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Strategies of Identity Construction
The Writings of Gildas, Aneirin and Bede

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Content

1 Acknowledgements .................................................. 9

2 Introduction .......................................................... 13

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

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

5 Methodological Considerations - Identity Construction as Discourse . 51
   5.1 The concept of discourse ....................................... 51
   5.2 Discourse and the Construction of Identity .................... 54
8.4 Selection of texts ........................................ 171
  8.4.1 The *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* ........ 172
  8.4.2 The *Chronica Minor* and the *Chronica Maior* ... 173
  8.4.3 The *Historia Abbatum* ................................ 174
8.5 Manuscripts and Editions of the Texts .................... 175
  8.5.1 *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* ............ 175
  8.5.2 *Chronica Maior* ..................................... 176
8.6 Structure and Subject Matter ................................ 177
  8.6.1 *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* ............ 177
  8.6.2 *Chronica Maior* ..................................... 180
8.7 *Gentes* and collective identities in Bede’s writings .. 181
  8.7.1 Bede and the Britons .................................. 181
    8.7.1.1 The Britons, Bede and the DEB .................. 181
    8.7.1.2 Bede and the Britons after Gildas .............. 200
  8.7.2 Bede and the Saxons .................................. 204
    8.7.2.1 The *geuisi* in the *HE* ....................... 209
    8.7.2.2 The *gyrui* in the *HE* ....................... 211
    8.7.2.3 The Continental Saxons in the *HE* .......... 213
  8.7.3 Bede and the *angli* .................................. 216
  8.7.4 Bede, the *picti* and the *scotti* .................. 227
8.8 Summary and Conclusion .................................. 238
9 Summary ................................................................ 247
  9.1 Textual and Intertextual Identity Markers .............. 247
10 Conclusion - Strategies of Identity Construction .......... 257
  10.1 Strategies of identity construction - the Analysis of Discourse Strategies .................................. 257
    10.2 Gildas’ *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* .... 259
    10.3 Aneirin’s *Y Gododdin* .................................. 260
    10.4 Bede’s *Historiae* ...................................... 261
    10.5 Outlook for further research ......................... 265
Editions and Translations ...................................... 267
Bibliography ..................................................... 269
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weeks of proof-reading, commenting and correcting. Without the support of all these great people I would not have been able to approach this project, let alone finish it. The responsibility for all the views expressed here and for all the errors in this work is, of course, my own.
This island at present, following the number of the books in which the Divine law was written, contains five nations, the English, Britons, Scots, Picts, and Latins, each in its own peculiar dialect cultivating the sublime study of Divine truth.

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

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

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

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

Of course, both assumptions are wrong. *Saxons* and *Angles* had lived in Britain for centuries before either of the two authors began to write. Reading these two passages in contrast to each other shows that both authors named different groups: the names of the peoples of Britain, as well as their origins, histories and traditions, were treated very consciously in the writings of medieval Britain. Information was added and left out on purpose in order to give *history* a different meaning. Authors worked consciously with the features that construct collective...
identities and were, in spite of the differences in the passages shown before, very much aware of the peoples that inhabited Britain. It is the aim of this study to show how this awareness was constructed in early medieval writings in Britain and how this construction of collective identities relates to the contemporary political and social developments.

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

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

Before entering the discussion of collective identity it is necessary to outline the geographical area this paper is referring to, namely *Britain*. Even common geographical and cultural terms tend to be used incorrectly, even among scho-
The term English refers to the landmass or the people in the south-west of Britain. Therefore, arguing against common critical statements, England is not the name of the entire island but forms a part of the island of Britain sharing its landmass with Scotland, Wales and Cornwall.¹

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

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

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² (Tschirschky 2006: 67)
³ The terms gens and natio are most frequently used to refer to groups and peoples in the Middle Ages (Jarnut 1985: 83). However, they refer to groups of various sizes and social structures, natio, was only used after the Middle Ages to refer to larger collective groups or peoples (Graus 1985: 76).