

Introduction: Framing History

The ninth-century British Latin pseudohistorical narrative known as the *Historia Brittonum*¹ opens by situating the island of Britain and its inhabitants temporally, geographically, and historically. After carrying the common late antique and early medieval set of calculations known as the *sex aetates mundi* (six ages of the world) through to the present day,² the author of the *Historia Brittonum* writes:³

Brittania insula a quodam Bruto, consule Romano, dicta. Haec consurgit ab Africo boreali ad occidentem versus. D CCC in longitudine milium, CC in latitudine spatium habet. In ea sunt viginti octo civitates et innumerabilia

¹ John Morris (ed. and trans.), *Nennius: British History and the Welsh Annals* (London: Phillimore & Co., 1980), from which all citations and translations are taken; the text of this edition is a reprint of Edmond Faral, *La légende arthurienne: Études et documents, Les plus anciens textes*, 3 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1929), vol. 3, 4–62. The *Historia Brittonum* was likely first compiled in 829–30 in north Wales. On its complex textual tradition, see David N. Dumville, ‘Some Aspects of the Chronology of the *Historia Brittonum*’, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 25 (1972): 439–45; ‘“Nennius” and the *Historia Brittonum*’, *Studia Celtica* 10/11 (1975–76): 78–95; ‘Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend’, *History* 62 (1977): 173–92; *The Historia Brittonum*, vol. 3: *The ‘Vatican’ Recension* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985); and ‘The Historical Value of the *Historia Brittonum*’, *Arthurian Literature* 6 (1986): 1–26; also Thomas Charles-Edwards, ‘The Arthur of History’, in Rachel Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman, and Brynley F. Roberts (eds.), *The Arthur of the Welsh* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), 15–32. Throughout this book, editions and translations from which primary source material will be cited are introduced in an initial footnote. Uncited translations are my own.

² This tradition became popular in the medieval west from Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* onward. For good recent discussions of the *sex aetates mundi* in insular tradition, see Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘“The Metaphorical Hector”: The Literary Portrayal of Murchad mac Briain’, in Ralph O’Connor (ed.), *Classical Literature and Learning in Medieval Irish Narrative* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 140–61 at 144–5 and Michael Clarke and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘The Ages of the World and the Ages of Man: Irish and European Learning in the Twelfth Century’, *Speculum* 95 (2020): 467–500.

³ The identity of the author of the *Historia Brittonum* has been debated: Dumville, ‘“Nennius” and the *Historia Brittonum*’, has argued for the Nennian preface as a late addition to the *Historia Brittonum*; its authenticity has been defended by P.J.C. Field, ‘Nennius and His History’, *Studia Celtica* 30 (1996): 159–65 and most recently Ben Guy, ‘The Origins of the Compilation of Welsh Historical Texts in Harley 3859’, *Studia Celtica* 49 (2015): 21–56.

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promuntoria cum innumeris castellis ex lapidibus et latere fabricatis, et in ea habitant quattuor gentes: Scotti, Picti, Saxones atque Brittones.

(The island of Britain is so called from one Brutus, a Roman consul. It reaches from the south-west northward, and lies to the west. It is 800 miles long, 200 broad. In it are twenty-eight cities and headlands without number, together with innumerable forts built of stone and brick, and in it live four nations, the Irish, the Picts, the Saxons and the British.)⁴

These short sentences contain a great deal of information about the tradition within which the author of the *Historia Brittonum* was writing and the narrative of history he envisioned for his text. Four key features are particularly noteworthy. The first is the legendary origin story that the island of Britain took its name from Brutus, a Roman consul. This eponymous ancestral figure, introduced as our first known piece of information about Britain, offers an origin narrative that explains the singularity of the island's prehistory whilst simultaneously tying it to the known history of the broader world. Yet several other features of this passage are also remarkably important to the framing of the *Historia Brittonum* and underscore some key arguments of this book as a whole. The geographical and physical description of Britain, while seemingly unremarkable, reveals that the author of the *Historia Brittonum* was aware of and participating in a long and learned intellectual tradition of geographical and historical texts extending back to the late antique period.⁵ In other words, while the *Historia Brittonum* is the only sustained historical narrative from Wales to survive from the earlier medieval period,⁶ it was far from written in isolation. The *Historia Brittonum* drew on a long tradition of previous material, just as subsequent insular histories would come to encompass this text in turn.⁷

These introductory sentences in the *Historia Brittonum* not only describe Britain's geographical location within the known world, they also place great weight on its status as an island. Unsurprisingly, the peoples who inhabited early medieval Britain and Ireland had a heightened sense of themselves as island-dwellers.⁸ Living on an island

⁴ Morris, *Nennius*, 59 and 18.

⁵ See A.H. Merrills, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁶ For the later period, see Owain Wyn Jones, *Historical Writing in Medieval Wales* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Bangor University, 2013).

⁷ See Robert W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain: From Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), chapter IV.

⁸ See Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 49 and 53 and *Writing the Map of Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 133–6; and for the extension of these themes in the later medieval period, Kathy Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000–1534* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,

had an immediate and visible impact on the rhythms of daily life, from food production to travel, communication, and trade. These islands were also identified as such in intellectual tradition, by a long chain of classical and late antique geographical texts.⁹ Crucially, awareness of their island status also shaped their inhabitants' understanding of their histories. A place that is only accessible via a sea crossing underscores, more so than other landscapes, the necessity that one's ancestors 'must' have originally traveled to Britain or Ireland from somewhere else. The brief introduction to Brutus in the *Historia Brittonum*'s opening passage crystallises these issues. When writing the history of their region, early medieval insular peoples sought to provide answers to some obvious questions. Who were their ancestors? Where did they come from? And why did they leave their homelands?

The introductory remarks of the *Historia Brittonum* also emphasise one crucial final fact: the awareness of early medieval historians and chroniclers that early medieval Britain and Ireland were inhabited by four peoples: the Irish, the Picts, the Anglo-Saxons, and the British.¹⁰ To turn to another passage slightly later in the same text, the *Historia Brittonum*'s (British) author makes clear that early medieval peoples were interested not only in their 'own' origins when he writes, 'si quis autem scire voluerit quando vel quo tempore fuit inhabitabilis et deserta Hibernia, sic mihi peritissimi Scottorum nuntiaverunt' (if anyone wants to know when Ireland was inhabited and when it was deserted, this is what the Irish scholars have told me).¹¹ Early medieval authors thus sought to provide answers to the same questions about their neighbours as they did about themselves. Who were their ancestors? Where did they come from? And why did they leave their homelands?

Over the course of the early medieval period, a discourse of origin narratives developed within the insular region. By the time of the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, an expansive origin legend had become attached to each of the four peoples who inhabited Britain and Ireland. This book explores the development of these origin stories in the early medieval period from (roughly) the departure of the Romans to the arrival of the Normans, i.e. the fifth to eleventh centuries CE, before turning to an examination of how they were treated by early modern chroniclers writing histories with a more nationalist bent. The key words here are 'discourse' and 'development'. As has been well documented, these origin legends were literary constructs that reflect contemporary

2006) and Sebastian I. Sobecki (ed.), *The Sea and Englishness in the Middle Ages: Maritime Narratives, Identity and Culture* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011).

⁹ Merrills, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity*, 254–60.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the terminology used to reference peoples throughout this book, see the discussion in Chapter One, 28–33.

¹¹ Morris, *Nennius*, 62 and 21.

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concerns at the time of their composition and not any historical reality of the so-called ‘migration era’ or ‘dark ages’.¹² They open a window into the period in which they were written, not the period in which they are set. This book explores the development of these stories – the origins of origin legends – as they were written in the early medieval period and later repurposed in early modern chronicles.

This book’s main arguments are usefully crystallised in the opening passage of the *Historia Brittonum*. The question of origins was heightened by an appreciation of geography. The reality that Britain and Ireland were a group of islands naturally brought narratives of travel and migration to the forefront, creating a logical foundation for the construction of a corpus of origin legends. As we have seen, the origin stories of the early medieval insular world were not written in isolation. They were embedded into broader historical chronicles, texts which themselves demonstrated significant participation in a longer intellectual tradition that stretched both backward and forward in time. The authors of these chronicles and histories demonstrated an awareness of all four peoples who inhabited the region and the desire to know the origin stories of each of them. Drawing these threads of investigation together for the first time, this book lays out the ways in which legendary origin narratives in early medieval Britain and Ireland formed a cohesive corpus that grew and developed together. Origin stories did not preserve ‘authentic’ memories from a people’s prehistory that were passed down unaltered through oral tradition until they could be safely embedded within later written chronicles and historical narratives.¹³ They were literary constructs: fluid, dynamic, and constructed to reflect contemporary concerns. This book traces the development of these origin stories over the course of the early medieval period, demonstrating that the corpus of insular origin legends evolved together to flesh out the history of the region. Individual origin narratives were in constant development, written and rewritten to respond to other works in the early insular corpus of historical and pseudohistorical works. Together, these legends were constructed not to form four distinct ‘national’ histories but rather to fill in the blanks of prehistory for the early medieval insular region as a whole.

The Anachronism of Nationalism

The origin legends of the peoples of early medieval Britain and Ireland formed an important genre. They provided their subjects with both

¹² See discussion below on ‘The Anachronism of Nationalism’, 4–13.

¹³ On this point see most trenchantly Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A. D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), discussed further below, 4–13.

a collective identity and a connection to broader world history, and have influenced the construction of national identities from the early medieval period right down to the present day. Yet they have never been interrogated all together, nor have their interrelationships been properly examined. This book, the first comprehensive study of how insular origin narratives were constructed before the twelfth century and repurposed in the early modern period, fills that gap.

The texts which contain these stories were written in Latin and a range of difficult vernaculars,¹⁴ meaning that they have until now been studied as the products of four disparate traditions by modern scholars whilst simultaneously being used to argue for the long roots of current nationalisms in the popular imagination. Yet insular origin narratives were neither written nor read in isolation during the early medieval period, and this book demonstrates the widespread circulation of this material across perceived geographical and linguistic boundaries. By studying these origin legends in the context within which they were written in their earliest permutations – as part of a broader set of histories of the insular region as a whole – we can learn much more about these texts and the peoples who wrote them than we can if we examine them in linguistic or ‘national’ isolation.

Part of the reason that these origin legends have been studied separately from one another in the current era comes as a consequence of the impact of modern nationalism on the study of medieval texts. The *longue durée* of the concept of nationalism itself has been much debated, and I should be clear that use of this term in reference to the Middle Ages suggests a heightened awareness of and advocacy for one’s ‘own’ nation without necessarily possessing the modern implications of a desire for national independence and political self-determination. In the early medieval period, a range of terms was used to describe groups of peoples with a (perceived) shared identity of some sort: *gens*, *natio*, *populus*, and *regnum* were most common in Latin, alongside corresponding phrases in various vernaculars.¹⁵ The definitions of these terms were fuzzy. Although often translated by modern scholars as ‘people’ (*gens* and *populus*), ‘nation’ (*natio*), and ‘kingdom’ (*regnum*), in reality they could be used fairly interchangeably to refer to a range of

¹⁴ Discussed in detail below, ‘Sources, Legends, and Arguments’, 22–7.

¹⁵ See Patrick J. Geary, ‘Ethnic Identity as a Situational Construct in the Early Middle Ages’, *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien* 113 (1983): 15–26; B. Zientara, ‘Populus – Gens – Natio. Einige Probleme aus dem Bereich der ethnischen Terminologie des frühen Mittelalters’, in Otto Dann (ed.), *Nationalismus in vorindustrieller Zeit* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1986), 11–20; F. Lošek, ‘Ethnische und politische Terminologie bei Iordanes und Einhard’, in H. Wolfram and W. Pohl (eds.), *Typen der Ethnogenese unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Bayern* 1 (Vienna: Denkschriften der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, philosophisch-historische Klasse 201, 1990), 147–52.

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common identities: family groups; those perceived to share descent from a common ancestor; people with the same language, set of laws or customs, or geographical region; or those united under a (loose) political structure. As Hans-Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut, and Walter Pohl write:

For simplicity's sake we may just call the (somehow) 'ethnic' and political bodies of the early medieval communities 'peoples' and 'kingdoms', whilst constantly bearing in mind the ambiguity of these terms. This coincides with the equally ambivalent and wide-ranging meanings of Latin terms (such as *gens* or *natio*, or even *regnum*), and, of course, there is a vast gap or shift of meaning between early medieval and modern terminology.¹⁶

Indeed, this ambiguity was such that terms were often used interchangeably by the same author. Barbara Yorke writes, for example, that 'the terms *natio* or *populus* were alternatives to *gens* which Bede – like Isidore of Seville – used interchangeably'.¹⁷

Medieval understandings of group identities thus do not correspond neatly to modern identity categories, or even to an internally consistent set of definitions.¹⁸ However, this is not to say that medieval peoples lacked the means to conceptualise groups who shared an identity.¹⁹ Most medieval authors (and modern scholars) attempting to define identity categories in the early medieval period have followed the guideposts of the influential *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville.²⁰ Isidore wrote that:

¹⁶ Hans-Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut, and Walter Pohl (eds.), with the collaboration of Sören Kaschke, *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 'Conclusion', 598.

¹⁷ Barbara Yorke, 'Political and Ethnic Identity: A Case Study of Anglo-Saxon Practice', in William O. Frazer and Andrew Tyrrell (eds.), *Social Identity in Early Medieval Britain* (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), 69–89 at 71. On Isidore, Merrills, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity*, 177, notes: '... the very ambiguity of Isidore's work testifies to the complexity of conceptions of ethnicity within late Antiquity. The precise significance of the terms *natio* and *gens* have been the subject of considerable study in recent years, but it seems evident that the linguistic ambiguities of the terms were as evident in the seventh century as they are today. In the *Origines*, for example, Isidore appears to have been indiscriminate in his use of such terms, and *gens* and *natio* are virtual synonyms within the work.'

¹⁸ As Kim M. Phillips, 'Race and Ethnicity: Hair and Medieval Ethnic Identities', in Roberta Milliken (ed.), *A Cultural History of Hair in the Middle Ages* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 123–36 at 124, writes: 'It has been widely accepted that cultural factors including religion, myths of origin, shared territory, military organization, customs, language, and legal identities prevailed in early medieval societies as markers of group difference, while somatic elements such as body, skin, and hair type were less frequently remarked.'

¹⁹ Discussed further below in the section on 'Origin Legends and the Construction of Identities in the Early Medieval West', 17–21.

²⁰ Stephen A. Barney, W.J. Lewis, J.A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (trans.), with the collaboration of Muriel Hall, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). All translations of Isidore are from this edition.

A nation (*gens*) is a number of people sharing a single origin, or distinguished from another nation (*natio*) in accordance with its own grouping . . . The word *gens* is also so called on account of the generations (*generatio*) of families, that is from ‘begetting’ (*gignere*, ppl. *genitus*), as the term ‘nation’ (*natio*) comes from ‘being born’ (*nasci*, ppl. *natus*).²¹

Yet Isidore was not dogmatic in his explications,²² and elsewhere identifies criteria other than common ancestry by which *gentes* could be distinguished from one another, namely shared law, language, or custom.²³ It is thus important to bear in mind that medieval peoples had both a range of criteria through which to define shared identities and a variety of terms to denote them with.²⁴

The question, then, as to what extent nationalism (or something approaching it) existed in the medieval period has been hotly debated. A significant body of publications in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries argued that nationalism had long roots stretching back to the Middle Ages; however, many of these claims were constructed in support of the Nazis (and other fascist groups) and have been both debunked and denounced by modern scholars from the second half of the twentieth century onward.²⁵ As Ingo R. Stoehr writes,

any serious attempt at placing the medieval tradition within literary history has to acknowledge the political appropriation of the Middle Ages by National Socialism [Nazism], which infused a medieval literature that is – despite its own internal tensions between intolerance and inclusiveness – usually understood as characterised by the absence of nationalism, with a nationalism of the most violent kind.²⁶

²¹ Isidore, *Etymologies* IX.ii.1, 192.

²² As Sigbjørn Olsen Sønnesyn, *William of Malmesbury and the Ethics of History* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012), 117, notes: ‘Linguistic affinity and difference can therefore not in itself be the decisive factor of the genesis of *gentes*, as indeed is clear from Isidore’s own definition of the term, in which biology and language predominates. Isidore’s account displays the difficulties of reconciling the biblical account of the tower and confusion of Babel with the obvious etymological roots of the term *gens*. His encyclopaedia may be a very useful collection of classical and patristic statements on a variety of subjects, but its lack of internal coherence makes it a very insecure foundation for eliciting general medieval notions of complex concepts.’

²³ Isidore, *Etymologies* V.vi.1; IX.i.14; and IX.ii.97.

²⁴ See also Walter Pohl, ‘Ethnonyms and Early Medieval Ethnicity: Methodological Reflections’, *Hungarian Historical Review* 7 (2018): 5–17.

²⁵ See discussion in Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), chapter 1, ‘A Poisoned Landscape: Ethnicity and Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century’, 15–40.

²⁶ Ingo R. Stoehr, ‘(Post)Modern Rewritings of the *Nibelungenlied* – Der *Nibelungen Roman* and Armin Ayren as *Meister Konrad*’, in Albrecht Classen (ed.), *Medieval German Voices in the 21st Century: The Paradigmatic Function of Medieval German Studies for German Studies* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 165–78 at 167.

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The modern study of nationalism is usually credited to Hans Kohn's highly influential *The Idea of Nationalism*, published in 1944.²⁷ In more recent scholarship, the idea that nationalism – or proto-nationalist sentiments – can be found in the Middle Ages has enjoyed a resurgence,²⁸ with the case having been made for Wales,²⁹ Ireland,³⁰ Scotland,³¹ and Anglo-Saxon (and later medieval) England.³² Debate on these issues was reignited with the publication of Benedict Anderson's much-discussed 1991 monograph *Imagined Communities*, which argued strongly for the modern roots of nationalisms.³³ Anderson's book has been characterised by

²⁷ Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in its Origins and Background* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944).

²⁸ See Simon Ford, Leslie Johnson, and Alan V. Murray (eds.), *Concepts of National Identity in the Middle Ages* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1995).

²⁹ R.R. Davies, 'Law and National Identity in Thirteenth-Century Wales', in R.R. Davies, Ralph Griffiths, Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, and Kenneth Morgan (eds.), *Welsh Society and Nationhood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1984), 51–69; Huw Pryce, 'British or Welsh? National Identity in Twelfth-Century Wales', *English Historical Review* 116 (2001): 775–801; R.R. Davies, 'The Identity of "Wales" in the Thirteenth Century', in R.R. Davies and Geraint H. Jenkins (eds.), *From Medieval to Modern Wales: Historical Essays in Honour of Kenneth O. Morgan and Ralph Griffiths* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), 45–63; and Euryng Rhys Roberts, 'A Surfeit of Identity? Regional Solidarities, Welsh Identity and the Idea of Britain', in Andrzej Pleszczyński, Joanna Sobiesiak, Michał Tomaszek, and Przemysław Tyszka (eds.), *Imagined Communities: Constructing Collective Identities in Medieval Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 247–78.

³⁰ Thomas Finan, *A Nation in Medieval Ireland? Perspectives on Gaelic National Identity in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2004); Brendan Bradshaw, 'And so began the Irish Nation': *Nationality, National Consciousness and Nationalism in Pre-Modern Ireland* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

³¹ Dauvit Broun, 'The Origin of Scottish Identity', in Claus Björn, Alexander Grant, and Keith J. Stringer (eds.), *Nations, Nationalism and Patriotism in the European Past* (Copenhagen: Academic Press, 1994), 35–55; *The Irish Identity of the Kingdom of the Scots in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1999); *Scottish Independence and the Idea of Britain: From the Picts to Alexander III* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

³² Sarah Foot, 'The Making of *Angelcynn*: English Identity before the Norman Conquest', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th ser. 6 (1996): 25–49; Kathleen Davis, 'National Writing in the Ninth Century: A Reminder for Postcolonial Thinking about the Nation', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28 (1998): 611–37; Alfred P. Smyth, 'The Emergence of English Identity, 700–1000', in Alfred P. Smyth (ed.), *Medieval Europeans: Studies in Ethnic Identity and National Perspectives in Medieval Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 24–52; Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature and National Identity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). For a survey of scholarship on Anglo-Saxon England, see Lindy Brady, 'Constructing Identity in Anglo-Saxon Literature: Review of Current Scholarship', *South Atlantic Review* 81 (2016): 111–27.

³³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991). The literature on this subject is vast: see most usefully Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); and Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (London: Canto, 1991), in addition to works cited below.

some scholars as ‘an account of nation that medievalists love to hate’,³⁴ and there has been pushback by those arguing for a sense of national identity (or various degrees of ‘imagined communities’) in the premodern period³⁵ – yet the matter is far from settled, even amongst medievalists.³⁶

Current scholarly consensus on the matter, insofar as there is one, occupies a middle ground. Most scholars would agree that while proto-nationalist sentiments can occasionally be found in individual texts from the medieval period, widespread nationalism – that is, a primary identification with a nation-state that transcends other shared identities (such as with kin groups, religions, cities or territories, professional guilds, etc.) – is a modern phenomenon. The biggest stumbling block for claims of nationalism in the Middle Ages is class: only some small fraction of written texts from the early medieval period survive, and they represent the viewpoints of a literate, educated, wealthy, politically attuned (and almost exclusively male) elite. As Jean W. Sedlar writes: ‘Although sentiments of a nationalist type can occasionally be found as long ago as ancient Egypt or classical Greece, nationalism was not then a large-scale phenomenon. In both ancient and medieval Europe, the distinctions of social class, rank, and religion were vastly more significant.’³⁷ John Hutchinson notes that ‘while there is evidence of an elite medieval nationalism, it is often unclear how far this carried down the social scale’.³⁸ The conclusions of this study add further weight to those who have not found widespread evidence of nationalism in the early medieval period. Origin stories of all four peoples in Britain and Ireland were compiled together in early insular historical and pseudohistorical texts. The legends belonging to various peoples were not viewed as somehow ‘superior’ to one another in the early medieval period,

³⁴ Patricia Clare Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 8.

³⁵ E.g. Kathy Lavezzo (ed.), *Imagining a Medieval English Nation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Pleszczyński et al. (eds.), *Imagined Communities*.

³⁶ Anthony D. Smith, ‘National Identities: Modern or Medieval?’, in Ford, Johnson, and Murray (eds.), *Concepts of National Identity in the Middle Ages*, 21–46 at 35, writes that: ‘It is only from the late fifteenth century that we can confidently speak of a growing sense of English national identity, in a wider national state’; Derek Pearsall, ‘The Idea of Englishness in the Fifteenth Century’, in Helen Cooney (ed.), *Nation, Court and Culture: New Essays on Fifteenth-Century English Poetry* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 15–27 at 15, argues that ‘there was no steadily growing sense of national feeling’ prior to the Reformation.

³⁷ Jean W. Sedlar, *East Central Europe in the Middle Ages, 1000–1500* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1994), 401.

³⁸ John Hutchinson, *Nationalism and War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 22; see also Lauryn S. Mayer, *Worlds Made Flesh: Reading Medieval Manuscript Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 32–66.

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but rather, were drawn together to construct the history of the region as a whole.

It is clear, however, that from roughly the early modern period onward, as concepts of nationalism took hold in academic and popular understanding, antiquarians and later scholars attempted to isolate the history and legends of ‘their’ countries alone.³⁹ Several key studies have been particularly instrumental in interrogating the extent to which crucial presuppositions about late antique and early medieval origin legends – such as their historicity, antiquity, and stability over time – were in fact imposed externally by romantic nationalists (and fascists) seeking to construct their own origin narratives of ethnicity in the modern era.⁴⁰ A comprehensive overview of the situation is provided by Patrick Geary’s invaluable lucid *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*. This lays out – as his dedicatory preface remarks – ‘the importance of the past for the present and the difference between the two’, and his chapter on ‘Ethnicity and Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century’ provides a particularly valuable overview of how we got from the medieval texts we actually have to the nationalist interpretations they have often been given.⁴¹ Another recent survey of these issues is Ian Wood’s *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages*.⁴²

In terms of the scholarship itself, those works which form the products of a long-running (and at often times heated) debate between scholars from the ‘Toronto’ and ‘Vienna’ schools of thought over the validity of a cohesive ‘Germanic’ identity have advanced our understanding of identity formation in the late antique and early medieval periods.⁴³ The most significant contributions to the ‘Vienna School’ – which sought to explore the ethnogenesis of ‘Germanic’ (and later other) identities in the early medieval period without, to be clear,

³⁹ As discussed in detail in Chapter Five. For a recent survey, see Lotte Jensen (ed.), *The Roots of Nationalism: National Identity Formation in Early Modern Europe, 1600–1815* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

⁴⁰ A selection of relevant papers is also collected in Thomas F. X. Noble (ed.), *From Roman Provinces to Medieval Kingdoms* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁴¹ Geary, *Myth of Nations*, chapter 1, ‘A Poisoned Landscape: Ethnicity and Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century’, 15–40.

⁴² Ian Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴³ For good overviews and contextualisations of this debate, see Mischa Meier, *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung: Europa, Asien und Afrika vom 3. bis zum 8. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2019), 61–74 and James M. Harland and Matthias Friedrich, ‘Introduction: The “Germanic” and Its Discontents’, in Matthias Friedrich and James M. Harland (eds.), *Interrogating the ‘Germanic’: A Category and Its Use in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, *Ergänzungsbande zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 123 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 1–18.