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Book Review

Saxon Identities, AD 150–900. By **Robert Flierman**. Bloomsbury. 2017. xiv + 274pp. £91.80.

Both ‘identity’ and the Saxons have long held special places in the study of the early Middle Ages, not least because they intersect in discussions of the origins of modern Germany, although more recent studies have tended to problematize this intersection. That the title of this monograph, Flierman’s first, contains *Identities* in the plural is the first clue that it is part of this problematization. Although Flierman does not explicitly connect his study to the origins of modern Germany, it is his aim to break down previously held assumptions about the continuity of Saxon identity in the period from the earliest references to Saxons in Roman sources to the consolidation of Saxon self-identification in the ninth century. Indeed, Flierman’s central thesis is that there was no such continuity beyond the imaginations of those who wrote about Saxons – whether they themselves were Saxons or not. In this sense, Flierman is part of an emergent historiographical movement of scholars who seek to write about early medieval identities not by viewing them as historical facts, nor even by seeking *Traditionskerne* that survived down the years, but rather by taking each reference to an ethnic group as part of an ongoing discourse about that identity.

Chapter 1 acts as an introduction which lays out the current ‘state of play’ for studies of the Saxons and early medieval identities, while a conclusion serves to summarize Flierman’s findings. Between these the book is divided into two parts, each consisting of two chapters. The first part addresses descriptions of Saxons as outsiders in texts by Roman and Merovingian authors. The second takes Charlemagne’s Saxon Wars as the decisive turning point in the history of Saxon identity, and addresses descriptions of Saxons first by Carolingian authors writing from a Frankish perspective during the wars and second by those who identified as Saxon writing after the conquest and Christianization of Saxony. Such a chapter division is not a slavish adherence to modern notions of periodization, but rather serves to demonstrate genuine changes in the perception of the term ‘Saxon’ as a marker of identity, although as with any *longue durée* study there are also important elements of continuity.

In chapter 2, ‘The Most Ferocious of Enemies’, Flierman examines references to Saxons in texts by Roman authors, beginning with Ptolemy’s *Geographia* in 150 and following through to Sidonius Apollinaris and Gildas at the end of the western Roman empire. Flierman observes a notable gap between Ptolemy’s reference and an increased interest in the Saxons in the fourth century which continued into the fifth. This is identified as the period that cemented the Saxons as one of the great adversaries of ‘civilization’. While Flierman rightly addresses each of his authors separately, they are also drawn together to provide an overall Roman vision of the Saxons, which has two particularly striking features. The first is that Roman authors rarely associated the Saxons with a particular

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territory or ‘homeland’, something quite rare in antique ethnography. Secondly, Saxons are almost always mentioned in military contexts, whether accounts of particular battles or panegyric praises. From these two points Flierman draws a compelling conclusion: while the Saxons probably were an identifiable ethnic group by the fourth century, Roman authors preferred to use the term as a label for various military threats that assailed the western empire in its last centuries, and especially those threats which had a maritime component. Thus, rather than being interested in Saxons for who they actually were, Romans utilized the term for what it could represent to the citizens of the empire.

In chapter 3, ‘Rebels, Allies, Neighbours’, Flierman demonstrates how Merovingian authors built upon these non-specific Roman models but also generated new ways of writing about the Saxons. Here, added to the Roman fascination with the Saxons as a military threat, we have references to individual Saxons and the origins of the concept of Frankish hegemony over the Saxons. In the earliest Merovingian references to Saxons – those by Venantius Fortunatus and Gregory of Tours – Flierman points out the continued geographical vagueness of the Saxons, although by the sixth century it has become something else; rather than having no ‘homeland’, there were multiple Saxon groups scattered across what was becoming the Frankish world. It is with Fredegar and the *Liber Historiae Francorum* that we gain more insight into the place of Saxons in the Frankish world, at least as far as the Franks themselves saw it. These authors place the Saxons firmly across the Rhine, but the relationship continued to be a military one as the Franks fought to assert their dominance over their neighbours. Flierman concludes this chapter by pointing out that during the Merovingian period Frankish hegemony became the defining feature of how authors wrote about the Saxons, and set the standard for Carolingian authors.

With chapter 4, ‘*Gens Pefidia* or *Populus Christianus*’, Flierman reaches the pivotal moment in early medieval Saxon history, and this is the section of his study with the largest historiography behind it. In keeping with the rest of the book, though, the author brings a freshness to the topic by seeking not to narrate the Saxon Wars, nor to explain their protracted nature, but rather by examining what each Carolingian source can tell us about contemporary attitudes towards the Saxons and, crucially, how they changed in response to Charlemagne’s efforts. While Flierman does an excellent job of highlighting the different perspectives at play in Carolingian sources, the true strength of this chapter is the focus on the central theme of Saxon (in)fidelity, which is found to varying degrees across all the sources. Indeed, Flierman is able to show clearly the long history behind both the concept of *fides* and the idea that the Saxons owed loyalty to the Franks, and how these were combined to form a narrative of infidelity that simultaneously justified Charlemagne’s actions, explained Frankish setbacks, and glossed over the realities of political divisions within Saxony.

Flierman’s study reaches its own crux with chapter 5, ‘From Defeat to Salvation’, in which he examines how Saxon authors of the ninth century sought to understand their pagan past and conquest at the hands of a Frankish ruler and utilize these to forge new conceptions of Christian Saxon identity. In particular, Flierman, departing from the few earlier studies of this topic, demonstrates that Saxon authors did not view their conquest as a traumatic episode. Instead it was presented as part of a divine plan in which Charlemagne became the deliverer of the Saxons, facilitating their conversion to Christianity and integration into the

Carolingian empire. Rather than simply narrating the Saxon Wars as Frankish authors had, Saxon authors placed their conquest in the context of monastic foundations and relic translations, both processes having been just as crucial to the integration of Saxony as political conquest. Furthermore, these authors sought to break down the stigma of defeat by portraying the wars not as a collective Saxon experience, but as a period in which new families rose to power, whether through political or episcopal appointments. This is not to say that there was not a collective element to the ninth-century Saxon memory of the conquest. The apogee of ninth-century writing about their past came with Rudolf of Fulda's *Translatio s. Alexandri*, which began with a history of the Saxons that for the first time gave them a literary *origo gentis*. While it would have been interesting to continue the study with tenth-century developments under the Ottonians, Rudolf's use of Tacitus brings the story of *Saxon Identities* full circle: a Roman author now used to present Saxons as part of civilization.

Flierman's monograph represents a vital addition to early medieval studies in several regards. Firstly, it is one of only a few book-length anglophone studies of the continental Saxons. Secondly, the bibliography represents a comprehensive must-read of modern Saxon historiography and a thorough guide to the primary source material. These factors make *Saxon Identities* an excellent introduction to the subject. The book also serves as an exemplar for future studies of early medieval identity which can drive forward the research area based on new approaches and questions. Above all, Flierman writes with an enviable combination of wit, clarity and depth, demonstrating a mastery of his source material and contextualizing his arguments and their foundations without devolving into simple narrative. In *Saxon Identities*, Flierman elucidates what could otherwise be a rather bewildering topic, making it accessible to anyone interested in the complexities of both early medieval identity and modern scholarship on the issue.

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