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Dark Age Migrations and Subjective Ethnicity: The Example of the Lombards

In the past Germanic tribes were usually defined as objective ethnic units, small peoples bound together by linguistic and religious ties.¹ This view, which was based on statements and concepts formed by classical writers in the Mediterranean world, is today out of date. Reinhard Wenskus' "Stammesbildung und Verfassung. Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen gentes" (Cologne and Graz 1961) marked a clear break with the old tradition. The tribes and their historical context were carefully studied. According to Wenskus the tribes were heterogeneous units grouped around a core of nobility, which defined the tribe and carried its tradition. This new view has led to a number of works, in which classical and early medieval ethnic groups are analysed in a new way — especially Herwig Wolfram's study on the Goths and Walter Pohl's study on the Avars.² Today we know a lot more about the history and pre-history of the Age of Migrations than we did before the 1960s, but that does not mean that historical research has reached a common consensus. How did society actually function in the Dark Ages — were the tribes the historians refer to real peoples (with women, children, semi-free servants and slaves) or were they simply aristocratic bands of robbers? In an essay on the Goths Alvar Ellegård wants to take a step further than Wenskus and maintain that the migrations between roughly 500 BC and 1.000 AD were not migrations of peoples ("Völkerwanderungen"), but operations of warrior retinues and armies. His arguments are:

- that only luxury articles changed drastically — ordinary household pottery show a basic continuity throughout the period (i e the mass of the population remained permanent, only the rulers changed)
- that the agricultural and cattle herding economy remained unchanged — no great natural catastrophes or extreme climatic changes occurred, in spite of the explanations given by classical writers to the migrations they witnessed or heard about (i e the tribes had no economic reason to leave their homes — the small changes that did occur could be handled by the local economic structure)
- that the peoples of Europe do not show any distinct genetic characteristics — no homogeneous islands of peoples with proper physical features that separate them from their neighbours (i e gradual infiltration is more probable than early medieval bloc movements)

- that more recent conquests were not made by great peoples — for example the Norman conquest of England 1066, which was only followed by settlement of some tens of thousands (i e not a people, but an aristocratic military caste)
- that few Germanic languages remained after the initial conquests — probably because Ostrogoths and Lombards in Italy, Visigoths in Spain and Vandals in Africa were not very numerous (i e they were warrior-bands, not actual peoples).³

These arguments are only sufficient if combined with each other and applied to specific historical events. Taken separately, they do not automatically imply absence of *peoples*.

- that archaeological finds show great similarities during long periods of time only means that the material culture remained intact. Household utensils and everyday tools are not ethnically fixed. They can be the same in several cultures at the same time. The ceramics that were established in late antiquity were still more or less the same 700 years later. In antiquity Northern Africa was a leading producer of pottery, so-called Red Slip Ware, which was exported to many parts of the Roman empire. When the export ended (the 6th and 7th centuries), North African ceramics were replaced by local products. The reason for this change can on the one hand be regarded as the result of fewer opportunities for international trade, and on the other hand as worsened quality of production: if African wares were as bad as Italian wares, the Italians could just as well produce their pottery themselves or buy the goods from elsewhere. The point is, that the products themselves look more or less the same all the time, regardless of who produces them.⁴
- that there is no evidence of climatic pressure or natural catastrophes does not mean that people could not have migrated anyway. The great migrations from Asia and Europe during the 19th century have never been explained by an “inundation-hypothesis”. And even if we admit that only small robber-bands left their homes in search of booty, a robber-band might very well develop into a people-in-arms after a couple of years. A classical example of this is the case of the Cimbri, a tribe that occupied parts of Jutland.⁵ The resident Cimbri of Jutland were not the same as the famous “Cimbri” who, just as the Teutoni and the Ambrones, attacked Central and Southern Europe and were defeated by Marius 101 BC. This eventually very big warlike expedition can be described as a warrior-band (possibly with a Cimbric core of tradition-carriers), which grew and developed into a belligerent *Völkerwanderung* by absorbing especially Celtic peoples in Central Europe (for example the Tigurini).⁶ General migrations might therefore develop from simple warrior-bands — but they can also start for other reasons.
- that firm genetic borders do not exist in present-day Europe does not imply

anything concerning the situation 1500—2500 years ago. Furthermore, since everything (as will be explained below) points to wandering tribes' assimilating other groups of people, the peoples themselves as well as the warrior-bands automatically became very heterogeneous. This kind of migration would therefore produce a weakening of potentially strong genetic borders between different populations.

- that more recent conquests did not involve large settlements does not mean that this was the case in antiquity and in the early medieval period. The Norman conquest of England was an operation headed by feudal lords and based on continental forms of agrarian exploitation and societal control. Norman 1066 cannot be juxtaposed to Lombard 568 any more than the Norman barons can be juxtaposed to the British settlers in Kenya and South Africa in the 19th century. The social infrastructure that formed the bases for later conquests was lacking in early medieval Europe. Another problem is where to draw a demographical line between wandering armies and wandering peoples. Do 20.000 men form a people? 100.000? 200.000? — yes, probably, otherwise the Icelanders of today would not constitute a separate people. We know nothing about the demography of *Völkerwanderungen* — the only sources we have (concerning the Vandals when they crossed the Straits of Gibraltar) are completely untrustworthy.⁷ The Normans who settled in England might have amounted to between 2.000 and 10.000 men (while England as a whole probably had a population of 1—1.5 million inhabitants.⁸ These Normans could hardly have constituted a “people”. The interesting thing, however, is not whether the conquerors/settlers were numerous or not, but whether they were regarded by others and by themselves as a people and possessed the social qualities we normally associate with a people, i.e. a unit consisting of not only warriors, but also of women, children and possibly servants.
- that early medieval conquerors did not introduce any great linguistic changes does not mean, which Ellegård admits, that the conquerors were few. It might also mean that they were culturally inferior, that is, that their language met with great obstacles in the new society.⁹ Immigrants, however powerful they might be, who are incorporated with a socio-political context that is more advanced than their own are easily absorbed by the new context. Legal tradition made the Visigoths, Franks and Lombards use Latin instead of their own languages when they wanted to collect and codify their laws and write everyday juridical documents. Furthermore, which will be dealt with below, the linguistic remnants were not always as few as we often believe.

This study is an attempt to clarify the functions and structure of the *Völkerwanderungen*. Peoples or warrior-bands? The basic problem is that small warrior bands as well as big migrations of peoples are characterized in the same way by the classical and early medieval writers: they used *tribal names*.

When someone was to be ethnically defined, that was done by referring to his/her tribe: Goth, Frank, Saxon, Lombard, Pannonian, Bulgarian, Sarmatian, Roman etc. A group of Goths can be a temporary coalition of heterogeneous elements as well as a relatively numerous people settled in Castile. Before the riddle of the *Völkerwanderungen* can be solved, early medieval ethnicity must be defined. When that is done, this study will focus on one tribe in particular, the *Langobardi* — the Lombards.

Ethnicity in classical and early medieval society

There are two basic ways of treating ethnicity as a historical category: by *objective* or *subjective* definitions. According to objective definitions ethnic groups exist as real phenomena; according to subjective definitions ethnicity is a process through which individuals are constituted as members of a certain group. Wsevolod Isajiw maintains that objective definitions are preferable, since ethnicity is connected to culture and thereby to the socialization process, which can only occur in real groups.¹⁰ However, what Isajiw does not take into consideration, is that socialization process in itself is a historically relative concept. Different periods of time might provide different kinds of processes. Association with groups and development of group identity are not structurally identical processes in all societies. For historians, subjective definitions provide more possibilities than objective definitions.

Patrick Geary has defined the early medieval ethnic groups in Europe as subjective categories. A man was ethnically defined by himself and by others according to specific situations and specific reasons, especially with regard to political contexts. During the Age of Migrations men had identified themselves as belonging to groups which were ethnically defined by the aristocratic warlords, but this identification did not end when the groups were territorialized. When territorial ties replaced personal ones, when agrarian exploitation replaced warfare and pillage and geographical borders became normative, the older way of subjective ethnic identification continued to exist. Ethnicity did not create political disorder — rather, ethnicity was formed and used as a political means in conflict. Most of this is based on what Wenskus said earlier, but Wenskus had believed that the process of territorialization abolished subjective criteria, so that ethnic concepts like “Roman” and “Gothic” became territorial concepts instead of ethnic ones.¹¹

What criteria can be used to characterize subjective ethnic categories? If you reduce the generalizations down to single individuals you receive a sympathetic, but unwieldy, view. In this case, ethnic groups are juxtaposed to cultural and social groups in general.¹² The historical relativity of individuals poses a major problem here: the relations of individuals to ethnic groups (as well as to other groups) are not structurally the same in different historical periods. F. Daim maintains that *ethnos* in itself was more important in the constitution of

society during the early medieval period in Europe than individuals within the ethnic groups. You automatically thought of yourself as a small part of an ethnic unit, not as an individual.¹³ The importance of Daim's criticism is the relativization of the concepts — as for the case of early medieval ethnicity, Daim's view might very well be incorrect.

The concept of ethnicity is relative. If regarded as a fundamental category of humanities and social science it must be conceptualized in different ways both with regard to different parts of history and with regard to different disciplines. An objective concept of ethnicity might suit sociologists better than historians. In certain historical periods certain criteria are more fundamental for the construction of subjective ethnic groups than the same criteria are in other historical periods.

Earlier, several historians and archaeologists were influenced by Kossinna's theories: Kossinna used archaeological evidence to define different ethnic groups. Pottery and arms became ethnic remnants.¹⁴ This methodology is today condemned by most people: archaeological groups are not a priori ethnic groups.¹⁵ Some want to give biological criteria (mainly derived through studies in physical anthropology) much importance, while others (as Wenskus) completely neglect these.¹⁶ Wenskus regarded two criteria as central: a) the general feeling of belonging to a group that is sharply separated from other groups ("Wir-Gefühl") and b) the belief in common ancestry.¹⁷

In certain historical periods archaeological sources are not sufficient. Written evidence is needed in order to confirm ethnicity — for example when dealing with the early Middle Ages. But written sources too vary in importance, since the factors which define ethnicity are subject to historical change. On a purely hypothetical level certain paleolithic societies might have been ethnically defined according to the size and shape of certain man-made objects or by certain kinds of settlement structure: if this is the case, ethnicity can be traced (but, of course, never proved) through archaeology. This, however, is definitely not the case in the age of the *Völkerwanderungen*. As will be shown below, physical anthropology is not very helpful, either. The written sources must be penetrated in search of subjective ethnicity.

Geary has said: "Ethnicity was perceived and molded as a function of the circumstances which related most specifically to the paramount interest of a lordship. Thus a duke may have been Gallic when his birthplace was mentioned, but he was a Frank when talking of his close connection to the king, and an Alamannian when leading the Alsacian levy."¹⁸ By accepting subjective ethnicity every kind of statement on ethnicity must be analysed in itself. When classical writers refer to Germanic tribes (or, for that matter, Celtic and other tribes) they do not necessarily express themselves about the same group of people whenever they mention the same tribal name. When Pliny, Tacitus and Ptolemy refer to the Goths, they do not mean the same thing as Procopius does when he uses the tribal name "Goth" a couple of centuries later. Procopius used the name "Goths" to describe two groups of people: on the one hand the Ostrogoths

in Italy, on the other hand all Arian peoples who were thought to be speaking the Gothic language.¹⁹

All peoples and tribes in what used to be the West Roman empire are based on this subjective ethnicity. In Northern Africa in the 5th–6th century there existed two kings: the Vandal king of Carthage — “Rex Vandalorum et Alanorum” (king of Vandals and Alans) — and the Berber king — “Rex gentium Maurorum et Romanorum” (king of the Mauric and Roman peoples).²⁰ Vandals, Alans, Berbers and Romans — behind these terms are no objective criteria, simply a consciousness of *difference*. This subjective difference separated ethnic groups from each other. A romanized Berber chieftain could belong to the category “Roman” or “Berber” depending on the situation and/or certain reasons which we very seldom can penetrate.

Sometimes tribes were created by several heterogeneous elements, which were joined together by some of these varying subjective criteria — a sense of difference, of a common purpose etc. A typical example is the creation of the Bavarians (the Baiouarii) in the early Middle Ages: Thuringian, Erulic, Alamannian, Skiric and other elements joined to form a new Bavarian ethnic identity.²¹ Sometimes the experience of ethnic difference is constituted by sharp geographical features. The sense of isolation in some Alpine valleys produced a certain political autonomy and an ethnic continuity, which made the Roman population Roman and not Germanic. The people identified itself with their Roman *patria*, Fatherland.²²

When a writer refers to Lombards (“Langobardi”) he might mean a band of warriors temporarily serving as mercenaries in the East Roman army somewhere in Mesopotamia. When another writer refers to Lombards he might mean a big, heterogeneous cluster of peoples talking a variety of languages — but with a ruling nobility which defines itself as Lombard and thereby also defines the subject population associated with the nobility. At the same time other alternative ethnic definitions may exist: the Lombard king Agilulf (590–616) was definitely regarded as a Lombard by several of his subjects and enemies. But in the great enumeration of Lombard kings in the Lombard law-code (Rothari’s Edict) of 643, he is referred to as “turingus”, “Thuringian”.²³ Apparently Agilulf was the leader of a Thuringian fraction of the great Lombard tribe. He was probably regarded as Lombard when residing in Milan and meeting ambassadors from Frankish kings or from the pope — but it is an open question how he was regarded by the Lombard nobility and by his own warriors in Turin (where he had been duke before he became king). The eventually normative ethnic term was a consequence of under what “*ius*” the people lived. In late antiquity “*ius*” had lost its sense of objective law (“*lex*”) and changed its meaning to “authority”, “realm” and “system”. The Lombards demanded that all their allies from different peoples bowed to the Lombard *ius* and, consequently, became Lombards. A big group of Saxons, who had accompanied the Lombards to Italy in 568, refused this subordination and left Italy.²⁴ Most groups, however, remained and accepted the subordination. This also applied to other eth-

nic groups, which arrived at a much later date — for example a group of Bulgarians in the 660s.²⁵

With this subjective meaning of the word “Lombard” (“Langobardus”) it becomes clear that even the suppressed Romans could become Lombards, provided that they wanted to and were allowed to join the tribal system with its wars and general political context. Lombard history is in fact a sample collection of subjective ethnicity: all the way from their mythical exodus from Scandinavia in a shadowy past the Lombards attracted and absorbed members from different tribes, Germanic as well as non-Germanic.²⁶ When they — after sojourns in Lower Austria, Moravia, Western Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia — invaded Italy in 568 the Lombards were an alliance of Germanic, Roman and Asian peoples. István Kiszely has demonstrated (in a study on the physical remnants of Lombard graves in Central and Southern Europe) that the physical differences *within* the Lombard tribe became more evident as time went on and the Lombards wandered south.²⁷ To speak of ethnic continuity is both correct and misleading: tribal traditions (kingdom, rituals, myths and tales) remained intact, but the people who carried the traditions changed. A possible way of studying ethnic association is the tradition of naming — separate ethnic groups in Italy kept their own tribal names for a long time (especially among the nobility): Roman, Lombard, Gothic and Frankish names. When Lombards and Romans were assimilated with each other these differences disappeared. Unfortunately the source material before the 8th century is too sparse to provide for studies on Lombard naming in the Age of Migrations.²⁸

The Lombards as warriors and mercenaries

Lombard ethnicity revealed itself partly through secondary criteria — certain clothes and certain ways of combing the hair, ritual weapons like the lance and the arrow, etc²⁹ — but especially through the tribal tradition, the myth of the origin of the Lombards: “*Origo gentis langobardorum*”. This is the name of a small text from the 7th century, and the same story is told by Paul the Deacon in the end of the 8th century. The myth was an explanation of the role of the Lombard tribe in world history, and its central element was how the people received its name from the god Godan (Wotan), after they had fooled him into granting them victory in a battle against the Vandals.³⁰ The story also contains some standard features in similar tales (emigration, wars against real and fantasy peoples, etc).³¹ This tribal tradition was kept alive as long as the concept of the Lombard tribe existed. New elements in the tribe acknowledged the myth. As has been explained above, that does not mean that all mentionings of “Lombards” (i.e. people who acknowledged this myth) denote the same kind of unit. In some cases it is clear what the writers refer to, in other cases it is unclear.

Procopius (Greek historian, c.490—c.565) describes the Lombards as a people resident in Pannonia (parts of Hungary and neighbouring parts of present-day

Austria and Yugoslavia). They were above all important as a means to uphold the balance of power on the Danube frontier of the East Roman empire.³² But the Lombards were also active allies in 552 to the emperor Justinian in his war against the Goths in Italy.³³ Obviously he talks about the Lombard people as such when referring to the Lombards in Pannonia, and to a warrior-band when referring to the Lombard auxiliaries in Italy. *Agathias* (Greek historian, c. 536—c.582) also talks about Lombard forces as auxiliaries. In 555 Lombards supported the Romans against the Persians near Phasis (present-day Poti in Georgia).³⁴ He also refers to the Lombards as a people in Pannonia.³⁵ *Menander Protector* (Greek historian, second half of the 6th century) describes the Lombards as a belligerent people, at first in Pannonia,³⁶ later in Italy.³⁷ When the Romans in Italy ask the emperor Tiberius II to help them against the Lombard invaders they are given the advice, that they are to try to make the Lombards stop harassing Italy and, if possible, make them come to the Empire's aid. This tactic — which of course involved large bribes — seems to have worked out well in some cases.³⁸ Those who were to be bribed are referred to as some of “τῶν ἡγεμόνων τοῦ Λογγιβάρδων ἔθνους” (the leaders of the Lombard people/tribe). They are to come to the Empire's aid “ξὺν τῇ κατ' αὐτοῦς δυνάμει” (with their forces).³⁹ We see before us a people consisting of separate warrior-bands, where the military function is the only one to interest the historians of Constantinople. We know from other sources (especially Paul the Deacon) that these bribed Lombard warlords in Italy existed roughly between 575 and 605. *John of Ephesus* (Syriac bishop and historian, c.507—c.586) refers to the Lombards as auxiliaries on the Roman side (in 575) in the war against the Persians in Mesopotamia⁴⁰ and as potential allies against the Avars.⁴¹ *Theophylactus Simocattes* (Greek historian, d.after 640) refers to the Lombards as a warring tribe in Pannonia and in Italy,⁴² but he also mentions single names: Ἀριούλφ (Arioulf)⁴³ and Δρόκτων (Drokton).⁴⁴ They might be identical with the Lombard duke Ariulf of Spoleto (d.601) and the Alamannian-Lombard duke Drochtulf, who deserted to the Romans.⁴⁵ Arioulf served Constantinople in the Orient (in 582) and Drokton near Adrianople in Thrace (in 586).

The Greek and Syriac sources show the Lombards as both warrior-bands and a resident tribe (which consists of warrior-bands). It is unclear if these warrior-bands *are* the tribe, or if they are simply parts of the tribe, parts that can be formed when needed. The sources from Western Europe show a similar picture. The pope *Gregory I the Great* (590—604) in his “Dialogues” describes the Lombards as villainous plunderers of churches and monasteries in Italy.⁴⁶ The Frankish historian *Gregory of Tours* (539—594) talks about independent Lombard warlords plundering in Southern Gaul in the 570s,⁴⁷ but he also reports the invasions of Northern Italy by the Frankish king Childebert II — the Lombards, who lived in Northern Italy, defended themselves successfully by escaping to their cities, where Childebert could not reach them.⁴⁸ The probably Burgundian chronicler, who is usually referred to as *Fredegarius* (7th century), describes the Lombards as a people resident in Italy with plotting and belliger-

ent kings — the situation in Italy appears to be the same as in Gaul and Spain.⁴⁹ The Lombard historian *Paul the Deacon* (second half of the 8th century), who is largely depending on the lost works of bishop Secundus of Trento (c.600), shows the Lombards as a heterogeneous people, which in 568 leaves Pannonia and invades Italy. 574—84 they have no king, and the dukes are independent. This decade appears to have been a terrible experience for the Roman population in Italy as well as in Southern Gaul — the Lombard dukes ravaged the country and sometimes deserted to the Romans, persuaded by East Roman bribes. The character of the people and their settlement is very hard to define — Paul the Deacon was (as were almost all medieval chroniclers) mainly interested in telling about the wars and certain natural catastrophes. Paul's history concerning the first half of the 7th century is very sketchy, since he lacked source material — but we learn that border dukes (for example the dukes of Friuli) continued to send warlike expeditions to neighbouring regions (Istria, Slovenia).⁵⁰ Other West European sources — the Southern Gaulish chronicle by *Marius of Avenches* (late 6th century) and the North Italian work called *Prosperi Continuatio Havniensis* (c.625) describe the Lombards as a conquering people with a king and dukes, but since these texts describe the conquest of Italy as such, it is impossible to see any differences people — warrior-band.⁵¹ In later sources the Lombards are always described as a people firmly rooted in Italy.⁵²

The Lombard people

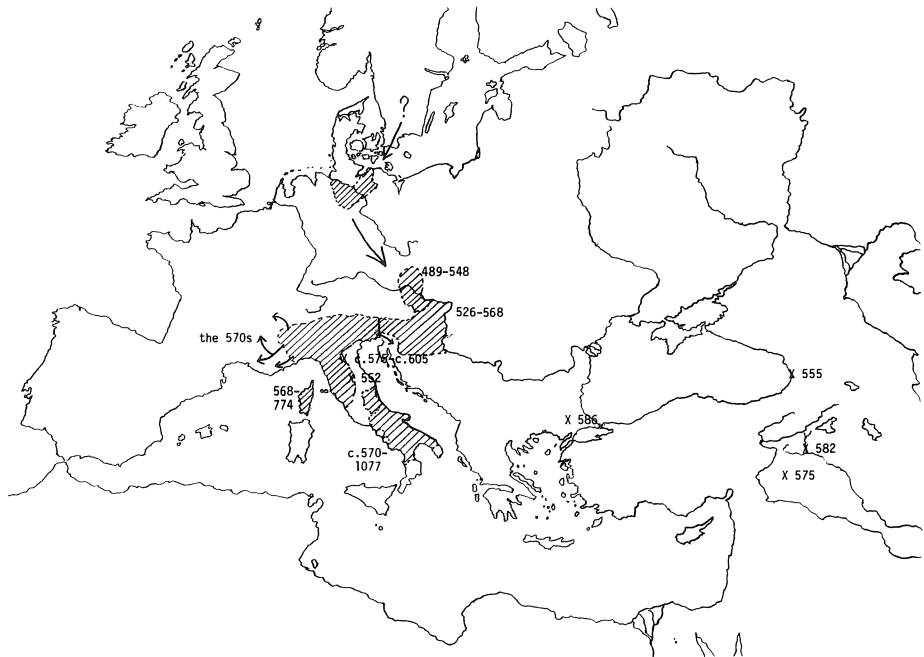
We now know that parts of the male population could be engaged in faraway military activity on their own or as mercenaries employed by the East Roman emperor; we also know that the Lombards were a flexible ethnic group without any firm religious, linguistic or physical features that separated them from others, but with a core of tradition-carrying Germanic nobles. If the Lombards were nothing more than barbarian plunderers we ought to find rather few traces of them, and we would suspect these traces to be concentrated to a few strategic spots. We would also expect relatively few linguistic remnants outside the military and strictly political vocabulary. But what is it really like?

The Lombards themselves maintained that they originated in Scandinavia,⁵³ but Greek and Roman writers placed them on the Lower Elbe, at least from the age of Augustus. They seem to have occupied this territory for a couple of centuries, but our sources are very few.⁵⁴ Parts of the tribe could have made warlike expeditions to other parts of Europe, and we have strong indications that a troop of Lombards crossed the Danube some time in the 160s, and returned.⁵⁵ In the late 480s they settled in what was known as Rugiland (Lower Austria) and continued their expansion east and south during the 6th century. They defeated the Eruli and occupied most of Pannonia.⁵⁶

In Pannonia the Lombards seem to have been a mounted warrior-tribe, living

on tributes and booty. Their social units seem to have been groups of roughly 100 individuals, probably but not necessarily based on kin ties. Several Lombard cemeteries have enabled archaeologists to speculate on social stratification: approximately 4 percent of the Lombards belonged to the aristocratic nobility (kings and warlords), 43 percent were free men (warriors), 20 percent free men of a somewhat lower status (young men and women, poorer strata of the population), 19 percent were probably semi-free (“aldii”) and 14 percent seem to have been slaves.⁵⁷ The settlements were — still according to finds in cemeteries — permanent, but they did not last long. The Lombards were not nomads, but they moved from one settlement to another, so that each cemetery usually only covers one generation.⁵⁸

568 the Lombards invaded Italy and rapidly occupied most of Northern Italy and large areas in Central and Southern Italy. They enlarged their territory in the 7th and 8th centuries but were defeated by Charlemagne in 774. The future Frankish emperor incorporated Northern and Central Italy with his own realm, but the Lombard principality of Benevento in Southern Italy remained independent until the Norman conquest (1077). Italo-Lombard cemeteries are of differ-



Map 1. The migrations of the Lombards.

X=evidence of Lombard forces as East Roman allies

The Lombard parts of Italy indicated on the map are the territories occupied c.700, before the final Lombard conquests of the 8th century, which incorporated most of the remaining Roman territories in Italy with the Lombard kingdom.

ent kinds, but most of our finds are only relevant for the 6th and 7th centuries. Some cemeteries are very large (as Nocera Umbra and Castel Trosino), others are small (as the recently excavated Trezzo sull'Adda). The main problem with cemeteries is the social and ethnic interpretation. Romans and Germans had in several cases very similar forms of burial.⁵⁹ We can seldom be absolutely sure that a cemetery from the 7th century really was an exclusively Lombard cemetery — but in some cases the criteria of Lombard ethnicity (artefacts, size and form, funeral gifts, etc.) are so distinct, that we may presume that the buried individuals belonged to a stratum, that was definitely alien to the original Roman population. These conquerors' places of burial can be divided into three categories with regard to size: a) large urban cemeteries, situated close to cities (the central administrative and economic places in the Lombard kingdom and duchies); b) large rural cemeteries (usually regarded as belonging to citadels and castles); c) small cemeteries (probably belonging to settlements close to strategic positions — bridges, rivers, etc.). The largest known cemeteries of type a reveal an estimated population of a couple of hundred Lombards in each city (most research has been done in Cividale del Friuli, the capital of the duchy of Friuli); type b reveal roughly 100 Lombards in each place and type c 10 Lombards.⁶⁰ To this can be added all the invisible Lombards — people who were buried in separate graves, undiscovered cemeteries and Lombards who died in combat and could not be buried in the appropriate way. It is impossible to try to estimate a total Lombard population based on these cemeteries. Firstly, only fractions of all potential cemeteries have been discovered and excavated; secondly, the actual Lombard population appears to have varied demographically from region to region. Maps of Lombard finds show a marked concentration in Northern Italy,⁶¹ but we know from written sources that the Lombards maintained a firm control of Central and Southern Italy as well — and these parts of the country have not at all been as extensively surveyed and studied as Northern Italy. A certain indication of settlement density might be provided by linguistic studies (place-names, dialects, loan-words): the method is not safe, but if the results are compared with archaeological finds it becomes obvious that certain regions (for example the Brescia-region) were more intensively colonized by Lombards than other regions.⁶² If we were to speculate on Lombard demography in Northern Italy, we would have to presume that the important cities (Cividale del Friuli, Verona, Trento, Brescia, Bergamo, Milan, Pavia, Como, Asti and Turin) each contained a couple of hundred Lombards (more than the average in the capitals Verona, Milan and Pavia), which gives us an estimated population of 3.000—4.000 Lombards only in the most important cities conquered in the first Lombard wave (in the 560s and 570s) — the smaller cities and the later conquered cities of Emilia and Tuscany must have attracted large groups of Lombards as well. If you add all the rural settlements — small as well as large ones — and all the settlements in Central and Southern Italy, the total number of hypothetical Lombards might easily be several tens of thousands.

The linguistic remnants of Lombard in Italian are more numerous than one might expect. More than 300 words still remain. It is important to consider, that the linguistic influence is *not* functionally homogeneous. The Lombard language provided few abstract loan-words, but several that refer to different parts of ordinary life: law, agriculture, forestry, technology, building activity, family life, crafts, everyday objects, military terms, the animal world, place-names and a variety of Italian proper names. In other words, we face a deep penetration of Italian society in Northern as well as in Southern Italy.⁶³

Archaeological as well as linguistic sources speak of an important immigration and settlement. Are we to assume a simple warrior-band consisting of Germanic and non-Germanic aristocrats? Hardly — everything we know of Lombard social history show us a continuing process of social differentiation in the late 7th century and during the 8th century: the process was a consequence of a spread of the concept of private property, the territorialization of personal relations, the conversion to Catholicism and the gradual reversion from an economy based on war and booty to an economy based on agriculture. The tendencies towards feudalism were related to similar phenomena all over Europe; in the 6th and 7th centuries, on the other hand, the society of the free Lombards was apparently more equal than later.⁶⁴ The hypothetical tens of thousands of Lombards were obviously ruled by warlords (kings and dukes), but as long as they were free men they had several rights themselves. Since the Lombards were resident in Pannonia as well as in Italy, it is natural to assume that they had homes with women and children and often a few servants (aldii and slaves). If this was the case — as it seems to have been — the Lombards were not an aristocratic warrior-band, but a people with war as a way of life for the male population. The tribe could be enlarged by absorbing other elements, and it could be diminished by letting groups of warriors leave the tribal settlements on warlike expeditions.

Lombards, Romans and early medieval society

The Lombards were a people of warriors, and war was a normal feature of life for all free men. This did not stop them from owning land and keeping families. They possessed permanent settlements, but they could leave if they wanted to and return a few years later with riches and experience. Society was flexible: just as Scandinavians during the Viking Age could travel south and serve the Byzantine emperor in the Varangian Guard, Lombards could fight for the Empire in Syria and in Thrace. Most Germanic tribes probably resembled the Lombards — it would be difficult to prove that Saxons, Burgundians and Gepids were structurally different. The most elusive problem is how important this warfare was for the social structure as such. Were the expeditions common features of every year, that is, did the king or some warlord assemble his men each spring, attack a neighbouring country and return in October? Or were

these expeditions just one solution among many to the basic problem of provision of food and property? Did the Lombards — in Pannonia as well as in Italy — live on tributes and rent more than on plundering? These are questions that cannot be given any definite answers yet. A possible solution lies in a conscious development of landscape archaeology in order to evaluate the material remnants of a whole region in a historical context. Unfortunately, this kind of study has not yet been extensively used with regard to this particular problem. The settlement structure in Italy can be taken as an example of the difficulties in grasping the social life of a Germanic tribe.

In earlier research it was often maintained, that the Lombards lived separated from the indigenous population.⁶⁵ In the cities the Lombards were thought to have inhabited certain ethnic quarters, for example the northeastern section of the capital Pavia.⁶⁶ However, there are no actual traces of these ethnic quarters — they might very well never have existed outside the minds of archaeologists and historians.⁶⁷ We do not know whether early medieval subjective ethnicity contained the notion of ethnically separated space. If we move from urban to rural environment we can easily see that ethnic schemes for settlement structure were lacking. Earlier it was customary to interpret the citadels (“castra”) in Eastern Friuli, which are mentioned by Paul the Deacon as places of refuge during an Avar invasion c.610,⁶⁸ as Lombard military islands in a mostly Roman sea. However, excavations of one of these hill-settlements, Ibligo (Invillino), have demonstrated that these settlements were entirely Roman creations from the 5th century. Lombards went there when they were attacked by the Avars (as did probably everyone who had access to these easily defended hills). In other words, the citadels are proofs of Roman continuity, not of Germanic military suppression.⁶⁹ We do not know if there was a general code of settlement and conduct between Lombards and Romans. Research in Friuli has, somewhat surprisingly, shown that Lombards preferred to settle on the fertile plain and not necessarily in close connection to strategic points, like roads and fords.⁷⁰ Most of what we know today lead to the assumption, that Lombards inhabited the rich plain of Northern Italy in direct contact with the Roman population. The settlement structure varied from region to region — sometimes the Lombards confiscated Roman lands, sometimes they inserted themselves in the existing pattern by land clearing. Large cemeteries do not have to mean a dense and ethnically separated Lombard population — it may simply imply, that people in this region had the habit of burying their dead in officially authorized cemeteries, that might have been used by several villages and farms at the same time, and by Romans as well as by Lombards and other tribes.⁷¹

These heterogeneous and flexible tribes were probably in several cases proper peoples, in other cases they might have been simple warrior-bands. The problem is, that the tribal terms are the same for both kinds of migration and for all variants of the two ideal types. We cannot even be sure that the *same* name always refers to the same kind of tribe (as has been demonstrated above).

According to us, the Lombard plunderers and warriors in Provence and the mercenaries in Mesopotamia are categorically different if compared with the Lombard tribe/people as such, the demographical base for the wandering warrior-bands that we encounter in several parts of Europe and the Middle East. But according to classical and early medieval writers this difference was irrelevant — what was important to them was to use tribal terms in order to demonstrate a difference not based on linguistic and religious norms, but on the subjective criteria of ethnicity. It must have been self-evident to a Frankish or Greek historian, that the Lombards they encountered in their own country were no more than a group of warriors who identified themselves with the ethnic traditions of the Lombard tribe — but this inner difference was not what they felt they should write about. The important separating line was the one between the warrior-band and other, ethnically different, warrior-bands and populations.

Since the works by classical as well as medieval historians are focused on wars it is not strange that we primarily regard Lombards, Goths, Vandals, Franks, Huns and others as warriors. These tribes became interesting in the eyes of the writer when they approached the object of the historian's study, and these contacts usually involved war. The fact that we have difficulty in separating warrior-bands and peoples, since we have misunderstood the significance of ethnicity, has furthermore rendered our possibilities of interpreting the true character of the societies of the *Völkerwanderung* difficult. To reach a better understanding we have to develop the studies of the ambivalence of ethnic concepts, but it is also necessary to use archaeological research to place the peoples in relation to their environment and their alternative sources of income. This should help us to create a less anachronistic picture of Dark Age Europe, when Rome had fallen and the Middle Ages, as we commonly know them, had not yet arrived.

References

I have not thought it necessary to list editions of famous classical writers, like Tacitus and Strabo — but all important early medieval authors whose writings are essential to this study have been listed with mentionings of printed editions.

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