Genealogy: A Comparative Perspective from the Early Medieval West

Walter Pohl

Genealogies and similar forms of structuring descent were widely diffused in recorded history; indeed, they offered one basic “perceptual grid” for shaping the past, legitimizing the present and preparing for the future. Yet they did not carry the same weight, or have the same meaning in different historical contexts. The present article addresses the question how much they mattered in early medieval continental Europe, where and when. It will briefly reassess the evidence from the mid-6th to the mid-9th century. Taken together, the following examples provide impressive traces of genealogical thinking; they could be (and often have been) taken as tips of an iceberg, and interpreted as written traces of detailed genealogical knowledge and its oral transmission among the “Germanic” elites of the post-Roman kingdoms. I will argue that we need to be more precise and also acknowledge the limits of genealogical thinking and of its social impact: perhaps there was no single iceberg? Among the elites, noble descent may have mattered, but it rarely needed to be specified, and it seems that actual genealogical knowledge seldom stretched back more than three or four generations. Royal succession was usually represented by king lists rather than royal pedigrees. Strikingly, neither of these have been transmitted from the Merovingians’ more than 250 years of rule. Genealogies gradually become more prominent in our evidence from the Carolingian period; but it seems that the emerging Merovingian and Carolingian pedigrees were not based on pre-conceived oral genealogical knowledge ultimately written down, but were experimentally created and expanded on the basis of written documents in ecclesiastic institutions.

Comparison between genealogical thinking in the post-classical West and in Early Islamic Arabia make it possible to step back from old certainties, and assessing remarkable differences beneath certain evident similarities.

---

1 I would like to thank Stuart Airlie, Max Diesenberger, Nicola Edelmann, Patrick Geary, Andre Gingrich, Bernard Jussen, Daniel Mahoney, Helmut Reimitz, Pavlína Rychterová, Karl Ubl, Herwig Wolfram and Ian Wood for help and suggestions, and the entire viscom team for the creative atmosphere in the project in which my ideas could grow.


3 A point already made by Wenskus, Stammesbildung, 55.
In the early medieval West, genealogies have been transmitted in writing almost exclusively for ruling dynasties, whereas Arabic genealogies—although written from the perspectives of various elites—reference and address much broader social ranges, and are much more numerous. Tribal genealogies constructed relative distances between kin groups and tribes. Sometimes, pedigrees also make it possible to connect families or lineages with a common ancestor of a tribe, more elaborately so in Northern Arabia than elsewhere.

There is little trace of such connections between family pedigrees and tribal genealogies in the early medieval West. Conceptually, the *gentes* (peoples) of Latin Europe were derived from “the generations of families”, as Isidore of Seville states; however, there is little evidence that families were ever actually traced back to common ancestors of tribes of peoples. On the other hand, the political role of ethnicity grew considerably in the post-Roman West. The polities that replaced the Roman Empire—the kingdoms of the Goths, Franks, Lombards, Anglo-Saxons and others—were generally known by the ethnic background of their ruling elites, and increasingly styled themselves as ethnic communities. In early Islamic polities, tribal or ethnic affiliations were relevant for access to power and privilege, but they were not the decisive criterion for the right to rule a specific realm as in Latin Europe. The relationship between ethnicity, kinship and political power therefore developed differently in Arabia and in the West in the Early Middle Ages. Thus genealogies represent an attractive field for comparative study of the different balances among genealogical thinking, kinship patterns, ethnic distinctions and political cohesion in the societies under scrutiny.

Daniel Mahoney’s contribution in this section outlines very well that intricate and ever-shifting genealogies were an important expedient of structuring and conceiving the social world from the perspectives of tribal elites in early medieval highland Yemen. In the Islamic world at large, genealogies came to be written down soon after the Islamic conquest, when new tribal allegiances and social identities emerged and became relevant for the status of conquering groups. They seem to have been more relevant for negotiating

---

4 Isidore, *Etymologies* 9.2.1, ed. Lindsay: *Gens autem appellata propter generationes familiarum, id est a gignendo, sicut natio a nascedo*.

5 Pohl, “Introduction: Ethnicity, Religion and Empire”.

6 For instance, Charlemagne’s conquest of the Lombard kingdom in Italy in 774 was perceived as the transfer of the rule over Italy from Lombards to Franks: Pohl, “Gens ipsa peribit”.

7 See the overview in Kellner, *Ursprung und Kontinuität*; Gingrich, “Kinship”.

8 Kennedy, “Arab genealogical literature”; see also Savant and de Felipe, eds., *Genealogy and Knowledge*. 