James M. Harland

Ethnic Identity and the Archaeology of the *aduentus Saxonum*

A Modern Framework and its Problems

Amsterdam
University
Press

Amsterdam
University
Press

Ethnic Identity and the Archaeology
of the *aduentus Saxonum*

The Early Medieval North Atlantic

This series provides a publishing platform for research on the history, cultures, and societies that laced the North Sea from the Migration Period at the twilight of the Roman Empire to the eleventh century. The point of departure for this series is the commitment to regarding the North Atlantic as a centre, rather than a periphery, thus connecting the histories of peoples and communities traditionally treated in isolation: Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians / Vikings, Celtic communities, Baltic communities, the Franks, etc. From this perspective new insights can be made into processes of transformation, economic and cultural exchange, the formation of identities, etc. It also allows for the inclusion of more distant cultures – such as Greenland, North America, and Russia – which are of increasing interest to scholars in this research context.

Series Editors
Marjolein Stern, Gent University
Charlene Eska, Virginia Tech
Julianna Grigg, Monash University

Ethnic Identity and the Archaeology of the *aduentus Saxonum*

A Modern Framework and its Problems

James M. Harland

Amsterdam
University
Press

For my parents.

Table of Contents

List of Tables and Figures

Acknowledgements

Guy Halsall was the scholarly mentor to whom this book owes its origins. Almost everything I know about the late antique world and mortuary archaeology I learned first from him, and he has shown his typical scholarly erudition, as well as guidance, effort, and friendship in directing me. This cannot have been easy. I was a somewhat erratic student, and I am especially grateful to him for his patience. Medievalists in the School of English at the University of Leicester such as Philip A. Shaw, Anne Marie D'Arcy, David Clark and Ben Parsons (who have sadly been made redundant and seen their programme closed on false pretexts, in a shameful decision by Leicester's administration) first taught me how to think about the early Middle Ages, and I also owe them a tremendous debt.

I also wish to thank the community of the Fachbereich Geschichtswissenschaft at the Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen for granting me the space in which to complete this book (on top of my other scholarly duties) during my time as an Akademischer Mitarbeiter. I especially wish to thank Steffen Patzold, Mischa Meier, Sebastian Schmidt-Hofner, Thomas Kohl, and Christina Brauner for their support, encouragement, and fresh scholarly insight, as well as for tolerating my blundering efforts with the German language. The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft provided the financial backing which enabled this, via the Center for Advanced Studies 2493 'Migration and Mobility in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages,' and the CRC 923 'Bedrohte Ordnungen.' Likewise, the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council provided the funding for the original doctoral research upon which this book is based, under Grant 1376284.

The numerous fellows who have passed through the Migration and Mobility project have also offered tremendous guidance and commentary and I am particularly grateful for the insights of Sam Cohen, Harry Mawdsley, Stefan Donecker, Guido Berndt, Roland Steinacher, Becca Grose, Simon Brelaud, Irene Bavuso and Annamaria Pazienza in this respect. Alex Wilson, Curtis Runstedler, Leila Nouioua, and Johanna Göcke have also offered staunch friendship during my time in Tübingen, and I am grateful to Alex, Harry, and Simon for successfully forcing me into a punishing but invigorating running regime. My fitness has never been better, and that has doubtless aided my ability to write and think.

Next, I wish to acknowledge the encouragement of the scholarly community and friends further afield. It is far from an easy time to be a junior researcher, and I have received guidance and assistance from an

international network of scholars on issues as varied as book manuscript guidelines, specific disciplinary questions, and jobs. Many, far too many to name, provided assistance in these areas via the medium of Facebook or Twitter, and aided the completion of this book. I should specifically mention Catherine Hills, Sam Lucy, Gareth Perry, and Douglas Carr, who all very kindly read and engaged with my commentaries on their work (in some cases helping me to avoid embarrassing errors!) or offered access to data, illustrations, and maps. Charlotte Rowley was instrumental in helping apply a new typology to the Spong Hill data. Erin Dailey, my editor at Amsterdam University Press, also deserves thanks for his patience regarding my slow delivery of this manuscript, as well as for professionally addressing numerous doubts and queries. My studentische Hilfskraft Antonia Lakner assisted greatly in proofreading, as did Amsterdam's copy-editor, Vicky Blud.

I owe particular thanks to Andrew Welton, Bonnie Effros, Lucy Sackville, and James Gerrard, who all read the entire manuscript at different stages, and helped turn this into a far, far better book than that which was first conceived. It would have been immeasurably poorer without their expert insight, corrections, and guidance. I bear full responsibility for any errors which may remain.

Finally, the love and support of my parents (and I am blessed with the good fortune to possess more than two) and of my family sustained and enabled the writing of this book. It is dedicated, ultimately, to them.

1   Introduction

This book is a historiographical investigation into the study of ethnic identity in the early medieval period. It focuses on the migration from northern Germania of the diverse groups whom our late Roman sources knew as 'Saxons' to Britain over the course of the 'long' fifth century,[1] which took place alongside the collapse of effective Roman rule over that diocese in the late fourth and early fifth centuries AD. In the book, I explore the means by which archaeologists from the late twentieth century to the present day have attempted to make use of the material remains of that period to infer the presence of ethnic identity, and the methods of those who have decried such attempts. The understanding that archaeologists have had of ethnicity is vastly variable, and in the following work I aim to outline the unconscious assumptions and explicit theoretical thought processes that these archaeologists make use of when applying this concept in their analyses. To achieve this, I examine the methodological and interpretative choices which archaeologists make, and the justifications made of these choices.

That such a work is needed has been recognised for quite a long time. Surveys of the discipline's development from its antiquarian roots are well established, and the interested reader has several options to choose from in that regard,[2] but, until very recently, there has been little in the way of historiographical engagement with contemporary work on the subject. In 2005, Howard Williams pointed out that studies on the origins of the field

> have identified the need for a critical appraisal of the socio-political context of the discipline in the light of racial theories and nationalism. However, to date there have been no sustained and detailed assessments that attempt to pull apart the theoretical agenda and biases of late antique

---

1   An event known to historians, after Bede, as the *aduentus Saxonum* ('arrival of the Saxons'). Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 1.15–16.

2   For these, refer to the references in Chapter 2.

---

and early medieval archaeologists, nor a consideration of how such biases are interpreted in academic and public contexts.[3]

Though Sam Lucy's and Howard Williams's crucial and groundbreaking work offers a coherent critical overview of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century approaches to this subject,[4] no such work has yet been produced for more recent archaeological scholarship, including that of Lucy herself. Some brief attempts have recently been made, normally in article form, to review what are increasingly regarded as the questionable discursive frameworks that still characterise this field,[5] and some minor skirmishes have resulted.[6] Yet there remains a lack of a sustained and detailed assessment of the field of early Anglo-Saxon archaeology,[7] addressing theoretical agendas, biases, and their contexts.

Previous work that critically interrogates and contextualises this subject has largely been done using inherited methodological tools, received either via post-processual archaeological theory, early medieval historical work on identity (especially that of the Toronto and Vienna schools),[8] or a combination of the two. In order to contextualise the field of study further, I compare the present state of research into early Anglo-Saxon archaeology with current

3   Howard Williams, "Rethinking Early Medieval Mortuary Archaeology," *Early Medieval Europe* 13, no. 2 (2005): 195–217, 197.
4   Sam Lucy, *The Early Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries of East Yorkshire: An Analysis and Reinterpretation*, BAR British Series 272 (London: Archaeopress, 1998); Sam Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000). See discussion in Chapter 2, below.
5   See, e.g., Philipp von Rummel, "The Fading Power of Images: Romans, Barbarians, and the Uses of a Dichotomy in Early Medieval Archaeology," in *Post-Roman Transitions: Christian and Barbarian Identities in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Walter Pohl and Gerda Heydemann (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 365–406; Guy Halsall, "Ethnicity and Early Medieval Cemeteries," *Arqueología y Territorio Medieval* 18 (2011): 15–27; Florin Curta, "Medieval Archaeology and Ethnicity: Where Are We?" *History Compass* 9, no. 7 (2011): 537–548.
6   For a few examples of the exchanges of fire, see Heinrich Härke, "Ethnicity, 'Race' and Migration in Mortuary Archaeology: An Attempt at a Short Answer," *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 14 (2007): 12–18; Guy Halsall, *Cemeteries and Society in Merovingian Gaul: Selected Studies in History and Archaeology, 1992–2009* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 49–88; Catherine Hills, "Anglo-Saxon Migration: Historical Fact or Mythical Fiction?" *Antiquity* 87 (2013): 1220–1222; Michel Kazanski and Patrick Périn, "Archéologie funéraire et ethnicité en gaule à l'époque mérovingienne (réponse à Guy Halsall)," in *Entangled Identities and Otherness in Late Antique and Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Jorge López Quiroga, Michel Kazanski, and Vujadin Ivanišević, BAR International Series 2852 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2017), 199–212.
7   By this, I refer solely to the discipline which, for good or ill, currently bears this name. The problems with the term 'Anglo-Saxon' are discussed later in this chapter.
8   On which, see Andrew Gillett, ed., *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), and more discussion, below.

scholarly understanding of ethnic identity, as articulated in the disciplines primarily focused on the study of this phenomenon, anthropology and sociology. I contend that a lack of sufficient attention to the most recent trends in these fields has produced work which—through drawing upon understandings of identity largely framed via archaeological theory—offers answers that are empirically unverifiable and epistemologically questionable. This is as much the case for studies that are critical of the ethnic paradigm in archaeological scholarship as for those that are in its favour.

In the following chapters, I argue that because of this problem of empirical verification, one which originates in the philosophical quandary of how to bridge the divide between subjectivity and objectivity, an alternative philosophical framework is necessary for studying identity in early medieval Britain. I draw upon the work of poststructuralist philosophers to propose such a framework. I make use of these philosophers not simply because I believe their ontological position to be correct, but because the means by which they demonstrate this position is through rigorous empirical and critical engagement with the dominant frameworks through which philosophers of identity have sought to understand objective reality, and the human subject's engagement with that objective reality. This provides a powerful set of critical tools for outlining the contradictions, flaws, and interpretative dead ends that all who attempt to assert absolute truths rely upon. I use those tools to highlight that such contradictions, flaws, and interpretative dead ends are as prevalent in the study of identity in the early medieval period as in any other act of intellectual inquiry.

Although committed to empirical engagement with archaeological material, the argument which follows therefore rejects positivist approaches to archaeological interpretation. It has become commonplace to see it claimed in popular media that certain, previously-held 'facts' about the migration of people from northern Germany to Britain in late antiquity have been proven—or refuted—by the introduction of new empirical methods, unlocking, at last, the 'true' answer to questions about the earliest origins of English history.[9] Although this is often the result of inaccurate reporting, these media often draw upon rigorous academic studies of the phenomena to which these questions are applied. These studies are often no less guilty of assuming that such positivist methods are how these questions can be answered. I aim to demonstrate that this is an epistemological impossibility, one derived from the baseless assumption that absolute narratological truth is an achievable end goal.

9   For an especially egregious recent example, see Norman Hammond, "England's Ancient Growth Spurt," *The Times*, 11 February 2017.

Historical Approaches to the *aduentus Saxonum*

All who come to the study the migration to Britain of those who have, to date, been labelled the 'Anglo-Saxons' are forced to grapple with the dearth of available historical evidence, and approaches to this evidence have altered dramatically even within the last two decades. The little written source material that exists has been long studied, and the vast majority of this material postdates by a considerable margin the events it purports to describe. Its historiography, too, has been well covered, so this account can be brief.[10] An earlier generation of historians accepted much of its content, such as the seemingly detailed accounts of Anglo-Saxon invasion and conquest offered by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, at face value.[11] A more critical generation of historians, influenced by—among other things—anthropological and sociological theory, as well as poststructuralist literary criticism, have taken this thoroughly to task, highlighting that the older approaches could often display considerable naivety in their understanding of the genre conventions, textual purpose, and other contexts crucial to properly understanding these sources. These scholars have created a new body of source criticism that now renders it impossible for the informed and careful reader to simply take the content of these sources at face value.[12]

   The Roman Empire underwent several crises from the late fourth through the early fifth centuries, which would eventually lead to the *de facto* political collapse of the Western Roman Empire by the end of the fifth century. In popular media (and in some popular historical works) this is usually represented as a somewhat straightforward affair involving barbarian mass migration as the primary cause of the Empire's collapse. Such ideas have long been rejected by a wide body of scholarship, and though the primary cause of the Empire's collapse remains subject to heated debate, it is best to regard this as a drawn-out, complicated socio-political process which can be attributed to no single factor, though internal struggles for power and

---

10   For a recent statement see Guy Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur: Facts & Fictions of the Dark Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

11   See, for example, the approaches of Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1943) and John Morris, *The Age of Arthur* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973).

12   There is an enormous potential bibliography, but for the most immediate refutations of more naive readings see David N. Dumville, "Sub-Roman Britain—History and Legend," *History* 62 (1977): 173–192, and James Campbell, "The Age of Arthur," in *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1986), 121–130. An overview can be found in Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur*, 51–86.

a growing sense of distance from the centre for elites in the peripheries of an increasingly militarised Empire can be seen as particularly decisive.[13]

The excessive dominance of simplistic narratives is no less the case for Britain. In museum exhibitions and popular works one still regularly finds references being made to Rome allegedly 'withdrawing the legions' in AD 410 to defend an increasingly beleaguered Empire. Such ideas have very little basis in a proper understanding of the source material (in this instance, a throwaway reference in a poem in praise of an emperor whose effective rule over Britain had arguably long since ceased).[14] Much of what we consider to be 'Roman' about Roman Britain (high-status villa culture, highly urbanised towns, etc.) had already undergone significant decline during the fourth century.[15] Britain, like many peripheral provinces, also appears to have had an increasing sense of insufficient attention from the central imperial government, which prompted two military commanders stationed in Britain to launch attempted usurpations of the Western Roman Empire: Magnus Maximus in 388, and Constantine 'III' in 407. These events, and the subsequent failure of the Western Roman Empire to re-establish control over the province, bear ultimate responsibility for the end of Roman Britain, due to the failure of the system of payment of troops and the taxation mechanisms which aided it, upon which Britain's fragile market economy depended.[16] What exactly this meant for the c. 90% of the population involved in agricultural labour, however, remains a matter for considerable debate.[17]

It is at this juncture that we encounter the traditional starting point for the 'origins of the English.' In the aftermath of the social crisis that this series of events prompted, the British authorities invited peoples known to

---

13   Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Michael Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars: From the Third Century to Alaric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Michael Kulikowski, *Imperial Tragedy: From Constantine's Empire to the Destruction of Roman Italy, AD 363–568* (London: Profile Books, 2019); Mischa Meier, *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung: Europa, Asien und Afrika vom 3. bis zum 8. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2019).

14   Claudian, *Carmina*, ed. and trans. Maurice Platnauer (London: Heinemann, 1922), 15.414–429.

15   Richard Reece, "Town and Country: The End of Roman Britain," *World Archaeology* 12, no. 1 (1980); Simon Esmonde Cleary, *The Ending of Roman Britain* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1989), 138–161; James Gerrard, *The Ruin of Roman Britain: An Archaeological Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15–117.

16   Esmonde Cleary, *The Ending of Roman Britain*; Gerrard, *The Ruin of Roman Britain*; Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur*.

17   For a recent statement on the range of available views, see Gerrard, *The Ruin of Roman Britain*.

Roman sources as 'Saxons' to settle in Britain, to combat Pictish and Irish incursions. Our source materials for this sequence of events are scarce. In addition to fragments of material found in entries by late Roman chroniclers and modern philological work done on toponyms,[18] the bulk of what we possess in the way of historical narrative comes almost entirely from two complete sources, or three at a stretch, none of which are straightforward to deal with. The first of these is a near-contemporary, a member of the clergy known to modernity simply as 'Gildas.' His work, *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* ('On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain'), is variably dated to between the late fifth century and the mid-sixth century.[19] Though the meat of the text is a polemical section attacking Gildas's contemporaries, it begins with a historical description of the Britons' prior sins and eventual ruin at the hands of the Saxons.[20] Due to apparently detailed discussion of the events that took place after the effective collapse of imperial authority in Britain, it has long been used as a fundamental source, in the absence of other options, for addressing all questions about the period.[21] Yet Gildas is far from a straightforward source for such purposes. His text is a moralising tract, in which Gildas condemns the rulers and (mainly) priests of the day, in the guise of an Old Testament prophet. It has been long recognised that the use of the *De Excidio* for constructing straightforward narrative history is an impossible task, and no attempt to do so shall be made here. Useful information can be pulled from Gildas about the *aduentus Saxonum*, but only with extreme caution. The narrative outlined by Gildas belies a far more complex and fluid situation, and it is quite possible that his apparently

---

18   For a summary, see Mark Vessey, "407 and All That: Insular Late Roman Historiography and the Literary-Historical Turn," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2, no. 1 (2009): 30–48.

19   For the state of dating, see Howard Wiseman, "The Derivation of the Date of the Badon Entry in the *Annales Cambriae* from Bede and Gildas," *Parergon* 17 (2000): 1–10, which argues that Gildas's language is sufficiently impenetrable that any date from the late fifth to early sixth centuries is possible.

20   Gildas, *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, ed. Theodore Mommsen, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Auctores Antiquissimi* 13 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1898), 4–26.

21   Michael Lapidge and David Dumville, eds., *Gildas: New Approaches* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1984); Nicholas J. Higham, *The English Conquest: Gildas and Britain in the Fifth Century* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1994); Ian N. Wood, "Before and After the Migration to Britain," in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century. An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. John Hines (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), 41–55; Alex Woolf, "The Britons: From Romans to Barbarians," in *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship Between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, ed. Hans-Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut, and Walter Pohl (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 345–380; Karen George, *Gildas's de Excidio Britonum and the Early British Church* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009); Thomas O'Loughlin, *Gildas and the Scriptures: Observing the World Through a Biblical Lens* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012).

rigid depiction of ethnic boundaries align with particular exegetical and eschatological goals drawing upon normative influences shaped by Gildas's background, steeped in normative classical Roman values.[22]

The second source is a text from the early eighth century, produced by Bede, who was based at the dual monastic foundation of Monkwearmouth–Jarrow in what was then the Kingdom of Northumbria. In his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* ('Ecclesiastical History of the English People'), Bede is the first to inform us that the new arrivals to Britain from *Germania* arrived in three distinct tribes, *Angli*, *Saxones*, and *Iuti*, and it is this information upon which rest most early archaeological attempts to identify and delineate the cultural boundaries of early 'Anglo-Saxon' migrants.[23] This seemingly straightforward narrative is actually contradicted by Bede himself, who in a later chapter of his text provides an alternative list of the tribal grouping of the new arrivals.[24] All attempts to study the putative tribal formations that Bede describes before the migration of these arrivals rely on a combination of philological reconstruction, guesswork, and, inevitably, the application of culture historical approaches to the archaeological record.[25] Sometimes elaborate theoretical frameworks (such as *Traditionskern* ethnogenesis theory)[26] have been relied upon to make such reconstructions.[27]

This point is particularly noteworthy because our knowledge of who precisely the Saxons were in the period before and during their migration to Britain is really quite lacking, a situation which results from the similar dearth of knowledge in our Roman sources. From what we can ascertain, 'Saxon' appears to have been a general term used by Roman authors to describe seafaring inhabitants of the lower Rhine from the third to fifth centuries. There appears to have been a degree of confusion over their places of habitation, and *Saxones* were sometimes conflated with Franks (*Franci*) in the broader Roman ethnographic imaginary.[28] In truth, it seems likely that

22   James M. Harland, "Rethinking Ethnicity and 'Otherness' in Early Anglo-Saxon England," *Medieval Worlds* 5 (2017): 113–142.

23   Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, I.15.

24   Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, V.9; Wood, "Before and After the Migration to Britain," 41.

25   For a classic example of such a study see John Hines, *The Scandinavian Character of Anglian England in the Pre-Viking Period*, BAR British Series 124 (Oxford: BAR, 1984).

26   See discussion later in this chapter.

27   For summaries of the problems see Barbara Yorke, "Fact or Fiction? The Written Evidence for the Fifth and Sixth Centuries AD," *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 6 (1993): 45–50; Wood, "Before and After the Migration to Britain."

28   Ian N. Wood, "The Channel from the 4th to the 7th Centuries AD," in *Maritime Celts, Frisians and Saxons*, ed. Seán McGrail (London: Council for British Archaeology, 1990), 93–97; Robert Flierman, *Saxon Identities, AD 150–900* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 43–45.

the small social groups which inhabited the lower Rhine in these centuries did not have a solidified ethnic self-consciousness, and almost certainly had no sense of their putative identity as fellow Germani alongside such groups as the Franks or Alamanni. The reason for this is that the notion of the Germani as an overarching umbrella of cultural identification was almost entirely a construction of the Roman ethnographic imagination, imposed upon the peoples they examined and later adopted by Romantic nationalists in the modern period.[29]

The final text is a composite collection of multiple chronicles, annals, and other texts, which are collectively known as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, generally regarded as taking shape in its earliest form as the so-called 'Common Stock' assembled at the West Saxon court of Alfred the Great in the later ninth century.[30] The *Chronicle* offers an account that appears to describe the progress of Anglo-Saxon settlement in detail, including the migrations, battles and conquests of named figures of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes (such as 'Port,' 'Hengest,' or 'Wihtgar') responsible for the founda- tion of kingdoms and dynasties.[31] This account is now generally regarded as being largely fictitious, and Barbara Yorke several years ago noted that it is packed with the sorts of literary tropes and 'scarcely credible personas' that make it unlikely to offer a useful account of the *aduentus Saxonum*. Instead, this text, along with the genealogies that it contains of various royal dynasties (most notably that of the kings of Wessex) is best regarded as a contemporary political document that can offer much insight about notions of political legitimacy, attitudes to the past, and culture in the Kingdom of Wessex from the ninth century onwards.[32]

Most who face these difficulties turn to the archaeological record in hope of finding clearer answers, but another popular approach has been to refer to the more secure record for the political history of seventh-century Britain (again derived from Bede) in relation to documents such as the *Tribal Hidage*. These are often purported to offer a fragmentary snapshot of social

---

29   See discussion on the 'Germanic,' below.

30   Alice Jorgensen, "Introduction: Reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," in *Reading the Anglo- Saxon Chronicle: Language, Literature, History*, ed. Alice Jorgensen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 1–28; Nicholas Brooks, "Why Is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle About Kings?" *Anglo-Saxon England* 39 (2011): 43–70.

31   Michael J. Swanton, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996).

32   Yorke, "Fact or Fiction?" On the genealogies see, especially, David N. Dumville, "The Anglian Collection of Royal Genealogies and Regnal Lists," *Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (1976): 23–50. and David N. Dumville, "Kingship, Genealogies and Regnal Lists," ed. Sawyer Peter H. and Ian N. Wood (1979): 72–104.

and political conditions in Britain during the so-called 'Migration Period,' and are used to offer models reconstructing the gradual formation of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of the seventh century out of what are presumed to be collection of myriad smaller tribal polities.[33] This approach, too is far from unproblematic.[34] There is not the space to unpack these widely acknowledged difficulties here; the crucial point to observe is that all attempts to construct early 'Anglo-Saxon ethnic', social, and political structures rely on inferences and conjecture made from an extremely fragmentary body of source materials. The study of the archaeological material is inseparable from these problems, because it is the guiding framework of Bede and those who have followed him that has ultimately governed the formation of the discipline of Anglo-Saxon archaeology.

We will see later that many of the theoretical frameworks scholars have attempted to draw upon to reconstruct the early details of Anglo-Saxon narrative history have also been applied to interpretation of the material culture that putatively evidences this history. All applications of this narrative to the material culture evidence, as we will see, depend on interpretative leaps made from a body of assumptions that are themselves fraught with historiographical difficulty. This is the case both in the more traditional approaches of Culture History and in the approaches which, drawing upon a constructivist framework, are critical of it, and which are simply an opposite reaction to the same set of interpretative frameworks. To be clear, this book does not deny the possible applicability of the questions these written sources have offered to the interpretation of the archaeological record; it simply queries the methodological possibility of obtaining fruitful answers to these questions for reasons of epistemology. I instead propose some alternative interpretative avenues, less fraught with either historiographical or methodological difficulty, which may be more fruitfully pursued.

It is also for this reason that the poststructuralist approaches alluded to above, and discussed in much greater detail in Chapter 3, are essential to my argument. Current studies of the archaeological material rely upon

---

33   See the collected articles in Stephen Bassett, ed., *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1989).

34   For the difficulties with this approach see discussion in Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur*, 118–120. Harrington and Welch's 'Beyond the Tribal Hidage' project neatly unpacks some of these issues, but relies upon culture-historical assumptions about ethnic identity that are dealt with later in the book. Sue Harrington and Martin Welch, *The Early Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms of Southern Britain AD 450-650: Beneath the Tribal Hidage* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014), 5–8. See below, 85–86.

a historiographical understanding of ancient ethnic groups based upon particular philosophical approaches to the study of identity. These approaches can vary from outright culture historical (assuming the existence of temporally and geospatially stable entities, often related through 'blood' or 'race') to the more subtle and constructivist, sometimes drawing upon sociological frameworks such as those of Pierre Bourdieu or Anthony Giddens. All nevertheless hinge upon the assumption that identity consists of stable categories, which can be identified in the historical and archaeological record through empirical observation.[35] Poststructuralism, and its particular approach to the philosophy of being ('differential ontology'), offers both a toolkit for demonstrating the logical inconsistencies present in such putative acts of empirical demonstration, and an ontological understanding of identity that enables one to circumvent such inconsistencies. This does not mean 'refuting' that which the documentary record 'tells' us. To understand that record, after all, is rather more complex than simply treating the source material as a compendium of narrative events and historical figures. Rather, we can identify the methodological stumbling blocks posed by any attempts to reconcile the narratives told by our documentary and our archaeological sources, offering alternative questions to be asked of these sources on this basis. This approach draws upon Halsall's appeal to avoid casual cross-disciplinary 'borrowings,' recognising the different categories of data that archaeological and historical interpretation use, and bringing them into comparison only at the most sophisticated levels of interpretation.[36]

A Note on Terminology

Several terms that are ubiquitous in scholarship but by no means uncontentious are used frequently. For the sake of clarity and precision, I offer here some definition of these terms.

---

35   See discussion, e.g., of the 'Germanic' in the subsequent section of this chapter, and the detailed discussion in Chapter 2.

36   I.e., those high up 'Hawkes's Ladder.' C. F. C Hawkes, "Archaeological Theory and Method: Some Suggestions from the Old World," *American Anthropologist* 56 (1954): 155–168; Guy Halsall, "Archaeology and Historiography," in *Cemeteries and Society in Merovingian Gaul: Selected Studies in History and Archaeology, 1992-2009*, by Guy Halsall (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 44–48; Guy Halsall, "Commentary One: Archaeology and Its Discontents," in *Cemeteries and Society in Merovingian Gaul: Selected Studies in History and Archaeology, 1992–2009*, by Guy Halsall (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 72–88.

'Ethnicity'

Definitional disputes over the concept of 'ethnicity' are so central to my argument that any attempt to outline the concept here would be unhelpful. Chapter 2 charts these disputes at length and provides a full workable understanding of the concept in its most contemporary guises. Still, a brief definitional statement may be helpful, and for this purpose I turn to Andreas Wimmer who, after Weber, defines ethnicity as

> a subjectively felt belonging to a group that is distinguished by a shared culture and by common ancestry. This belief in shared culture and ancestry rests on cultural practices perceived as 'typical' for the community, or on myths of a common historical origin, or on phenotypical similarities indicating common descent.[37]

'Roman'

At face value, 'Romanness' appears a straightforward term. After all, this book concerns the transformation of a diocese of the Western Roman Empire, a polity defined largely by its possession of this quality of 'Romanness,' and an ideological association, especially, with the city of Rome. Roman Britain eventually came to an end, and one might therefore assume that at some point, 'the Romans' ceased to be found there. Sadly, things are not quite so simple. Romanness, like most such categories, was never static and this is especially the case in late antiquity, which witnessed shifting understandings of the concept, especially after the extension of citizenship to all of the Empire's inhabitants in AD 212 under the *Constitutio Antoniniana*. Part of the difficulty in defining the concept of Romanness lies in its construction, at points where the Empire's survival was secure, through identification (and thus exclusion) of that which it was not: barbarous, effeminate, irrational, and so on. Such criteria are always subjective; contemporaries of the late Roman period were often conflicted over who did or did not 'legitimately' qualify as 'Roman,' and some of these conflicts are explored in Chapters 6 and 7 in particular.

Between the fourth and sixth centuries, substantial political turbulence in, and the eventual collapse of, the Western Roman Empire saw the concept

---

37   Andreas Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

of Romanness undergo dramatic shifts.[38] As Pohl notes, it is not simply enough to identify those who felt *themselves* to be Roman, nor will the universalising concept of classical Romanness suffice for our purpose.[39] For now, a heuristically useful definition is that 'Romanness' refers to the quality of being in some way associated with Rome or the Roman Empire. This need not mean the Empire as an *actually existing* polity, but can also refer to 'the Roman' as an idealised abstract concept, given the centrality of *imperium romanum* (literally 'Roman power') to expressions of authority both in and beyond the Roman frontiers in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.[40] I sometimes use the word *romanitas* to refer to the state of something being 'Roman' or having 'Roman' qualities. The word is not a common one in our period of discussion but is widely used as shorthand in scholarship.

A crucial proposition which underpins my argument is that the actual existence of Roman ideology and its various manifestations (artistic, political, and literary) can be empirically demonstrated from our source material due to the survival of written sources. It is for this reason that I find it a less contentious term, in all its complexity, than the conceptual category often raised as its antagonistic opposite, the 'Germanic.'

'Germanic'

The 'Germanic' is a concept laden with political, ethnic, cultural, and geographical resonances. These are complex, entangled and often controversial. Because of the crucial role challenging this concept plays in my argument (as well as the concept's centrality to the study of the early Middle Ages more generally), it is discussed here at some length.

In late antique and early medieval scholarship, the 'Germanic' has widely been rejected as a useful explanatory category to describe various phenomena.[41] Yet its usage persists, and it is thus necessary to briefly discuss the problems with the concept.[42] It is difficult to know where to begin. In some respects, the presumed existence of a 'pan-Germanic' cultural

38   Walter Pohl, "Romanness: A Multiple Identity and Its Changes," *Early Medieval Europe* 22, no. 4 (2014): 406–418.
39   Ibid., 409.
40   Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations.*
41   See discussion below.
42   Fuller discussion is made in James M. Harland and Matthias Friedrich, "Introduction: The 'Germanic' and its Discontents," in *Interrogating the "Germanic": A Category and Its Use in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Matthias Friedrich and James M. Harland (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2020), 1–18.

identity is inextricably bound up with the development of Medieval Studies as a discipline in the nineteenth century, as it was partly the desire to shape a foundational narrative of 'Germanic antiquity' (*germanische Altertum-skunde*) that led to the energetic editing and collation of medieval texts, compilation of encyclopaedic volumes, development of 'scientific' historical methodologies, burgeoning excavation of early medieval cemeteries, and the antiquarian study of their artefacts, which so characterised this period. This was fuelled especially by the nationalist project of German unification under Bismarck (though it had earlier roots in the formative stages of enlighten-ment Romanticism in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and especially early nineteenth centuries), and then the disastrous ethnonationalist ideologies of the early twentieth century. Discussion on this subject could be (and is) vast. To note a few brief outcomes of these trends, they resulted in such formative textual projects as the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* and the *Reallexicon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*.[43] In archaeology, too, the extent of the interrelation of these discourses with contemporary nationalist ideolo-gies is enormous, but an obvious example would be Heinrich Himmler's foundation (in Germany under the Third Reich) of the *SS Ahnenerbe*, an archaeological research organisation intended to capture, collate, and study items from German 'Volk' antiquity, and which launched its expeditions sometimes only shortly after Wehrmacht Panzers had rolled through the lands whose invasion and ethnic cleansing these artefacts were purported to justify.[44] Such concerns also had notable effects on the development of English historiography and archaeology, especially in the early twentieth century under the influence of pseudoscientific understandings of 'race'.[45]

---

43   Ian N. Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Horst Furhmann, *Sind eben alles Menschen gewesen. Gelehrtenleben im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert, dargestellt am Beispiel der Monumenta Germaniae Historica und ihrer Mitarbeiter* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1996); Agnès Graceffa, *Les historiens et la question franque. Le peuplement franc et les Mérovingiens dans l'historiographie française et allemande des XIXe–XXe siècles* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009).

44   Wood, *Modern Origins*; Guy Halsall, "Two Worlds Become One: A 'Counter-Intuitive' View of the Roman Empire and 'Germanic' Migration," *German History* 32, no. 4 (2014): 515–532, 516. On the wider interrelation of these discursive contexts with ideologies of Romantic nationalism in archaeology see, e.g., Hubert Fehr, "*Volkstum* as Paradigm: Germanic People and Gallo-Romans in Early Medieval Archaeology Since the 1930s," in *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Andrew Gillett (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 177–200; Howard Williams, "'Burnt Germans': Alemannic Graves and the Origins of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology," in *Zweiundvierzig. Festschrift für Michael Gebühr zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Stefan Burmeister, Heidrun Derks, and Jasper von Richthofen (Rahden, Westf.: Leidorf, 2007), 229–238; Bonnie Effros, *Uncovering the Germanic Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

45   Williams, "'Burnt Germans'"; Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages*, 199–222.

The idea that there existed a coherent 'Germanic' cultural *ethos*, via which the disparate languages, actions, cultural products, cosmologies, social structures, and political formations of putative 'Germanicness' could be both described and explained, has been a fundamental product of this nationalist context. To slightly oversimplify, the 'Germanic' world is held by those who follow this view to have been a coherent cultural system, functioning as a counterweight against, and an antagonistic binary to, the Roman world which it eventually overran and consumed, in its place laying down its own distinct *regna* with its own, 'unique' Germanic laws, costume traits, and social structures.

Yet this conceptual framework is entirely lacking in *prima facie* empirical basis. A crucial challenge to it in historiography has been the work of Walter Goffart of the University of Toronto, who since the mid-twentieth century has worked to demolish the elaborate, but entirely baseless, argumentative structures that generations of late antique and early medieval historians and archaeologists have conjured almost from air. Goffart and other scholars of the 'Toronto School' have, through careful, attentive historicisation of the activities of the barbarian groups purported to share this unity, and the contexts of the sources alleged to preserve traces of their authentic myths, highlighted the total lack of any empirical basis for the assertion that so-called 'Germanic' peoples recognised their putative cultural unity and concomitant common interest in late antiquity.[46] Debate about this point has raged without end in recent decades and it would take up far too much space to rehearse this debate fully here. To summarise in brief, the core clash was fought in the 1990s and 2000s between the 'Toronto' and 'Vienna' schools of early medieval ethnicity. The Toronto narrative developed as a response by Goffart and his students to what they perceived to be lack of critical methodological reflection by proponents of *Traditionskern* Ethnogenesis Theory[47] (originally developed by Reinhard Wenskus but which came to particular prominence under Herwig Wolfram and his students and associates), now known as the 'Vienna School.'[48] In its earlier guises, this

46   See, especially, Walter Goffart, "The Theme of '*the* Barbarian Invasions'," in *Das Reich und die Barbaren*, ed. Evangelos K. Chryos and Andreas Schwarcs (Vienna: Bölau, 1989), 87–108; Walter Goffart, "Two Notes on Germanic Antiquity Today," *Traditio* 50 (1995): 9–30; Walter Goffart, "Does the Distant Past Impinge on the Invasion Age Germans?" in *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Andrew Gillett (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 21–38. See also the other contributions to Gillett, *On Barbarian Identity*.

47   As it is popularly known, though Wenskus himself never used the phrase.

48   Reinhard Wenskus, *Stammesbildungund Verfassung: Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen Gentes* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1961); Herwig Wolfram, *Geschichte der Goten, von den Anfängen bis*

was a form of ethnic constructivism, but one that was ultimately predicated in the assumed existence of a broader, pan-Germanic cultural *ethos*, albeit divorced from racial and genetic essentialism, which held that an elite preserved a core of tradition (*Traditionskern*) based upon myths of origin, names of gods, and suchlike, which formed the basis for the formation of ethnic groups constructed out of peoples of diverse origins.[49]

Substantial scholarship has been devoted to critiquing the concept of 'Germanic' cultural identity, but little in the way of substantive response to these criticisms is offered by those who remain wedded to it, who instead treat it simply as an axiom.[50] Yet numerous studies have grappled with the various aspects of the early medieval record held to embody authentic

---

zur Mitte des Sechsten Jahrhunderts: Entwurf einer Historischen Ethnographie (Munich: Beck, 1979); Walter Pohl, "Introduction," in *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of the Ethnic Communities, 300–800*, ed. Walter Pohl and Helmut Reimitz (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 1–15; Gillett, *On Barbarian Identity*; Andrew Gillett, "Ethnogenesis: A Contested Model of Early Medieval Europe," *History Compass* 4, no. 2 (2006): 241–260. For discussion see Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations,* 14–19, 457–470 and Meier, *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung*, 61–74.

49   Gillett, "Ethnogenesis," 244–246.

50   A few recent examples will suffice. In historiography, the word is liberally used as a legitimate diagnostic category in many works, but a recent example would be Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). In archaeology, numerous examples are available toward the latter end of Chapter 3, but clear recent examples are John Hines, "The Origins of East Anglia in a North Sea Zone," in *East Anglia and Its North Sea World in the Middle Ages*, ed. D. Bates and R. Liddiard (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2013), 42–43; and Catherine Hills, "The Anglo-Saxon Migration: An Archaeological Case Study of Disruption," in *Migrations and Disruptions: Toward a Unifying Theory of Ancient and Contemporary Migrations*, ed. Brenda J. Baker and Takeyuki Tsuda (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2015), 33–51, 45. In stylistic interpretation, Charlotte Behr, "The Origins of Kingship in Early Medieval Kent," *Early Medieval Europe* 9, no. 1 (2000): 27; Alexandra Pesch, *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit: Thema und Variation* (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2007), 378; Alexandra Pesch, "Facing Faces: The Head Motif in Migration-Period Archaeology," *Medieval Archaeology* 61 (2017): 41–68. The assumption that Germanic speakers are equivalent to a coherent Germanic 'people' may be found in works as recent as Bryan Ward-Perkins, "Why Did the Anglo-Saxons Not Become More British?" *English Historical Review* 115, no. 462 (2000): 513–533. An excellent example of a linguist who avoids such assumptions is Alaric Hall, "The Instability of Place-Names in Anglo-Saxon England and Early Medieval Wales, and the Loss of Roman Toponymy," in *Sense of Place in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Richard Jones and Sarah Semple (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2012), 101–129.

The Gillett volume *On Barbarian Identity* aims most of its ire at Wenskus's student, Wolfram, and Wolfram's student, Pohl. Yet Pohl's subsequent work on medieval ethnicity is in fact far more subtle than this criticism—which could be more reasonably targeted at some of the scholars just listed—suggests. Walter Pohl, "Ethnicity, Theory, and Tradition: A Response," in *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Andrew Gillett (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 221–240.

remnants, preserved from before the *Völkerwanderung*, of the protohistoric 'Germanic' past, and in all almost all cases these are found to be lacking.

The utility of the 'Germanic' as an interpretative framework has been questioned in application to almost all available forms of evidential material. The putatively 'Germanic' aspects of post-Roman barbarian law might well derive from provincial Roman law.[51] In the realm of linguistics, the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis is sometimes erroneously applied to argue that linguistic similarity produces contemporarily recognised cultural uniformity.[52] More recent work on the interrelation of the structures of 'Germanic' heroic poetry with the morphology and phonology of the 'Germanic' languages offers subtler interpretations of how these phenomena might relate, without needing to assume there was a contemporarily perceived unified cultural *ethos*.[53] In terms of material culture, the empirical basis for such assertions is handled at length in Chapter 5, but it suffices here to mention that many allegedly empirically 'proven' instances of material culture bearing something 'Germanic' in its character rely entirely upon assumptions derived from interpretations of the linguistic, legal, and documentary evidence.[54] The degree to which one remains wedded to assumptions of a pan-Germanic cultural *ethos* is often closely related to one's historiographical understanding of the 'end' of the Western Roman Empire.[55]

There is almost no evidence that the disparate social groups who existed along the Baltic and the North Sea coasts, in Germany, across the Danube, and in Scandinavia, consciously identified with one another in the late Roman and early medieval periods.[56] To assert that they did so is to impose elaborate sociological constructs upon flimsy and scant traces of evidence, sometimes relying upon the linking of late antique texts with

51   Paul S. Barnwell, "Emperors, Jurists and Kings: Law and Custom in the Late Roman and Early Medieval West," *Past & Present* 168 (2000): 6–29.

52   Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 23.

53   Cătălin Țăranu, "Who Was the Original Dragon-Slayer of the Nibelung Cycle?" *Viator* 46, no. 2 (2015): 23–40; Nelson Goering, "(Proto-)Germanic Alliterative Verse: Linguistic Limits on a Cultural Phenomenon," in *Interrogating the "Germanic": A Category and Its Use in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Matthias Friedrich and James M. Harland (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 241–250.

54   For fuller discussion, see, e.g., von Rummel, "The Fading Power of Images," 378–393.

55   For a summary see Guy Halsall, "Movers and Shakers: The Barbarians and the Fall of Rome," *Early Medieval Europe* 9 (1999): 131–145. For a sense of the range of historiographical dispute Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*; Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*.

56   Walter Pohl, *Die Germanen*, 2nd ed., Enzyklopädie Deutscher Geschichte 57 (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2004), 50–51.

Roman ethnographic works four centuries younger,[57] or 'pagan' Icelandic texts preserved in a Christianising context almost six centuries later.[58] In historical scholarship of the late medieval, early modern, or modern periods such an approach would be rightly derided as ludicrous.[59] In some instances the very inclusion of some of these peoples under the rubric *Germani* is entirely a nineteenth-century imposition, 'correcting' the 'inaccurate' Roman ethnographers.[60] It is possible that such a phenomenon as 'Germanicness' became contemporarily recognisable during the seventh to ninth centuries,[61] perhaps in a context of Carolingian expansion into Saxony and the energetic work undertaken by Anglian and Saxon missionaries to convert the same region to Christianity.[62] But this could only occur after early medieval historiographers in the vernacular-speaking parts of the former Western Empire began to conceptualise their own understandings of historical development through an ethnographic lens derived from the classical historiography to which they owed their stylistic heritage.[63] In the fourth to sixth centuries, those groups that some modern historians erroneously label *Germani* far more frequently communicated with the inhabitants of the Roman Empire

---

57   I.e., with Tacitus's *Germania*.

58   I.e., with the Norse myths contained in the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson.

59   It is for this reason that the reader will find no discussion here of texts such as Beowulf, or other later works of Old English literature, which, though sometimes evoked as putatively indicating traces of memory from the so-called 'Migration Period,' in my view do very little to offer elucidation of the contemporary societies of that period. On this point see especially Roberta Frank, "Germanic Legend in Old English Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 82–100.

60   Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 46–47; Walter Goffart, *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 187–229.

61   Such processes might be preserved, for example, in a reference to homilies being translated into *Theotisca* at the Council of Tours in 813. I am grateful to Nik Gunn for bringing this to my attention.

62   Giles Brown, "The Carolingian Renaissance: An Introduction," in *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 9–11. Even this was less obviously framed around 'Germanicness' than some have assumed. For a convincing refutation see Cătălin Ţăranu, "The Balloon That Wouldn't Burst: A Genealogy of 'Germanic'," in *Interrogating the "Germanic": A Category and Its Use in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Matthias Friedrich and James M. Harland (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 89–111.

63   *pace* Nicholas J. Howe, "Rome: Capital of Anglo-Saxon England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34, no. 1 (2004): 147–172, 167. On this ethnographic lens, see Andrew Gillett, "The Mirror of Jordanes: Concepts of the Barbarian, Then and Now," in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. Philip Rousseau (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 392–408. On the classical frameworks which shaped early medieval historiography, Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History*, 1st paperback edition. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

than with their putative ethnic comrades. This should hardly be surprising, as the majority of such groups existed near the imperial frontiers.[64]

This is not to suggest that such a concept could not *possibly* have existed in localised contexts at specific points between the fourth and sixth centuries. The post-groupist view of ethnic sociology argued for in Chapter 2 necessitates recognition that the presence of ethnic expression in the absence of evidence can be neither proven nor disproven. Yet neither the evidence for such a concept nor the social infrastructure which would produce it exists to justify the coherence, self-awareness, and ideological power that is often attributed to it in opposition to Romanness. So thoroughly lacking in utility is this concept that some scholars have pleaded for the term to be dropped altogether in discussion of late antique historiography, and I am sympathetic to this view. Jörg Jarnut, for example, rejects the concept on the grounds that the notion is simply incoherent when applied to late Roman, post-Tacitean contexts:

> the critical historiographical application of the concept of 'Germanism' is justifiable and meaningful for Roman antiquity from the first century before Christ to the third century after Christ, while the use of the term should be, under all circumstances, be avoided for later (or earlier) periods, because—in this context—it is anachronistic and not based in the textual record.[65] (My translation)

Even when applied to the early imperial period, the label is arguably meaningless.[66] Yet we will see that such warnings tend to go unheeded in Anglo-Saxon archaeological scholarship.

I reject the accuracy and utility of this term as an empirical diagnostic category to describe cultural phenomena from the period that this book

---

64   On this see A. D. Lee, *Information and Frontiers: Roman Foreign Relations in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 66–71, 158–161. and especially the application of the findings of this work by Philip A. Shaw, "Uses of Wodan: The Development of His Cult and of Medieval Literary Responses to It" (PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2002), 50–54.

65   'An dieser Stelle zeichnet sich ab, dass die kritisch–geschichtswissenschaftliche Anwendung des Germanenbegriffes für die römische Antike vom ersten vorchristlichen bis zum dritten nachchristlichen Jahrhundert vertretbar und sinnvoll ist, während seine Benutzung für spätere (oder auch frühere) Epochen unter allen Umständen vermieden werden sollte, weil er in diesem Kontext anachronistisch und quellenfern ist.' Jörg Jarnut, "Zum 'Germanen'-Begriff Der Historiker," in *Altertumskunde – Altertumswissenschaft – Kulturwissenschaft: Erträge und Perspektiven nach 40 Jahren Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, ed. Heinrich Beck, Dietrich Geuenich, and Heiko Steuer (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2012), 391–400, 400.

66   Nico Roymans, *Ethnic Identity and Imperial Power: The Batavians in the Early Roman Empire* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 28–29.

examines.[67] It could be argued that such semantic pedantry is excessively purist, but arguments advanced below will make clear that continual reliance on this concept has caused considerable difficulties in the interpretation of mortuary material from our period, and the construction of historical narratives from this interpretation. Therefore, when I make use of the term, I refer in almost all cases to the conceptual category as it is conceived and applied—with all the implications this carries—by those who accept its utility as a legitimate term. Otherwise, I refer to a specific set of related languages grouped by their shared linguistic traits, the 'Germanic languages.' To refer to those who spoke these languages, I use 'Germanic-speaking peoples.'

'Anglo-Saxon'

The term 'Anglo-Saxon' bears many of the same problems as the concept of the 'Germanic'; in the scholarship on the material it describes it has usually been seen as having advantages over the latter in that it is generally recognised by those in the field who use it to be problematic, imprecise, and anachronistic in its application to the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries.[68] The historiography on problems with the concept in its application to late antiquity is extensive.[69] Its problems have especially recently come to a head, as a growing number of scholars have called to reject the term as a category of periodisation and description, owing to its observed associations with imperialism, nationalism, and white supremacy.[70] This has involved, among other things, a large number of resignations from and the renaming of a major scholarly society (formerly known as the 'International Society

---

67   See further the various contributions in Friedrich and Harland, eds., *Interrogating the "Germanic"*.

68   See, e.g., Helena Hamerow, David A. Hinton, and Sally Crawford, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xxiii.

69   The best overview is Susan Reynolds, "What Do We Mean by 'Anglo-Saxon' and 'Anglo-Saxons'?" *Journal of British Studies* 24, no. 4 (1985): 395–414.

70   Mary Rambaran-Olm, "Anglo-Saxon Studies, Academia and White Supremacy," Medium (27 June 2018), https://medium.com/@mrambaranolm/anglo-saxon-studies-academia-and-white-supremacy-17c87b360bf3. Accessed January 2021; Catherine A. M. Clarke, with Adam Miyashiro, Megan Cavell, Daniel Thomas, Stewart Brookes, Diane Watt, and Jennifer Neville, "Twenty-five Years of 'Anglo-Saxon Studies': Looking Back, Looking Forward," in Catherine E. Karkov, Anna Kłosowska, and Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei, eds., *Disturbing Times: Medieval Pasts, Reimagined Futures* (Santa Barbara, CA: punctum books, 2020), 317-350; Mary Rambaran-Olm, "Misnaming the Medieval: Rejecting 'Anglo-Saxon' Studies,", *History Workshop Online* (4 November 2019), https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/misnaming-the-medieval-rejecting-anglo-saxon-studies/. Accessed January 2021.

of Anglo-Saxonists,' now the 'International Society for the Study of Early Medieval England'). Measures which highlight and tackle the problems inherent to our discipline, and which challenge its historic function of bolstering imperialism and colonialism, are surely to be welcomed.

As with 'Germanic,' I try to avoid use of the term to discuss the new forms of material culture that appear in Britain in the fifth century. In the rare occasions where I do so, in inverted commas, this is primarily in order to engage in critical conversation with the sub-discipline of archaeological scholarship to which 'Anglo-Saxon' lends its name, mainly to highlight how the term is being used by that discipline. Because there is at least some recognition of the term's anachronistic aspects, when navigating the scholarship one can find it used as a category referring solely to the body of material studied by this discipline,[71] with no necessary implications of ethnic or cultural affiliation, but I nevertheless highlight areas where this becomes muddied. I thus deviate from this scholarship in my hope that the term will disappear from use. Thus, unless explicitly referring to its deployment by others as an ethnic or cultural category I have tried here to use the term 'Anglo-Saxon' to refer solely to the discipline of 'Anglo-Saxon archaeology'—that is to say, the discipline which believed itself to be studying that phenomenon, whatever it may in the future become.

I have tried to avoid other ethnonyms to describe the material culture which that discipline studied as much as possible, for a quite simple reason. We simply do not, and cannot, know the names by which the diverse newcomers who came to Britain from northern Germany and Scandinavia in the fourth to sixth centuries called themselves. We know only that Roman authors called them 'Saxons,' which, we will see, is also far from unproblematic. Indeed, the core proposal of this book is that we should not assume that this material can be associated with specific ethnic or cultural groups, and for that reason alone ethnonyms should be avoided where possible.

'Military'

This book devotes considerable space to the discussion of such processes as the 'militarisation' of social elites or behaviours. This is not intended to reify any single notion of what being a 'soldier' or of 'military' status meant. To be 'military' means more than simply being a participant in violence, but

---

71   Namely, certain types of material culture that appear, by whatever cause, in lowland Britain in the late fourth to seventh centuries, and their stylistic and typological descendants, which partly have their origins in and show links with northern Germany and Scandinavia.

what precisely this means is context-dependent and difficult to pin down.[72] Gardner has commented extensively on late Roman military identity in Britain in the fourth century, drawing upon a Giddensian structuration framework to describe the nature of military identity as a recursive locus wherein certain features of social life, 'selectively drawn from the complexities of daily interactions,' are reified as institutions. This process created the Roman military as an 'institution,' which had an identity organised with a specific sense of its corporate nature, reproduced by those members recruited into and who participated in its specific lifeways.[73]

This definition is too precise to be heuristically useful for the material covered by this volume. Phenomena such as weapon burial, for example, can sometimes be associated with material cultures, such as certain types of belt sets, likely affiliated with the institution of the Roman military. But these phenomena often lack diagnostic criteria for explicit affiliation with such coherent institutional bodies, and there is considerable debate over whether such phenomena express 'militarisation,' or trends such as the expression of power through aristocratic hunting symbolism.[74] Such trends clearly, at least, have more to them than mere participation in violence. Weapon burial and other acts of expression which appear in the fifth century, often described as 'militarised' by modern observers, are clear expressions of social power and the ability to enforce it through violent means, in the context of state collapse.[75] Such phenomena represent a reconstitution of social relations in late antique western Europe that, whatever its degree of affiliation with the official Roman military, embodies a shift from the negotiation of power structures within the former Western Roman Empire via civic means towards violent means. This fundamental renegotiation of

---

72   There is an enormous bibliography on corporate military identity in the late Roman and early medieval west. Good starting points are Guy Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450–900* (London: Routledge, 2003); Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 101–110; Andrew Gardner, *An Archaeology of Identity: Soldiers and Society in Late Roman Britain* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007); A. D. Lee, *War in Late Antiquity: A Social History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007); Simon James, *Rome and the Sword: How Warriors and Weapons Shaped Roman History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 22–28. Laury Sarti, *Perceiving War and the Military in Early Christian Gaul (ca. 400–700 A.D.)* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

73   Gardner, *An Archaeology of Identity*, 209–217.

74   On this debate, see discussion in Chapter 6.

75   I here rely on Wickham's definition of the late antique state and its arguments concerning the centralisation of legitimate enforceable authority. Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 57. See Guy Halsall, "Violence and Society: An Introductory Survey," in *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Guy Halsall (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998), 3–4, on the significance of weapon burial in such contexts.

social conjunctures does not simply represent individual acts of violence within an existing civic state superstructure, but the emergence of an alternative system of power relations. I therefore use 'military' to refer to the acts of expression, material or otherwise, which constituted this alternative system, whereby power relations were governed through violent means. This could draw some of its features from the late Roman army, but need not refer exclusively to this institution.[76]

To use this framework is not to refer to individual acts of expression within this system as being performed by 'warriors.' Discussion on the nature of military identity in early Anglo-Saxon England is vast. There is no space here for a full discussion. We will later see that there is much to debate in Sam Lucy's approach to identity in early medieval England, but the fundamental premise of her thesis derives from the crucial point that early 'Anglo-Saxon' society was not one of endemic warfare, but 'one consisting of men, women and children living in predominantly farming communities.'[77] The burial practices that survive for us today in the form of weapon burial do not necessarily represent the burial of 'warriors,'[78] but this does not mean that they cannot convey 'military' symbolism.

The Structure of the Book

Chapter 2 provides a critical literature review and historiography of the development of paradigmatic trends in the study of ethnic identity. It charts the reception and application (or lack thereof) of these paradigmatic trends in wider and specifically early medieval archaeological scholarship. This chapter highlights some of the critical junctures where over-reliance on outdated schools of ethnic sociology, as well as contemporary political contexts, have shaped Anglo-Saxon archaeological thinking in a manner that produces problematic interpretations. Alongside exposing the philosophical fault-lines responsible for these problematic interpretations, it introduces some possibly fruitful alternatives being developed on the continent, particularly those coming from the University of Freiburg. Chapter 3 offers an alternative philosophical and ontological framework for the study of

---

76   See Halsall, *Warfare and Society*, 14–19. on the fluidity of such distinctions in the early middle ages.

77   Lucy, *The Early Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries of East Yorkshire*, 1.

78   Heinrich Härke, "'Warrior Graves'? The Background of the Anglo-Saxon Weapon Burial Rite," *Past & Present* 126, no. 1 (1990): 22–43.

identity in late antiquity, drawing upon differential ontological thought as articulated in the works of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. The chapter charts the intersections and clashes of approach of these three thinkers, as well as the critical reception of these by other philosophers and, where appropriate, their current application in archaeological scholarship. The chapter uses this to shape a coherent hermeneutic methodology which draws upon these philosophers' respective strengths for application in the subsequent analytical chapters of the thesis. Chapter 4 shows this methodology in action, drawing upon Derridean deconstruction as it is described in Chapter 3. This methodological tool is used to chart the most recent thinking of archaeologists of the early medieval period in relation to ethnic identity, and to expose the critical fault-lines in their interpretation, by identifying the points at which their argumentation ceases to rely upon empirical demonstration and has instead moved into the realm of interpretative leaps (known in poststructuralist philosophy as *aporiae*). The chapter demonstrates that all such interpretative leaps are ultimately founded upon the non-empirical foundational axiom that early Anglo-Saxon material culture somehow conveyed something 'Germanic' in its semiotic properties. Chapter 5 grapples with the empirical basis for this argumentation, highlighting the problematic nature of the evidence that Anglo-Saxon archaeologists claim provides the lynchpin for their interpretations. The chapter examines material, biological, and artistic evidence, and challenges the claims that such empirical data offers evidence for the existence of a contemporarily recognisable so-called 'Germanic' ideology. Application of post-groupist ethnic sociology as described in Chapter 2 shows these supposedly empirical lynchpins to be anything but.

Having drawn upon Derridean deconstruction as well as more traditional historiography to shake the narrative frameworks of the field, Chapter 6, 'Building an Alternative,' outlines a possible path toward reconstructing the narrative. It uses the alternative Deleuzo-Guattarian framework for ontology outlined in Chapter 3 to offer a possible interpretative approach to early Anglo-Saxon material culture. This approach emphasises difference and fluidity as core aspects of subjective being in the fifth century in Britain. It proceeds through three case studies, two focusing upon the key early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries of Spong Hill and Wasperton (the rationale for the selection of which is explained in Chapter 3). These case studies highlight the flawed ethnic argumentation that has previously been applied to these two cemeteries, based upon the reasoning advanced in previous chapters. It then attempts to identify aspects of semiotic expression that can more reasonably be inferred from the material in these cemeteries, to advance

arguments about ideological transformations identifiable in gendered uses of grave-goods and which may be tied to the militarisation of society. The final case study attempts an analysis of the semiotic content of the cruciform brooch—an early Anglo-Saxon artefact crucial to recent analyses which propose ethnic interpretations—in order to bolster these arguments. The chapter finally attempts to tie such transformative narratives to wider narratives about the transformation of the Roman world, which operate as an alternative to narratives which assert that barbarian migration and invasion were the catalysts for the shift from a stable imperial polity to a collection of early medieval barbarian *regna*. I draw upon the 'Freiburg School' of archaeology, as described in Chapter 2, and Halsall's understanding of the role which gender and martial expression played in the sociopolitical transformation of the Western Empire. Using a Deleuzo-Guattarian lens, I explain how the evidence discussed in my case studies can be explained as a consequence of the above-described wider sociopolitical reconfiguration, albeit with unique local particularities and differences. In so doing, I demonstrate that the rejection of 'ethnic' narratives renders us no less able to construct political historical arguments from our source material. Chapter 7 draws the summative conclusions of these chapters together, comments on their implications for the study of the field, and offers a brief closing discussion of possible areas for future research that the thesis has exposed, highlighting ongoing work that offers other fruitful alternatives to the ethnic paradigm which has hitherto dominated the discipline.

A Note on Contemporary Political Resonances

Acts of historical interpretation can never be politically neutral. There is an ethical demand on any act of historical writing.[79] It should not be surprising that, as an avowed poststructuralist, I do not treat the 'authentic' past, in a Rankean historicist sense, as something that can be straightforwardly accessed. This is not to suggest that the very occurrence of past events is subject to fundamental relativism, as proposed by some of the more philosophically incoherent examples of so-called 'post-modern' historiography.[80] This radical subjectivism, derived from poststructuralist philosophy, applies instead to

---

79   Guy Halsall, "History and Commitment," in *Burn After Reading: Vol. 1: Miniature Manifestos for a Post/Medieval Studies*, ed. Eileen A. Joy and Myra Seaman (Brooklyn, NY: punctum books, 2014), 60; Guy Halsall, *Why History Doesn't Matter* (forthcoming).
80   As found, e.g., in Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991).

our ability to construct *absolute narrative truths* from these events. Ever perceptive of the difference between the straw man of absolute relativism, so often condemned by the historicists, and this more ontologically secure narrative relativism, Hayden White notes,

> whatever gestures are made in the direction of an appeal to factual evidence or the reality of the events dealt with, insofar as a history purports to explain the congeries of events that serves as its putative subject matter by telling a story about it, the explanation provided thereby admits of no assessment as to its veracity or objectivity by criteria that might be considered 'scientific.' To be sure, this does not mean that a narrative (or story) account of any given phenomenon has no truth-value; but it does mean [...] that historical accounts cast in the form of a narrative may be as various as the modes of emplotment which literary critics have identified as constituting the different principles for structuring narratives in general.[81]

In what follows, I demonstrate that Anglo-Saxon archaeologists are involved in drawing upon these various modes of emplotment in the construction of narratives from their evidence. The alternative that I attempt to shape does so no less. As is discussed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, all acts of historical interpretation depend upon interpretative leaps from that which may be empirically demonstrated by the source material.

Though I aim to show that in many respects the narrative I craft is more satisfying, both empirically and epistemologically, it is therefore a given that elements of my interpretative approach are shaped by my own historical and philosophical outlook. This work is unashamedly anti-essentialist. I submit it in opposition to some of the alarming political contexts to which widespread intellectual approaches to the early Middle Ages both owe their origins and that they have helped to fuel.[82] These contexts of racial chauvinism, Romantic nationalism, white supremacy and, in the twentieth century, fascism, are well known in scholarly literature and will not be rehearsed here. My political leanings are likely evident in my approach to archaeological analysis of the material, also. Though poststructuralism and

---

81   Hayden White, "Historical Pluralism," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 3 (1986): 486–487.
82   Overviews can be found in Andrew B. R. Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-first Century* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer: 2017); Daniel Wollenberg, "Defending the West: Cultural Racism and Pan-Europeanism on the Far-Right," *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 5, no. 3 (2014): 308–319.

its complications of objective truth guide its core principles, my approach is nevertheless materialist: ideology is here held to be a product of the material relations that govern society.[83] It is this belief that governs the insistence below on the necessity of delineating what in ideological expression can and what cannot be empirically demonstrated.[84]

In the years during which I have researched this book, a noise that at its outset was a low hum of threatening political discourse has crescendoed into a deafening cacophony. To rehearse just two examples from recent years, we have seen the surge of racist, xenophobic, and chauvinist nationalist sentiments relating to the United Kingdom's decision by referendum to leave the European Union. In the United States of America we have seen the election of a president—though now voted out of office—with familial links to the Ku Klux Klan and whose rhetoric directly channelled white supremacist ethnonationalism, and who relied on and encouraged the white supremacist violence upon which the United States of America is ultimately founded.

Closer to home, in January 2017, Theresa May was the first leader of a foreign nation to make a state visit to Trump's United States. In a section of a joint speech dedicated to battling 'the ideology of Islamist extremism,' she declared that the United Kingdom and the United States of America share a relationship based on 'the bonds of history, of family, kinship and common interests.'[85] Such shared bonds of kinship carry undoubted connotations of a shared Anglo-Saxon past, such as that imagined by the USA's founding fathers.[86] A culture war for control over British heritage is currently

---

83   Anyone familiar with the intellectual heritage poststructuralism owes to Western Marxism, the Frankfurt School (etc.) should be unsurprised by this.

84   See on this, especially Steve Roskams and Tom Saunders, "The Poverty of Empiricism and the Tyranny of Theory," in *Environmental Archaeology: Meaning and Purpose*, ed. Umberto Albarella (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer, 2001) 61–74; Steve Roskams, "'Late Antique Field Archaeology': A Legitimate Aim?" *Late Antique Archaeology* 9, no. 1 (2012): 17–50.

85   Theresa May, "Speech Delivered at the White House, Washington D.C., USA" (Transcript and audio from gov.uk). Accessed July 9, 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-press-conference-with-us-president-donald-trump-27-january-2017.

86   Bernard Rosenthal and Paul E. Szarmach, eds., *Medievalism in American Culture: Papers of the Eighteenth Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies.* Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 55 (Binghamton: State University of New York Press, 1989); Paul Freedman and Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Medievalisms Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies," *American Historical Review* 103 (1998): 677–704; Kim Moreland, *The Medievalist Impulse in American Literature: Twain, Adams, Fitzgerald and Hemingway* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996); María José Mora and María José Gómez-Calderón, "The Study of Old English in America (1776–1850): National Uses of the Saxon Past," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 97, no. 3 (1998): 322–336.

being pushed by her successor as Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, a man renowned for making racist gaffes and who once authored a book packed with antisemitic and racist tropes. His government and its supporters in the British press continue to wage an ideological war against moves to introduce much-needed recognition of (and reparations for) the United Kingdom's role in world history as a force of white supremacy and colonial oppression.[87]

The increasingly xenophobic UK and US media have, in recent years, increasingly falsely framed such conflict as an inevitable result of a multicultural society in order to pursue this fabricated culture war. A contemporary narrative of a clash of civilisations is being crafted, and the so-called 'alt-right,' the online foot-soldiers of a new far-right movement, consciously draw upon an imagined medieval past to craft their mythology and justify their participation in this conflict.[88] The early medieval past and its contemporary reception are indisputably part of this narrative.[89] Current scholarship researching this past inadvertently reproduces discursive narratives that can be seized by the far-right groups discussed above.[90] Though this is often the result of distortion, I aim to show that the seizure

---

87   On this, see in particular, Peter Mitchell, *Imperial Nostalgia: How the British Conquered Themselves* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021); Akala, *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire* (London: Two Roads Books, 2018); Angela Saini, *Superior: The Return of Race Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019); Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

88   A range of online articles by academic researchers addressing the subject in relation to medieval studies may be found at *The Public Medievalist's* recent *Race, Racism, and the Early Middle Ages* series, including Paul B. Sturtevant, "Introduction: Race, Racism, and the Middle Ages: Tearing down the 'Whites Only' Medieval World," *The Public Medievalist*, Race and Racism in the Middle Ages (7 February 2017), http://www.publicmedievalist.com/race-racism-middle-ages-tearing-whites-medieval-world/. Accessed January 2021; Amy S. Kaufman, "A Brief History of a Terrible Idea: The 'Dark Enlightenment'," *The Public Medievalist*, Race and Racism in the Middle Ages (9 February 2017), http://www.publicmedievalist.com/dark-enlightenment/. Accessed January 2021; Andrew B. R. Elliot, "A Vile Love Affair: Right Wing Nationalism and the Middle Ages," *The Public Medievalist*, Race and Racism in the Middle Ages (14 February 2017), http://www.publicmedievalist.com/vile-love-affair/. Accessed January 2021; and James M. Harland, "'Race' in the Trenches: Anglo-Saxons, Ethnicity, and the Misuse of the Medieval Past," *The Public Medievalist*, Race and Racism in the Middle Ages (17 February 2017), http://www.publicmedievalist.com/race-in-the-trenches/. Accessed January 2021; The most recent published interventions are Matthew X. Vernon, *The Black Middle Ages: Race and the Construction of the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), especially 22–28; Miyashiro, Adam, "Our Deeper Past: Race, Settler Colonialism, and Medieval Heritage Politics," *Literature Compass* 16, no. 9–10 (2019), and Clarke et al. "Twenty-five Years of Anglo-Saxon Studies".

89   Donna Beth Ellard, *Anglo-Saxon(ist) Pasts, postSaxon Futures* (Santa Barbara, CA: punctum books, 2019).

90   See discussion, e.g., of responses to recent genetic studies outlined in Chapter 2.

of these narratives is inevitable because, even in their subtler constructivist iterations, they remain framed around questions which understand ethnicity via a Herderian normative framework, inextricably bound up with the intellectual contexts of Romantic nationalism and imperialist colonialism.[91] This is not to impute malicious intent to researchers. Those who follow a poststructuralist understanding of text recognise that the reproduction of such contexts is an inevitable result of grappling with any discursive field, and the current book is doubtless no less guilty in that respect.[92]

Moreover, the nature of fascism is such that the actual empirical truth of the arguments put forward is irrelevant. Fascism, an ideology with roots in pseudo-Nietzschean philosophy, functions as 'a fuzzy totalitarianism, a collage of different philosophical and political ideas, a beehive of contradictions.'[93] The inconvenient penetration of the truth cannot halt it. It

> tolerate[s] contradictions. Each of the original messages contains a sliver of wisdom, and whenever they seem to say different or incompatible things it is only because all are alluding, allegorically, to the same primeval truth.[94]

Many who write well-intentioned, well-researched and empirically accurate historical work, and who would never dream of associating with or assisting far-right politics, nevertheless operate within discursive frameworks which facilitate the seizure of their works by the far right. It is for this reason that I offer a critical enquiry grappling primarily with the epistemological and philosophical contradictions of the field. People only deconstruct works that they respect, and I offer the following chapters in this spirit, as, I hope, a tool to grapple with interpretative frameworks which have, all too frequently, been harnessed to projects their authors, and I, have no wish to fuel.

---

91   On Herderianism, see discussion below, Chapter 2.
92   See discussion, Chapter 3.
93   Umberto Eco, "Ur-Fascism," *New York Review of Books* (22 June 1995).
94   Ibid.