The Creation of Europe*

by Ross Balzaretti

In 1992 when the old twentieth-century European order is everywhere disintegrating it may seem peculiarly perverse to be pondering the creation of Europe. Yet, in the face of eastern European catastrophe, politicians in the west have embarked upon the deliberate creation of a new unitary Europe of a sort never before seen. Discussion about this unity must involve historians for the simple reason that ill-informed appeals to some glorious tradition of distinctive past European development are being made all the time. Whilst, as an historian of the early Middle Ages in Europe, I am no more qualified than the next person to pronounce upon the immediate political advantages or disadvantages of these momentous changes, I feel happy that I should have the opportunity here to attempt to provide some informed historical comment about the historical creation of Europe. It should be a matter of concern that a newly homogenized modern European present is causing many in the historical profession to search for an impossibly unitary early medieval European past and to spend time writing about this search for European origins - for the fake unity of the European past: such activity not only perpetuates a redundant image but also gets in the way of an understanding of the essential disunity of that past.¹

1. THE PAST

The emergence, creation, birth or formation of particular national identities in Europe has preoccupied historians of the Middle Ages for centuries.² But
in the last fifty years and especially in the last five years there has been a spate of books arguing for ‘Europe-formation’ in the earlier Middle Ages. The Birth of Europe, The Birth of Europe (again), The Birth of Europe (and again), The Formation of Christendom, Early Medieval Europe, The Origins of Europe and many articles dealing with the same issue.³ It is very likely that in 1992 there will be yet more. Whilst most of them are interesting, few, if any, seek to question whether early medieval Europe is a valid object of study at all. One could argue that the authors of these books have obscured the most important characteristics of Europe in the early Middle Ages in their relentless search for anything which points in the direction of Europe-wide development. The historians and archaeologists have manufactured Europe in their own, modern image. The most extreme example of this can be found on the dust jacket of Roger Collins’ new textbook history of Early Medieval Europe 300–1000: ‘This book provides a synoptic but detailed account of the centuries during which Europe changed from being an abstract geographical expression into a new, culturally coherent, if politically divided, entity.’ ‘The centuries studied here are vital ones for the understanding of the formation of many aspects of the political and intellectual heritage of modern Europe’.³ Whilst this may show that historians are, thankfully, real, creative people who have been influenced by the supposed increasing unity of Europe which has taken place since the Second World War, is it not a little disturbing that the very notion of Europe as truly a ‘Dark Age’ creation is not being challenged more widely, and that no-one has yet produced a book explicitly deconstructing the concept of ‘early medieval Europe’?

In this essay I shall suggest that the search to find the beginnings of European unity in the early medieval period is ill-advised for two reasons. Firstly it is odd, in an intellectual sense, to search for (and thereby create) something which we know did not exist: there was no such thing as a cohesive European identity, in the sense in which there now is, in the period 500–1050. Secondly, the search for origins results too often in a politically unattractive silencing of the plurality of early medieval voices which still speak to us. Diversity and disunity, not uniformity and unity are the most basic, as well as the most attractive, of early medieval ‘European’ characteristics – as indeed they are of Europe in the present.

Nonetheless it would be improper to dismiss such approaches out of hand as they have a long, and in some respects, distinguished history. Therefore in the first part of this essay I want to introduce to non-medievalists three older approaches to the early medieval ‘European’ past, those of Marc Bloch, Denys Hay and Perry Anderson. These men wrote, in the 1930’s, 1950’s and 1970’s respectively, about social, ideological and economic issues of Europe-wide significance. I want to use the ideas of these three historians as a springboard from which to plunge into the deep sea of those newer approaches which argue for the early medieval ‘Birth of Europe’, a sea whose waters are still muddied by strong undercurrents of the earlier
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approaches of Bloch, Hay and Anderson. The final part of the essay makes some suggestions as to where to go next in early medieval studies to escape these ill-advised yet influential approaches.

I begin the creation story with a death. On the evening of 16 June 1944 Marc Bloch was murdered by the Nazis for his involvement with the French Resistance. Amidst all the current commercial hype of ‘1992 and the great European market’ those of us who work in Western Europe now should sometimes remember how dangerous it was to be an historian of Western Europe in those times, especially if, like Bloch, you were good (an appropriate contemporary parallel would be the democratically-inclined Chinese historian of China, residing in China). The existence of Europe and all things European seemed to be over. And the New Order of the Thousand Year Reich (with plans of its own for a unitary Europe) was to replace it. Bloch was one of those who refused this and was killed. In a sense he died to defend not simply his country but his life’s work as an historian of medieval Europe. Indeed his image and his thoughts are very much alive nearly half a century on in the last photograph of him, which, rather like an early icon with its penetrating, humane, serious, defiant gaze, seems to belong to a very disillusioned human being.

In his writings Bloch, who became increasingly angry as the war progressed, reveals not simply his profound and perhaps still unsurpassed understanding of medieval European history but also his conviction that the real purpose of the dangerous, complex and mysterious job of the historian is to resist the powerful as best s/he can. I feel that Bloch would have thought it wholly bad for historians to go along with the times creating a complacent past, the sanitized past which the powerful want. In 1992 is it right that many historians are seeking to (re)create Europe in the market image, integrated, homogeneous, unitary? Should not the disturbances of our own times, however optimistic some of us may be about the potential good of European unity, make us wary of endorsing received opinion about the over-riding importance of the European history of Europe?

Bloch’s unrivalled position as a historian of medieval European society lends great weight to his opinions about the creation of Europe. It is significant perhaps that he commented explicitly upon the issue only infrequently in his works. But what he said has proved nevertheless thought-provoking: ‘The European economy in the Middle Ages – in the sense in which this adjective, borrowed from the old geographical nomenclature of the five “parts of the world”, can be used to designate an actual human reality – is that of the Latin and Germanic bloc, edged by a few Celtic islets and Slav fringes, gradually won to a common culture. . . . Thus understood, thus delimited, Europe is a creation of the early Middle Ages.’ Or again, ‘What does it matter, after all, how the name [i.e. Europe] and its limits were defined with the old artificial geography, with its “five parts of the world”? All that counts is its human significance.’ Thus, though Bloch stated here that in particular, very limited, respects Europe was created at
this period, he recognized the complexities of European development in the earlier Middle Ages. In the sentence just cited he applies the word Europe to the early Middle Ages most hesitantly and in his great work on ‘feudal society’ he was much more concerned with the differences observable between French and German history than with their respective contributions to a unitary Europe. Feudal Society was not a history of Europe but a history of certain characteristically European manifestations of those widespread social phenomena: lordship, kingship and kinship.

I came across Bloch’s opinions about the creation of Europe whilst reading another influential historian of early medieval Europe, Perry Anderson. With typical insight Anderson quoted Bloch at the beginning of his book-length essay, Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism, which provides the opening of Anderson’s own monumental investigation into ‘the creation of Europe’. The bulk of the book is about the appearance, in the course of the early Middle Ages more or less all over Europe, of oppressive economically-driven feudalism (in a Marxist sense). Anderson tackles first the vexed question of the emergence of this feudalism, arguing that feudalism in western Europe was produced by the collision and subsequent fusion of the pre-existing Roman and Germanic worlds. It could not have happened without the long series of invasions of the Roman Empire by the various Germanic tribes which took place from the third century onwards, particularly the second wave of invasions, involving the Franks and Lombards, which was marked by a long-lasting ‘cultural sedimentation’ (the deep influence of Germanic social habits/social organisation). The Christian Church had a key role in this fusion for, as a result of its association with certain emperors, its bureaucracy and economic power managed to subvert the Late Roman state. This was most important in the field of language where the Latinisation of Germanic tongues and the formation of Romance languages was largely the work of churchmen. Real fusion of Roman and Germanic happened under the rule of the Carolingians when everything briefly came together in the person of Charlemagne and the church at this point was ‘the official mentor of the first systematic attempt to “renovate” the Empire in the West, the Carolingian Monarchy’. The feudal mode of production proper had developed by c. 1000 in some places and was most characteristically represented by a natural economy with little commoditisation of land, most land held in fiefs or benefices but some land held communally, with a consequent continual tension between lords and peasants, and between town and country.

In these pages then the ‘Dark Ages’ are redeemed for Marxist History and their critical importance to ‘the creation of Europe’ forcibly argued. Anderson realises that this development did not happen so early in Scandinavia, eastern and south-eastern Europe. Indeed when it did happen it happened very differently in each of these cases. The discussion of areas other than the West allows Anderson to suggest how odd the development of feudalism in the West really was. Scandinavia is explicitly used as a
‘control’, to check the validity of the argument about the West. He plays down the size of the Viking raids (following Sawyer) and plays up the commercial quality of the Viking expansion. Tension between the centre and the periphery was important in the delayed emergence of fully feudal state societies.\(^{14}\)

Anderson’s *Passages* quite sensibly concentrates on the material aspects of the ‘Dark Age’ European past. It could not have been otherwise in a Marxist text. It is very brilliantly argued and convincingly evidenced (albeit with scant reference to ‘primary’ material). For these reasons and because its explanations of the political and social development of Europe are so clearly economics-based it could be seen as an appropriate text for those interested in the European past to read in 1992. And yet Anderson does his job so well that we really have to look outside of Marxist approaches to understand more fully the ‘cultural sedimentation’ to which he refers. To investigate the creation of Europe, in the way Anderson does, does not automatically allow us to understand being *European* (as the ‘1992’ hype wants us to) unless we understand Europe as exclusively or predominantly materially created. Anderson claims to have tried hard to appreciate the validity of other approaches to the Late Roman past such as those of Peter Brown (‘historical psychology’) and the more general approach to the past of Foucault. In the end though he has denied them, most carefully in his lectures *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*.\(^{15}\) Anderson’s views on structuralism and post-structuralism make plain why it is that *Passages*, for all its brilliance, represents an end point rather than a starting point. Why in fact it is a dead end.

In 1983 Anderson devoted a lecture to ‘the nature of the relationships between structure and subject in human history and society’. Anderson rightly points out that Marx was preoccupied with the interaction between collectivity and individual (again shades of ‘1992’). But Marx correctly saw that it was not possible to separate from this issue the problem of agency. The *Annales* school (of French social and economic historians among whom Bloch was a leading figure), together with Sartre, Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, and Nietzsche are all attacked by Anderson for attempting in their various ways to deny this.\(^{16}\) In particular the parallels drawn by the philosophers between language and society were wrong because, ‘the subject of speech is axiomatically individual – “don’t speak all together” being the customary way of saying that plural speech is non-speech, that which cannot be heard. By contrast, the relevant subjects in the domain of economic, cultural, political or military structures are first and foremost collective: nations, classes, castes, groups, generation. Precisely because this is so, the agency of *these* subjects is capable of effecting profound transformations of those structures.’\(^{17}\) But Anderson is here reducing human history too much to the material on the one hand and to the rational on the other. Speaking all together is not always non-speech; it can be speech which is simply difficult to understand. It is important for
historians – particularly those interested in far-distant times – to investigate the mechanisms of language because it is, as was clear to those French scholars Anderson chastises, one of the most powerful tools humans have for effecting change. As such it is crucial to any investigation of agency. It is not good enough for Anderson to leave us with the naive view that ‘the distinction between the true and the false is the ineliminable premise of any rational knowledge. Its central site is evidence’.\textsuperscript{18} What is the evidence? Words, true and false, rational and irrational.

Anderson’s recreation of Classical and Medieval Europe does nothing to evoke the thought-world of the time in spite of the fact that some parts of \textit{Passages} imply that thoughts and beliefs were crucial to the transformation of the ancient into the medieval world. This was particularly so with the Christian Church which over the Late Antique period altered attitudes to secular rule, to the spiritual world and to slavery (although this change took a very long time). Indeed the Church brought about a fundamental change in the very language which the masses spoke.\textsuperscript{19} But such arguments are rare in his book and more often thoughts and attitudes are ranked far behind the overriding importance of material nature, and also the requirements of a rational developmental narrative.\textsuperscript{20} Nowadays this reads oddly in the light of recent experimental archaeological work which seeks to draw inferences about beliefs precisely from the most material evidence of all.\textsuperscript{21} But it also must have seemed somewhat strange to read in 1974 (when \textit{Passages} was first published) a book concerned with agency, with how humans interact with each other and with their environment, with the dialectic of structure and subject, which reveals to us so little of the reasoning behind the tide of events.

It is at this point perhaps that we should begin to ask questions about what early medieval people themselves thought about Europe and about being European. From the limited sources available this is very hard indeed to comprehend but clearly it cannot be done, as Anderson wants, by privileging rational knowledge over other sorts of knowledge. It is necessary to analyze early medieval \textit{language} for clues, to recover the specifically early medieval discourses preserved for us in written, visual and material texts. The problem is that we have lost so much of their context that we have to take most of what the ‘sources’ say on trust. We have to adjust our research methods and our questions accordingly.\textsuperscript{22} Anderson brushes aside what these difficulties mean for the historian of early medieval societies.

Symptomatic of Anderson’s basic attitude is his omission of any reference to another clever essay, \textit{Europe, The Emergence of an Idea}, published by Denys Hay in 1957.\textsuperscript{23} Here we are perhaps getting closer to the problem of the \textit{creation} of Europe. Europe was not a material entity but an idea: a small idea in the minds of very few in the early Middle Ages when, according to Anderson (drawing on Bloch’s relatively few remarks of this nature), it was first created; a very large idea indeed in the minds of the ‘1992’ pundits.

Hay, reviewing the evidence of a wide variety of texts, put forward some
interesting ideas himself about Europe. He showed that references to Europe or to Europeans in the earlier Middle Ages were few and very neutral. Even the Latin words used to signify ‘Europe’ varied from writer to writer. Apparently the idea of Europe derived what meaning it had from its interaction with neighbouring, different cultures notably with Islam, an interaction which was insignificant until the eleventh century. Educated Westerners such as the tenth-century bishop of Cremona, Liutprand, might have known the culture of the Greek East quite well but that of the Arabs was resisted because it was entirely alien. The idea of Europe was essentially a territorial notion. And yet before the eleventh century the area thought of as Europe had not acquired boundaries. Only in the letters of Pope Gregory VII (1073–85) does ‘Christianitas’ (Christendom) come to mean the entire territorial area claimed for Catholicism by the Papacy and all the people in it. Hay notes that Charlemagne’s description as ‘the father of Europe’ is a contemporary one, meaning that he ruled an area and its people in the way that the Eastern emperor ruled Byzantium. His Europe was equated with the old Western Roman empire. Europe remained an idea confined to the court circles of the time and there is no indication in any source as to what the mass of people knew of it.

So Hay’s analysis of the written evidence had established by 1957 that the idea of Europe was not properly formed in the ‘Dark Ages’: it was certainly not a conscious creation of any early medieval individual. Given this fact is it not improper for historians and archaeologists to persist in referring to early medieval Europe, even when using it as a shorthand term? Is it not consequently all too easy to fall into the trap of looking for and subsequently stressing in narrative accounts (as the books by Collins, Randsborg, Herrin and Hodges do) Europe-wide developments and so misrepresenting the very great diversity which makes the early Middle Ages such an interesting period to study in its own right rather than as some formative stage in the history of progress to the present? The media insist on the importance of Europe, ever more so now that events in the east have overtaken the ‘common market’ as the dominant European story. We have been bombarded by books on the subject over the last few years. It is surely wrong that in some, self-consciously innovative, quarters a supra-national early medieval Europe is seen as the unit most suitable for revelatory historical analysis, in the way that past generations were obsessed with national units.

2. THE PRESENT

I want to turn now from the past interpretations to current ones. The creation of huge quantities of new archaeological evidence since the 1970’s has undermined many of the older perceptions of the early medieval past. This fabulous source of new evidence has been most disruptive when
coupled with new ways of seeing material culture, associated with the theories of the New Archaeology and of systems analysis, first developed in pre-historical contexts in the 1970's.  

Although the appropriation of these new ideas has been restricted to only a few early medieval archaeologists, notably Richard Hodges, Klaus Randsborg and more recently John Moreland, their work has transformed understanding of the economies of the early medieval world and the ways in which European social development were determined (though it is never put as crudely as this) by basic ecological and economic facts. It is only with their comparatively recent general syntheses that they have entered the debate about the creation of Europe. Their work stands alongside that of Anderson in arguing for the importance of the material world in explaining European development, although their account of this importance is very different from his.

Hodges has been particularly keen to argue for the Dark Age origins of Europe under Charlemagne (d. 814), for the early appearance of markets and commoditisation then – especially in the areas around the North Sea – and even (most improbably) for the emergence of an early form of capitalism in Anglo-Saxon England's ‘First Industrial Revolution'. It should immediately be clear that these explanations of the character of early medieval economies conflict directly with Anderson's Marxist approach. Hodges is arguing that the economy of the late eighth to tenth centuries was better able to move goods around than has previously been thought, with the consequence that kings were able to maintain a much more direct relationship with producers/peasants than Anderson, and most others, would allow. Recently Hodges has gone even further by arguing that peasants were more able to resist their oppressors than historians have hitherto realised. Such conflict was important not because it enabled lords to oppress peasants but rather because it evidences the market-oriented desire of medieval peasants to innovate in agriculture. In this picture the traditional importance of feudal ties in maintaining the social order is very much downgraded.

Hodges' work has often been misunderstood, especially by traditionalist historians who persist in criticising it from the perspective of the written sources. Hodges has tried to create a new framework for an analysis of early medieval European development based, he would argue, on archaeological evidence treated on its own terms. Like the majority of archaeologists Hodges thinks in more extended temporal and spatial spans than most historians and has as a consequence been able to trace the shifts in economic patterning found across Europe in the entire early medieval period. However, he has tried to explain these shifts by an old-fashioned reliance upon royal initiatives (notably by Charlemagne and Alfred) which he thinks were aimed at developing a Europe-wide exchange of centrally-produced commodities such as glass, iron, pottery. In this world Charlemagne 'was attempting to devise a commodity-based economy that would release Latin Christendom from the kin-based forces of the previous three centuries'.
Janet Nelson and I have criticised this sort of interpretation elsewhere (did Charlemagne have enough information to hand to make such grandiose plans and big decisions? Does Hodges understand the thought-world of Charlemagne? Can this be done from archaeological evidence?). There are other problems though, notably the compression of the many regional variations within the Carolingian economy which Hodges himself has often pointed out. Our increasing understanding of such regional variations and the problems which rulers had in coping with (or indeed recognising) them should cause us to think hard about the validity of using ‘Europe’ in the casual way that Hodges does.

Randsborg’s *The First Millenium in Europe and the Mediterranean* in some ways manipulates a thousand-year period with great brilliance: its arguments are theoretically informed and very wide ranging in time and space. Yet he seems very confused about Europe, regarding it as both a ‘natural’ unit and as a changing entity. On his last page he tells us that: ‘Classical Antiquity destroyed the *European commonwealth of the Neolithic and Bronze Ages*, but without the “villain” of Classical Antiquity the rise of Europe would not have taken place’, which seems to mean that pre-historic Europe was a natural unit, broken up by the Mediterranean focus of Classical civilisation. With the collapse of Rome this natural unit of Europe was free to re-emerge. This may prove to be an insight worth taking seriously in the light of further research on the First Millennium but for the present it seems to me to caution once more against the too casual use of the Europe label. If Randsborg thinks that the true beginnings of Europe as we now know it lie in the period of the Late Roman Republic/early Empire, and that the legacy of a split between the Mediterranean and the northernmost parts of the continent which remained external to the Empire was crucial to the subsequent formation of Europe, in what sense do we have before us a constant unit which we may legitimately call Europe? His application of the archaeologically fashionable centre/periphery dynamic to the relationship between the Mediterranean and the north surely renders too simple the mutual cultural borrowings of the Germanic, Celtic and Graeco-Roman worlds. Randsborg may be correct that ‘the end of Late Antiquity coincides with the cessation of the large Mediterranean “common market” for foodstuffs and pottery’ and that there was at the same time a rich northern civilisation centred on Denmark which previous authors have very much neglected. But if Rome got in the way of the development of such societies, what price ‘Europe’, which even Randsborg must admit was indebted to Rome for so much of its cultural heritage in the Middle Ages?

3. THE FUTURE

To grasp any distinctiveness which European societies may have exhibited in the early Middle Ages we will have to investigate the realm of ideology,
mentalities and social custom. 35 Whilst it is interesting to see if these can be reflected in more material manifestations of culture it remains true that the particular uses made by early medieval European societies of writing (as a means of recording thoughts about the world) do in the end provide an easier route into these issues than the evidence which can be extracted from archaeological contexts.

It is a real pity therefore that Anderson, Hodges – and to a slightly lesser extent Randsborg – by and large neglect approaches which seek to comprehend the irrational, the mysterious, the strange, the personal. For these are most likely to reveal to us the construction of historical ‘European-ness’ at any given moment in the pre-modern past. 36 Emotions, feelings, desires and fears as made manifest for us in records of public rituals and private ceremonies are surely sites where the irrational (in the sense of those distinctive pre-modern cultural modes which post-Enlightenment westerners find hardest to grasp) most frequently operates and where the ever-changing power relationships which exist between individuals and groups can most pertinently be observed by historians. Historical approaches which allow economic considerations to predominate over these (as most Marxist and most archaeological analyses do) are never very revealing of the thoughts and motives which do so much to explain human activities now and which were so crucial a part of societies which trusted in the value of the supernatural. 37 Approaches derived from anthropology, pre-historical archaeology, linguistics or psychology, to gender-issues, to personal politics, and to the power of sexuality, are what for me make the early medieval history of Europe potentially so interesting. Surely it is an indictment of the curiosity of early medievalists that so little work of the sort done by Peter Brown, Jacques Le Goff, Caroline Walker Bynum and Peter Burke has yet been published with respect to the period 500–1000 when very important formative developments occurred, when peculiarly European phenomena can be observed but when Europe was, as we have seen, not in existence. 38

If, as currently seems to be the case, there is a revival of interest in the history of Europe in the period 500–1000, it has seldom been preoccupied with this range of difficult issues. This is not to say that innovative work is not being done in other spheres, for there is a body of recent work which has already begun, or so it seems to me, to subvert the view that European culture in the early Middle Ages was unified. This work has been based on writings which are in themselves distinctively early medieval products: monastic chronicles and annals; collections of charters (legal instruments recording property transfer) and the laudatory lives of saints. 39 From such sources various ‘micro-histories’ have been produced, studies which have adopted a deliberately narrow temporal and spatial focus, with the result that the diversity of response to the Late Roman heritage becomes very apparent. These studies have looked at regions as dissimilar as Kent, Wales, Brittany and Tuscany and, when taken together, have shown how great was
the variety of relationships found in societies supposed, by Anderson, Hodges, Randsborg and the others, to have participated in a common European culture.\textsuperscript{40} In particular these studies have subverted the notion, so much favoured by French schools, that in some way the Franks, and especially the Carolingians, managed to impose a common Frankish culture throughout Europe. Other studies have made it clear that Carolingian culture itself, in spite of some superficial unity, was in fact highly disparate.\textsuperscript{41} If we were to take the example of kingship we can see straightaway that the successors of Charlemagne were not made in his image. Different kings favoured different families, favoured different stopping-off points in Europe, favoured different theological beliefs.\textsuperscript{42} And even though Europe ostensibly shared the same religion (Christianity) and the same language (vulgar Latin) the levels at which understanding of these was developed varied enormously, again across time and space.\textsuperscript{43}

This work has begun radically to alter old perceptions. But methodologically-speaking it remains traditional: most work on the early Middle Ages remains solidly empiricist. It is a complete puzzle to me why historians (especially in Britain) have been so shy to use those approaches which go under the heading ‘critical theory’, or to adopt viewpoints about the Other and the Otherness of early medieval societies with the purpose of deconstructing earlier work by offering radical re-readings of much-read texts.\textsuperscript{44} If the ‘sources’ are few surely we must be open to new ways of reading them? This would involve taking on board the many deliberately anti-traditional critical methods of post-modernist discourse which have been developed over the last two decades including, for example, the great body of feminist and lesbian/gay theoretical insights about marginalization and exclusion, so that we can decode meanings in cultures unlike our own.\textsuperscript{45} My own, still rudimentary, acquaintance with this body of thought suggests that it could most fruitfully be applied to early medieval material in two ways.

The first would be to pursue the idea, which is clear from almost any document of the period which one cares to read, that any distinctiveness which European societies had in the early Middle Ages may have rested upon the very precise \textit{categories} in which individuals were placed: already in the early Middle Ages men (and it was mostly men) put people (especially women) in categories when they wrote.\textsuperscript{46} These categories, which would include free, half-free or unfree; noble or non-noble; male or female; adult or child; cleric or lay; powerful or weak; rich or poor; sinner or saint, had certain stereotypes attached to them which may reflect a particular world view.\textsuperscript{47} So if we combine two or more categories we should get a very precise sort of stereotype: ‘powerful female’ appears in texts in a particular light therefore. Let us look at an example. Liutprand of Cremona, who wrote his \textit{Antapodosis} (‘Tit-For-Tat’) in the 960’s, is a constant fund of such images: ‘A certain shameless strumpet called Theodora, grandmother of the Alberic who recently passed from this life, at one time was sole monarch of Rome
and – shame upon us even to say the words! – exercised power in the most manly fashion'.48 This tells us that in the view of Liutprand men and not women were supposed to be politically powerful and that if a woman was so it was wrong and likely to be due to her sexual nature. Such an image recurs across many societies of course but our task would be to see if the early medieval version had any special characteristics. One of these might be that women themselves collaborated in maintaining the image in a self-oppressive way. Another might be that in spite of the negative image many women do appear to have had a degree of political power, in spite of all the dangers which that entailed for them. Research which is currently investigating ‘women’ in early medieval Europe has some interesting results in store.49

The second approach would be to investigate seemingly universal human categories, such as gender, body, sex, anti-feminism and misogyny to find out if the early medieval European versions had any common features which rendered them truly distinctive. Let us take the example of sexual behaviour, which has not yet had the major impact upon early medieval scholarship which it has had upon that devoted to later periods.50 The few studies available suggest that the way in which the early medieval Christian Church approached women and sexuality did result in the development of a distinctive misogyny based on a melding of Mediterranean, Celtic and Germanic traditions which confined legitimate female sexual activity to monogamous marriage, but which was accepting of divorce (at least when men of high social status were involved), of prostitution (at least little practical was done to stop it), of rape (secular laws were more concerned with this), and which pretended that lesbian behaviour (which was wrong even when consensual) hardly existed.51 This same church silenced women, as women’s speaking was regarded as an evil.52 In the confessors’ manuals for priests, known as penitentials, few sexual crimes involve women as the perpetrators because of woman’s stereotypical passive role. If then we compared male sexual stereotyping in the early medieval period (about which very little work has been done as yet) we might uncover a distinctive (and long-lasting) set of gendered relationships which did form part of the bedrock of Anderson’s ‘cultural sedimentation’.53

Methods which disrupt the historical status quo have far more interest and value than those which do not. These alone make us realise that alternative versions of our own existence are possible because they were possible in the past. In this way early medieval history could finally lose the ridiculous claims to empirical objectivity which have dogged it for so long. Happily some work of this type is underway, mostly in America.54 Its most important results have been the reclamation of women for early medieval history and the introduction at last into serious discussion of politicized issues surrounding sexuality, imagery, power, privacy.55 Such issues are crucial to an understanding of Europe’s creation and yet they hardly ever figure in general books. Is it not important for those who are being addressed
in such books to know that the Christian Church developed much of its severe moral outlook upon sex in the Middle Ages? That the legal restrictions placed upon women in this period (particularly regarding property) persisted for centuries? That the persecution of minority groups, such as lepers, prostitutes and male homosexuals was perhaps slow to evolve in earlier medieval Europe?\textsuperscript{56} That the exclusion of women from most positions of political power was crucial to the reproduction of medieval society?

I have tried to show in this brief essay that there was no moment in the early medieval past when Europe was created, not even in the ashes of Rome as so many authors have argued. Caroline Walker Bynum has recently highlighted how ‘the human condition requires us, both as historians and as human beings, to accept limitation, artifice, compromise and paradox in telling the story of the past’.\textsuperscript{57} Let us hope that in the future we can respect and use these limitations to widen our understanding of the European past rather than to reduce it to a false history of ever greater progress towards a glorious present. Let us hope that we will write more about the disunity of the early Middle Ages and less about its unity. Let us hope that we, when writing about Europe, do not reinforce these powerful words of Elias Canetti: ‘I hate the respect of historians for Anything merely because it happened, their falsified, retrospective standards, their impotence, their kowtowing to any form of power. These courtiers, these toadies, these ever-partial jurists. . . . It would be nice to cut up history into little bits that couldn’t be found any more, even by a whole beehive of historians’.\textsuperscript{58}

NOTES

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1 In what follows I am using the term Europe loosely to refer to the \textit{geographical} area – covering both western and eastern Europe, including Scandinavia and Mediterranean countries within the European Community such as Greece – which is commonly believed at the present time to have a distinctive culture which distinguishes it radically from, say, African or Asian cultures.


4 R. Collins, \textit{Early Medieval Europe 300–1000}, London, 1991. I realise that Collins may not be responsible for these words but they do not give a false impression of his approach in the book. Klaus Randsborg in his introduction to the essays published as \textit{The Birth of Europe} (Rome, 1989) sees ‘the creation of Western Europe as an independent power. . . ’ (p. 8) as one of the crucial processes visible in First Millennium Europe.

10 Anderson, *Passages*, p. 111: ‘The long symbiosis of Roman and Germanic social formations in the boundary regions had gradually narrowed the gap between the two, although it still remained in most important respects an immense one. It was from their final, cataclysmic collision and fusion that feudalism was ultimately to be born’.
17 Anderson, *Tracks*, p. 44.
19 ‘The Romance languages were the outcome of this popularisation, one of the essential social bonds of continuity between Antiquity and the Middle Ages.’ (Anderson, *Passages*, p. 136). See also *Passages*, p. 152.
20 Anderson, *Passages*, p. 255 note 19 criticising the explication of the ‘historical psychology’ of Peter Brown. See also the curious paragraph on p. 152 where the ideological power of kings is contrasted unfavourably with their actual power.
24 The statements in the following paragraph are drawn from Hay, *Europe*, pp. 25, 27, 37, 51–2.
25 Janet Nelson has pointed out to me that only one author in Charlemagne’s reign makes such references. This has not prevented them from attracting undue attention. — D. A. Bullough, ‘*Europae Pater*: Charlemagne and his achievement in the light of recent scholarship’, *English Historical Review*, lxxv 1970, pp. 59–105 and R. E. Sullivan, ‘The Carolingian Age: reflections on its place in the history of the Middle Ages’ *Speculum*, lxix 1989, pp. 188–203.
27 Carefully criticised in J. Moreland, ‘Method and Theory in Medieval archaeology in the 1990’s’ (forthcoming *Archeologia Medievale*). I am very grateful to John Moreland for allowing me to read this before publication. His advocacy of the post-processual stance, ‘material culture as non-verbal discourse’, is a very exciting development. I am also grateful to Guy Halsall for clarifying my understanding of current archaeological approaches to these issues.
30 Hodges, ‘Charlemagne’s elephant’, p. 166 (my emphasis).
31 In *Past and Present*, 135, 1992, in the course of a debate with John Maddicott about King


33 Randsborg, *First Millennium*, p. 185 (my emphasis).

34 Randsborg, *First Millennium*, p. 130. In time this view may subvert Bloch’s contention (accepted by Anderson) that ‘the most remarkable characteristic of the western world at the beginning of the Middle Ages was the fact that it had been constituted by the encounter and fusion of civilisations existing at very unequal stages of evolution’, ‘European Feudalism’, *Mélanges Historiques*, vol. 1, pp. 177–88, at p. 178 [originally published 1931].

35 Randsborg has a chapter on this (pp. 148–164) but it does not overcome the problems of drawing on archaeological evidence for this sort of concern.

36 A surprising example of Anderson’s negativity is this: ‘the historical profession, on the other hand, was soon under the sway of the Anadales school, then progressive in its social sympathies, but intellectually not only very distinct from Marxism but largely uninterested in the problem of agency as such, which it identified with mere surface events in pursuit of deeper processes of longer durations in history.’ Anderson, *Tracks*, p. 35.

37 The history of early medieval emotions is still to be written. Julian Barnes has this to say in his novel *A History of the World in 10 half chapters*, London, 1989, especially p. 240: ‘But I can tell you why to love. Because the history of the world, which only stopped at the half-house of love to bulldoze it into rubble, is ridiculous without it’.


39 What I mean is that none of these documentary forms were very much-used before about 400 A.D., whilst they were found, albeit in differing forms, over most of Europe in the period 400–1000.


43 It could be objected that there were, in spite of these qualifications, enough points of similarity between Frankish, Celtic and Mediterranean cultures to make them more like each other than like non-European cultures. I would not wish to deny this, for the comparative research that would tell us this is only just beginning to be done. On language see R. McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word*, Cambridge, 1988; R. McKitterick (ed), *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe*, Cambridge, 1st → J. Smith, ‘Oral and Written: Saints, Miracles, and Relics in Brittany, c. 850–1250’, *Speculum*, 65, 1990, pp. 309–343.


48 Liutprand of Cremona, Antapodosis, Book one, Chapter 48 (translated by F. A. Wright).


50 Most famously in the works of Michel Foucault, particularly his La Volonté de savoir, Paris, 1976, which appeared in English as The History of Sexuality, volume 1, Introduction, London, 1979. Sadly his death from A.I.D.S. in 1984 prevented him completing the projected volumes on the Middle Ages.


52 R. Howard Bloch, Medieval Misogyny, pp. 4–5.


54 The best way to keep up with this is via the Medieval Feminist Newsletter.


