

ETHNIC IDENTITIES in EARLY MEDIEVAL EUROPE

WITTGENSTEIN PROJECT (2005-09)

In 2004, Walter Pohl was awarded the Wittgenstein Prize, which is the most prestigious scientific award to be won in Austria. By giving the prize to Walter Pohl, the Wittgenstein Prize commission of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) paid tribute to the research on the Early Middle Ages that has been carried out at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (OeAW) for years. The prize money of 1.5 million EUR was used to launch an extensive research program in 2005. Until 2009, about a dozen young historians from Europe and the US will conduct studies on ethnic identities in early medieval Europe as part of the project. Research undertaken on the Early Middle Ages – i.e. the period between 400 and 1000 AD – has so far been insufficient. Yet, this era is indispensable for a deeper understanding of present-day Europe.

How did new identities form in emerging Europe? What was the role of peoples in forming the political landscape of those times? Today, these are two of the most important questions for historians all around the world. To date, scholars have worked on the assumption that peoples constitute their respective states. As a matter of fact, however, in Europe this idea only established itself gradually between the 4th and 10th century. It is a view that eventually led to the development of today's "modern nations". In order to understand the present, we therefore need to study ethnic processes in the Early Middle Ages. The Wittgenstein team has been examining early medieval texts that partly have received little scientific attention so far: historiography, legal codes, biographies of saints, biblical commentaries, inscriptions, letters, sermons, poems and others. These analyses are aimed at giving a detailed overview of the significance of ethnic identities. How did communities form in times of political unrest and how did they survive? The Wittgenstein Project will draw a comparison between the Early Middle Ages and the 21st century, because the migration and integration of foreign peoples during the Great Migration may be considered a "distant mirror" of today's immigration problems.

What is fascinating about the period between 400 and 1000 AD is that a great variety of disciplines, like archaeology, German, Roman Classical Studies, and other branches of philology, Byzantine studies, Islamic studies, theology and religious history are important to a better understanding. Consequently, the second focus of research is on studying identities on an interdisciplinary level. The project cannot include all the disciplines in question to the same extent. However, working groups, workshops, interdisciplinary seminars

and joint publications will be promoted until 2009 in order to facilitate communication between the various disciplines. For example the issue of "archaeology of identity" is being fiercely debated. The Wittgenstein project brings together historians, archaeologists and representatives from other disciplines to further discuss the subject in detail. A whole new range of problems has been caused by scientific methods, which offer instruments that enable us to reconstruct the movements of population groups. Genetic research, trace element analyses and research into diseases and the immune system have led to controversial debates. Scholars working in these fields have frequently established connections rather hastily between genetically (or linguistically) defined "populations" and historical "peoples". By doing this, they run the risk of defining ethnic identities according to racial and biological criteria. Another aim of the project is to discuss the possible application of models used in ethnology, sociology and cultural studies to the Middle Ages. The questions raised in this context are: Which concepts of identity can be directly applied to the Early Middle Ages? To what extent can we draw on the knowledge gathered by Early Medieval Studies to solve today's identity problems?

In addition, the project aims at drawing comparisons between different cultures. What role did peoples play in different political landscapes in the past? How were ethnic identities seen? In this context, it is of particular importance to compare Latin Europe to the other post-Roman cultures in the Mediterranean – Byzantium and the Islamic civilisation. We can also gain considerable insight by contrasting Classical Antiquity, the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period. Was the political importance of peoples characteristic of Western Europe? This question will be addressed in cooperation with leading representatives from other disciplines.

The results obtained through the Wittgenstein project will be published in a number of scholarly journals, but we will also make them accessible to a wider public in a series of books.

INFORMATION

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