Spring 2022

History, Ritualization, and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy in Decem Libri Historiarum and Wei Shu

Bo Wen (Kent) Zheng
Bard College

History, Ritualization, and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy in *Decem Libri Historiarum* and *Wei Shu*

Senior Project Submitted Jointly to
The Division of Social Studies and
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by

Kent Zheng

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2022

Acknowledgements

For the initial conception of this thesis, I would like to thank Mr. Perry Anderson, Distinguished Research Professor of History at UCLA's College of Social Sciences, who kindly offered his insight and encouragement and gifted me a copy of his *Passage from Late Antiquity into Feudalism* in the summer of 2019.

For the completion of the Senior Project, I would like to thank my Project Advisors, Prof. David Ungvary and Prof. Lu Kou, for their patience, generosity, and insight throughout the past academic year. I also express my gratitude to them for their joint nomination of my Project Proposal for the Irma Brandeis Prize last May, which I received and have thereby been incentivized to fulfill my original vision.

I would like to thank Prof. Robert J. Culp, my Major Advisor, to whose counsels I owe much of the success of my academic career at Bard and the assembly of my Senior Project Board, on which he himself has graciously agreed to sit.

For intellectual inspiration and support, I would like to thank all my past and current instructors, especially faculty members in the Social Studies and Languages and Literature Divisions. I would also like to thank all my friends and colleagues at Bard, who have ever been living proof of the value of good company.

Last but not least, I thank my family, without whom I cannot be where I am in life.

Table of Contents

史臣曰：有魏始基代朔，廓平南夏，闢壤經世，咸以威武為業，文教之事，所未遑也.

Wei Shou, *The Book of Wei*, Vol. 7 Part 2 page 187

Haec autem generatio Francorum non intellexit primum; intellexerunt autem postea, sicut sequens historia narrat.

Gregorius, episcopus Turonensis, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, Liber II Capitulum X

Introduction

Historical scholarship since the Second World War has, in general, successfully challenged the nationalist notion that ethnic identities are essential and stable markers of self-hood. The most influential entry in this impressive bibliography is Benedict Anderson's seminal study on the "horizontal" affect of the nation-state, *Imagined Communities* (1983), wherein the author identifies print capitalism and mass literacy as key contributors to the birth of "national communities" in the modern sense. Less well defined in Anderson's story of the nation, however, is the potential effect of pre-modern historical experiences on trajectories of modern state-formation. While European and colonial experiences generally provide "ideal" delineations of the process, circumstances were not everywhere the same, even for regions that have succeeded in developing "robust" or "modern" states. For example, one cannot even begin to explain the particularities of the modern Chinese state without addressing its imperial "pre-history," albeit one stripped of nationalist rhetoric to avoid anachronistic analysis. A comparative view of parallel historical developments can further our understanding of pre-modern state formation and its contribution to discrete articulations of "national" identity, past and present alike.

Toward a Comparative Late Antiquity

In *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires*, Walter Scheidel claims that "only comparisons with other civilizations make it possible to distinguish common features from culturally specific or unique characteristics and developments, help us identify variables that were critical to particular historical outcomes, and allow us to assess the

nature of any given ancient state within the wider context of premodern history."[1] The comparative method hence holds the potential to reveal differences as well as confirm universalities across "particular" histories. Less apparently, comparison de-centers the "deceptively familiar," forcing historians to consider a broader range of continuities and contingencies than those typically studied within any specific field.[2] My own comparative ethos derives from the commandment of Charles Tilly in his essay "[The] Means and Ends of Comparison in Macrosociology": "Effective social science, like effective science of any other kind, does not concern cases or variables, but valid causal mechanisms, wherever and at whatever scale they occur."[3] Therefore, it behooves us not to merely translate a social process from the past into modern sociological concepts, but more importantly to examine the ordering of events that enables us to perceive it as such in the first place.

In a synoptical reflection on the respective historical processes that took place at two ends of the Eurasian continent through classical antiquity, Scheidel summarizes the specific attraction of the study of parallels between the Mediterranean world and China: A comparative look at state formation in these two macro-regions reveals a "'Great Convergence' that spanned the entire first millennium BCE and the first half of the first millennium CE, until a '(First) Great Divergence'[4] began to unfold from about the sixth century CE onward."[5] The latter process entailed mainly "the cyclical restoration of a China-wide empire in the East and the decline of

---

[1] 5, quoted from p7 of *Rome, China, and the Barbarians* (2020)

[2] Scheidel, Walter. "Introduction". *Escape from Rome: The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity*. 22.

[3] *Comparative Social Research*, Vol. 16, 1997: 51.

[4] The second one refers to the Industrial Revolution.

[5] Scheidel, Walter. "From the 'Great Convergence' to the 'First Great Divergence': Roman and Qin-Han state formation and its aftermath". *Rome and China : Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires*. 11.

empire and central government in the West, followed by the slow creation of a polycentric state system that proved resistant to any attempts to impose hegemony, let alone unification, and ultimately evolved into the now-familiar cluster of modern nation states".[6] Thus Scheidel elucidates the chief historiographical puzzle in the pre-medieval East-West analogy: How did two similarly endowed empires, Han China (202 BCE–220 CE) and the [western] Roman Empire (27 BCE–476 CE), leave behind starkly divergent legacies, namely a cyclically reunified China and a perennially divided Europe, which persist to the present day?

To frame my own study within the growing field of comparative Classical and Medieval Studies, a brief review of relevant and up-to-date scholarship seems expedient. Among recent comparativist projects, Randolph B. Ford's *Rome, China, and the Barbarians: Ethnographic Traditions and the Transformation of Empires* (2020) offers an example of the meticulous, text-based approach that permits one to escape generalizations when assessing the traditions of two distinct cultures. Contextualizing the divergent legacies of the Roman empire in western Europe and the Han dynasty in East Asia, Ford sets out to "consider the ways in which the ethnographic discourse of the classical era is employed in representations of foreign political actors"[7] respectively by Procopius of Caesarea (c. 500–c. 565) in *Words on the Wars* (*Hypèr tōn Polémon*

---

[6] ibid.

[7] Ford, Randolph. "Introduction". 19

Lógoi)[8] and Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (578–648) in *the Book of Jin* (*Jin Shu* 晋書).[9] In other words, Ford aims to determine exactly to what extent the respective classical repertoires accessible to Roman and Chinese authors for describing "barbarians" or cultural others remained salient in post-classical texts. His findings challenge both the presumptive inclusiveness of pre-modern Chinese culture and the rhetorical rigidity of "Roman" and "barbarian" identities often found in modern reviews of classical historiography.[10] Namely, whereas Procopius consistently avoids subsuming the personalities of "barbarian" rulers in the western provinces under stock ethnographic categories, "the *Jin Shu* doubles down on established dichotomies of Chinese and human-faced/beast-hearted outsiders" and emphatically denies legitimacy to all rulers of foreign ethnic origin.[11]

I have selected Ford's study as a point of entry into the field because his methodology, through analytical readings of "classicizing" texts wherein ethnic identity features more or less as an essential marker of political community, addresses one among a host of factors which contributed to the dramatic divergence between the respective political landscapes of East Asia and Europe since the late sixth-century CE. In doing so he employs, in Scheidel's words, "a comparative perspective…essential in identifying factors that precipitated dramatically different

---

[8] The "wars" as discussed by Ford's reading of Procopius primarily refer to the Vandal War (533-534) in North Africa and the Gothic War (535-554) in Italy, both prosecuted by the Eastern Roman general Flavius Belisarius (c. 500-565). Procopius himself accompanied Belisarius as a lieutenant in both campaigns and left a copious amount of first-hand observations regarding his Vandal and Ostrogothic foes in the *Wars*.

[9] Compiled in 648 by a group of Tang court officials, *Jin Shu* covers the history of the Jin dynasty (266-420) and, in the form of "Chronicles" (*Zai-ji*), those of its rival "barbarian" courts in the Sixteen Kingdoms period. The early Tang ideal of political orthodoxy (*zhengtong*), which privileged the legitimacy of empires ruled by elites indigenous to the Central Plains, empowered the hostile rhetoric adopted by the authors of *Jin Shu* toward many northern "barbarian" regimes.

[10] As Walter Scheidel points out in his review "Rome and China in Comparison". *The Classical Review*. 71.1 205–207

[11] Scheidel, Walter. "Rome and China in Comparison". *The Classical Review* 71.1 206

long-term outcomes in east and west: the famous 'dynastic cycle' in China and the resilient polycentrism of the medieval and modern European state system".[12] Although his study "does not aim to determine historical causality or identify the 'robust processes' that are sought by some comparativists," Ford's contribution to the greater project of deciphering this historiographical conundrum is worthy of review and engagement.[13]

However, Ford's tendency to assume equivalency between political and ethnic identities within the "Chinese" repertoire simplifies the historiographical dimension of his project. While his reading of the *Wars* certainly enriches the modern understanding of East Roman attitudes toward the barbarian rulers of Latin Europe,[14] Ford seems to fall in line with the same "nationalistic discourse of Chinese-language scholarship" he critiques when he consistently renders words that connoted centrality in *Jin Shu* as "China."[15] It is hence dubious whether hegemonic notions of ethnicity really took precedence over political or religious allegiance in either case. Though this reductivism is understandable in the context of his own study, comparative scholarship on Late Antique Eurasia in general would benefit further by considering

---

[12] "From the 'Great Convergence' to the 'First Great Divergence': Roman and Qin-Han state formation and its aftermath". 10

[13] "Introduction" *Rome, China, and the Barbarians*. 13

[14] Ford 16-17; scholars whom he implicitly critiques include Guy Halsall and Walter Goffart, both of whom have insisted on the "rhetorical dichotomy between Romans and barbarians in Late Antiquity" (17). Influenced by my own reading of *Decem Libri Historiarum*, I would say that the issue certainly has a religious dimension as well, especially given how Gregory of Tours inherited the rhetorical tradition of late imperial Christian historiography but makes almost no use of the classical ethnographic repertoire in his own text. By contrast, while "the Christian historian Orosius represents the Gothic kings Alaric and Athaulf not as savage barbarians but as 'Christian champions,'" he does so with Rome's prestigious role in mind: Their defense of a Christian *imperium* overrode concerns with doctrinal orthodoxy (Ford 324). Gregory, ever a fierce opponent of royal heretics, would beg to differ.

[15] Kou, Lu. 125

the “diverse array of contradictions and alternative possibilities” beneath legitimating labels that Ford himself alludes to.[16]

This line of intervention need not feature in a comparison across traditions. For instance, Nicolas Tackett has observed that, contrary to the dominant views voiced in his own period of inquiry, the Song (宋 960–1279), “under the Sui [隋 581–618] and Tang [唐 618–907] dynasties, there had been widespread agreement among scholars that the Mandate of Heaven (possessed by the one and only legitimate emperor) had been held by the Sārbi dynasties in the north, not the Han-ruled regimes in the south.”[17] He then explains why this was the case, pinpointing a primary divergence of official Song rhetoric from Sui-Tang precedents: “In earlier times, the fact that the Northern Dynasties had — in principle at least — performed the imperial rituals in accordance with tradition and had made use of the Chinese administrative infrastructure was sufficient to establish the legitimacy of their rulers.”[18] Tackett then proceeds to isolate concrete and specific processes, such as diplomatic and cultural shifts that took place between the Tang and Song dynasties, that contributed to the Song deviation from this norm. By fully contextualizing its subjects, an open framework of analysis helps account for the necessary variability within each textual tradition and steer the comparison in a productive direction.

Hence, I hope to explore the dialectic between state-building and identity formation in post-imperial Latin Europe and China through close readings of a pair of historical writings that cover similar periods of dynastic foundation, growth, and decline: *The History of the Franks*

---

[16] Ford 13

[17] Tackett 191

[18] ibid. 192

(*Decem Libri Historiarum*, commonly known as the *Historia Francorum*)[19] by Gregory of Tours (538–594) and *The Book of Wei* (*Wei Shu* 魏書)[20] by Wei Shou 魏收 (506–572). Two suggestions near the end of Scheidel's review of Ford's book prompt this selection:

> We must ask how more overtly Christian authors engaged with 'barbarian' power (p. 324). In his desire to foreground classical paradigms in classicising writing (pp. 21-2, 326), F. deliberately gives short shrift to the homogenizing effect of Christianity (and of Buddhism in China), even though Procopius himself considered conversion as a significant factor in acculturation (pp. 166-7, 183, 305). As for China, we would also like to know whether xenophobic topoi were similarly common under the more substantively Tuoba/Tabgach regimes that preceded the Sui and the Tang.[21]

Reading the authorial colophons in the *Imperial Annals* (*Di-Ji* 帝紀) and the "Treatise on Rituals" (*Li-Zhi* 禮志) from *The Book of Wei* with questions of political legitimacy and identity in mind should enable us to appreciate the ways in which narrative and rhetoric collaborate to present the otherwise "barbarian" Tuoba clan as legitimate rulers of *zhongguo* [lit. "Middle Country," a usage carried over from the pre-imperial period to designate the area covering most of what would later become known as "China proper"]. Likewise, the "homogenizing" influence of Christianity on Western attitudes to ethnic identity may be better evaluated with reference to the *Historia Francorum*, one of the more "Christianizing" examples in the early medieval genre of "national" histories.

---

[19] A history of Gaul whose "Frankish" chronology ranges from the humble beginnings of the Merovingian dynasty (481-751) in the fifth-century to the final years of the author's life (c. 591). The Franks spoke a Germanic language and likely originated in a frontier zone shared by the Belgic provinces of the Roman Empire and what would later be known as the Netherlands.

[20] Official history of the Northern Wei (386-534), a hybrid regime ruled by a substantially Xianbei (Sārbi) aristocracy in conjunction with a primarily indigenous ("Chinese") cast of civil functionaries, compiled under the Northern Qi (550-577), one of its two successor states before the end of the "Northern and Southern Dynasties" [Nanbeichao 南北朝 (420-589)] period. The Xianbei were a North Asian (Turco-Mongolic) group with origins near the Greater Khingan Range (originally known as "the Xianbei Mountains") in Inner Mongolia.

[21] Scheidel "Rome and China in Comparison". 207

This study thus seeks to interpret the works of Gregory of Tours and Wei Shou through parallel schemes of political legitimation in Merovingian Francia and Northern Wei China. Furthermore, I will try to navigate the complexities of identity rhetoric in Late Antique China and Europe by addressing flexible sources of legitimacy and affiliation, such as charismatic leadership and collective ritual, noting their relevance in historicized narratives of state-building. Finally, I will compare the rhetorical parallels between these two texts as (re)constructive pieces of historical writing, products of the cultural middle ground between potentially opposing notions of ritual propriety and statehood. On the front of modern ritual theory, Catherine Bell has made the observation that "ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane,' and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors."[22] Bell's model of ritualization not only describes the cultural strategies of legitimation which were topics within the historiographic projects I examine, but also captures the "ritualizing" nature of history-writing in practice.

In the broadest terms, my research addresses the historical themes of statehood and identity formation through a comparative lens, focusing on the key transitional period of Late Antiquity (c. 150-750 CE) in Eurasian history. The two texts chosen for this purpose, Gregory of Tours' *Ten Books of Histories* and Wei Shou's *The Book of Wei*, tell deceptively familiar stories of charismatic kingship after the collapse of a sophisticated imperial bureaucracy. Nevertheless, a

---

[22] "4: Action and Practice". 74

comparison between Christianization and *li*[23] as "classicizing" vehicles of legitimation will pinpoint the divergent historical trajectories underpinning these discourses. Since Merovingian Francia and Tuoba Wei each showed the greatest civic and ideological promises of "imperiogenesis" in their respective regional contexts, their divergent courses potentially laid a historic "pedestal" upon which the subsequent "Great Divergence" between state formation in the Latin west and China developed.

[23] *Li* (禮), a word which, in modern vernacular Chinese, can refer either to the social practice of paying respect or to the specific gift being exchanged for the acknowledgement of its recipient, had a political salience in the classical tradition. The observance of proper rites—mostly in the form of sacrifices "graded" according to the identity of the participants and their relationship to the altar where offerings were made—served as a compass for assessing the *de facto* legitimacy of a government. Theoretically, even a state that appears to fulfill its secular functions perfectly neglects ritual propriety at its own peril. One may hence brand *li* as one ruling strategy among many the world has seen.

Chapter I: Frankish Identity in the *Decem Libri Historiarum*

Authorial Profile: Gregory of Tours

In the classic formulation of J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, Gregory of Tours' writings, whether historical or hagiographical, "were only one side of a career of ceaseless activity as administrator, builder, evangelist and (though some will not have it) politician."[24] Therefore, there were always social and political stakes to his literary projects. Repeatedly self-deprecating throughout his historical and hagiographical works, the bishop nonetheless saw the worth in these as faithful, if not eloquent, accounts of the Christian experience in late Roman and Merovingian Gaul. Gregory's concluding remark on his own achievements as Bishop of Tours in Book Ten of the *Historia Francorum* merits partial citation here:

> I, Gregory, have written the ten books of this *History*, seven books of *Miracles* and one on the *Lives of the Fathers*. I have composed a book of *Commentaries on the Psalms*. I also wrote a book on the *Offices of the Church*. I know very well that my style in these books is lacking in polish. Nevertheless I conjure you all, you Bishops of the Lord who will have charge of Tours cathedral after my unworthy self, I conjure you all, I say, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Judgement Day feared by all sinners, that you never permit these books to be destroyed, or to be rewritten, or to be reproduced in part only with sections omitted, for otherwise when you emerge in confusion from this Judgement Day you will be condemned with the Devil. Keep them in your possession, intact, with no amendments and just as I have left them to you.[25]

For an ecclesiastical writer, it is understandable to place particular emphasis on the salvific significance of hagiographies and miracle narratives, but Gregory lists his *Historia* alongside the explicitly religious entries of his corpus. This parallel does not convey a generic demarcation between the secular and the sacred: It argues for their entanglement. It also, perhaps, bespeaks

---

[24] "The Work of Gregory of Tours". *The Long-Haired Kings*. 52

[25] *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*. trans. Lewis Thorpe. X.31 602-603

the deep personal involvement of the bishop-historian in the power politics of a splintered Merovingian kingdom since the death of King Sigibert (r. 561–575) in 575.[26]

Belonging to "that senatorial class who had, under the Imperial regime, won their status either by holding office or by the favour of the Emperor," Gregory's Roman pedigree wanted little in terms of prestige, especially in a time when hereditary social status was often correlated with literacy and thus access to civil and episcopal offices.[27] Indeed, out of his eighteen predecessors in the Metropolitan See of Tours, thirteen had been blood relations of some kind. As an elite member of the Gallic Church and an active participant in local government, Gregory exemplifies the "cultural broker" in Helmut Reimitz's specific reference to the term in *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550-850*.[28] Summarizing the mediating role of such sub-Roman political actors as Sidonius Apollinaris (c. 430–c. 485) and the patrician Syagrius (b. 430), Reimitz sets up a preamble to his study of Gregory of Tours as cultural broker:

> The engagement of Roman regional elites in the political and social reconfiguration of the Roman world resembles the work of people whom anthropologists and ethno-historians have called cultural brokers — that is, cultural intermediaries, who 'stand guard over the crucial junctures of synapses of relationships', which connect different social groups or systems to a larger whole.[29]

In Gregory's case, the most important "juncture" of cultural discourse was the Church itself. The Gallic *ecclesia* and the Catholic doctrine it represented remained, throughout the bishop's work,

---

[26] Thorpe, Lewis. "Introduction: II. The Times in which Gregory lived". *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks.* 19.

[27] Dill, Samuel. "Chapter IV: Gregory of Tours and his Circle in Auvergne". *Roman Society in Gaul in the Merovingian Age*. 309.

[28] First introduced by anthropologist Eric Wolf and then used by Clifford Geertz to "challenge the concept of culture as a stable, self-contained and self-perpetuating system," cultural brokerage, in the updated definition of Helmut Reimitz, "has to be seen as a creative performance in social contexts that are characterised by a complicated interplay between different social groups and identities that fuel the brokers' actions and form the basis of their social prestige" (Reimitz 18-19).

[29] "Introduction". *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550-850*. 18.

a critical framework in which Gregory interpreted the actions of individuals, even though the influence of social custom on theological exposition cannot be underestimated.[30] For instance, Wallace-Hadrill has pointed out the tacit correlation between the Frankish concept of blood-feud and Gregory's depictions of divine vengeance.[31]

To the episcopacy and city of Tours, what remained of vital interest, at least as long as the Merovingians stayed in power, were the characters of Clovis and his descendants. The Germanic past of the Franks hardly features in Gregory's historiography. However, his *Historia* does allow one to glean the long-term effects of the Merovingian occupation. Social relations did seem to have become even more "personal" and clan-based than in the late Roman province of Gaul. For example, the only two Frankish words to appear in the *Historia*, *leudes* (military retainer) and *morgengabe* (dowry), must have denoted concepts unfamiliar enough to Gregory's clerical audience to not call for Latin substitutions.[32] Gregory likely retained these particular expressions to acknowledge the "foreign" character of the Franks from time to time, even though it mattered relatively little to the agenda of the Gallic Church.

By the time Gregory came to office, however, ecclesiastical historiography already had a history of at least two centuries, if one starts the tally from the Church father Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339–340). The sources he consulted on universal history prior to the dominion of the Franks in Gaul, "the chronicles of Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, and of the priest Jerome, explain clearly how the age of this world is computed, and set out in systematic form the entire

---

[30] Reimitz gives the example of the trial of Bishop Praetextatus of Rouen, which Gregory recounts in Book V; see "Gregory of Tours and His Genealogy of Pastoral Power in Late Antique Gaul", pp. 41-43

[31] See his discussion of "*ultio divina*" in "VI: The Bloodfeud of the Franks" (127).

[32] Thorpe, Lewis. "Introduction: IV. The History of the Franks". 45.

sequence of the years."[33] Gregory's concern with a canonical chronology affirms the cosmological backdrop of Christian historiography, against which the history of the Franks counted as but one phase, though perhaps the final, before the second coming of Christ. For Frankish affairs proper, he relied on the Roman historian Sulpicius Alexander but notably acknowledged the latter's failure to "provide any name for their first king at all."[34]

Unlike Wei Shou, who diligently recounted the origin and rise of the Tuoba clan in the *Imperial Annals* of the *Wei Shu*, Gregory of Tours did not provide a complete genealogy of Merovingian kings that extended back before their permanent settlement in Gaul. Whereas Wei always referred to the early Tuoba chieftains by their posthumous regnal titles, Gregory did not seem much bothered by the absence of early Frankish *reges* from his *Historia Francorum*. If one reads Gregory literally, it seems as if "only in Gaul did the Franks have kings for the first time."[35] Before the fifth-century, the best they had produced among themselves were called *duces*, "war leaders."[36] Therefore, despite having undertaken the composition of a history "of the Franks," Gregory of Tours' field of investigation was more dynastic than ethnographic. For him, the story of the dynasty was embedded within the history of Gallic Christianity.

Reimitz's model of cultural brokerage mainly encompasses Gregory's episcopal persona. He has illustrated the importance of Gregory's ecclesiastical perspective to this function, which he defines as an effort to counter the "danger of history" to Christian *communitas*: "Gregory did

---

[33] *DLH*, I, *Pref*., trans. Lewis Thorpe. 69.

[34] Reimitz, Helmut. "Introduction". 22: "*Nam cum multa de eis Sulpicius Alexander narret historia non tamen regum primum eorum ullatinus nominat*. (While the History of Sulpicius Alexander tells us a lot about them [the Franks] he fails to provide any name for their first king at all.)"

[35] Reimitz. "Chapter 3: The Dangers of History". 54.

[36] ibid.

not want to provide contemporary individuals and groups with a past that could legitimate their positions as independent from his history of pastoral power."[37] To put it succinctly, Gregory of Tours did not so much write a history of the Franks as that of Christian Gaul under the dominion of one particular group of Franks, the Catholic Merovingians. As political actors within a Christian kingdom, the Merovingian nobility thus feature in the *Historia Francorum* not as the heroes and villains of a glorious Frankish saga in the making, but rather as secular potentates who recall Biblical precedents and are significant in so far as they influence the lives of the faithful.

How real was the "danger" Gregory allegedly saw in exclusively "Frankish" claims to legitimacy? Here it is worth pointing out that, if the author of the *Historia* intentionally toned down the ethnological relevance of Frankish rule, his vision of the *regnum* was not necessarily "Roman" either. For instance, he discusses both the Gallo-Roman usurper Avitus of Clermont (c. 390–457) and Childeric (c. 437–481), the father of Clovis (r. 481–511), in terms of *luxuria*.[38] In service of his Christianizing agenda, "Gregory does not let his readers forget that like the Franks, the *senatores* had a pagan past, too."[39] The Franks deserved particular scrutiny because of their dominance within the polity and, therefore, ongoing propensity to contest the autonomy of the Church.

Book II of the *Historia* witnesses a chronological and conceptual transition into the "post-Roman" period. Citing Gregory of Tour's own preface, Reimitz writes:

---

[37] Reimitz 52

[38] ibid. 72

[39] ibid. 73

> His *Histories* presented a ragbag of stories about the deeds and virtues of the saints, and the struggles of peoples: *mixte confusequae tam virtutes sanctorum et strages gentium memoramus*. At no place did Gregory use the historical or ideological framework of the Roman Empire to give order and orientation in his narrative of confusion.[40]

As established above, of course, this did not force Gregory to adopt the Frankish perspective on the events he set out to describe. Instead, the historian's pastoral framework contributed to the creation of "a specific social imagination of the world as one divided among Christian peoples which we might call a Western ethnicity."[41] By mingling the vices of kings with the virtues of saints in his narrative, Gregory emphasizes the continuity of ecclesiastical presence in Gaul despite the former province's political fragmentation. In this interpretive context, his historiographical project hinges on the successful elucidation of an exclusively Christian peoplehood within the Merovingian kingdom. Hence the danger of pre-Christian or "classicizing" histories for Gregory consists precisely in their potential to provide alternative (civic and/or ethnic) networks of identification.

The other notable occasion in the *Historia* on which Gregory revealed his eschatological concern was his preface to Book V. While Gregory bemoans the fate of the "*gens* and *regnum Francorum*" through an allusion to Matthew 24:8, the rhetorical audience of his sermon remain the Merovingian kings:

> What is your object? What do you seek? What have you not got in plenty? In your homes there are luxuries in abundance. In your storehouses wine, grain and oil abound; gold and silver are piled up in your treasuries. But one thing you lack: without peace, you have not the grace of God.[42]

---

[40] "Chapter 2: *Virtutes Sanctorum et Strages Gentium*: 'The Deeds of the Saints and the Slaughters of the Peoples'". 45.

[41] Reimitz. "Introduction". 2.

[42] *DLH*, V, prologue trans. Helmut Reimitz. "Chapter 3: The Dangers of History". 65.

By accusing Frankish royals of engaging in civil war out of avarice in the context of prophesied destruction, Gregory qualifies their dominion as one held under the auspices of God. Impassioned with righteous indignation, the bishop of Tours delivers a prophecy of his own: "As things are, what else can you look forward to, except that your army will be beaten and that you yourselves will be left without support and will fall into ruin, conquered by enemy peoples."[43] Just conflict takes place within the soul, not among Christian kinsmen. Even in discord, the Franks did not lack precedents, as Gregory's unusual reference to the demise of Carthage illustrates.[44] Allegiance to Gaul's Christian *communitas*, now exemplified through the observance of its *mores*, defined Gregory's representation of Merovingian legitimacy in the era of division after Clovis.

Elaborating on Reimitz's hermeneutic, I am interested in the rhetorical tactics Gregory the historian and cultural broker employed to navigate his cultural position and relegate Frankish identity to a Christian *populus*. To answer this question, the discrepancy, well-observed by Wallace-Hadrill, between the bishop's characterization of Clovis the "*pugnator egregius*" and that of his vigorous but quarrelsome successors deserves examination.[45] In addition, one must ask if the subtle "muting" of ethnic differences in the *Historia* conveyed an ideal of Catholic homogeneity that was, first and foremost, predicate on Clovis's momentous decision to adopt the orthodox faith.[46] This calls for a close reading of Book II, with particular attention paid to the portrayal of Clovis and his warriors in contrast to the Gallo-Roman warlord Syagrius (430-487)

---

[43] *DLH*, V, *Pref*., trans. Lewis Thorpe. 254.

[44] ibid.

[45] "The Work of Gregory of Tours". *The Long-Haired Kings*. 61.

[46] Again Wallace-Hadrill drops the cue: "By the mere fact of conversion to Catholicism Clovis is a new kind of barbarian king" (172).

and other "barbarian" groups vying for control over the Gallic provinces. A study of Gregory's legitimation strategy in the overlapping contexts of Christianization and dynastic rivalry will yield *comparanda* for similar instances of cosmological and political rhetorics in the *Wei Shu*.

Introduction

In Walter Goffart's seminal study of Late Antique Latin historiography, *The Narrators of Barbarian History* (1988), the author makes the following statement regarding the *Decem Libri Historiarum* of Gregory of Tours:

> Gregory's account of the *excidia miserorum* was meant to inspire contempt of the world, not to denounce, still less to celebrate, the Franks or anyone else. Simultaneously, more particular lessons were imparted. Gregory's advocacy of generosity as the pre-eminent royal virtue, of orthodoxy as being important even when it seemed safe, of mercy and nonviolence, and of other matters can be easily inferred from his presentation. The perennial history he evoked is a gallery of pictures with a narrator to guide us among them. The features on the canvasses are sometimes indistinct, but the moral colors are invariably clear. Gregory's artistry resides in making us forget that the *Histories*, in format as in contents, is didactic literature.[47]

While Goffart correctly identifies the project of Gregory's *Histories* as the cultivation of a Catholic genealogy of catastrophes and miracles in Gaul, I would like to complicate the modern historian's emphasis on the bishop's neutral attitude toward such particular groups as "the Franks". Justifying Guy Halsall's recent proposition of "multilayered identities", Reimitz has observed that for Gregory of Tours the name of the Franks "can be confined to the family of the Merovingian kings; but it can also indicate different groups under their rule, a specific region within the Merovingian kingdom, the whole *regnum*, individual officials, parts of the population

[47] "Chapter III: Gregory of Tours". 230

in cities, parts of the army or even the whole *exercitus*."[48] If nothing else, the pattern of Gregory's ethnonymic usage itself merits attention. Furthermore, in stark contrast to the relative ubiquity of the *Franci* in the narrative, whether as *reges*, *comites*, or less frequently an entire *populus*, the word *Romani* ceased to function as a signifier of indigenous origins in Gregory's Gaul. Indeed, Raymond Van Dam has gone so far as to claim in *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul* that "in sixth-century Gaul most free men, including the descendants of the indigenous Gallo-Romans, could now be considered Franks."[49] From a modern perspective, Van Dam's judgement does apply if one defines a "Frank" as a *civis* of any Merovingian territory and, hence, a member of the *regnum Francorum*, but Gregory's usage of the term remains ambiguous on the textual level.

For one, the *Franci* appear in the *Histories* alongside regional Gallic groups, the pre-Roman *Arverni* and Gregory's own *Turonensi* being foremost among them. In liturgical contexts such differentiations would have mattered a great deal, as *civitas* remained the broadest unit of political organization in sixth-century Gaul.[50] To a large extent, the *romanitas* of early Merovingian *cives* in the Gregorian context went without saying: "Romans [senators] continued to dominate regional politics" in Southern Gaul, where the bishop of Tours spent the majority of his lifetime.[51] Guy Halsall concurs in his contribution "Transformations of Romanness: The northern Gallic case," speaking of the decline of Roman cultural prestige in the late 500s: "This

---

[48] "Politics of Identity in the Merovingian Kingdoms of the Sixth Century". 115

[49] "Early Merovingian Gaul: The World of Gregory of Tours". 180

[50] Murray, Alexander C. "The Merovingian State and Administration". *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*. 227: "There were two main liturgical obligations on the inhabitants of the *civitates*, each not dissimilar to the other, and probably linked through the same officials overseeing both: peace-keeping duties and military service."

[51] Pohl, Walter. "Introduction: Early medieval Romanness - a multiple identity". *Transformations of Romanness : Early Medieval Regions and Identities*. 15.

is also the period when Gregory of Tours was writing his Histories. In this context I think it is unsurprising that Roman identity is conspicuous by its absence."[52] Out of a myriad of potential questions one could ask about ethnicity from this period, one remains unresolved and perhaps always will: How reliable was civic identity an index of ethnic origin? In other words, if "there was no binary opposition between *Arvernus* and *Francus* any more than there was between *Arvernus* and *Arelatensis* in the embassies mentioned by Gregory," did ethnic identity factor at all into Gregory of Tours' historiographical project, which, after all, was to translate the *facta* of saints and sinners into the *dicta* of a moral cosmology?[53]

As a formative response to this puzzle, this chapter will establish an interpretive framework for reading the *Histories* as a text that homogenizes Gallo-Christian and Frankish identities. Gregory's intervention syncretizes Catholic unity with Frankish solidarity, in the process presenting the *gens Francorum* as a group whose members he always assesses with reference to his Christian historiographical agenda. Should the *Franci* obtain any legitimation from the Bishop of Tours, they would do so as Catholics and defenders of the Gallic Church. The majority of Frankish laymen and clerics in Gregory's account, however, fell short of his ideal. As Goffart pointed out back in 1988, Gregory found few redeeming qualities among the Merovingians of his own time after the generation of Clovis fulfilled their mission "to save Catholic Gaul from Arian heresy."[54] Gregory's characterization of secular transactions can sometimes border on satire, whose theological root Goffart traces back to St. Augustine's disdain

---

[52] Halsall, Guy. "Transformations of Romanness: The northern Gallic case". *Transformations of Romanness : Early Medieval Regions and Identities*. 53.

[53] ibid. 55

[54] "Chapter III: Gregory of Tours". 205

for the "earthly city" (*civitas terrena*).[55] Apparently, even members of royalty were not exempt from this critical edge. Goffart writes: "Despite the preface to book V, the Merovingians are not so much a lineage experiencing deterioration as a uniform pack of reprobates, forming a backdrop against which the virtues of three kings (Clovis, Theudebert, and Guntram) stand out."[56] Regardless of the tribe they hailed from, Gregory has few compliments in store for secular authorities beside these three.

Although Goffart's attention to the preponderance of Gregory's Christian moralism in the *Historia* deserves approbation, his attempt to effectively efface ethnic identity from the discussion of Gregorian historiography seems rather dubious. Moral ambiguities of its chief political players aside, Gregory retains the designation of the kingdom as one "of the Franks," whose collective acceptance of Catholicism under Clovis did signify a watershed moment in the historian's narrative. This brings us to Halsall's contribution to the ongoing "debate" on Late Antique ethnicity between the "Toronto School" (Walter Goffart) and the "Vienna School" (Walter Pohl). According to Halsall,

> In Goffart's view [these] Germanic ethnic groups did not bring down the Roman Empire and were of no historical significance whereas, for Pohl, whether or not they brought down the Empire, ethnically-named political groups were of central importance in the political changes of the fifth and sixth centuries.[57]

Here, Halsall mediates the dispute between the two schools by isolating the real crux of their disagreement. As he sees it, Goffart misreads Pohl's argument for the political salience of late Roman "ethnic groups" as "a refiguring of the old view of the conquest of the Roman Empire by

---

[55] ibid. 206; see 197-203 of the same for Goffart's reading of Gregory as satirist

[56] ibid. 208

[57] "Transformations of Romanness: The northern Gallic case". 46

Germanic peoples."[58] Directing his critique primarily toward the historiographical implications of Pohl's analysis of ethnicity, Goffart isolates the Germanic tribes from among a host of ethnic groups which had denoted the birth communities of citizens and provincials "throughout imperial history."[59] In effect, however, Goffart fails to explain the aporia "concerning what differentiates an ethnic from a non-ethnic identity and about what differentiated an intra-imperial ethnic group or identity from an extra-imperial one."[60] For instance, one can only determine whether the modifier "*Romanus*" denotes a civic or ethnic identification when it appears along with other signifiers, such as "*Francus*" (ethnic) or "*miles*" (occupational). The distinction between "intra-imperial" and "extra-imperial" identities appears even more tendentious: Did provincial civic identities with pre-imperial tribal origins, such as that of the *Arverni*, gain a status equivalent to that of the *Franci* or *Burgundes* within the Merovingian kingdom, or did they remain "Roman" in everything but name?

In his 2018 contribution to the Millennium Studies project *Transformations of Romanness*, Pohl responds to Halsall's prompt by stressing the rhetorical nature of ethnic categories: "I have argued that ethnicity is, on a rather formal level, a system of distinctions between basically analogous, inclusive social groupings predominantly based on ethnonyms, and a way to endow these groups with **agency and meaning** (emphasis mine)"[61] Therefore, Goffart's objection to the Pohlian definition of ethnicity would seem especially unreasonable in the context of Gregory's *Decem Libri*. Like Wei Shou, who performed cultural brokerage within a

---

[58] ibid. 47

[59] ibid. 48

[60] ibid.

[61] "Introduction: Early medieval Romanness - a multiple identity". 29

native literary tradition that maintained a formal distinction between the "civilized" and the "foreign/barbarian",[62] Gregory of Tours was "more concerned to pinpoint the city of origin of Gallo-Romans (especially if they came from Tours) than to differentiate between Franks."[63] But Pohl's portrayal of the *Franci* as a group with "agency and meaning" in the *Historia* also acknowledges Goffart's central claim without stripping the text of its "ethnic" content: "It was not easy for him [Gregory] to integrate the Franks in his vision of a non-ethnic, post-Roman Christian world."[64] While straightforward unfamiliarity could account for Gregory's ambivalent attitude toward Frankish identities since Book II, his pedagogical purpose provided a strong incentive to curb what Reimitz called "the danger of history" through deliberate silence.

Taking cues from Halsall and Pohl, I propose to address the "*aporias*" or "points of undecidability" in Gregory's own text where multiple interpretations are possible.[65] More precisely I ask: Where does his conception of "ethnic" collectives, whether *Franci*, *Romani*, or the sub-groups thereof overlap with his presentation of such groups as actors in his didactic drama? Hence I will focus on Book II, a volume book-ended by the deaths of St. Martin of Tours (316–397) and King Clovis (466–511), respectively the holiest saint and the greatest prince in Gregory's account of Gallic history, visiting a point in his narrative before the *Franci* came to be

---

[62] Emperor Yongzheng (r. 1722-1735) of the Qing [清] dynasty (1636-1912) attributed this phenomenon to the polycentric politics of the so-called "Period of Disunion" (220-589) in Chinese history: "The origins of the explanation of the [differences] between "Outlander" and "Chinese" came from the period of disunion during the Jin, Song, and six dynasties. The territories of the princes were of equal extent, and in their achievements they were on a level. So, the northerners began to slander southerners by calling them "isolated outlanders" and southerners began pointing to northerns as "braided savages." During that time, people did not labor to perfect virtue and practice righteousness. Instead, they served the trivial matter of ridiculing each other, making their perspective only crude and base" ("Yongzheng emperor, Resolving Confusion with a Discourse on Righteousness". trans. Devin Fitzgerald. *Books and the Early Modern World: The Research of Devin Fitzgerald*).

[63] Pohl. "Introduction". 30

[64] ibid. 30

[65] Halsall 44

defined primarily by their functions in a Christian kingdom. Reimitz's informative framing of Gregory as cultural broker within the *regnum Francorum* bent on promoting a non-ethnic vision of community would help contextualize the latter's literary strategy. Therefore, it first behooves this study to show that Gregory's use of ethnonyms reflects the contingencies of his religious rhetoric. Second, I intend to investigate definitive moments in the evolving articulation of Frankishness within Book II. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by examining their implications in the broader scheme of Gregorian historiography.

The *Franci* Revisited: Clovis and Christian Gaul

Prior to the debut of the Franks in Chapter Nine as a people without kings, Vandals, Goths, and Huns already set a fairly low bar for barbarian dominion in Gaul. King Trasamund and his successor Huneric, both Arian Vandals, carry on the roles of pagan Roman emperors despite being nominally "Christian". By equivocating "*christiani*" with Catholics, however, Gregory assimilates the persecuting Arian *gentes* into the genealogy of anti-Christian dynasties: He glosses over their "ethnic" traits almost entirely. Instead, the Vandals are known simply as those under whom "the persecution of Christians" took place.[66] As the kingdom of the Vandals perished along with Geilamir, their last king, the Goths under Athanaric assumed the same role and appeared, at least collectively, as little else than heretics to be despised and ridiculed.[67] Finally, the Huns, an "unbelieving and undeserving race", invaded Gaul in accordance with "what our Lord God has spoken".[68] More warlord than persecutor, however, the character of

---

[66] *DLH* II.2

[67] *DLH* II.3-4

[68] *DLH* II.5

Attila receives little development above the bare minimum required of the leader of a *gens*. In Gregory's reckoning, he was no particular rival to Aetius or the idea of Roman Christendom.

Gregory thus allows no suspense whatsoever about the outcome of the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains (451), where Attila finally tasted defeat in the open field:

> Igitur Aetius cum Gothis Francisque coniunctus adversus Attilanem confligit. At ille ad internitionem vastari suum cernens exercitum, fuga delabitur. Theodor vero Gothorum rex huic certamine subcubuit. Nam nullus ambigat, Chunorum exercitum obtentu memorati antestites fuisse fugatum. Verum Aetius patritius cum Thorismodo victuriam obtinuit hostesque delivit.[69]
>
> Therefore Aetius, reinforced by the Goths and the Franks, engaged in battle against Attila. But Attila, discerning that his army was being depleted to extermination, slipped away in flight. Theodoric, King of the Goths, was slain in this battle. Let no one doubt that the host of the Huns was put to flight by the prayers of the bishop I have related to you about: Indeed Aetius the patrician obtained victory along with Thorismund and destroyed his foes.

Here a reader of the *Histories* sees the *Franci*, spared from the twofold persona of persecutor and heretic given to the Vandals and, to a lesser extent heretofore, the Goths, emerge for the first time in Gregory's narrative as allies of the *Romani* under Aetius. Even then, rather than resisting a "post-Roman" label, as one may expect of the reminiscence of an imperial victory, the passage encourages a parochial interpretation of the event.[70] Aetius, *magister militum* and de facto ruler of Roman Gaul, merits the more relatable title to Gregory's contemporaries, *patricius*. Gregory does not give Aetius's effort to preserve imperial hegemony its due. Instead, his military expertise mattered little to Gregory since, in the previous instance, even though Aetius, Theodoric, and Thorismund relieved Orleans of a Hunnic siege "with their own forces" [*cum*

---

[69] *DLH* II.7

[70] Van Dam. "Early Merovingian Gaul: The World of Gregory of Tours". *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul*. 201: "But any discussion of Merovingian Gaul based primarily on the writings of Gregory of Tours will resolutely reflect his own parochial world."

exercitibus suis], he immediately adds that it was Christian piety that really saved the day by assuring their timely arrival: "Therefore was the city set free by the prayer of its blessed bishop. They routed Attila…"[71] Whoever possessed the favor of God would triumph against their enemies, a theme later vindicated by the career of Clovis as well. Though reasonable in the context of Gregory's pastoral project, the characterization of Aetius raises questions when compared to the last champion of Christian *Romanitas* in Gaul, Syagrius, King of the Romans and dynastic rival of Clovis. Just how much effort did the author put into reconciling potential contradictions between historical narration and the didactic mode which he has undertaken since the very beginning of the *Libri Historiarum*?

As we discussed earlier in this chapter, Goffart's definitive interpretation of the matter in *The Narrators of Barbarian History* suggests that Gregory had never intended his *Decem Libri* to serve as a "History of the Franks" as such. Nor, in the words of Ian Wood, "is there anything to suggest that Gregory was attempting to create a new genre of national historiography."[72] My own view differs from theirs in that I perceive a syncretic dynamic between the ecclesiastical aims of Gregorian historiography and its dynastic subject matter. First, one can hardly deny Gregory's interest in the nature of Frankish leadership long before the Merovingians took center stage in Gaul. Ruminating on his main source for early Frankish ethnography, the *Historia* of Sulpicius Alexander, Gregory writes: "However, when he calls them [Marcomer and Sunno, *regales Francorum*] 'kinglets' [*regales*], we do not know whether they were kings indeed or merely ruled according to vicissitudes."[73] *Regales*, the diminutive form of *reges*, seems to denote at least

---

[71] *DLH* II.7

[72] "Chapter Two: Late Fifth- and Sixth-Century Culture". *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450-751.* 32.

[73] *DLH* II.9: Cum autem eos regales vocet, nescimus, utrum reges fuerint, an in vices tenuerunt regnum.

a perceived inferiority in status or legitimacy in Supicius's original text. Regardless, Gregory cautions his readers against taking the Latin title for granted ("nescimus").

More interesting to the study of Frankish presence in late-Roman Gaul is therefore the textual disjuncture between the obscurity of early war-leaders and the relatively well-defined genealogy of the Merovingians. Wood speculates: "The dislocation apparent in Gregory's account of the early history of the Franks may be a direct reflection of the fact that the Merovingians were not a significant dynasty before the mid-fifth century. Their origins were separate and later than those of their people."[74] This ambiguity may count as one *aporia* in Gregory's text, which either diminishes the antiquity of the Merovingian genealogy and, thereby, its associations with a primordial and essential "Frankishness," or simply posits rulers from this lineage as the first true *reges* of the *gens Francorum*. While both interpretations can be valid, the *Historia*'s rhetorical contingency would compel Gregory to emphasize the historical discontinuity between early Frankish leaders in imperial historiography and the Merovingians under his own pen. Since the bishop of Tours does not seem enthusiastic for any "ethnicizing" or even genealogical approach to political legitimation, the former reading is more relevant to his schematization of history.

Thus, only the deeds of Clovis "the good king" accounted for the establishment of Frankish dominion in Gregory's account. This is where "genuine" historiography begins in his narrative. Instead of characterizing the Franks as natural heirs to "Roman" Gaul, the bishop implies that their subscription to the doctrine of the Church, which set them apart from other barbarians, was ultimately responsible for their success. In Gregorian historiography, the moral

---

[74] "The Franks before 537". 37.

legitimacy of a regime depended on its respect for ecclesiastical autonomy, a compact which had to be rigorously maintained by secular rulers. Besides, his references to anything "Roman" in Book II seem to evoke little beyond ethnic identification in the first place. Even at the peak of its power, Rome "is represented almost exclusively by a string of persecuting emperors, the prototypes…of the barbarian persecutors who come next."[75] On the other hand, Gregory's lengthy diatribe against idolatry, of which "at first the Frankish knew nothing," firmly depicts the ideological antagonism in the story as that between paganism and Christianity.[76] The fact that the Franks prior to Clovis's leadership had been devout pagans could not have escaped him.[77]

In addition, the close succession of the "libidinous lifestyle" of Childeric, the first named King of the Franks and father of Clovis, to that of the late Gallic emperor Avitus sets up an analogy wherein universal vices of the powerful cut across ethnic boundaries.[78] Clovis, endowed with an otherwise moderate libido, seemed to have bequeathed a thirst for autocracy to his descendants.[79] A Stoic philosopher would not approve of a majority of his actions in the second volume of the *Historia*, but a Catholic bishop could see his conquests of heretics and hapless kinsmen as God-sanctioned efforts to unify Christian Gaul. Furthermore, Gregory alleges that the victories of Clovis vindicated his descent from the "most distinguished and noble family of the

---

[75] Goffart 165

[76] *DLH* II.10

[77] So much so, in fact, that Clovis initially believed that the *populus* who followed him "does not suffer to abandon their own gods" (*DLH* II.31).

[78] *DLH* II.11-2

[79] *DLH* II.42: "One day when he had called a general assembly of his subjects, he is said to have made the following remark about the relatives whom he had destroyed: 'How sad a thing it is that I live among strangers like some solitary pilgrim, and that I have none of my own relations left to help me when disaster threatens!' He said this not because he grieved for their deaths, but because in his cunning way he hoped to find some relative still in the land of the living whom he could kill" (158, Thorpe translation).

Franks."[80] Through this he appears to pay homage to an official rhetoric of Frankish legitimacy, as he does later by highlighting the opposite of Arian Burgundians: "Meanwhile, just as the terror of the Franks resounded in these parts [ruled by Burgundians] and all wished them to rule with avid anticipation, Saint Aprunculus, the Bishop of the city Langres, began to be deemed suspect among the Burgundians."[81]

If this apparent preference of pagan Franks to heretical Burgundians and Goths[82] seemed reasonable due to bad blood between Catholic communities and their Arian rulers, Clovis's triumph against Syagrius, a "king" of the Romans whose own father, Aegidius, had supplanted Childeric as king of the Franks for eight years, remained ambivalent in its immediate implications.[83] First of all, Syagrius's title not only deviates from that of Aegidius (*magister militum*), but also that of Aetius (*patricius*) through the inclusion of an ethnic modifier (*Romanorum rex*), suggesting a semantic shift resulting from the collapse of imperial institutions at the end of the fifth century. Being culturally "Roman" in post-Roman Gaul no longer implied access to a supra-ethnic civic identity regulated by the official apparatuses of provincial government. The Catholic Church, while maintaining features of the *pax Romana* through universalist doctrines of faith and the continuation of collective rituals, found itself under the jurisdiction of competing dynasties that operated with narrower conceptions of "nationality". Though lacking corroborating evidence, Gregory's report of Syagrius's dynastic ambition

---

[80] *DLH* II.9: "ibique iuxta pagus vel civitates regis crinitos super se creavisse de prima et, ut ita dicam, nobiliore suorum familia. Quod postea probatum Chlodovechi victuriae tradiderunt, itaque in sequenti digerimus."

[81] *DLH* II.23: "Interea cum iam terror Francorum resonaret in his partibus et omnes eos amore desiderabili cupirent regnare, sanctus Abrunculus Lingonicae civitatis episcopus apud Burgondiones coepit haberi suspectus."

[82] The Goths, notably, were both persecutors and invaders: "Huius temporis et Euarix rex Gothorum, excidens Hispanum limitem, gravem in Galliis super christianis intulit persecutionem" (*DLH* II.25). Trespassing the Spanish frontier, King Euric of the Goths brought "grave persecution" over the Christians in Gaul.

[83] *DLH* II.12; 18

captures the zeitgeist of Gallic politics at the time. Making his residence at Soissons, the stronghold of Aegidius, Syagrius pursued an explicit rivalry with Clovis, which culminated in a war begun in the fifth year of the latter's reign (486 CE).

Gregory provides few, but thematically insightful details of the conflict:

> Super quem Chlodovechus cum Ragnechario, parente suo, quia et ipse regnum tenebat, veniens, campum pugnae praeparare deposcit. Sed nec iste distolit ac resistere metuit. Itaque inter se utrisque pugnantibus, Syagrius elisum cernens exercitum, terga vertit et ad Alaricum regem Tholosa curso veluci perlabitur. Chlodovechus vero ad Alarico mittit, ut eum redderit; alioquin noverit, sibi bellum ob eius retentationem inferri. Ad ille metuens, ne propter eum iram Francorum incurrerit, ut Gothorum pavere mos est, vinctum legatis tradedit. Quem Chlodovechus receptum custodiae mancipare praecipit; regnoque eius acceptum, eum gladio clam feriri mandavit. Eo tempore multae aeclesiae a Chlodovecho exercitu depraedatae sunt, quia erat ille adhuc fanaticis erroribus involutus.[84]
>
> Clovis, coming upon him [Syagrius] with Ragnachar his own kinsman, for the latter also held a domain himself, challenges him to take the field of battle. But Syagrius himself did not object to the prospect, nor did he fear to contend with Clovis. While they were thus engaged in combat with each other, Syagrius, seeing his own army crushed, turns tail and flees in speedy course to King Alaric in Toulouse. Clovis then dispatches [messengers] to Alaric, hoping that he would return Syagrius; Alaric knew that otherwise a war would be brought upon himself because of Syagrius's custody. Alaric, fearing lest he would incur the wrath of the Franks on Syagrius's account, as it is the custom of the Goths to cower, handed the man over, all bound up, to the delegates of Clovis. Clovis enjoins Syagrius to be imprisoned as soon as he has been recaptured, and having thus seized the domain of Syagrius, he ordered the man to be dispatched secretly by the sword. At the same time many churches were plundered by the army of Clovis since he was still involved in fanatical errors.

The lack of circumstantial pretext for the campaign and its moral ambiguity distinguish it from later conflicts in Clovis's career. While ruthlessness would remain as a neutral trait of the first Frankish ruler of Gaul for the rest of Book II, the Clovis of Chapter Twenty-seven would not fulfill Gregory's criteria for Christian kingship, for he yet clung to the false beliefs of his

---

[84] *DLH* II.27

people.[85] Without doubt, he was well on his way to claim hegemony over all of Gaul, but that in itself could spell disaster for the land if the Franks continued to menace the Church, however opportunistic their aggression may seem compared to Arian persecutions. As for the fate of poor Syagrius, Gregory blames the customary cowardice of the Goths as much as the insistence of Clovis, a rather rare instance of ethnic prejudice breaking through the neutrality of his historical discourse.

Unlike the "barbarian" enemies of Clovis, Gregory's Syagrius notably lacks characterization beyond his (rather dubious) ethnic affiliation. Again, two possible interpretations present a juxtaposition that may be resolved by referring to the rhetorical agenda of Gregorian historiography in general. One possible explanation for Gregory's nullification of Syagrius's personality is that there was relatively little at fault with it to begin with. While Clovis's subsequent foes, namely the Gothic king Alaric II (see *DLH* II.37) and the Frankish rulers Chararic and Ragnachar (*DLH* II.41-2), all had at least one glaring vice under their belt with which to rationalize their demise in Gregory's Christian narrative, for Syagrius this did not seem to be the case. One can safely assume that whatever sources about Syagrius's career the historian had consulted did not provide materials to which the deeds of Clovis up to the time of their confrontation could be compared favorably.

The other reading engages more with the rhetorical use of ethnonyms in narrative contexts than the actions of the character per se. I propose that Gregory's treatment of Syagrius

---

[85] This should recall II.10, where Gregory outright introduces the Frankish *gens* as an idolatrous lot. While their reputation was redeemed later by the conversion of Clovis and his unification of the land, Gregory did not assign a collective destiny to "the Franks" in general. On the other hand, Frankish nobles and retainers (*leudes*) were well integrated into Gallic society by his time. The Merovingian kingdom, per Andrew Eisenberg's formulation of the Northern Wei dynasty, can also be said to have been a "corporate regime" consisting of the ruling family and an urban network of "ethnic" and native officials that cooperated with local clergy on a regular basis (385).

implies a deliberate effort to make the ideological residue of imperial *Romanitas* itself appear minimal in context. In suggesting the statement above, I concur with Reimitz that Gregory made ethnic identity one of the lesser criteria for political legitimacy, but I would like to apply this inference specifically to the absence of "Roman" cultural trappings in the description of Syagrius's regime. Rather than pointing simply to the concurrent disappearance of the institutions which had enabled the ideal of a universal empire to exist in the first place, one may find useful Goffart's reminder that the *Historia* also functions as didactic literature. Therefore, Gregory may have transposed an instance of imperial survival in Gaul, however limited in scope and substance, into merely one of many "ethnic" kingdoms in the political topography of Book II. It also seems likely that Gregory intentionally glosses over the religious status of this last "Roman" kingdom in the West. Unlike those ruled by Burgundian heretics at the time of Saint Aprunculus, a Catholic alive under Syagrius's rule in 486 would not be thrilled at the idea of Frankish takeover. For Gregory nonetheless, that the fall of Syagrius had taken place prior to the conversion of Clovis and the consequent legitimation of his rule left valuable room for the rhetorical progression of his narrative. By contrast, dwelling on the potential tragedy of Syagrius's defeat as the last paragon of orthodox *Romanitas* in Gaul would compromise his triumphalist interpretation of Clovis's career.

As an ideological entity free from the ethnic "taint" of its many *regna*, "the Gallic lands" [*Galliae*] in Gregorian historiography do eventually become "Frankish" in a particular sense, for through Clovis's conversion and his conquest of all Gaul the parallel destinies of *Galliae* and the *regnum Francorum* merged into one. One could, as Gregory likely did, downplay the content of "Frankishness" in the ideological and administrative apparatuses of the kingdom by presenting

an alternative genealogy for the territories it represented, but such remediation still occurred in a political landscape where the folk of Clovis vied for supremacy with the *Burgundes*, *Alemanni*, *Gothi*, and even other *Franci*. In some instances after the mass baptism of the king and his followers as recalled in Chapter Thirty-one, the ethnic identities of Gregory's *dramatis personae* acquired quite distinct connotations that contributed specifically to the legitimation of Frankish rule. The *Franci* under Clovis, for example, were sought after by many "*ex Galleis*" as rulers, as Gregory echoes the sentiment expressed earlier in Chapter Twenty-three and one which, in this case, attains additional justification due to their new affiliation with the Church.[86]

Gregory clearly excluded the Goths from the multitude that pined for Frankish dominion, for in the passage that follows he reports: "Hence this [a treaty of *amicitia* between Clovis and Alaric II] was made with the result that Quintianus, Bishop of the Ruthenois, was expelled from the city over this offense. For they [the inhabitants] were saying to him: 'Because your desire is that the domain of the Franks would include this land.'"[87] Among those who conspired to put the bishop to the sword were, along with the citizens who quarreled with Quintianus, suspicious Goths "who were dwelling in the city."[88] This scheme set the stage for the twofold triumph of Church and kingdom in the next watershed of Frankish history, when Clovis conquered the heretics with the unmistakable help of Saint Martin and Saint Hilarius.

---

[86] *DLH* II.35

[87] *DLH* II.36: "Unde factum est, ut Quintianus Rutenorum episcopus per hoc odium ab urbe depelleretur. Dicebant enim ei: 'Quia desiderium tuum est, ut Francorum dominatio possideat terram hanc."

[88] ibid: "Gothos, qui in hac urbe morabantur, suspitio attigit…"

Chapter Thirty-seven frames Clovis's campaign against the Gothic kingdom in Gaul as a response to Arian encroachment on ecclesiastical immunity.[89] In its aftermath, "the Goths fled, as they were prone to do, and Clovis was the victor, for God was on his side," Gregory alleges, re-iterating his previous observation of Gothic cowardice.[90] However, what had previously seemed to be an alliance forged in convenience (see Clovis's monologue in *DLH* II.30) gained an eschatological relevance through the various signs of favor given to the army of Clovis by Saint Martin and Saint Hilary, the respective patrons of Tours and Poitiers, two Catholic centers of worship in *senatores*-dominated southern Gaul.[91] In other words, Gregory's text performs cultural brokerage by symbolically wedding his native cultic milieu to the *regnum Francorum* of Clovis, "the new Constantine." Since Arianism posed a constant threat to the Gregorian concept of Christian *communitas*, the Goths of Alaric II, who yet professed this heresy, became a convenient foil to the pious folk of Clovis. Here Gregory is at his most pedagogical in Book II, where he unproblematically identifies Clovis's campaign against the Arians with the divine mission of Christian state-building.

On the other hand, Gregory's homage to "a greatest host of Arvernians" who fought under "the foremost of their senators" highlights the contribution to this project of the provincial group to which his own *civitas* belonged.[92] Absent from earlier wars in Clovis's career, the "Christianizing" mission of his venture into Gothic *Gallia* ensured the support of Catholic saints "trapped" in enemy territories. Aprunculus of Langres and Quintianus of Rodez were living

---

[89] *DLH* II.37: "Igitur Chlodovechus rex ait suis: 'Valde molestum fero, quod hi Arriani partem teneant Galliarum. Eamus cum Dei adiutorium, et superatis redegamus in ditione nostra."

[90] ibid., trans. Lewis Thorpe. 153.

[91] ibid. 152

[92] ibid.

testimonies to the fatal tension between those suspect for sympathizing with the Frankish cause due to their subscription to the Trinitarian doctrine and the Arian majority in other Gallic kingdoms. Though somewhat lacking in historiographical objectivity, Gregory's version of the story exemplifies a lucid synthesis of dynastic legitimacy and ecclesiastical authority on the Frankish side, which he clearly pits against Gothic cowardice and heretical fanaticism on the other. This configuration would serve as the default context of Gregory's "national" discourse, accomplished only through a redefinition of what it means to behave "like a Frank" under the glorious leadership of a Davidic king and his saintly guardians. For Gregory, the ideological pieces necessary for the Frankish mandate finally fell into place when Clovis received the approbation of Saint Martin, a "most outstanding and incomparable man" [*summi et inconparabilis viri*].[93] The universal veneration of Saint Martin not only constituted a cultural middle ground for Christians of all ethnic backgrounds, but also signified the ideological integration of southern Gaul into the domain of Clovis.

Conclusion: *Regnum et Ritus*

Therefore, the Christianization of Frankish identity under Clovis at the turn of the sixth-century created a new model of political legitimation that successfully incorporated the *Franci* into the social fabric of Roman Gaul. Retrospectively making sense of this continual and haphazard process, Gregory of Tours has chosen to diminish the role of ethnic solidarity in the founding stage of Merovingian history. Nonetheless, I argue that, by merging the distinct contours of ethnic identity and religious affiliation in his account of Clovis's attainment of

---

[93] *DLH* II.1

regional supremacy, Gregory foregrounds the main narrative of his *Historia* in an alternative paradigm of political legitimacy that ascribes political centrality to the Franks as defenders of *universae Galliae*. But the occupation of cultic centers and cities alone could not fully legitimate a regime: According to Gregory, it was only through the wholehearted commitment of churchmen like Saint Remigius of Rheims that Clovis turned his pagan followers into the saviors of Gaul.[94]

Because the reign of Clovis oversaw the greatest expansion of the Frankish domain on both political and ideological fronts, the fusion of doctrinal orthodoxy and identity politics in Gregorian historiography counts as a mature example of Halsall's "multilayered identities" in Late Antiquity. Gregory's historicization of the *regnum Francorum* in Christian time thus imbues its political objectives with salvific urgency. In Book II, the triumph of Clovis over the Arian Goths became a foundational event for Gallic Christendom. Equally, however, did Christianization derive its organizational potency from Frankish solidarity, which Gregory, even more so than Goffart perhaps, downplays through his moralizing rhetoric.[95] However grand and profound it was, Gregory's vision of Christian *communitas* had to proceed from shared, pre-existing notions of social boundaries and protocols that were rehearsed and modified through common rites and beliefs.

---

[94] *DLH* II.31: "De exercito vero eius baptizati sunt amplius tria milia."

[95] Bell, Catherine. "The Power of Ritualization". *Ritual theory, ritual practice*. 222: "Ritualization cannot turn a group of individuals into a community if they have no other relationships or interests in common, nor can it turn the exercise of pure physical compulsion into participatory communality. Ritualization can, however, take arbitrary or necessary common interests and ground them in an understanding of the hegemonic order; it can empower agents in limited and highly negotiated ways."

Chapter II: "Northern Wei Identity" in *Wei Shu*

Authorial Profile: Wei Shou

Like Gregory of Tours, Wei Shou occupied the middle ground of identity politics in the courts of the Eastern Wei (534–550) and the Northern Qi (550–577), both successor states to the Northern Wei (386–534). Wei Shou's brief autobiographical introduction, located halfway through "Biography Ninety-Second: Self Introduction" (*liezhuan-dijiushier—zixu* 列傳第九十二自序) in *The Book of Wei*, ties the beginning of his own career to the catastrophic turn of events in the last years of Tuoba (Northern Wei) rule:

> 收字伯起，小字佛助。年十五，頗已屬文。及隨父赴邊，值四方多難，好習騎射，欲以武藝自達。滎陽鄭伯調之曰：魏郎弄戟多少? 收慚，遂折節讀書。夏月坐板床，隨樹陰諷誦，積年，床板爲之銳減，而精力不輟。以文華顯。初以父功除太學博士，及尒朱榮於河陰濫害朝士，收亦在圍中，以日晏獲免。[96]
>
> [Wei] Shou's *zi* [courtesy name] is bo-qi; his nickname at birth is fo-zhu. At the age of fifteen, he was already quite capable of literary composition. As he later went to the frontier with his father[97] when the four regions were fraught with disasters, he was fond of practicing horse-riding and archery, desiring to distinguish himself with martial skills. Zheng Bo of Xingyang teased him: "How many halberds has Master Wei handled?" Shou felt ashamed and devoted himself instead to reading books. In the summer months, he would sit on a bed base and read under the shade of a tree such that, with each passing year, the board sharply diminished in size, whereas his energy never did. He was finally revealed [to public view] due to the elegance of his writings. Initially, on account of his father's achievements he had obtained the post of Doctor of Taixue [court school official in charge of teaching higher-ranking aristocrats and providing counsel on ritual

---

[96] *Wei Shu* 104.2323-2324

[97] Wei Zijian (474-533), whose exploit of winning over the newly conquered Di tribe is recounted rather fondly in preceding passages.

> proprieties], till Erzhu Rong indiscriminately slaughtered court peers at Heyin,[98] where Shou was among those rounded up and only managed to escape as the sun had set.

Hence, Wei Shou's studious character and prestigious position at court define his public self-portrait in *The Book of Wei*. Hailing from a family distinguished for its tradition of loyal service under the Tuoba Wei regime,[99] Wei also lays claim to the equivalent of "patrician" status in the Han imperial tradition: His alleged ancestor during the early Han, Wei Wuzhi, was made Marquis of Gaoliang by the first emperor Liu Bang himself.[100] Promoted at a young age to courtly rank due to the combined merits of his father's position and his own talent, Wei Shou had made good use of his privileged access to high literary culture and official connections. In addition to the commission of the official history of the Tuoba Wei dynasty, the author's elite status empowered him to act as a cultural broker between his native peers and the dominant Xianbei nobility, a function mandated by the hybrid character of the late Northern Wei, Eastern Wei, and Northern Qi courts.

Though lacking the episcopal authorities of Gregory of Tours, Wei Shou shared the bishop's role of cultural mediator. Through textual presentations and, indeed, interpretations of the past that attempt to establish an ideological middle ground across the polity, both historians legitimate a particular vision of the society to which each belonged. Despite his unusual interest in the developments of Buddhism and Taoism by the standards of the tradition he would

---

[98] County in the suburbs of Luoyang, the capital of Northern Wei in its last years, where the Qi Hu [契胡] general Er Zhurong 尒朱榮 (493-530) assembled some thirteen-hundred court members under the pretense of performing sacrifice to Heaven, rounded them up with a force of cavalry, and slaughtered the group treacherously in 528 (*WS* 74.1648). Many among the slain were Yuan (Tuoba) clan members, including powerful princes.

[99] Both his father and grandfather attained posts at least at or above the commandery (*jun*) level

[100] *WS* 104.2321

contribute to,[101] Wei's focus comes off as generally dynastic and secular, for the vast majority of volumes in his *magnum opus* consist of biographies of court officials, provincial notables, and hostile warlords. For these, he presumably relied on official records and earlier compilations both before and after the relocation of the Northern Wei court in 493. Similar to Gregory, Wei was aware of the historiographical tradition he operated in and the potential divisiveness of cultural politics. As multiple entries from the biographical section of the historian's work suggest, differences in ritually constituted subjectivities could have fatal consequences.

One prominent example of such tensions at play resulted in what the modern historian Chen Yinke (1890–1969) dubbed "Cui Hao's Dilemma." Unlike Wei Shou, Cui Hao (d. 450), an indigenous courtier whose strategies were not least responsible for the unification of northern China by the Northern Wei under Emperor Taiwu (Tuoba Tao, r. 424–452), hailed from a time when the *wu* (武 "martial") principle of Xianbei-style political organization had still dominated the court.[102] At the age of twenty, Cui Hao, "the eldest son of Xuanbo,[103] the Duke of the White Horse," entered the court of Emperor Daowu (Tuoba Gui, r. 386–409) as a minor literary official (*zhilang* 直郎) of almost encyclopedic erudition, being one among the few to have won the trust

---

[101] His *Shi-Lao Zhi*, the last volume ("*juan*") of the *Wei Shu*, is available in at least one English translation (see *Wei Shou: Treatise on Buddhism and Taoism, an English translation of the original Chinese text of Wei-shu CXIV and the Japanese annotation of Tsukamoto Zenryu* by Leon Hurvitz).

[102] While a *wu*/martial ethos was not an index of ethnicity per se, it generally remained a cultural prerogative of nomadic peoples throughout Northern Wei history.

[103] Cui Xuanbo (d. 418) served in the court of a younger Tuoba Gui and advised him, then Prince of Dai, to opt for the dynastic name "Wei" in allusion to the lands Gui had conquered himself. The official title change from "Dai" to "Wei" took place in 398.

of an elderly and suspicious Tuoba Gui.[104] Upon Gui's death, Cui served his successors Tuoba Si (r. 409-423) and Tuoba Tao with distinction.

However, Cui's exclusive mastery of *wen* (文 "cultural; lettered") discourse pitted him against the dominant "*Dai-ren* clique" (*Dai-ren jituan* 代人集團) in court, Tuoba clansmen and Xianbei nobles who stood to lose the most from political "Sinicization" (*han-hua* 漢化).[105] For instance, Kou Qianzhi, court strategist and Taoist "Celestial Master" in the service of Tuoba Tao, asked Cui to compile for him "the governing institutions of ancient kings, and elucidate their common principle."[106] In compliance, Cui "authored some twenty treatises ranging from the Great Beginning of the world to the reforms and decline of the Qin and the Han, presented generally as an argument for restoring the Five Ranks as the foundation [of government]."[107] This exchange demonstrates the broad and continuing appeal to Chinese elites of the classical ideal of "virtuous governance" (*dezheng* 德政) by the ruler and his graded court of aristocratic peers. Such programs as Cui seemed to favor emphasized literacy in the election of office-holders—specifically the mastery of classical *Ru* (Confucian) discourse—thereby excluding

---

[104] *WS* 35.807

[105] Kang 60: "代人集團的出現在拓跋發展史上可說是跨時代性的一件大事，沒有這個團體，常備軍不可能組成，拓跋政權大概就會像早先的匈奴人一樣，始終只是個遊牧聯盟，而無法形成一個擁有固定都城及領土的國家." Translation: "The emergence of the *Dai-ren* clique was a watershed moment in the history of the Tuoba state. Without this group, the Tuoba regime would likely have, as the Xiong-nu before them, remained a nomadic confederation and unable to transform into a state with fixed capital and territories."

[106] *WS* 35.814: "卿爲吾撰列王者治典，並論其大要" (Chen 248).

[107] *WS* 35.814-5: "浩乃著書二十餘篇，上推太初，下盡秦漢變弊之迹，大旨先以復五等爲本" (Chen 249).

illiterate Xianbei chieftains who retained a traditional preference for martial distinctions.[108] Thus, though Wei Shou's account of his political career suggests genuine loyalty toward the Tuoba state, Cui's devotion to a holistic discourse of classical *li* promoted hierarchical differentiation and *wen* cultivation, both of which conflicted with the interests of the Xianbei nobility.

Hence, Cui Hao's preoccupation with historiography precipitated his downfall.[109] Wei Shou's description of the matter seems suspiciously contemplative: "When Qie Biao and others first erected a stone monument on which to publish the Records of State, Hao narrated the history of the [Tuoba] state so exhaustively that it turned out comprehensive rather than canonical."[110] Cui's excessive candor allegedly sparked public controversy and led to an investigation by the judicial bureau, which implicated hundreds of his associates and resulted in a guilty plea for receiving bribes. The rest concerning the rationale of the investigation and subsequent execution of the historian must be inferred.[111] Since entire lineages of prominent families tied to Cui by kinship or marriage were wiped out in the aftermath of his execution, however, the tragedy of Cui Hao hinted at deep cultural divides between the politically powerful *Dai-ren* clique and native scholar-officials such as himself. Whatever information Cui had

---

[108] Chen, Yinke. "*Dishilwupian: Bei-Wei qianqide Hanhua (Cui Hao wenti)*". [No. 15: The Sinicization of the Northern Wei in its Early Period (Cui Hao's Dilemma)]. 第十五篇 北魏前期的漢化 (崔浩問題). 252: "崔浩既然主張高官與儒學合一的貴族政治，鮮卑有政治勢力而無學術文化，自必被排斥在崔浩所理想的貴族政治之外." Translation: "Since Cui Hao advocated for an aristocratic politics that would combine high ranks in the officialdom and *Ru* studies, the Xianbei, wielding political power but lacking scholastic cultivation, must naturally have been excluded from the meritocracy Cui Hao had envisioned."

[109] I will clarify the connection between *li* and *shi* [史 "history"] in the Northern Wei text in a later section of this chapter.

[110] *WS* 35.826: "初，郄標等立石銘刊國記，浩盡述國事，備而不典."

[111] Chen 252: "崔浩的國記'備而不典'（魏書-崔浩傳）, 鮮卑本無文化可言，其為不典，是很自然的。而崔浩卻因此罹禍." Translation: "Cui Hao's *Records of State* was 'comprehensive rather than canonical' (*Wei Shu*—"Biography of Cui Hao"). Because the Xianbei had no culture (*wenhua*, here understood as literary tradition) to speak of, it was natural that it turned out less than "canonical." Cui Hao suffered misfortune for it nonetheless.

considered innocuous or appropriate for public inscription apparently offended many Xianbei magnates at court, for only their collective wrath could have resulted in genocidal retribution.

While Wei Shou seems to have attributed Cui's downfall to a lack of political discretion, this anecdote shows that the Tuoba clan of this period used the cultural and administrative resources of its Chinese officials without truly incorporating them into the ruling stratum. Tuoba Tao's apparent lack of qualms regarding the total annihilation of Cui's clique when the man himself had outlived his worth validates the first metaphor in Wei's colophon. What was Cui Hao if not a mere bow, swiftly discarded as the quarries of the Northern Wei—rebels, the Rouran menace from the north, and the Liu Song (420-479) threat from the south—had been dealt with?[112] Above all else, Cui's tragic fate illustrates the fragile nature of such literary "hegemony" as he himself held in a time when traditional, steppe-style *li* yet defined Tuoba identity.[113] Despite the royal patronage of cultural elites like Cui Hao and Kou Qianzhi, the "Northern Wei 'inner court' is understood by historians to have been a Tuoba and Xianbei policy-making

---

[112] *WS* 35.827-828: "屬太宗為政之秋，值世祖經營之日，言聽計從，寧廓區夏。遇既隆也，勤亦茂哉。謀雖蓋世，威未震主，末途邂逅，遂不自全。豈鳥盡弓藏，民惡其上？將器盈必概，陰害貽禍？何斯人而遭斯酷，悲夫!" Translation: "In the time of Taizong's government and through the course of Shizu's rule, [Cui Hao's] words were heeded and counsels obeyed, such that the Xia [Chinese] realm was pacified. As the reception of his person was magnanimous, his diligence grew in accordance with favor. Though his strategies found no match in the world, his prowess itself did not impress his lord, such that an incident near the end of life's journey proved to be his undoing. Has this been a case of 'when the birds are shot, the bow is hidden' because the people abhor their superiors? Or rather 'a vessel filled to the brim must be strickled, and injuries unknown sowed the seeds of disaster'? Why did this man suffer such a fate—alas!"

[113] For the ceremonial distinctiveness of Tuoba rites prior to their re-organization during the later years of Taihe, see Kang Le (1995), pages 165-173. In Wei Shou's text, the most comprehensive account of the Tuoba "Grand Sacrifice" comes from the first chapter of *Li-Zhi* (*WS* 108:1.2736). Key formal differences from its Han-Jin equivalent ["sacrifice to heaven" 祭天] can be gleaned from Wei's description of the Tuoba ritual, given for the year 405, which emphasizes location (western vicinity of the capital), numerical symbolism ("seven"), and royal participation ("seven kinsmen from the ten clans affiliated to the Emperor were chosen to minister libation").

apparatus distinct from the extant Chinese style administrative apparatus and its personnel."[114] The Taihe era (477–499) would see the erosion of this distinction and the partial, if posthumous, victory of Cui's administrative agenda.

A few statements seem necessary to qualify the popular "sinicization" model used to characterize the policies of Emperor Xiaowen. Systemic acculturation, even at its pinnacle during the last years of the Taihe era, was an elite phenomenon largely confined to the capital and its vicinity.[115] Practical needs of government and the cultural imperative of ritualization justified the initiative, rather than any necessity to identify with the subject populace. In fact, just as their adoption of a historical dynastic name ("Wei" 魏) nearly a hundred years before constituted an attempt to legitimate Tuoba dominion over lands associated with it, the imperial clan purported as much to mythologize their conquest through the reconstruction and performance of *li* precedents. Emperor Xiaowen's "sinicization" program was therefore less assimilatory than generative, though not a few leading Xianbei aristocrats of his day saw it as a threat to ancestral customs.[116] They were not wrong. In astute irony, the Taihe years witnessed both the climax of the Northern Wei's political power in China proper and a simultaneous,

---

[114] Eisenberg, Andrew. "Collapse of a Eurasian Hybrid: *The Case of the Northern Wei*". *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity : Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppe, Ca. 250-750*. 370.

[115] Chen 234: "可是，孝文帝仍舊沒有解決民族問題。被遷到洛陽來的鮮卑人漢化了，留在北鎮的鮮卑人卻保持鮮卑舊俗." Translation: "However, Emperor Xiaowen still did not resolve ethnic issues. While the Xianbei people who were resettled in Luoyang were sinicized, those who stayed in the northern (garrison) towns kept old Xianbei customs."

[116] Most notably Mu Tai (穆泰), Lu Rui (陸叡), and Crown Prince Xun (太子恂), all of whom suffered the penalty of death for revolting against the Taihe regime. See their biographies from the *Lie-zhuan* section of the *Wei Shu* (Yuan Xun: *WS* 22.587-588; Mu: WS 27.663; Lu: *WS* 40.910).

drastic decline in the "cultural capital" of its Xianbei compatriots, as the ruling house gradually phased out steppe-style sacrificial rites in favor of Chinese institutes of *li*.[117]

For one, the seventeenth year of Taihe (493) saw the final relocation of the capital to Luoyang (洛陽), the site which previous rulers of China, from ancient kings to the late Eastern Han and Western Jin emperors, had made their court. Through this move, Xiaowen hoped to facilitate the "conversion" of Xianbei chieftains to Chinese literary culture, thereby fostering a new *shizu* (士族, clans of hereditary distinction in state service) class that encompassed native elites and Dai compatriots alike.[118] This manifested in a more or less comprehensive program of adopting the dress, language, and burial site of the Central Plains as the court and its attendant populace made their move south. In March of the following year (eighteenth year of Taihe, 494), the Tuoba tradition of offering sacrifice to Heaven in the western vicinity was abolished.[119] Finally, an imperial edict in June 495 (nineteenth year of Taihe) forbade the use of the "customary tongue of the north" in court and threatened to revoke the current commission of anyone who would violate the rule.[120] Later in the same month, Wei Shou writes, "[Hong] ordered that, upon death, the people newly settled in Luoyang ought to be buried south of the

---

[117] Kang, Le. "Guojia-Jidian de Gaige". [Chapter 5: Reforms of State Ceremony]. 國家祭典的改革. 185: "Of the forty-five items undergoing reform in this period (491-493), about eighty percent were those pertaining to the institution of *li* (thirty-five items), among which as many as twenty-seven concerned sacrificial ceremony." 總計這個時期（491-493）的改革項目有四十五項，有關禮制的改革就佔了百分之八十左右（三十五項），其中與祭典相關的更多達二十七項...

[118] Chen, Yinke. "*Dishiliupian: Bei-Wei houqide Hanhua (Xiaowen-di de Hanhua-zhengce)*". [No. 16: The Sinicization of the Northern Wei in its Later Period (The Sinicizing Policies of Emperor Xiaowen)]. 第十六篇 北魏后期的漢化 (孝文帝的漢化政策). 255.

[119] Kang 182

[120] *WS* 7-2.177: "六月已亥，詔不得以北俗之語言於朝廷，若有違者，免所居官."

Yellow River and not have their remains sent back north. Consequently Dai[121] emigres all became inhabitants of Luoyang, south of the Yellow River".[122] Thus concluded the most radical of Tuoba Hong's reforms.

Tuoba Hong's "sinicization" initiative sought to unite indigenous and Xianbei elites through the cultivation of common interests as well as ideological beliefs. Even in the months before the June edicts, the Xianbei ruler had dispatched emissaries to make sacrifice at the altar of Emperor Gaozu of Han (Liu Bang, r. 202 BCE-195 BCE) and "seek out a principal descendant from the Kong clan and grant him the title of 'Sage-Venerating Marquis' and fief of a hundred households, such that he would conduct the sacrificial rites due to Confucius".[123] It seems hardly surprising, therefore, that Wei Shou highlights the transformative aspect of Tuoba Hong's second edict. Just as the cultic sites of the first Han emperor and Confucius remained relevant (or gained new relevance), the burial of former compatriots of Dai in lands south of the Yellow River sustained their physical presence in the Middle Country into future generations when, hopefully, a homogenous ruling class would emerge from the conglomeration of noble Chinese and Xianbei lineages. While this process did gain momentum through Emperor Xiaowen's reforms, it arguably precipitated the fall of the dynasty by politically dividing the Xianbei into "townsmen" (*zhenren* 鎮人) on the frontiers who kept observing their "national customs" (*guosu* 國俗) and the new, hybrid class of court nobles (*chaoshi* 朝士) in Luoyang. The discontent and

---

[121] 代; Old Xianbei country in what is now largely Inner Mongolia. Tuoba Yilu, one of Tuoba Hong's ancestors, was granted the title "Duke of Dai" (代公) by the Western Jin court in 310.

[122] *WS* 7-2.178: "丙辰，詔遷洛之民，死葬河南，不得還北。於是代人南遷者，悉爲河南洛陽人."

[123] *WS* 7-2.177: "遣使以太牢祭漢高祖廟...又詔選諸孔宗子一人，封崇聖侯，邑一百戶，以奉孔子之祀."

insubordination of the former stratum of compatriots (*guoren* 國人) toward the post-Taihe court led to the disastrous Uprising of the Six Garrisons (*liuzhen-zhiluan* 六鎮之亂, 524-530), whose aftermath reduced the remaining Tuoba princes to being the puppets of ambitious warlords.[124]

Instead of reinforcing the characterization of Northern Wei identity politics as one of progressive and straightforward Sinicization, I argue that the adoption of Chinese-style ritual practice and theory constituted an effort to legitimize imperial rule in the context of traditional discourse. To understand Wei Shou's own perspective on "the culture of Taihe" in a successor state that inherited the Tuoba project of legitimation, his colophons and entries in the *Imperial Annals* (*Di-Ji*) and the *Treatise on Rituals* (*Li-Zhi*) will be examined later in this study. I am particularly interested in ritualization as a constitutive act in itself: To what extent could Xianbei participants in classical ("Chinese") ceremonies claim to continue the Han-Jin imperial order? How does Wei Shou's treatment of the potential contradiction between "national" (Xianbei) heritage and imperial aspiration in the Northern Wei case compare to Gregory of Tours' strategy of Christianization in his articulation of Merovingian legitimacy? Since ethnographic tropes are often subject to rhetorical manipulation in historiographical discourse, a study of Merovingian and Tuoba uses of ritualization strategies may shed more light on the performative function of identities in post-imperial state formation. I will attempt to answer these questions after identifying and analyzing points of comparison from both texts, paying particular attention to the correlation between ritual participation and political identity.

---

[124] Chen, Yinke 234. One such warlord was a Xianbei-Chinese general of *zhenren* extraction, Gao Huan (496–547), who held supreme power in the Eastern Wei court. The *Wei Shu* was commissioned during the reign of his son, Gao Yang (r. 550–559) of the Northern Qi.

Introduction

In the case of the Northern Wei, similar dynamics existed between established interest groups and parallel rhetorics of political legitimacy. Explicating the ideological rivalry within the Tuoba empire between a North Asian military aristocracy and their indigenous collaborators, Kang Le has associated the creation of the so-called "Dai-ren clique" with the Northern Wei's transition from nomadic confederation into a sedentary state.[125] More recently, Andrew Eisenberg has defined the dynasty as "a pioneering ethnic minority conquest regime" due to the fact that "the broad ruling elite of the Northern Wei did not view themselves as Chinese (even when later constructing Chinese-style imperial administrative structures), and were viewed by the majority Chinese population as…ethnically distinct."[126] Though personal views of legitimation further depended on individual backgrounds and rhetorical contexts, one can broadly distinguish the cultural sensibilities of Tuoba "compatriots" from those of newly incorporated native elites. The tragedy of Cui Hao discussed earlier in this chapter was a manifest, though extreme, example of this implicit but ongoing conflict throughout the history of Northern Wei dominion in northern China.

To reiterate, little evidence suggests that the Northern Wei "inner court," even after its relocation to Luoyang, ever considered itself ethnic "Chinese".[127] Both of Tuoba Wei's successor states, the Northern Zhou (557-581) and the Northern Qi (550-577), subsequently accommodated

---

[125] 60

[126] "Collapse of a Eurasian Hybrid: The Case of the Northern Wei". 369

[127] In fact, many scholars argue that, in the classical model, "Chinese" identity itself was never ethnic in nature. Instead, the proper dichotomous counterpart of *yi* ("barbarian") was always *hua* ("illustrious, civilized"). According to Nicolas Tackett (2017), however, "*Han* began to serve as an ethnic designator duirng the Northern Wei, as a means of distinguishing the Sārbi ruling class from the indigenous population" (159). One may hence theorize about a historical parallel between the fates of imperial Chinese and Roman identities in receiving an "ethnic" downgrade during the Middle Ages.

and even valorized the presence of "foreign" culture in the respective parts of *zhongguo* that they controlled.[128] A relatively static and Sino-centric ethnographic discourse only resurfaced in the Sui-Tang period, achieved through the violent conquest of Chen, the last southern dynasty, by a reunified northern regime, the Sui (581-618). Since the fall of Sui's long-lived successor, Tang (618-907), and the reconstitution of empire under the Northern Song (960-1127), as Hugh R. Clark puts it, "the reunified empire stood in remembered contrast to the chaos of the alternative".[129] The broad political context in which *Jin Shu (the Book of Jin)* was compiled in the early to mid-seventh century can thus be seen as a precursor to this later ideal of holistic "Chinese-ness". In Wei Shou's lifetime, however, the lofty ideal of "great unification" [*da-yitong* 大一統] under a universalist, patrimonial empire modeled after those of the Han and Jin dynasties was far from political reality. Rather, the necessary negotiation in this period between multilayered and potentially contradictory identities within the Tuoba regime, such as concurrent positions in tribal leadership and official bureaucracy, posed epistemic challenges to the dichotomizing rhetoric of the imperial past. This calls for a more nuanced understanding of "traditional" legitimation practices, in particular their deployment by the Tuoba Wei in the post-imperial context of its dominion.

Therefore, I propose to define *Wei Shu*'s narrative of Tuoba state-building through the ritualist paradigm of political legitimacy. Angela Zito, foreshadowing her discussion of knowledge and power in Qianlong's empire in the eighteenth-century, ascribes universal utility

---

[128] Ford 313: "Ethnic distinction and tension between Särbi-Xianbei and Chinese continued under the Northern Qi (北齊), and the Northern Zhou's (北周) founder reversed the Northern Wei edict requiring Särbi-Xianbei to abandon their traditional clan names in favor of Chinese equivalents; even Chinese subjects were awarded clan names in the Särbi-Xianbei language under the Northern Zhou".

[129] "What's the Matter with 'China'? A Critique of Teleological History". *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 77, No. 2 (May) 2018: 296.

to this line of analysis: "As ruling formations, monarchies of the past share with modern-day governments by the 'people' (be they democratic or socialist) the necessity to found themselves within a declared natural order of people and things."[130] Understood politically, *li* most approximated the modern scholarly definition of "ritual" as a specific set of legitimating practices: Timely and appropriate sacrifices constituted conformity to the mandate of Heaven [天命 *tian-ming*], the ultimate, cosmic source of political legitimacy in the Sinitic imperial tradition. In the Northern Wei court, a Taihe-era discussion of the proper elemental phase [德 lit. "virtue/ excellence"] the dynasty ought to adopt expressed opposing views on the cosmic-historical functions of this practice.[131] Courtiers debated the merits and flaws of preceding regimes to determine the most propitious "genealogy" of the current empire, justifying their proposals with ritual precedents and historical rationales. Their devotion to the idea of "the rightful order" [*zheng-ci* 正次] of the transfer of divine legitimacy testified to the political salience of Wei's treatise on *li*.

Thus, the Confucian obsession with the organization of hierarchical social relations between father and son, lord and vassal, and capital and periphery reflected a cultural attitude that recognized *li* as an organizing principle of human society. *Li* conceived as such entailed ritual activities whose performance were contingent on shared metaphysical notions of cosmic and social orders. *Li*'s malleable and supposedly neutral qualities, however, do not obscure the practical context of its performance as a means to an end. In Zito's words, "imperial rituals,

---

[130] 15

[131] *WS* 108:1.2744-7; included in the *Treatise on Rituals*, this passage will be excerpted in the next section of this chapter.

whether the sacrificial unification of spirits and men, or the creation of the domain of the son of Heaven as the incorporation of the lesser domains of peripheral lords, construct orders of differences that embody the proper positions of the people and things of the cosmos."[132]

Zito's presentation of *li* as the representation of "the way things ought to be" hints at the inherently political stakes involved in its performance. According to the Northern Qi historian, *li-yi* ["ritual ceremony"] was so crucial to the governance of states historically that whichever of them had lost it faced imminent doom. He follows up the argument by offering an example of this correlation through the divergent fates of two similarly positioned states: "Lu followed the rituals of Zhou, and the domain was able to conquer formidable foes; the folk of Qi removed the proper vessels, and they yielded to others as stratagems failed."[133] While both Qi (1046–386 BCE) and Lu (1042–249 BCE) derived political legitimacy in classical historiography from being vassal states of the Zhou kingdom (c. 1046–256 BCE) and were similar in size and prowess, the ruling house of Lu followed the precepts of *Zhou Li* ["The Rites of Zhou"] and established proper institutes for their subjects to observe. This distinction in the ability to perform *li* rites properly, Wei Shou suggests, makes the difference between victory and defeat for a state.

Despite the classical context of Wei's allusion to the historical role "Ritual," understood typically as *Zhou Li*, has played in governance, he recognizes that changes in social customs necessitate adaptations. This ambivalent characterization of *li* as both traditional and evolutionary may account for the apologetic tone of Wei Shou toward the "neglect" of early

---

[132] "Writing the Ritualist Metaphysics". 115.

[133] *WS* 108:1.2733: "魯秉周禮，國以克固；齊人撤器，降人折謀."

Tuoba monarchs concerning the institution of rituals. In the following and last passage of his preface, Wei's periodization of *li*'s status in Northern Wei history bespeaks an awareness of the practical flexibilities of ritualization:

> 自永嘉擾攘，神州蕪穢，禮壞樂崩，人神殲殄。太祖南定燕趙，日不暇給，仍世征伐，務恢疆宇。雖馬上治之，未遑制作，至於經國軌儀，互舉其大，但事多粗略，且兼闕遺。[134]
>
> Since the disturbances of Yongjia (Jin regnal era 307-311), the divine realm (China) was overgrown with weeds as "ritual was corrupted and music ruptured" and mortal and divine perished alike. When Taizu (Tuoba Gui, 371-409) ventured south into the lands of Yan and Zhao, days yielded no leisure as they were spent on campaign, his priority being the expansion of the realm. Although he ruled from the back of his horse and spared no time to institute rituals, when it came to the conventions and ceremonies which governed the state, he prioritized the most vital among them, but these were often crude, abbreviated in execution, and without complete precedents.

Wei begins the closure of his preface by setting a rather low bar for the early Tuoba rulers: The "Middle Country" they entered was a literal wasteland. Furthermore, the historian acknowledges the difficulties of adopting classical standards of *li* in times of heavy campaigning, especially as the literary tradition itself had suffered severe blows from earlier wars and called for sustained institutional efforts to recover. Though modern discussions of the Northern Wei's *li* institutes tend to focus on the historical implications of the cultural policies of Emperor Xiaowen (Tuoba Hong, later Yuan Hong, r. 471-499), the rule of Emperor Daowu (Tuoba Gui) a century before had laid the foundation of Tuoba legitimacy in northern China. Prior to the alleged assimilation of Xianbei *guoren* into the social fabric of Xiaowen's reconstructed *tianxia* (universal imperial order), the Tuoba dynasty had relied on a mixture of group solidarity and classical political rhetoric to legitimate their occupation of former imperial lands. Taking cues from the innovative

---

[134] ibid.

way in which Gregory of Tours validated the Frankish conquest of all Gaul, I intend to use Wei Shou's concept of ritual propriety as a similar framework of reference to that of Catholic orthodoxy in the former's project. How was *li* first incorporated into the Northern Wei repertoire? According to Wei Shou, what primarily set the Tuoba founding fathers from their rivals?

The Xianbei Revisited: "Compatriots" in Central Lands

In order to contextualize the Northern Wei's particular approach to political legitimacy, it seems necessary to consider the rhetorical malleability of Sinitic historiography, especially given that our primary source, the *Wei Shu*, still makes heavy use of the classical repertoire. First, novel usages of traditional motifs can blur the rhetorical contingencies of an allusion by seemingly highlighting its established connotations in the conventional repertoire. It is arguable, for instance, that the Tuoba clan's alleged descent from the mythical patriarch Huangdi ("Yellow Emperor") as noted in *Wei Shu* "virtually makes the Särbi-Xianbei Chinese, insofar as they are made a branch of the same genealogical line from which previous Chinese dynasties had claimed to descend."[135] The rhetoric of shared descent with a formerly powerful people, however, does not usually mean common identity in historical contexts: Indeed, more often the accruing narrative shows how much historical circumstances have since then molded two separate *gentes* from a single ancestral stock. As told in the *Fredegar Chronicle* and the *Liber Historia Francorum*, the Trojan origin myth of the Merovingians does not reinforce Frankish legitimacy in Gaul by necessarily proving that they were "Roman" due to putative common descent, but

[135] Ford 319

rather by inserting the predecessor of the Merovingian state in the prestigious context of the classical canon, specifically that of Virgil's *Aeneid*.[136]

Likewise, if one examines *Wei Shu*'s allusion to the Tuoba origin myth in context, they should see that it differentiates the tribe from the Xia ("Chinese") people to the south at least as much as it seems to construct a common origin for them. The full entry in the *Imperial Annals* (*Di-Ji*), which Ford refers to, affirms this:

> 昔黃帝有子二十五人，或內列諸華，或外分荒服。昌意少子，受封北土，國有大鮮卑山，因以為號。其後，世爲君長，統幽都之北，廣漠之野，畜牧遷徙，射獵為業，淳樸為俗，簡易為化，不爲文字，刻木紀契而已，世事遠近，人相傳授，如史官之紀錄焉。黃帝以土德王，北俗謂土爲托，謂后爲跋，故以爲氏。其裔始均，入仕堯世，逐女魃於弱水之北，民賴其勤，帝舜嘉之，命爲田祖。爰歷三代，以及秦漢，獯鬻、獫狁、山戎、匈奴之屬，累代殘暴，作害中州，而始均之裔，不交南夏，是以載籍無聞焉。[137]
>
> In times past Huangdi had twenty-five sons, some established in the *hua* ("civilized") lands, others dispatched abroad to outer regions. Changyi, his youngest son, was granted a fief in a northern land, the country named after the "Great Xianbei Mountain"[138] within its borders. Since then, the [Xianbei] chiefs of every generation have ruled lands north of Youdu and the vast wilderness of the steppe, rearing livestock and migrating periodically, making hunting by bow their profession. Plain were their customs and simple their culture, such that they made no use of letters and merely recorded events through wood engravings. Of happenings in the world both far and near, the people related to each other as if they had been recorded in the chronicles of historiographers. Huangdi claimed kingship by virtue of the earth [element]. Northern custom renders earth ["tu"] as "tuo" and king ["hou"] as "ba", and thus [the Xianbei chiefs] adopted this ["Tuoba"] as the name of their clan. Huangdi's descendant Shijun entered the court as a minister during the reign of Yao [the second to last mythical ruler before the founding of Xia], chased the goddess of drought Nüba to the north of Ruoshui, and was relied upon by the people for

---

[136] Dorler, Philipp. "*The Liber Historia Francorum* — a Model for a New Frankish Self-confidence". *Networks and Neighbors* vol. 1:1 (2013), pp. 27-31; Dorler goes further with his interpretation of the version recorded in the *LHF*: "While, in the eyes of the author, the Roman tradition originated with the illegitimate Aeneas, that of the Franks went back to the righteous Antenor. Consequently, they are not only equal but even superior to the Romans. Thus the *LHF*-author's aim is not to prove the equality of Romans and Franks; he or she demonstrates the independence of the Frankish people by carefully transforming the legend of Troy" (31).

[137] *WS* 1.1

[138] Now identified with the Greater Khingan Range (*daxinganling* 大興安嶺) in Inner Mongolia

> his diligence. The Emperor Shun [Yao's successor] rewarded him, naming him the ancestral patron of agriculture. Throughout the three dynasties [Xia, Shang, Zhou] and the reigns of the Qin and the Han, the Xun-yu, Xian-yun, Shan-rong, and Xiong-nu tribes[139] afflicted the central domains with their atrocious violence from generation to generation, but the sons of Shijun did not interact with the Xia states to the south, such that they are not heard of in the chronicles.

Without doubt, beneath this somewhat tortured aetiology lies an attempt to associate the obscure and illiterate Xianbei tribe with the prestigious political lineage appropriated by the native ruling houses of the Han and Jin empires. Nevertheless, this association does not "sinicize" the people's origin as Ford suggests. First, the opening sentence already implies the difference between descent from Huangdi and claim to "hua" or civilized status through the geographical dichotomy of 諸華 ("civilized lands") and 荒服 ("out-lands"), the latter having similar connotations as the Latin term *barbaricum*. Second, the passage makes no effort to conceal or tone down the nomadic habits of the early Tuoba rulers: If anything it seems to deliberately recall descriptions of other northern tribes less favorably portrayed in traditional historiography, most notably those of the Xiongnu. It is this negative association that might have merited the very specific explanation for Tuoba obscurity before the third century that seems to contradict the career of Shijun (unless one understands his position as akin to that of Joseph in Genesis). That the author finds it appropriate to recount the ancient hostilities between the northern tribes and the Central Plains dynasties in juxtaposition to the inactivity of Shijun's folk, who clearly resemble the enemies of *zhongguo* in custom and habitat, is telling. If Wei Shou had wanted to censor the "barbarian" origin of the Tuoba clan, he could have done away with ethnographic observations

---

[139] All are used here to designate specific tribes; see a discussion of such ethnographic tropes by Ford in "The Chinese Ethnographic Tradition," 39-55.

altogether and thus dispensed with the need to further distinguish the Xianbei from their aggressive neighbors.

Instead, similar to how Gregory of Tours clearly sets the *Franci* apart from their Arian neighbors in Gaul in Book II of the *Historia*, *Wei Shu*'s version of the Tuoba origin myth pays rhetorical homage to both classical historiography and dynastic legitimacy. In particular, it adapted classical ethnography to the post-imperial context of "non-Chinese" ethnic hegemonies in northern China, among which that of the Tuoba came closest to realizing the universalist political ideals of Han imperialism. While they clearly originated from a peripheral region, Wei Shou, or whatever source he referenced, deliberately reconciled the "barbarian" [*hu* 胡 in Han-era texts] character of the early Xianbei with their later reception of the mandate to rule the Central Plains. This provision, however, does not necessarily reduce the role of ethnicity in determining legitimacy: Ironically it might have ethnicized the discourse of dynastic succession more than the classical but "relatively unboundaried, inclusive rhetoric that prevailed in the late Warring States and early Qin-Han Empire" by privileging the distinct origin of Tuoba compatriots.[140]

Throughout the history of Tuoba dominion in China proper, political tension between a universalist, *li*-based ideal of "virtuous governance" and the particularist, "ethnic" foundation of the dynasty manifested from time to time, climaxing in the infamous "Cui Hao incident" of 450. A native literatus serving in a substantially hybrid court, Wei Shou could not have condoned an ethnocentric ideology, but nor did circumstances allow him to completely ignore the alternative, and indeed antecedent, narrative of Xianbei *guoren* proving themselves worthy of the *tian-ming*

---

[140] Chittick 51

to rule. Later emperors, such as the learned Xiaowen-di, ruled as much by hereditary merit as through their adoption of the Sinitic paideia. Hence, I will spend the rest of this chapter analyzing and defining the conception of the Tuoba claim to rule, closely reading one passage from the *Treatise on Rituals*. To compare the stance of Wei Shou's historiography on Tuoba legitimacy with the late-Taihe canon, I will then allude to highlights from the career of Tuoba Gui as recorded in the second volume of the *Imperial Annals* and the historian's colophon at its end.

The foundational period of Tuoba history remained an ideological battleground for top Northern Wei officials near the end of the fifth-century. In the fifteenth year of Taihe (491), just two years prior to their move to Luoyang, a coalition of officials headed by Mu Liang, a native of Dai and the Prince of Chang Le, submitted their deliberation over a debate of considerable consequence to Emperor Xiaowen. After reviewing two opposing arguments in a debate about the appropriate "elemental succession" [*xing-ci* 行次][141] of the dynasty, Mu and others reached the following conclusion:

> Because the imperial Wei had continuously ruled northern lands down to the times of Wei and Jin and, although Zhao, Qin, and the two Yan kingdoms[142] occupied the central domain, their dominions were short and insignificant, it is not in congruence with principle that these [Zhao, Qin, and Yan] should also rank in the succession.[143]

---

[141] The Five Elemental Phases (Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, Earth), whose rotation signaled the replacement of the dynasty espousing a previous elemental "merit" (*de* 德). For instance, the Taihe consensus achieved through the panel quoted here was that the Northern Wei, in direct succession from Western Jin (Metal), ought to adopt the Water element since "Metal generates Water" in the well-known "Five Dynastic Phase" (*wuxing* 五行) theory of Zou Yan (305-240 BCE).

[142] Shi Zhao 石趙 (319-351), Fu Qin 苻秦 (351-394), Former Yan 前燕 (337-370), and Later Yan 後燕 (384-409) were all conquest dynasties like the Northern Wei itself. They all preceded the Northern Wei in controlling parts of the Central Plains, thus earning the title "usurper" from the extant Eastern Jin dynasty (317-420).

[143] *WS* 108:1.2747: "伏惟皇魏世王玄朔，下迄魏、晉，趙、秦、二燕雖地據中華，德祚微淺，並獲推敍，於理未愜..."

Through two opposing sets of supporting evidence that can be characterized broadly as "geographical" and "historical," the controversy revealed the larger concerns of Taihe courtiers with political legitimacy and dynastic succession. Both parties in the debate clearly assumed the political and cosmic significance of *li*, down to such minutiae as the color of ceremonial paraphernalia,[144] but the arguments they advanced ranked the various factors of legitimacy differently.

According to the court advisor Gao Lü, "Qin, Zhao, and Yan, though short of being bright and sagely, each staked an upright claim to dominate the Middle Country; sacrifices to Heaven and Earth continued of every category and order while the making of legal and ritual conventions did not disregard older institutes."[145] Because the former realm of all three kingdoms "embraced the Tai Mountain and straddled the Yellow River," they ought to be included in "the rightful order" [*zheng-ci* 正次] of states that occupied the central domain.[146] Furthermore, Gao suggests that his opponents preferred a dispensable *yi* [義 "righteousness" pertaining to human action] to a *li* that could be fulfilled, which he considers a reversal of ethical priorities.[147] Gao's simpler and geographically bounded conception of *li* could undermine the legitimacy of the Northern Wei itself, however, which had only acquired large parts of northern China through Emperor Daowu's

---

144 *WS* 108:1.2746

145 *WS* 108:1.2745: "又秦趙及燕，雖非明聖，各正號赤縣，統有中土，郊天祭地，肆類咸秩，明刑制禮，不失舊章."

146 ibid.: "奄岱踰河，境被淮漢...今若并棄三家，遠承晉氏，則蔑中原正次之實."

147 ibid.: "今議者偏據可絕之義，而不録可全之禮."

campaigns against the "legitimate" Later Yan. His adversaries exploited this contradiction to argue for a contrary discourse of legitimation that historicized the Tuoba Mandate.

Two literary officials, Li Biao and Cui Guang, raised the objection: "Lü proposes that the state has succeeded the Qin dynasty (Fu Qin 苻秦, 351-394); we, being in charge of the domain's records and having read quite a few of them, value the rightful order of succession and disavow the aforementioned sequence."[148] In their view, Northern Wei's prehistory as a vassal state of the Western Jin (266-316) took precedence over the temporal proximity of Qin's dominion over the Central Plains. Thus:

> 然此帝業，神元為首。案神元、晉武，往來和好。至于桓、穆，洛京破亡。二帝志摧聰、勒，思存晉氏，每助劉琨，申威并冀。是以晉室銜扶救之仁，越石深代王之請。平文、太祖，抗衡苻石，終平燕氏, 大造中區。則是司馬祚終於郟鄏，而元氏受命於雲代。[149]
>
> The imperial project began with Shenyuan (Tuoba Liwei, r. 219-277). Truly Shenyuan and Jinwu (Sima Yan, r. 266-290, the first emperor of the Jin 晋 dynasty) were on good terms with each other. In the times of Huan (Tuoba Yituo, r. 295-305) and Mu (Tuoba Yilu, r. 307-316), the Jin capital of Luoyang fell, and the same emperors vowed to destroy Liu Cong and Shi Le for the preservation of Jin, time and again helping Liu Kun and showing great strength in the prefectures of Bing and Ji. Hence, the [Sima] house of Jin recognized the benevolence of those rescue efforts and Yue Shi (courtesy name of Liu Kun) oversaw the investiture of Mu as Prince of Dai. Pingwen (Tuoba Yulü, r. 316-321) and Taizu (Daowu/Tuoba Gui) contended with the houses of Fu (Qin) and Shi (Zhao), eventually subduing the kingdom of Yan and occupying large swathes of the Middle Region. Thus the reign of the Sima clan ended with the fall of Jia-Ru (Luoyang), and the Yuan (Tuoba; Wei Shou uses the sinicized surname for consistency) clan received the mandate in the lands of Yun and Dai. [i.e. The two original "fiefs" of the Tuoba kingdom].

According to the librarian Li Biao and his cohort, the predecessor of the Northern Wei, the kingdom of Dai, continued to fight for the Jin dynasty even as the Central Plains had fallen into

---

[148] *WS* 108:1.2745-6: "尚書閻議，繼近秦氏。臣職掌國籍，頗覽前書，惜此正次，慨彼非緒."

[149] *WS* 108:1.2746

the hands of warlords like Liu Cong and Shi Le who, in Gao Lü's dubious reckoning, were rightful rulers. Moreover, it was the Western Jin general Liu Kun (270-318) who had petitioned the enfeoffment of Tuoba Yilu with the commandery of Dai in the last years of Sima rule. Hence the Tuoba clan arguably "inherited" the Mandate as early as in 311, when Luoyang fell to Xiong-nu forces under Liu Cong.

Unlike Gao, who identified dominion over the Central Plains as the decisive factor in assessing legitimacy, Li and Cui championed a more holistic definition of the Mandate. While their strategy seemed to hold spatial continuity in less regard, it compensated for this shortcoming in conventional *li* by stressing the practical aspect of approximating legitimacy. In the narrative of Li and others, it was only through *ren* [仁 benevolence], an ethical quality that pertained specifically to the actions of Tuoba Yituo and Tuoba Yilu, that the latter "received the mandate in the lands of Yun and Dai." Whereas Gao Lü emphasized the sanctity of the former core of the archaic and classical "Chinese" dynasties, Li Biao and Cui Guang argued for the exceptional status of the Tuoba Dai kingdom, which had directly succeeded the late Jin Empire while based in traditionally peripheral lands (Yun and Dai). This mode of argument strikes a similar chord as does the genealogical preface of *Di-Ji* that I discussed earlier in this chapter. Likewise, it prevailed as an amended iteration of classical ritualist rhetoric against more rigid, dichotomized correlations of political legitimacy with traditional criteria. The resultant narrative corroborates the founding myth of Tuoba exceptionalism in the *Imperial Annals*.

For Wei Shou's own project, Gao's view is problematic for its implicit nullification of "merit" [*de* 德], a conception of moral excellence that often justified less prestigious contenders for universal rulership. Indeed, it contradicts *Wei Shu*'s colophon on the careers of Huan and Mu,

for "the rise of kings," Wei concludes, "must have been accompanied with the accumulation of merit [*de*] and praiseworthy deeds [*gong* 功] that propagated benefits [*li* 利], so that its way [*dao* 道] corresponded with forces both arcane and apparent, and was thereby conducive to divine will."[150] Furthermore, the observation that "Huan and Mu served the house of Jin" does not escape the historian, whose own perspective on the political heritage of the Tuoba regime thus seems to align with the Taihe consensus recounted in the *Treatise on Rituals*.[151] The historiographical implications of Wei's comment, which affirms his account of the position taken by Li Biao, Mu Liang, and likely Xiaowen-di himself, are definitive. If the divine destiny of the primordial Wei (Dai) state preceded its occupation of the Central Plains and the attendant appropriation of Han-Jin administrative and religious repertoires, then later Tuoba rulers cannot be said to have ruled by virtue of these Sinitic "add-ons," which contributed to meritorious government but fell short of legitimating dynastic power. Wei Shou's admiration for Xiaowen-di's rigorous subscription to classical *li* precepts does not translate into disapproval of his less cultured ancestors.

On the contrary, the "classicizing" character of the second volume of the *Imperial Annals* imputes the Tuoba state's historic transition from peripheral vassal to regional hegemon to Tuoba Gui, the first of his lineage to claim the Mandate of Heaven. One crucial event took place in the sixth month of 398 CE ("the first year of Tianxing" in the Wei dynastic calendar), as the first in a series of civic initiatives that marked the beginning of permanent Tuoba settlement in northern

---

[150] *WS* 1.16: "史臣曰：帝王之興也，必有積德累功博利，道協幽顯，方契神祇之心."

[151] ibid.: "…桓、穆勤於晉室."

China. Tuoba Gui, then already Prince of Wei for twelve years,[152] summoned an assembly of ministers to finalize the "title of state" [*guo-hao* 國號]. Not unlike the Taihe debate examined above, Wei Shou's account describes two opposing camps, though the *Imperial Annals* records only the synopsis of the argument and the royal objection and edict. Against the ministers' traditionalist preference for "Dai",[153] Tuoba Gui voiced the first transcribed proclamation [*zhao* 詔] in the *Imperial Annals*:

> My ancestors of old governed the North, controlled far-flung domains and, despite claiming kingship, had not yet pacified the Nine Regions [sic. archaic "China"]. As for my own reign a hundred generations since then, All Under Heaven [*tianxia* 天下] has fallen apart and the civilized [*hua* 華] lands lack a lord. Although the customs of peoples differ, appeasement is achieved by merit [*de* 德]; therefore have I led six armies and swept clean the central lands, so that the wicked and rebellious have been obliterated and those from far and near have submitted. The former title, that is Wei, should be kept. Let this be announced in All Under Heaven, so that my will is known.[154]

Never before has the concept of *tianxia*, the proper geographical context of the *da-yitong* ("great unity") mode of political organization, been at the forefront of a royal speech in Wei Shou's text. The theme of "appeasement by merit," however, does recur in this period of Tuoba Gui's rule and seems to support a "charismatic" interpretation[155] of its character.

---

[152] For an analysis of the ascent of Tuoba Gui to the throne of Dai in 386 and the first title change to Wei in the same year, see Liu Puning (2021), p39.

[153] "The first and most popular [naming convention] was to derive the dynastic title from a place name. Some dynasties (such as the Shang, Zhou, and Qin dynasties) derived their names from the location in which the ruling family had originated" (Liu 38). Tianxing courtiers apparently had pre-Qin and Han models in mind, and both traditions preserved the name of the "original fief" of the royal clan. See *WS* 2.32 for Wei Shou's summary of the ministerial position on this issue.

[154] *WS* 2.32-3: "詔曰：昔朕遠祖，總御幽都，控制遐國，雖踐王位，未定九州。逮于朕躬，處百代之季，天下分裂，諸華乏主。民俗雖殊，撫之在德，故躬率六軍，掃平中土，兇逆蕩除，遐邇率服。宜仍先號，以為魏焉。布告天下，咸知朕意."

[155] Kang 27

Having few parochial resources, either infrastructural or rhetorical, with which to justify Tuoba hegemony, Gui appealed to divine mandate and the resultant feasibility of governing a diverse population. During the siege of Zhongshan [capital of the North China-based Later Yan, then at war with the Tuoba kingdom] in August of the previous year (397 CE), the Xianbei Prince of Wei dismissed the homesickness of his followers in the midst of a plague. His reasoning was terse and callous but, according to its own logic, irrefutable: "Such is the heavenly mandate, and what can be done about it! All mankind of the four seas can compose a domain [*guo* 國] as long as I appease them so. Why fear the lack of subjects?"[156] Here *guo* obviously refers to the expanded sense of "political dominion," rather than the stricter geographical (and arguably ethnic) definition evoked in contemporary uses of *guoren*. Hence, the Tuoba Gui of *Wei Shu* almost appears to champion this universal expansionism at the expense of his parochial subjects: "*Regnum* above *civitas*/g*ens*," to recap the now popular (and also my own, albeit modified) reading of the *Historia Francorum*, applies to the Northern Wei case as well.

That this grand political vision remained rooted in a web of checks and balances, largely maintained by the very compatriots expected to execute it, has been the subject of many an excellent study.[157] Not much opposition is gleaned from reading the *Imperial Annals* itself, however. Moreover, the first Tianxing edict of Tuoba Gui was, according to the Biography of Cui Xuanbo in Volume Twenty-four, as much the mind-child of this "new man" as that of the Prince himself.[158] A seasoned cultural broker like his son, Cui Hao, would become, Cui Xuanbo had

---

[156] *WS* 2.30: "斯固天命，將若之何！四海之人，皆可與爲國，在吾所以撫之耳，何恤無民?"

[157] For the most comprehensive treatments of "ethnic/civic" tension in the Northern Wei, see Kang Le (1995) and Zhou Yiliang (1997).

[158] *WS* 24.620-621. See Liu (2021) pp. 40-41 for a discussion of this entry in the context of dynastic legitimacy.

served Murong Chui, Tuoba Gui's maternal uncle turned nemesis, and apparently supported the Dai/Wei cause out of necessity.[159] His "outsider" background regardless, Cui was appointed the chief supervisor of a holistic attempt to formalize bureaucratic ranks, music, and ritual ceremonies (specifically "shrine worship, Grain and Soil, court attendance, and banquets") in the eleventh month of the same year.[160] In the twelfth month of the first year of Tianxing (January of 399 CE), the ministers of Tuoba Gui, again headed by Cui Xuanbo, justified the adoption of the earth elemental phase by recalling the Tuoba descent from the Yellow Emperor and the ox-like form of the mystical beast (for the ox is "an earthy beast") who led the clan out of the far north into the former homeland of the Xiong-nu.[161] The ritualist component of Tuoba legitimacy from this period was thus well-documented, and Cui Xuanbo's involvement in the project set the precedent for later rulers' selective appropriation of native talents.

This retrospective attribution of a universalist *da-yitong* ideology to Emperor Daowu posits his reign as a prefiguration to that of Emperor Xiaowen almost a century later, when the latter tried his very best to turn this ideal into reality. In Wei Shou's version at least, the first Tuoba prince to attain the "imperial height" was Tuoba Gui, and though his "crown and footwear" were somewhat unkempt, his decrees and policies survived long generations.[162] It is

---

[159] *WS* 24.620

[160] *WS* 2.33

[161] *WS* 2.34: "尚書崔玄伯等奏從土德..."; *WS* 108:1.2734: "羣臣奏以國家繼黃帝之後，宜為土德，故神獸如牛，牛土畜，又黃星顯曜，其符也。於是始從土德." For Wei Shou's account of these two myths, see *WS* 1.1 and 1.2.

[162] *WS* 2.44-5: "史臣曰：晉氏崩離，戎羯乘釁，僭偽紛糾，豺狼競馳。太祖顯晦安危之中，屈伸潛躍之際，驅率遺黎，奮其靈武，克剪方難，遂啟中原，朝拱人神，顯登皇極。雖冠履不暇，栖遑外土，而制作經謨，咸存長世..."

worth noting that Wei's interpretation of Tuoba state-building in his own colophon differs from that of Li Biao and Cui Guang's cohort in the Taihe *xing-ci* debate, despite their agreement on the illegitimacy of post-imperial regimes that occupied the Central Plains earlier. Namely, the Taihe ministers regarded Shen-yuan ((Tuoba Liwei, r. 219-277) as the founder of "the imperial enterprise" [*di-ye* 帝業] instead, with the conquests of Taizu (Tuoba Gui) being characterized as the continuation of the work begun under Dai vassalage to the Jin Empire.[163]

Read alongside Wei Shou's preface to the *Treatise on Rituals*, their position further vindicates the separation of dynastic legitimacy from ritual propriety, whose fulfillment nonetheless facilitated the conglomeration of tribal affiliations we may broadly define as "*Dai*" or "*guoren*" identity. While "feudal" [*fengjian* 封建] obligations to Jin emperors might have given the Tuoba founders their *casus belli* against "barbarian" rivals, Tuoba Gui's merit-based claim to the mandate, his insistence on the adoption of "Wei" as dynastic title, and the institutional groundwork he laid for the more radical reforms of Tuoba Hong marked the first organized effort in Northern Wei history to expand the ideological compass of the polity. As a result, the latent competition among various uses of "*guo*" and the contingent role of *li* in political legitimation are obscured in the *Wei Shu* by a unitary, vertical, and inclusive conception of "the Wei state" which the Tuoba clan monopolized.[164] Therefore, Wei Shou clearly gives historiographic priority to the Tianxing era, without which there could be no "culture of Taihe" (*Taihe-zhifeng* 太和之風).

---

[163] *WS* 108:1.2746

[164] This conception of statehood was certainly more universal than what the Tuoba chieftains had originally claimed to rule on the steppes, but we cannot preclude the parallel and fundamental iteration of Tuoba legitimacy through the performance of North-Asian communal rites and sacrifices, which are known to have persisted into the last years of Taihe (Kang 168-169).

Conclusion: *Guo* and *Li*

This chapter has established a working definition of *li* and alluded to its practical implications in discussions of political legitimacy and subjectivity. In the historiographical context, the model of ritualization holds the potential to refine our understanding of *li*, particularly its discursive aspect and how it factored into historical narratives of state-building. Expanding the concept of *li* into a discourse where "the relationships between words and things, and the practices whereby those conventions are instituted, imply subjectivities who will understand and 'find' themselves through those practices," Zito provides a ready model for the sometimes tenuous connection between identity and ritualization.[165] As multiple entries from the *Imperial Annals* and the *Treatise on Ritiuals* indicate, Wei Shou's historiography identifies the reign of Tuoba Gui as the real beginning of Wei *guo*, though the notion of the Tuoba dynasty, sometimes generously styled as *guo-jia* ("our nation"), far preceded its formal conception.

Whereas Gregory of Tours' rhetorical "Christianization" of Clovis's *regnum* syncretizes two potential modes of legitimation (dynastic and religious) by presenting the dominion of the Franks as a distinct phase of Gallic history, the *Wei Shu*'s account of Tuoba Gui's career highlights its restorative character. In the absence of a common ideological alternative to the Sinitic political repertoire, the text's rhetorical use of "ritual" (*li*) and "virtue" (*de*) compensates for the relative paucity of legitimating resources accessible to early Tuoba rulers. Wei Shou's own commentaries in *Di-Ji* and *Li-Zhi* thus corroborate Tuoba legitimacy on the periphery of classical discourse, but they never quite go beyond it in doing so. Just as Gregory generally

---

[165] "Method, Monarchy, and Ritual". 57

hesitates to identify Merovingian rule as “Frankish” in the *Decem Libri* and prefers to glorify the piety of its local subjects, however, Wei relies on the more malleable elements of the classical repertoire to rationalize the role of the Tuoba clan in the cosmic-historical context of *tianxia*. At the very least, both authors only acknowledged the legitimacy of the royal lineage they wrote about by contextualizing it in the unfolding of a divine mandate.

Chapter III: Toward Divergent Fates

Introduction

Both composed through a retrospective lens, the respective second volumes of the *Decem Libri Historiarum* and *Wei Shu* depict comparable trajectories of identity formation and civic consolidation. They speak volumes of the ways in which the two authors reconstructed narratives of state-building. For both authors, the projection of a grand vision for the political community they each contemplated supplied ideological gravity to historical events. Gregory of Tours championed a particular version of "Frankish" *communitas* based on the Christianized legacy of Clovis, which the preface to Book V juxtaposes against contemporary covetousness and civil discord. Wei Shou likewise idealized the merits of Tuoba Gui, highlighting the inclusive potential of a Wei *guo* more firmly rooted in "Sinitic universalism" than Tuoba/Dai parochialism. As homogenizing histories with cosmological stakes, both texts deliberately assimilate moments of cultural conflict or ambiguity into traditional (Christian and *li*) paradigms. Other sources confirm this tendency by offering more ethnographic details about the barbarian masters of *universae Galliae* and *zhongguo*. Later Frankish writers who seemed less adamant than Gregory about the promise of universal *regnum* included more "exotic" origin myths in their histories while historians from the Southern Dynasties commonly, though not always, stressed the cultural and political distinctiveness of the braided Xianbei barbarians from indigenous northerners. Ultimately, we must ask how an analysis of similar themes in both cases should inform our understanding of state formation in Late Antique Eurasia and, by extension, Scheidel's

proposition of the "First Great Divergence," which summarizes the cumulative historical impact of its discrete variations in East Asia and Europe.

Ritual Differences: "Stable" Division Versus "Fragmentary" Unification?

My study shares a basic set of historiographical concerns and methodological premises with Ford's. First, it seems beyond dispute that, after the restoration of unitary rule under the Tang, "the barbarians who had entered China eventually abandoned their respective barbarian identities for a 'Chinese' one," whereas many similar groups who had settled in the western provinces of the former Roman Empire did not, which were perhaps the most important set of the "radically different outcomes" historians face in comparing post-imperial China and Latin Europe.[166] Second, my interest in post-imperial historiography and legitimation resonates with his acute observation that the modern understanding of civilizational "survival" depends on "as simple a question of whom those in power chose to identify themselves with."[167] To avoid the same biases that Ford accuses contemporary Chinese historians of espousing, however, I have highlighted the potential compatibility between non-ethnic paradigms of affiliation and their conspicuously absent alternatives near the end of my discussion of both texts.[168] In other words, while Ford's study attempts to establish causative relations between "imperial" repertoires and

---

[166] Ford "Conclusion". 311

[167] ibid. 332

[168] Chen Sanping (2012) has even extended the analogue of conspicuous absence to that of the now widely discussed Tuoba heritage of the Tang imperial house from official historiography: "Moreover, despite Chen Yinke's admittedly politically influenced objective of demonstrating the Li clan's alleged Han Chinese origin, the studies by him and others have also shown that the official histories compiled during the Tang had been subjected to much political doctoring in order to conceal the imperial house's 'Barbarian' background" (7).

post-imperial historical developments, mine explains the importance of state-building narratives to the rhetorics of identity and political legitimacy in the Late Antique world.

In my reading of Gregory of Tours, ideological detachment from *Romanitas* precedes and justifies the synthesis of Catholic and Merovingian-Frankish modes of legitimation in his text, creating a rhetorical "tradition" his historiographical successors would adapt to their own tastes and circumstances. Similarly, I have argued that while Emperor Xiaowen's strict adherence to Chinese-style ritual practice and theory did qualify as an effort to legitimate his claim to rule the former territories of the Han and Jin empires,[169] in Wei Shou's reckoning the Tuoba mandate had formally come into effect during the career of Tuoba Gui (Emperor Daowu), a newer contestant in his time for the imperial title who, like Clovis, laid the foundation of dynastic legitimacy by appropriating the rhetorical and administrative resources of local elites. Both representations were produced according to the retrospective projections of dynastic mandates: For Gregory of Tours, the political unity of *universae Galliae* under a non-Roman Christian *regnum*; for Wei Shou, the restoration of a *zhongguo* where the observance of classical rites became coterminous with virtuous governance for the first time since the decline of the Jin dynasty.

While the narratives they constructed to buttress Merovingian and Tuoba legitimacies both imply the formation of an inclusive "national" identity, the respective ideological vehicles of ecclesiastical and *li* institutions allowed for different degrees of co-optation and interpretive flexibility. This fact could explain the differential capacities of the Merovingian and Tuoba Wei states to retain political cohesion which, given the hopeful status of both in achieving quasi-imperial hegemony at their respective starting positions, may well have dictated the course of the

---

[169] It is worth noting that the so-called "culture of Taihe" coincided with the southward move of the Tuoba court and its entry into an intensifying diplomatic and military rivalry with the Jiankang-based Southern Dynasties.

first and most crucial "phase" of "The First Great Divergence." Namely, while the descendants of Clovis "failed," in Gregory's view at least, to keep the *Franci* united as champions of Christian Gaul, those of Tuoba Gui gradually whittled away *guoren* opposition to political centralization and cultural integration, which culminated in the apex of Northern Wei domination under Emperor Xiaowen.

The Northern Wei's aptitude for Han-style imperialism, however, led to rather counter-intuitive consequences for the ruling dynasty as it split into two halves in the early sixth-century, the Eastern Wei and the Western Wei (535–557), which were each usurped by a prominent warlord of *zhenren* extraction. On the other hand, Merovingian dynastic continuity was maintained in spite of endemic civil wars over territorial disputes for two centuries after the death of Clovis, enough time for the original *Franci* to become fully ensconced in Gallic societies. How do we trace this seemingly incidental divergence in discursive terms? I propose that we account for the respective ideological autonomy of Tuoba and Merovingian dynastic interests from *li* and Christian modules of legitimation. Strategies of differentiation mattered as well, as ritualization served as much to insert hierarchical orders as to promote horizontal groupings.

Overall, both texts showcase strategic uses of the traditional repertoire of political legitimation. In the *Decem Libri Historiarum*, the divorce of Christian orthodoxy from explicit references to imperial *Romanitas* enabled the rhetorical union between the former and a "Frankish" version of Gallic unity. On the other hand, broadly "Confucian" ideals of universal kingship and meritorious governance formed a basic "meta-narrative" upon which the *Wei Shu* reconstructed the legendary careers of the early Tuoba monarchs. Both narratives thus employ

ritualization in the form of "culturally specific strategies" to emphasize the transcendental principles at work in particular processes of state-building.[170] A case in point is Gregory of Tours' hortatory preface to Book V of his *Historia*, which invites comparison to Wei Shou's cautionary preface to *Li-Zhi*:

> Debebant enim eos exempla anteriorum regum terrere, qui, ut divisi, statim ab inimicis sunt interempti. Quotiens et ipsa urbs urbium et totius mundi capud ingens bella civilia diruit; quae cessante, rursum quasi ab humo surrexit. Utinam et vos, o regis, in his proelia, in quibus parentes vestri desudaverunt, exercimini, ut gentes, vestra pace conterritae, vestris viribus praemirentur! Recordamini, quid capud victuriarum vestrarum Chlodovechus fecerit, qui adversos reges interfecit, noxias gentes elisit, patrias subiugavit, quarum regnum vobis integrum inlesumque reliquit.
>
> The Franks ought, indeed, to have been warned by the sad fate of [their] earlier kings, who, through their inability ever to agree with each other, were killed by their enemies. How many times has [Rome] the city of cities, the great head of all the world, been brought low by her civil dissensions, yet it is true that, when the strife was over, she rose once more as if out of the ground! If only you kings had occupied yourselves with wars like those in which your ancestors larded the ground with their sweat, then the other races of the earth, filled with awe at the peace which you imposed, might have been subjected to your power! Just think of all that Clovis achieved, Clovis, the founder of your victorious country, who slaughtered those rulers who opposed him, conquered hostile peoples and captured their territories, thus bequeathing to you absolute and unquestioned dominion over them.[171]

Here the Gallic bishop makes an unusual allusion to the civic tenacity of imperial Rome, perhaps to recall Augustine's theological metaphor of the Two Cities. By transposing the Augustinian idea into his own context, Gregory presumes the ideological prestige of the Frankish *civitas terrena*, which he also regards as the legacy of Clovis and no other.[172] His view thus affirms Brown's model of qualified Gallo-Frankish cooperation: "Gallo-Roman bishops, well aware of

---

[170] Bell 74

[171] *DLH*, V, *Pref*., trans. Lewis Thorpe. 253; brackets indicate implied words.

[172] Peter Brown, who has boldly claimed that "the intolerance that greeted the barbarian immigration…led directly to the formation of the barbarian kingdoms," concedes in *The World of Late Antiquity* that "the Franks were the exception that proved the rule" (124-5).

the continued existence of strong Arian states to their south, hailed the unsavoury warlord of the Franks, Clovis (481-511), as 'a new Constantine.'"[173]

Likewise, Wei Shou laments that "the deeds of the Liu [Han] and Sima [Jin] clans would hardly have compared" to the ritualization efforts of Yuan Hong had he not passed away prematurely.[174] Though Hong's ancestor Tuoba Gui had instituted a crude reconstruction of classical (Zhou) rites only, Wei credits his legacy with the permanent settlement of Xianbei *guoren* as registered households in the vicinity of Pingcheng (modern day Datong, Shanxi province)[175] and measures to expand the ideological scope of his rule at the expense of a pastoralist and tribal *guo-jia* [patrimonial polity]. Beneath the analogy drawn with previous regimes that both passages obviously feature, however, we have to consider the specific political genealogy in which each attempts to locate and interpret its historiographic subject.

While Gregory attributes martial vigor to various *Franci* throughout the ten books of his *Histories*, it seems probable in context that Clovis is the only character who embodies it unproblematically. Merovingian and ecclesiastical aims converged for at least as long as Arian kingdoms posed a threat to Latin Christendom, and in that sense Frankish retainers conveniently

---

[173] 125

[174] *WS* 108:1.2733: "高祖稽古，率由舊則，斟酌前王，擇其令典，朝章國範，煥乎復振。早年厭世，叡慮未從，不爾劉馬之迹，夫何足數。世宗優遊在上，致意玄門，儒業文風，顧有未洽，墜禮淪聲，因之而往。肅宗已降，魏道衰羸，太和之風，仍世凋落，以至於海內傾圮，綱紀泯然。嗚呼!" Translation: "Gaozu (Tuoba Hong, later Yuan Hong, r. 471-499) referenced ancient texts and followed past rules without exception, assessing former kings and selectively adopting their codes and institutes, such that court rules and domainal models shone with the brilliance of renewal. Had he not grown weary of the world at a young age (passed away) and left no successor to carry out his astute plans, the deeds of the Liu [Han] and Sima [Jin] clans would hardly have compared. Shizong (Yuan Ke, r. 499-515) led a leisurely life on high and devoted himself to the study of spiritual matters (Buddhism/Taoism). Therefore, Confucian duties and literary cultivation were not well attended to. The decline of ritual and music followed this. Since the reign of Suzong (Yuan Xu, r. 515-528), the way of proper government waned in Wei and the culture of Taihe (477-499) continued to decline until, across the entire realm, institutions collapsed and laws perished. Alas!"

[175] *WS* 83:1.1812

replaced Roman officers as defenders of an orthodox frontier against heresy and paganism. In other words, the "Christian" *telos* of the late imperial project is crucial to Gregory's placement of the Frankish kingdom in direct succession to the Empire that the patrician Aetius had saved from Attila the Hun. By Gregory's time, however, endemic civil strife and occasional infringements on Church autonomy by the sons of Clovis had led the bishop to pen his scathing *praefatio* to Book V.[176] Perhaps this very awareness of current depravities on Gregory's part has steered his narrative of Book II in a triumphalist direction. Clovis had at least the decency to tell friend from foe: Except Syagrius, virtually all of his notable victims were either Arian or insubordinate family members. Through his unconsciously mythologizing account of Clovis's journey to become ruler of all Gaul, Gregory validated Merovingian monopoly over political legitimacy in the absence of an adversarial alternative. Over the following centuries, *Franci* would not only qualify but encompass indigenous territorial categories (e.g. *Arverni*) as well, signaling a semantic shift to reflect political demarcations. The Christianization of civic "Roman-ness" had already prefigured this change, but Gregorian historiography consolidated the "Frankish" re-configuration of Gallic identity after Rome.

Therefore, this line of analysis affirms Peter Heather's assertion that "if the conditions and context which produced a particular group-consciousness changed sufficiently, then, no matter how strong its sense of identity, the group could be pulled apart and effectively destroyed."[177] When Heather wrote the statement in 1998, he had in mind the hapless *Heruli*, a minor Scandinavian tribe that gradually lost group cohesion through the fifth- and sixth-centuries

---

[176] Wood, Ian. *The Merovingian Kingdoms*. 62: "Wicked monarchs challenged tax-free status, as happened on more than one occasion to the church of Tours."

[177] "Disappearing and Reappearing Tribes". *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300-800*. 107

due to conflicting interests among members of its diaspora, but the observation applied equally to the *Romani* in Merovingian Gaul. The promise of a parochial restoration of *Romanitas* thus perished permanently with Syagrius, the last Gallic warlord to legitimate his rule with a primarily "Roman" repertoire. To reiterate Brown's thesis in the Gallic context, Christianization had created conditions favorable to a realignment of civic boundaries along ethnic lines, in whose aftermath Frankish identity emerged as the most viable option. By subordinating the *regnum Francorum* to Christianized time, Gregory of Tours ironically prophesied its independent future.

On the other hand, Wei Shou employs the mediating concept of *li* to bridge classical political discourse and historical experience. Civic rituals "accomplish this task because they both expose and construct the implicit grounds of the declared 'natural,' which everyone shares."[178] *Li* hence bears interpretive significance as the medium through which historians demonstrate causative relations between contingent events and "timeless" principles, the former being the proper subject of historiography and the latter that of "classics" or "canonical texts." Similar to how Qing scholars of the Qianlong era believed that discourses of ritual "made possible the reactualization of the sages' past *words* in present *ceremonial*," the *Li-Zhi* provides a stable framework wherein classically trained readers can make sense of the disparate biographies of emperors, princes, and officials.[179] The "ritualized" reading of history this encourages tends to mute or elide nuanced differences between "canonical" definitions and the "historical" uses

---

[178] Zito "Classifying Li: Time and Agency". 91

[179] ibid. 95

thereof. Thus does the first volume of *Di-ji* establish the credentials of its original sources by comparing Tuoba oral traditions to "the chronicles of historiographers."[180]

In addition, Wei Shou's colophons exemplify his own efforts to integrate the discrete lives of its core members and affiliates into a holistic retrospect of the Tuoba regime. To put earlier Tuoba rulers, who were quite akin to the traditional foes of Sinitic empires, in dynastic perspective, the historian chooses to emphasize their virtuous dispositions—a subaltern legitimating repertoire embodied through the performance of laudable acts. Huan (Tuoba Yituo) and Mu (Tuoba Yilu) both fall into this category, for their lack of access to ritualist and bureaucratic assets did not prevent them from obtaining diplomatic recognition from the Sima clan, which Wei clearly counts toward the cumulative "merit" [*de*] of the Tuoba dynasty.[181] Thus far the historian's conceptualization of Tuoba statehood in ritualized time mostly involves the second set of oppositions Catherine Bell has defined in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*: "the horizontal opposition of here and there, or us and them, which generates lateral or relatively egalitarian relationships."[182]

Hence, the entry of Tuoba Gui into the "deer chase" for the imperial title proceeded first from the consolidation of his power base through a series of southward campaigns from 386 to 398, in much the same way as Clovis's conquests of Soisson and neighboring Arian territories secured lasting prestige for his own lineage. However, the need to legitimate the entire lineage, rather than Tuoba Gui and his descendants alone, suggests the absence of changes in the ideological repertoire of the post-Han historiographic tradition on a level comparable to that of

---

[180] *WS* 1.1

[181] *WS* 1.16

[182] "Ritual Traditions and Systems". 125

Christianization in the Roman one, which did enable Gregory of Tours to assign epochal significance to the rule of Clovis and seemingly "de-ethnicize" it. This divergence had significant implications for the nature of either ritualizing tradition's relationship with the dominant political group. While Emperor Xiaowen's classicizing "revanchism" signified a trend toward synthesis, as I have suggested, the fact that *li*'s ideological potency did derive from a claim to metaphysical continuity precluded cultural brokers like Wei Shou from interpreting the program as an innovative break from the past.

In the Gallo-Frankish model of state formation, horizontal collaboration between the Gallic Church and a relatively compact and cohesive group of "ethnic" Franks facilitated direct brokerage between native ecclesiastics and their foreign lords. The resulting dynamic favored the restrictive yet stabilizing exclusion of an "imperial" repertoire, such as Gregory of Tours' dismissal of Chilperic's "Romanizing" ambition suggests.[183] By contrast, Wei Shou consistently relies on classical *li* as a viable guide for assessing the legitimacy of political projects, thereby subsuming Northern Wei history under a cosmological narrative of the rise and decline of dynasties that once were worthy of the Mandate of Heaven. At least on a rhetorical level, Wei "assimilates" Tuoba rule, whose merit culminated in imperial legitimacy, into the discursive structure of *li*. This legitimating strategy, however, prioritizes the "vertical opposition of superior and inferior" and "the opposition of central and local, which frequently incorporates and dominates the preceding oppositions" ["hierarchical structures" and "egalitarian relationships"], de-stabilizing the traditional repertoire of kinship and shared mythology among the formerly

[183] Wood. *The Merovingian Kingdoms*. 68

privileged *guoren*.[184] Although post-Roman societies experienced similar tensions between regnal centers and aristocratic localities,[185] the dominant solutions seem to have been articulated just as often by the latter category of political cliques. Gregory's conception of Tours as deserving its own spiritual genealogy is an indication of the continual partnership that defined Frankish "centers" and Gallo-Roman "peripheries" throughout Merovingian rule. Such attribution of legitimate political agency to the local seems hardly present in the *Wei Shu*.[186]

Conclusion

Thus, the at best "mixed" legitimation repertoire of Gregorian historiography might have reinforced the Merovingian dynastic project to a greater extent than its author had intended. By more or less divorcing Frankish legitimacy from a culturally venerable but politically impractical *Romanitas*, Gregory's unpretentious narrative left open the possibility for the enduring union of Frankish identity with a Gallo-Christian repertoire instead. Thence embedded in the social landscape of Christian Gaul, the Merovingian *Franci* became conspicuously exempt from the

---

[184] Bell 125

[185] Brown, speaking of the survival strategies of post-imperial Roman elites: "They tended to back the kings against their unruly followers by encouraging them to establish strong dynasties on the imperial model" (128). This observation provokes the counter-factual hypothesis that, had imperial Christianization not occurred, the barbarian kingdoms of the Late Antique west could have resembled their Chinese counterparts a lot more.

[186] Even prestigious literati of indigenous (local) origin, such as the infamous Cui Hao himself, fell short of asserting their will from positions outside the ideological confines of the court. An exhortation of his dated to the reign of Tuoba Si (r. 409–423) records the following:
"今居北方，假令山東有變，輕騎南出，耀威桑梓之中，誰知多少？百姓見之，望塵震服。此是國家威制諸夏之長策也" (*WS* 35.808).
Translation: "Now, given that the state makes its abode in the north, if Shandong (lands east of the Taihang Mountain) harbors revolt, light cavalry can strike south and display our prowess among the mulberry and catalpa trees [ie. in the countryside], and who can know their number? When the people see this, they will submit at the heels of our forces. Such is the long-term strategy of the state in subduing the Xia lands by threat of force."
Here Cui uses the term *zhu-Xia* (Xia lands, Central Plains, "China") without its traditional connotation of centrality. On the contrary, he exhorts the Tuoba dynasty to control the Central Plains from their stronghold in the North in much the same way as a Central Plains-based dynasty would do its northern periphery from the South.

homogenizing type of representation to which the *Wei Shu* subjects the Tuoba Xianbei. Here it seems expedient to reiterate the performative aspect of each author's project through the conceptual framework of cultural brokerage. As "ritualizing" vehicles, historiographic texts present visions of their respective societies that are contingent on the various personas their authors enact through writing. In the respective contexts of Merovingian and Northern Wei statehood, then, Gregory of Tours and Wei Shou have each used historiography as a means of mediating ideal and reality. However, beneath their similar cosmological agendas lie "ritual differences" expressed in the distinctive ways the two authors articulated political community and its "natural" boundaries. This becomes particularly salient when we consider their personal stakes in writing history.

In the case of Gregory, the composition of the *Decem Libri* presumably took place in the midst of a political resolution, bookmarked near the end of Book X by the baptism of Chlothar, the infant son of Chilperic, under the guidance of Guntram, the wisest Merovingian of his generation.[187] Without the knowledge of subsequent history, it would seem to a contemporary audience that at last the bloody feud among the grandsons of Clovis had ceased, such that the customary division of their once united patrimonies would finally begin to safeguard the *regnum Francorum* against the hereditary avarice of its princes. The Bishop of Tours could yet picture a brighter future for Gallic Christendom under Merovingian leadership. Wei Shou, for better or worse, wrote in the aftermath of a permanent sundering between the eastern and western halves of the former Tuoba empire. Though this lack of immediate attachment to the regime might have permitted Wei Shou to adopt a more "historical" perspective on the dynasty's successes and

---

[187] *DLH* X.28

failures, the *Wei Shu*'s homogenizing narrative, which indicated the rhetorical continuity of Sinitic ritual discourse in post-Han historiography, precluded alternative or syncretic interpretations of its legitimacy. Ultimately, we also need to take into account the latent conflict between Tuoba reliance on *guoren* and other "ethnic" cavalry for military supremacy and the ruling house's simultaneous incorporation of the Chinese political canon for administrative and legitimating purposes.[188] Wei Shou's somber foreword to *Treatise on Rituals* thus alluded to the failure of the Tuoba attempt to "classicize" their hybrid political structure, whereas Gregory's fiery sermon at the beginning of Book V of the *Decem Libri* rather ironically attested to the successful integration of Merovingian dynastic legitimacy with the then emerging concept of a Christian monarchy free from Roman civic trappings.

---

[188] Mark Lewis has claimed that, for the nascent *guo* of Tuoba Gui, "'backwardness' compared to the Murong proved a blessing, because contacts with the steppe regions enabled them to obtain large numbers of horses and allies" (79). For an extensive exposition of the role of the quasi-feudal tribal leaders [*lingmin-qiuzhang* 領民酋長] in Northern Wei history, among whom one may count the treacherous post-Taihe warlord Erzhu Rong, see Kang (1995) pp. 99-104.

Conclusion: Reflections on Comparative Historiography and Historical "Nationhood"

Five decades have passed since the publication of Peter Brown's seminal treatise on the cultural transformations that spelled the demise of the Roman empire in the West. Although countless since have adopted, modified, or challenged the concept of a cultural Late Antiquity (c. 150–750 CE) as the transitional phase between the Classical and Medieval periods in European history, few took advantage of the interpretative possibilities it opens up in the broader context of world history. Indeed, Brown himself seems to have flirted with the idea of Eurasian comparativism in the second part of *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971), in which he briefly portrays Western failure to assimilate their barbarians in light of the extraordinary success early Medieval China enjoyed in doing the same:

> Northern China, for instance, was more thoroughly occupied by the barbarians of Mongolia than ever the western provinces of the Roman empire were by the Germanic tribes. Yet in China the barbarians 'went native' within a few generations, and continued the Chinese imperial tradition without a break, from dynasty to dynasty. The Visigothic, the Ostrogothic and the Vandal kingdoms of western Europe were never absorbed in this way: They survived as foreign bodies, perched insecurely on top of populations who ignored them and set about the more congenial business of looking after themselves.[189]

While accurate in portraying Gothic and Vandal statehoods in the Latin west as relatively ephemeral projects, Brown's statement contains a reductive assessment of steppe influence on the political landscape of northern China since the late third century CE. Certainly no homogenous "Chinese" empire existed in the chaotic Sixteen Kingdoms period (304–439), and, as the second chapter of this study suggests, even the highly successful Tuoba Wei (386–534) did not resolve the conflict between their steppe-based "compatriots" and local subjects by simply

---

[189] Brown, Peter 125

going native. In fact, an even-handed examination of available accounts concerning the latter period would suggest the contrary assessment to that given by Brown: The wholesale adoption of Sinitic dress, customs, and language by the Tuoba monarchy alienated them from their original constituency in the north and helped precipitate a series of revolts that effectively ended their rule.

Nevertheless, Brown's assessment is broadly correct in terms of the cyclical imperial regeneration that truly set post-imperial historical development in much of China apart from that of Europe. He erred rather in dichotomizing the lived experiences of conquest dynasties along "Western" and "Chinese" lines. Prior to the radical reforms of Xiaowen, the Northern Wei had been doing just fine as a corporate regime ruled by a politically dominant and culturally distinct minority. The failure of the Gothic and Vandal kingdoms in the western Mediterranean to do the same had just as much to do with East Roman intervention under Justinian (r. 527–565) as with Late Antique parochialism. In East Asia, by contrast, the substantially "Chinese" southern regimes (Eastern Jin, Song, Qi, Liang, Chen) were typically victims of northern aggression. Conflicts between steppe conquerors and their agrarian subjects in the north were also not mediated by simply rehearsing precepts from "the Chinese imperial tradition," as much of that had to be "reclaimed" through the collaboration of *literati* ministers with their foreign lords, the latter having to placate conservative elements within their own ranks as well. Instead, contemporaries paid much more attention to the legitimacy of the dynasty from a cosmic perspective, citing ritual and political precedents when appropriate to support or challenge policies or advocate the advancement of their own interests.

While the anachronistic and teleological characterization of pre-modern Sinitic states as "Chinese" has provoked convincing critiques in recent scholarship, especially Andrew Chittick's *Jiankang Empire* (2020), the divergent fates of the respective barbarians of continental East Asia and Europe merit fuller examination. Among the earlier generation of scholars, Perry Anderson has offered a materialist rebuttal of Brown's "psychological" approach in *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (1974): "Extensive desert nomadism could never fuse with the intensive irrigated agriculture of the Chinese imperial State, and the whole economic and demographic polarity between the two was consequently altogether different from that which gave rise to the Romano-Germanic synthesis in Western Europe".[190] In other words, steppe barbarians had to adapt or perish in agrarian heartlands, regardless of the subjective attitudes of their indigenous neighbors. Anderson's thesis in turn relies on Owen Lattimore's *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (1951), which features a compelling argument for this essential divide on the basis of geography. Within Chinese historiography itself, however, the dynamics between ethnic affiliation, political ideology, and economic models are difficult to capture in a simple geographical dichotomy.

Anderson's observation should also point us to the fact that other "Germanic" tribes achieved greater success in establishing enduring polities with potential for future ethnogenesis. The Franks in Gaul and Anglo-Saxons in Britain, for instance, each imbued their respective domain with a legacy that would manifest in modern discourses of "national origin." Perhaps the better comparison to make in Brown's context would be: How does one explain the divergent fates of barbarian groups within the Latin-speaking provinces? I suspect that geography (the Mediterranean coast versus north of the Alps) and historical contingency (Justinian's *renovatio*

---

[190] "The Nomadic Brake". n19 225-226

imperii in Italy and North Africa) played rather important roles. Therefore, I contest that the key to understanding the mechanisms which brought about Scheidel's "First Great Divergence" between China and Europe lies not in cultural attitudes toward outsiders, which have always been subject to revision according to historical experiences, but rather in the dominant discourse of state formation, a favorite vehicle of dynastic legitimacy for historians in the Chinese and European traditions alike.

In quasi-Weberian fashion, I argue that, above ethnic and cultural affinities, the state as "the agency that guarantees security" continued to function as the basis of common identity for all its interested subjects, even though "civic participation" declined steadily in western Europe since the late Empire and never developed systematically in most of East Asia.[191] To put simply, the ethnic particularities of the "Franks" did not matter nearly as much as the fact that the state they founded would come to be known as that "of the Franks."[192] Especially in such volatile times as Late Antiquity, civic, ethnic, and religious identities could overlap or separate to create new paradigms of political allegiance. Although a similar opportunity emerged in the Sinitic world for the Northern Wei to re-negotiate these combinations, the native ideological repertoire most accessible to its ruling house favored a model of unitary control imposed by the political center upon its peripheries.

Unlike how Merovingian ascendancy facilitated in Gaul a symbiotic dynamic between Church and state, Tuoba hegemony in northern China, militarily dependent upon the horizontal cohesiveness of its tribal nobility, failed to reconcile conflicting strata of ritualizing relations

---

[191] Weber, Max. "The Nation". *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. 177

[192] Mark Elliot espouses a similar view of Chinese ethnogenesis: "In other words, the emergence of the Han as a single ethnic group was not so much the basis for Chinese unity as a consequence of it" (179).

within its governing structure. This remarkable contrast explains the failure of the Tuoba patrimonial state to develop a synthetic and autonomous repertoire of dynastic legitimacy prior to its collapse and replacement by less prestigious successors. Otherwise, the ruling emperors of the Sui and Tang dynasties might well have explicitly styled themselves as Xianbei, just as Charlemagne (r. 768–814) of the Carolingians (751–987) remained Frankish in significant ways after his coronation in 800 as Emperor of the Romans.

Bibliography

Anderson, Perry. *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*. London: Verso, 1974.

Bell, Catherine M. *Ritual theory, ritual practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Brown, Peter. *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150–750*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971.

Chen, Yinke. 陳寅恪. *Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi jiangyan lu* [*Lecture Series on the Histories of Wei-Jin and the Northern and Southern Dynasties*] 魏晋南北朝史讲演录. Hefei: Huangshanshushe, 1987.

Chen, Sanping. 陳三平. "The Legacy of the Tuoba Xianbei: The Tang Dynasty". *Multicultural China in the Early Middle Ages*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. pp. 4-38.

Clark, Hugh R. "What's the Matter with 'China'? A Critique of Teleological History". *The Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 77.2 (May 2018): 295-314.

Chittick, Andrew. *The Jiankang Empire in Chinese and World History*. Oxford Studies in Early Empires. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Dill, Samuel. "Chapter IV: Gregory of Tours and his Circle in Auvergne". *Roman Society in Gaul in the Merovingian Age*. London: Macmillan and co., 1926. pp. 308-351.

Dorler, Philipp. "*The Liber Historia Francorum* — a Model for a New Frankish Self-confidence". *Networks and Neighbors* vol. 1.1 (2013): 27-31.

Eisenberg, Andrew. "Collapse of a Eurasian Hybrid: *The Case of the Northern Wei*". *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity : Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppe, Ca. 250-750*. ed. Nicola Di Cosmo and Michael Maas. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. pp. 369-385.

Elliott, Mark. "8. *Hushuo: The Northern Other and the Naming of the Han Chinese*". *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority*. ed. Thomas S. Mullaney and others. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. pp. 173-190.

Ford, Randolph B. *Rome, China, and the Barbarians : Ethnographic Traditions and the Transformation of Empires*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Gregory, Bishop of Tours. *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks*. trans. Lewis Thorpe. The Penguin Classics. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.

Gregory, Bishop of Tours. *Gregorii episcopi Turonensis.* [*Decem*] *Libri Historiarum X*. ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison), MGH SRM I 1, Hannover, 1951.

Goffart, Walter A. The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.01027. EPUB.

Kou, Lu. "Review: *Rome, China, and the Barbarians: Ethnographic Traditions and the Transformation of Empires*." *Early Medieval China* vol. 2021.27 (2021): 124-126.

Kang, Le. 康樂. Cong Xijiao dao Nanjiao: Guojia Jidian yu Bei-Wei Zhengzhi [From Western Suburbs to Southern Suburbs: State Ceremony and the Politics of Northern Wei] 從西郊到南郊：國家祭典與北魏政治. Xinzhuang, Taibei: Daohe Chubanshe, 1995.

Liu, Puning. *China's Northern Wei Dynasty, 386-535: The Struggle for Legitimacy*. Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020.

Lewis, Mark Edward. "3: Military Dynasticism". *China Between Empires: The Northern and Southern Dynasties*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. pp. 54-85.

Murray, Alexander C, ed. *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*. Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, Volume 63. Leiden: Brill, 2016.

Pohl, Walter, and Helmut Reimitz. *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300-800*. The Transformation of the Roman World, V. 2. Leiden: Brill, 1998.

Pohl, Walter, Clemens Gantner, C Grifoni, and Marianne Pollheimer-Mohaupt, eds. *Transformations of Romanness : Early Medieval Regions and Identities*. Millennium-Studien Zu Kultur Und Geschichte Des Ersten Jahrtausends N. Chr. = Millennium Studies in the Culture and History of the First Millennium C.e, Volume 71. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.

Reimitz, Helmut. *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550-850*. First paperbacked. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought. Fourth Series 101. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Scheidel, Walter. "From the 'Great Convergence' to the 'First Great Divergence': Roman and Qin-Han State Formation and its Aftermath". *Rome and China : Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires*. Oxford Studies in Early Empires. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. pp. 11-23.

Scheidel, Walter. “Introduction”. *Escape from Rome: The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019.

Scheidel, Walter. “Rome and China in Comparison”. *The Classical Review*. 71.1: 205–207.

Tilly, Charles. “Means and Ends of Comparison in Macrosociology”. *Comparative Social Research*, Vol. 16, 1997: 47-57.

Tackett, Nicolas. *The Origins of the Chinese Nation: Song China and the Forging of an East Asian World Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Van Dam, Raymond. *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Wood, Ian. *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450-751*. London: Longman, 1994.

Wallace-Hadrill, J. M. *The Long-Haired Kings*. Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching, 11. Toronto: Published by University of Toronto Press in association with Medieval Academy of America, 1982.

Wei, Shou. 魏收. *Wei Shu* [*The Book of Wei*] 魏書. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1974.

Weber, Max, Hans Gerth, and C. Wright Mills. “The Nation”. *From Max Weber : Essays in Sociology*. International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstuction. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948. pp. 171-179.

Yongzheng. “Yongzheng emperor, Resolving Confusion with a Discourse on Righteousness”. trans. Devin Fitzgerald. Books and the Early Modern World: The Research of Devin Fitzgerald. <http://devinfitz.com/translations/zhengtong-and-history/yongzheng-emperor-resolving-confusion-with-a-discourse-on-righteousness>.

Zito, Angela. *Of Body & Brush : Grand Sacrifice As Text/Performance in Eighteenth-Century China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.