

KINGSHIP AND ORALLY TRANSMITTED STAMMESTRADITION AMONG THE LOMBARDS AND FRANKS

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This discussion proceeds from two observations made by REINHARD WENSKUS in his *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*: that the evolution and maintenance of *Stammestraditionen* were essential to the long-term existence of the Germanic *gentes* of barbarian Europe, and that these *Stammestraditionen* were in each case propagated by *die politisch führende Schicht des Stammes*¹. The available evidence shows that such *Stammestraditionen* typically included myths and legends relating to earlier stages of the individual *gentes*' existence; since the Germans were pre-literate at this stage, such material was orally transmitted, often in verse form. The earliest and certainly best known example comes from Tacitus' *Germania*, where a myth deriving a variety of Germanic peoples from a god Tuisto is said to have been current in *carminibus antiquis, quod unum apud illos memoriae et annalium genus est*². In the early sixth century, when he came to write his *Gothic History*, Cassiodorus was able to draw on oral tradition preserved in *prisicis . . . carminibus pene storicu ritu* which told of the Goths' origins in Scandinavia, their early kings and wanderings, the emergence and development of the Amal royal dynasty, and the careers of leaders prominent in their national history³. Among the Anglo-Saxons, *carmina regia* described the descent of royal dynasties from gods and the development of these dynasties in subsequent generations⁴. These examples, which are intended to be representative, by no means exhaust the available evidence. Now, the reason why such orally transmitted *Stammestraditionen* were essential to the *gentes* which maintained them is that they articulated the bases of these *gentes*' ethnic consciousness and legitimized their political status quo at any given time. This is readily observable in Tacitus' description of the cult of the Semnones, where the ritual celebration of a myth of divine descent very like the one already cited from the *Germania* served not only to consolidate the ethnic consciousness of the Suebi, but also allowed the Semnones, a dominant group within the Suebic federation, to legitimize its dominance by a claim to particularly close association

¹ REINHARD WENSKUS, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*. Köln 1961, 54—82; also in *Die deutschen Stämme im Reiche Karls des Großen. Karl der Große. Persönlichkeit und Geschichte*, ed. HELMUT BEUMANN. Second edition, Düsseldorf 1966, 182—183. WENSKUS' analysis is disputed by FRANTISEK GRAUS in his review of *Stammesbildung* in *Historica* 7 (1963) 185—191 and *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger*. Prague 1965, 313—334; GRAUS' arguments are rebutted by HERWIG WOLFRAM, *Methodische Fragen zur Kritik am „sakralen“ Königtum germanischer Stämme*. *Festschrift für Otto Höfler*, eds. HELMUT BIRKHAN and OTTO GSCHWANTLER. Wien 1968, 473—490.

² Taciti *Germania* 2 (ed. RUDOLF MUGH, *Die Germania des Tacitus*. Third edition. Heidelberg 1967).

³ *Iordanis Getica* 4, 25—28; 24, 121; 13, 78—14, 81; 5, 43—44 (ed. THEODOR MOMMSEN. *MGH AA* 5, 1882).

⁴ See HERMANN MOISL, Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies and Germanic oral tradition. *Journal of Medieval History* 7 (1981) 215—248 for details.

with the national divine progenitor⁵. Similarly, the implicit significance of the claim to divine or semi-divine descent made by the royal dynasties of so many peoples — Goths⁶, Franks⁷, Lombards⁸, Anglo-Saxons⁹, Danes¹⁰ and Swedes¹¹—is made explicit by the Anglo-Saxon chronicler Æthelweard when he refers to Ida, the progenitor of all branches of the Bernician dynasty, *cuius prosapia regni et nobilitatis a Vuothen exordium sumit*¹². That is, the claim to divine descent bestowed *nobilitas* on a dynasty, and thereby legitimized its authority to rule. Nor is it difficult to envisage a political function for oral tradition apart from national or dynastic origin legends. The traditions of all the peoples just cited, Lombards excepted, followed descent through more or less numerous generations from the divine progenitor. A dynast at any given time would thereby have been able to establish a link with the source of his authority. It is clear that, as custodians of the *Stammestraditionen*, royal dynasties had a potentially very effective ideological tool which could be cited and indeed manipulated for political effect; an example of the latter is Theodoric's manipulation of Gothic *Stammes-tradition* with the intention *die Amalertradition ausschließlich an sein Haus zu binden*¹³. The discussion which follows will argue that Langobardic and Frankish kings made use of this ideological tool as well.

It is not difficult to show that the Lombards cultivated orally transmitted *Stammes-tradition* of the sort just described. Early medieval Latin historiography is the main source of evidence for this¹⁴. The two most important texts are the seventh century *Origo Gentis Langobardorum* and Paul the Deacon's later eighth century *Historia Langobardorum*, though the *Historia Langobardorum codicis Gothani* also has a little to offer¹⁵. When one follows the

⁵ Tac. Germ. 39. Important for this much-discussed material are: WENSKUS, *Stammesbildung* 234—272; KARL HAUCK, *Lebensnormen und Kultmythen in germanischen Stammes- und Herrschergenealogien. Saeculum* 6 (1955) 186—223; KARL HAUCK, *Carmina Antiqua. Z Bayr LG* 27 (1964) 1—33; OTTO HÖFLER, *Abstammungstraditionen. RGA* ed. H. BECK and others. Second edition. Berlin 1969-current, 19—21.

⁶ Iord. Get. 13, 78—14, 79. On this material see WOLFRAM, *Methodische Fragen*; HERWIG WOLFRAM, *Theogonie, Ethnogenese und ein kompromittierter Großvater im Stammbaum Theoderichs des Großen. Festschrift für Helmut Beumann*, ed. KURT JÄSCHKE and REINHARD WENSKUS. Sigmaringen 1977, 80—97; HERWIG WOLFRAM, *Geschichte der Goten*. Second edition. München 1980, 24—26 and 134; also REINHARD WENSKUS, *Amaler. RGA*; HÖFLER, *Abstammungstraditionen*, 25; NORBERT WAGNER, *Gapt, Hunuil und die Adogit. ZfdA* 98 (1969) 2—9.

⁷ Gregorii Turonensis libri historiarum 2, 9 (ed. BRUNO KRUSCH and WILHELM LEVISON. *MGH SS rer. Merov.* 1, 1951) and Fredegarii chronicarum libri 3, 9 (ed. BRUNO KRUSCH. *MGH SS rer. Merov.* 2, 1888). On this material see HAUCK, *Lebensnormen* 195—204 and MOISL, *Genealogies* 224—226.

⁸ Pauli Diaconi historia Langobardorum 1, 15 (ed. G. WAITZ. *MGH SS rer. Lang. et. Ital.*, 1878). See HAUCK, *Lebensnormen* 206—213.

⁹ See MOISL, *Genealogies*, for details.

¹⁰ FR. KLAEBER (ed.), *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. Third edition. Boston 1950, lines 1—85; commentary *ibid.* 121.

¹¹ FINNUR JONSSON (ed.), *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning*, Copenhagen 1912—1915, A I, 7—15; see JAN DE VRIES, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*. Second edition. Berlin 1964, vol. 1, 131—136, and HÖFLER, *Abstammungstraditionen* 20. This material, and indeed the whole subject of the descent of royal dynasties from gods, has in the past been controversial: see WALTER BAETKE, *Yngvi und die Ynglinger. Sitzungsberichte der sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Phil.-hist. Klasse* 109, 1964, and the works by GRAUS cited in *ftnt.* 1. Rebuttal by WOLFRAM, *Methodische Fragen*.

¹² Æthelweardi Chronicon 1, 5 sub anno 547 (ed. ALASTAIR CAMPBELL, *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*. London 1962).

¹³ WOLFRAM, *Theogonie* 90 and *Geschichte* 24—26.

¹⁴ OTTO GSCHWANTLER, *Formen langobardischer mündlicher Überlieferung, Jahrbuch für internationale Germanistik* 11 (1979) 58—85 reviews most of the evidence.

¹⁵ On the close relationship of these texts see OTTO GSCHWANTLER, *Die Heldensage von Alboin und Rosimund, Festschrift für Otto Höfler*, ed. HELMUT BIRKHAN. Wien 1976, 222 f.

course of Langobardic history as it is described in the *Origo* and Paul's *Historia*, one often finds indications that the writers of these texts drew, directly or indirectly, on orally transmitted Langobardic myth and legend. Some of it was demonstrably in verse form; whether or not all of it was is a problem that cannot be gone into here¹⁶. These indications are of two sorts. One is explicit admission by the author that he is using oral tradition. The other depends on features of style and content which suggest an oral source. There is an element of subjectivity here, and one would do well to heed ANDREAS HEUSLER's warning that *wo es in den Chroniken lebhaft und dramatisch zugeht, darf man nicht gleich mit der Liedquelle kommen*¹⁷. Nevertheless, such evidence cannot simply be dismissed out of hand.

Both the *Origo*¹⁸ and Paul's *Historia*¹⁹ begin their accounts of Langobardic history by telling how a group calling itself the Winnili departed from Scandinavia to seek its fortune elsewhere under two *duces* named Ibor and Aio. Early on in their wanderings the Winnili were threatened by the Vandals and, in desperation, they appealed for help to the god Woden via his spouse Frea. Woden granted them victory over the Vandals, and at the same time gave them a new name by which they were subsequently known: Langobardi. A natural assumption would be that this material, with its element of pagan Germanic mythology, derives from Langobardic tradition which, in the nature of things, must originally have been orally transmitted. This is confirmed by direct comment. Paul adds *ut fertur* to his account of the departure from Scandinavia; the Woden story is introduced with the words *refert hoc loco antiquitas ridiculam fabulam*, and it ends with *haec risui digna sunt et pro nihilo habenda*. The *Historia Langobardorum codicis Gothani* begins a rather different version of the account with *asserunt antiqui parentes Langobardorum*²⁰, and the *Chronicle of Fredegar*, which also offers a version, includes the comment *fertur*²¹. We are, in fact, dealing with the Langobardic national origin legend, whereby the Lombards traced their ethnic identity to the patronage of a pagan god²². As such, it is clear that the Lombards, like the other Germanic peoples previously mentioned, cultivated orally transmitted *Stammestradition* in the period before their Christian conversion.

Following their defeat of the Vandals, the *Origo*²³ and Paul's *Historia*²⁴ both take the Lombards further in their wanderings. The *Origo* at this point becomes an annotated king-list. Paul's narrative, however, is of a self-evidently legendary character, and though he gives no explicit indications of an oral source, such a source is implicit, and it seems very probable that the material was derived from the same body of tradition as the account of the departure from Scandinavia and the Woden episode: how the Lombards managed to deceive another enemy people, the Assipitti, by pretending to have among them especially terrifying warriors with dogs' heads and to be a more numerous nation than they really were, how they triumphed over the Assipitti by arranging and winning a single combat between champions, and how, in order to build up their numbers, they allowed captives to join them by a solemn oath. Paul and the *Origo* then proceed to recount the creation of their first king Agelmund. The *Historia* includes a story of how Agelmund's eventual successor was born: a prostitute gave

¹⁶ On this see GSCHWANTLER, *Formen*.

¹⁷ ANDREAS HEUSLER, *Die altgermanische Dichtung*. Berlin 1923, 147.

¹⁸ *Origo gentis Langobardorum* 1 (ed. G. WAITZ. *MGH SS rer. Lang. et. Ital.*, 1878).

¹⁹ Paul. *Diac. hist. Lang.* 1, 2—3 and 1, 7—8.

²⁰ *Historia Langobardum codicis Gothani* 1 (ed. G. WAITZ. *MGH SS rer. Lang. et. Ital.*, 1878).

²¹ *Fred. chron. lib.* 3, 65.

²² HAUCK, *Lebensnormen* 206—214. Also WENSKUS, *Stammesbildung* 485—488 and GSCHWANTLER, *Formen* 58—59.

²³ *Origo gent.* *Lang.* 2.

²⁴ Paul. *Diac. hist. Lang.* 1, 10—13.

birth to seven sons and threw them into a pond to drown; Agelmund happened to ride by and prodded them with his spear, whereupon one of the boys grabbed the spear; Agelmund pulled him out and gave him the name Lamissio. The legendary character of the story is manifest, and there are strong indications that it is mythical in origin²⁵. In either case, an oral source is implicit. Again, there are explicit comments to confirm that our texts are ultimately dependent on oral tradition for information about Agelmund's reign. The *Origo* says: *et dicitur quia fecerunt sibi regem nomine Agelmund*, and Paul, summing up his account of Agelmund's reign, notes that *sicut a maioribus traditur, tribus et triginta annis Langobardorum tenuit regnum*. Paul also has accounts of how Lamissio fought and won a single combat against the strongest of a race of Amazons which stood in the Lombards' way, and how he took revenge on the Bulgarians for having killed Agelmund²⁶. The first is introduced by *ferunt*, and the second has features with close parallels in extant Germanic *Heldensage*, both of which point to oral sources²⁷.

The *Origo* and Paul's *Historia* now arrange their treatment of Langobardic history according to the successive reigns of kings. The order of kings is the same in both, but, as noted, the *Origo* is little more than a king-list at this stage. The *Historia*, on the other hand, in many cases goes into considerable detail about the various reigns. The four kings which follow Lamissio—Lethu, Hildeoc, Gudeoc and Claffo—are as briefly documented in the *Historia*²⁸ as in the *Origo*²⁹, and the only indication that an oral source was used by either text comes from the *Origo*'s comment on Lethu: *et dicitur quia regnasset annos plus minus quadraginta*. For the seventh king Tato, however, Paul's treatment is again much fuller. It includes the story of how Tato's daughter had the brother of Rodulf, king of the Herules, murdered while he was at the Langobardic court, and how this led to a war between the two peoples³⁰. There are numerous *Heldensage*-type features, and an oral vernacular source is certain³¹. The next two kings, Wacho and Waltari, are again quite briefly mentioned, but the careers of Audoin and his son Alboin, who follow them, are extensively described, and Paul's narrative contains elements drawn from oral tradition. In fact, virtually everything that Paul says about Audoin came from the so-called Thurisind saga³², and for Alboin's reign he includes the Rosimund saga³³, both of which have long been recognized as Latin adaptations of vernacular *Heldensagen*³⁴. Paul furthermore attests the existence of oral tradition about Alboin in a well known passage:³⁵

Alboin vero ita praeclarum longe lateque nomen percrebuit, ut hactenus etiam tam apud Baioariorum gentem quamque et Saxonum, sed et alios eiusdem linguae homines eius liberalitas et gloria bellorumque felicitas et virtus in eorum carminibus celebretur.

²⁵ Ibid. 1, 14—15. HAUCK, *Lebensnormen* 206—214; HÖFLER, *Abstammungstraditionen* 26.

²⁶ Paul. Diac. hist. Lang. 1, 15—17.

²⁷ On the oral sources for Lamissio's reign see GSCHWANTLER, *Formen* 60—61.

²⁸ Paul. Diac. hist. Lang. 1, 18—20.

²⁹ *Origo gent.* Lang. 2—4.

³⁰ Paul. Diac. hist. Lang. 1, 20.

³¹ GSCHWANTLER, *Formen* 61—63.

³² Paul. Diac. hist. Lang. 1, 22—24 and 27.

³³ Ibid. 2, 28—30.

³⁴ HERMANN SCHNEIDER, *Germanische Heldensage*. Second edition. Berlin 1928—1934, 2/2, 141—145; KLAUS VON SEE, *Germanische Heldensage*. Frankfurt am Main 1971, 74 ff.; HEIKO UECKER, *Germanische Heldensage*. Stuttgart 1972, 129—134; OTTO GSCHWANTLER, *Versöhnung als Thema einer heroischen Sage, Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 97 (1975) 230—262; GSCHWANTLER, *Heldensage*; GSCHWANTLER, *Formen* 72—78.

³⁵ Paul. Diac. hist. Lang. 1, 27.

The accounts of the reign of Alboin's successor Cleph and of the interregnum which followed him contain nothing of interest here. For Authari, however, there are two relevant episodes: the romantic legend of the wooing of the Bavarian king's daughter Theudelinda³⁶, and a brief note, introduced by *circa haec tempora putatur esse factum, quod de Authari rege refertur. Fama est enim . . .*, which tells how the king rode to the southernmost part of Italy, *et quia ibidem intra maris undas columna quaedam esse posita dicitur, usque ad eam equo sedens accessisse eamque de hastae suae cuspide tetigisse, dicens: „Usque hic erunt Langobardorum fines.“*³⁷ For Agilulf, Adaloald and Arioald there is again nothing of interest. This brings us to Rothari; for reasons that will emerge shortly, the survey can end here.

In view of what has been said, then, it is fair to conclude that a substantial body of orally transmitted Langobardic *Stammestradition* was available to ecclesiastical historiographers working in the seventh and eighth centuries. To this evidence can, furthermore, be added the occurrence of Langobardic kings in medieval *Heldensage*—for example, the Old English poem *Widsith* refers to Ælfwine (Alboin), Eadwine (Audoin), and Ægelmund, all of whom are familiar³⁸.

It can be demonstrated that a Langobardic king, Rothari (636—652), made this body of tradition the basis of royal propaganda. The prologue to the *Edict* which he issued in 643 is the key to showing this. Rothari first explains his reasons for producing a law code, and then continues³⁹:

Tamen quamquam haec ita se habeant, utilem prospeximus propter futuris temporis memoria, nomina regum antecessorum nostrorum, ex quo in gente nostra Langobardorum reges nominati coeperunt esse, in quantum per antiquos homines didicimus, in hoc membranum adnotari iussimus.

There follows a list of Langobardic kings extending from Agelmund to Rothari himself. It is abundantly clear that this list was intended as royal propaganda. Firstly, it is generally recognized that, among the early Germanic peoples as in comparable societies elsewhere, genealogies and regnal lists were not primarily historical records but political instruments⁴⁰. Tacitus' *Mannus* genealogy is one example; the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies and regnal lists are another⁴¹. When, therefore, Rothari is seen to publish a king-list which claims to itemize all the kings of the Lombards beginning with the first and ending with himself, one is entitled to suspect that it was intended to be politically functional in some way. Secondly, there is the observation that seventeen kings, including Rothari himself, are listed. HERWIG WOLFRAM has pointed out the significance of this apparently unremarkable fact⁴². In the Gothic Amal genealogy, which Cassiodorus deliberately constructed for the Ostrogothic royal family, there are seventeen generations from Gapt to Athalaric, and these are meant to parallel the seventeen from Aeneas to Romulus in contemporary Roman tradition, a coincidence which Cassiodorus arranged to imply that Athalaric was the new Romulus. WOLFRAM sees Rothari's specification of seventeen kings in much the same way: *In seiner Intitulatio*

³⁶ *Ibid.* 3, 30.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 3, 32.

³⁸ KEMP MALONE (ed.), *Widsith. Anglistica* 13. Copenhagen 1962, 126—127, 139, 126. Also WENSKUS, *Stammesbildung* 489—490.

³⁹ Rothari *Edicti* prologus (ed. GEORG PERTZ. *MGH leges* 4, 1868).

⁴⁰ DAVID DUMVILLE, *Kingship, genealogies and regnal lists. Early Medieval Kingship*, eds. P. SAWYER and I. WOOD. Leeds 1977.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; also REINHARD WENSKUS, *Zum Problem der Ansippung. Festgabe für Otto Höfler*, ed. HELMUT BIRKHAN. Wien 1976, 650—657.

⁴² HERWIG WOLFRAM, *Intitulatio I. Lateinische Königs- und Fürstentitel bis zum Ende des 8. Jahrhunderts. MIOG* 1967 Erg.-Bd. 21, 99—103; WOLFRAM, *Methodische Fragen* 482—485.

muß daher, so folgt daraus, Rothari sein Königtum bewußt und gleichwertig an die Seite seiner italischen Vorgänger, der mythisch-historischen Amalerkönige und der mythischen ‚römischen‘ Albanerkönige, gestellt haben⁴³. And thirdly, there is the fact that the list prefaces the law code. PATRICK WORMALD has convincingly argued that the promulgation of written law codes by early medieval European kings had a primarily ideological significance: *that Germanic kings made laws, first and foremost, partly in order to emulate the literary legal culture of the Roman and Judaeo-Christian civilization to which they were heirs, and partly in order to reinforce the links that bound a king or dynasty to their people*⁴⁴. When the *Edict* is seen in this light, the close association of king-list and law code indicates that the two had a common purpose⁴⁵. In combination, these three points do, I think, establish that Rothari meant the king-list to function as propaganda. Nor is it too difficult to see what he had in mind: by showing that he was the latest in a long-established and illustrious line of Langobardic kings, he was citing the credentials which gave him the authority to act as his people's lawgiver.

Now, the clear implication of Rothari's stated intention to compile a written list of Langobardic kings *propter futuris temporis memoria* is that this was being done for the first time, and consequently that the information which came to him *per antiquos homines* did so via oral tradition. Two considerations support this. Firstly, the king-list gives the same succession of Langobardic kings as that described in the *Origo* and the *Historia*⁴⁶. But we have seen that oral tradition about at least some of these kings was available in the seventh century to the compiler of the *Origo* and in the eighth to Paul the Deacon. Rothari would, therefore, have had orally transmitted material available to draw on. Secondly, in issuing his *Edict*, Rothari was taking the radical step of reducing *antiquas legis patrum nostrorum quae scriptae non erant*⁴⁷ to writing for the first time. In general terms, the notion that the king-list which prefaces the *Edict* is also based on unwritten sources is entirely consonant with the nature of the king's literary activities. But one can be much more specific on this point. The terminology used to describe the literary redaction of previously unwritten Langobardic law parallels that used to describe the compilation of the king-list. Where the list was produced *propter futuris temporis memoria*, the *Edict*, the written manifestation of previously unwritten law, was to be observed *futuris temporibus firmiter et inviolabiliter*⁴⁸; where the names of the kings *in hoc membranum adnotari iussimus*, the revised orally transmitted law *in hoc membranum scribere iussimus*⁴⁹; where Rothari got his information for the list *per antiquos homines*, so the unwritten law on which the *Edict* is based represents what *per antiquos homines memorare potuerimus*⁵⁰. The *antiqui homines* who provided the information about unwritten law must also have provided the raw material for the king-list. In view of what has been said about the availability of Langobardic oral tradition, it is beyond doubt that Rothari used the same body of material as the compiler of the *Origo* and Paul the Deacon did. This being so, the conclusion must be that Rothari used orally transmitted Langobardic *Stammestradition* as a basis for his royal propaganda.

The Franks, too, cultivated orally transmitted *Stammestradition*, and the main source of evidence is again ecclesiastical historiography which drew on oral tradition. In describing

⁴³ WOLFRAM, *Intitulatio* 104.

⁴⁴ PATRICK WORMALD, *Lex scripta and verbum regis: Legislation and Germanic Kingship, from Euric to Chnut. Early medieval kingship*, eds. SAWYER and WOOD, 136.

⁴⁵ WORMALD, *Lex scripta* 134—135.

⁴⁶ See GSCHWANTLER, *Heldensage* 222 for textual relationships.

⁴⁷ Roth. *Edict.* 386.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

the earliest stage of Frankish history, Gregory of Tours first of all assembles the information that Latin historiography has to offer, and then, noting that his written sources are exhausted, he proceeds to give the account quoted below. The self evident implication that it is based on oral tradition is confirmed by the expressions *tradunt*, *ferunt* and *adserunt* which occur in it⁵¹:

Tradunt enim multi, eosdem de Pannonia fuisse degressus, et primum quidem litora Rheni amnes incoluisse, dehinc, transacto Rheno, Thoringiam transmeasse, ibique iuxta pagus vel civitates regis crinitos super se creavisse de prima et, ut ita dicam, nobiliore suorum familia . . . Ferunt etiam, tunc Chlogionem utilem ac nobilissimum in gente sua regem fuisse Francorum . . . De huius stirpe quidam Merovechum regem fuisse adserunt, cuius fuit filius Childericus.

This *Wandersage* is comparable to the Langobardic one discussed earlier, and indeed to the Gothic⁵² and Kentish⁵³ ones, all of them orally transmitted. In the next century the *Chronicle of Fredegar*, having followed Gregory in the passage just cited, adds an account of how Chlodio and his wife were on the seashore one day and, approached by a *bistea Neptuni Quinotauri* [read: *Minotauri*] *similis* while she was swimming, how she became pregnant *aut a bistea aut a viro* and later gave birth to Meroweck, from whom the Merovingians descended⁵⁴. KARL HAUCK⁵⁵ has shown that the story represents a pre-Christian cult myth which drew the descent of the Merovingian royal dynasty from a divine or semi-divine ancestor; that it was orally transmitted originally is certified by the *fertur* which introduces the account. As the Woden episode was previously used to show that the Lombards maintained orally transmitted *Stammestradition* prior to their Christian conversion, so this account demonstrates it for the Franks.

The *Historia Francorum* and the *Chronicle of Fredegar* also provide evidence for the existence of *Stammestradition* relating to subsequent stages of Frankish history; to these must be added the *Liber Historiae Francorum*. Fortunately, a detailed and inevitably lengthy survey of these texts is unnecessary here, because CLAUS VORETSCH long ago collected the relevant material from them in a study entitled *Das Merowingerepos und die fränkische Heldensage*⁵⁶. After commenting on the passages already referred to, VORETSCH proceeds to assemble a quite substantial body of material relating to successive Merovingian kings which, in his view, was derived from oral tradition. As before, there is an element of subjectivity here, but while one may doubt individual parts of VORETSCH's reconstruction, one can hardly doubt the whole thing, and it is generally accepted that early Frankish historiography did draw on vernacular oral tradition⁵⁷.

The existence of Frankish *Stammestradition* apart from the *Wandersage* and the Merovingian *origo* is also attested by the following well known passage from the Poeta Saxo's late ninth century *Gesta Karoli Magni*⁵⁸:

⁵¹ Greg. Tur. Lib. hist. 2, 9.

⁵² Iord. Get. 4, 25—28. On this material see NORBERT WAGNER, *Getica. Untersuchungen zum Leben des Jordanes und zur frühen Geschichte der Goten*. Berlin 1967, 140—155; ERNST SCHWARZ, *Die Herkunftsfrage der Goten. Zur germanischen Stammeskunde*, ed. ERNST SCHWARZ. Darmstadt 1972; WOLFRAM, *Geschichte der Goten* 32—37.

⁵³ MOISL, *Genealogies* 232—233.

⁵⁴ Greg. Tur. Lib. hist. 2, 9 and Fred. ebron. Lib. 3, 9.

⁵⁵ *Lebensnormen* 196—204; see also MOISL, *Genealogies* 224—226.

⁵⁶ CLAUS VORETSCH, *Das Merowingerepos und die fränkische Heldensage. Philologische Studien. Festgabe für Eduard Sievers*. Halle 1896.

⁵⁷ For example ERICH ZÖLLNER, *Geschichte der Franken bis zur Mitte des sechsten Jahrhunderts*. München 1970, 71—72 and 102.

⁵⁸ *Poetae Saxonis gesta Karoli Magni* 115—120 (ed. PAUL DE WINTERFELD. *MGH poet. lat. mediæ*

*De claris genitus fulsit praeclarior atque
 patribus invictis fortior enituit;
 est quoque iam notum: vulgaria carmina magnis
 laudibus eius avos et proavos celebrant,
 Pippinos, Carolos, Hludowicos et Theodricos
 et Carlomannos Hlothariosque canunt.*

Carolus must be Charles Martel, Carlomannus one of his sons, and Pippinus, another of Charles' sons, was of course Charlemagne's father. The remaining names do not appear in the Carolingian family tree prior to Charlemagne⁵⁹. Saxo clearly had Chlodowech and his sons Theodoric and Chlothar in mind⁶⁰. That Merovingians are said to be ancestors of Charlemagne's does not compromise the credibility of the passage: since the time of his father Pippin and possibly even earlier it had been Carolingian policy to associate themselves genealogically with the Merovingians⁶¹, and Saxo reflects this. According to our passage, therefore, *vulgaria carmina* which celebrated Merovingian and Carolingian kings were still current at the end of the ninth century.

Saxo and VORETSCH's narrative evidence corroborate one another. Taking into account also what was said about the *Wandersage* and the Merovingian *origo*, the following conclusions are permissible: The Franks cultivated orally transmitted *Stammestradition* from pre-Conversion times, and continued to do so long into the period of Christian literacy. These traditions were often in verse form, just as those of other Germanic peoples typically were. And, with regard to their subject matter, they told of the early wanderings of the Franks, of the divine or semi-divine origin of their royal dynasty, and of the careers of subsequent kings in that line and in the Carolingian line which supplanted it. As such, Frankish orally transmitted *Stammestradition* was very similar to that of the Lombards, and, looking further afield, to that of the Goths.

It remains to show that this material could be politically functional. To do this, we turn to Einhard's famous comment that Charlemagne *barbara et antiquissima carmina, quibus veterum regum actus et bella canebantur, scripsit memoriaeque mandavit*⁶². Normally, in discussions of early medieval vernacular literature, this passage is excerpted from Einhard's narrative without regard to its context and interpreted in terms which suggest that Charlemagne's motives were those of a liberal antiquarian⁶³. But the context is crucial. The passage comes just after Einhard has told how, *post susceptum imperiale nomen*, Charlemagne reformed existing law codes and redacted the previously unwritten laws of the peoples under his dominion, and it is clear that Einhard saw the writing down of the laws and of the *carmina* as closely related undertakings. This invites comparison with what Rothari had done a century and a half earlier. Both kings were issuing definitive written law codes based, in whole or part, on law previously transmitted orally, and both were doing so to manifest their authority; WORMALD⁶⁴ is surely right to see particular significance in the fact that Charlemagne only

aevi 4, 1899). On this work see A. EBENBAUER, *Carmen Historicum. Untersuchungen zur historischen Dichtung im karolingischen Europa*. Wien 1978, 199—211.

⁵⁹ On the Carolingians see EDUARD HLAWITSCHKA, *Die Vorfahren Karls des Großen. Karl der Große*, ed. BEUMANN.

⁶⁰ On the Merovingians see ZÖLLNER, *Geschichte der Franken* 279.

⁶¹ WENSKUS, *Ansippung*.

⁶² Einhardi *vita Karoli Magni* 3, 29 (ed. G. PERTZ and G. WAITZ. *MGH rer. Germ. in usum scholarum* 25, 1911). For a thorough study of this passage see GERHARD MEISSBURGER, *Zum sogenannten Heldenliedebuch Karls des Großen. GRM* 44 (1963) 105—119.

⁶³ MEISSBURGER, *Heldenliedebuch* 107—108 and 113.

⁶⁴ WORMALD, *Lex Scripta* 128—129.

began his legal reforms after he had been made Emperor. Rothari prefaced his code with a king-list cum genealogy which he based on orally transmitted Langobardic *Stammestradition*, because he saw invocation of this material as a means of legitimizing his authority in the eyes of his subjects. We have just seen that Frankish orally transmitted *Stammestradition* was current before and after Charlemagne's time. Given the Langobardic precedent, Einhard's juxtaposition of Charlemagne's legal reforms with the literary redaction of *barbara et antiquissima carmina* about the deeds of kings of old must interpreted to mean that Charlemagne intended much the same thing as Rothari. In fact, the thrust of Charlemagne's propaganda must have been specifically genealogical. Frankish *Stammestradition* included *carmina* about Merovingian and Carolingian kings. It was also noted previously that it had been Carolingian policy to associate themselves genealogically with the Merovingian dynasty. A literary redaction of orally transmitted Frankish *Stammestradition* would, under the circumstances, have amounted to a writing of family history⁶⁵.

This discussion has argued that a Langobardic king, Rothari, and a Frankish one, Charlemagne, exploited their respective *Stammestraditionen* as royal propaganda. If the arguments are accepted, these two examples explicitly confirm what is implicit in the role of Germanic royal dynasties in general, and of Langobardic and Frankish dynasties in particular, as custodians of *Stammestraditionen*. These examples furthermore show that so quintessentially pre-literate an institution could survive into the literate Middle Ages. Rothari was by the mid-seventh century firmly within the context of the literate romano-Christian heritage, and Charlemagne was at the centre of a great efflorescence of ecclesiastical learning based on that heritage. Nevertheless, both kings found it at once possible and desirable to use their respective *Stammestraditionen* for propaganda purposes. This means that these traditions were still current in the mid-seventh and early ninth centuries respectively, something that has in any case been shown from independent evidence. It also means, however, that they must at those times have retained their validity and ideological importance for the Langobardic and Frankish ruling classes at which the propaganda was directed. Were this not the case, it is difficult to see why Rothari and Charlemagne should have bothered with these traditions at all, or how the propaganda which they based on them could have been effective. It is interesting to note in this connection Paul the Deacon's comment that Theudelinda, the Bavarian wife of Agilulf (590—616), *palatium condidit, in quo aliquit et de Langobardorum gestis depingi fecit*⁶⁶. On their own, Paul's words need be taken as no more than an indication of the queen's personal interests, but in combination with what has just been said about Rothari, it constitutes valuable evidence that Langobardic *Stammestradition* was known and esteemed by the royal court at the turn of the sixth century, just a few decades before Rothari produced his king-list. As such, Rothari's exploitation of *Stammestradition* can be seen in the context of a longer-term interest in it on the part of the royal court, which is precisely what WENSKUS' principle that *die politisch führende Schicht des Stammes* propagated *Stammestraditionen* leads one to expect⁶⁷.

⁶⁵ Further on this in MEISSBURGER, *Heldenliederbuch*.

⁶⁶ Paul. Diac. hist. Lang. 4, 22.

⁶⁷ I would like gratefully to acknowledge the grant from the Research Fund of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne which helped me in the preparation of this paper.