Introduction: cultural memory and the resources of the past

Walter Pohl and Ian Wood

Cultural memory has been a successful concept in medieval studies for some time.[1] This introduction cannot set out at length the theoretical toolbox used for the contributions in this volume, but can only offer a few observations to clarify our general approach. 'Cultural memory' can be, and is often used in a rather straightforward manner. Still, to explore its potential it may be helpful to be aware of some of the strategic choices that are involved in employing it. Like other key terms in contemporary historical research (such as discourse, identity or cultural exchange), 'cultural memory' circumscribes a relatively wide field of research, which has been shaped by previous uses of the concept: opened up by successful approaches to the subject, unified by a basic consensus that it constitutes a meaningful topic, criss-crossed by lines of research, landscaped by more or less insurmountable divides created by debates and polemic, and changing in the course of the gradual progress of scholarship. Indeed, this particular field has moved from 'collective' through 'social' to 'cultural' memory, which rather expresses changes of fashion ('collective' has acquired a negative ring through its uses by twentieth-century totalitarian systems) than paradigm shifts. Moving through this field we should be aware which turns we take and why; the more swiftly we seem to be progressing, the more likely it is that we are simply following well-established routes to find what others have discovered before us. And we may end up affirming and reifying relatively simple models of cultural progress, or, on the other hand, of a progressive loss of authenticity in the course of transmission.

This latter position, in fact, marks the starting point of modern theorising about 'collective memory'. In the 1930s, the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs distinguished between collective memory, which is

[1] See, for instance, J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*; A. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*; Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*; Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*; Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*; Hen and Innes (eds.), *The Uses of the Past*; Fried, *Der Schleier der Erinnerung*.

spontaneous, natural and selective, and historical memory, which aims for a more inclusive, broader picture, but in a much more self-reflective and therefore manipulative manner.[2] History, he claimed, strips the past of its magic. In the 1980s, Pierre Nora built on these ideas when he edited the three-volume series *Les Lieux de mémoire* about the French 'places of memory'.[3] For Nora, the original form of collective memory thrives in the *milieux de mémoire*, 'genuine, social and untouched memory'. But these cultures of memory disappear with modernity and with professional historiography: 'Things tumble with increasing rapidity into an irretrievable past . . . What was left of experience, still lived in the warmth of tradition, in the silence of custom, in the repetition of the ancestral, has been swept away by a surge of deeply historical sensibility.'[4] Memory is delegated to specific spaces, museums, archives or memorials, in short, the *lieux de mémoire*. The warmth of tradition is transformed into the cold gaze of the unconcerned observer.

As historians, we may regard Pierre Nora's model as a warning not to take our own professional perception of the past for granted. Invariably, we lose the heat of the moment, the immediacy of the living memory – not that the archive is necessarily as cold as Nora implies.[5] Yet, professional history has not terminated popular social memory, its myths and its uses in national, religious or political strategies of identification – which are often called 'ideology' in this context.[6] The Czech historian František Graus once wrote an article called 'Die Ohnmacht der Wissenschaft gegen Geschichtsmythen' (the powerlessness of scholarship against historical myths).[7] Most of us have experienced this feeling. But what is worse, in the long run, professional history does count, especially where it helps to create, not to undermine historical myths.[8] This is one reason to be sceptical of Halbwachs' and Nora's neat distinction. The other reason is that their model is not very helpful in dealing with medieval uses of the past – and indeed the Middle Ages, and particularly the early Middle Ages, are often overlooked by theoreticians of cultural memory, to the extent that Western Civilization has been presented as Classical, Renaissance and Modern, with the best part of a millennium confined

[2] Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective*; Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux*; Namer, 'Le Contretemps démocratique chez Halbwachs', p. 57.
[3] Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire* (English translation: *Rethinking France*).
[4] Nora, 'General introduction', p. 1.
[5] J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, pp. 327–32; Derrida, *Archive Fever*.
[6] See, for instance, Reimitz and Zeller (eds.), *Vergangenheit und Vergegenwärtigung*; Geary and Klaniczay (eds.), *Manufacturing Middle Ages*.
[7] Graus, 'Ohnmacht'.
[8] MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History*, tends misleadingly to portray 'amateur' historians as myth-makers and 'professional' historians as myth-busters.

to near oblivion.[9] As many of the contributions in the present volume demonstrate, early medieval histories were produced in the most lively *milieux de mémoire* of the period, in courts and cloisters. Admittedly, these were not scholarly histories in the modern sense. But they combined an acute sense of searching for the truth about the past – and individual authors certainly had an understanding of the need for research – with an embeddedness in milieux where this past mattered. These memories were not at all immutable. There is overwhelming evidence that these histories and other texts about the past were very much alive: in the process of transmission, they were selected, adapted, abbreviated, augmented, rewritten and epitomised.[10] They fit exactly into the category of 'functional memory' as elaborated by Aleida Assmann.[11] At the same time the libraries and archives of the early Middle Ages, in preserving and ultimately transmitting the works of Antiquity, could act as 'storage memory' – the other pole of one of the conceptual divisions that she employs.

Writing something down does not fix it for ever. On the contrary. literacy introduced a new dynamic in societies, as Jack Goody and others have shown.[12] It allowed knowledge and memory to be preserved as it is in an external storage device. Cultural memory in literate societies is, as Jan Assmann has argued, not limited to tradition and communication any more: 'Without it [i.e. literacy] there can be no infringements, conflicts, innovations, restorations, or revolutions. These are all eruptions from a world beyond the current meaning, through the recalling of the forgotten, the revival of tradition, or the resurfacing of what has been repressed.'[13] Reappropriations from the vast cultural archive of written memory can connect the present with a distant past, make the old texts productive in a changed context, and generate new meanings. The successive medieval revivals of classical cultural contents provide excellent examples. This potential of the written tradition provokes attempts to control it by manipulation, repression, replacement or destruction, as Assmann maintains. Perhaps, however, one should not make too much of the distinction between creative reappropriation and repressive control of written memory. Memory and oblivion were two sides of the same

[9] Thus A. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, largely reduces the cultural memory of the period to 'divine' (p. 35) and 'feudal memory' (pp. 67–8), which is presented as dynastic, and allocates to it no more than a few passing references.
[10] See Pohl, 'History in fragments'.
[11] A. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, pp. 119–34.
[12] Goody, *Power*; Manguel, *History of Reading*; Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*; Stock, *Listening for the Text*.
[13] J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, p. 8.

coin.[14] As the contributions in this volume demonstrate, no clear line can be drawn between the different strategies of appropriation, between memory and its manipulation. As Patrick Geary has shown in a seminal study about eleventh-century textual forms of remembrance, our knowledge about the past rests on a series of previous decisions about what was worth remembering, and in what form: 'What we think we know about the early Middle Ages is largely determined by what people of the early eleventh century wished themselves and their contemporaries to know about the past.'[15]

Cultural memory was, of course, shaped by a multiplicity of voices, of competing interpretations that characterized (for instance) Carolingian uses of the past. Early medieval society was far from being a conformist collective. To see this we only have to tune in to styles of debate and dissent rather different from the modern world. Rewriting old texts was one way of expressing judgements about the present. Pre-modern identification with a community of the past did not necessarily mean, as Halbwachs assumed, eliminating all differences between yesterday and today (whereas according to him modern historians would see only discontinuities).[16] Re-using the past could mean both acknowledging that things had changed, and changing the past to fit the present.

In the context of broader theories of culture, 'cultural memory' is an interesting case. Since the 1990s, humanities scholars have increasingly (and sometimes forcefully) argued that the concept of 'cultural transfer' is reductive, and we should rather speak of 'cultural exchange'; indeed, that the notion of 'a' culture is an ethnocentric simplification, for all cultures are hybrid.[17] This is surely reasonable as long as it does not imply that in an overwhelming continuum of hybridity distinguishing between cultures becomes altogether impossible. In any case, the diachronic cultural flow between past and present constitutes a specific case. There can be no exchange between the dead and the living. Only transfer is possible. But this transmission almost invariably leads to hybridity. Even the most canonical tradition changes in the course of the generations that adapt to it, and adapt it in the process. These often subtle changes are in the focus of the present volume. What were the resources of the past, and how were they transformed in the course of their transmission? Manuscript cultures provide excellent and little-used material to study this process.

[14] A. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, p. 400.
[15] Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*, p. 177.
[16] Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective*, p. 75; J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, pp. 28–31; J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, pp. 42–3.
[17] See, for instance, Burke, *Cultural Hybridity*.

A second, even broader context of cultural theory should also briefly be considered. Andreas Reckwitz has shown that towards the end of the twentieth century, the field of cultural theory was transformed. Two previously distinctive theoretical strands converged: first, the neo-structuralist and semiotic strand, as represented, for instance, by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault or Pierre Bourdieu; and second, the tradition of phenomenology and hermeneutics, which he exemplifies by Alfred Schütz, Irving Goffmann, Clifford Geertz and Charles Taylor.[18] Both schools gradually overcame the traditional binary opposition 'objective versus subjective' and became interested in the links between knowledge and social practice. Both had privileged a rather homogeneous view of cultural communities, assuming that they generally tended to reproduce themselves by repeating the same modes of cultural practice and by handing down established systems of knowledge and discourse. This 'myth of cultural integration', as Margaret Archer has called it,[19] has only rather recently been challenged by a more dynamic understanding.

This is also highly relevant for theories of cultural memory. In most previous research, cultural memory and discourse formations have been attributed to definite communities, which they helped to preserve and perpetuate. Recent theoretical debates have shown the need to overcome this simplified model, and some source-oriented medievalist studies demonstrate that it unnecessarily limits the range of interpretation of the material; but more often than not, sophisticated research is then fed back into rather conventional conclusions, more or less tacitly assuming a rather simple model of cultural memory: a more or less linear process of transmission of knowledge, which serves to affirm the identity of a community, and which is analysed by means of a set of static and binary categories such as lay/clerical, theory/practice, authentic/derivative or archaic/modern. On the other hand, ambitious theory-driven research has not always been grounded in a careful analysis of the sources. Moreover, theory itself is inevitably based on a selection of evidence, which is rarely drawn from the Middle Ages.[20]

The early medieval examples presented in this volume show that the transmission of memory did not simply serve the reproduction of a given community, but was a much more open process; and in fact, the period chosen for this research is paradigmatic in this respect. The Frankish kingdom and later the Roman empire of the Carolingians, *c.* 750–900, which provides us with the core of our documentation (though we look

[18] Reckwitz, *Die Transformation der Kulturtheorien*, pp. 542–80.
[19] Archer, *Culture and Agency*; Reckwitz, *Die Transformation der Kulturtheorien*, pp. 617–23.
[20] Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, provides a significant exception.

earlier and later, and beyond Francia), adopted a variety of strands of identification, from the Biblical Israel of the Old Testament and the early Christian communities to the classical myths of Troy, the pagan and the Christian Roman empire and the post-Roman kingdoms. For a long time, the early Middle Ages have mostly been regarded as a dark age in which the bare survival of classical knowledge and erudition depended on the more or less mindless activity of badly educated monks who randomly copied texts that they did not understand.[21] Recent early medieval studies have demonstrated, on the contrary, how deliberate and sophisticated the reception of past knowledge and cultural contents was in the Carolingian age – and in this respect the preservation of knowledge in the supposed Dark Ages scarcely constitutes 'storage memory'.

In fact, this period is particularly well suited to further our understanding of the dynamics of cultural memory and of identity formation in general, and for several reasons. Most importantly, the early Middle Ages are the first period of European history from which many thousands of original manuscripts that can be studied have been transmitted to us (*c.* 7,000 manuscripts from the Carolingian period alone).[22] Most of the earlier history of literate societies and their cultural production in Europe and the Mediterranean have only come down to us because of the intense early medieval efforts to copy texts, previously preserved on papyrus and other more perishable materials, into parchment codices. Nor was it simply 'those documents that served to legitimate groups and institutions', as implied by Aleida Assmann.[23] Almost the whole of ancient literature and scholarship, but also of the Bible and of patristic writing have been transmitted to us through the filter of the early Middle Ages, and they were put to a variety of uses.

This huge body of material so far has been used mainly to reconstruct and edit texts as witnesses of the period in which they had been composed. It has also been subjected to increasingly severe scrutiny by ever more sophisticated methods of source criticism, not least, in the course of the 'literary turn' of the 1980s and 1990s.[24] A recent fundamental book by Johannes Fried, *Der Schleier der Erinnerung* (the veil of memory), goes one step further: it relies on advanced models from neuroscience, psychology and ethnology to construct a historical approach that it terms 'Memorik', arguing that individual memory is much more precarious and manipulative than we may assume.[25] The main use of this approach

[21] Le Goff, *Les Intellectuels*, pp. 13–14. [22] McKitterick, *History and Memory*.
[23] A. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, p. 328.
[24] See, for instance, Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*.
[25] Fried, *Der Schleier der Erinnerung*.

then is to show that many of our sources may in fact be less reliable than they were thought to be. Thus, Fried argues for 'eine gehörige Portion Mißtrauen gegen das kulturelle Gedächtnis', a good dose of distrust in cultural memory.[26] His aim is 'Umwertung der erhaltenen Quellen', re-evaluation of the extant sources, in the context of a 'neuro-kulturelle Geschichtswissenschaft'.[27]

It is open to debate whether the rather general 'neuro-cultural' model employed by Fried can actually be useful for a more precise critique of specific sources and constitute a reliable basis for arguing, for instance, that St Benedict never existed, what really happened at Canossa or who forged the Donation of Constantine, as Fried claims; reviewers have doubted that Fried's well-presented arguments had much to do with his concept of 'Memorik'.[28] In any case, the scope of the present volume is rather different. It is not intended to discuss whether past events described in the texts that Carolingian scribes copied and often transformed actually happened in that way or another. It deals with the process of transmission of these texts, of their appropriation and transformation in the course of their 'ré-écriture', and thus addresses a key issue of the transfer of knowledge from past to present.[29] This process (that Fried is only marginally interested in) can shed new light on the dialectic of codification and modification of the cultural heritage, and on the contemporary debates that went with it; thus, it is of great interest as an exemplary case for the study of cultural dynamics in general. And it allows us to address the problem of how the resources of the past were employed in the construction of contemporary identities, precisely because several options were available at the time.

How is cultural memory related to social identity? This depends on the type and range of community and its identity that we look at. One possible line of research was explored by *Memorialforschung*, memorial research, perhaps the most important medievalist school in Germany after 1945.[30] Its main object of study was medieval *Libri memoriales*,

[26] Fried, *Der Schleier der Erinnerung*, p. 367.
[27] Fried, *Der Schleier der Erinnerung*, pp. 385 and 393.
[28] Fried, *Der Schleier der Erinnerung*, pp. 344–57; Fried, *Donation of Constantine* (see also the review by Jürgen Miethke, http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2007–3–159, accessed 04/01/2014); Fried, *Canossa*. See also the review by by H.-W. Goetz, www.sehepunkte.de/2013/01/21982.html, accessed 04/01/2014: 'Mit "Memorik" und Erinnerungskritik – und Frieds Verdienste auf diesem Gebiet sollen und dürfen keineswegs bestritten werden – hat Frieds Vorgehen letztlich nichts zu tun'; and Patzold, 'Frieds Canossa'.
[29] Pohl, *Werkstätte*; Corradini, Diesenberger and Niederkorn-Bruck (eds.), *Zwischen Niederschrift und Wiederschrift*.
[30] Schmid and Wollasch (eds.), *Memoria*; Geuenich and Oexle (eds.), *Memoria*.

books of memory. These impressive documents consist mainly of long lists of names of the living and the dead that a monastic or ecclesiastical community chose to remember: deceased members of the community, but also lay donors and protectors. For Aleida Assmann, 'the anthropological heart of cultural memory is *remembrance* of the dead'.[31] At least notionally, all these individuals were included in the prayers and the liturgy performed at the institution which created the *Liber memorialis*. In this way, the monastic community could integrate its own past, and act as a 'powerhouse of prayer' for lay donors and supporters around it.[32] This was a form of highly structured, literate memory that regularly became the focus of ritual performance, and was basic for the identity of the monastery. It expressed the idea of a carefully bounded community in which each individual was named and expressly included, a face-to-face community in which each of the deceased was individually remembered. Through fraternities of prayer (*Gebetsverbrüderungen*) other monasteries could become part of the memorial community, and it could thus be extended beyond those who were personally known in the *familia* of one particular cloister. However, it always operated on the basis of definite lists of names.

The cultural memory that this volume deals with is related to different types of identity: not the small, clearly bounded community in which most members know each other personally, but much broader social groups. Jan Assmann has distinguished quite appropriately between *Grundstrukturen* (basic structures) of identity and community, and *Steigerungsstufen* (levels of extension) which go beyond the face-to-face community. The latter are necessarily unstable and need cultural integration.[33] Identity is not a given, and recent research has demonstrated that especially in larger social groups it needs constant re-identification to be maintained: identification of individuals with the group, identification of the group as such through representatives or collective rituals, and identification of the group by outsiders.[34] These series of identifications rarely coincide fully, but they need to be sufficiently related in order to establish relatively stable communities. They rely on a complex of shared symbols that Jan Assmann has called 'cultural formation'. Its coherence is mainly based on two types of traditional knowledge: 'normative texts' that indicate what should be done, and

[31] A. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, p. 23.
[32] Powerhouse of prayer: de Jong, *In Samuel's Image*, p. 87; de Jong, 'Monasticism', p. 651; Brown, *Rise*, pp. 219–31.
[33] J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, pp. 124–6.
[34] Pohl, 'Introduction: strategies of identification'.

'formative texts' that respond to the question 'who are we?'.[35] Many of the texts analysed in the present volume fall in one of the two categories. But most of the historiographical works studied here not only address the question of who is the author's 'we'; they construct much more complex relationships between groups that were more or less 'us', between particular communities and a larger social whole, between one Christian people and a world of *gentes*, between the others and 'the Other'.[36] The biblical, ancient and early medieval past provided a rich repertoire of communities many of which were in some ways related imaginatively to the social topography of the Carolingian world, and which had to be fed in different ways into appropriate 'visions of community' for the present.[37]

The Carolingian period is a good example of such an extension of the horizons of community and identity, and for the rich cultural production that was aimed at integrating that identity. At its heart, there was in fact a face-to-face group that met regularly at Aachen or at other places where the royal, and later imperial court was based.[38] This group was active in a great number of ways to draw together the huge polity that its military success had created. Johannes Fried has argued forcefully that contemporaries were incapable of conceptualizing this realm as an abstract entity.[39] Yet in fact, there was not only one concept but several: the *gens* and the *regnum Francorum*; the *Imperium Romanum*; the *ecclesia* and the *populus Christianus*. All of these were very far-reaching concepts, inevitably precarious, impossible to delineate precisely, and problematic because these communities all overlapped, but were not coterminous. The *regnum Francorum* consisted of more than Franks; the empire of more than the *regnum*; and the *ecclesia* had an even wider horizon, although it could at the same time be flexibly mapped as the sum of certain churches, and of their respective *populi Christiani*.[40] To maintain these elusive constructions required massive efforts at all levels, political, military, cultural, cognitive, spiritual, ritual and much else. The past was central to most of them. It could be used, for instance, to create legitimacy, explain inclusion and exclusion, establish precedent, provide orientation, exemplify moral exhortation, inspire a sense of what was possible and what was not, to negotiate status, to argue about the

[35] J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, p. 123.
[36] See Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Rise of Western Ethnicity, 550–850*.
[37] Pohl, Gantner and Payne (eds.), *Visions of Community*.
[38] McKitterick, *Charlemagne*; de Jong, *Penitential State*; Nelson, *Courts*.
[39] Fried, 'Gens und regnum'; for a critique: Goetz, 'Staatlichkeit'; see also Airlie, Pohl and Reimitz (eds.), *Staat im frühen Mittelalter*; and Pohl and Wieser (eds.), *Der frühmittelalterliche Staat*.
[40] De Jong, '*Ecclesia* and the early medieval polity'; de Jong, 'Charlemagne's church'.

right norms or to imagine the future. Corresponding to this multiplicity of uses of the past and to the variety of possible modes of identification for which it could be used, the Carolingian period disposed of several strands of cultural memory. It was mainly based on the inclusive constructions of Christian history that Eusebius/Jerome and others had assembled in Late Antiquity, which essentially blended biblical history with the classical tradition.[41] This eclectic construction was augmented by the memories of the post-Roman centuries, including 'barbarian' and vernacular elements. In this wide-reaching temporal and spatial matrix, boundaries could now be redrawn.

Related to questions of the horizons of community and identity is the question of exclusion: what was included was in part defined by what was excluded. Following on from Halbwachs' emphasis on the role of cultural memory in the creation of group cohesion, Aleida Assmann stresses its function in the establishment of 'distinction'.[42] Group identity could be strengthened by emphasis of what did not belong. It is, therefore, no surprise that the resources of the past were employed to distinguish one's community from the 'Other'. The drawing of boundaries thus constitutes another major theme of our volume. Here, inevitably, we have been influenced by a wide range of scholarship relating to 'Otherness', for instance the pioneering work of Edward Said on Orientalism,[43] and of Henri Tajfel on intergroup relations:[44] the East–West and masculine–feminine polarities that underlie much of the work on the topic have certainly provided a background to many of the questions we have asked. Although in scholarship these discussions have tended to run parallel to those on cultural memory, they have a great deal in common: certainly they are sides of the same coin, for the construction of group cohesion almost inevitably involves the designation of those outside the group as 'Other'. These lines of exclusion were usually presented as very time-resistant. Thus 'the resources of the past' have a role to play, and we have therefore been concerned with how early medieval writers used the written resources available to them to describe and categorise those they regarded as 'Other': how they used the Bible, and how they used classical authors. In so far as geographical distinction was an issue, early medieval writers turned to the classical geographers, who provided them with most of their information about the known world: but above all, it was the children of Israel who provided an ideal model for the self-identification

[41] McKitterick, *History and Memory*; Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Rise of Western Ethnicity, 550–850*.
[42] A. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, p. 129
[43] Said, *Orientalism*. [44] E.g. Tajfel (ed.), *Differentiation*.