INTRODUCTION

This book explores the history of Frankish identity in the Merovingian and Carolingian kingdoms from the sixth to the middle of the ninth centuries – the period in which these kingdoms came to be seen as the Frankish kingdoms. Their rise to become one of the most important and enduring successor states of the Western Roman Empire started with Clovis I, the son of Childeric I, one of the client kings of Rome in its last days. But soon Rome was not there to have clients. At the end of his life in 511, Clovis found himself ruling over most of the former Roman provinces of Gaul. His descendants, the legendary Merovingian kings, established themselves as one of the longest-ruling royal families of the early medieval period, controlling roughly the territory of modern France, including some regions along the Rhine that are now part of Germany. Their rule ended only when members of the Carolingian family replaced them as kings around the middle of the eighth century. Among other strategies, the new kings legitimated their usurpation with intensified military expansion. Under Charlemagne (768–814) their kingdom comprised most of western and central Europe, and modern France and Germany were the core regions of what was to become the first medieval Christian empire in the West in the year 800.

The Carolingian renovation of the Roman Empire was in many ways an experimental process. The creation of new imperial structures was built as much on the remaining resources of the late Roman Empire as on the experiences and experiments of post-Roman societies to reconfigure these resources in a new world. In this way, the Carolingian world became one of the most important filters and transmitters of the social, religious and political syntheses by which post-Roman societies attempted to reorganise the diverse social and political frameworks inherited from the late Roman West.

This perspective on the history of the post-Roman West defines the chronological boundaries of the book. It does not want to describe the end

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of a process in which Frankish identity established itself in its 'true' form in the middle of the ninth century. Experimentation in linking the name of the Franks to a common history and meaning started as an open-ended process and never resulted in the establishment of a single dominant conception of Frankish identity in the Merovingian and Carolingian period. The rich transmission of texts that were written and copied in the early medieval Frankish kingdoms has bequeathed us a particularly rich and varied body of sources in which older models, myths, fables and (hi)stories were rewritten, expanded and adapted in order to articulate new conceptions of Frankish identity. Yet, different as they were, the efforts of Merovingian and Carolingian scribes and scholars contributed to the long-lasting success of the Frankish name by continually investing Frankish identity with new meaning and social prestige.

Such reflections not only established a wide and various repertoire to imagine the social and political horizons of communities that were identified as Franks, they were also connected to reflections about the imagination of the larger social whole to which these Frankish communities belonged. They were part of a process in which the inhabitants of the regions that were increasingly called Europe came to imagine the world as one divided among peoples chosen by God to rule over the former Roman provinces.

What we observe in this process is not the formation of Ethnicity with a capital E, but the formation of a specific social imagination of the world as one divided among Christian peoples which we might call a Western ethnicity. In this book we shall explore the formation of this Western form of ethnicity and its dynamic relationship with the history of Frankish identity until the middle of the ninth century, when a common understanding regarding the imagination of the social world as a world divided among peoples started to slide more firmly into place.

REFLECTIONS ON FRANKISH IDENTITY

This book will thus explore the history of Frankish identity as part of ongoing social and political experiments and as a tool of orientation in the quickly and constantly changing late Antique and early medieval West. It will offer a history that goes 'beyond groupism', as Roger Brubaker has called the 'tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as 'basic constituents of social life … and fundamental units of social analysis'.[1] The book is thus not a history of *the* Franks. It is a history of how people

[1] Brubaker, *Ethnicity without groups*, p. 164; see also the discussion in Rebillard, *Christians and their many identities*, p. 5.

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in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages used and shaped images and imaginations of Frankish identity in their efforts to make sense of their social world, and a history that reveals how early medieval people reflected on questions about who the Franks had been, what they had become and what they should be.

For a long time, and even until now, many scholars have assumed that members of a Dark Age society rarely worried about such abstract questions. As a result, modern historical scholarship largely took Frankish identity for granted. And yet, the Merovingian and Carolingian kingdoms have left us an impressive variety of meanings and interpretations for the name of the Franks. The Merovingian kings legitimated themselves as *reges Francorum*, but the name turns up as a description for particular regions or groups within the realms of these kings too. Merovingian and Carolingian historians continued the debates about the etymology of the name of the Franks that had already started in the time of the Roman Empire.[2] They also had different views on the origins of the Franks. In the various Frankish law books, the name of the Franks affirms that different Franks in different regions claimed an elevated social and legal status in contrast to other social groupings, including new Franks. The name was used to legitimate the political claims of different elites and their position in the *regnum*. It was, however, also linked to Christian visions of community, to assert that a Christendom defined as Frankish took precedence over other Christendoms.[3] Some studies do indeed discuss the ambiguity of the name of the Franks, which is documented in the extant sources, especially from the seventh century onwards.[4] This ambiguity, however, has rarely been explored as a sign of deeper reflections about Frankish identity in the Merovingian and Carolingian kingdoms. Most scholars seem to have trusted that the Franks themselves would have known who they were.

We shall see in the course of this book that Merovingian and Carolingian contemporaries were not so sure. A closer look at the history of the use of the Frankish name in the extant evidence from late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages reveals that Frankish identity was a complex phenomenon – for the inhabitants of the Frankish kingdoms themselves as well as for outsiders. What constituted being a Frank was

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[2] See Nonn, *Die Franken*, pp. 12–15; Reimitz, 'Franks', with further references.
[3] See P. Brown, *The rise of Western Christendom*, pp. 13–29 and 355–79, for barbarian, Roman and Christian identities, pp. xxvi–xli.
[4] Recent discussions include, Goetz, 'Gens, kings and kingdoms'; Goetz, 'Zur Wandlung'; Goetz, '*Gentes* in Wahrnehmung'; I. Wood, 'Defining the Franks'; Pohl, 'Zur Bedeutung'; Nelson, 'Frankish identities'; McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, pp. 266–78; Garipzanov, *Symbolic language*, pp. 231–318; and still Ewig, 'Volkstum'; Ewig, 'Beobachtungen'; D. Frye, '*Gallia, patria, Francia*'.

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not only much debated but also fiercely contested in different regions
and social milieux. In these ongoing debates, the importance and mean-
ing of Frankish identity changed in many different ways. Most import-
antly, a gradual but nevertheless fundamental change occurred in these
centuries as to how the larger social world was to be imagined to which
these visions of Frankish communities had to be connected.

In the Roman Empire, the collective identification of a *gens*, such as
that of the Franks, Saxons or Alamans, was understood primarily as a
quality of the 'other'.[5] The Roman imagination had organised the world
into a powerful dichotomy of the civilised Roman world and the oppos-
ite, barbarian world of the *gentes*. By the ninth century, however, this per-
spective had fundamentally changed. Now the Carolingian Empire itself
had become inhabited and ruled by *gentes*, such as the Franks, Saxons and
Alamans. They saw their own world as divided among peoples that God
had chosen to rule over the former Roman provinces.

The many different interventions and reflections about the meaning
and role of Frankish identity from the sixth to the ninth century will
help us to explore this process. But the history of Frankish identity will
not only be used as a window into this process. We shall also see that
the different reflections and interventions about the meaning and con-
ception of Frankish identity played an influential role in the specific
shape that the social imagination took when thinking of a world divided
among peoples. The formation of such a conception of ethnicity was
as much the result of a specific historical process as the formation of a
discourse on Frankish identity. Both would be further transformed and
developed for many centuries to come.

identity and processes of identification

These introductory remarks give an impression of the approach to
identity and ethnicity I shall be taking in this book. It might be help-
ful, however, to make plain some of the methodological foundations
I am using to explore identity and ethnicity in the Merovingian and
Carolingian kingdoms.[6] In building upon recent sociological and
anthropological research, I understand 'identity' as a 'toolkit'. This
toolkit can be used to develop a dense array of strategies involving

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[5] See Maas, 'Barbarians', with further references.
[6] The approach has been developed in the course of the Wittgenstein project on 'Ethnic Identities in
the Early Middle Ages' (2005–10) funded by the Austrian FWF (Fonds zur Förderung der wissen-
schaftlichen Forschung). The results of the collaboration are published in two companion volumes
edited by Pohl and Heydemann: *Strategies of identification* and *post-Roman transitions*.

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groups, individuals and their interrelationships.[7] From such a perspective, 'Frankish identity' did not simply exist. It was a constant process of identifications and imaginations of who the Franks were. They had to be created and constantly re-created in a circuit of communication between an individual's identification with a group (whether accepted by the group or not), the identification of the group as such or through its representatives and identifications of that group in the perceptions of outsiders.[8] In such a view, we not only have to explore the formation of identity as an intrinsically relational phenomenon, but also have to let go of the romantic idea that we might be able to find more stable notions of identity behind extant articulations, or even instrumentalisations, of identification in our sources. As Stuart Hall observed on the 'structure of identification':

The story of identity is a cover story. A cover story for making you think you have stayed in the same place though with another bit of your mind you do know that you have moved on. What we have learned about the structure of the way in which we identify suggests that identification is not one thing, one moment … It is something that happens over time, is never absolutely stable, that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference.[9]

It is the aim of this book to explore what happened 'over time' in regard to Frankish identity. We shall thus explore the circuits of communication in which the meaning of Frankish identity was constantly created and re-created in identifications that built on imaginations of a Frankish past and its extension to the future. As we shall see these imaginations never built on the reality of core Frankish identity. They were 'situational constructs', which does not mean that they were just random appropriations of a name for a social group and its history.[10] Such situational constructs take place in heavily contested social contexts. Through them people are able to create a 'gap between the past and the future' which in turn allows them to distinguish between reality and possibility.[11] The realisation of an identity in processes of identification always goes beyond the experience of groupness and beyond what people perceive as real.

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[7] For a comprehensive discussion see Pohl, 'Introduction. Strategies of identification' with references to the social and anthropological approaches and literature.

[8] See Pohl, 'Introduction. Strategies of identification', p. 6; and Pohl, 'Christian and barbarian identities', p. 8.

[9] Hall, 'Ethnicity: identity and difference', p. 344.

[10] See Geary, 'Ethnic identity'.

[11] Ahrendt, *Between past and future*; and Wagner, 'Fest-Stellungen', pp. 70–2.

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ethnicity and ethnic identity

In order to explore the formation and transformation of Frankish iden-
tity as an open-ended historical process, we shall also have to extend the
approach to ethnicity. This is particularly important for research on early
medieval identities. For a long time, early medieval 'tribes' were seen
as the direct ancestors of the European nations.[12] Nationalist concepts
and claims of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were projected
back onto early medieval collectives such as the Franks, Angles, Saxons,
Suevians, Thuringians and so on, in such a way that the history of late
Antique and early medieval *gentes* was constructed as the start of modern
nations, such as the French, English, German and so on. The assumption
was that an inborn essence in all of these peoples was what made their
success and persistence possible. Because of their great political success,
the Franks were even taken as evidence of the triumph of the nation over
the supra national civilisation of the Roman Empire. Their history repre-
sented the ascent of the Germanic people in the former provinces of the
Western Empire, who imposed more and more of their 'Germanic' men-
tality, traditions and institutions on the population of these provinces.
The *Gentilismus* – the pride in being *gentes* – of the conquering peoples
was considered to be a stronger mode of thought than was the Roman
imperial consciousness of the provincials.[13]

During the last few decades, such tendencies of earlier historians
have been thoroughly deconstructed.[14] This process went hand in hand
with the fundamental revision of the dramatic image of the 'Decline
and Fall of the Roman Empire'. As more recent works have shown, the
'Fall of Rome' was not a melodramatic 'clash of cultures' but rather 'a
long-term process of transformation, accentuated not by one fatal blow
to classical civilisation, but as a multitude of transitions that eventually
created rather different societies'.[15] The changing meaning of ethnic
identity has to be understood as part of this process. It was the result of

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[12] Geary, *Myth of nations*, pp. 15–40; and now the comprehensive study of the historiography in
I. Wood, *The modern origins*.

[13] Wenskus, *Stammesbildung*, p. 2: 'Der Gentilismus der landnehmenden Stämme war als politische
Denkform stärker als das römische Reichsbewußtsein der Provinzialen.' See the discussion of
Wenskus in Pohl, 'Tradition'; Pohl, 'Ethnicity'; and now Pohl, 'Von der Ethnogenese'.

[14] Geary, *Myth of nations*; Goffart, *Narrators*; Pohl, 'Modern uses'.

[15] Pohl, 'Christian and barbarian identities'; P. Brown, *The rise of Western Christendom* (with the
new introduction to the third edition of 2013); the impulses of the research programme of the
European Science Foundation in the 1990s on 'The Transformation of the Roman World' played
an important role; for recent overviews inspired by it, see Pohl, *Die Völkerwanderung*; Smith, *Europe
after Rome*; Halsall, *Barbarian migrations*; Wickham, *Inheritance of Rome*; for a revival of the catas-
trophist perspective, see Ward-Perkins, *The fall of Rome*; the barbarian invasions are also seen as the
main factor by Heather, *Fall of the Roman Empire*; and Heather, *Empires and barbarians*.

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these transformations, not a precondition of them. Understanding these changes, however, requires extending the historical approach to identities as open and dynamic processes – to what Rogers Brubaker has called ethnic 'common sense'[16] or what we might also call 'ethnic discourse' (in the sense of Michel Foucault).[17]

In order to do this, I suggest distinguishing between ethnic identity and ethnicity. Building on the definition suggested by Brubaker, I will explore ethnicity as a way of observing the social world as a world divided among 'distinctive and analogous groups that are perceived as naturally constituted'.[18] Such a definition is not only a more flexible one, allowing for the study of different ways to perceive and order the social world as a world divided among distinctive and analogous groups, it might also help to explore ethnic identity and ethnicity as different ways to observe them. In this regard it might be helpful to combine Brubaker's definition of ethnicity with the distinction between different forms of observation that has been developed by Nicklas Luhmann: the difference between observations of the first and second order.[19] Whereas first-order observations are operations in which things are observed and differentiated, second-order observations are observations of those (first-order) observations. First-order observations create differences without considering the difference itself: the differentiated subjects that result from the observation are assumed to be definitive, without reflecting on the criteria for the distinction in the first place. Luhmann's goal was above all to develop a theory to understand the complexity of modern society. The adoption of his ideas, however, may well help to explore the complexities of ancient and medieval societies as well.[20] In taking stock of his ideas we might understand ethnicity as a conceptualisation of the world in a second-order observation. An ethnic identity is consequently a collective identity that such forms of observation observe – that is observed as belonging to a world divided among 'distinctive and analogous groups'.

The distinction between ethnic identity and ethnicity might help us explore both aspects of ethnic processes – the imagination of the Franks as a *gens* or *populus*, as well as the imagination of the larger social whole to which *gentes* and *populi* were connected – and most importantly to

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[16] Brubaker, *Ethnicity without groups*, p. 9.
[17] Pohl, 'Introduction. Strategies of identification', pp. 21–4.
[18] See Brubaker, *Ethnicity without groups*, pp. 7–20.
[19] See Luhmann, 'Deconstruction'; Luhmann, *Art as a social system*. Here and at other places where Luhmann discusses first- and second-order observations, he refers to the work of von Foerster; see his *Observing systems*.
[20] For a more comprehensive discussion of the problems and opportunities applying Luhmann's ideas to the study of late Antique and early medieval societies, see Heydemann and Reimitz, 'History as reflection'.

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study how the dynamic relationship between these two forms of obser-
vations shaped and reshaped both. Such a conceptualisation of ethnic
identity and ethnicity as interdependent historical processes is not only
crucial to explore how they were both subject to the play of history and
difference in the early medieval West. It will also help us to define them
more precisely in their respective historical contexts, which will allow us
to differentiate ethnic identity from other visions of Frankish commu-
nities that connected the name to other or even alternative macro-social
mappings. This in turn will enable us to understand how observations of
Frankish communities as an ethnic identity were shaped by the interplay,
coexistence and competition with other forms of social identities, such
as Christian, civic, regional or military identity.[21]

To illustrate this methodological outline, let us look briefly at some
early medieval perceptions, observations and imaginations of social
groups and the larger social whole to which they belonged.

LATE ANTIQUE AND EARLY MEDIEVAL REFLECTIONS ON ETHNIC IDENTITY AND ETHNICITY

At the beginning of the tenth century, the former abbot of Prüm and
current abbot of St Martin in Trier, Regino of Prüm saw the world as a
world of nations whose populations were differentiated by descent, cus-
toms, language and law.[22] In a recent and perceptive discussion, Matthew
Innes has placed Regino's anthropological observations in their con-
text.[23] Regino made these remarks in a dedicatory letter to Archbishop
Hatto of Mainz, to accompany his comprehensive collection of canon
law, *Libri duo de synodalibus causis et disciplinis ecclesiasticis*. Regino saw the
social order of the world divided among peoples 'as an analogy for diffe-
rence in custom of the universal church'.[24] This example shows not only
that the early Middle Ages thought about the world in this way, it also
helps illustrate how much conceptions of ethnicity were shaped by their
interplay with other macro-social mappings. And it shows too how such
social imaginations were used as tools to order and form one's actual
social world. After all, Regino used his conception of ethnicity to accom-
modate difference in a *populus Christianus* whose members as Christians

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[21] Pohl, 'Introduction. Strategies of identification', p. 19.
[22] *Nec non et illud sciendum, quod sicut diversae nationes populorum inter se discrepant genere, moribus, linguis, legibus, ita sancta universalis ecclesia toto orbe terrarium diffusa, quamvis in unitate fidei coniungatur tamen consuetudinibus ecclesiasticis ab invicem differt* (Regino of Prüm, *Libri duo*, p. 22). For Regino see now the introduction by MacLean to the translation of his Chronicle, *History and politics*.
[23] Innes, 'Historical writing'. [24] Innes, 'Historical writing', p. 312.

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were supposed to be all alike. 'Identity', as Walter Pohl observed, 'is never only identical'.[25]

I hope to have shown by the end of this book the extent to which this observation of Walter Pohl's applies to the formation of an early medieval Western conception of ethnicity in the centuries before Regino. We will also have seen that Regino built on a world view that had only slid more firmly into place about a hundred years before he wrote. The catalogue he uses to describe this world of peoples calls to mind modern attempts to define ethnicity, which draws our attention to how much modern scholarship of ethnicity is a product of its own European history. That goes past the scope of this book, however, which focuses on the period before Regino was born. I do hope, however, that this history of Frankish identity and the study of the formation of Western conception of ethnicity in the Merovingian and Carolingian kingdoms up to the mid-ninth century may help develop a couple of new starting points when it comes to posing such questions to later periods of European history.

It is in any case important for the subject of this book to maintain that the social imaginations of the world such as Regino's – that is the imagination of the world as a world divided among peoples – was minted and continually re-minted by specific cultural and political contexts. These developments are possibly even easier to detect in texts that originated in the centuries before Regino. As we shall see in the course of this book, Regino was building on a consensus about this social imagination that should be seen as the result of a longer process in the Frankish world. Consequently, the reflections about this order of the world that we have from earlier centuries can better convey how open the questions were about what a *gens*, *natio* or *populus* was, and what kind of order these concepts should be associated with in the post-Roman world.

A good example of this comes from the *Etymologiae sive origines*, the project that Isidore of Seville worked on in the early decades of the seventh century. This was a twenty-volume encyclopaedia that Isidore compiled out of all the works that were available to him, and in it he used separate entries to explain the origins – and hence the meaning – of significant terms.[26] In his definition of *gens*, Isidore did not use a catalogue of criteria like those that Regino would use 300 years later. Instead Isidore emphasised the structural aspects of ethnicity.[27]

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[25] Pohl, 'Introduction. Strategies of identification', p. 36.
[26] Isidore, *Etymologiae*, ed. and trans. Barney *et al.*; Henderson, *The medieval world of Isidore of Seville*.
[27] See for the passage Pohl, 'Introduction. Strategies of identification', p. 21, who also discusses the biblical background of Isidore's reflections.

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A *gens* is a number of people sharing a single origin or distinguished from another *natio* in accordance with its own grouping as the ones of Greece or Asia Minor … The word *gens* is also so called on account of the generations of families, that is, from begetting, just as the word *natio* derives from being born.[28]

It seems that early medieval intellectuals did not need twenty-first-century sociologists and anthropologists to tell them that ethnicity was a 'relational mode of social organisation, in which a soci-ety comprises a number of distinctive and analogous groups that are perceived as naturally constituted'.[29] The backdrop for this affinity seems to be that Isidore was trying to find a way to call prevailing conceptions of ethnicity into question. It was a matter of finding new ways to define the social imagination of a *gens*, to emancipate it from the Roman world order to which the concept had previously been tied. In his *Etymologies*, Isidore not only restored the 'monumental fabric of the ancients', as his pupil Braulio of Saragossa would write in praise of his master,[30] he also adapted it to a world that was ruled by the kings of the *gens Gothorum*. The kings of this *gens* had only recently converted to Catholic Christianity, and Isidore provided them and others in the kingdom with 'all they needed to know'.[31] When Isidore enumerated the peoples of the world in his reflection on the *gentes*, the Romans were one of them.[32]

Isidore's encyclopaedic work was not the only one to rearrange the world. As Jamie Wood has recently shown, such a reorganisation also played a great part in his historical works, in which Isidore promoted the *gens Gothorum* as the legitimate successors of the Romans in Spain.[33] For Isidore it was not the social and political integration of the *gens Gothorum* that concerned him most. He was, as Peter Brown observed, among the most enthusiastic episcopal advisers of the Visigothic kings, who 'wished to create a new common social and political vision of their own true Christian commonwealth in thinly disguised competition with the "kingdom of the Greeks" – the self-styled "Holy Commonwealth" of East Rome'.[34] In this context, the redefinition of ethnicity helped accommodate the autonomy of the various and increasingly confident

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[28] *Gens est multitudo ab uno principio orta, sive ab alia natione secundum propriam collectionem distincta, ut Graeciae, Asiae … Gens autem appellata propter generationes familiarum, id est a gignendo, sicut natio a nascendo*. Isidore, *Etymologiae* IX, 2, ed. Lindsay, the English translation follows Barney *et al.*, p. 192.

[29] See above, n. 18.

[30] Braulio of Saragossa, *Renotatio librorum domini Isidori*; for the translation, see P. Brown, *The rise of Western Christendom*, pp. 364 and 366.

[31] P. Brown, *The rise of Western Christendom*, p. 365; on the highly heterogenous population of late Antique and 'little Romes' in Spain see Martin, *La géographie*.

[32] Isidore, *Etymologiae* IX, pp. 2 and 84.

[33] J. Wood, *Politics of identity*; J. Wood, '*Religiones* and *gentes*'.

[34] P. Brown, *The rise of Western Christendom*, p. 366

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