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Strategies of Identity Construction

The Writings of Gildas, Aneirin and Bede

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Content

1 Acknowledgements 9

2 Introduction 13

3 Theoretical considerations 17
3.1 Imagined Communities - the construction of identity 21
3.2 Medieval Ethnic communities and Writing 25
3.3 Markers of ethnic identity 28
3.3.1 Names 29
3.3.2 The Founding Myth 31
3.3.3 History 32
3.3.4 Heroic Figure 33
3.3.5 Rule and Kingship 34
3.3.6 Customs 35
3.3.7 Laws 36
3.3.8 Territory and Boundaries 37
3.3.9 Language 38
3.3.10 Otherness 40
3.3.11 Religion 42
3.3.12 Summary 43

4 Discussion of other Potential Source Writings 45
4.1 Adomnán's *Vita Sancti Columbae* 45
4.2 The *vitae* of St Cuthbert 46
4.3 The Whitby *Life of Gregory the Great* 47
4.4 Felix's *Life of St Guthlac* 47
4.5 Stephen of Ripon's *Vita Sancti Wilfrithi* 48
4.6 The Works of *Taliesin* 49

5 Methodological Considerations - Identity Construction as Discourse . . 51
5.1 The concept of *discourse* 51
5.2 Discourse and the Construction of Identity 54

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5.3 Discourse Analysis 56
5.3.1 Historical Discourse Analysis 56
5.3.2 Critical Discourse Analysis 57
5.3.3 The *Discourse Historical Approach* 58
5.3.4 Analysis of the Discoursive Strategy (ADS) of Identity Construction 58
5.4 Methodological Steps 61

6 Gildas' *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* 65
6.1 Authorship and Date of Composition 68
6.1.1 The origin of the name *Gildas* 68
6.1.2 Gildas' geographical background 69
6.1.3 Gildas' educational background 71
6.1.4 Date of Composition 74
6.2 Manuscripts and Editions 80
6.3 Structure and Subject Matter 81
6.4 *Gentes* and collective identities in Gildas' *DEB* 82
6.4.1 Britons in Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae* 82
6.4.2 Romans in Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae* 91
6.4.3 The Saxons in Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae* 94
6.4.4 Picts and Scots in Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae* 97
6.5 Summary and Conclusion 100

7 Aneirin's *Y Gododdin* 109
7.1 Authorship and Date of Composition 112
7.2 Manuscripts and Editions 121
7.3 Structure and subject matter 126
7.4 *Gentes* and collective identities in Aneirin's *Gododdin* poems . . . 129
7.4.1 The Britons in *Y Gododdin* 131
7.4.2 The Saxons in *Y Gododdin* 135
7.4.3 The *English* in *Y Gododdin* 138
7.4.4 People of Deira, Bernicia and Gwynedd in *Y Gododdin* . . . 141
7.4.5 Christian references in the *Gododdin* poems 150
7.5 Summary and Conclusion 154

8 Bede's *Historiae* 161
8.1 Authorship and Dates of Composition 164
8.1.1 Bede's Life and Death 164
8.1.2 Bede's Language 166
8.1.3 Jarrow and Wearmouth 167
8.2 The scholarly discussion about Bede 168
8.3 Bede's Works 170

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8.4 Selection of texts . . . 171
8.4.1 The *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* . . . 172
8.4.2 The *Chronica Minor* and the *Chronica Maior* . . . 173
8.4.3 The *Historia Abbatum* . . . 174
8.5 Manuscripts and Editions of the Texts . . . 175
8.5.1 *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* . . . 175
8.5.2 *Chronica Maior* . . . 176
8.6 Structure and Subject Matter . . . 177
8.6.1 *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* . . . 177
8.6.2 *Chronica Maior* . . . 180
8.7 *Gentes* and collective identities in Bede's writings . . . 181
8.7.1 Bede and the Britons . . . 181
8.7.1.1 The Britons, Bede and the *DEB* . . . 181
8.7.1.2 Bede and the Britons after Gildas . . . 200
8.7.2 Bede and the Saxons . . . 204
8.7.2.1 The *geuissi* in the *HE* . . . 209
8.7.2.2 The *gyrui* in the *HE* . . . 211
8.7.2.3 The Continental Saxons in the *HE* . . . 213
8.7.3 Bede and the *angli* . . . 216
8.7.4 Bede, the *picti* and the *scotti* . . . 227
8.8 Summary and Conclusion . . . 238

9 Summary . . . 247
9.1 Textual and Intertextual Identity Markers . . . 247

10 Conclusion - Strategies of Identity Construction . . . 257
10.1 Strategies of identity construction - the Analysis of Discourse Strategies . . . 257
10.2 Gildas' *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* . . . 259
10.3 Aneirin's *Y Gododdin* . . . 260
10.4 Bede's *Historiae* . . . 261
10.5 Outlook for further research . . . 265

Editions and Translations . . . 267

Bibliography . . . 269

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This island at present, following the number of the books in which the Divine law was written, contains five nations, the English, Britons, Scots, Picts, and Latins, each in its own peculiar dialect cultivating the sublime study of Divine truth.

The Venerable Bede, Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum, Book I, Chapter I.

Lastly, it is inhabited of five peoples, Romans, to wit, Britons, Saxons, Picts and Scots.

Geoffrey of Monmouth, Historia Regum Britanniae, Chapter II.

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Throughout history, people have believed to live in a world of distinct groups, differing in culture, ethnicity or origin. This belief is based on features of identity which are applied to formulate the differences between individuals or between different peoples. These features, or the terms referring to them, have always functioned as symbols of identification for individuals and communities either in the way of self-identification or to contrast others from oneself (Le Page 1985: 208). With their symbolism, these terms allowed communities to formulate a unity of individuals agreeing to the categories of a group and also to mediate the difference to other communities, maybe even sometimes emphasizing barriers.

Both, Bede, who wrote his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* around AD 732, and Geoffrey of Monmouth, who wrote his *Historia Regum Britanniae* around AD 1137, name five particular peoples living in Britain. These quotes are only two examples found in writings from earlier as well as later authors who mention these peoples to live on the island. Bede and Geoffrey use the *names* of these peoples to distinguish them from each other. The same peoples appear in Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae*, dated to the mid-6th century, and most of them can be found in the late British vernacular poem *Y Gododdyn*, presumably dated only a few decades later. These quotes demonstrate an early awareness of the different collective groups inhabiting Britain and were obviously used to differentiate between them. Comparing the quotations from the early eighth-century historian Bede and the twelfth-century historian Geoffrey, the reader recognizes a peculiar difference: Bede's *Angles* were replaced by Geoffrey's *Saxons*. This then leads to two questions: where there no *Saxons* in Britain when Bede wrote his text? And had the *Angles* left the island when Geoffrey wrote his *history*?

Of course, both assumptions are wrong. *Saxons* and *Angles* had lived in Britain for centuries before either of the two authors began to write. Reading these two passages in contrast to each other shows that both authors named different groups: the names of the peoples of Britain, as well as their origins, histories and traditions, were treated very consciously in the writings of medieval Britain. Information was added and left out on purpose in order to give *history* a different meaning. Authors worked consciously with the features that construct collective

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identities and were, in spite of the differences in the passages shown before, very much aware of the peoples that inhabited Britain. It is the aim of this study to show how this awareness was constructed in early medieval writings in Britain and how this construction of collective identities relates to the contemporary political and social developments.

This study will approach three exemplary writings from the period between AD 550 to AD 732 in order to show how the respective features of identity construction were and still are presented. The three sources chosen for this study represent different perspectives on peoples in Britain during this time. Two of them come from British authors, Gildas and Aneirin, who wrote about their own people as well as about the peoples who began invading the island shortly after the fall of the Roman Empire in the mid-fifth century. The third author, the Venerable Bede, writes from the perspective of these invading peoples and speaks of his view of the invasion and about the peoples who lived in Britain. The authors also differ in regard to their social background. While two of them, Gildas and Bede, were ecclesiastics, the third author, Aneirin, wrote his poem from a secular perspective. Another difference between the sources which will be used in this study is their textual genre. Earlier studies, like the research of the concept of *origo gentis* limited their focus to writings of the genre of *historiae* (Plassmann 2006: 31–32). I will show that the construction of identities is not limited to this specific genre but can be found in all the writings dealt with in my thesis, which belong to the textual genres of letters, poems, histories and chronicles.

The central research questions of my thesis can thus be formulated as follows: what are the features that can be considered to have been instrumental in the construction of the identity of a *gens*? How is the use of these features influenced by the historical and social context of the writings and their authors? Where are the similarities in the use of these features in the texts, where are their differences? How can these similarities and differences be explained? Following these questions, my study will show that features of identity construction can be found in writings from different genres and from different social and ethnic backgrounds. In spite of these differences, features of identity construction are also inherited from earlier writings and put into a new context in order to fit the purpose of a new writing. The construction of identities in texts will therefore be demonstrated to have been a dynamic process embedded in the strategies of authors who were writing for a specific purpose. In other words, the respective identities are not freshly constructed for each writing but rather copied from earlier writings and recontextualized in the new texts depending on the perspective and purpose of the author.

Before entering the discussion of collective identity it is necessary to outline the geographical area this paper is referring to, namely *Britain*. Even common geographical and cultural terms tend to be used incorrectly, even among scho-

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lars, especially scholars with a non-British research background. The term *English* refers to the landmass or the people in the south-west of Britain. Therefore, arguing against common critical statements, England is *not* the name of the entire island but forms a part of the island of Britain sharing its landmass with Scotland, Wales and Cornwall.[1]

This study uses the geographic term *Britain* or *Island of Britain* when referring to the island that includes the areas of England, Scotland and Wales.[2] At this point it needs to be emphasized that this *geographical* definition must not be confused with a political definition of the term *Britain*; in the Middle Ages, this term referred to the area under Roman administration between AD 46 and until about 410. Furthermore, the term *British* refers to the inhabitants of this province and was used to distinguish them from the other *gentes* on the island such as the Picts, the Scots, i.e. the Irish in the north of Britain, and the Saxons or Anglo-Saxons. The *Britons* later changed their name into *Cymraeg* referring to the *gens* living in Strathclyde-Cumbria and in the area we know today as Wales, a term which originated from the Anglo-Saxon word *wealas*, meaning foreigner or slave. However, this differentiation only took place after the seventh century (Davies 1995: 8). In earlier sources, as will be shown, the term *British* was applied to distinguish the inhabitants of the Roman province from the Picts in the north and the Saxon invaders.

Concerning the terminology used in this thesis, the term *gens* is used when referring to the Britons, the Saxons or Anglo-Saxons or other collective or ethnic groups. There are two reasons for this approach: first, translations of contemporary Latin terms like the English words *tribe* and *people* or the German terms *Volk* or *Rasse* carry negative connotations depriciating these groups and thus falsify the at least more neutral and descriptive meaning of the Latin term *gens* (Jarnut 1985: 83). Secondly, other contemporary terms such as *populus* or *natio* can generally be seen as synonyms of *gens* which is why this term is used exclusively to avoid confusion.[3] The term *gens* is therefore used to ensure a uniform terminology although it does not allow a clear differentiation from other Latin or Greek terms that are used in the primary sources (Pohl 1994: 13). The fact that a depreciative connotation of this term as well has been brought into the discussion (Pohl 1985: 93) needs to be mentioned, in this thesis it is used for all collective groups that are distinguished by ethnic origin. At this point, however, it is crucial to outline the difference between the research focus of this thesis and research on nationalism;

1 For a discussion of the problems of geographical definitions see Tschirschky, 2006, 65–67, and Thomas Charles-Edwards, 2003, 5.

2 (Tschirschky 2006: 67)

3 The terms *gens* and *natio* are most frequently used to refer to groups and peoples in the Middle Ages (Jarnut 1985: 83). However, they refer to groups of various sizes and social structures, *natio*, was only used after the Middle Ages to refer to larger collective groups or peoples (Graus 1985: 76).

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while nationalism has been argued to be a modern phenomenon not evidenced earlier than the French Revolution, this thesis focuses on a *sense of nation* in the early Middle Ages.[4] It is clear that before 1800 no nation could be created by design, that means that no *gens* would have been able to claim a nation for themselves in the modern meaning of the term, i.e. the concept of a nation-state. (Smith 1995: 37) However, there can be no doubt that the awareness and the feeling of forming part of a larger collective, i.e. of sharing a collective identity, can be found much earlier than the late 18th or early 19th century.[5]

The following chapter will provide a detailed discussion of various approaches and theories on identity construction. It will also introduce the methodology for this study and explain the choice of the writings used as primary sources. In the chapters ensueing, these sources will be analysed according to their chronological origin, at least insofar as the dates of composition for the writings have been affirmed in recent research. The analysis will commence with Gildas´ *De Excidio Britanniae* and continue with the Late British poem named *Y Gododdyn*. After these two British writings, the focus will move to an Anglo-Saxon author, the Venerable Bede and a selection of his writings. This change of perspective is necessary to demonstrate the continuities and discontinuities in earlier medieval identity construction of collective ethnic groups as shown by both major *gentes* in Britain of this period. The discussions of these writings will include an introduction to their history, the context of their production and the history of their authors. Each chapter will be followed by a short discussion of the results of the analysis of the particular writing as well as possible conclusions. In the final chapter, I will provide answers to the research questions formulated before and an outlook to further research regarding the construction of identities in early medieval writings.

4 It was pointed out earlier by Krishan Kumar that these two phenomena should not be confused (Kumar 2003: 33).

5 Anthony Smith is right in claiming that to refuse the term *nation* to any pre-modern form of community would be unduly restrictive. (Smith 1995: 34) This would indicate a static nature of the term which I think does not exist. The fluidity of the concept of *nation* does not allow a static definition. If one would apply such definition this would lead, as it has in the past, to the necessity of constant exceptions when applied to existent population units. This, in my opinion, supports Smith's claim that the concept of nation and its connection to the past should not be approached from static paradigms. However, to avoid the sin of retrospective nationalism, it should always be emphasized that, although modern nations developed out of pre-modern communities, the contemporary form of a nation must by no means be equalled to a pre-modern form of population group.

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3 Theoretical considerations

The background to the theoretical approach which will be introduced here is based on three major assumptions which have been discussed in the past decades in literary and cultural studies.

First, I approach the primary sources which are the subjects of my analysis, as only *one* part among others constituting culture during the early Middle Ages in Britain. I claim that writings are, among other phenomena such as art or archaeological findings, only one source of information on how medieval societies saw themselves and others. In this regard, writings do not necessarily hold a central position to phenomena like collective or cultural memory, arts, tradition or history. The different forms of writings of this period, however, constitute sources that, in my view, have been neglected in regard to their information on early medieval cultures and societies and, in numerous cases, have been overestimated in regard to their value to provide historical *facts*.

Second, I assume a reciprocal relationship between writings and societies in regard to the exchange of ideas, values and information. Writings are here approached as witnesses to a complex system of communication of a society with itself, indicating controversies and topics of relevance for societies. Therefore, writing is seen as a textual manifestation of culture (Nünning 1998: 188). Although there can be no doubt that medieval writings were never a medium of mass communication, they represented a medium of communication of a small elite within medieval society. Here, my approach agrees with the assumption of Jan Assmann who claimed that cultural memory never represented the memories of all members of a community but rather the memories, real or constructed, of a small, specialized elite which influenced the construction of identity with the transmission of specific forms of memory (Assmann 1988: 14). In this regard, the constructed character of memory is central because this small elite did not only use cultural memory as it was transmitted, rather, memory is continuously in the process of being reconstructed within different social, historical and cultural backgrounds (Assmann 1988: 13). Cultural memory as found in texts, therefore, is no memory of the community chosen by itself. It is rather a constructed or selected memory of a community chosen by a small elite group or members of this group for speci-

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fic reasons, with a distinct purpose (Nünning 1998: 187). Textuality, however, not just mirrors reality but participates in the production of cultural identity.

Third, I approach the sources in this thesis as subjects to *discourse* traditions in regard to the construction and articulation of collective identities. While previous research acknowledged the role of writings in the construction of shared identities or traditions, it failed to connect different types of written sources to understand the development of the construction of shared identities. This failure is surprising considering the consensus about the dynamic and flexible nature of identities in general and, moreover, earlier approaches such as *ethnogenesis* or *origo gentis* which ignored the connections between their sources altogether but categorized them into works that fit a static definition of what has even been considered a textual genre, the account of *ethnogenesis* or *origo gentis*.[1] To me, this one-dimensional and static approach seems to be in contrast with the dynamic nature of the subject matter of identities or ethnicity.

Following these three assumptions on the relationship between writings and identity, I now turn to the theoretical background of my work and to the current state of research on different forms of collective identities, their development and characteristics and, finally, to the question of identity construction.

The idea of collective identity leads straight to the question of what we understand by the terms of a *collective*, a *group*, or a *gens*. The concept behind the term of a *gens* is one of unstable nature and changing definition (Davies 1994: 2). The term comes from the Greek *ethne*, meaning membership of a people (Halshall 2007: 35). The two most common Latin terms, *gens* and *natio*, indicate a community with a shared origin or birth (Davies 1994: 6). But defining *people* simply by their birth and decent would mean that any fudging of the boundaries that divide them would be impossible. This would lead to a sense of unity and immutability which is surely mistaken (Pohl 1998c: 67). Therefore, membership was also expressed via a number of characteristics of the community's members. These characteristics were transmitted through the sources defining the members of the community they referred to (Davies 1994: 6). This approach of characterization was first named *biological* and later became *ethnic*, including characteristics such as decent, custom and geography. Later approaches also offered a political or constitutional definition of a people based on shared laws, allegiance and historical processes (Geary 2003: 42).

Isidore of Seville, in his *Etymologia*, defined a *gens* in the following way:

1 As applied by Plassmann 2006. In her theoretical justification, Plassmann discusses the problem of *origo gentis* as a genre. She denies the applicability of the concept of genre to texts that provide information which can be read as *origo gentis*. However, she fails to follow her own critical approach when she claims that Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae* cannot be assigned to the genre of *origo gentis* because it does not show all the characteristics that are presumably essential for a text to be assigned the label of *origo gentis*, see Plassmann, 2006, 49–51.

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> **Gens** est multitudo ab uno principio orta, sive ab alia natione secundum propriam collectionem distincta, ut Graeciae, Asiae. Hinc et gentilitas dicitur. **Gens** autem appellata propter generationes familiarum, id est a **gignendo**, sicut natio a nascendo.[2]
>
> [A *gens* is a group coming from one origin, (a group) which is distinguished from a second nation through its unity, like Greece and Asia. That is why it is named a people. However, they are called *gens* because of the generations of the families, based on *gignere* (to give birth), like natio is based on nasci (to be born).] [3]

This passage is significant because Isidor not only speaks of a shared origin as the unifying element of a *gens* but also appears to use *gens* and *natio* as synonyms. He provides further details, explaining that groups or *gentes* are united because of their shared origin, their language and their culture which could be recognized in clothing and armoury and would be closely connected to law and tradition (Oeser 1985: 17).

But what is meant by *people* today? Since the 19th century the concept of *a people* equalled with the concepts of the *nation* and the *state* which led to the application of the concept of ethnicity to the concept of nation itself. This development led to the idea of physical, moral and psychological distinctiveness elementary for nationalism. Here, in what Guy Halshall ascribed to be a primordialist view, biological or rather pseudo-biological ideas of race were confused with the sociological concept of ethnicity (Halshall 2007: 35).[4] I will return to the concept of primordialism in short.

However to a certain extent, this problem can be avoided by resorting to terms that can be found in the sources such as *gens* or *ethnos*. As Patrick Geary pointed out earlier, Herodotus used the terms to distinguish people, Greek *ethne*, from tribe, Latin *gens*. His description of Europe's peoples became the basis for subsequent European ethnology (Geary 2003: 43 and 46). These are terms for the concept of a biologically shared origin which has fortunately been abandoned by contemporary researchers as fictitious. It furthermore tended to neglect the influence of social and cultural environments on the members of a community. Both terms were used interchangeably and haphazardly in the sources of Antiquity (Davies 1994: 5). However, the methodological problem and the necessity of an adequate terminology for modern scholars remains (Pohl 1994: 12)(Pohl 1998a: 15).

I chose to use the term of *gens* when referring to peoples in the early Middle Ages in Britain. I made this choice for several reasons. First, during Antiquity this

2 *Isidori. Hispalensis Episcopi. Etymologiarum sive originum*, Wallace M. Lindsay, vol. I, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1962.

3 My translation with my own comments.

4 (Oeser 1985: 4)

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term was used for a community outside the *populus Romanum* (Pohl 1985: 93). The distinction between Roman citizens and non-citizens constituted a vital line in the organization of the Roman society (Geary 2003: 58). I therefore chose it because, in the period in question, the *gentes* in Britain were no longer members of the *populus* of the declining Roman empire. Furthermore, as the passage of Isidor of Sevilla shows, this term was used as a synonym for *natio*. Second, I chose it for the reason of uniformity. Since the sources used in this thesis employ various terms for *peoples*, I decided to minimize confusion by reducing them to one term. It is, however, impossible to ascertain what the identity of these *gentes* was (Geary 2003: 73). In my thesis, I use the term *gens* in order to be able to categorize ethnic communities. By applying this term, I do not suggest any primitive connotation, as was argued earlier against the term (Pohl 1985: 93). The same holds true for all other connotations the term acquired in any later period (Pohl 1985: 94). Finally, and most importantly, I want to emphasize that the term *gens* was chosen out of uniformity reasons and not because it is free of any connotations that other terms, referring to the same concepts, could carry. It was chosen simply as a term that refers, among others, to the concept of a people but, although this has been refuted in the past, should still be assumed to carry negative connotations like all other terms related to the concept.[5]

While it is clear that *gens* refers to a group of people defined by specific characteristics, scholars have argued that *gentes* are neither homogenous nor stable in their existence:

> Peoples may not be an 'enduring reality', whatever that is; but perceptions, myths and sentiments should surely be legitimate items for the historian's (sic!) agenda if we mean to try to reconstitute the experience of the past [...]. Illusions, if such they be -and our own included- are likewise an essential item on that agenda.[6]

This leads to the next step in my approach, to the understanding of early medieval communities and their imagined nature.

5 In her work, Plassmann argues that the term is found in the primary sources and therefore does not carry the connotations which are connected with the German translations *Volk* or *Stamm*. However, her argumentation implies a neutrality of the term *gens* that I find impossible to prove based on the readings of Classical or medieval sources, see Plassmann 2006, 13–14. Therefore, it also seems to me advisable to indicate the possibility of connotations implying superiority or subordination which might be connected to *gens* as well.

6 (Davies 1994: 3)

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3.1 Imagined Communities - the construction of identity

The construction of identities was first emphasized in 1961 in Reinhard Wenskus's work on the development of tribes and *gentes* in Europe (Wenskus 1961: 2).[7] The publication of his research started a lasting scholarly discussion about his approach as well as about the features he proposed as the basis for identity construction. Within this discussion, the question whether or not a form of pre-modern nationalism can be assumed to have existed in Classical Antiquity or in the Middle Ages has been assigned a major role.[8] Apart from the question of a pre-modern form of nationalism, the question of the nature of communities or groups has always been in the centre of the discussion about pre-modern *gentes*.

The concept of constructed or imagined communities was first proposed in the early 1980s by Benedict Anderson.[9] Anderson claimed that communities need to be "imagined" because their members are mostly unknown to each other, but imagine themselves to form part of one unity:

> In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity or genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.[10]

Anderson argued that the imagined character is common to all larger forms of community and that they only differ in the way they are imagined. This implies the artificiality of all communities.[11] This view was rejected by scholars like Ernest Gellner who argued that communities are natural phenomena (Smith 1996: 367). Claiming that communities are constructed, Anderson's phrase *imagined communities* does not indicate that communities are not *real* (Johnson 1995: 6). That this construction and reconstruction is determined by and contributes to imagined communities of the present was argued by other scholars as well (Johnson 1995: 2). Anthony Smith did not explicitly state the constructed nature of communities, but he agreed that a shared belief in a common history and identity is essential for a community to develop ethnic or national identity, without which, it would remain

7 On the role and the importance of Wenskus's work for the current research on Medieval Studies see Pohl, 1998, 15. On the context of Wenskus' research and the influence of earlier scholars, see Wood, 2013, 299f.

8 On the discussion about pre-modern nationalism, see especially Smith (1981) as well as Smith (1986). On the differentiation between two existing forms of nationalism, one modern and one pre-modern, see Pohl, 1998a, 12.

9 On the influences of Anderson's research and the context of his arguments, see Wood, 2013, 312f.

10 (Anderson 2006: 6)

11 The idea of an imagined community and the artificial nature of communities in general has also been applied to other related concepts such as the process of ethnogenesis. This was done by Walther Pohl who claimed that ethnogenesis is constructed out of political developments rather than being a natural phenomenon, see Pohl, 1985, 95–97.

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purely academic (Smith 1981: 66). In the past, it has been argued that Anderson's idea of the *imagined communities* focuses too much on single units of people and neglects the fact that they always exist in contact with other forms of communities, often in direct competition (Davies 1994: 4). This contact or competition leads to a constant re-definition and reshaping of communities, to which Davies used the example of the *gentes*. This resulted in a fascinating paradox, i.e. the fact that the *gentes* are imagined as historically stable but are in fact in a constant process of redefinition, and therefore "are characterised by a curiously simultaneous solidity and insubstantiality".[12] In spite of his criticism of Anderson, Davies never questioned the artificial nature of ethnic communities. He emphasises the central role of the community's name for its identity on the one hand and the definition of it by other communities on the other hand (Davies 1994: 20). Another critical objection to Anderson's theory was that it overstates the homogeneity of medieval culture as well as overestimates sacral language while ignoring vernacular languages (Johnson 1995: 4). Furthermore, Johnson criticises that Anderson's theory

> grossly oversimplifies world view in circulation in medieval culture in order to produce one dominant version in which historical and cultural differences are simply not apprehensible. In his study, as in others, the medieval past is idealised, homogenised, mythicised and made to serve a 'before the Fall' time, as a period of pre-nationalist thinking and imagining, which may conveniently serve as a point of origin for a study which is in other respects committed to nuanced historical specificity and materialist analysis.[13]

Although Johnson's criticism seems justified, there are a few points that I think are necessary to be specified here since my argument follows, to a certain extent, Benedict Anderson's theory. First of all, as a theory, *Imagined Communities* does not claim to characterize all imaginable communities throughout history. It merely provides a theoretical framework which can be applied when explaining historical communities in various periods. Although I do not see how Anderson idealizes the medieval past, a certain homogenization can indeed be found when approaching his model. In this regard, however, his theory does not differ from the majority of publications about medieval culture and communities. Even if *Imagined Communities* does insinuate a certain homogeneity, this should remind scholars to try to avoid this mistake as far as possible when adopting Anderson's theory.

One advantage of Anderson's theory is mentioned by Johnson himself: Anderson's study puts more weight on cultural processes through which the idea of communities is constantly in the process of being made and remade. It also raises ques-

12 (Davies 1994: 4)

13 (Johnson 1995: 4–5) The argument of the generalization of Anderson's theory to relate to communities in general was made earlier by Keith Stringer (Stringer 1994: 27).

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tions about the how, the where and the when the community is imagined as well as by whom and to what purpose.[14]

In the past, numerous scholars agreed with Anderson's theory of imagined communities. Walter Pohl, for example, acknowledged the role of myths, truth and fantasy when constructing collective identities (Pohl 1998b: 7). He also emphasized the central role of shared beliefs in a community by its members. The idea of communities as constructed or imagined entities was also subscribed to by Patrick Geary who saw the Roman community as a constitutional category in contrast to Barbarian communities which were invented (Geary 2003: 63). The membership also *"depended more on the willingness of the people to identify with the traditions of that people [...] than on biological descent, culture, language, or geographical origin."* [15] Patrick Geary, similar to what Davies said earlier about Anderson's work, also emphasized the complexity and dynamic of communities and the constant state of transformation and dispute of their identities which, according to him, seemed to be dismissed by phrases like *imagined communities* or *invented traditions* (Geary 2003: 173).

Eric Hobsbawm argued that traditions are invented rather than rooted in history (Hobsbawm 1983: 1). To him, *invented traditions*

> mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past.[16]

According to Hobsbawm, traditions appear as responses to novel situations with the claim of being historically unchanging and invariant (Hobsbawm 1983: 2). Traditions are not to be confused with customs, which, according to Hobsbawm, do not preclude innovation and change but give any desired change or resistance to variation the sanction of a historical continuity. This means that, while traditions are invariant, customs are not (Hobsbawm 1983: 2). He explicitly refers to the conscious instrumentalisation of traditions when he says:

> More interesting, from our point of view, is the use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes. A large store of such materials is accumulated in the past

14 Johnson speaks here about nations but I am certain this is only an example of one form of community where one can find advantages when applying Anderson's work (Johnson 1995: 6).

15 (Geary 2003: 62)

16 (Hobsbawm 1983: 1)

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> of any society, and an elaborate language of symbolic practice and communication is always available.[17]

This means that traditions, real or invented, are constantly reconstructed in order to meet novel situations.[18] Traditions, naturally, can be old and still alive. However, if no traditions are available, innovators will invent their own (Hobsbawm 1983: 8). While old traditions are characterized as specific and strongly binding, newly invented ones are unspecific and vague but play a central role in public rather than private areas (Hobsbawm 1983: 10).

Hobsbawm classified invented traditions into three different types:

1. Those which establish or symbolize social cohesion and membership of groups, real or artificial communities.
2. Those which symbolize or legitimize institutions, status or relation of authority.
3. Those whose main purpose is to symbolize socialization, beliefs, value systems of behavioral conventions.[19]

Due to my research questions, the main focus of my thesis will lie on traditions that could be ascribed to type one and three with a strong focus on *ethnic* communities. As I will show in the following chapters, texts like Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae* or Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* use invented traditions in order to construct cohesion and membership of communities. The perceived role of history in this notion of invention is central, as Hobsbawm points out:

> For all invented traditions, so far as possible, use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion. Frequently it becomes the actual symbol of struggle. Even revolutionary movements backed their innovations by reference to a 'people's past' [...] and to its own heroes and martyrs.[20]

That new traditions are stronger when they are built on older ones or on sentiments present in the community has also been emphasized by other scholars (Stringer 1994: 28).

17 (Hobsbawm 1983: 6)

18 Hobsbawm argues that it is not clear how far these inventions can go but it is clear that for many political institutions, ideological movements or communities a historical tradition had to be invented to explain their presence and, more important, their role in power in the contemporary world. He names the example of Bodicea or Vercingetorix, who he claimed to be meta-fiction and which gained significant roles as heroic figures for their respective ethnic communities. However, there are also purely fictional examples for invented traditions such as Czech medieval manuscripts to explain historical continuity (Hobsbawm 1983: 7).

19 (Hobsbawm 1983: 9)

20 (Hobsbawm 1983: 12–13)

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To sum up, I will follow both Anderson's and Hobsbawm's assumptions. Therefore, I assume that communities, while being perceived to be stable, are in the constant state of being defined and re-defined. This strategy is influenced, following Hobsbawm, by the changing contemporary realities in politics, society or culture (Hobsbawm 1983: 6). This leads to the community's shared identity to be constantly re-defined or constructed. I consciously use the term *construction* because, following the assumptions of Reinhard Wenskus and his theory of a *Traditionskern*, a kernel of tradition, which will be introduced shortly, a small elite within the community uses various strategies to *construct* an identity that suits their present situation. I deliberately use the term *construction* because identity as it presents itself in various media, including written texts, is based on various components, for example, on a shared perceived history, which may be based on historical events or be purely and simply invented.

3.2 Medieval Ethnic communities and Writing

Since the written sources do not allow to make claims about the felt identity of a medieval *gens*, the question arises what research can say about this phenomenon within this period of history. This leads to a concept which Armstrong called *nostalgia* (Armstrong 1982: 16–51). *Nostalgia* as a concept based on collective memory forms a persistent image of a superior way of life in the past. In this way it is primarily significant, among other things, for written texts which preserve this image. Although there is no intermediate relevance for group identity, *nostalgia* provides different symbolic contents which include myths and symbols which again are essential for the development of a group identity (Armstrong 1982: 21). Therefore, the concept of *nostalgia* is only indirectly connected to the concept of group identity, being mostly reflected in verbal discourses, in this case writings. Therefore, it provides us with an indirect connection of two concepts: it allows us to analyse indirectly how group identity may have been constructed and, to a certain extent, how it was perceived in a period of time for which historical sources are scarce. In this regard,

> nostalgia is a critical indicator of attachment to a way of life; and the expression of nostalgia constitutes a strong symbolic device to transmitting attitudes deriving from such life patterns.[21]

Although Armstrong uses the idea of what he calls a "shared territory" as a symbol that can be seen in the expression of nostalgia, numerous other symbols can be found in written sources. This does not mean that writings from this period should be treated as anything different but fiction, although these fictional texts

21 (Armstrong 1982: 51–52)

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nevertheless found their introduction into the tradition of the *gentes* (Armstrong 1982: 86). As the history of the transmission of the texts dealt with here will show, myths and symbols essential for various expressions of collective identities were transported by these texts. With this transport, medieval texts continued a tradition that had begun centuries before in earlier civilizations handing down symbols and myths that were used to construct identity for their audiences (Armstrong 1982: 165).[22] These audiences can be assumed to have been familiar with the subject matter the authors presented in their writings (Plassmann 2006: 21).

This process, however, should not deter scholars from considering the impact of writings on medieval societies. In medieval Byzantium, for example, only two percent of the population were literate (Armstrong 1982: 201). The only contact between a political elite and the masses was restricted to military issues and to the collection of taxes. Contact was closer between the masses and ecclesiastical structures which aimed at reaching all social levels and all regional areas of a community (Armstrong 1982: 202). The Church, therefore, provided a far more advanced communication network than non-ecclesiastical structures. This network was not only widespread but also unique in its quality and therefore provided a strong force for perpetuating one rather uniform concept of collective, ethnoreligious identities (Armstrong 1982: 211). This indicates that ecclesiastical communication reached broader audiences than political communication. Still, it was a very small elite who communicated in written form. This means that scholars are forced to distinguish between a popular oral culture of the masses of the community and the elite culture as it presents itself in the sources (Goetz 1999: 334). Assumptions regarding the perception of written texts and the symbols and myths among the majority of a *gens* are, therefore, very difficult to formulate. This is also true of course for the research conducted here, where the source texts only reflect a small proportion of the community in focus.[23] In spite of this historiographical problem, source texts always reflect the consciousness of the people who brought them to writing, i.e. authors or scribes. It was claimed earlier, that the literate elite was that part of society in which ethnicity was a central issue (Goetz 1999: 337) (Pohl 1998a: 17). Bearing this in mind, it is essential not to underestimate the role of written texts in the early Middle Ages:

> [e]arly medieval society as a whole in whatever historical context one chooses to see it, was one in which literacy mattered, and where literacy had repercussions right down the social scale […].[24]

22 Audience, in this context, refers to the readership of the text but also includes individuals or groups who listened to the texts being read aloud.

23 For the problem of assumptions about popular culture on the basis of elite literature, e.g. hagiographical works, see (Goetz 1999: 335). Peter Brown proposed earlier a more dynamic view of a *popular* religion accepting the idea of a complicity between the literate elite and the practices of the religious community (Brown 1981: 22).

24 (McKitterick 1990: 333)

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McKitterick suggested to approach writings not just as a historical records but as narratives of ideology and symbols, playing a significant role in the step of history becoming memory (McKitterick 2000: 22–24).[25] Medieval writings were the primary medium of communication between the *Traditionskern* of a *gens* and the people who identified with it. Ethnicity was mainly mediated through writings, including not only mythical narratives but also referring to recent events (Pohl 1994: 23) (Smith 1986: 68). Scribes and priests, but also poets and other spiritual figures were therefore able to communicate their culture from central to outlying areas of the community.[26] By their mobility they did not only transport the culture from remote areas to the central area of a community but also vice versa. As will be shown in the following chapters, direct written communication, i.e. the process of writing a text down, was not necessary as long as the works of these individuals were at some point put into writing, even centuries after their composition. This is particularly true for the poets whose works were put into writing and entered the written transmission at some point.[27] Notably, all groups were closely interwoven with the concerns of ethnic identity and the community's goals (Smith 1986: 158).

In conclusion, the concepts of *ethnicity* and *ethnic identity* as they present themselves in the source texts of my research base should be considered to be part of an ethnic practice rather than inborn characteristics of the members of a community, serving as a form of expression of these concepts (Pohl 1998a: 17). Particularly the written sources from the sixth to the eighth century are witnesses of the elite's efforts to come to terms with and remain in control over a changing world (Pohl 1994: 20).[28]

25 The importance of a critical differentiation between truth and historical record was also pointed out by Walter Pohl (Pohl 1994: 22).

26 While scholars such as Patrick Sims-Williams speak of *bards*, I prefer to use the term *poets* because of the common misconceptions the first term bears. There is hardly any evidence whether works of poetry were only written down or also recited or sung for an audience. Furthermore, there is no concise definition of the concept of a *bard*, or Welsh *bardd* as well as there is no clear differentiation between a *bard* and a *poet*. The concept of role, function and importance of a bard in society seems to differ significantly when approaching different *gentes*, for example when comparing the Irish *bard* with their Welsh or Late British equivalents. Therefore, instead of using the term *bard* I henceforth use *poet* when referring to the authors of early medieval poetry in order to avoid any implication or confusion with common misconceptions the term *bard* might imply, see Sims-Williams, 1984, 183–184.

27 In this regard, particularly the role of poets in the communication and construction of ethnic identities are of interest. Aside of the examples given in my thesis, see also Thomson's work on Gaelic ethnic identity and communication in poetry (Thomson 1985: 262).

28 Scholars like Guy Halshall argued that this strong transition and change of ethnic identities began even earlier in the middle of the fourth century (Halshall 2007: 457).

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3.3 Markers of ethnic identity

In regard to the construction of collective identity in the written sources, scholars have agreed upon a set of features that are elemental for this process. This list of features often includes a founding myth.[29] In the research of ethnic identities, the founding myth or the myth of origin of a *gens* has received particular attention. Scholars developed the concept of an *origo gentis*, a historical narrative about the mythical origin of the *gens*. As the following study will demonstrate, the concept of *origo gentis* is only of limited use when discussing the construction of identities. There are three reasons for this: first, *origo gentis* is an artificial concept to summarize writings that contain a passage that could be read as story of origin for a *gens*. The concept was developed by modern historical research to categorize classical or medieval writings (Plassmann 2006: 15). Scholars who support the idea of the *origo gentis*, however, acknowledged that they study a concept which was not known to any medieval author (Plassmann 2006: 15–16). The assumption of a writing to be an *origo gentis* even led repeatedly to the misunderstanding of the concept to be a genre to which writings could be assigned to.[30]

Second, the concept of *origo gentis* can, following its definition, only be applied to writings that are understood as *historical*. This leads to two problems: first, scholars tend to use the term *historical* in its modern meaning ignoring that a medieval understanding of history might have differed from ours. As the following study will show, approaching medieval writings following a *Ranke'sches Geschichtsverständnis*, a modern understanding of history and historiographical sources as facts, has always provided scholar with more questions than answers regarding the historical value of the writings. Second, the concept of *origo gentis* ignores all other writings that do not fit into the genre of *historia*. This narrow focus on the presence of a founding myth in a *historia*, in my opinion, leads to a limited understanding of the influence of writings in the construction of identity in general.

Besides this myth, other important elements of identity construction include a perceived common history, shared names and geographical or political boundaries, customs and laws, and, to a certain degree, language.[31] However, political boundaries, ethnic territories, linguistic groups and areas of archaeological cultures should not be seen as synonymous and therefore should be approached with circumspection because of their possible overlapping in the written sources (Pohl 1998a: 22).

29 See (Wenskus 1961: 14), (Armstrong 1982: 29 and 52–53), (Smith 1986: 4),(Wolfram 1990: 30), and (Pohl 1998a: 15 and 24).

30 This is also true for the writings which will be discussed in the following chapter. I will get to this problem shortly.

31 Even slavery as a tradition was argued to provide a legitimation and thus to support the construction of an ethnic identity (Armstrong 1982: 91).

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The following part of this chapter provides an overview of the potential features instrumental in identity construction. These will be further discussed in the context of the analysis of the textual sources resorted to. What will follow is a collection of characteristics that have been mentioned in the research of the past decades to constitute ethnic identity and other forms of collective identities and are supposed to support a set of characteristics to be looked for during the analysis in later chapters.

3.3.1 Names

In the past, names of *gentes* or *ethnonyms* have been considered to be central characteristics of ethnic communities conveying a sense of a shared ethnic identity (Anderson 2006: 157–158). They are material for the definition of the superseding ethnic particularity of the community (Le Page 1985: 219). The use of names to distinguish between ethnic identities is, of course, no invention of the Middle Ages. It was also common in Classical Antiquity and names also form part of the Biblical world-view (Pohl 1998b: 4). They are central for both, the individual as well as the community:

> Nothing touches our individual or collective identity more closely than the name or names with which we are associate. [...] It is through names that we order, describe, categorise and label the world. [...] Names in that sense make a people; no people can exist without its name.[32]

Furthermore, names may be conventional or may be artificially constructed:

> The names of people are in a measure political artefacts; but they are also ultimately, more importantly and irreducibly, manifestations of a sense and conviction of communal identity; [...] They might appear timeless, literally aboriginal, especially in a society which constructed so much of its history around the concept of an eponymous founder; but they are in fact a product of time, circumstance and accident. As such, they have no ultimate fixity; they can be modified, transformed or forgotten.[33]

Thus, names are dynamic and flexible characteristics of collective identities. They may indicate unity or timelessness but are of constructed and artificial origin, changing their meanings with the change of political and social realities (Geary

32 (Davies 1995: 3)
33 (Davies 1995: 4–5)

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