

LATE ANTIQUE AND EARLY MEDIEVAL IBERIA



Edited by Dolores Castro and Fernando Ruchesi

Leadership, Social Cohesion, and Identity in Late Antique Spain and Gaul (500-700)

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Late Antique and Early Medieval Iberia

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Cover illustration: Patrimonio Nacional. Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial,
{d-I-2 (1^o)}, fol. 0142R

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 595 8

e-ISBN 978 90 4855 377 8

DOI 10.5117/9789463725958

NUR 684

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Introduction

Dolores Castro and Fernando Ruchesi

Between 640 and 650, it is recorded, Queen Nanthild (610–642) and her son, the young Clovis, visited the city of Orleans, in the Kingdom of Burgundy, where she summoned all members of the aristocracy – including *duces* and bishops – to a meeting. The reason behind this gathering was her intention to appoint a new mayor of the palace: Frank Flachoald. She knew, however, that this decision had to come from the members of the *primati regnum Burgundiam*.¹ An interesting detail is that Nanthild won the loyalty of these lords, one by one, during the ceremony, and her chosen candidate was finally appointed without arousing suspicion or conflict. She even offered her niece to Flachoald in marriage.

Certainly, not all situations were resolved peacefully and, in some cases, violence played the primary role. As illustrated by the war between King Theoderic II (595–613) and his brother, King Theodebert II (595–612), leaders often confronted each other, even when relatives were involved. We read that Theodebert was defeated and later humiliated by Theoderic in a parade in the city of Cologne, in which the former was divested of his royal clothing. This act was significant since it meant depriving the defeated opponent of the legitimizing elements of monarchical power.² Another account reports that Theoderic actually murdered his brother and hung his head from the walls of Cologne. Moreover, the anonymous author of the *Liber Historiae Francorum* mentions that Theoderic took the city and its treasures, and that the *Franci seniores* swore loyalty to him in the Church of Saint Gereon.³

As these episodes illustrate, the creation and consolidation of leadership and ties of social cohesion in late antique societies involved practices and strategies of a diverse nature: peaceful negotiations between coexisting authorities, deployments of military rites of victory, public demonstrations of power in

1 Fredegar, *Chronicle* IV.89, pp. 165–166.

2 Fredegar, *Chronicle* IV.38, pp. 139–140.

3 *LHF*, 38, pp. 307–309.

significant places, humiliation of defeated opponents, uses of distinguished markers of legitimacy and identity, with many more examples possible.

The complex scenario that emerged after the disappearance of the political structures of the Western Roman Empire, a process that affected the former imperial provinces in many different ways, appears to us as an interwoven patchwork of identities and communities in which new forms of leadership and social cohesion were being shaped.⁴ Political, cultural, and socio-economic transformations, however, did not necessarily imply abrupt changes or a complete rupture with the past.⁵ On the contrary, continuities and adaptations of local practices and Roman institutions were key elements in the construction of the newly established barbarian kingdoms and their relationship with the wide variety of communities spread across the former imperial territories.⁶

How were leaderships created, preserved, and reinforced? What strategies and approaches were put into practice to establish unity and cohesion? Which discursive devices and rhetorical skills were involved in these processes? How did leaders interact and relate to each other? These questions underpin the themes explored in this book. Each chapter addresses the intersection of leaderships, identities, and social cohesion in Late Antiquity from different angles, and with a particular focus on Visigothic Spain and Merovingian Gaul.

Over the last three decades, an increasing number of collective volumes on the Visigoths and Merovingians have been published, focusing on their

4 Some of these forms of social cohesion and identity began to be modified by the authors of the sixth century: As Walter Pohl suggests, while these writers did not identify themselves with the ruling elites of the Western *regna*, they legitimized their government through their writings. See: Pohl, 'Archaeology of Identity', p. 13.

5 These continuities were the result of the integration of the barbarians within late-Roman structures, a process that gained momentum from the fourth century onwards. In Evangelos Chrysos's words, 'The political terms concerning the regulations for settlement on public, confiscated or derelict private land, the conditions of autonomous (legal) conduct within the Roman system of control and coercion, the framework for trade and the transfer of goods for the people [...] all these and many other, more or less obvious channels of communication and means of affiliation served as the instruments for shaping the *regna* within or at the edge of the Roman Empire.' See Chrysos, 'The Empire', p. 15.

6 The adoption and transformation of these key elements have become a focus of widespread attention in recent years. Scholars have demonstrated how crucial they became in the making of political entities in the late antique West. An example of this is to be noted in Wormald's study of the written law codes of the sixth and seventh centuries, which were implemented by most – if not all – post-Roman kingdoms. See Wormald, 'The *Leges Barbarorum*', esp. p. 21.



history, origins, culture, and society. To quote just a few examples, it is worth mentioning the series of books edited by the San Marino Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Social Stress (CIROSS), organized within a research project directed by Giorgio Ausenda, focused on the Visigoths (edited by Peter Heather), and the Franks and Alamanni (edited by Ian Wood).⁷ Other noteworthy examples include *Framing Power in Visigothic Society* (2020),⁸ *The Visigothic Kingdom* (2020),⁹ *The Merovingian Kingdoms and the Mediterranean World* (2019),¹⁰ and the most recent publication of *The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World* (2020).¹¹ Despite this growing interest and the substantial research publications in recent decades, few attempts have been made to engage in dialogue-building between late antique Spain and Gaul.¹² Following this perspective, the current book aims to provide a suitable framework for addressing some of the key questions described above, which are central to these political entities and geographical spaces that grew and developed during the demise of Roman structures in the West.

Both Visigothic and Frankish kingdoms managed to adapt to varying circumstances and changing contexts, enduring the test of time across centuries. These groups did not only share their origins as *foederati* for the Western Roman Empire during the fourth and the fifth centuries¹³; research over the last decades has demonstrated the continuity of late Roman practices, especially in the bureaucratic and administrative spheres, which both *regna* modified according to their current needs.¹⁴ They also developed close contacts with each other, as well as different kinds of relationships: from trade and war to political alliances, including alliances brokered through marriage between their royal families.¹⁵ Such a dynamic context of mutual

7 See Heather, *The Visigoths*; Wood, ed., *Franks and Alamanni*.

8 Dell'Elicine and Martin, *Framing Power*, esp. pp. 9–22. The introduction offers a good summary of the latest collective works on Visigoths.

9 For an overview of the current perspectives on negotiation of power in Visigothic Iberia, see Panzram and Pachá, eds, *Visigothic Kingdom*, pp. 17–38.

10 The encompassing perspective adopted by the contributors and editors of this volume can also be traced back to Wickham's *The Inheritance of Rome* (2009) and Fischer and Wood's *Western Perspectives on the Mediterranean* (2012). See also Pérez Martínez's contribution in this collection.

11 Effros and Moreira, *The Oxford Handbook*.

12 See, for example, Buchberger's *Shifting Ethnic Identities in Spain and Gaul, 500–700* (2017). The author provides a new framework to explore identity shifts in the Early Middle Ages. On episcopacy, see Natal and Wood, 'Playing with Fire'.

13 Chrysos, 'The Empire', pp. 13–14.

14 Goetz, 'Introduction', p. 6; Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, pp. 489–491.

15 For some examples on alliances through marriages, see Heather, 'Gens and Regnum among the Ostrogoths', pp. 94, 97; Collins, *Visigothic Spain*, pp. 41, 73–74.



relations is further expressed in material, cultural, and social exchanges, which developed among the various communities spread throughout Spain and Gaul: literary and narrative models, objects and accessories related to secular and military offices, political and administrative practices, rituals, trends, and strategies spread and circulated fluidly across the frontiers.

Contributions in this volume also stress the relevance of interdisciplinary collaboration and the diversity of sources – hagiographical, historiographical, legal, theological, material, and archaeological. Over the last few decades, archaeology has become a growing field within late antique studies. Methodological renewal and increased research activities, especially in the area of urban archaeology, have made a remarkable impact on the study of urban elites, landscapes and topographies, and architectural representations of power.¹⁶ During the fourth and fifth centuries, cities underwent material and symbolic transformations that resulted in a ‘new concept of the urban space’.¹⁷ Despite the heterogeneity of urban developments, these changes encompassed the emergence of new political and territorial markers, both civil and religious, and new ideological and cultural representations and identities.¹⁸ Archaeological and epigraphic evidence, thus, has significantly contributed to a more complete understanding of late antique and early medieval towns and cities, questioning traditional theories which for a long time had considered ancient urbanism – with its splendour and monumentalism – as the urban model par excellence. Current archaeological debates, instead, have stressed the importance of putting aside categories such as ‘catastrophe’ and ‘decline’, traditionally used to describe this period, inviting us to contemplate this urban world on its own terms.

The topics discussed in this volume have a long history: research areas such as ethnicity and strategies of identification, the transformation of Romanness, and the many methods involved in building social cohesion and leadership in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages have received increased attention during recent decades, and more studies have been

16 The bibliography on this topic is vast. See, for example, Sánchez Ramos and Morín de Pablos, ‘Los paisajes urbanos’; Gutiérrez Lloret, ‘Repensando la ciudad’; Panzram and Callegarin, eds, *Entre civitas y madīna*, Sánchez Ramos and Mateos Cruz, *Territorio, topografía y arquitectura de poder*, and Gurt Esparraguera and Sánchez Ramos, ‘Las ciudades hispanas’; Kulikowski, ‘Cities and Government in Late Antique Hispania’; Ferdière, *Capitales éphémères*; Gauthier, ‘Christianisation et espace urbain’; Loseby, ‘Decline and Change’; Christie and Loseby, *Towns in Transition*; For a comparative study between Italian and Spanish medieval archaeology, see Gelichi and Hodges, eds, *New Directions*.

17 Sánchez Ramos and Morín de Pablos, ‘Los paisajes urbanos’, p. 99.

18 For an excellent survey of the changes in Roman architecture and monumental building during the fourth century, see Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, pp. 79–96.



conducted with significant outcomes.¹⁹ This book is intended as a contribution to these ongoing research frameworks exploring the different processes of creation, negotiation and uses of identities, leadership, and social cohesion.

It is no coincidence that most chapters deal – in greater or lesser depth – with episcopal leadership. The fourth and the fifth centuries witnessed the rising power of bishops within the later Roman Empire: they became prominent figures in public life, fulfilling judicial, defensive, administrative, political, as well as doctrinal and spiritual functions.

In the last few decades, an increasing number of studies have addressed different facets of this influential figure in Late Antiquity: its history, image, and patterns of leadership. Moreover, recent historiography has explored the role of bishops exhaustively in an attempt to encompass its complexity – and its correlation with other major transformations such as the expansion of monasticism and the promotion of ascetic qualities among the elites – and to overcome long-established assumptions which had installed a clear-cut and no longer sustainable distinction between secular and religious spheres. Philip Rousseau,²⁰ Conrad Leyser,²¹ Andrea Sterk,²² and Claudia Rapp²³ are some examples of this historiographical trend. A more comprehensive understanding has been further pursued among scholars, addressing the multiple dimensions involved in the emergence and development of the episcopal figure in Late Antiquity.

Questions related to local leadership were also discussed by Raymond Van Dam in his seminal study *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul*.²⁴ In examining this relationship, the author has raised broader historiographical issues about the need to abandon the traditional distinction between secular and ecclesiastical history, to understand leaderships in close connection with the communities within which they emerged and developed, and to address the challenges posed by the available sources. By exploring these questions in depth, the contributions in this volume aim to revisit how late antique and early medieval communities were organized and structured, societies within which the Church, understood not only in

19 Some of the most recent work on ethnic materials and its important role in the shaping of political and cultural identities in the Early Middle Ages include Pohl and Reimitz, eds, *Strategies of Distinction*; Pohl and Heydemann, eds, *Strategies of Identification*; Pohl and Heydemann, eds, *Post-Roman Transitions*, and Pohl et al., eds, *Transformations of Romanness*, esp. pp. 3–40.

20 Rousseau, 'The Spiritual Authority'.

21 Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism*.

22 Sterk, *Renouncing the World*.

23 Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, esp. pp. 3–22.

24 Van Dam, *Leadership and Community*, esp. pp. 1–6.



its institutional dimension, took a leading position: organizing practices, producing knowledge, and defining values, norms, and beliefs. An underlying concern here is therefore to understand leadership not as part of an autonomous sphere, but, rather, as being closely intertwined with religious and social life. Hence leadership cannot be studied in isolation. Questions of identity, urbanism, social status, war, and violence are also raised and examined in direct relation with the transformation and consolidation of authority and the building of networks of patronage.

Over the course of the contributions to this book a picture is developed of the pivotal role of bishops and its transformation over the period. New challenges had to be faced in the newly established post-Roman realities. After the demise of Roman hegemony in the West – along with the resulting breakdown of sponsoring local elites through gifts and patronage – local authorities underwent a series of changes, and had to forge and re-elaborate political alliances, and build new connections within the centralized kingdoms.²⁵ In fact, different kinds of authority came to coexist within a range of interrelationships that could vary, as shown by Meritxell Pérez Martínez and Pablo Poveda Arias (Chapters 4 and 5, respectively), from cooperation to confrontation. Cities were politically dynamic centres, and urban leaders – mainly bishops and *comites ciuitatis*, but in some cases *duces* and local *potentes*, too – interacted within competitive environments. Noteworthy here is Poveda Arias's use of the concept 'coopetition' to illustrate this complex scenario of overlapping spheres of influence and jurisdictions. In fact, as the author points out, a 'coopetitive' framework did not actually imply that the two strategies – cooperation and confrontation – were mutually exclusive or that they could not occur simultaneously. Competition was experienced in various fields, but bonds of cooperation could also emerge and become relevant in certain circumstances, as observed in the legal evidence regarding the degradation of bishops' secular duties over the course of the seventh century. Such a phenomenon, attested both in Visigothic Spain and Merovingian Gaul, although it may have led to confrontation and conflict between urban leaders, did not necessarily entail the end of cooperative relations. This 'coopetitive' model of interaction helps us to better understand the political dynamics of late antique cities as a system of counterbalancing powers, that compete, confront, but also cooperate with and control each other.

As Pérez Martínez also asserts, bishops assumed a leading role in shaping new post-Roman identities within the territories of *Hispania tarraconensis*

25 In the case of Merovingian Gaul, see Halfond, *Bishops and the Politics of Patronage*; Halfond, *Archaeology*.



from the fifth to the seventh centuries. This case study draws our attention to how leaders had to readapt and reconfigure their authority, interacting with new political actors and agendas, and how Roman identity was both preserved and transformed. In a diachronic approach, the author emphasizes the continuity of the Roman component in close connection with both the preservation of a Mediterranean identity and the history of Tarraco as a Roman provincial capital and metropolitan see. Pérez Martínez's contribution challenges traditional views, showing that the Visigothic settlement should not be labelled either as a collapse or a total break with the past. Further studies also reveal signs of continuity – e.g. the preservation of Roman administrative structures – and urban revitalization in a context in which traditional patterns of loyalty were being transformed. The sixth century witnessed the institutional and jurisdictional consolidation of the metropolitan see of Tarraco, especially over the bishoprics in the coastal areas of the province, and the strengthening of the episcopal position through the patronage of local saints (a practice also adopted in other cities such as, for example, Merida), conciliar activity, and through an urban restoration programme. Pérez Martínez also captures the complexity of the post-Roman period, shedding light on the changes that affected the regional churches against the backdrop of a political and religious identity emanating from Toledo and its pre-eminence as *sedes regia* and ecclesiastical see, during the seventh century.

The close relationship between bishops and cities is in fact another major theme that runs through the contributions gathered in this volume. Post-Roman urbanism underwent several changes, and while some places retained an important economic or political role, as was the case with Tarraco or Merida, other developments included the dismantling of the existing urban structures and the emergence of polynucleated settlements.²⁶ Urban transformations would sometimes go hand-in-hand with the development of the church and the presence of episcopal leaders, also deeply engaged in political, economic, and social affairs.

Building and reasserting leadership, therefore, entailed the deployment of manifold resources and overlapping strategies that could range widely from military rhetoric to the implementation of rituals associated with the secular, military, or even religious spheres. The implementation of a 'martial pedagogy' based on violence, threats, and *exempla* became crucial not only to reinforce authority, but also to bring cohesion to armed aristocracies and

26 For a comprehensive overview of the continuities and transformations of urban landscapes in Hispania, see Martínez Jiménez et al., *The Iberian Peninsula*, esp. pp. 153–188.



their followers, as Fernando Ruchesi demonstrates (in Chapter 6). In this context, objects, symbols, and rituals were also important devices – e.g. military banners, insignia of office, weapons, and armour – used to reinforce command and nurture a military identity uniting armies around common activities, feelings, and wartime experiences. Such methods, moreover, revealed the continuity and further development of late Roman military traditions, presumably inherited by the Frankish and Visigothic armed groups. Leaders were expected to demonstrate their military skills and to ensure divine assistance on the battlefield. They orchestrated religious and collective rites before battle, and celebrated victory to raise the morale of the troops and strengthen their unity, not only through the celebration of the victory *per se* but also through the distribution of plunder, and the sharing of hardships. In addressing narrative and legal evidence, Ruchesi explores how common experiences and memories could have strengthened the ties between military leaders and warriors, stressing the fundamental part played by the army as a mechanism of integration within late antique societies.

However, protection and defence were not just a matter of battles and conflicts. Other ways of exhibiting leadership by assuming a protective role were more concerned with founding and building activities, and performing charitable works. As Dolores Castro explores (see Chapter 1), the language of charity framed several hagiographic accounts of the period, helping to enhance the position of leaders as mediators and protectors of communities. Depicting these figures as generous, protective (often closely connected to local saints), and charitable (distributing food, helping the poor, and showing hospitality) also meant the promotion and shaping of local interests, identities, and traditions. Additionally, the integration of ascetic values and founding initiatives into the social and political culture helped to bolster the newly established elites as studied by Alexander O'Hara (Chapter 3) regarding the Merovingian dynasty and the Frankish aristocracy. As the author puts it, religion, and especially monastic culture, came to fill the vacuum left by the ancient civic and secular normative codes after the demise of the Roman Empire in the West. Particular attention is given to the role of Columbanus in providing a model of monastic foundation that was embraced by lay elites during the seventh century. Thus, the appropriation of monastic strategies of distinction – such as burial rituals, settlement patterns, ascetic norms, values, and new forms of atoning for sins (gift-giving and penance) – played an important role in shaping new aristocratic identities and defining social status and authority. As O'Hara explains, drawing on cultural anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse's study of social cohesion, collective practices such as rituals could foster cooperation and



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trust among the members of a community, enhancing their inner cohesion due to their participation in collective goals. In light of this perspective, monastic sponsorship and piety became ritual activities through which group cohesion and identification were enhanced and strengthened in Merovingian Gaul. Thus, members of the ruling class exhibited and bolstered their authority, legitimizing their leading role as divinely approved Christian rulers. In such a process, the boundaries between court and monastic spheres became blurred during the seventh century.

Barbarian leaders also adapted and further developed legal resources to deal with political factions and opposition. This is the case studied by Christian Stadermann (Chapter 7) regarding royal sanctions – e.g. exile, ban on episcopal consecrations, and prohibition of synodal activity – enacted by Visigothic rulers against the Catholic episcopate in Gaul. Drawing on a wide variety of documentation – historiographical and hagiographical sources, conciliar and imperial legislation, and epistolary literature – Stadermann outlines the political character of such sanctions, putting aside previous interpretations based on Euric's religious zeal and his alleged interest to 'Arianize' the Catholic population of the kingdom. Such measures, as Stadermann argues, were in fact intended to weaken the Church as an institution, to undermine political factions, to eliminate immediate threats, and to deal with conflicts of loyalty. However, integrative measures during the reign of Alaric II – e.g. allowing bishops to convene and attend synods – would also have been aimed at suppressing conflicts affecting the monarchy. Thus, oppositional strategies towards the Church, confrontation as well as recognition and integration, were aimed, as Stadermann points out, at strengthening social and political cohesion in two different political scenarios. In line with other contributions in this volume, the author provides insight into leadership formation within a changing context of competition and transformation of loyalties, networks, and social-political ties.

Late antique and early medieval elites forged and expressed their own conceptions and representations of the society in which they lived. They experimented with explanations of the relationship between heaven and earth, the spiritual and the secular, God and mankind. They also wondered about the prerogatives, responsibilities, and roles to be assumed by each member of the *ecclesia*: What was the part to be played by the monarchy, the aristocracy, the clergy or the people within the providential plan created by God? Such questions were often carried over to the conciliar scene, where the Visigothic and Frankish bishops were respectively discussing disciplinary, dogmatic, and also political issues. Societies and their ruling classes made an enormous effort to classify individuals and social



collectives, to exclude and marginalize all those who did not fit in and did not accept their principles of identity and traditions. Michael J. Kelly's contribution (Chapter 2) is an example of how discourses create identity by constructing – and formulating contrasts with – others who did not meet the hegemonic criteria of what it meant to be a member of the society, and, on the other hand, how such discourses also produce mechanisms of social control by classifying, including, and excluding individuals and social collectives. The question of human nature, studied by Kelly, brought the situation of the Jews – and minorities – to the table. Neither religious nor political leaders would have been unaware of this source of concern, which could be traced back to early Christian times. Theological writings, sermons, and homilies have depicted Jews as alleged enemies, as polluting and infectious forces that endangered the ideal Christian society. They were also labelled as subhuman, and associated with carnality, impurity, and corruption, being identified with animals and wicked, unfaithful creatures. By drawing on philosophical insights, Kelly explores this concern with human nature in Late Antiquity, with special attention to Visigothic councils, and demonstrates its connection to the prevalent logic of social control and surveillance. Up to seventh-century Hispania, Jews had retained their own rituals and traditions, defying disciplinary ecclesiastical norms, and represented a potential threat to Visigothic elites who sought to consolidate the unity of the kingdom. Strengthening a Christian identity – and political integration – went hand-in-hand with combatting the spread of beliefs regarded as erroneous and blasphemous. It was not only bishops who dealt with doctrinal and disciplinary issues concerning the Jews, but Visigothic kings such as Recceswinth, Erwig, and Egica also took the initiative and enacted measures that led to their civic degradation.²⁷ Thus, building a kingdom and consolidating an identity around Christian practices, values, and leaders was inseparable from marginalizing other identities and rejecting any individual or collective that would oppose the prevailing hegemonic normative systems. Defining and recognizing otherness was thus central to the construction and assertion of identities and leaderships, and to the cultivation of a world view of inclusion and exclusion.

Originally coined within the field of social sciences, the concept of 'social cohesion' has become extremely pertinent in late antique studies. As Dick

27 See Martin, 'La degradación cívica'.



Stanley explains, social cohesion refers to the ongoing process in which the shared values of a community are developed, as well as shared challenges and opportunities, which are based on a sense of hope, trust, and reciprocity.²⁸ The author claims that social cohesion is

the sum over a population of individuals' willingness to cooperate with each other without coercion in the complex set of social relations needed by individuals to complete their life courses. A socially cohesive society, then, is a population which has sufficient social cohesion to sustain that complex set of social relations beyond at least the average life span of individuals in the population.²⁹

Such willingness could be experienced in different contexts, which, as the author described, are usually perceived as difficult. For example, Nils Weidmann and Christoph Zürcher have demonstrated how an adverse context shaped by war could affect the internal cohesion of the members of small communities in Afghanistan.³⁰ Other social theorists, such as Jeffrey Reitz, assert that integration and social cohesion are in fact interrelated. In this regard, Reitz conceives social cohesion as the ability of a society to establish long-term objectives and to deploy the instruments to fulfil them. Hence, a cohesive society could act more efficiently than one that is not: in societies lacking cohesion, the members of the community or group fail to contribute to effective collective action.³¹ Finally, for Brian Heuser, social cohesion comprises both economic and social phenomena. He envisions social cohesion as a fundamental antecedent for wealth, which enables the members of a community to act and live in integration according to norms and values. For Heuser, these sets of values in turn contribute to the inner stability of such community, something that fosters its wealth development and guarantees the society's level of cohesion, given that economic life is profoundly entwined with social life.³² The author emphasizes that while social capital is founded on the development of trust among members of communities, groups, and organizations, social cohesion indicates the degree

28 Stanley, 'What Do We Know about Social Cohesion', pp. 7–9.

29 Stanley, 'What Do We Know about Social Cohesion', p. 9.

30 Weidmann and Zürcher, 'How Wartime Violence', pp. 2–3, 16.

31 Reitz, 'Assessing Multiculturalism', pp. 20–21.

32 Heuser, 'Ethics of Social Cohesion', pp. 8–9, 10–13. In the case of Social Capital, Heuser follows Heyneman and Fukuyama, to whom trust and reciprocity are some of the main elements that bind people together.



of inclination of said members to behave virtuously, as a requirement for the common good.

Within the field of history, the concept has been used particularly by the members of the Vienna School.³³ As Walter Pohl has demonstrated, the notion of social cohesion could be helpful in the analysis of communities and societies in order to explore the resolution of inner conflicts and the confrontation of difficult situations like the antagonism of a rival group or enemy, or a context of economic crisis. This is not to suggest, as Pohl also warned, that social cohesion implied a complete absence of conflicts or contradictions within late antique and early medieval societies. On the contrary, such elements played an important part in the development of strategies and responses in order to deal with changing contexts and conditions.³⁴ At this point, some of the questions raised at the beginning of this chapter reappear: What was the role of elites in the processes of creating social cohesion? What measures and resources did they deploy to achieve unity and why? Certainly, integration could be encouraged through a variety of devices and institutional procedures. As we have already discussed, several of the contributions to this volume explore mechanisms such as the distribution of land and the spoils of plunder amongst the members of the army and the distribution of goods and wealth within local communities. In other cases, cohesive bonds were nurtured through the creation or preservation of a particular identity and the development of signs of identification connected, for example, to ethnicity and religion.³⁵ Christianity, as we shall see in the following chapters, played a key role in the transformations and reconfiguration of ancient modes of reference and identification.³⁶

Identification and questions connected to identity in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages have received a great deal of attention from the

33 Major contributions on social cohesion in the Early Middle Ages have been developed in the context of the European Research Council Advanced Grant 'Social Cohesion, Identity and Religion in Europe, 400–1200', carried out at the Institut für Mittelalterforschung (ÖAW) and the University of Vienna. The results of the project will be available in the forthcoming *Social Cohesion and Its Limits*, edited by Walter Pohl and Andreas Fischer.

34 Pohl, 'Social Cohesion', pp. 23–24.

35 Pohl conceives ethnicity as a system of distinctions among analogous social groupings, which are also inclusive, and based on ethnonyms. Thus, ethnicity constitutes a means of endowing such groups with agency and meaning. See: Pohl, 'Introduction: Early Medieval Romanness', p. 29.

36 Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, pp. 16, 135.



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scholarly milieu in recent decades, especially from the Vienna School, and are usually concerned with the study of the *gentes barbarae* and the Migration Period.³⁷ While a complete literature overview is beyond the scope of these pages, it would remiss of us to neglect to mention Reinhard Wenskus, whose classic work *Stammesbildung und Verfassung* epitomizes the historiographical renovation dating from the second half of the twentieth century. Wenskus's theory on the origins of the so-called Germanic peoples explains how barbarian groups joined larger contingents, drawn by their prestige and reputation, a position founded on the preservation of a kernel of oral traditions, myths, and legends.³⁸ Especially noteworthy were Herwig Wolfram's reformulations, centred on the concept of ethnogenesis, which had an undeniable impact on late antique studies. As the author explains, three elements were particularly relevant in the formation of *peoples*. The first one was to carry out an important or legendary deed in the past, such as crossing a river, or defeating a powerful enemy. The second had to do with the change of cult. The third, finally, was the identification of a common and sworn enemy.³⁹ Wolfram went even further in an attempt to construct a categorization of the types of ethnogenesis.⁴⁰ Another important point in Wolfram's arguments is related to the implications and deep influence that the policies of the Late Roman Empire exerted on the inner composition and organization of the *barbarian gentes*.⁴¹

These groundbreaking contributions, though not without criticism,⁴² were crucial to anchoring the origins of the *barbarians* within the processes of

37 Pohl, *Die Völkerwanderung*; Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, pp. 14–16.

38 Wenskus, *Stammesbildung*, pp. 429–431.

39 Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, pp. 9, 12; Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and Its Germanic Peoples*, pp. 8–9.

40 Wolfram, 'Typologie des ethnogénèses'.

41 Wolfram, *Intitulatio*, pp. 35–36; Wolfram, 'Gotisches Königtum', pp. 26–27.

42 Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*, pp. 1–12. See also the critiques offered in Andrew Gillett's *On Barbarian Identity* that are focused on the use of the ethnogenesis concept and the challenges posed by late antique sources. Michael Kulikowski's critical response, for example, argues that the canonical approach to ethnogenesis as well as other variants – even if they acknowledge the distorting character of narratives – assumes that it is still possible to grasp the reality of the barbarians. This concern about the sources lies at the core of Kulikowski's approach. In fact, the attempts of the ethnogenesis theory to unravel the *interpretatio romana* are, following Kulikowski, quite fruitless. He emphatically considers sources as 'opaque barriers' that are ultimately open to different interpretations and addressed in conceptual frameworks that are foreign to them. Moreover, neither were the sources interested in the meaning of ethnicity or its manifestations. For further development, see Kulikowski, 'Nation versus Army'. Other criticisms of the Wenskus–Wolfram model are echoed in Alexander Murray's work. In examining Wenskus's paradigmatic work, focused on the interpretation of names and philological similarities, he points



identity manipulation. Research studies in this field were further shaped by the analysis of Fredrik Barth, who contested traditional views that ethnic identities were inherited, immutable, and fixed. Instead, he argued, such identities were in fact flexible, allowing individuals to change their identity according to particular interests and throughout their lives.⁴³ Identity, thus, was at the core of heated and complex debates that revealed how old dichotomies became epistemological obstacles to developing a better understanding of the multifaceted processes of cultural and social change that took place in the post-Roman world.⁴⁴ Separating identity from nationalistic and biologically reductive theories was indeed a major step, enabling a comprehensive process of rethinking categories and reframing late antique communities.⁴⁵ As Patrick Geary also suggested, ethnic identities may be conceived as situational constructs – malleable and arbitrary – that are susceptible to manipulation and appropriation in very different political and social contexts.⁴⁶

Subsequently, several studies addressing barbarian polities as well as the sources that describe them, pointed out the ideological content of legends and origin narratives,⁴⁷ which grew from an active work of re-elaboration and adaptation of different oral traditions, materials, and backgrounds. Walter Pohl continued and broadened this perspective, studying how late antique authors employed and selected signs of identity – such as language, clothing, weapons, and hairstyles – to label and distinguish groups from each other. In so doing, Pohl changes the question: it is not a matter of elaborating a fixed ethnic classification based on those criteria, but asking how such elements were employed, and when and why they became relevant.⁴⁸

Barbarian communities experienced a high degree of cultural transformation during Late Antiquity – through contacts with the Roman Empire, as

to a confusion between history and philology, which leads to a separation of ‘the philological dimension of language’ from its context. See Murray, ‘Reinhard Wenskus’, pp. 40, 58–59. Charles Bowlus also questions the suitability of the ethnogenesis concept for describing each and every group within the migration period, taking the examples of the Burgundians and the Bavarians. Not one of these, affirms Bowlus, could have fitted into Wolfram’s scheme, since there is no evidence of a primordial deed, nor a single declared enemy. See: Bowlus, ‘Ethnogenesis’, pp. 255–256.

43 Barth, *Ethnic Groups*, pp. 22–24. See also Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, pp. 30–32.

44 Pohl, ‘Introduction: Early Medieval Romanness’, pp. 6–7.

45 For an excellent survey of the development of ethnic nationalism during the nineteenth century, see Geary, *Myth of Nations*, pp. 6–7, 11–12.

46 Geary, ‘Ethnic Identity’, pp. 15–26.

47 Pohl, ‘Ethnicity, Theory, and Tradition’, p. 223.

48 Pohl, ‘Telling the Difference’, p. 19.



well as with other non-Roman political entities – and identities were exposed to constant changes.⁴⁹ The fact that late antique and early medieval sources ascribed certain features and customs to one particular *gens* did not necessarily mean that all individuals were alike or followed the same model, as many scholars have previously noted. There are certainly many facets to the concept of identity and its use requires a cautious approach. It may be understood in different ways – ‘as static or dynamic, as objective or subjective, as social or individual, as factual or as constructed’⁵⁰ – and its ideological implications should also be considered. In the changing political context of the late antique West, ethnic discourses and the construction of traditions based on cultural memory aimed at defining large groups of people and strengthening social cohesion by creating a sense of belonging and identification.⁵¹ In this regard, texts and sources from the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries were not simple reflections of realities or automatic repetitions of ancient traditions: in selecting, adapting, excluding, or including materials, choices were made that followed and expressed the interests, aims, personal motivations, and concerns of a particular time. It is worth noting that although texts played a significant part in the creation of meaning, they were not the only means of shaping social contexts and realities.⁵² Furthermore, adopting certain literary genres and vocabulary or performing certain practices and rituals also meant moulding and controlling the message, that is to say, the channels and mechanisms through which such messages were communicated. Finally, late antique and early medieval authors forged their own conceptions and representations about the society where they lived, preached, and fought. They sought and offered explanations about spiritual and secular matters, about the relationship between God and mankind. They attempted to make sense of the world they saw and experienced. And in so doing, they sought to ‘construct the past’, a process in which a great effort was made to reconcile contradictory opinions and sources.⁵³ Texts and histories concerned with past identities not only dealt with identities of the past and their present: such texts helped to create, reaffirm, modify, and legitimize; the narratives had the potential to shape communities and identities.⁵⁴

49 Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, pp. 131, 152.

50 Pohl, ‘Archaeology of Identity’, p. 10.

51 Pohl, ‘Telling the Difference’, p. 67; Pohl, ‘Historiography and Identity’, p. 12.

52 Pohl, ‘History in Fragments’, pp. 347–348.

53 Pohl, ‘History in Fragments’, p. 353.

54 Pohl, ‘Historiography and Identity’, pp. 11–12.



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This book raises questions that invite future research to explore the intricate set of transformations that took place during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, encouraging interdisciplinary dialogues and comparative perspectives. Ultimately, the aim of this text is twofold: first to contribute to ongoing discussions about the creation and negotiation of leaderships, identities, and social cohesion in a complex and changing post-Roman world, and, second, to further the scholarly debate on the continuity of Roman cultural structures and traditions into the Early Middle Ages. This last point is of particular significance, since not only has nationalism greatly contributed to the spread of misleading perspectives – projecting the early medieval world to as the immediate and direct origin of modern European states – but also mass media and popular culture continue to disseminate a prejudiced and stereotypical image of the Early Middle Ages, depicted as a dark, primitive, irrational, and extremely violent age. Much has been done to dismantle these preconceptions and visions, but echoes of them still remain.

As we shall see, the studies collected in this volume examine the intersections of leadership, social cohesion, and identity, revealing the development of particular social and political dynamics and the emergence of new patterns – and the reconfiguration of old ones – which we consider to be useful for rethinking late antique forms of power and community.

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