CHAPTER 7

Vernacular Oral Tradition and The ‘Germanic’ Past

From the late sixth century till the end of the eighth, the written culture of western Europe was confined almost exclusively to the spheres of ecclesiastical learning and pragmatic literacy. If one excludes documentary material, the vast majority of texts surviving from this period belong to the realm of religious production of some form; this includes even historical works, the majority of which were composed to present definite religious views (though this fact does not exclude political functions for such texts). The histories examined in chapters two to four are not free of religious influence; they are nevertheless among the relatively few Latin narratives of the period that are primarily secular in their function. We should not be blinded by the weight of the number of manuscripts and texts, however: while there was certainly no vast gulf between the secular and clerical elites, the former would have had a cultural education different from that dictated by religious doctrine, and the secular aristocracy’s sense of the past would also not have been bound by strictly religious concerns. Early medieval historical consciousness would therefore necessarily have contained much that is not extant in texts presenting a more ecclesiastical viewpoint.

This secular elite historical consciousness must have been manifest primarily in an oral form, influenced, to be sure, by Latin literary culture, but not by this alone. The Latin ‘national’ histories examined above are evidence of the assertion of a secular historical consciousness within a literate, Latinate, Church-dominated context; hence their efforts to stress continuity and smooth over what might appear to us to be significant breaks in history, which were also perceived thus in the works of other, more strictly religious writers such as Bede. Although it is generally difficult to prove direct dependence on oral sources, we have nevertheless seen that material is included in these histories that could only be derived from an oral milieu, even if, as was the case with the Frankish origin myth, the oral material itself was ultimately based on Latin texts.

More importantly, we have seen that despite the often competing influence of ecclesiastical thought and the weight of written, Roman tradition, the sense of continuity with a barbarian and often pre-Christian past was sufficiently strong that it needed to be written, in Latin, and in a way that stressed this continuity, often at the expense of the significance of the conversion to Catholic Christianity and the concomitant condemnation of the pre-Catholic
past. That these histories were written, and in Latin, is an acknowledgement both of the importance of a historical consciousness rooted in secular values and traditions, as well as of the authority of the Latin written word. It is also evidence of a vibrant interface between the clerical, Latinate culture of those who wrote these narratives, and a secular, largely vernacular culture of the lay elites who ruled the kingdoms of which these are the histories. We should note further that although these historical texts providing a primarily secular viewpoint are few in number (relative to the total corpus of non-documentary written matter surviving from our period), they were nevertheless very popular, and continued to be copied well after the end of our period.1

Works like *Waltharius* and *Beowulf* were less popular than the ‘national’ histories, judging from the manuscript survivals—but this says nothing regarding the popularity of any oral antecedents. Narratives such as these are further examples of the existence of this secular, largely vernacular culture and historical consciousness, and also of its close connections with Latin and ecclesiastical approaches to the past. They attest to a discourse about the distant past that took place primarily in an oral culture, but was deeply influenced by Latin learning. As we have seen, the relationship of these texts to the extant Latin historical narratives that cover the same material (to the extent to which any do) is uncertain, but both *Beowulf* and *Waltharius* show that there were independent traditions about the past that differed from the Latin histories, in terms of the stories told, the identification of the characters, and the chronological location of people and events.

Unfortunately, because the secular historical culture was largely oral, little evidence of it survives beyond *Waltharius* and *Beowulf*, and what was incorporated into the Latin histories. There are two categories of sources for an oral secular historical culture: narratives which have made the transfer from an oral to a literate milieu; and references to such oral narratives that were not written, or do not survive in written form. *Waltharius* and *Beowulf* are the only two substantial extant texts that belong to the first category, but most of the works examined above do contain some kind of references to or recordings of otherwise unwritten oral narratives. In the Latin histories, it is extremely difficult to decipher what derives from a genuine oral source, and what does not; nevertheless, Paul and Jordanes both seem to cite some originally orally transmitted stories, and the Trojan

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