

Editorial

Narratives of Ethnic Origins: Eurasian Perspectives

Origin myths of Eurasian peoples have long been a topic for literary and mythological studies. Furthermore, they often served as key texts in nationalist historiographies. There was a surge in scholarly interest around the middle of the twentieth century, when nationalist, irrationalist, mythographic and structuralist concerns with these texts prompted lively debates and great syntheses. The late twentieth-century critique of national myths and postmodern deconstructivism have largely disqualified these origin stories as historical sources. Indeed, most of them tell us less about actual origins than previous generations of scholars had assumed. However, they are valuable indicators of how these origins were perceived at specific points in time and space and what they may have meant for the respective communities. Instead of looking for one ‘authentic’ and primeval myth later diluted in the course of its transmission, what still needs considerable research is the way in which rewritings, competing variants and new syntheses reflect contemporary interests. This process in which narratives and meanings were gradually transformed has continued in modern scholarship. Recent research on cultural memory and on the ‘uses of the past’ provides us with a good methodological basis for a comparative historical analysis of a set of relevant texts.

The contributions to this issue explore the construction and significance of different types of medieval ‘ethnic’ and ‘tribal’ origin narratives from several exemplary Eurasian contexts: Early Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean, the ancient Turks in the Central Asian steppes, South Arabia and Tibet. Some deal with *Origines gentium*, the origins of peoples

(Goths, Longobards, Franks and others) from the period when the Roman Empire in Europe had disintegrated. In particular, the irresistible spread of the myth of Trojan origins of the Franks, arguably the most successful origin narrative in Medieval Europe, receives a systematic treatment. The gender perspective is explored through the Late Antique/Early Medieval receptions of the Amazon myth. Another comprehensive study traces several versions of ancient Turkish descent from a wolf. An anthropogenic element is reflected in the many variants of the origin myths of the Tibetans, which are analysed here in their long-term transformation by Buddhist scholars. Two case studies deal with Yemeni tribal origin narratives and genealogies in contentious political contexts and with the adaptations of the genealogy of the Turkish Rasulid dynasty in South Arabia to their claims of Yemeni origin.

Many parallels, as well as a wide range of possibilities, emerge from the comparison of these studies. For instance, origin narratives were often (if to varying extents) linked with genealogies. The first ancestor could be human—male, female or a couple—or an animal. In both cases, he/she could be more or less associated with supernatural or divine powers. A god/ess could be supposed to have intervened in the genesis of the people or even be their ancestor. The pedigree could begin with the first human being (as in the Tibetan case or also in Christian and Islamic genealogies going back to Adam), with a man who broke away from a previous unit, with the mythical ancestors of southern/northern Arabs, or with the first ruler. Wise or demonic women could figure as female ancestors (as with Tibetans, Huns or Longobards). To what extent women played a role in the pedigree or had agency is very different; ‘women in the beginning’ were important in many European origin narratives, for instance, those of the Longobards or of the Czechs.

The narrative could trace only one or several peoples back to a common ancestor and thus underline their relatedness. The selection of the groups sharing their distant ethnic origin could be obvious choices to be explained by contemporary political circumstances (such as the Tibetan myth about three brothers from whom the Tibetans, the Chinese and the Mongols had sprung) or create rather enigmatic ethnic genealogies (such as the family relations between Trojans, Franks, Turks, Phrygians and indirectly Romans in the Frankish origin narrative). In many cases, the ethnonym, tribal name or dynastonym is explained by eponymous ancestors, such as Khawlān or Francio; the founders of dynasties may appear rather late

in a genealogy, as with Rasūl or the Ostrogoth Amal. These ancestors could be linked to their late offspring by a continuous pedigree, as was frequent in the elaborate Arab genealogies. In other cases, a succession of kings from different families was more important, and often, obvious chronological gaps (as between the fall of Troy and the appearance of the Franks) did not seem to matter.

The texts that relate these stories are often parts (and usually, beginnings) of larger historical works but can also belong to other textual genres—genealogical manuals, ethnography, hagiography or the prologues of law codes. There is a variety of ways in which they were transmitted. With some of them (the Trojan origin myth of the Franks, the Amazon stories or the Rasulid genealogies), we can trace their intertextual transmission in a manuscript culture and also guess the political interests behind certain elements of the narrative. In other cases, there are strong hints that oral lore played a role (most clearly in late versions of the Tibetan origins which had been told to travellers or scholars). The narrative form displays great diversity: some are straightforward accounts, and some contain more elaborate ‘tales to remember’ (or to remember with), such as the Turkish wolf tale or the story of the long-bearded ‘Longobard’ women on the battlefield. ‘Mythical’ discourse often blends into a more historiographic or ethnographic mode.

The authors to whom we owe the written texts could be insiders (the Tibetan case) or outsiders (the Chinese chronicles that relate the Turkish origin narratives). Or they were ‘cultural brokers’ living in a frontier zone, under foreign rule and/or in a hybrid cultural environment (as in the post-Roman West). The texts may be transmitted in the vernacular or in a literate language (Latin, Chinese). They could enjoy wide circulation, as can be deduced from a great number of textual versions or manuscripts, or from numerous references in other texts (as in the case of the Trojan origins of the Franks), or they remained limited to the immediate environment of their author (arguably, the Rasulid pedigrees did not spread far beyond their court). In most cases of successful myths, there is not one ‘canonical’ version or an ‘authentic’ model from which all others can be derived but a coexistence of variants or even counter-narratives. We should not abandon the idea that many of these narratives could serve as expressions of deep-rooted self-identification, although this aspect has often been regarded too exclusively in research. At the same time, most of these origin stories represent traces of transcultural communication about the

origin and nature of ethnic groups in a wider environment. They provided a medium for negotiations for legitimacy, power, and status within and between communities.

There is also a wide range of ways in which religious discourse framed the narratives. Divine legitimation only mattered in some cases and tends to come into tension with Christian, Islamic or Buddhist ideas of religious legitimacy. Some narratives can still be contextualised within a living culture of the traditional beliefs expressed in them. However, in this issue we have collected several cases in which former systems of belief in supernatural beings were already in transformation; the gods, sacred animals or demons that these narratives feature had already lost their power by the time our earliest textual witnesses were written down. The monkey from whom, according to one version of their ethnogenic myth, the Tibetans were descended had come to be pictured as a Bodhisattva, and the story how the god Wodan gave the name to the Longobards was retold as a ‘ridiculous fable’. Buddhism and Christianity, in rather different ways, gradually reframed the narratives. This is one of the most interesting parallels that emerge from the present selection of articles. In several cases, if we follow different versions of a narrative over time, we can see hybridity (or hybridisation) in action. Ethnic (or tribal) identities are gradually accommodated within a wider religious discourse. However, they are not simply replaced by new (e.g., Christian) models, and ethnic distinctions are by no means faded out. These narratives continued to matter, and many of them could ultimately be appropriated by modern national ideologies.

This interest in the impact of ‘universal’ religions on particular identities corresponds to the research agenda of a large project supported by the Austrian Research Fund (FWF) under the SFB funding scheme for large interdisciplinary projects, from which this collection of articles results. It is entitled ‘Visions of Community: Comparative Approaches to Ethnicity, Region and Empire in Christianity, Islam and Buddhism (400–1600 CE) (VISCUM)’ and has received funding from 2011 to 2019. More specifically, the present publication has been prepared by the work of a Transversal Working Group about ‘Tribes and Ethnicity’ in the course of a series of internal meetings and two public workshops. Five of the contributions were written by members of the project team; they are complemented by two contributions from guests (Kıvılcım Yavuz and Peter B. Golden), to whom we are particularly grateful. While Dr Yavuz sums

up the results of her as yet unpublished PhD thesis, Professor Golden's paper is based on a lifetime of research on the Medieval steppe peoples and, above all, on the ancient Türks. The contributions by the project team owe much to the extraordinary opportunity of continuous exchange and collaboration among the disciplines and research fields within the comparative adventure of VISCOM.

Walter Pohl
Daniel Mahoney