking when comparing them to other origin myths from Northeast Asia. Although some motifs also appear in other northeast Asian myths, the thematic constructions differ between Jurchen-Manchu myths and other Tungusic myths.[131] This leads to the conclusion that the thesis that the Manchu emperors »wished to minimize the association and the memory of their relations with the Jurchens« is not entirely convincing.[132] Rather, the transformation of the Manchu myth is more complicated. It is correct that the term »Jurchen« disappeared from the Manchu myth over time. However, there was no clear-cut transition from the term »Jurchen« to the term »Manchu« as a reference to the people, and their uses even briefly overlapped. In the Hūrha myth (1635), only the term »Manchu« appears; in the Mount Bukūri myth (1635), both Jurchen and Manchu are used, clearly referring to the same group of people; only from variation I (1655) onwards, does »Manchu« completely replace »Jurchen«. It was thus unnecessary to add the ethnonym »Manchu«; one merely needed to emphasise it.

At the same time, the Manchu myth maintains Jurchen motifs, firstly and most importantly, the *miraculous birth* to mark the First Ancestor – Wanyan or Hanpu and Bukūri Yongšon, respectively – as the chosen ones; secondly, the motifs of *stranger-king* and hero; thirdly, the motif of *ancestor and ancestress*, whereby the hero marries a woman from the clan he joins as a stranger; fourthly, the motif of a *prophecy* by senior relatives that the hero was to become ruler; fifthly, the motif of *three siblings*, as brothers of the hero himself and as sisters of the hero's mother who have important supportive roles; sixthly, the *clan* that the hero pacifies and joins; seventhly, *waters and rivers* as dwelling places but also as sacred places of origin; and, eighthly, a *mountain* as a sacred place of origin.

Finally, it is remarkable that in the Manchu theme myth of 1635 the sacred mountain is Mount Bukūri, which plays no role in the Jurchen myth. Over time, however, it is replaced by the White Mountain, which of course occupies a similar position in the Jurchen myth. This puts the Manchu in closer relation to the Jurchen, even if the latter's name is no longer mentioned. Even though the Jurchen as a people have disappeared from the Manchu myth, the Jurchen myth is, hidden in plain sight in the Manchu myth.

131 For brief notes on a number of foundation myths, see Grayson, *Myths from Korea*, 24-123 (Korea), 123-151 (northeast Asia in general).

132 Sun, Writing an empire, 103.

	Jurchen Wanyan myth	Jurchen Hanpu myth	Hūrha theme	Mount Bukūri theme	Manchu variation I	Manchu variation II	Manchu variation III	Manchu variation IV	Manchu variation V
Introduction of a Holy Mountain		X			(X)	X	X	X	X
Conception and Birth of the Ancestor			X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Arrival of the Ancestor	X	X							
Riverine Journey of the Ancestor				X	X	X	X	X	
Marriage between Ancestor and Woman from the Tribe (Ancestress)	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
Ancestor Elected Leader	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Ancestor Establishes New Social Order		X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Stating the Place of Residence of the Tribe		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Establishment of the People			X		X	X	X	X	X
Ancestor Is Admitted to the Tribe	X	X							
Hero's Escape					X		X	X	X
Reestablishment of the People					X		X	X	X

Table 1. Comparison of elements of thematic structure in the Jurchen and Manchu origin myths.

References

Primary Sources

Aisin gurun i suduri bithe, compiled by Toqto'a (Chin. *Tuotuo* 脱脱, 1314–1356) (Neifu 內府 edition, Beijing, 1646).

Beishi 北史, by Li Yanshou 李延壽 (fl. 659) (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition, Beijing, 1974).

Chunqiu Zuozhuan 春秋左傳, by Zuoqiu Ming 左丘明 (c. 502–c. 422 BC) (Min Qiji 閔齊伋 edition, [China], 1616). http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:4259249.

Daicing gurun i taidzu dergi hūwangdi i da hergen i bithe dergi debtelin (*Manwen Taizu Gao huangdi benji shu* 滿文太祖高皇帝本紀書), Vol. 1, manuscript (1819). http://kanji.zinbun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/db-machine/toho/html/N0140001.html.

Daicing gurun i taidzu dergi hūwangdi i yargiyan kooli (*Qing Taizu Manwen shilu daquan 4: Da-Qing Taizu Gao huangdi shilu: Qianlongben* 清太祖滿文实录大全 4: 大清太祖高皇帝实录 : 乾隆本), ed. Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'anguan 中国第一历史档案馆 (Shenyang, 2016).

Daicing gurun i taidzu horonggo enduringge hūwangdi i yargiyan kooli (*Qing Taizu Manwen shilu daquan 1: Da-Qing Taizu Wu huangdi shilu: Shunzhiben* 清太祖滿文实录大全 1 : 大清太祖武皇帝实录 : 顺治本), ed. Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'anguan 中国第一历史档案馆 (Shenyang, 2016).

The Grand Scribe's Records, Vol. I: The Basic Annals of Pre-Han China, by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145-90 BC), ed. William H. Nienhauser Jr., trans. Tsai-fa Cheng, Zongli Lu, William H. Nienhauser, Jr. and Robert Reynolds (Bloomington, 1994).

A History of Buddhism in India and Tibet: An Expanded Version of the Dharma's Origins Made by the Learned Scholar Deyu [mKhas pa lde'us mdzad pa'i rgya bod kyi chos 'byung rgyas pa], by mKhas pa lDe'u (c. 13th cent.), trans. Dan Martin (Somerville, 2022).

Jinshi 金史, compiled by Toqto'a (Chin. *Tuotuo* 脱脱, 1314–1356) (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition, Beijing, 1975).

Jiu Manzhou dang 舊滿洲檔, ed. Guoli gugong bowuyuan 國立故宮博物院編 (Taibei, 1969).

Jiu Manzhou dang: Tiancong jiunian 舊滿洲檔 : 天聰九年 = *Chiu Man Chou Tang: 'The Old Manchu Archives', vol.1: The Ninth Year of T'ien-Ts'ung (1635/6)*, ed. Kanda Nobuo 神田信夫, Matsumura Jun 松村潤 and Okada Hidehiro 岡田英弘 (Tokyo, 1972).

Liaoshi 遼史, compiled by Toqto'a (Chin. Tuotuo 脱脱, 1314-1356) (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition, Beijing, 1974).

Manju yargiyan kooli (Manzhou shilu 滿洲實錄) (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition, Beijing, 1986).

Manwen riyue xingchen zhan 满文日月星辰占, manuscript (c. 1780). https://figgy.princeton.edu/catalog/6a51f38d-893b-471d-9a65-886f569432cf.

The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies: An Annotated Translation of the XIVth Century Tibetan Chronicle: rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-long, trans. Per K. Sørensen (Wiesbaden, 1994).

Qinding Manzhou yuanliu kao 欽定滿洲源流考, compiled by Gaozong huangdi 高宗皇帝 (1711-1799, reign 1735-1796) and Agui 阿桂 (1717-1797), in: *Siku quanshu*, »Shibu«, »Dililei« 四庫全書, 史部, 地理類 ([Jingdu], 1777).

Qingshigao 清史稿, compiled by Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽 (1844-1927) (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition, Beijing, 1976).

Samguk yusa 三國遺事*: Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea*, by Ilyon (Iryŏn, 1206-1289), trans. Tae-Hung Ha and Grafton K. Mintz (Seoul, 1972).

Sanchao beimeng huibian 三朝北盟會編, by Xu Mengxin 徐夢莘 (1126–1207) (Siku quanshu 四庫全書 edition, 1782).

Sanchao beimeng huibian 三朝北盟會編, by Xu Mengxin 徐夢莘 (1126–1207) (Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社 edition, Shanghai, 1987).
Shangshu 尚書, in: *Sibu congkan chubian* 四部叢刊初編, vols. 3-4 (Shanghai, 1919).
Shiji 史記, by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145-90 BC) (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition, Beijing, 1959).
Songmo jiwen 松漠紀聞, by Hong Hao 洪皓 (1088-1155) (Siku quanshu 四庫全書 edition, 1782).
Songmo jiwen 松漠紀聞, by Hong Hao 洪皓 (1088-1155) (Gujin yishi 古今逸史 edition, n.d. [19XX]).
Songshi 宋史, compiled by Toqto'a (Chin. Tuotuo 脱脱, 1314-1356) (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition, Beijing, 1977).
Suishu 隋書, compiled by Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580-643) (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 edition, Beijing, 1973).
Taizu Gao huangdi shilu 太祖高皇帝實錄, in *Qingshilu, di yi ce* 清實錄，第一冊 (Beijing, 1986).
Taizu Gao huangdi shilu gaoben sanzhong 太祖高皇帝實錄稾本三種, compiled by Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉 (1866–1940), manuscript facsimile (Shiliao zhenglichu 史料整理處 edition, [China], 1933).
Ubaliyambuha suhe gisun kamcibuha manju i yargiyan kooli = Manzhou shilu 滿洲實錄, ed. and trans. Imanishi Shunjû 今西春秋 (Xinjing, 1938).

Secondary Sources

Biran, Michal, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History between China and the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 2005).
Birell, Anne M., *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction* (Baltimore, 1993).
Chang Fu-jui, Hung Hao, in: Herbert Franke (ed.), *Sung Biographies* (Wiesbaden, 1976) 464-465.
Chen Jiexian 陳捷先, *Manwen Qing benji yanjiu* 滿文清本紀研究 (Taipei, 1981).
Cheng Yu 程郁, Sanchao beimeng huibian 三朝北盟會編, in: Zhou Gucheng 周谷城, ed. *Zhongguo xueshu mingzhu tiyao: Lishi juan* 中國學術名著提要：歷史卷 (Shanghai, 1994) 160-163.
Crossley, Pamela, An introduction to the Ch'ing foundation myth, *Late Imperial China* 6/2 (1985) 13-36.
Crossley, Pamela, *Manzhou yuanliu kao* and the formalization of the Manchu heritage, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46/4 (1987) 761-790.
Crossley, Pamela, The Qianlong retrospect on the Chinese-Martial (*hanjun*) Banners, *Late Imperial China* 10/1 (1989) 63-107.
Crossley, Pamela. Thinking about ethnicity in early modern China, *Late Imperial China* 11/1 (1999) 1-34.
Doğruyol, Harun, Epic as a literary genre and the Turkish epic »Oguz Khan«, *CBÜ Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 10/1 (2012) 187-196.
Dotson, Brandon, Theorising the king: implicit and explicit sources for the study of Tibetan sacred kingship, *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 21 (2011) 83-103.
Durrant, Stephen W., Repetition in the Manchu origin myth as a feature of oral narrative, *Central Asiatic Journal* 23/1-2 (1979) 72-83.
Fiskesjö, Magnus, On the »raw« and the »cooked« barbarians of Imperial China, *Inner Asia* 1/2 (1999) 139-168.
Franke, Herbert, Chinese texts on the Jurchen: a translation of the Jurchen monograph in San-Chao Pei-Meng Hui-Pien, *Zentralasiatische Studien* 9 (1975) 119-186.

Franke, Herbert, Chinese texts on Jurchen II: a translation of chapter one of the Chin Shih, *Zentralasiatische Studien* 12 (1978) 413-452.

Franke, Herbert, The Chin Dynasty, in: Herbert Franke, Denis Crispin Twitchett, and John King Fairbank (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China, vol. 6: Alien Regimes and Border States, 907-1368* (Cambridge, 1994) 215-320.

Fuchs, Walter, Bulhuri omo: die älteste Fassung der manjurischen Stammessage, *Sinologische Arbeiten* 1 (1943) 47-52.

Goodrich, L. Carrington and Chaoying Fang (eds.), *Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368-1644* (New York, 1976).

Grayson, James Huntley, *Myths and Legends from Korea: An Annotated Compendium of Ancient and Modern Materials* (Richmond, 2001).

Grube, Wilhelm, *Die Sprache und Schrift der Jučen* (Wiesbaden, 1896).

Hauer, Erich, Das mandschurische Kaiserhaus, sein Name, seine Herkunft und sein Stammbaum, *Mitteilungen des Seminars für orientalische Sprachen an der Friedrich Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin* 29 (1926) 1-39.

Hauer, Erich, *Handwörterbuch der Mandschusprache* (Tokyo, 1952).

Hucker, Charles O., *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford, 1985).

Kiyose, Gisaburō N., *A Study of the Jurchen Language and Script: Reconstruction and Decipherment* (Kyoto, 1977).

Lattimore, Owen, The Gold Tribe, »Fishskin Tatars« of the Sungari, *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association* 40 (1933) 1-77.

Lee, Joo-Yup, Some remarks on the Turkicisation of the Mongols in post-Mongol Central Asia and the Qipchaq Steppe, *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientarium Hungaricae* 71/2 (2018) 121-44.

Lewis, E. Douglas, *The Stranger-Kings of Sikka: With an Integrated Edition of Two Manuscripts on the Origin and History of the Rajadom of Sikka* (Leiden, 2010).

Matsumura Jun 松村潤, The founding legend of the Manchu reconsidered, *Memoirs of the Research Department of The Toyo Bunko (The Oriental Library)* 55 (1997) 41-60.

Matsumura Jun 松村潤, Qing Taizu shilu yanjiu 请太祖实录研究, trans. Aɣula 敖拉, *Mengguxue xinxi* 蒙古学信息 3 (2002) 23-31.

Müller, Max. *The Languages of the Seat of War in the East: With a Survey of the Three Families of Language, Semitic, Arian, and Turanian* (London, 1855).

Munkh-Erdene, Lhamsuren, From people to territory: (the Chinggisid) sovereignty transformed, in: Kären Wigen (ed.), *Territorial Imaginaries: Beyond the Sovereign Map* (Chicago, 2025) 31-46.

Norman, Jerry, *A Comprehensive Manchu-English Dictionary* (Cambridge MA, 2013).

Roth Li, Gertraude, State building before 1644, in: Willard J. Peterson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of China, vol. 9, pt. 1: Ch'ing Empire to 1800* (Cambridge, 2002) 9-72.

Saussy, Haun, *The Making of Barbarians: Chinese Literature and Multilingual Asia* (Princeton, 2022).

Schmid, Andre, *Korea between Empires, 1895-1919* (New York, 2002).

Shirokogoroff [Širokogorov], Sergej M. *Social Organization of the Manchus: A Study* (Shanghai, 1924).

Shirokogoroff [Širokogorov], Sergej M., *Social Organization of the Northern Tungus: With Introductory Chapters Concerning Geographical Distribution and History of These Groups* (Shanghai, 1929).

Stary, Giovanni, Mandschurische Reime und Lieder als Beispiele autochthoner Dichtkunst, in: Michael Weiers, Walter Fuchs and Giovanni Stary (eds.), *Florilegia Manjurica: In Memoriam Walter Fuchs* (Wiesbaden, 1982) 76-86.

Sun Jianbing 孙建冰 and Song Lili 宋黎黎, Cong Manwen wenxian kan sanxiannü chuanshuo de yanbian 从满文文献看三仙女传说的演变, *Manyu yanjiu* 满语研究 = *Manchu Studies* 1 (2012) 49-56.

Sun, Lin, Writing an empire: an analysis of the Manchu origin myth and the dynamics of Manchu identity, *Journal of Chinese History = Zhongguo lishi xuekan* 中國歷史學刊 1/1 (2017) 93-109.

Twitchett, Denis and Herbert Franke, Introduction, in: Herbert Franke, Denis Crispin Twitchett and John King Fairbank (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China, vol. 6: Alien Regimes and Border States, 907-1368* (Cambridge, 1994) 1-42.

Yang Gongji 杨公骥, *Zhongguo wenxue, di yi fence* 中国文学，第一分册 (Changchun, 1957).

Yang, Lihui and Deming An, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*, with Jessica Anderson Turner (Santa Barbara, 2005).

Zhang Bibo 張碧波, Yin-Shang, Gaogouli, Manzu »sanxiannü« zuyuan shenhua de bijiao yanjiu 殷商、高句丽、满族《三仙女》族源神话的比较研究, *Manyu yanjiu* 满语研究 = *Manchu Studies* 1 (2000) 48-53.

Zhang Huake 张碧波 (Chang, Hwa-Ker), *»Jiu Manzhou dang« cihui jiexi fa de jianli – yi Qingchu sizu Manwen cihui shiyi weili* 《舊滿洲檔》詞彙解析法的建立—以清初四組滿文詞彙釋義為例. Unpublished PhD thesis (Zhongguo wenhua daxue 中國文化大學, Taipeh, 2014).

Zhang Huake 張華克 (Chang, Hwa-Ker), »Sansiannü« chuanshuo tanyuan 《三仙女》傳說探源, *Zhongguo bianzheng* 中國邊政 204 (2015) 99-141.

Ancient Greek Origin Myths

Naoíse Mac Sweeney and Eleni Kopanaki*

Origin myths from the ancient Greek world constitute a rich body of comparative material for the study of medieval origin myths. Not only did individual ancient Greek origin myths sometimes enjoy medieval afterlives, but the corpus of ancient Greek origin myths is a large and diverse one, facilitating many lines of analysis and comparison. In this paper, we will set out a brief overview of this corpus as a whole, highlighting the diversity of source material, thematic trends, as well as structural commonalities. Through this, we aim to shed light on how origin myths functioned in the ancient Greek world – how they acted both *in* and *on* society. To do this, we shall employ a »big data« approach, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to draw conclusions from a dataset comprising over a thousand individual mythic episodes. We hope that both the experimental methodology employed, and the insights it permits into the nature and function of ancient Greek origin myths, may be helpful in stimulating comparative discussions.

Keywords: ancient Greek, myth, origin, foundation, genealogy, big data, methodology, comparative

Introduction

The ancient Greek world was alive with myth, and many ancient Greek tales remained popular not only into the medieval period but also through to modern times. Yet the legends of monsters and heroes that tend to dominate our modern imagination were only part of a much wider mythological landscape. Much interest within antiquity was instead directed at the telling of origin myths, depictions of which adorned the walls of houses and public buildings, as well as appearing in the minor crafts including painted pottery and the images impressed on coinage; references to which found their way into the everyday idioms and bawdy jokes, as well as common onomastic practices and popular cult; and written accounts of which were recounted by professional scholars and poets, as well as local historians, tragic playwrights, and the authors of technical treatises. The ancient Greeks were obsessed with where they came from, and ancient Greek origin myths are varied and plentiful.[1]

The sheer number of such myths means that they constitute a valuable dataset for the comparative study of origin myths from other periods. Points of similarity and difference

* Correspondence details: Naoíse Mac Sweeney, University of Vienna, naoise.macsweeney@univie.ac.at, and Eleni Kopanaki, University of Vienna, eleni.kopanaki@univie.ac.at

This article is part of the thematic section *Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasian Comparison*, guest editor: Reinier Langelaar. To read all related articles, please access https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026.

1 Modern scholarship in the subject is also varied and plentiful and includes: Dougherty Archaic Greek foundation poetry; Calame, Myth and performance; Malkin, *Returns of Odysseus*; Berman, Double foundation; Patterson, *Kinship Myth*; Mac Sweeney, *Foundation Myths and Politics*; Mac Sweeney, *Foundation Myths in Ancient Societies*.

eISSN-Nr. 2412-3196
DOI 10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026s253

may point to new insights, as might methodological considerations. In this paper, we aim to offer a brief introduction to ancient Greek origin myths for colleagues specialising in other historical periods, in the hope that this material might be thought-provoking from a comparative perspective.[2] By looking at the corpus as a whole, we also aim to shed new light on the role and place of origin myths within ancient Greek culture and society. Instead of delving into any individual myth in detail, we will look across the dataset employing a novel and experimental methodology. Our aim with this work is to consider the function of origin myths in the ancient Greek world, asking not what these stories *said* but what they *did*. How did these narratives function both *in* and *on* society? Our experimental methodology is no way intended to replace or negate more traditional approaches based on close reading and the detailed historical interpretation of individual texts, images, and mythic discourses. We affirm that such approaches are essential, and will always offer the best and most nuanced way to appreciate individual (hi)stories. Our methodology is proposed rather as a means of enhancing these traditional approaches, offering an additional perspective. While it is standard practice to contextualise studies of individual ancient Greek texts by considering them against the background of wider literary traditions and immediate historical setting, we suggest that it may also be fruitful to consider in relation to contemporary trends in mythmaking.

The work presented in this paper has been conducted within the frame of a larger research project into migration and the origin of ancient Greek cities, entitled »Migration and the Making of the Ancient Greek World« (MIGMAG). This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No. 865644). As part of this project, we and other members of the project team gathered information about ancient Greek myths of foundation and origin, and examined these from the perspective of how they functioned to construct and negotiate collective identities during different periods within antiquity, and in different parts of the ancient Greek world. Forthcoming publications will set out in full the methodology adopted by this project, make the underlying dataset fully and openly available for scholarly scrutiny, explore the nuances of different mythic traditions in relation to various themes and historical contexts, and set out the full conclusions reached in the analysis.[3] Due to constraints of time and space, it is not possible to include these elements within this short overview paper. Instead, our aim in this paper is much more modest. We will present an overview of the material collected, characterising the nature of the dataset as a whole, coming to some

2 We have ourselves already benefitted from taking part in the 2024 workshop, »Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasian Perspective« and this resulting publication, learning much from the rich comparative perspective that it has afforded us. We are grateful to the organisers of the workshop and editors of this volume for this opportunity.

3 The methodology used for this research was developed collaboratively by Naoíse Mac Sweeney, Principal Investigator of the project, with Clara Hansen and Eleni Kopanaki, doctoral students on the project. Important contributions were also made by Bettina Bernegger, administrative assistant to the project. Data collection was undertaken by Mac Sweeney, Hansen, Kopanaki, and Bernegger; who have each also assumed responsibility for the primary analysis and interpretation of the material linked to different parts of the ancient Greek world. A monograph presenting this work in full is currently in preparation (Mac Sweeney et al. *Origin Myths*), while the dataset of collected myths is available for open access download (Mac Sweeney et al. *Database*).

broad conclusions about how origin myths functioned in ancient Greek society. This, we hope, may fruitfully be compared with the role played by origins myths in other historical contexts.

As for other colleagues writing within this volume, from the outset it was important to define the subject under discussion. What is an »ancient Greek origin myth«? The definition that we arrived at was as follows: any narrative (whether historical or mythical) that sought to explain the origins of a Greek civic or ethnic community (i.e., a community which claimed Greekness, or to be part of »*to hellēnikon*«).

Greek civic and ethnic communities came in a range of different forms at a range of different scales. Perhaps the best known is that of the *polis* or city state, an autonomous political unit that focused on a primary urban centre, around which was a territory or hinterland within which were often several secondary and smaller-scale settlements. Well-known and powerful *poleis* included Athens, Thebes, and Ephesus. At least 1,035 such *poleis* are attested from the archaic (c. 750-500 BCE) and classical periods (c. 500-300 BC), scattered across the shores of the Mediterranean and Black Sea from Crimea to Cyrenaica, and from Spain to Cyprus (figure 1).[4] Yet there were also other Greek communities, operating at both larger and smaller scales. At smaller scales, individual towns and villages could also be the focal points of such communities. Examples might include the mining community of Thorikos within the territory of the *polis* of Athens; or the community around the famous sanctuary of Olympia within the territory of the *polis* of Elis. At larger scales, the Greek world also encompassed larger territorial states (such as the Ptolemaic Kingdom or the Kingdom of Macedon), federal units or alliances (such as the Achaians or the Thessalians), and *ethnos* or tribal collectives (such as the Ionians or the Dorians).[5]



Figure 1: Map of the ancient Greek world, showing poleis of the early classical period, c.500 BCE. Map by Georgia Tsiouprou.

4 The number of 1,035 is that collected within the standard reference work, the *Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis* (Hansen and Nielsen, *Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis*). For a more recent overview of the *polis* as an institution and cultural phenomenon, see Ma, *Polis: A New History*.

5 For a critique of the modern tendency to focus narrowly on the *polis*, see Vlassopoulos, *Unthinking the Greek Polis*. For explorations of non-*polis* states with a particular focus on *ethnos* states, see Morgan, *Early Greek States*, and for federalism in Greek antiquity see Beck and Funke, *Federalism*.

At this point, it is important to note that these diverse ancient Greek communities were never united within a single political structure. »Greece« as a coherent political or social entity did not exist until the establishment of the modern Greek state in 1821, and indeed the definition of Greekness itself was hotly debated within antiquity.[6] Myths about the origins of »the Greeks« as a whole were indeed sometimes told, yet these stories are small in number and appear only rarely in the surviving sources. Far more numerous and, apparently, far more important to ancient commentators were the thousands of myths that recounted the origins of different Greek civic and ethnic communities. Our focus in this paper therefore lies in the stories that so consumed the ancient Greeks themselves – the narratives that claimed to explain the origins of different Greek civic and ethnic communities.

Sources for Greek Origin Myths

The heterogeneous nature of the subject is reflected in the heterogeneous nature of the source material. Even in the largest *poleis* and the most powerful of kingdoms, there were no official court historians, and no officially sanctioned myths of origin. In this sense, our sources for ancient Greek origin myths are fundamentally different to many others discussed in this volume. Ancient Greek historical and mythographic texts were certainly written in celebration of individual states and dynasties, but these were rarely official, in that very few historians enjoyed the official patronage of a ruler, and very few myths had the status of official history.[7] Instead, mythographical writings served a range of purposes and were aimed at a range of audiences. Origin myths were recounted for popular audiences at civic and religious festivals; within diplomatic negotiations to remind interlocutors of ancestral feuds or alliances; by orators and sophists in competitive demonstrations of scholarly erudition; and to delight dinner guests in compendia of historiographical and sociological curiosities. The diversity of these writings in terms of form, context, and genre stands testament to the depth of interest that ancient Greeks took in their origin myths.

Within this paper, our focus is solely on these ancient Greek written sources. They constitute a rich and diverse corpus, nonetheless bound together by the coherence of language and literary tradition. Other manifestations of origin myths – such as the images depicted on coins, in vase painting, references made in epigraphy, or in cult practice – have been excluded from the corpus on this basis. These other instantiations and representations of origin myths are, of course, vital for any in-depth discussion of specific myths and their social and cultural contexts. In this paper, however, due to constraints of space we shall restrict ourselves to presenting an overview of the single most important class of source material for ancient Greek origin myths: literary texts written in the ancient Greek language.[8]

6 For changing ancient definitions of Greekness between ethnicity, culture, territory, and politics, see Hall, *Hellenicity*, 25-36, and 125-171.

7 A notable exception is Kallisthenes, who accompanied Alexander of Macedon on his campaigns and wrote an »official« history.

8 Texts written in other ancient languages, notably Latin, do sometimes also offer evidence for ancient Greek origin myths. However, as the factors shaping the composition and preservation of these texts are different, they are not discussed in this paper.

Despite this central pillar of coherence within the corpus, it is important to acknowledge the partial and imperfect nature of the dataset that will be presented here. Most of the literary texts that survive from antiquity did not do so as original artefacts, but instead by being copied and re-copied through the centuries within late antique and early medieval manuscript traditions. As a result, only fragments remain of many texts, surviving as quotations or summaries in the works of later authors. For yet many more authors, no text at all survives, merely oblique references to works that once existed, but which are now lost. A recent estimate of these survival rates posits a ratio of roughly 2:5 – for every two authors from whom passages of text still survive, the writings of five authors whose names are known to us have been lost completely.[9] These numbers do not, of course, tell us anything at all about the »unknown unknowns«, or the less popular and perhaps the less prolific authors of antiquity whose names have also disappeared over the ages. As a result, our corpus therefore contains source material of variable quality, both in terms of the length of texts, and their reliability.

Ancient Greek literary texts that recount the origins of Greek civic and ethnic communities are therefore heterogeneous in more than one way. They deal with heterogeneous subject matter – the diverse, dispersed, and decentralised communities of the ancient Greek world. They do this in a heterogeneous fashion – appearing in a range of different literary genres and social contexts. Their state of preservation and reliability is also heterogenous – meaning that we can never be sure if we have the whole picture.

To deal with all this unruly heterogeneity, we have adopted a »big data« approach, collating large datasets and assessing these in relation to standardised criteria in order to discern trends and patterns across both time and space. There is sometimes concern about big data approaches within some areas of the humanities, as these approaches cannot capture the detail and nuance of close readings and individual source analysis. In addition, as we have highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, the datasets are often deeply and structurally flawed, shaped by various factors which mean that they are rarely fully representative. Yet working with flawed and partial datasets is a standard feature of many academic disciplines, and it has long been established that if the nature of the dataset is understood and the taphonomic factors that have structured it are investigated and acknowledged, some valid conclusions can nonetheless still often be drawn about overall trends and patterns in the data, giving us a glimpse of the »big picture«.[10]

By zooming out to get the big picture, we hope to gain a broad perspective on how ancient Greek origin myths functioned, and what their place was within ancient Greek society. As

9 According to the Canon of Greek Authors and Works of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, for the period between the 8th century BCE and the 5th century CE, there are more than 1,800 authors with existing works, and more than 4,500 known authors in total (Pantelia, *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, xxi).

10 An example of this is archaeology. Archaeological data is entirely composed of partial and problematic datasets, shaped by complex and multiple taphonomic factors. Archaeologists have, over the last two centuries, developed sophisticated methodologies for working with such datasets, in particular taphonomic studies and assemblage analysis. There is no suggestion that archaeologists should not study their material or draw conclusions from it, on the basis that it is partial. See Cipolla, Crellin and Harris, *Archaeology for Today*, for a discussion of how archaeological thinking, and in particular relational thinking and approaches based on assemblages, might potentially be applied beyond the bounds of academic archaeology.

already stated in the introduction to this paper, we argue that this big data and big picture approach is complementary to the detailed and nuanced discussion of individual myths in their full historical context. We reaffirm once more that both approaches are crucially valuable. Micro approaches are crucial for an appreciation of how individual myths really worked and the complex dynamics of how they acted on and in ancient Greek society. But this macro approach will, we hope, give us another way to contextualise this nuanced understanding, offering us a better sense of how the aggregation of all such individual dynamics shaped the fabric of ancient Greek culture.

Dataset and Methodology

Even within the frame of a large-scale research project such as this one, the quantity of material for ancient Greek origin myths is such that the compilation of a comprehensive corpus was not feasible. Instead, in our work we focused on five case-study regions, the selection of which was in part determined by a deliberate attempt to include different histories and different cultural and political trajectories, but also by practicality and feasibility, given the wider goals and constraints of the project. As for any project where case studies are used to investigate broad questions, we want to acknowledge that the picture gained from the current corpus may change if and when more data is integrated. We very much hope that it will be possible to expand the corpus in the coming years, testing our tentative conclusions and improving our understanding of ancient Greek origin myths.

Within the Greek peninsula, we considered central Greece, in particular the regions of East and West Lokris and the city of Thebes; as well as Athens. Further east, we gathered origin myths for the thirteen cities of Ionia, strung out along the western seaboard of Anatolia; and. also, for the larger region of Cilicia in southern Anatolia, peopled by a mix of non-Greek indigenous groups, Levantine and Mesopotamian migrants, as well as Greek communities. In the central and western Mediterranean, we considered the region of Magna Graecia in southern Italy, as well as the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, and finally the Greek cities of Spain and southern France. Despite this range, our data collection has left large portions of the ancient Greek world untouched, in particular Libya and Egypt, Cyprus, the Black Sea, northern Greece, the Aegean islands, and the Peloponnese. We hope that it will be possible to expand the corpus to these regions in the coming years.

Our approach was to begin with these locations, and then gather textual references for origin myths linked to people and places within these locations. The organisational framework for data collection was therefore geographical according to the place discussed within the origin myth. Our aim was to be as comprehensive as possible, gathering all documented references within secondary literature, before searching digital corpora of texts for specified locations or mythical episodes where this was possible, and physical indexes where it was not. While we have aimed in all cases for a comprehensive collection of all surviving textual references to Greek origin myths in the specific regions, the nature of human error will inevitably mean that we may have missed some along the way. Our corpus, then, may continue to grow in the coming years, although the main bulk of the material has already been collected and analysed.

The ambition for comprehensive collection has led to a corpus of 1,920 discrete passages of ancient Greek text, written by 226 distinct authors who lived between the 7th century BCE and the 13th century CE. Of these, no dates could be assigned to six authors, and a further 46 authors lived in periods that might be characterised as late antique or early medieval (in or after the 4th century CE). During these periods, both Greek literary traditions and the

nature of Greek civic identities were dramatically different from those in earlier »classical« antiquity.[11] As a result, both the undatable authors and those belonging to late antiquity will be treated separately from the remaining 171 authors, although of course all authors remain vitally important for understanding mythic variations and content.

Within this corpus, we have opted to classify the dataset primarily by author, as the least unsatisfactory of the available options. For the reasons mentioned above, classification by text was too vulnerable to the uneven patterns of preservation and literary survival. We found that focusing rather on subdivisions of texts such as »passages«, »chapters«, or »books« was practical on a daily basis for ease of reference, but on reflection decided that this was not methodologically rigorous as a unit of analysis. These textual divisions were rarely the designations of the authors themselves, but instead were more often imposed on texts by later commentators, and therefore might be useful terms of reference, but could not be the basis for any meaningful quantification.

Quantification by author does, of course, present its own challenges. Crucially, textual references of radically different scales are all allotted the same weight. The orator Aelius Aristeides, for example, discussed the various origin stories of his home city of Smyrna across no fewer than four different speeches, whereas only a brief mention of Smyrnaean origins appears in a single sentence in Pseudo-Herodotus' *Life of Homer*. Despite the difference in the scale and depth of the treatment, both Aelius Aristeides and Pseudo-Herodotus each only gets a single count in a list of authors who wrote about Smyrnaean origins, as their works bear witness to the simple fact that the Smyrnaean myth was textually recounted during their lifetimes. Naturally, the scale and depth each author dedicates to origin myths in general, or to origin myths of specific cities or people, is a measure to consider and can be studied against, for example, their geographical context, literary genre, and political inclinations. But for grasping wider trends in mythmaking and dissemination (rather than focusing on individual authors), a mere reference is enough to indicate that a myth has caught an author's attention, has been transmitted, and was relevant for the wider mythic discourse beyond its local context. While we acknowledge the obvious problems with this system, we have not, to date, been able to determine a good way of weighting different types of textual treatments appropriately.

Using the author as an anchor does, however, give us a working proxy through which we can locate myths in space and time.[12] It allows us to consider, for example, whether most authors who wrote origin myths about Athens actually hailed from Athens, or whether Athenian origins were a topic of broad interest for authors from across the ancient Greek world. Similarly, it allows us to explore whether stories about Athenian origins were more popular in some periods rather than others, or whether they remained consistently popular

11 Some of the factors impacting on the production and survival of literature in ancient Greek from late antiquity are discussed in Kazhdan, *History of Byzantine Literature* and Krumbacher, *History of Byzantine Literature*.

12 The biographical details of individual authors are often the subjects of intense scholarly discussion. As nonspecialists in these discussions we have relied on standard reference works for this information – the Trismegistos database, Brill's New Pauly, and Brill's New Jacoby.

through time. The ability to ask and answer questions such as these can give us an additional way of thinking contextually about individual myths, stories, and texts.

Such chronological and geographical position, however, relies on the biographical details of ancient authors – which often remain obscure. However, in many cases dates can be reconstructed for their lives (either on the basis of style and language, or in relation to events referenced within their texts), and their places of origin or work are sometimes recorded. The scholar and poet Callimachus, for example, lived between c.310-240 BCE, and originally hailed from Cyrene in Libya, although he worked and lived for most of his adult life at the great Library of Alexandria in Egypt. The origin myths that he recounted can, therefore, be understood as being written in a specific historical context – that of North Africa in the 3rd century BCE, even though the content of these myths recounted the imagined origins of Greek communities across the Mediterranean and Black Sea. Callimachus' account of the foundation of Smyrna might, therefore, be *mythologically* located in Anatolia in the mists of a heroic deep past. It is, however, to be *historically* located in the Hellenistic period of the 3rd century BCE amongst the scholarly elites of the Ptolemaic capital city. By using the author as an anchor, we can place these 1,920 textual instantiations of origin myths back into their historical contexts and begin to discern patterns in the overall corpus.

Chronological Patterns

The chronological distribution of our dataset was a question of primary concern. Were origin myths equally important throughout Greek antiquity, or were there moments when they became more and less significant? And what does this tell us about the shape of ancient Greek history as a whole? It is possible to get a sense of this from the waxing and waning of our corpus over time. Figure 2 below shows the count of authors in our corpus (i.e., the number of authors who are known to have written in the Greek language about the origins of Greek communities in our study regions) by century, starting from the earliest Greek literary texts in the 8th century BCE and ending with the 3rd century CE, after which (as stated above) literary traditions shifted dramatically. The number of authors in our corpus is presented alongside the number of authors as listed in the Trismegistos database for each century, as a proxy for the total number of authors writing in ancient Greek.[13] We have done this because the variations in our corpus become more meaningful when viewed in the context of broader patterns of literary production and text preservation.

13 The Trismegistos database is a standard reference source, although it is far from being the only reference for authors writing and texts written in ancient Greek. An alternative would be the corpus of the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae. We are still working with the data from this corpus, to see if it aligns with that of the Trismegistos database, and to consider how the corpora in both databases compare with our own.

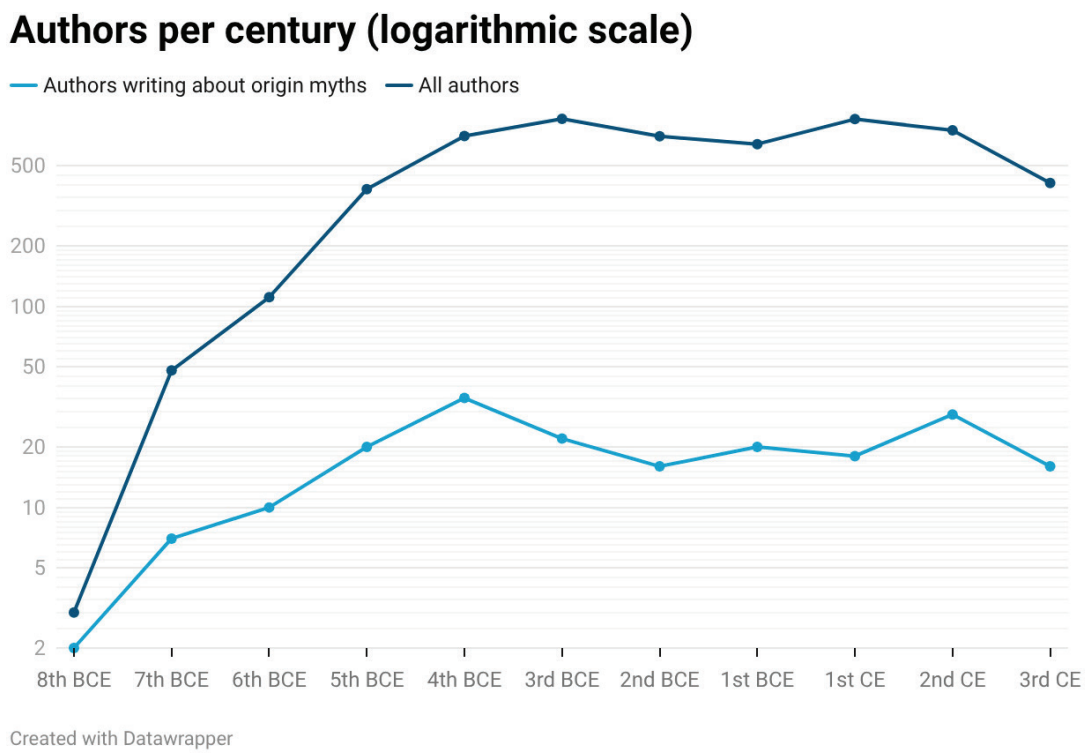


Figure 2: Chart showing the number of authors writing about Greek origin myths in relation to the total number of Greek authors from the Trismegistos database over time (logarithmic scale). Created by Datawrapper.

At first glance, it becomes evident that literary activity in our corpus mirrors, in many respects, the broader patterns of ancient literary production and survival rates. Notably, the sudden increase observed in the classical period in both corpora is followed by a gradual reduction in the Hellenistic period, after which there is a period of general, but uneven, increase accompanying the Pax Romana into the Common Era. There are several points, however, where the corpus of authors writing origin myths diverges from the complete corpus of Greek authors. Perhaps most significantly, notable moments of inflection occur in the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE. In the 1st century BCE, the number of Greek authors overall continues to decline, following a trajectory that had begun two centuries earlier. At this moment, however, the number of authors writing Greek origin myths takes an upturn, reversing its trajectory. The opposite happens in the 1st century CE. Just as the overall number of Greek authors begins to climb again, the number of authors writing about Greek origin myths decreases. These divergent trajectories tell us that during these periods, the place and function of origin myths in ancient Greek society was changing.

A slightly different way of looking at the same data is the chart in figure 3. This shows the number of authors writing about Greek origin myths as a percentage of all Greek authors. The chart shows that between the 5th and 2nd centuries BCE (the 8th to 6th centuries have been excluded from this chart, as in absolute terms the numbers are too small for the representation of percentages to be meaningful), the number of authors who chose to write about origins declined. Put simply, writing about the origins of cities, states, regions, and peoples became increasingly less popular over the course of these four centuries. The decline then reverses sharply, and origin myths became a more popular topic again in the 1st century BCE, before their popularity dropped once more in the 1st century CE, only to recover in the 2nd.

The significance of these trends becomes clearer when the chronological patterns are considered alongside contemporary changes of geography and genre.

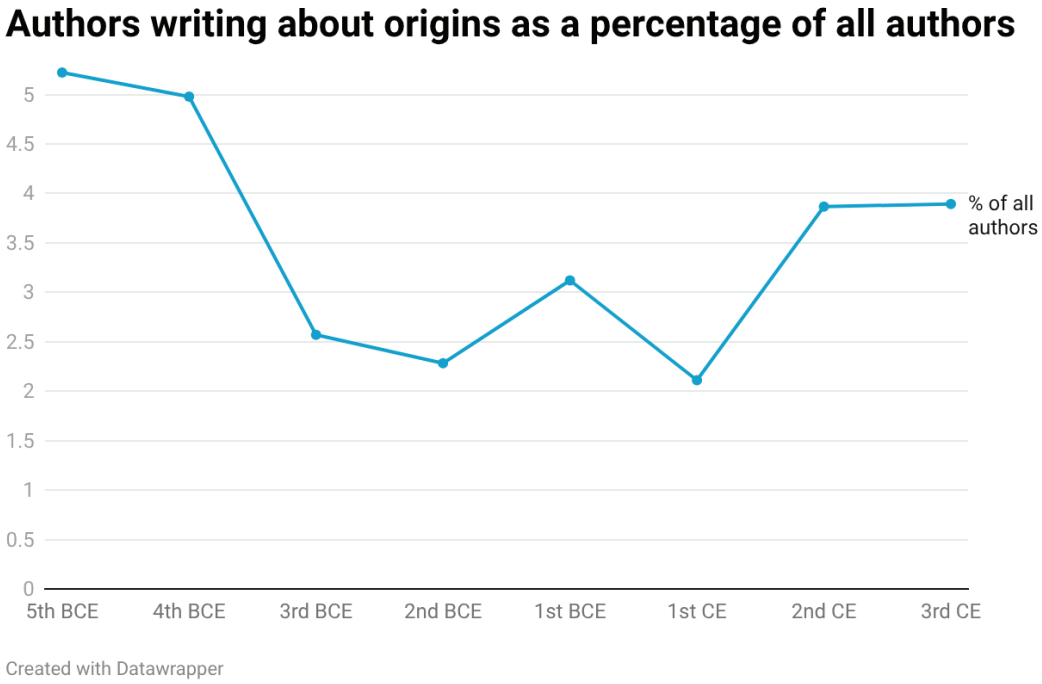


Figure 3: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek about Greek origin myths as a percentage of the total number of Greek authors over time. Chart created by Datawrapper.

Geographical Patterns

The geographical emplacement of Greek origin myths also has much to tell us about the role(s) that such myths played in Greek antiquity. Did origin myths matter more to Greeks in some regions than in others? And did this change over time? Figure 4 presents the authors of our corpus according to their region of purported origin, using the blunt tool of six (rather large and somewhat artificial) regional groupings. This initial distribution shows a fairly even split between the regions, with broadly similar numbers of authors hailing from the Greek peninsula and central Aegean islands, and from Anatolia and the eastern Aegean. Significant proportions of authors also come from the southeastern Mediterranean (the Levant, Egypt, and Libya), the central Mediterranean (the Italian peninsula and Sicily), and the northern Balkans (Macedonia, northern Greece, northern Aegean), while only a handful of authors are associated with the western Mediterranean. This relatively even distribution is perhaps unsurprising, given the geographical spread of the study regions selected for this project.

A more significant pattern does begin to emerge, however, when this same data is considered over time (figure 5). This suggests that interest in origin myths followed a strikingly different trajectory in different regions. Authors originally from the Greek peninsula and the central Aegean islands, traditionally considered to be the core region of the ancient Greek world, seem to have been deeply invested in origin myths only during a very specific moment in time – the classical period of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE. In contrast, authors from Anatolia and the eastern Aegean were much more consistently engaged with discourses of origins throughout Greek antiquity. Other regions appear in our corpus somewhat later, and seem to take an interest in origin myths also mostly at particular moments during antiquity.

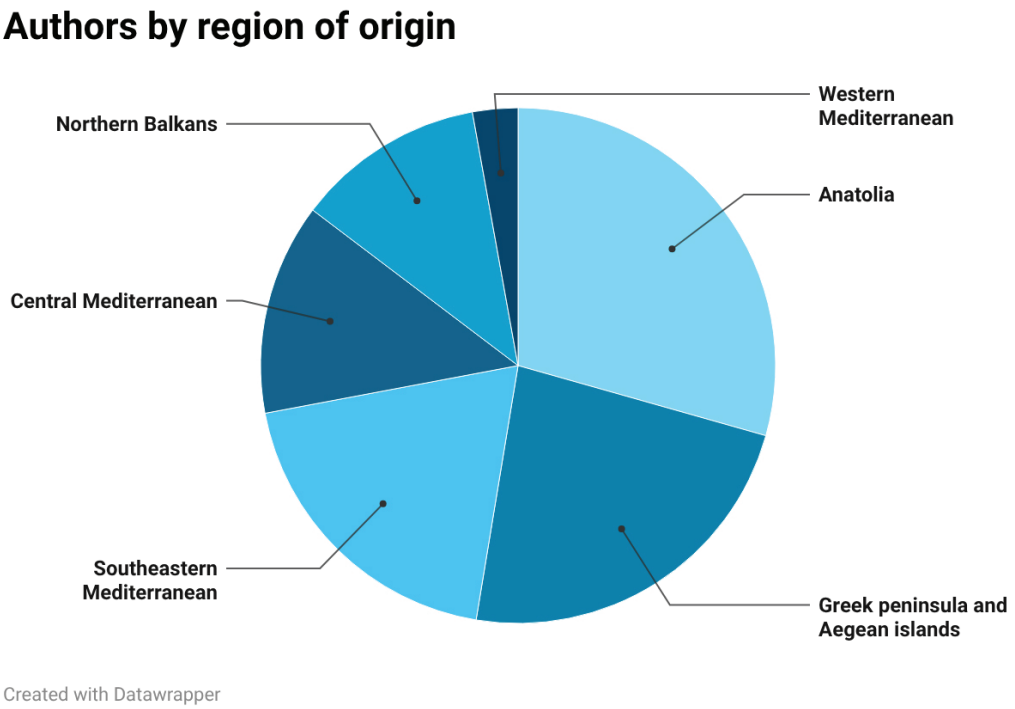


Figure 4: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek about Greek origin myths according to their region of origin. Chart created by Datawrapper.

For authors from the North Balkans this is the 4th century BCE and around the time of Macedonian territorial expansion, when texts written by northern Greek and Macedonian authors were more likely to have been widely transmitted. For authors from the central Mediterranean it is the 1st century BCE, coinciding with the consolidation of Roman imperial power across the Mediterranean. And for authors from the southeastern Mediterranean interest spikes in the 3rd century BCE, with the emergence of a new literary hub around the Library of Alexandria, but is more consistent from the 2nd century CE onwards.

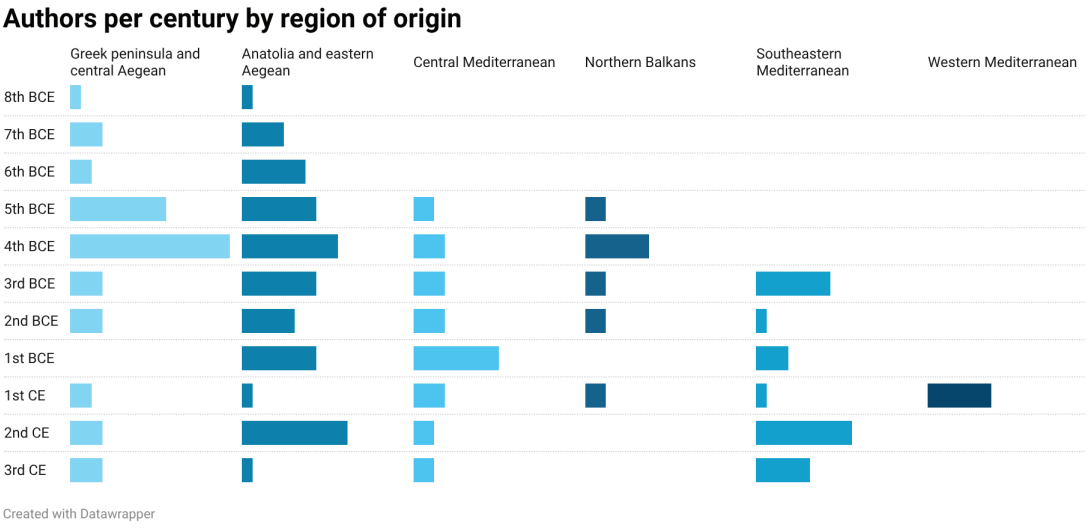


Figure 5: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek about Greek origin myths according to their region of origin per century. Chart created by Datawrapper.

Patterns of Genre and Literary Form

Yet more nuances emerge when shifting patterns in genre and literary form are layered onto the analysis. Unlike the chronological and geographical contextualisation, which was anchored solely at the level of the author, the examination of literary forms and genres also operates at the level of the individual work, since a single author may have engaged with multiple forms and genres. As with chronology and geography, there are many problems with the classification of our corpus in relation to forms and genres.

The distinction between verse and prose is perhaps the clearest, based as it is on literary form. Within the ancient Greek literary tradition, verse is the elder, evolving from oral traditions, and maintaining a performative and public aspect throughout antiquity. In contrast, prose literature in ancient Greek first emerged in the 6th century BCE in western Anatolia, from where it grew in popularity and spread to encompass a range of genres. In addition to verse and prose, in our analysis we found a third category to be helpful – that of erudite texts. Instead of the long, connected narrative passages that tend to comprise works of prose, these texts are more commonly (although not always) constructed from an accumulation of short snippets or briefer passages, collected into a single work. The central feature of this form, however, is the centrality of intertextuality. Intertextual engagements and original composition are fundamentally intertwined within these works, leading to a hybrid form. This literature of erudition emerged in the scholarly context of Hellenistic Alexandria, where earlier texts were studied, interpreted, and reworked in a spirit of imitation and emulation, but burgeoned in the Roman period, particularly in the context of wider trends towards Roman philhellenism in the 2nd century CE. This body of texts is characterised by systematic practices of collecting, summarising, correcting, critiquing, comparing, and preserving earlier works.

It seems that writing about Greek origin myths largely follows this chronological pattern, with prose appearing later than verse, and erudite texts later again (figure 6). Yet two factors are noteworthy. First, the significant spike in the number of authors writing in prose in the 4th century BCE is remarkable, entirely eclipsing all other literary forms. The revival of verse in subsequent centuries owes much to the Hellenistic interest in diversified forms. A second point of interest is that erudite literature only begins to take significant interest in origin myths in the 2nd century CE, several centuries after the emergence of the form, as part of wider literary trends of the Hellenistic period, in the 3rd century BCE.

The picture is made yet more complex when we consider genre. Distinctions of literary form are independent of, but sometimes overlap with, classifications based on genre. This is because while designation of a genre may sometimes relate to a text's literary form (e.g., »epic poetry« or »letters«), in other cases it might relate instead to the text's thematic content (e.g., »history« or »scholia«). Some of our genre classifications, therefore, align neatly with literary forms (epic, lyric, drama, and epigram all fit within »poetry«; letters, oratory and the novel are all contained within »prose«; and scholiast and encyclopaedia lie entirely within »erudite«), while others operate across more than one literary form (i.e., history, geographical writing, biography, technical literature, and miscellany).

Classification by genre is complex for several reasons. Firstly, given the existence of genres relating to content and genres relating to form, it is possible for the same text to belong to two genres simultaneously – for example, the *Pharsalia* by Lucan records historical content, but it does so using the medium of epic poetry. The process is made even more complex by the fact that genres frequently intersect and develop alongside one another, not always

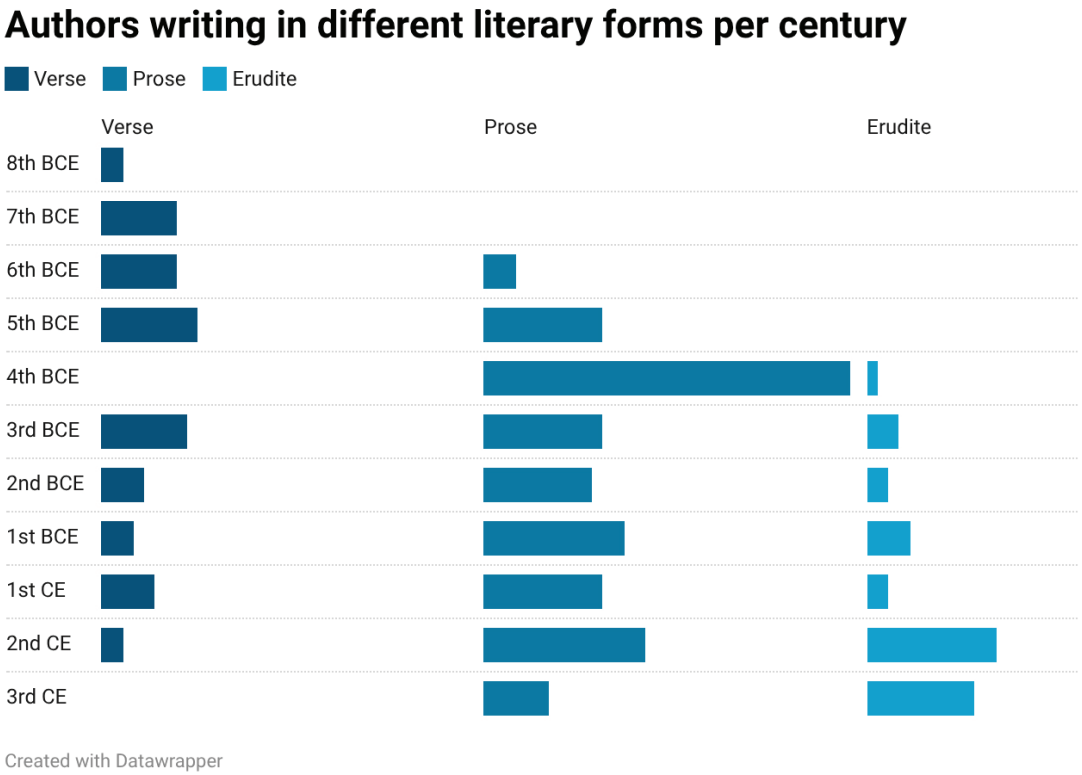


Figure 6: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek about Greek origin myths according to literary forms employed per century. Chart created by Datawrapper.

allowing for a clear distinction (e.g., the blurred boundary in antiquity between »history« and »geographical writing«);[14] and yet more complex once more by the fact that while some genres were recognised as meaningful categories during antiquity itself (e.g., »drama«), others are entirely modern designations (e.g., »the novel«). Yet despite these difficulties, genre remains a helpful way of thinking about our corpus, as it gives us a good sense of the intended audiences and social contexts of the texts. We classified texts by genre, therefore, mostly as a »thought tool« to help with this social contextualisation. In our definition and application of generic categories therefore, we have largely followed standard reference works within our field, adapting these as necessary for our corpus.[15]

14 For the intertwined development of history and geography and their correlation, especially in Strabo, see Montanari, *History of Ancient Greek Literature* 2, 977-982.

15 We were primarily informed by the definitions provided in Hose and Schenker (eds.), *Companion to Greek Literature* and Harrison (ed.), *Companion to Latin Literature*. This was supplemented with information from compiled studies on the histories of ancient and Byzantine literature, such as Montanari, *History of Ancient Greek Literature* and Kazhdan, *History of Byzantine Literature*, as well as genre-definition entries in Brill's New Pauly encyclopaedia and philological studies focused on individual genres or authors. For a discussion of the genre classifications used, and the criteria upon which they are based, see Mac Sweeney et al, *Origin Myths*.

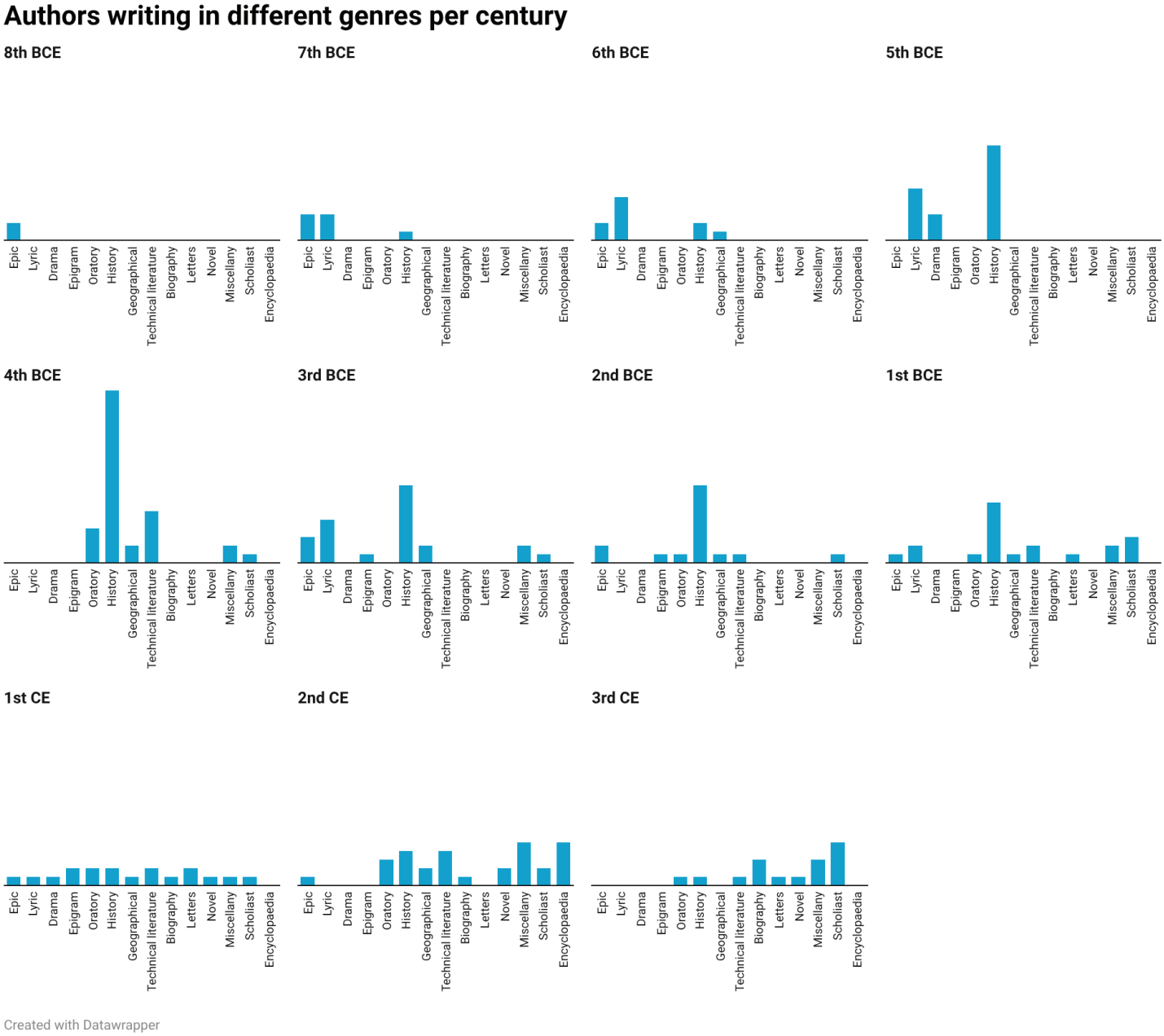


Figure 7: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek about Greek origin myths according to genres employed per century. Chart created by Datawrapper.

Two points stand out as being particularly relevant here. First is the spike in the numbers of historiographical texts within our corpus in the 4th century BCE in particular, accounting for no insignificant proportion of the dataset as a whole. Second is the spread of genres within our corpus in the latter part of our period – most notably within the 1st century CE, when stories about origins appeared in texts written across a wide range of different genres, aimed at a range of different audiences, and read in a range of different social contexts. Both points will help us to understand the specific history of origin myths in Greek antiquity.

The Changing Place of Origin Myths in Ancient Greek Society

Considering these three axes of analysis together, we can begin to make some inferences about the changing place of origin myths in wider Greek society and culture. It is perhaps significant that stories about the origins of Greek communities appear within the very earliest texts that we have in the ancient Greek language. Even though relatively few works in ancient Greek survive from the 8th and the 7th centuries BCE, our corpus nonetheless begins in this early period, demonstrating that discourses about origins, foundations, and ancestries were »baked into« ancient Greek literature from the very start. The unbroken continuation of our corpus across more than a millennium into late antiquity stands testament to the resilience of origins as a literary theme – these myths were evidently a stable part of ancient Greek literary traditions. This is further supported by the fact that authors within our corpus hail from almost all regions of the ancient Greek world. Origins were not an obsession of any region in particular – instead, they were a theme for writers across the ancient Greek world, across classical antiquity. This point, prosaic as it might seem, gains significance when the sustained Greek interest in origin stories is compared with relatively low levels of interest in origins within other bodies of ancient literature.[16]

From the 6th century BCE onwards, we can begin to point towards some emergent trends. It is at this point when we might begin to see a particular interest in origin discourses amongst authors from Anatolia and the eastern Aegean (figure 5), although given the comparatively high levels of literary production in the region at the time, it is not currently possible to tell whether this apparent trend is significant. We can be more confident, however, about a trend that begins in the following 5th century BCE and which matures in the 4th.

The sudden increase in our corpus observed in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE (figure 2) corresponds to the emergence of new genres across Greek literature as a whole: the flourishing of drama in the Athenian *polis*-context of the early classical period, followed by a fourth century boom in prose writing (history, technical literature, oratory), which significantly expanded literary activity beyond the (predominantly oral) verse genres of the preceding archaic period.[17] Amongst these, the spike in our corpus appears to have been driven in particular by works of historiographical prose (figures 6 and 7). This might not seem surprising, given that origin myths, by their fundamental nature, deal with events in the past. However, we have already seen that origin narratives were already an established feature of poetic genres in the previous centuries, including venerable traditions in epic (such as the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, an epic compilation of heroic and demographic genealogies) and lyric (such as the reflections of poets such as Archilochus and Mimnermus on recent violent conquests). In addition, extended treatments of origin myths are also known in drama (such as Euripides' celebrated plays, the *Erechtheus* and the *Ion*, each offering slightly different perspectives on Athenian origins). Nor was it inevitable that the new prose histories would

16 Mesopotamian and Egyptian literature, in comparison, appears to be less concerned with discourses of community origin and is more concerned with cosmological origins and/or the origin of human civilisation as a whole; see Hess, *I Studied Inscriptions*.

17 For wider trends in the literary activity of the classical period, see, e.g., McGlew, Literature in the Classical Age; Montanari, *History of Ancient Greek Literature*. See also Goldhill, *Invention of Prose*.

necessarily include origin narratives. Greek historiography tends to focus on events either within or at the edges of living memory (e.g., Herodotus and the Persian Wars, Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War, Xenophon and the campaigns of Cyrus the Younger), and indeed ancient Greek historians famously argued against treating events from the deep past because of their inherent unknowability (e.g., Thucydides' *archaiologia*; Herodotus' *prologue*). It seems that the new prose histories engaged with origin myths despite, rather than because of, the emerging conventions of the genre.

Not only did they engage – they engaged enthusiastically. The 4th century BCE is an outlier in all of our charts. The new genre of prose history embraced the origin myth at scale, suddenly and dramatically, and nowhere was this more evident than amongst writers from the Greek peninsula and the central Aegean. Although these writers show relatively little interest in origins for much of Greek antiquity, their interest increases in the 5th and reaches a high peak in the 4th century BCE (figure 5). This must be seen in relation to the contemporary historical context. The 4th century saw struggles for hegemony between Greek states on the peninsula – the defeat of Athens by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War was followed by conflict between Sparta and Thebes, and the second half of the century was characterised by the rise of Macedon under Philip II and his son, Alexander.[18]

Amidst these new political realities, Greek communities might have sought solace in (or a romantic reimagining of) their identities, rooting these discourses of identity in their own ancient pasts. Indeed, around this time, origin myths often seem to have been coloured with political significance. This is sometimes evident when we consider the specific textual contexts of many of these narratives. The tale of a city's origin is recounted, in many cases, within the frame of diplomatic interactions – with alliances or rivalries being cast as ancestral brotherhoods or enmities.[19] This is true, not only of the new prose historiography, but also of its close relation within ancient Greek literary tradition, oratory. In one prominent speech of the 4th century for example, the Athenian orator Isocrates reflects on his city's recent loss of power and subordination to Spartan hegemony, describing how the Ionian cities broke their former alliance with Athens, despite originally being peopled by Athenian migrants (Isocrates, *Panygyricus* 122). Here, as in many other cases, the recounting of the origin myth occurs in the text within an explicitly political frame.

Also relevant is the kind of origin myths being told. This aspect of our analysis is ongoing, and only preliminary results can be shared here, but some intriguing patterns in mythic content are already beginning to emerge for the 4th century BCE. For example, during most of Greek antiquity, origin myths were written with an emphasis on the agency of heroic or remarkable individuals. Herakles is described as the progenitor of many Sicilian communities, for instance (e.g., Diodorus Siculus 4.23.1-2); while the urbanisation of Athens is attributed to Theseus (e.g., Plutarch, *Theseus* 36); and the foundation of many cities and cults in the central Mediterranean to Odysseus (e.g., Cassiodorus, *Var*. 12.15.1) and Diomedes

18 For this dynamic period in ancient Greek history, see Ma, *Polis*, as well as Tritle, *Greek World*, and also Börm and Luraghi, *Polis in the Hellenistic World*.

19 For what is known as »kinship diplomacy« in the ancient Greek world, see in particular Patterson, *Kinship Myth*.

(e.g., Strabo 5.1.8).[20] Yet in the 4th century BCE, for the first and the last time in antiquity, more authors attributed agency to collective groups rather than remarkable individuals when recounting origin myths (figure 8). The people of Delphi as a whole were credited with the foundation of Magnesia (Theophrastos F631 Rose). A group of assertive Trojan women were described as the agents behind the settlement of Kroton, forcing their menfolk to comply with their demand by burning their ships (Aristotle, *Mirabilia* 840b.109-110). We also find references to a group of Spartans founding the city of Taras (Plato Leg. 637B); a set of refugee Phokaians establishing Massalia (Isokrates, *Archidamos* 84); and a band of lawless Lokrians settling in Amphissa (Aischines 3.113), amongst other tales of collective action. In a world that was increasingly controlled by kings and tyrants, the origins of Greek communities were untypically cast in terms of communal agency.

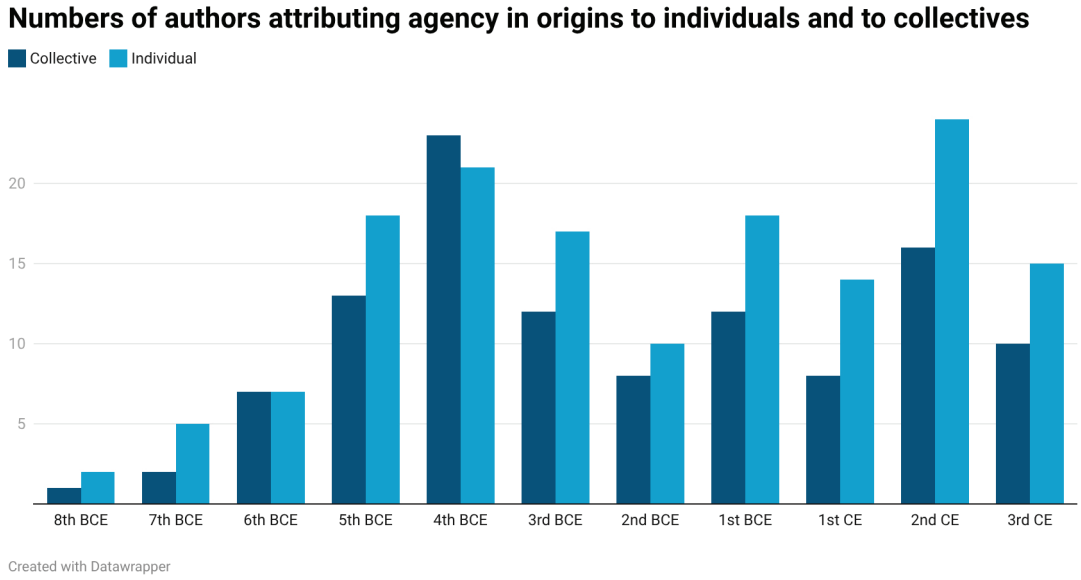


Figure 8: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek attributing agency to individuals and collectives in the establishment of new communities. Chart created by Datawrapper.

Another characteristic of the origin myths told in the 4th century BCE is an emphasis on indigeneity and autochthony.[21] It is in this century when stories of Athenian autochthony are at their peak in the work of a group of local historians known as the Atthidographers, as well as appearing in other genres including works by Isocrates (e.g., Isokrates, *Panath*. 12.126) and Plato (e.g., Plato Tim. 22a; Plato Critias 110B).[22] In the 4th century we also read about the

20 For Odysseus and Diomedes as founding heroes, see Malkin, *Returns of Odysseus*.

21 For autochthony and indigeneity in ancient Greek origin myths more generally, see Detienne and Jones, Art of founding autochthony; Pelling, Bringing autochthony; Roy, Autochthony.

22 For the myth of Athenian autochthony, see Loraux, *Born of the Earth*; Blok, Gentrifying genealogy; Calame, Myth and performance. For the Atthidographers, see Harding, *Story of Athens*.

Thebans as »*spartoi*« or »sown men« who grew out of the Theban soil (e.g., Palaephatus, *De Incredibilibus* 3; Androtion BNJ 324 F60).[23] A range of other communities are also described in terms of indigeneity at this time, including the Ephesians (Ephoros BNJ 70 F114a), the inhabitants of the Ionian cities more generally (Aristoboulos of Kassandreia FGrHist 139 F6), the Lokrians (Aristotle fr 560 Rose), the Samians (Aristotle F571 Rose), the people of Anchiale (Ptolemaios Lagu BNJ 138 F5), and the Sicilians (Philistos Syracusanus FGrHist 556 f45).

Overall, the telling of origin myths in the 4th century BCE, then, constitutes a very particular literary phenomenon, set within a particular historical context. Both qualitatively and quantitatively, it represents a departure from previous practices. At that particular time, origin myths functioned in an unusually powerful and political way within ancient Greek culture, perhaps having particular salience on the Greek peninsula and in the central Aegean. This was set to change, however, towards the end of the 4th century, and with the dawning of a new historical and literary context in the Hellenistic period.

As noted above, our corpus declines through the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE (figure 2). This matches a general decline in the overall corpus of surviving Greek literature, and can in part be explained by a resurgence of verse genres, particularly lyric poetry and elegy, whose lower transmission rates likely account at least partly for this slight dip, reflecting reduced surviving output rather than a genuine decline in literary activity.[24] This renewed interest in verse was accompanied by the emergence of erudite literary forms, and both of these literary developments relate in no small part to the new scholarly culture that flourished in Alexandria with the establishment of its famous library. By this time, the Greek world was characterised by large empires – the Ptolemaic, the Seleucid, and the Antigonid dynasties ruled over vast stretches of territory in the eastern Mediterranean and in western Asia; while the Roman and Punic empires controlled large parts of the central and western Mediterranean.[25] This is not to deny the continuing importance of the local at this time – indeed, our own corpus demonstrates the vitality of local traditions and continuing interest in regional and micro-regional narratives. However, the incorporation of smaller independent communities within larger political entities altered the frames of reference. While these new empires did not yet sponsor »official« works of historiography and standard versions of origin myths to any significant degree, they nonetheless had an impact on literary output. The centre of literary gravity shifted, and indeed the dominance of Alexandria in Greek literary culture at this time is reflected in the geographical shifts within our corpus, with the southeastern Mediterranean now constituting a major locus (figure 5). But origin myths were often also less explicitly

23 For this myth of Theban autochthony, see Nimis, Theban autochthony and Athenian ideology; Berman, Double foundation; Berman, Myth, literature, and the creation.writings of the mythographers, and archaeological evidence, this article argues that the two stories of foundation existed in parallel in the early Greek poetic tradition and represent two distinct contexts of composition, one Mycenaean and the other archaic. Only with prose mythographers and logographers such as Hekataios and Pherekydes were these stories chronologically and genealogically ordered. This ordering represents a permanent change in how the mythic material was and continues to be understood.«,«container-title«:«Transactions of the American Philological Association (1974-

24 For the literature of the Hellenistic period, see Montanari, *History of Ancient Greek Literature* 2; Phillips, Citation and transmission; Sampson, Papyrology.

25 For the history of the Hellenistic period, see Shipley, *Greek World After Alexander*.

inflected with political significance. They were compiled in the new erudite genres, included within historical and geographical works, and alluded to in verse (figure 7). Often, however, references to origin myths were brief, even fleeting, and seemed to have been included mostly to add colour to a text, or to demonstrate the author's virtuoso scholarship.

It has previously been assumed that interest in origin myths was particularly strong in this period, given the broader literary currents of the time, as well as the historical context of warring Hellenistic kingdoms. Previous scholars have written about the Hellenistic period as one when mythopoetic activity reached »hitherto unprecedented levels«,[26] and argued that a new genre of *ktisis*-poetry (poetry recounting foundation myths) was invented at this time.[27] While both of these assertions might yet be true, quantitative analysis of our corpus suggests that in real terms (and in particular in relation to the preceding classical period of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE), the importance of origin myths actually declined in the Hellenistic age. Put plainly, stories about the origins of Greek communities played a less central role, both in literature and in wider society, than they had done previously.

This is emphatically not the case in the 1st century BCE. Despite a continued decline in the number of ancient Greek texts overall, our corpus grows both in absolute (figure 2) and relative (figure 3) terms. It seems that, in proportion to all literary activity, more time was being invested in the writing of origin myths. Once more, the historical context of this trend is important. The 1st century BCE saw the consolidation of Roman power in the Mediterranean, as Rome steadily defeated rival empires and kingdoms. A revival of origin as a theme in ancient Greek literature is likely related to a similar interest in origins found in contemporary Latin literature. Although not discussed here for reasons of space, Latin authors at this time were crucially concerned with origins, foundations, and lineages. It was in this period that the tale of Roman origins began to harden into a canonical »official« form under the direction of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, centring on Aeneas and his flight from Troy, the arrival in Italy and establishment of a hybrid dynasty, the birth of the twins Romulus and Remus, and finally the foundation of the city of Rome itself.[28] Authors writing in Latin did not confine themselves, however, to narrating Roman origins. They also reflected on origins and ancient interconnections between a wide range of groups both within Rome's conquered territories and beyond.

The impact of Rome on our corpus is perhaps most evident in figure 5, which shows the geographical distribution of authors within our corpus. The 1st century BCE is the only time when significant numbers of authors from the central Mediterranean wrote in the ancient Greek language about origin myths, many of them describing the origins of Greek cities in Italy and Sicily, but others also discussing the various origins of other Italian communities and groups. Yet interest in origin stories was also strong at this time amongst authors hailing from Anatolia and the eastern Aegean (figure 5), a fact that might perhaps be related to the Roman engagement with Troy.[29] Such stories did not always make explicit reference to

26 Scheer, Past in a Hellenistic present, 218.

27 Dougherty, Archaic Greek foundation poetry.

28 For Roman origin myths, see Wiseman, *Remus*; Wiseman, *Myths of Rome*; Squire, Figuring Rome's foundation.

29 For Troy and Rome, see Mac Sweeney, *Troy: Myth, City, Icon*; and for the impacts of this on other Anatolian communities, see Mac Sweeney, Failed Nostoi and foundations.

Roman origin discourses, but sometimes alluded to them in indirect and subtle ways, through mythological parallels and the use of common motifs.[30] This is not to say that Greek origin myths in this period were necessarily politically instrumentalised, as the origin myths of the 4th century BCE had often been. Rather, the cultural frame of Greek origin myths had shifted – Latin literary traditions, Roman cultural expectations, and also the »official« historiography of the Julio-Claudian imperial vision all played a part in altering the environment. As the Romans sought to make sense of the world through origin narratives, the Greeks also began to rethink their origins afresh.

If the 1st century BCE saw origin myths occupying a disproportionately large amount of literary attention, then the 1st century CE saw the opposite – origin myths decreasing in importance (figure 3). It is in this century that we see them appearing in the widest range of different genres of texts (figure 7), showing up in all different kinds of literary productions from epic poetry to technical treatises, and from romantic novels to encomiastic speeches. By this point, origin myths are everywhere, but at the same time they are also nowhere in particular. It is as if they have melted into the generic background of underlying literary landscape, a theme once more »baked into« Greek literature as it was in our very earliest sources, but which occupied no particular place in the cultural and political imaginary of the time.

In the centuries that followed, origin myths return to popularity, and our corpus swells once more (figures 2 and 3). Much of this increase, however, is driven by the proliferation of texts in erudite genres – scholia, encyclopaedias, lexica, as well as several miscellanies and technical treatises (figures 6 and 7). With this shift, we see origin myths moving out of the literary mainstream and into the world of scholars and antiquarians. The rising popularity of origin myths was not driven by their place in public discourse or the wider cultural consciousness. Instead, these stories increasingly appear in our corpus because they were compiled and compared, discussed and analysed by specialists – grammarians and sophists, philhellenes and aesthetes – writing primarily for each other. This is particularly true of the 2nd century CE, when nuggets of obscure knowledge were bandied back and forth by members of the elite learned class in competitive displays of virtuoso erudition.[31] From this point onwards, origin myths may have been prevalent in the surviving source material, but they were not necessarily relevant to wider Greek society.

Conclusions

The gradual slide into prolific irrelevance is a fate that we ourselves may perhaps avoid, if we are willing to think in terms of the big picture, to try out new methods, and to open up comparative perspectives. We have tried, in this paper, to do all three. By compiling a large dataset of origin myths and by considering this corpus in relation to various axes of analysis, we have made a first attempt at telling the history of origin myths in the ancient Greek world. It is a history that leads to new insights for the study of Greek antiquity, but, we hope, may

30 This theme is a complex one and cannot be fully explored here. A more detailed treatment will be offered in Mac Sweeney et al., *Origin Myths*.

31 For literature and culture in the 2nd century CE, particularly under the influence of the Second Sophistic, see Part V in Richter and Johnson (eds.), *Oxford Handbook to the Second Sophistic*.

also prove valuable for readers approaching this article from a comparative perspective. There is much that can yet be learned by all of us, not just about what origin myths *say*, but also about what origin myths *do*.

Acknowledgements

The work presented in this paper was carried out within the frame of the research project, »Migration and the Making of the Ancient Greek World« (MIGMAG). This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No. 865644). The authors of this paper are grateful to the ERC for its generous support of the project, and to the University of Vienna for hosting the project. We are also grateful to Clara Hansen and Bettina Bernegger, our colleagues on this project, who have worked directly on this mythological material, and whose work will be showcased in the primary publication of the project results. We are also grateful to the wider project team, including Tom Maltas, Jana Mokrišová, and Francesco Quondam, who worked exclusively on the archaeological work package of the project, and Fabiola Heynen, who served as administrative assistant at the start of the project. We are also grateful to the FWF Cluster of Excellence COE 8, »EurAsian Transformations« (Grant-DOI: 10.55776/COE8), from which we have received funding to expand this work to explore origin myths in the Roman world, in particular linked to Rome and Troy. This latter extension work is ongoing. We are also grateful to the editors of this volume and organisers of the conference on which it is based for the opportunity to take part, as well as to Ingrid Hart for her editorial expertise and patience in the preparation of this paper.

References

Beck, Hans, and Peter Funke (eds.), *Federalism in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2015).

Berman, Daniel W., The double foundation of Boiotian Thebes, *Transactions of the American Philological Association (1974-)* 134/1 (2004) 1-22.

Berman, Daniel W., Myth, literature, and the creation of the topography of Thebes, *Cambridge Core* (Cambridge, 2015).

Blok, Josine, Gentrifying genealogy: On the genesis of the Athenian autochthony myth, in: Ueli Dill, Fritz Graf, and Christine Walde (eds.), *Antike Mythen: Medien, Transformationen und Konstruktionen [Fritz Graf Zum 65. Geburtstag]* (Berlin, 2009).

Börm, Henning and Nino Luraghi (eds.), *The Polis in the Hellenistic World* (Stuttgart, 2018).

Calame, Claude, Myth and performance on the Athenian stage: Praxithea, Erechtheus, their daughters, and the etiology of autochthony, *Classical Philology* 106/1 (2011) 1-19.

Cipolla, Craig N., Rachel J. Crellin, and Oliver J.T. Harris, *Archaeology for Today and Tomorrow* (London, 2024).

Detienne, Marcel, and Elizabeth Jones., The art of founding autochthony: Thebes, Athens, and Old-Stock French, *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 9/1 (2001) 46-55.

Dougherty, Carol, Archaic Greek foundation poetry: Questions of genre and occasion, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 114/4 (1994) 35-46.

Goldhill, Simon, *The Invention of Prose* (Oxford, 2002).

Hall, Jonathan M, *Hellenicity: Between Ethnicity and Culture* (Chicago, 2002).

Hansen, Mogens Herman, and Thomas Heine Nielsen (eds.), *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis* (Oxford, 2004).

Harding, Phillip (ed.), *The Story of Athens: The Fragments of the Local Chronicles of Attika* (London, 2008).

Harrison, Stephen (ed.), *A Companion to Latin Literature*, Blackwell companions to the ancient world (Chichester, 2005).

Hess, Richard S., *I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11*. Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 4 (Winona Lake, ID, 1994).

Hose, Martin, and David J. Schenker (eds.), *A Companion to Greek Literature*, Blackwell companions to the ancient world (Chichester, 2016).

Kazhdan, Aleksandr, *A History of Byzantine Literature, 650-850*, 2 vols (Athens, 1999).

Krumbacher, Karl, *The History of Byzantine Literature: From Justinian to the End of the Eastern Roman Empire (527-1453)* (second edition), (Munich, 2001).

Loraux, Nicole, *Born of the Earth: Myth and Politics in Athens* (Ithaca, 2000).

Ma, John, *Polis: A New History of the Ancient Greek City-State from the Early Iron Age to the End of Antiquity* (Princeton, 2024).

Mac Sweeney, Naoíse, *Foundation Myths and Politics in Ancient Ionia* (Cambridge, 2013).

Mac Sweeney, Naoíse (ed.) *Foundation Myths in Ancient Societies: Dialogues and Discourses* (Philadelphia, 2015).

Mac Sweeney, Naoíse, *Troy: Myth, City, Icon* (London, 2018).

Mac Sweeney, Naoíse, Failed Nostoi and foundations. Kalchas at Kolophon, in: Simon Hornblower and Giulia Biffis (eds.), *The Returning Hero: Nostoi and Traditions of Mediterranean Settlement* (Oxford, 2018).

Mac Sweeney, Naoíse, Clara Hansen, and Eleni Kopanaki, *Ancient Greek Origin Myths* (forthcoming).

Mac Sweeney, Naoíse, Clara Hansen, and Eleni Kopanaki, *A Database of Ancient Greek Origin Myths* [data set] (Zenodo, 2026).
Malkin, I., *The Returns of Odysseus. Colonization and Ethnicity* (Berkeley, 1998).
McGlew, James, Literature in the Classical Age of Greece, *A Companion to Greek Literature* (New York, 2015).
Montanari, Franco, *History of Ancient Greek Literature. Volume 2: The Hellenistic Age and the Roman Imperial Period* (Berlin, 2022).
Montanari, Franco, *History of Ancient Greek Literature. Volume 1: The Archaic and Classical Ages* (Berlin, 2022).
Morgan, Catherine, *Early Greek States Beyond the Polis* (London, 2003).
Nimis, Stephen, Theban autochthony and Athenian ideology in the Phoenissae of Euripides, *Mediterranean Studies* 25/2 (2017) 147-163.
Pantelia, Maria C., *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae: A Bibliographic Guide to the Canon of Greek Authors and Works* (Berkeley, 2022).
Patterson, Lee E., *Kinship Myth in Ancient Greece* 1 (Austin, 2010).
Pelling, Christopher, Bringing autochthony up-to-date: Herodotus and Thucydides, *The Classical World* 102/4 (2009) 471-483.
Phillips, Tom, Citation and transmission, in: Laura Swift (ed.), *A Companion to Greek Lyric* (New York, 2022) 119-131.
Richter, Daniel S., and William A. Johnson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook to the Second Sophistic* (Oxford, 2017).
Roy, James, Autochthony in Ancient Greece, in: Jeremy McInerney (ed.), *A Companion to Ethnicity in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Oxford, 2014).
Sampson, C. Michael, Papyrology, in: Laura Swift (ed.), *A Companion to Greek Lyric* (New York, 2022) 89-118.
Scheer, Tanja S., The past in a Hellenistic present: Myth and local tradition, in: Andrew Erskine (ed.), *A Companion to the Hellenistic World* (New York, 2005).
Shipley, Graham, *The Greek World After Alexander, 323-30 BC* (London, 2000).
Squire, M., Figuring Rome's foundation on the Iliac Tables, in: Naoíse Mac Sweeney (ed.), *Foundation Myths in Ancient Societies: Dialogues and Discourses* (Philadelphia, 2014).
Tritle, Lawrence A., *The Greek World in the Fourth Century: From the Fall of the Athenian Empire to the Successors of Alexander* (London, 1997).
Vlassopoulos, Kostas, *Unthinking the Greek Polis: Ancient Greek History beyond Eurocentrism* (Cambridge, 2007).
Wiseman, T. P., *Remus: A Roman Myth* (Cambridge, 1995).
Wiseman, T. P., *The Myths of Rome* (Exeter, 2004).

Websites

Thesaurus Linguae Graecae. *TLG E*, accessed on 14 April 2026: https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/
Trismegistos database, accessed on 14 April 2026: https://www.trismegistos.org/ref/
New Pauly, accessed on 14 April 2026: https://referenceworks.brill.com/display/db/npog
New Jacoby, accessed on 14 April 2026: https://scholarlyeditions.brill.com/bnjo/

List of Figures

Figure 1: Map of the ancient Greek world, showing *poleis* of the early classical period, c.500 BCE. Map by Georgia Tsiouprou.
Figure 2: Chart showing the number of authors writing about Greek origin myths in relation to the total number of Greek authors from the Trismegistos database over time (logarithmic scale). Chart created by Datawrapper.
Figure 3: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek about Greek origin myths as a percentage of the total number of Greek authors over time. Chart created by Datawrapper.
Figure 4: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek about Greek origin myths according to their region of origin. Chart created by Datawrapper.
Figure 5: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek about Greek origin myths according to their region of origin per century. Chart created by Datawrapper.
Figure 6: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek about Greek origin myths according to literary forms employed per century. Chart created by Datawrapper.
Figure 7: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek about Greek origin myths according to genres employed per century. Chart created by Datawrapper.
Figure 8: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek attributing agency to individuals and collectives in the establishment of new communities. Chart created by Datawrapper.

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

Reinier Langelaar*

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

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

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

* Correspondence details: Reinier Langelaar, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia (IKGA); Dominikanerbastei 16, 1010 Vienna, Austria; tel. +43-1-51581-6425; email: reinier.langelaar@oeaw.ac.at

This is the conclusion of the thematic section *Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasian Comparison*, guest editor: Reinier Langelaar. To read all related articles, please access https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026.

eISSN-Nr. 2412-3196
DOI 10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026s277

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

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

Indeed, the maturity of the disciplines and size of the (explored) primary literatures circumscribe the possible levels and methods of analysis. To cite just one example, the elaborate dataset employed by Mac Sweeney and Kopanaki for ancient Greek materials, coupled with available estimates of literary survival rates (this volume),[2] cannot be replicated in the study of, say, Turkic, Tungusic or indeed Tibetan origin myths. Although such sweeping analyses based on large datasets still seem to be distant in many disciplines, the increasing availability of digital technologies, such as Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) and Optical Character Recognition (OCR) for smaller languages, along with advancements in neural network-based textual analysis, brings us closer to the day when something similar can be attempted[3] in smaller fields – the extant evidentiary base permitting. As things stand, however, and despite decades of gains, the voices of smaller regional disciplines still cannot resound with the same volume and refinement of more mature fields.

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

2 Mac Sweeney and Kopanaki, Ancient Greek origin myths.

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

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

Change in Origin Narratives and its Relevance

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

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

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

5 Pohl, Rychterová and Reimitz, Challenges of interpretation.

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

7 Wabnitz, Fantastic beasts, 184.

8 Pohl and Rychterová, Early Medieval Europe, 153.

9 Langelaar, Empire and identity.

10 Langelaar, Colours of the rainbow.

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

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

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

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

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

12 Scheid, Foreignness in Japanese origin myths.

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

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

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

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

Some Strands and Tropes

Stranger-Kings and Alterity

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

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

14 Wabnitz, Fantastic beasts, 195.

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

16 Langelaar, Empire and identity.

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

18 Sahlins, Elementary forms.

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

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

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

19 Sahlins, Elementary forms, 192.
20 Pohl, Rychterová and Reimitz, Challenges of interpretation, 103.
21 Schneider, Southern Tungusic origin myths.
22 Scheid, Foreignness in Japanese origin myths.
23 Lee, Origin myths of Turkic peoples, 205.
24 Lee, Origin myths of Turkic peoples, 208-209.
25 Graeber and Sahlins, *On Kings*, 5.
26 Lee, Origin myths of Turkic peoples, 203 and Wabnitz, Fantastic beasts, 185-186.
27 Cited in Lee, Origin myths of Turkic peoples, 204, fn. 4.
28 Schneider, Southern Tungusic origin myths, 242.
29 Czaja, *Medieval Rule*, 38-39.

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

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

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

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

30 Schneider, Southern Tungusic origin myths, 237.

31 Pohl and Rychterová, Early Medieval Europe, 135.

32 Beckwith, *Empires*, 1-12.

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

34 Sahlins, Stranger-king, 112.

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

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

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

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

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

37 Schneider, Southern Tungusic origin myths, 237.

38 Sørensen, *Mirror*, 139.

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

40 Sahlins, Stranger-king, 112.

41 Wellendorf, Old Scandinavian literature, 521.

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

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

44 Pohl and Rychterová, Early Medieval Europe, 139.

45 Lee, Origin myths of Turkic peoples, 210.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

49 Pohl and Rychterová, Early Medieval Europe, 91.

50 Sahlins, Elementary forms, 196.

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

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

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

Animal Guides

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

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

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

53 Schneider, Southern Tungusic origin myths, 237.

54 Sahlins, Stranger-king, 114.

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

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

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

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

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

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

57 Ziemann, Bulgarian origin legends, 176.

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

59 Lee, Origin myths of Turkic peoples, 210.

60 Allen, Animal guides.

61 Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*.

62 Allen, Animal guides, 386.

63 Krappe, Guiding animals, 245.

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

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

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

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

65 Dumézil, *L'idéologie tripartie*.

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

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

68 Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, 1094.

69 Lee, Origin myths of Turkic peoples, 210.

70 Wabnitz, Fantastic beasts, 195.

Sibling Trios

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

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

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

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

71 Ziemann, Bulgarian origin legends, 173.
72 Dumézil, *L'idéologie tripartie*.
73 Gary and El-Shamy, *Motifs in Folklore*.
74 Ziemann, Bulgarian origin legends, 175.
75 E.g., Tshal-pa-Kun-dga'-rdo-rje, *Hu-lan-deb-ther,* 33-34.
76 Schneider, Southern Tungusic origin myths, 234, 236.
77 Levine, Origins, 60-61.
78 Balikci, *Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors*, 70.
79 Moses, By the Numbers, 79.
80 Moses, By the Numbers, 79.

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

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

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the FWF under Grant COE8 »EurAsian Transformations« and under Grant P34212 »Buddhist Narratives and ›Tibetan‹ Ethnogenesis«. I thank Pavlína Rychterová, Walter Pohl and Ingrid Hartl for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

81 Žůrek and Rychterová, Slavonic and Czech identity.

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

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

References

Allen, Nick, Animal guides and Himalayan foundation myths, in: Samten Karmay and Philippe Sagant (eds.), *Les Habitants du toit du monde. Études recueillies en hommage à Alexander W. Macdonald* (Nanterre, 1997) 375-390.

Balikci, Anna, *Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors. Village Religion in Sikkim* (Leiden, 2008).

Beckwith, Christopher, *Empires of the Silk Road. A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton, 2009).

Czaja, Olaf, *Medieval Rule in Tibet. The Rlangs Clan and the Political and Religious History of the Ruling House of Phag mo gru pa. With a Study of the Monastic Art of Gdan sa mthil* (Vienna, 2013).

Dumézil, Georges, *L'idéologie tripartie des Indo-Européens* (Brussels, 1958).

Gary, Jane and Hasan El-Shamy (eds.), *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook,* [e-book] (Oxford, 2016 [2005]). Retrieved on 9 June 2026: EBSCOhost Ebook Super Collection – Austria.

Graeber, David and Marshall Sahlins, *On Kings* (Chicago, 2017).

Grimm, Jacob, *Deutsche Mythologie* (second edition), (Göttingen, 1844 [1835]).

Hill, Nathan W., A new interpretation of the mythological Incipit of the Rkong po inscription, in: Kurt Tropper and Christina Scherrer-Schaub (eds.), *Tibetan Inscriptions. Proceedings of a Panel Held at the Twelfth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Vancouver, 2010* (Leiden, 2013) 171-182.

Hu-lan-deb-ther = Tshal-pa-Kun-dga'-rdo-rje, *Deb-ther-dmar-po-rnams-kyi-dang-po-hu-lan-deb-ther* (Beijing, 1981 [completed in 1363]).

Krappe, Alexander, Guiding animals, *The Journal of American Folklore* 55/218 (1942) 228-246.

Langelaar, Reinier, Religion, Empire and identity. Tibetan Buddhist narrations of ethnicity, in: Don Wyatt and Shao-yun Yang (eds.), *Ethnicity and Race in Inner and East Asia* (New York, forthcoming).

Langelaar, Reinier, Chasing the colours of the rainbow. Tibetan ethnogenealogies in flux, *The Medieval History Journal* 21/2 (2018) 328-364.

Levine, Nancy, The origins of Stod-pa. A Nyinba clan legend, *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 4/1 (1976) 57-75.

Moses, Larry, Legends by the numbers. The symbolism of numbers in the »Secret History of the Mongols«, *Asian Folklore Studies* 55/1 (1996) 73-97.

Propp, Vladimir, *Morphology of the Folktale*, translated from Russian by Laurence Scott (Austin, 1968).

Sahlins, Marshall, The stranger-king: Or Dumézil among the Fijians, *The Journal of Pacific History* 16/3 (1981) 107-132.

Sahlins, Marshall, The stranger-king or, elementary forms of the politics of life, *Indonesia and the Malay World* 36/105 (2008) 177-199.

Sørensen, Per, *Tibetan Buddhist Historiography: The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies: An Annotated Translation of the XIVth Century Tibetan Chronicle: rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-long* (Wiesbaden, 1994).

Wellendorf, Jonas, Ethnogenesis and stranger-kings in Old Scandinavian literature, *Scandinavian Studies* 94/4 (2022) 504-529.

Žůrek, Václav and Pavlína Rychterová, Slavonic and Czech identity in the *Chronicon Bohemiae* by Přibík Pulkava of Radenín, in: David Kalkhous and Pavlína Rychterová (eds.),

Historiography and Identity VI. Competing Narratives of the Past in Central and Eastern Europe, c. 1200–c. 1600 (Turnhout, 2021) 225-256.