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INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORY OF EUROPE 500–700

Paul Fouracre

Hegel's notion of a state of transformation, in which the present negates the past in favour of the future, is well suited to this period of European history. At our starting point around the year 500, we may still characterise European culture as 'late antique'; by the year 700 we are firmly in the world of the Middle Ages. A transformation has apparently occurred. The idea that it is developing consciousness that calls changes into being is not far off the mark either, if we think about the triumph of the Christian future over the pagan past and the reconfiguration of culture and institutions around newly hegemonic religious beliefs and practices. This conception of history is avowedly teleological: it is ultimately more interested in what things were becoming than in what they were in their own terms and in their proper context. A survey such as this one, standing at the beginning of a series which looks at history over a 1000 year period, must of course be aware of future development in order to understand the nature and significance of contemporary phenomena. At the same time, however, it must equally be aware that what makes hindsight or overview possible is precisely a detailed knowledge of the past in its own terms. The balance between overview and detail must nevertheless be judicious. The present volume aims for balance in this way. It is organised on a chronological and geographical basis, from which a series of particular histories provide the background to a final section of thematic overviews.

Almost every chapter, whether topical or thematic, situates itself by measuring change from the late Roman period. That the end of Roman power in western Europe should form a common starting point is not meant to underplay the essential continuities between the culture of late antiquity and of the Middle Ages. As Gerberding emphasises, we can already perceive in the Roman world the outlines of much that we would identify as typically 'medieval'. Fontaine, too, explains that the lines of post-classical, Christian education and learning had already been laid down before the mid-fifth century. Nor should beginning with the end of the Roman Empire be taken to suggest that the 'Fall

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[More information](#)

of Rome' was sudden or catastrophic. As Halsall argues, few historians would now think in terms of an empire brought down by the incessant attacks of massed barbarians. He suggests that it is more sensible to think of the 'barbarian invasions' as one effect, rather than the major cause, of Rome's decline. And as Loseby demonstrates, the dislocation of the Mediterranean economic circuits which had lain at the heart of Roman culture was a slow and complex process which cannot be mapped onto a narrative of political and military 'decline'. It is nevertheless true that the often violent ending of Roman imperial rule in Europe did have enormous consequences. Kobyliński's account of the formation of the Slavs in a world made unstable by the disappearance of Roman power firmly brings home the point that those consequences were felt far beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. Hillenbrand and Hedeager investigate the consequences of the end of the Roman cultural and political domination in regions as far apart as Arabia and Scandinavia. In our period, the various governing regimes in France, Italy, Spain and Britain were decidedly 'post-Roman' in the sense that it was the vacuum caused by the disintegration of Roman government which brought them into being. Likewise, changes in education, religion, art and architecture can be described in relation to the failing state of the Roman Empire. And of course, the most dramatic post-Roman movement of all, the rise of Islam, made a clear connection between the failure of Roman power and the need for a new system to replace it.

Although the end of Roman rule did have immediate consequences, the more lasting result was the gradual adaptation of European, Middle Eastern and North African societies to changing economic, political, religious and military realities. The 'Transformation of the Roman World' is the way in which this process is usually described, and the subject of transformation has been a major focus of international scholarship over the past decade. It has taken the form of the European Science Foundation 'Transformation of the Roman World' project which will lead to the publication of no less than eighteen volumes of essays on different aspects of change between 400 and 800. The organisation of this massive multidisciplinary collaboration was thematic. The present volume of just twenty-nine essays, organised on a chronological and regional as well as thematic basis, stands to the 'Transformation of the Roman World' project as a kind of handbook of history. It sets out what is known about the development of each region as concisely as possible on the basis of the available source materials, and in reflection of present scholarly consensus. One cannot read the collection without coming to the conclusion that in our period every region of Europe was in a process of adjusting to the new post-Roman conditions, but 'transformation' itself is not the explicit focus of the volume. To have made it so would have been to anticipate future developments rather too keenly, and organising the volume around the theme of 'transformation' would have

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The history of Europe 500–700*

3

imposed too rigid an overview on our material. Each region must speak for itself, through whatever sources have survived. Generally the voices are too close to the memory of Roman culture to express a sense of transformation.

It is striking that the 'Transformation of the Roman World' project followed developments through into the ninth century. The two centuries from 500 AD saw that adjustment to new conditions which would set the agenda for future development, but it is only when one looks back from the ninth century that one can get a clear sense of what it was that the late Roman world had transformed into. It would be in the eighth century that the changes of the earlier period would give birth to new political, social and economic formations. As Lebecq explains, it was in the period 500–700 that the 'North Sea economy' emerged. The simultaneous decline of Mediterranean exchange networks, as described by Loseby, would see a northward shift in the centre of gravity of European culture. This is the context in which we see the consolidation of a dominant power in central and south-eastern England, namely, the kingdom of Mercia. It was likewise in the mid-eighth century that a new dynasty, the Carolingians, emerged in Francia. This was the dynasty which would change the balance of power in continental Europe, extending Frankish power to the Baltic in the north and to the Adriatic in the south. One result of this violent expansion would be the collapse of Avar power in central Europe and in its wake we see the stabilisation of the various Slav cultures whose origins Kobyliński traces so assiduously. The rise of a powerful Bulgarian state would be another consequence of the collapse of Avar power. It was also at this time that the Muslim caliphate shifted to Iraq and into the hands of the 'Abbasid dynasty. The Visigothic civilisation of Spain, the building of which Loring treats in some detail, came to an abrupt end when subjected to the pulse of Islamic conquest. Byzantium's reaction to the loss of its Middle Eastern and North African provinces to the Arabs in the seventh century, a shock dealt with from two different points of view here, by Louth and by Hillenbrand, would be worked out in religious and military terms in the course of the eighth century.

In each of these areas we are dealing with the further consequences of post-Roman development, but by the ninth century we are no longer in a post-Roman world. Now, when people wished to account for their history, culture and institutions, these they traced not to the Roman world, but to themselves. The eighth and ninth centuries boasted many authors who did this. For Bede in England, history effectively began with the coming of the Anglo-Saxons to the island of Britain, and concerned itself with the conversion to Christianity of those incomers, thus focussing on the seventh century. In Italy Paul the Deacon wrote the history of the Lombard people knowing very little of their early history or origins. Like that of Bede, Paul's history had a strongly contemporary

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message. In Francia, the new dynasty of the Carolingians embarked upon the unique exercise of justifying their assumption of power by denigrating their predecessors, the consequently much maligned Merovingians. They too were in effect writing near contemporary history. So in all three areas a sense of continuity with the Roman past was broken. It is a mark of the distance now felt between the present and that past that the Carolingians began to speak of a 'renewal' of society. They were very impressed by Roman culture, going to great lengths to imitate it, but they thought of themselves as different from, and actually rather superior, to the Romans. When Charlemagne was famously crowned 'Roman emperor' in the year 800, the Franks were clear that his empire was something new and different: it was a Frankish and Christian empire. It is interesting to note that much of the thinking about 'renewing' or 'correcting' society, that is, bringing to it a proper Christian order, originated in England and in Ireland. These were two areas that felt themselves to have little connection with the Roman past, except, of course, in terms of its religious legacy. Here we meet the perfect growing conditions for the developments in Christian education and learning that Fontaine describes.

With the special exception of Justinian's reign, in our period there was not much sense of 'renewal', but there was a sense of progress. Following the lead of Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, learning in the Christian world privileged the religious over the secular: in Fontaine's words, all learned culture became 'a means oriented towards a religious end which surpassed it'. This was progress, because it promised salvation. Wood points out that 'Christianisation' was a far more complex process than the conversion of the heathen. Christian culture, as opposed to the faith of the Gospels, was shot through with pagan or pre-Christian influences and practices. In Rome itself, for instance, Christian festivals held in January of each year involved identifiably pagan elements. The English missionary Boniface complained about this in the mid-eighth century, but the practices continued into the twelfth century. The writers of our period, however, were, like Boniface, perfectly clear in their minds about what was Christian and what was not, and about the differences between the sacred and the profane.

The desire to advance Christian society is what inspired the quartet of historians upon whom we rely for the traditional picture of what happened in the West in our period. These writers, whom Walter Goffart described as the 'narrators of barbarian history', are Jordanes and Gregory of Tours from the sixth century, and from the eighth century Bede and Paul the Deacon, who wrote about earlier times. In the works of Procopius, writing in the East in the sixth century, the Christian agenda is less obvious than conventions of writing history in the classical tradition, although, as Halsall and Louth explain, that tradition would largely disappear after Procopius. There was of course a host of

other writers of history in the West – Gildas, John of Biclaro, Isidore of Seville, or the chronicler known as ‘Fredegar’ to name but a few – but the works of our quartet are essential in providing what seems to be a continuous narrative that gives specific areas a comprehensible history. Halsall demonstrates how these narratives have been reinterpreted by modern historians. Not only have what might be termed ‘nationalist’ interpretations been challenged, the very sense that history can be reduced to narrative has been questioned. The works of Jordanes, Gregory, Bede and Paul the Deacon are sufficiently long, well provenanced and coherently written to allow analysis in literary critical mode, and this too has undermined confidence in the relevance and objectivity of their narrative. In short, we now understand more about these works as texts rather than as definitive histories.

Despite misgivings about traditional narrative approaches to the history of this period, it is clear that the four great narrative works retain an enormous hold over the imagination. The chapters in this volume refer to our narrative sources, and not just to the four, again and again. Look, for example, at how much of Van Dam on Gaul/Francia in the sixth century is drawn from the works of Gregory of Tours, or at the extent to which Thacker on seventh-century England relies on Bede’s *History*. For although we have learned to treat such texts with circumspection, it would be perverse not to make as much use of them as possible, especially as they are often our sole window on events. These works do, after all, allow us to tell a coherent (if sometimes misleading) story about regions that would develop into nations and play a leading role in the formation of Europe. The history of regions for which there is no clear narrative tradition may appear by comparison as impenetrable. This has often been the case with Celtic societies, often regarded as distinctly odd or even exotic. Davies and Stancliffe both show how to approach the history of the Celtic regions, demolishing modern myths and pulling together the disparate evidence to explain how they developed. Likewise Hedeager can discuss the thought world of early Scandinavia without the help of any contemporary writing from the region itself. Kobyliński too must conjure the Slavs out of the writings of other peoples, and in all these cases we see just how much archaeology can be used to fill gaps in our understanding.

Hamerow’s chapter on ‘The earliest Anglo-Saxon kingdoms’ shows that we are almost completely dependent upon the archaeological record for ideas of how lowland Britain became Anglo-Saxon England. Here we find evidence of assimilation and acculturation between natives and newcomers which stands in contrast to the narratives of Anglo-Saxon invasion and conquest which come to us from Gildas and Bede. In fact Hamerow’s Anglo-Saxons have much in common with Kobyliński’s Slavs, in the way that both groups formed ‘new’ peoples, the identities of which were expressed through material culture. And

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

in both cases we have narrative material which seems to know nothing of how these peoples were formed, but which treats them as long-established, readily identifiable groups which were well aware of their position in the world. Of course, we cannot expect a Gildas, a Procopius, or even a Bede, to have been able to report on a process of ethnogenesis, nor could they have articulated a notion of acculturation, for both are distinctly modern conceptions. Rather than seeing the formation of new groups, early medieval writers thought in terms of conflict between established peoples. Some of them might have arrived only recently in a given area, but they had come as a discrete 'people'. This is how Gildas described the arrival of the 'Saxons' in England, a picture which Bede elaborated to make three discrete groups of invaders, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes. The archaeological evidence does not support Gildas' picture of the 'fire and sword' conquest of Britain which followed the arrival of the Saxons. One conclusion to draw from this is that Gildas actually knew very little of what happened in Britain in the century before he wrote. Or, at least, that he turned what he did know into a conventional narrative. Bede then added to the story, giving it a chronology and geography, but in reality he knew little more of the 'coming of the Saxons' than Gildas.

The case of Bede and the history of the English reminds us that our major narrative sources are decidedly patchy in their coverage and reliability. It is naturally true that they know most of events close to their own times, and they tend to back-project the conditions with which they were familiar in order to make sense of a confusing past. Thus Bede's division of the fifth century invaders into Angles, Saxons and Jutes was a reflection of the political geography of England in the seventh and early eighth century which Thacker describes. One wonders, similarly, how much Jordanes knew of the early history of the Goths, or how much Gregory of Tours knew about his hero, King Clovis. Perhaps the most unsettling uncertainty of all, and one in which archaeology helps but little, is the history of the Lombards in the seventh century.

As Moorhead demonstrates, one can say quite a lot about later sixth-century Italy by drawing on papal, Byzantine and Frankish sources, but for the history of the Lombards we are dependent upon the account of Paul the Deacon which was written in the later eighth century. For the early history, Paul the Deacon relied upon a now lost source, the history of Secundus of Non, or 'of Trent', as he is sometimes called. Secundus was an adviser at the court of King Agilulf (590–616). He seems to have known much about the early Lombard leaders, but very little about how and where the Lombards were settled in Italy. Paul the Deacon's history is likewise narrowly political and military. It does contain colourful and dramatic anecdotes, but it is a thin narrative which allows us to see little of what went on beyond the confines of the royal courts. The Frankish chronicle known as Fredegar was interested

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

in the contacts between the Lombard and Frankish rulers in the first half of the seventh century, principally because the Lombard king Agilulf took a Frankish bride, Theudelinda, and their daughter Gundeberga would play an important role in Lombard politics. Fouracre discusses Fredegar's treatment of Gundeberga. When the chronicle of Fredegar ends in the 640s, our information on relations between Franks and Lombards stops more or less dead. We can glean a little more from Paul the Deacon, and he also tells us about growing connections between the Agilolfing rulers of Bavaria and the Lombards in the early eighth century. These connections clearly went back a long way, for, as we have seen, one early Lombard king, Agilulf, bore the same name as that of the Bavarian dynasty. The Lombard–Bavarian alliance would eventually spell disaster for both sets of rulers when in the later eighth century Charlemagne felt that it threatened his security. As a result, both Lombard Italy and Bavaria were incorporated into the Frankish empire. Paul the Deacon's history of the Lombards was written in the aftermath of Frankish conquest, and it closed with the reign of King Liutprand (d. 744), when the Lombards were at the height of their powers in Italy. The sequel was possibly too painful or too politically sensitive to write.

Apart from Paul the Deacon, we have a considerable body of law in the so-called *Edict of Rothari* from the mid-seventh century. Wormald discusses this legislation in terms of what it tells us about Lombard kingship. Otherwise, we are nearly in the dark. It is claimed that the 'Three Chapters' dispute, to which both Moorhead and Louth refer, rumbled on until it was finally ended at the Synod of Pavia in 698. Lombard support for schismatic bishops in Milan and Aquileia had been a useful way for the rulers to present themselves as the champions of Italian independence in the face of Byzantine interference. This was especially true in the early Lombard period when memories of the emperor Justinian's intransigence were at their strongest. There is no hagiography from Lombard Italy, and later cults are almost impossible to trace back beyond the eighth century. In fact, so little is known about relations between the Lombards and the native Catholics before the eighth century that historians have found it impossible to agree on what religion the Lombards followed in the late sixth and seventh centuries. Were they stubbornly pagan, or perhaps Arian, or maybe Catholic, or even not particularly interested in religious matters? The latter, at least, seems very unlikely given that religion occupied a central place in the mentality of every other early medieval society we know about.

Muddying the waters still more is a famous passage in Paul the Deacon's history: it says that in the time of King Cleph (572–574) and shortly afterwards the Lombards killed or drove out the more powerful Romans, killed many other Roman nobles and made the rest tributaries. This has been taken to mean that quite literally the Roman elite in the Lombard areas was completely destroyed.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

In the eyes of the papacy, the Lombards were 'that most wicked people', their name being almost a synonym for senseless violence. It is, however, possible to come up with a much less pessimistic and far more credible picture of the Lombards' cultural assimilation into Italian society, and it is much to be regretted that this volume was not able to include a planned chapter on 'Romans and Lombards in Italy' that would have explained in some detail how the various scraps of evidence do actually support a more positive view. It must suffice here to note that when we know more about the Lombard areas of Italy from the eighth century onwards, they do not show signs of having suffered chaos, disruption or genocide. Though the papacy continued to hurl insults at the Lombard rulers, at times the popes co-operated with them, and even depended upon their help. When charters begin to survive (from the mid-eighth century onwards) they reveal a society which had preserved much of Roman property law, and the notaries to allow even small transactions to be recorded. It is clear that a degree of functional literacy, and the bureaucracy to go with it, had continued throughout the Lombard period. By the time Paul the Deacon was writing, the Lombard language, dress and even hairstyles had all disappeared. Finally, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Frankish conquest of the Lombard kingdom in 774 was a seminal moment in the cultural revival that took place under Charlemagne. Intellectual capital, as well as the usual forms of treasure, was taken back to Francia. Again, this suggests that the seventh century had been a time of cultural fusion and development rather than of wholesale destruction.

The other area that is not covered in the present volume (although it is featured in subsequent volumes) is the rural economy. In this case, no chapter was ever planned, simply because there is insufficient material to write such a history for the period 500–700. It is only after 700 that we get the kind of detail we need to do this. The detail comes from charters which deal with transactions involving land, and which often name the peasant tenants of a given estate. Then, beginning in the ninth century we have the estate surveys known as polyptychs. Surviving surveys of this type were drawn up for ecclesiastical institutions at the heart of Francia, that is, between the rivers Loire and Rhine. They not only list peasant tenants over wide areas, but also specify what rents and services they owed. From the surveys we can see what was produced, and how institutions could collect a surplus. For evidence for rural markets, where that surplus might be exchanged, we have to wait until the end of the ninth century. Without information on tenants, tenancies, rents, services, land usage, surplus collection and exchange, we are left with some rather formulaic references to land and the people who worked the land in the earliest Frankish charters (from the mid-seventh century). As we have just seen, there are no charters from Italy in this period, and none from Spain either. The few that

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Edited by Paul Fouracre

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The history of Europe 500–700*

9

survive from Anglo-Saxon England pre-700 describe land, but not the people on it. Laws do deal with rural communities, and do refer to activities in the rural economy, such as bee-keeping or cattle-herding, but we can draw from them only the most general statements about rural life. The exception is the laws of Ine, from Wessex in England at the very end of our period, for these do go into much more detail about peasant activities and tenant obligations. We cannot, however, generalise from this unique collection.

Archaeology can tell us about the nature of settlements and their material culture. Hamerow, Kobylński and Hedeager, as we have seen, make the most of this evidence when faced with the lack of written material. Halsall discusses the changing interpretation of such evidence. But detailed though particular site investigations might be, again we can draw from them only general inferences about the rural economy and social structure. It is clear from a reading of Blackburn, Lebecq and Loseby that more specific conclusions can actually be drawn about long-distance exchange than about rural life. As Loseby explains in some detail, analysis of pottery remains is crucial to understanding the evolution of regional exchange economies in our period. Lebecq can do the same for the North Sea trading network from the evidence of material (above all, metalwork and coinage) found in coastal emporia; Blackburn demonstrates the wealth of information to be gleaned from coinage. The difficulty lies in evaluating this information in the wider social and economic context.

Although we can say relatively little about peasants, it must be assumed that they were the main producers of wealth in our period. Land was the basis of power, and the ways in which land was often held on a temporary basis, could be given as the support for office, and could be divided and inherited in portions, all presume a stable workforce which produced wealth for immediate access by a possible variety of masters. Laws which maintained a fierce division between the free and unfree suggest that the unfree formed a key component of the workforce. It is the unfree who in later charters are named and inventoried as part of the stock on lands which changed hands. The free are prominent in the laws: they are the normative social element. It is, however, impossible to determine the extent of a class of free peasant proprietors, for typically they leave no trace in narrative or early charter sources. It is also impossible to see where a dividing line came between the free and the nobility. Although the latter are the subject of narrative sources, and it is they who figure in land transactions, it is surprisingly hard to see how people were defined as 'noble'. The term 'noble' covers a wide social spectrum. Historians often use the term 'aristocracy' to refer to the more powerful in society, but no early medieval people used the word. They distinguished people in terms of power and wealth, often using comparative adjectives, and they did refer to specific offices which carried with them the highest social status, but overall, terms

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

of social class and distinction remained rather vague. Early medieval Europe was undoubtedly made up of hierarchical societies, but the vagueness of social terminology suggests that elites were not closed in this period. The changing fortunes of families subject to war and facing conditions of fierce competition for limited resources, plus a general tendency to divide inheritances, worked to provide a measure of exchange mobility. Such a generalisation must, of course, be broken down to suit what were very different regions and histories.

One can make a rough distinction here between areas more or less influenced by the culture and practice of Roman government. In the more Romanised areas there was the survival to a significant degree of offices and honorific titles which conveyed high social status. Likewise there survived categories of lesser status, and, as we have seen, unfreedom was widespread. Early medieval social structures in this sense evolved directly from later Roman hierarchies: in southern Europe, at least, in 700 at the top there were *senatores*, and at the bottom *servi*, just as there had been in the year 400. This social continuity is all the more striking when we consider the changing economic, political and military environment. Byzantium is a case in point here. The two centuries of Byzantine history that Louth deals with were a time of enormous change and adjustment. The Byzantine Empire was transformed from a widespread empire of city-based communities, into a much smaller state dominated by one metropolis (Constantinople), with city life fast in decline everywhere else. Armies were pulled back from lost provinces, and the theme system, which subordinated civil to military government, began to form. The Empire's social structure nevertheless retained its late antique form. Even in the tenth century, when government complained about the exploitation of the weak by the powerful, they employed the same rhetorical criticism of the excess of power that we see in the West in the fifth century.

In the West, we have most source material from Gaul/Francia. Van Dam and Fouracre can show how a political economy based on land evolved from the more bureaucratic later Roman government, a government that had been able to rely on considerable taxation. A significant factor in the maintenance of widespread political authority at a time of sharply declining revenues was a high degree of social stability and continuity. *Senatores*, for instance, were still visible in the late seventh-century Auvergne. From Loring's account, Spain too retained a social structure inherited from Roman times. From what little we know, in Visigothic Spain the social hierarchy seems to have been even more conservative, and oppressive, than in Francia. Where Italy is concerned, more guesswork is necessary, but as we have just seen, there is reason to think that there was a great deal of continuity in social structure there too. As Davies and Stancliffe both demonstrate, the Celtic countries of Europe were not quite so exotically different as is often claimed. The term 'Celtic' also covers a wide