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Introduction: using the past, interpreting the present, influencing the future

Matthew Innes

The past was a very real presence in early medieval societies.[1] It might provide a legitimating template for the current order of things, explaining how things were meant to be thus, or an image of an ideal order, a Golden Age against which the present could be judged. Within a social group, shared beliefs about the past were a source of identity: the image of a common past informed a *Wir-Gefühl*[2] (a sense of 'us-ness'), and the defining characteristics of that past identified those who were and were not part of 'us' in the present. This volume brings together a series of eleven essays studying different aspects of the past and its functions in European society between the fourth and twelfth centuries AD. Its central themes are the importance of ideas about the past in defining early medieval societies; and the role of the present in moulding these understandings of the past. What were the mechanisms which transmitted ideas about the past? To what extent were these mechanisms manipulated by wielders of cultural and political power? How far could the past be reshaped by the needs of the present? These are some of the questions we hope to answer. We are also concerned with the implications of these questions for our sources for the history of early medieval Europe. If early medieval historical writings were representations of the past made for present purposes, then we clearly need to understand the parameters within which they were shaped.

Neither the volume as a whole, nor this introduction, should be read as a manifesto for any school or methodology. The coherence of these essays comes from the common concerns of scholars from diverse historiographical traditions writing from a multiplicity of perspectives

[1] H.-W. Goetz, 'Die Gegenwart der Vergangenheit im früh- und hochmittelalterliche Geschichtsbewußtsein', *Historische Zeitschrift* 255 (1992), pp. 61–97, is an excellent discussion of the consciousness of the past in the early and high Middle Ages.

[2] The term was coined by W. Eggert and B. Pätzold, *Wir-Gefühl und regnum Saxonum bei frühmittelalterlichen Geschichtsschreibern* (Berlin, 1984).

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and dealing with different kinds of source material. These common concerns are the result of a series of stimuli which have affected all the contributors, and – hardly surprisingly, as all are professional historians who specialize in the study of the early Middle Ages – elicited similar responses. Some of our common concerns relate specifically to the development of early medieval history as a discipline since the 1970s, but most are manifestations of a series of wider intellectual developments affecting historical writing, indeed academic work in the humanities as a whole, in the late twentieth century. Although, then, these essays deal with western Europe between the fourth and twelfth centuries AD, their central themes – the relationship between texts and their social and cultural context, the mechanisms which construct shared views about the past, and the problems of using self-conscious representations of a past society as sources for the study of that society – will be of interest to all those involved in the study of the historical past.

Interest in the representation of the past in the early Middle Ages is in many ways the outgrowth of a long-established tradition of source-criticism. It was the proper practice of *Quellenkritik*, indeed, which, in the second half of the nineteenth century, came to define the study of history as an independent discipline with its own professional practitioners. For various reasons – not least, the difficulty of the sources and the difficulty of deriving an agreed 'factual' account from them – early medieval history for much of the twentieth century remained methodologically underdeveloped, insulated (others would say immune) from the new types of historical writing which were developing in other fields.[3] In that this positivist agenda largely relied on establishing the 'reliability' or otherwise of written sources, and in that the major written accounts on which historians attempted to base the stories which they told were themselves historical narratives, this inevitably led to interest in the writing of history in the early Middle Ages. Here, already before the war, scholars such as (to give just one example) Siegmund Hellmann were analysing written accounts in terms of the ways in which their authors achieved literary and ideological goals. That is, rather than simply judging their sources' plausibility as neutral witnesses, a greater understanding of their literary and intellectual contexts allowed early medieval historians to be seen to be consciously

[3] Of course, in many ways national historiographies have always been a determining factor, particularly before the current generation, but my generalization still seems valid: in spite of the interest of the likes of Henri Pirenne and Marc Bloch in the early Middle Ages, the mainstream of early medieval history long remained wedded to a traditional agenda.

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styling their accounts in particular ways: they could thus be exploited as sources for what Hellmann's pupil, Helmut Beumann, styled *Ideengeschichte*, the history of ideas about salient features of society (normally, in fact, kingship).[4] This approach, which spawned a whole school of German scholarship, was given a new spin in 1988 by the Canadian historian Walter Goffart. In a study of four of the canonical texts in early medieval history, Goffart argued that Jordanes' *Gothic History*, Gregory of Tours' *Histories*, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and Paul the Deacon's *History of the Lombards*, needed to be read as literary arguments, whose authors drew upon classical historiographical and rhetorical traditions inherited wholesale in representing the past of their societies to make a point about the present. In many ways, much of Goffart was already implicit in the work of Beumann or Heinz Löwe, but the way it was said prompted real debate: in some eyes, Goffart became a post-modernist who was arguing that conventional histories which attempted to reconstruct the 'facts' from these authors could not be written. Partly the reaction was due to Goffart's explicit citation of literary criticism, and in particular the work of Hayden White, in the course of his argument: the reception of his work was thus tied into a wider contemporary debate about post-modernism in academic life, and the 'linguistic turn' in historical writing.[5]

In fact, early medievalists being by and large a pragmatic bunch, the extreme position which would contend that all that we can work with is discourse, there being no reality external to that discourse, has had no real takers in early medieval studies. But the heightened consciousness of the constructedness of the sources has led to a series of interesting responses, which have much in common. In particular, techniques which were developed to enable the historical study of saints' lives – apparently barren material because of their domination by convention

[4] See, for example, the collected essays in S. Hellmann, *Ausgewählte Abhandlungen zur Historiographie und Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters* (Darmstadt, 1961) and H. Beumann, *Ideengeschichtliche Studien zu Einhard und anderen Geschichtsschreibern des frühen Mittelalters* (Darmstadt, 1962). The important anthology edited by C. Holdsworth and T. P. Wiseman, *The Inheritance of Historiography, AD350–900* (Exeter, 1986) rests on recognizably similar concerns: the contrast between that and the current volume makes clear the reorientation that has taken place subsequently.

[5] W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (AD 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988). For the work of Löwe see his collected essays, *Von Cassiodor zu Dante. Ausgewählte Aufsätze zu Geschichtsschreibung und politischen Ideenwelt des Mittelalters* (Berlin and New York, 1973). Hayden White's *œuvre* is best represented by *Metahistory* (Baltimore, 1973) and his collection of essays, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London, 1987); for the 'linguistic turn' and post-modernism, see G. Speigel, 'History, post-modernism and the social logic of the text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 65 (1990), pp. 59–86, and the debate on 'History and post-modernism', *Past & Present* 131, 133, 135 (1992).

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– have been fruitfully applied to a range of other genres.[6] Texts are to be related to their context, and read as coherent statements designed to have an effect on a contemporary audience. Reading a text necessitates the assembly of as much data as possible about the author's chronological, geographical, social and cultural locations as a key to unlock historical context. This is precisely what recent research has done, and it has followed, broadly, two patterns. Firstly, scholars have studied the ways in which early medieval historians explained the past in terms of God's agency, providing counsel for current rulers in the messages they drew. Writing about the past thus emerges as an act of power, in that it sought to influence action in the present.[7] Secondly, contextual reading has also allowed historical works to be seen as statements of their authors' attitudes about the proper ordering of society.[8]

Such was the state of play when the current volume was first envisaged and the essays contained in it planned: hence the emphasis of the title, on *using* the past. In their completed form, these essays take the debate forward, exemplifying a number of newer concerns. The stress on context has excited precisely because it shifts attention towards texts as products of individual intelligences.[9] This has produced some stunning results, but the epistemological and ontological problems of accessing the author through contextual reading of the text, well known from debates in other disciplines, need acknowledging. There are also historical problems with such a procedure. The data about context, for example, are inevitably incomplete and available largely by chance and so we can only ever relate a text to a partial reconstruction of its context. There is also a danger of projecting a unifying intelligence behind works which may have shifted in form and been subject to multiple authorship. Indeed, it has even been suggested that a certain propensity to redrafting and reshaping in successive contexts may have been typical of many

6 See, for the ways in which historians have used saints' lives, P. J. Geary, 'Saints, scholars and society: the elusive goal', *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London, 1994), pp. 9–29.

7 K.-F. Werner, 'Gott, Herrscher und Historiograph: Der Geschichtsschreiber als Interpret des Wirken Gottes in der Welt und Ratgeber der Könige, 4–12. Jht.', in E.-D. Hehl, H. Seibert and F. Staab (eds.), *Deus qui mutat tempora: Menschen und Institutionen im Wandel des Mittelalters. Festschrift A. Becker* (Sigmaringen, 1987), pp. 1–31.

8 See H.-W. Goetz, *Strukturen der spätkarolingischen Epoche im Spiegel der Vorstellungen eines zeitgenössischen Mönchs. Eine Interpretation der Gesta Karoli Notkers von Sankt Gallen* (Bonn, 1982); M. Heinzelmann, *Gregor von Tours 'Zehn Bücher Geschichte': Historiographie und Gesellschaftskonzept im 6. Jht.* (Darmstadt, 1994).

9 This paragraph owes much to Patrick Geary's analysis of the current state of play, and of reactions to Goffart's book, in a 1993 symposium – preserved, as delivered orally, in A. Scharer and G. Scheibelreiter (eds.), *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichte 32 (Vienna, 1994), pp. 539–42.

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early medieval texts.[10] Current research is tackling these problems head on. One area in which there has been important recent work is in the study of the original manuscripts of these texts as witnesses to their audience and reception, exemplified by Rosamond McKitterick's chapter in this volume. Walter Pohl also returns to the manuscripts, stressing the complex, shifting webs of Lombard tradition, and the role of their written redactors at nodal points within it.

Our awareness of the literary nature of our sources has led to study of how they work as texts.[11] One particularly fertile ground for analysis has been the implication of organizing written accounts of the past in narrative form, with events placed within a closed scheme of linear development. Catherine Cubitt's chapter demonstrates precisely how the creation of a coherent narrative reshaped material, before going on to relate the predilection for particular narrative conventions to their social context. Precisely because narrating is not 'telling things as they really were', but involves organizing them to fit a preconceived scheme, the study of narrative takes us beyond individual authors and invites us to relate them to the wider cultural world in which they worked. When individuals try to put together a coherent story about the past, they do so by drawing on standard patterns and expectations.[12]

Some narratives can come to shape the identity of an entire society. A series of contributors study what remains, in many ways, the most pervasive organizing story for historians of the early Middle Ages, that of the rise of the Franks under Carolingian leadership, the point being that the teleological metanarrative of Frankish triumph so often repeated by modern historians is based on the Carolingians' own self-representation in the historical narratives which serve us as sources. Following from McKitterick's analysis of political ideology in Frankish

[10] On 'soft' texts see e.g. J. L. Nelson, 'Public histories and private history in the work of Nithard', *Speculum* 60 (1985), pp. 251–93 [reprinted in J. L. Nelson, *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge, 1986), pp. 195–238]; M. Innes, 'Memory, orality and literacy in an early medieval society', *Past & Present* 158 (1998), pp. 3–36; R. McKitterick, 'L'idéologie politique dans l'historiographie carolingienne', in R. Le Jan (ed.), *La royauté et les élites dans l'Europe carolingienne* (Lille, 1998), pp. 59–70 [the English translation appears in this volume as chapter 7].

[11] See here G. de Nie, *Views from a Many-Windowed Tower. Studies in the Imagination of Gregory of Tours* (Amsterdam, 1986); J. M. Pizarro, *A Rhetoric of the Scene. Dramatic Narrative in the Early Middle Ages* (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 1989) and *Writing Ravenna* (Ann Arbor, 1995); F. Lifshitz, *The Norman Conquest of Pious Neustria. Historiographic Discourse and Relic Cults 684–1090* (Toronto, 1995). A useful survey of medieval texts generally is R. Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1991).

[12] These observations ultimately derive from the work of White: see particularly 'The value of narratology in the representation of reality', in *The Content of the Form*, pp. 1–12. I have found E. Tonkin, *Narrating our Pasts. The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge, 1992), particularly stimulating in its discussion of similar issues in non-textual narrative.

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history, Yitzhak Hen investigates the urgent needs in the present which lay behind the retelling of the Frankish past in wholly Carolingian terms dismissive of the Merovingian dynasty in one important ninth-century historical text. Mary Garrison and Mayke De Jong, in two important and complementary essays, offer the first two sustained studies of one of he most important Carolingian uses of the past, an intimate attachment to the biblical history of the Old Testament Israelites as a precursor to the Frankish present. Garrison traces the emergence of what was to become one of the standard tropes of Frankish political ideology under the Carolingians, the equation of the Franks with the Israelites of the Old Testament: an equation, she demonstrates, which was far from obvious or self-evident to the Franks, but was first made by outsiders and was internalized only slowly as the Frankish rulers came to re-educate their political community in the second half of the eighth century. Mayke De Jong explores the implications of this equation in the ninth century: debate on the biblical past became a code for thought about the Frankish present and thus a matter of real concern for Carolingian renaissance princes. These contributions likewise remind us that the past was not only conceived in linear, chronological terms: these elective affinities acquired their force from a typological mode of thought, in which the present was prefigured and explained in the Bible. The importance of the typological mentality is further stressed by Dominic Janes in his study of sacred art and architecture, which by offering the possibility of direct contact with the divine created pinpoints of timelessness where past, present and future merged.

Attempts to assess the significance of written representations of the past have encouraged work on the interface between the surviving sources and other, non-written, representations of the past: again, a shift from text to social context. This has been strongly influenced by current debate on the relationship between history and memory, whose rapid rise to historiographical prominence in the past decade seems to mirror a deep but as yet unidentified late twentieth-century intellectual need. (Indeed, it shows the scholarly maturity of early medieval history after a quarter of a century of quantitative growth and qualitative diversification that work on early medieval memory has been at the crest of this historiographical *nouvelle vague*, something that would have been scarcely thinkable before the 1970s.[13]) Although the buzzword, memory, rests on

[13] I am thinking in particular of the monograph by Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance. Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, 1994), and the general work co-authored by James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford, 1992). In medieval studies generally, the recent interest in history as memory might even be seen as an outgrowth of earlier work on

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an analogy between the ways in which societies construct their pasts and individual human remembrance, the study of social or collective memory is really the study of the common cultural pool which informed a vision of the collective past, explaining how and why present society came into being. For notions of memory to be meaningful, they must be specific: collective memory is by its very nature multivalent, with different memories being accessed by different groups in different situations. For the early medievalist, an additional problem is the written nature of our source material: we are inevitably studying memory at one remove, through a literary filter. Thus those who recorded the past in written form emerge as adaptors and editors of memory, but also as the authors of 'texts of identity' which in turn inform that memory.[14]

One of the features of this volume, indeed, is precisely that it is not simply an account of early medieval historical writing, but offers analysis of a much wider range of mechanisms which transmitted the past: as well as written histories, we encounter laws and buildings, documents and oral tradition. Notions of memory have proved attractive because they enable us to use a wide range of types of source material, and do not predicate a single, fixed, meaning. Memory, unlike tradition, is a concept that implies both continuity and transformation, and also allows for heterogeneity and malleability, phenomena stressed in Matthew Innes' reassessment of the evidence for transmission of oral traditions about heroic figures from the past. Other contributions stress the ways in which radical changes were negotiated by reworking identity-affirming traditions to meet new needs. Thus Rob Meens shows how the changing treatment of canon law by church councils was integral to the redefinition of Christian identity in the Merovingian period. Similarly, Marios Costambeys shows how what on first inspection might appear a stable body of thought about the monastic life was transformed as the social function of monasticism changed radically between the sixth and eighth centuries. Finally, Cristina La Rocca investigates the invention and

mnemonics and liturgical commemoration: M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory. A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1990); J. Coleman, *Ancient and Medieval Memories. Studies in the Reconstruction of the Past* (Cambridge, 1992); D. Geuenich and O. G. Oexle (eds.), *Memoria in der Gesellschaft des Mittelalters* (Göttingen, 1994).

[14] See, for ethnic identity, W. Pohl, 'Tradition, Ethnogenese und literarische Gestaltung: eine Zwischenbilanz', in K. Brunner and B. Merta (eds.), *Ethnogenese und Überlieferung. Angewandte Methoden der Frühmittelalterforschung*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichte 31 (Vienna, 1994), pp. 9–26; for social identities, Innes, 'Memory, orality and literacy'; C. Wickham, 'Lawyer's time: history and memory in tenth- and eleventh-century Italy', in H. Mayr-Harting and R. I. Moore (eds.), *Studies in Medieval History presented to R. H. C. Davis* (London, 1985), pp. 53–71, and J. Byock, 'Saga form, oral prehistory and the Icelandic social context', *New Literary History* 16 (1984), pp. 153–73, relate the genre of written traditions to their social contexts.

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elaboration of a largely fictitious Carolingian past in later medieval, early modern and modern Verona. This raises an important issue: when was it possible to get the past wholly wrong, simply to invent? As La Rocca shows, it was precisely because so much had been forgotten about the Carolingian past that the fictitious figure of Pacificus could be constructed: Pacificus, moreover, was a potent fiction precisely because he fitted preconceptions of what the Carolingian past ought to have been like. None of the users of the past that we are studying lived in a black hole of discourse: all were attempting to communicate to a present audience, and so, as Pohl reminds us, they had to construct a plausible version of that past.

Collectively, these essays demonstrate that the past was a vital force in early medieval societies. Yet precisely because of its potency, the past was a matter of debate, constantly being reshaped. We certainly cannot see the early Middle Ages as they are sometimes presented, a 'traditional' and 'archaic' world bound by the force of custom, where the power of the past led to a form of social inertia and a snail-like pace of change. Does not such a view of the period itself constitute a use of the past? It is an image which has strong echoes in popular images of pre-modernity as a kind of Prelapsarian Heritageland. Such an image is, of course, a form of self-definition in the present: this is what things are like now, and here is the photographic negative of the present, which might variously or simultaneously be a celebration of our progress, and a commentary on our failings. When it is dressed up in academic clothes, this image of pre-modernity can be conveniently anchored in a specific earlier period, providing a ready-made backdrop for later development. One of the consequences of the relative backwardness of early medieval history for much of the twentieth century, and of widespread and mistaken belief in the inadequacy of the evidence, was to make the presentation of the early Middle Ages as just such a backdrop a recurrent historiographical temptation. This is not to deny that the early Middle Ages were different from later periods, and the important quantitative and qualitative changes in the source material as one moves from the third century to the thirteenth. But to set up the early Middle Ages as a stateless, oral, organic Other is to avoid engaging with the early medieval evidence, and the growing confidence and sophistication of early medieval historians. The early Middle Ages were one of the most dramatic periods in our past. This volume helps us to understand how, through a dialogue with their past, contemporaries were able to negotiate their way through change.

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CHAPTER I

Memory, identity and power in Lombard Italy

Walter Pohl

In 1222, a notary from Piacenza, Johannes Codagnellus, told a very uplifting story. Many centuries ago, he wrote, Longobards (*Longobardi*) under their king Gisulf had invaded this part of Lombardy. But in a terrible battle, another people called the Lombards (*Lombardi*) succeeded in defeating the invaders and putting them to flight.[1] In a northern Italian commune troubled by successive interventions of emperors from Germany, the public may have been pleased with such an example of self-assertion. They may not have been aware of the paradox implied in this way of 'using the past': in the sixth century, in this part of Italy the Roman Empire had succumbed to a 'Germanic' invasion by the Longobards, whose name was later turned into 'Lombards'. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, 'Germanic' Roman emperors invaded a country defended by 'Romanic' Lombards. Johannes Codagnellus had to stretch his material considerably, but his solution to 'double' the Lombards makes perfect sense in this contradictory situation.

Nowadays, Lombard origins are being used against another kind of 'Roman' interference, to argue for a secession of Padania from the bureaucracy in Rome which governs Italy. Such modern ideological contexts make early medieval barbarian 'histories', like those of the Lombards, an uncomfortable topic, full of risks and misunderstandings, but also more relevant to the contemporary world than most topics in early medieval history. They are also a field of scholarly polemic. Two conflicting modes of interpretation have stirred numerous debates. One school has brought together an impressive stock of ethnographic and mythological parallels to prove the basic authenticity of the material in

[1] Johannes Codagnellus, *Liber Rerum Gestarum*, ed. O. Holder-Egger, *Neues Archiv* 16 (1891), pp. 475–505, esp. p. 479. See J. W. Busch, 'Die Lombarden und die Langobarden', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 29 (1995), pp. 289–311.

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these histories, even where it is legendary.[2] Others have argued for the more or less fictional character of these texts.[3] The polemic has focused on two connected issues. One is the factual accuracy of the histories, especially those passages that deal with the remote period before the integration of Goths, Lombards or Anglo-Saxons into the late Roman world. Did Goths or Lombards come from Scandinavia, are the successive stages of their migration rendered correctly, and, probably more interesting, how reliable are the fragments of information about pagan beliefs and archaic societies in these histories? The second issue is more fundamental to the theme of this volume: did origin myths and histories have a function for the ethnic communities in which they were written down, or were their authors 'storytellers in their own right'[4] who only sought to entertain and to edify their contemporaries? Or, in short, what were the uses of the past in the early medieval *regna*? And, to add a further question: how did these uses shape the texts? Did they encourage codification or manipulation of historical narratives?

In the case of the Goths, Herwig Wolfram has proposed a rather complex model of the use of historical narrative in the *Getica*, a sixth-century Gothic history by Jordanes, and there has been a lively debate ever since.[5] Lombard texts have been studied less carefully. Those scholars who dealt with them mostly concentrated on the pivotal figure of Paul the Deacon who wrote his *Historia Langobardorum* towards the end of the eighth century, not long after the Carolingians had taken possession of the *regnum Langobardorum*.[6] But it may be misleading in this

[2] This approach was chosen by most pre-1945 German scholars. A more critical, but still optimistic view is found in post-war German scholarship (for instance R. Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung: Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen Gentes* (Cologne, 1961); 2nd edn (Cologne and Vienna, 1977) and in many contemporary Italian works. For the Lombards, see, for instance, S. Gasparri, *La cultura tradizionale dei Longobardi* (Spoleto, 1983).

[3] This point of view became popular in Anglo-American scholarship after the 'linguistic turn', and in early medieval studies with Walter Goffart's *The Narrators of Barbarian History AD 550–800. Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988). For a review of the debate, see W. Pohl, 'Tradition, Ethnogenese und literarische Gestaltung', in K. Brunner and B. Merta (eds.), *Ethnogenese und Überlieferung. Angewandte Methoden der Frühmittelalterforschung*, Veröffentlichungen des Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung 31 (Vienna, 1994), pp. 9–29.

[4] Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*, p. 428.

[5] H. Wolfram, *Die Goten. Von den Anfängen bis zur Mitte des 6. Jahrhunderts*, 3rd edn (Vienna and Munich, 1990); published in English as *History of the Goths* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1988); Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*; P. J. Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford, 1996); P. Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489–554* (Cambridge, 1977).

[6] Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* [hereafter: *HL*], ed. L. Bethmann and G. Waitz, MGH SRL (Hanover, 1878), pp. 12–187. Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*; W. Pohl, 'Paulus Diaconus und die *Historia Langobardorum*: Text und Tradition', in G. Scheibelreiter and A. Scharer (eds.), *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung 32 (Vienna, 1994), pp. 375–405, with further literature.

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