



The fluidity of barbarian identity: the ethnogenesis of Alemanni and Suebi,

AD 200–500

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This article argues against the romantic notion that barbarian peoples organized themselves around internal identities which persisted essentially unchanged over centuries. The Alemanni comprised an amalgam of constituent groups whose identities and behaviour fluctuated according to situation and context. This loose association of groups was transformed into a more cohesively organized gentile configuration during the migration period, when Alemannic and Suebic elements formed a common Alemannic identity.

Today, the French call Germany *Allemagne*, while Germans and Swiss refer to south-west Germany and north-west Switzerland informally as *Alemannien*. In Freiburg, the *Alemannisches Institut* and its journal the *Alemannisches Jahrbuch* have dedicated themselves to researching and preserving the history of the upper-Rhine region. What serves as a national designation for some people, indicates a regional identity for others.

Modern Germans also call parts of south-west Germany *Schwaben*. The name survives formally in geographical terms such as *Schwäbische Alb*, but like *Alamannien* it lacks official political meaning.

In the Middle Ages both designated administrative district. In Otto the Great's empire of the tenth century, the Duchy of Swabia encompassed the Alsace, south-west and southern Germany, Switzerland and portions of northern Italy. Divisions within Louis the Pious' empire 150 years earlier reveal a smaller *Alamannia* in the same location, but no Swabia. Interestingly, eighth-century monastic chronicles refer to conflicts between early Carolingians and *Suavi*¹ in *Alamannia*.² In the

¹ *Annales Sancti Amandi* and *Annales Sancti Tiliiani*, ed. G.H. Pertz, *M[onumenta] G[ermaniae] H[istorica]*, *Scriptores* [SS]I (Hanover, 1826), pp. 6–9.

² *Annales Laureshamenses*, ed. G.H. Pertz, *MGH*, *SS* I, pp. 22–3.

sixth century, Gregory of Tours claimed Alamanni and Suebi were different names for the same people living east of the upper Rhine.³ For late Romans, Alemanni were a troublesome Germanic people inhabiting the upper Rhine and Danube regions beginning in the third century, and the Suebi a Germanic people residing variously on the middle Danube near modern Vienna in the third and fourth centuries, or along the Elbe in the first century of the Common Era. Thus, through the centuries, *Alamannia*, Swabia and kindred words have meant different things to different people and have served various uses.

This study seeks to peer behind centuries of accretions, to pierce the *interpretatio romana* of contemporary sources and look at the ethnogenesis of Alemanni and Suebi between AD 200 and 500, and to determine how Alemanni and Suebi came to form a common Alemannic identity by the sixth century.

The early Alemanni, 200–310

Upheavals in free *Germania* stemming from increased social differentiation within and among Germanic peoples in the later second century led to a reorganization of the barbarian world. The Roman policy of supporting and thereby enriching frontier chiefs malleable to Roman persuasion created within those groups Roman and anti-Roman factions which ultimately destabilized the Germanic world. The abundance of luxury goods in these areas attracted the attention of groups beyond the buffer zones causing increased intergermanic conflict. The Marcomannian wars accelerated the process of reorganization when Marcus Aurelius smashed the coalition of leadership united against the Empire. Old groupings and nobilities disappeared, but out of the ruin new confederations coalesced. The Alemanni were one of these new entities.⁴

The early history and scope of Alemanni remains problematic and difficult to discern. Modern investigators have complained that the Roman compulsion to organize opponents along the frontier into generic categories makes it difficult to determine the social reality behind the ethnographic terminology. Narrative and inscriptive evidence, they contend, indicate that *Alamanni* often functioned as another term for *Germani*. The *Historia Augusta*, for example, claims Alemanni were still called *Germani* during Proculus' reign (280). And, when one glosses the first appearance of Alemanni in Cassius Dio in

³ Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, ed. W. Arndt, MGH *S[criptores] 1[erum] M[erovingicarum]* {SRM} I, 2nd edn (Hanover, 1851), 2.2.

⁴ E.A. Thompson, *The Early Germans* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 72–108.

213 with imperial titulature, which designates Caracalla as *Germanicus maximus*, and with inscriptions of the *Fratres Arvales*, which describe Caracalla's foes variously as *Barbari* and *Germani*, one can see that for Romans *Alamanni* served as a collective term. In short, they argue, it is difficult to determine where Roman perceptions ended and Alemannic self-perception began.⁵

One should not ignore the Roman tendency to organize barbarians into generic categories, but neither should one exaggerate the effects of such practices. Producing evidence from the *Historia Augusta*, apparently written as a practical joke,⁶ to show the generic character of the term Alemanni, presents a risky strategy. For example, the *Historia Augusta* also asserts that Caracalla took the title *Alamannicus*,⁷ which clearly is an interpolation from the fourth century, when the *Historia Augusta* was written and when emperors commonly assumed that title.⁸ Second, glossing literary sources with inscriptions to elucidate how Roman historians used the term Alemanni may generate misleading conclusions. The closeness of celebratory inscriptions to actual events and the survival of their graven letters, uncomplicated by textual transmission, suggest a mimetic quality, that disintegrates upon closer inspection. The imperial titulature encoded within inscriptions formed a genre distinct from that of historical literature and, consequently, conformed to a different set of rules.

Michael Peachin's study of third-century titulature between 235 and

⁵ D. Geuenich, 'Zur Landnahme der Alemannen', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 16 (1982), pp. 25–44, at 27 and 30; R. Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung. [Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen gentes]*, 2nd edn (Cologne, 1977), p. 502; D. Geuenich and H. Keller, 'Alamannen, Alamannien, alamannisch im frühen Mittelalter. [Möglichkeiten und Schwierigkeiten des Historikers beim Versuch der Eingrenzung]', in H. Wolfram and A. Schwarcz (eds) *Die Bayern und ihre Nachbarn* 1 (Vienna, 1985), pp. 135–57, at 137.

⁶ Ronald Syme argues that one author wrote the *Historia Augusta* after 360 as a well-executed hoax, rather than the six argued by many other scholars, 'The Composition of the *Historia Augusta*', in R. Syme, *Historia Augusta Papers* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 12–29. By 1979, computer analysis had vindicated single authorship by demonstrating the homogeneity of structure, 'Controversy Abating and Credulity Curbed?', in *ibid.*, pp. 209–23, at 212. The author invented over 200 characters and 35 historians and biographers, and peppered his biographies with criticism of and comment on non-existent works – a virtual minefield for historians, 'Bogus Authors', in *ibid.*, pp. 98–108. The author values the monarchy and the Senate and glorifies the Antonine emperors, but his content does not betray any serious purpose. He is 'patently a rogue scholar, perverse, delighting in deception ... this man ranks with impostors in other ages', 'Propaganda in the *Historia Augusta*', in *ibid.*, pp. 109–30, at 128–9.

⁷ *Historia Augusta*, ed. E. Hohl (Leipzig, 1965), 13.10.6.

⁸ L. Okamura, *Alamannia Devicta. [Roman-German Conflicts from Caracalla to the First Tetrarchy (A.D. 213–305)]*, PhD thesis, University of Michigan (1984), p. 89; W. Kuhoff (eds.), *Inschriften und Münzen, Quellen zur Geschichte der Alamannen*, 6 vols (Sigmaringen, 1894), VI, pp. 11–23. None of the nineteen surviving, contemporary inscriptions collected by Kuhoff dealing with Caracalla refers specifically to Alemanni.

284 implicitly reveals the persistent use of geographical titles such as *Arabicus maximus*, *Britannicus maximus*, *Dacicus maximus*, *Germanicus maximus*, *Parthicus maximus*, *Persicus maximus* and *Sarmaticus maximus* rather than the designations of individual peoples so popular in the late third and fourth centuries.⁹ For much of the third century, emperors and laudatory poets preferred grander terms, which implied conquest of whole regions or races rather than tactical, defensive victories over bands of barbarians. Apparently, third-century practices still operated within the traditions of earlier imperial titulature which did not celebrate (or admit) victories over single peoples within a racial category. Cassius Dio reveals as much when he says that Marcus Aurelius adopted the title *Germanicus* in 172 after defeating the Marcomanni, because the Romans call all those who inhabit the northern regions Germans.¹⁰ One simply should not expect to uncover the subtleties of ethnic differences with evidence from third-century titulature.

Since inscriptions and panegyrics impose an impenetrable layer of generality for much of the third century, linguistic evidence and histories must serve as sources for uncovering the nature and structure of early Alemanni. The word *alamanni* was common to Germanic dialects ranging from Gothic to those of the lower Rhine. *Manni* simply meant 'people' and *ala*-functioned as an intensifier. After the arrival of Christianity the term assumed the sense of 'all people'.¹¹ Linguistic evidence can be suggestive, but one cannot assume the immutability of a word's meaning, especially if that word developed a technical sense or was reified into an ethnic designation.

Despite such problems, the etymology of *alamanni*, the polyethnic character of Alemanni observed in the fourth century by Ammianus Marcellinus and the location of Alemanni in south-west *Germania* has prompted some to suspect continuity with the Suebic Semnones of Tacitus. Others have rejected a Suebic connection and argued instead

⁹ *Gothicus maximus*, *Francicus maximus* and *Carpicus maximus* present exceptions to this pattern. Firm evidence indicates *Gothicus maximus* was bestowed first upon Aurelian (270–5). *Francicus maximus* appears in connection with Probus (276–9); however, the title appears in the problematic *Historia Augusta* (see n. 6). *Carpicus maximus* first appears in 248 with Philip the Arabian (244–9), and twenty-four years later with Aurelian; *Roman Imperial Titulature and Chronology, A.D. 235–284*, Studia Amstelodamensia ad Epigraphicam, Jus Antiquum et Papyrologiam Pertinentia 29 (Amsterdam, 1990), pp. 65, 86–7, 91–2 and 96. Nevertheless, of these three titles, two emerged in the later third century, when such designations became common.

¹⁰ Cassius Dio, *Historiarum Romanarum Quae Supersunt* 3, ed. U.P. Boissevain (Berlin, 1901), 71.3.5, p. 255: Γερμανούς γὰρ τοὺς ἐν τοῖς ἀνω χωρίοις οἰκοῦντας ὀνομάζομεν.

¹¹ Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*, pp. 500–2.

for the rise of a new union or confederation of peoples. The former proposition remains highly unlikely. If a Suebic *Traditionskern* did unite various elements, one must explain why they failed to adopt the legendary and venerable Suebic designation. The latter theory seems equally problematic. By definition, ethnic groups possess their own traditions and nomenclature. Hence, any constituent peoples would have identified themselves as something other than Alemanni.¹²

The objection to this latter theory, however, assumes the exclusivity of identities. One can imagine Alemanni as a new confederation of groups, if one assumes the operation of multiple of situational identities. Reinhard Wenskus has argued that the pan-Germanic character of *alamanni* indicates that this designation was not a new term. Rather, similar to Suebi, it offered a competing indigenous, neutral collective, which eventually won out in south-west *Germania*.¹³ Combining Wenskus' argument with the notion of a flexible identity indicates that a new coalition of Germanic groups may have adopted a familiar collective term, which did not expunge constituent identities.

Support for such an explanation comes from Agathias' mid-sixth-century account of Byzantine history. Agathias preserved a passage from Asinius Quadratus' history of the Germanic peoples, which was written in the first third of the third century and which suggests that Alemanni were a polyethnic entity from very early in their history. Asinius claimed the name Alemanni reflected a hybrid ethnic composition.¹⁴ The statements seems pejorative and may indicate either an unflattering designation applied to Alemanni by neighbouring Germanic peoples or the unfriendly interpretation of an Alemannic self-designation by hostile neighbours.¹⁵ The latter seems likeliest, since pagan, church-violating Alemanni serve in Agathias' history as exemplars of wickedness and as foils to the righteous, orthodox Franks.¹⁶ Agathias probably thought this piece of information unflattering and marshalled it for his pro-Frankish purposes.

¹² For a review of the debate see Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*, pp. 494–500; and more recently, with special emphasis on archaeology, H. Keller, 'Probleme der frühen Geschichte der Alamannen [(“alamannische Landnahme”) aus historischer Sicht]', in M. Müller-Wille and R. Schneider (eds) *Ausgewählte Probleme europäischer Landnahmen des Früh- und Hochmittelalters, Methodische Grundlagendiskussion im Grenzbereich zwischen Archäologie und Geschichte I* (Sigmaringen, 1993), 83–102.

¹³ Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*, p. 502.

¹⁴ Agathias, *Historiarum Libri Quinque*, ed. R. Keydell, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* 2 (Berlin, 1967), 1.6.3: οἱ δὲ Ἀλαμάνοι, εἰ γὰρ ἤρη' Ἀσίνιω Κοναδράτω ἐπεσθαι, ἀνδρὶ Ἰταλιωτῆ καὶ τὰ Γερμανικά ἐς τὸ ἀκριβὲς ἀναγεγραμμένω, ζυγλωδὲς εἰσὶν ἀνθρώποι καὶ μιγάδες, καὶ τοῦτο δύναται αὐτοῖς ἡ ἐπονομία.

¹⁵ H. Wolfram, *Das Reich und die Germanen. Zwischen Antike und Mittelalter* (Berlin, 1990), p. 81.

¹⁶ A. Cameron, *Agathias* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 44–5 and 54.

One should not dismiss the possibility that Alemanni attempted to surmount this apparent negative by interpreting polyethnicity as an advantage, which they codified in a name. Such a strategy would have been exceptional, but not necessarily improbable. Peoples of the ancient world also considered antiquity of ethnic roots a mark of distinction and strove mightily to show such maturity in their origin myths. Nonetheless, the Scythians turned the apparent weakness of newness to their advantage by frankly proclaiming themselves the youngest of nations.¹⁷ Early on, *alamanni* probably offered a flexible and familiar collective term, around which scattered bands of warriors and their dependents could rally against Germanic or Roman enemies, but which would not impinge on various foci of authority.

Narrative sources for the earliest period are few and brief, but they bear witness to a decentralized Alemannic ethnogenesis, which persisted throughout the third century. Cassius Dio's account of Caracalla's expedition into *Germania* along the Raetian *limes* in 213 represents the first written evidence of Alemanni.¹⁸ Unfortunately, portions of the account are missing because only an epitome of the relevant book survives, but Dio's belittling of Caracalla's achievements in the German campaigns¹⁹ indicates Alemanni were not as yet formidable foes. They apparently remained a marginal force until the mid-third century, for Herodian speaks only of incursions of *Γερμανοὶ* during the latter years of Alexander Severus' reign (222–35) and Alemanni fails to appear in his account of Maximinus Thrax's (235–8) campaigns against *Γερμανῖν* and the emperor's grandiose plans to conquer *Germania* once and for all.²⁰

The details of Alemannic formation can only be guessed at, but

¹⁷ Herodotus, *Historiae*, ed. Carl Hude, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1927), 4.5.1.

¹⁸ Some have denied the existence of Alemanni on the basis of the complicated manuscript tradition of Dio's history. Nineteenth-century editors reconstructed the critical events of 213 in Germany from portions preserved in the *Excerpta Constantiniana* of the tenth century and in an epitome of books 36–80 by Joannes Xiphilinus of the eleventh. The word *Alamanni* does not survive in the manuscripts, but rather four varied spellings, which were standardized to *Alamanni* by modern editors; see H. Castritius, 'Von politischer Vielfalt zur Einheit. [Zu den Ethnogenesen der Alemannen]', in H. Wolfram and W. Pohl (eds) *Typen der Ethnogenese unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Bayern I* (Vienna, 1990), pp. 71–84, at 73–4; and Okamura, *Alamannia Devicta*, pp. 99–110. Okamura goes on to argue that the cognates of Alemanni found in the surviving manuscripts were later interpolations, *ibid.*, pp. 122–4 and 129–33. However, the scepticism of Castritius and Okamura seems over-zealous, and Okamura in particular fails to locate definitively the source of interpolation or to explain persuasively the reasons for interpolation.

¹⁹ Cassius Dio, *Historiarum Romanarum Quae Supersunt* 3, 78.13.3–5.

²⁰ Herodian, *Ab Excessu Divi Marci*, ed. K. Stavenhagen (Stuttgart, 1967), 6.7.2–10 and 7.1.5–2.9.

Maximinus Thrax's ambitious offensive into *Germania* may have prompted an aggrandizement of the Alemannic entity, which was ideologically flexible and hence uniquely prepared to accommodate disparate groups. Gallienus' treaty 'with the leader of a Germanic people' to prevent further crossings of the Rhine c. 253–4²¹ indicates that significant foci of power and influence had coalesced at least six years prior to the reappearance of Alemanni in the sources in 259–60, when according to Eutropius and Aurelius Victor both Alemannic and Frankish war bands raided Gaul.²² The range and multiplicity of assaults attested between 259 and Constantus' stabilization of the Gallic frontier with his daring and decisive victory over a large host of Alemanni at Lingones (modern Langres) in eastern Gaul around 300 suggests Alemanni were still a decentralized, though growing and increasingly formidable, collection of groups.²³ Thus, one does not witness a change in the basic structure or behaviour of Alemanni in the third century, or any mutations in the process of their ethnogenesis,²⁴ but rather the elaboration of an ethnic idea.

In the early fourth century their growing influence was checked by Constantius' son, Constantine the Great (306–37), who won the affection of provincials by slaughtering Alemanni and Franks, and casting their *reges* to the beasts.²⁵ Either his brutal crackdown in Gaul liquidated a substantial portion of Alemannic leadership or his reorganization of the Empire deterred thoughts of raiding, for news of Alemanni

²¹ Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, ed. L. Mendelssohn (Leipzig, 1961), 1.30.2–3. Zosimus wrote his history sometime between 498 and 502 (see Cameron, 'The Date of Zosimus' *New History*, *Philologus* 13 (1969), pp. 106–10), but book 1 is primarily a summary of the work of the third-century historian Dexippus, who wrote an account of the third-century Gothic wars; see R.T. Ridley, 'Introduction', *Zosimus. New History* (Canberra, 1982), pp. xi–xv, at xi–xiii.

²² Eutropius, *Breviarium ab urbe condita*, ed. H. Droysen, *MGH, Auctores antiquissimi* [AA] II (Berlin, 1879), 9.7 and 9.8.2: Aurelius Victor, *Liber de Caesaribus*, ed. F. Pichlmayr (Leipzig, 1961), 33.3. Eutropius does refer to both *Alamanni* and *Franci* as *Germani*, a practice similar, say, to a modern American referring to French and Germans collectively as Europeans. That is, Eutropius' use of the term *Germani* here does not necessarily expose *Alamanni* and *Franci* as mere generic collectives.

²³ In 268 Alemanni disturbed Italia, *Epitome de Caesaribus*, 34.2. Around 270–1, 'Alemanni and their neighbouring peoples invaded Italia', Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, 1.49.1, and forced Aurelian to hurry from the east to relieve afflicted Italian cities, *Liber de Caesaribus*, 35.1–2. In the late 270s, during the reigns of Probus (276–82) and Proculus (280), skirmishes with Alemanni flared up again along the Rhine, *Historia Augusta*, 28.12.3. Constantius' victory is recorded in Eutropius' *Breviarium*, 9.23. See also Okamura on the patterns of coin hoard evidence, which corroborate this reading of the written sources, *Alamannia Devicta*, pp. 263–330.

²⁴ For a different reading of the sources, see Castritius, 'Von politischer Vielfalt zur Einheit', pp. 77–83.

²⁵ Eutropius, *Breviarium*, 10.3.2.

dries up for a half century until Ammianus Marcellinus picks up the trail in 354.²⁶

The Alemanni of Ammianus Marcellinus, 354–78

Firm, detailed observations of the decentralized gentile structure of the Alemanni emerge only in the mid-fourth century with the history of Ammianus.²⁷ His account of Julian's so-called war against the seven kings of the Alemanni in the battle of Argentoratum in 357 provides the richest passage on Alemannic gentile structure.²⁸ Admittedly, one must exercise caution when using Ammianus as a source, since his concerns were primarily military and political, rather than ethnographic. His portrayals show Alemanni in moments of considerable stress and so may or may not represent the social structures of peacetime. Nevertheless, how Alemanni displayed themselves in battle presumably says something about their hierarchy of power.

Ammianus recounts that in the Alemannic troop formation, Chonodomarius and his nephew Serapio, *potestate excelsiores ante alios reges*, commanded the left and right wings, respectively; followed by five *reges proximi potestate*, ten *regales a series optimatum*, and 35,000 troops *ex variis nationibus*. Some of these soldiers were mercenaries, others were loaned with the agreement that the favour be returned.²⁹ Thus, at the top of Alemannic wartime society sat *reges*, followed by more numerous *regales* (petty kings), then *optimates* (distinguished men) and finally a polyethnic body of warriors.

At first glance, the passage implies political stratification of a centralized *gens*. However, the context indicates that Ammianus distinguished two general categories of independent ruler based on martial ability

²⁶ Inscriptions from 331 in Phrygia, between 335 and 337 in Rome and before 340 in the province of Scythia proclaim Constantine II (337–40) *Alamannicus*, but they appear merely to reaffirm a title earned earlier, Kuhoff, *Inschriften und Münzen* pp. 47–9.

²⁷ See M. Grant, *The Ancient Historians* (New York, 1970), pp. 358–84; and J. Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus* (London, 1989), esp. pp. 306–32 and 376–82. Several additional points on the trustworthiness of Ammianus as an observer of barbarians should be made. Ammianus served in the army with barbarians, many of whom, according to Ammianus, remained in contact with relatives in *Germania*. Presumably, many of Ammianus' observations take the reader beyond the *interpretatio romana* into the barbarian world. Second, one must distinguish between groups Ammianus had direct knowledge of, like Burgundians, Alemanni, Goth and Persians, and those he did not, such as Huns, Scythians and Chinese. It is in the latter cases that he resorts to literary convention.

²⁸ Ammianus was transferred to the east just before the battle, but he apparently had access to letters and pamphlets of Julian and communiqués submitted by Julian to Constantius, see Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, pp. 378–9.

²⁹ Ammianus, *Rerum Gestarum* [*Libri Qui Supersunt*], ed. W. Seyfarth (Leipzig, 1978), 16.12.23–6.

and, by implication, on the size of their territories and retinues. Chonodomarius' *potestas* was neither magisterial nor official, as the word often indicates, but rather, in the spirit of its root *possum*, an influence which exuded from personal ability. Chonodomarius was *excelsus* – great in stature – because of his prowess on the battlefield. He was the *princeps audendi periculosa* who had defeated Decentius Caesar and sacked many wealthy Gallic cities.³⁰ One may clarify further the meaning of *princeps* by glossing it with another passage, which describes Chonodomarius as a skilful *ductor* (commander) beyond the others.³¹ The combination of terms indicates that Chonodomarius' authority derived from his skills as military leader.

Consequently, through martial prowess an Alemannic *rex* could extend his influence over neighbouring *reges* and *regales*. When two other *reges*, Gundomadus and Vadomarius, refused to dishonour the peace they had made with the Empire and join Chonodomarius' campaign, Gundomadus was murdered and Vadomarius' followers pressured him to join.³² Ammianus does not reveal who slew Gundomadus, but the pressures placed on Vadomarius and the common cause Gundomadus' *populus* made with Chonodomarius after the murder imply Gundomadus' own people, heeding Chonodomarius' call for war, mutinied.

Tacitus described a division among Germanic peoples between *reges* based on noble birth, who ruled in peace, and *duces* based on military prowess, who commanded on the battlefield.³³ This division of duties may have existed for the Alemanni in theory, but Chonodomarius acted both as *rex* and *dux*, and many of the other *reges* throughout Ammianus' history are seen both making war and brokering peace with the Romans.³⁴ It is perhaps more appropriate to situate Alemannic notions of leadership within the context of western- and eastern-Germanic political traditions. According to Herwig Wolfram, east-Germanic groups, such as Goths and Burgundians, distinguished the *thiudans* – an ethnic, sacral king of the people in the past – from the *rieiks*, who was *rex* of a constituent group. In times of emergency, the various risks invested one of their number for a limited time with the monarchical authority of the ancient *thiudans*.³⁵ The *rieiks* kingship ultimately prevailed among east-Germanic peoples, as these warrior

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.12.4–5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16.12.24.

³² *Ibid.*, 16.12.17.

³³ Tacitus, *Germania*, ed. A. Önnorfors (Stuttgart, 1978), 7.

³⁴ Geuenich, 'Zur Landnahme der Alemannen', p. 35.

³⁵ H. Wolfram, 'Atharic the Visigoth: Monarchy or Judgeship? A Study in Comparative History', *Journal of Medieval History* 1 (1975), pp. 259–78, at 268–9.

kings established their reputation and dominance during the trials of migration and founded barbarian kingdoms on Roman soil.³⁶

By contrast, west-Germanic groups, such as Alemanni, Franks and Saxons, and their Celtic neighbours had forsaken the *thiudans* high kingship by the time of Caesar, and the fates of Orgetorix, Dumnorix, Vercingetorix, Arminius and Civilis demonstrate the resistance of these western groups to strong *rieiks* kingships. By the migration period, west-Germanic groups had ceased using the term *rieiks* to describe their kings.³⁷ The equivalent, derived from Anglo-Saxon, was *cyning* or *kyning*, which became the most encompassing political term of the Franks. *Cyning* betrays the social foundations upon which west-Germanic lordship rested. The word derives from *cyn* (kin) and the suffix *-ing*, which means 'one belonging to' (e.g. modern earthling) and acts as a patronymic. The *cyning* literally was 'the man of, or from or representing the *cyn*', hence that one who embodied the power of the *cyn* and protected its interests.³⁸ Within a *pagus* (district), *cyning* applied specially to the leader of the most powerful kin group. Whether a *rex*'s influence was inherited or earned, his power ultimately rested in the strength and cohesion of the kin group.

The west-Germanic context and the Latin political terms *rex* and *regalis*, which convey a sense of independent and autonomous exercise of power, reveal that for Ammianus differences between Alemannic *reges* and *regales* resided in their relative influence among the confederation, not in formal subordination of the latter to the former. Theodor Mayer called these leaders *Gaufürsten*, or princes sovereign in *pagi* under their control and around whom Alemanni clustered.³⁹ Consequently, one hears in Ammianus of Macrianus, *rex* of the *Bucinobantes*, a *gens* of the Alemanni;⁴⁰ Priarius, *rex* of the *Lentienses*, a *populus*⁴¹ and *pagus*⁴² of the Alemanni; the *pagus* of *rex* Vadomarius;⁴³ and the *Juthungi*, both a *gens* and *pars* of the Alemanni.⁴⁴ The choice of vocabulary to describe these constituent entities lacks consistency, ranging from the political, to the biological to the geographical, yet it

³⁶ H. Wolfram, 'The Shaping of the Early Medieval Kingdom', *Viator* 1 (1970), pp. 1–20, at 4–5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–8.

³⁸ J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings* (New York, 1962), p. 153.

³⁹ T. Mayer, 'Grundlagen und Grundfragen', in *Grundfragen der alemannischen Geschichte. Vorträge und Forschungen* 1, *Konstanzer Arbeitskreis für Mittelalterliche Geschichte* (Sigmaringen, 1970), pp. 7–35, at 19.

⁴⁰ Ammianus, *Rerum Gestarum*, 29.4.7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 31.10.2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 15.4.1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 21.3.1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, the title of ch. 6 of book 17, p. 102; and 17.6.1.

does point up the absence of any Alemannic *Einkönigtum* at this time. Dieter Geuenich believes names like *Bucinobantes* and *Lentienses* to be geographic rather than ethnic divisions within an Alemannic *Völkerbund*;⁴⁵ however, the need to distinguish Alemanni with hyphenated terms may simply indicate the desire on the part of Ammianus to find some criterion by which he could account for the divergent policies of *reges* and various internal factions. Ammianus' choice of hierarchical or factional terminology, then, is best understood as the description of a social reality, rather than as the reflection of a formal, theoretical system of governance.

Be that as it may, like all of us, Ammianus can never completely free himself from unconscious biases. Part of the difficulty for a modern researcher sifting Ammianus' observations lies in Ammianus' tendency to admit tacitly the heterogeneity of Alemanni while simultaneously objectifying them as an ethnic group, with whom the Empire ought to be able to deal bilaterally. Hence, when defeats inflicted upon individual *reges* failed to compel peace from the whole, Ammianus considered the Alemanni a treacherous, untrustworthy lot.⁴⁶

Another problem arises from the possibility that qualified groups such as *Bucinobantes*, *Juthungi* and *Lentienses* may never have considered themselves Alemanni, but were stereotyped as such by Ammianus due to their geographical proximity to *Alemanni*. For a Roman, Alemanni probably served as a generic term for all groups inhabiting the region between the Rhine, Main and the Alps.⁴⁷ An alemannic entity did exist, but Roman pressures helped mould it. A reciprocal relationship existed between indigenous processes, which brought Alemanni into being, and Roman perceptions, which projected the term back onto a larger group, thus prompting neighbouring groups to adopt the identification in their dealings with the Empire. Something of the sort appears to have befallen the *Juthungi*.

Juthungi first appeared in 270 negotiating peace with Aurelian after an assault on Istria, though our source, *Dexippus*, neglects to mention any association of *Juthungi* with Alemanni at this time. An oversight perhaps, but the passage is much lengthier than any other source for the *Juthungi*, and *Dexippus*' description of the negotiation and treaty surely would have revealed other allegiances or alliances.⁴⁸ By the mid-fourth century, Ammianus considered *Juthungi* a *pars* and *gens* of the

⁴⁵ Geuenich, 'Zur Landnahme der Alemannen', pp. 32–3.

⁴⁶ Ammianus, *Rerum Gestarum*, 27.10.5.

⁴⁷ Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*, p. 502.

⁴⁸ *Dexippus*, *De Bellico Scythico*, *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, ed. K. Müller (1949; reprint, Frankfurt, 1975), 24–5.

Alemanni. However, around 430 Juthungi, unconnected to Alemanni, re-emerge in a panegyric to Avitus, which celebrates the defeat of Juthungi by Aëtius.⁴⁹

This fluidity of identity possible among barbarian groups like the Juthungi also applied to frontier Romans. One should not confuse the tendency of Roman authors to dichotomize politically the Roman and barbarian worlds with rigid ethnographic boundaries. The Alemannic attacks of 259–60 overwhelmed the *limes* and extinguished celto-roman *villa* habitations in the *agri decumates*.⁵⁰ Other types of settlements, however, persisted throughout the so-called Alemannic *Landnahme*.⁵¹ Several sites located on heights indicate that some Alemanni may have used old celtic *oppida* for protection against Roman strikes,⁵² and Roman settlements, which continued in the areas close to Roman forest in the midst of Alemannic territory, reveal a continuity of settlement before and after the *Landnahme*.⁵³ Indeed, Ammianus remarks that many of the houses of Alemanni were built in Roman fashion.⁵⁴

Throughout the third and fourth centuries, the Alemanni maintained a decentralized gentile structure. Movements of Alemanni lacked central co-ordination and membership changed as groups struck out for the Empire and others were added. Lulls in raiding after Constantine's accession and again after 378, when Ammianus' account ended, indicate loss and gain of members over time. However, not only membership, but also the gentile structure of Alemanni would be altered in the fifth century with the arrival of Suebic elements in south-west *Germania*.

The Suebi

Judging from Julius Caesar's punitive expedition into *Germania*, Suebi of the first century BC inhabited regions east of, though not bordering on, the Rhine.⁵⁵ By the turn of the first century of the Common Era, Tacitus located them further east in central *Germania* along the axis of the Elbe river, and in the 170s they fought in the Marcomannian wars

⁴⁹ Sidonius Apollinaris, *Carmina*, ed. C. Lütjohann, *MGH, AA*, VIII (Berlin, 1887), 7, vv. 233–5.

⁵⁰ G. Fingerlin, 'Zur alamannischen Siedlungsgeschichte des 3.-7. Jahrhunderts', in W. Hübener (ed.) *Die Alemannen in der Frühzeit* (Bühl, 1974), pp. 45–88, at 48 and 77.

⁵¹ On the set of romantic assumptions underpinning the traditional notion of the Alemannic *Landnahme*, see Keller, 'Probleme der frühen Geschichte der Alamannen', esp. pp. 83–5.

⁵² J. Werner, 'Zu den alamannischen Burgen des 4. und 5. Jahrhunderts', in W. Müller (ed.) *Zur Geschichte der Alemannen* (Darmstadt, 1975), pp. 84–90.

⁵³ Geuenich, 'Zur Landnahme der Alemannen', pp. 67–90, at 40–1.

⁵⁴ Ammianus, *Rerum Gestarum*, 17.1.7.

⁵⁵ Julius Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum*, ed. O. Seel (Leipzig, 1977), 4.1–19.

along the Danube near Bohemia. The connection between fifth-century Suebi and earlier Suebi is difficult to assess because the term seems to disappear from the sources around 180, after Aurelius' wars, only to reappear suddenly along the Rhine around 400. All references to Suebi in Dio's history, which spans the period from the Republic until AD 229, antedate the Marcommanian wars. Eutropius, whose *Breviarium* extends from the founding of Rome to Jovian in 364, mentions Suebi once in the Marcommanian wars.⁵⁶ The *Epitome de Caesaribus*⁵⁷ and Aurelius Victor,⁵⁸ which treat imperial history down to 395 and 361, respectively, speak only of Suebi in the early Empire. In Zosimus' history, which covers Roman history from 192 to 410, Suebi appear in 406, when they join the Alans and Vandals in attacking Gaul.⁵⁹ Orosius' *Seven Books Against the Pagans*, which treats Roman history down to the early fifth century, summarizes the general ebb and flow of Suebic nomenclature in Roman historiography. Orosius mentions Suebi four times during or before the Marcomannian Wars of the 170s.⁶⁰ Suebi disappear from his work in the third and fourth centuries, only to reappear four more times between 406 and 408.⁶¹

However, two brief exceptions to this pattern occur in the third and fourth centuries. The *Historia Augusta* speaks of Aurelian's (270–5) defeat of Suebi and Sarmatians,⁶² and his display of them in his triumph.⁶³ The account fails to mention the location of Aurelian's battle, but the conjunction of Suebi and Sarmatians points to the Pannonian Plain, where the latter resided. Admittedly, the reliability of the *Historia Augusta* poses problems, but Ammianus' weighty authority offers corroboration. According to Ammianus, Constantius hurried to confront Suebi, Quadi and Sarmatians raiding Raetia, Pannonia and Moesia after his triumphal visit to Rome in 357.⁶⁴ The passage does not clarify the direction of the Suebic assault on Raetia, but their proximity to Quadi and Sarmatians, who inhabited the middle Danube regions north of Pannonia and Moesia, indicates the

⁵⁶ Eutropius, *Breviarium*, 8.13.1.

⁵⁷ *Epitome de Caesaribus*, 1.7 and 2.8.

⁵⁸ Aurelius Victor, *Liber de Caesaribus*, 2.4.

⁵⁹ Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, 6.3.1.

⁶⁰ Orosius, *Historiarum adversus paganos libri VII*, ed. M.P. Arnaud-Lindet (Paris, 1990); Orose, *Histoires contre les païens*, 6.7.7, 6.9.1, 6.21.16 and 7.15.8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 7.38.3, 7.40.3, 7.41.8 and 7.43.14.

⁶² *Historia Augusta*, 26.18.2: 'Idem Aurelianus contra Suebos et Sarmatas isdem temporibus vehementissime dimicavit ac florentissimam victoriam rettulit.'

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 26.33.1 and 4: 'Non absque re est cognoscere, qui fuerit Aureliani triumphus ... Praecesserunt ... captivos gentium barbararum - Blemmyes, Exomitae, Arabes Eu[n]d[<a>emo[m]nes, Indi, Bactrani, Hiberi, Saraceni, Persae cum suis quique muneribus, Gothi, Halani, Roxolani, Sarmatae, Franci, Suevi, Vandali, Germani...'

⁶⁴ Ammianus, *Res Gestarum*, 16.10.20.

attack most likely came from the north-east above Noricum. Eighty-six years separate the brief appearance of Suebi in Ammianus and the *Historia Augusta*, but both authors situate them in similar locations and around the same neighbours, the Sarmatians.

Third- and fourth-century evidence is scarce, but sources on either side of the period corroborate the notion of a Suebic tribe persisting on the middle Danube near Sarmatians.⁶⁵ Eutropius' lone reference to Suebi in the Marcomannian wars shows Suebi fighting with Quadi, Vandals and Sarmatians. Jordanes tells of Suebi, whose land was near Pannonia, raiding Dalmatia and forming an alliance with Sarmatians, Gepids, Sciri and Rugii against the Goths around 470 north of modern Budapest.⁶⁶ In his panorama of mid-sixth-century Italy, Procopius says Suebi resided in the interior north of the Adriatic near the *Norici*.⁶⁷ Paul the Deacon implicitly links Suebi to the middle-Danube region in his *Historia Langobardorum*, which lists Suebi, Sarmatians, Pannonians, Noricans, Gepids and Bulgarians in Alboin the Lombard's host of 568.⁶⁸ Apparently, Alboin collected these mid-Danubian and eastern groups on his way into Italy from the northeast.

The relationship of third- and fourth-century Suebi to those of the first and second is impossible to establish with any certainty due to the 100 years of silence from the end of the Marcomannian wars until the reappearance of the Suebic name around 170 in the *Historia Augusta*. When enough details of their customs emerge around 400, with which to compare late-antique and early-imperial Suebi, the two entities scarcely resemble one another, as we shall see. However, several conclusions about late-antique Suebi may be advanced at this time. First, a Suebic group, which persisted from the later third century, independent and distinct from Alemanni, inhabited a region on the middle Danube at the edge of the Pannonian Plain. Second, these Danubian Suebi were related to those who appeared on the Rhine around 400, for no other precedent exists.⁶⁹ Third, they often associated with Sarmatians and often appear in the sources alongside them. Since no sources detail a movement of Suebic elements from the middle Danube to the Rhine in 406, Sarmatians will serve as a marker with which to chart the forces, that possibly prompted their relocation.

⁶⁵ See, F. Lotter, ['Zur Rolle der] Donausueben [in der Völkerwanderungszeit]', *Mitteilungen des Instituts für österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, 76 (1968), pp. 275–98, who fails to account for, and explain, the presence of third- or fourth-century references to Suebi.

⁶⁶ Jordanes, *Getica*, ed. T. Mommsen, *MGH, AA V*, 1 (Berlin, 1882), 274 and 277.

⁶⁷ Procopius, *De Bello Gothico*, ed. J. Haury, *Opera Omnia* 2 (Leipzig, 1963), 1.15.25–7.

⁶⁸ Paul the Deacon, ed. L. Bethmann and G. Waitz, *MGH, Scriptores rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum* (Hanover, 1878), 2.26.

⁶⁹ Lotter, 'Donausueben', p. 280.

Precisely when Suebic elements began moving west is unknown, but the process probably began with the movement of Gothic peoples from above the Black Sea. The intrusion of the Gothic Tervingi into the lower Danube in the late third century triggered a reorganization of barbarian alliances. Thwarted at the Danube by Constantine, the Tervingi moved into Transylvania and then into the Pannonian Plain, where they suffered a disastrous defeat in 332 from an alliance of Sarmatians and Romans. The Tervingi recovered under vigorous leadership and concluded a *foedus* with Constantine that same year. Fearing Gothic retribution, the Sarmatians armed their slaves, who promptly revolted in 334. Most free Sarmatians fled to the Empire, where Constantine admitted them, but a remnant fled to the Vandals, who then lived to their north on the Pannonian Plain. The Tervingian king Geberic conducted a punitive campaign against the free Sarmatians by assailing and plundering the Vandals in 336.⁷⁰ In 358, Constantius II led the free Sarmatians, who lived among the Vandals, back to the southern Pannonian Plain. Later that year, the Romans and Taifali, a group allied to the Tervingi, decisively defeated the former 'slave' Sarmatians in 358,⁷¹ probably in response to the above-mentioned raids of 357, when Suebi, Sarmatians and Quadi simultaneously attacked Raetia, Pannonia and Moesia.

A second upheaval with even further-reaching impact on the barbarian world occurred with the coming of Huns, who conquered the Alans living on the Don and compelled them to assist in an attack on the Goths. In 376, Huns and Alans conquered the Gothic Greutungi. They inflicted heavy losses on the Tervingi,⁷² and destroyed their alliance with the Taifali.⁷³ The Tervingi sought Roman protection from the Huns and fled south to the Empire, where they were settled in Thrace.⁷⁴ In the upheaval, barbarian groups were transformed. The Greutung king resisted his conquerors by forming an alliance with Huns against the Alans, and the enterprising Fritigern welded together a group out of Goths, Alans and Huns and besieged Constantinople.⁷⁵

These upheavals disturbed a wider area than the lower Danube. Roman sources primarily discuss only barbarians driven into the Empire, like Goths, but bits of circumstantial evidence indicate the same processes drove Suebi westward. A letter of St Ambrose alludes to Valentinian II's repulse of Huns and Alans in 383, who neared Gaul

⁷⁰ H. Wolfram, *History of the Goths* (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 61–3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 62 and 91.

⁷² Ammianus, *Rerum Gestarum*, 31.3.1–8.

⁷³ Wolfram, *History of the Goths* p. 91.

⁷⁴ Ammianus, *Rerum Gestarum*, 31.4.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.16.3.

through Alamannia.⁷⁶ This suggests the Hunno-Alanic incursions impacted an area stretching from the lower Danube to the Rhine. Furthermore, the historic association of Suebi and Sarmatians placed the Suebi in close proximity to the Sarmato/Vandalic-Gothic and Gothic-Hunno/Alanic conflicts. Apparently, the same upheavals, which drove Goths south into the Empire, drove other peoples west. It can hardly be coincidence that Suebi, Vandals and Alans appeared almost simultaneously on the Rhine around 400. A close association must have developed among the three during their move to the Rhine, for together they assailed the Franks in 406 and continued to Spain where Suebi and Vandals jointly seized Galicia.⁷⁷ The relationship between the Vandals and Alans was especially close. It resulted ultimately in the absorption of the Alans into the Vandals after they crossed into Africa.⁷⁸ In short, processes similar to those which transformed Gothic groups brought about the association and movement of Vandals, Alans and Suebi to the Rhine.

Suebic gentile composition and organization

It is easier to trace the continuity of the Suebic name than to determine what sort of people bore the name. What little evidence there is suggests that Suebi did not designate a rigidly defined group. Friedrich Lotter has cogently argued that after 400, and especially after 451, the Suebic name came to encompass Marcomannic and Quadic groups. The name Suebi, he observed, becomes prominent as the terms Marcomanni and Quadi disappear from the sources. Marcomanni and Quadi, apparently, had retained the memory of a common Suebic heritage and adopted the venerable name as their designations lost meaning, or when they found themselves surrounded by non-Suebic neighbours.⁷⁹

Lotter's argument that Suebi had come to encompass the identity of several constituent groups is a valid one, though it seems unnecessary to posit common Suebic roots to account for the phenomenon. One would have to explain both how a submerged ethnic memory would have been transmitted and how these people would have known the Suebic name was famous. As has been argued, the Suebic designation did not 'reappear' after 400, it had persisted since at least the third

⁷⁶ *Ambrosius Valentimiano Imperatori*, Otto Faller S.I. ed, *Sancti Ambrosii Opera* 10, *Epistolae et Acta* 1, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 54 (Vienna, 1968), 30 (24). 8.

⁷⁷ Isidore of Seville, *Historia Gothorum Wandalorum Sueborum*, ed. T. Mommsen, *MGH*, *AA XI* (Berlin, 1894), 71–2 and 85.

⁷⁸ Procopius, *De Bello Vandalico*, ed. J. Haury, *Opera Omnia* 1 (Leipzig, 1962), 1.5.21.

⁷⁹ Lotter, 'Donausueben', pp. 278–9 and 283.

century. It seems easier to argue that the reorganization of ethnic nomenclature resulted from conflict, rather than a submerged identity, which suddenly began to express itself. That is, Suebic warriors probably had managed to extend their authority over other gentile elements and reconstitute them as Suebi. As the work of Wenkus and Wolfram shows, the process of creating and recreating the internal composition of barbarian groups through the agency of strong warlords was endemic to the barbarian world, especially in the east. This cannot be proven in the case of Marcomanni and Quadi, but when details of Suebic activity emerge in the later fifth century, the process is well attested.⁸⁰

The elements which made up the Suebic-Marcomannic-Quadic fusion had for some time been acculturated to the lifestyle of sarmato-scythian *'Reitervölker'* of the Eurasian steppes.⁸¹ Zosimus speaks of Aurelian battling 'Scythians' in Pannonia in 271,⁸² a term probably referring to Sarmatians and neighbouring groups, who inhabited the plains north of Pannonia and whose mobility and habit of fighting on horseback resembled those of steppe societies. Not surprisingly, Suebic elements appeared travelling in the company of such groups, like Vandals of the Pannonian Plain and Alans of the Asian steppes. They were even stereotyped as 'Sarmatians' in a contemporary Gallo-Roman epigram. Paulinus, bishop of Béziers, referred to the pillaging of Gaul in 407 by 'Sarmatians, Vandals and Alans'.⁸³ The term 'Sarmatian' here can only have functioned as another designation for Suebi, since all other sources for the crossing of the Rhine by barbarians in 406–7 refer to Vandals, Alans and Suebi. His choice of terminology indicates that the appearance and behaviour of Suebi were associated with that of groups from the eastern plains.

One also notices, in a pattern characteristic of the oriental barbarian world, a tendency towards the development of powerful warlords among Suebic elements. The few clues that remain to us indicate the absence of a single kingship, but like Gothic, Hunnic, Vandalic, Alanic, Rugian and Erulic groups, Suebic factions produced strong, charismatic kings, in a process that differed markedly from the Alemannic system of *Kleinkönige*. A close reading of Isidore's *Historia Sueborum*, which covers the history of Suebi in *Hispania* from 406 until their conquest in 583 by the Visigoths, shows that a Suebic kingship developed among

⁸⁰ See below, pp. 20 ff.

⁸¹ Wenkus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*, p. 561; Lotter, 'Donausueben', p. 280.

⁸² Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, 1.48.1–2.

⁸³ *Epigramma*, vv. 1–95, ed. C. Schenkel, *Poetae Christiani Minores I*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 16 (Vienna, 1888) pp. 503–7.

those Suebi, who relocated from the Rhine in 406 to *Hispania*. The leader (*princeps*) Hermeric led Suebi into Hispania, seized Galicia with the Vandals and Alans, and took sole possession after the Vandals left for Africa. He presided (*praefuit*) in *Hispania* for thirty-two years, but after twenty-five years, because of illness, Hermeric placed his son Recchila into royal power (in *regnum*), who ruled (*regnavit*) for eight years after his father's death.⁸⁴ The switch in vocabulary from *princeps* to *in regnum* and from *praefuit* to *regnavit* belies a process by which Hermeric established himself as a leader of Suebi, probably due to his skills as a commander during the journey to *Hispania*, and consolidated his position to a degree that allowed him to bequeath royal power to his offspring. In short, he founded a dynasty among a group which lacked one.

Powerful leaders also arose among the Danubian Suebi. Jordanes speaks of two *reges*. Hunimundus and Halaricus, who fashioned a powerful coalition of Sarmatians and their kings, Sciri and their kings, Rugians and Gepids against the Goths in Pannonia around 470.⁸⁵ The two kings certainly wielded great influence, but their plurality betrays the absence of central kingship among the Danubian branch of the Suebi.

Yet these examples do illustrate, in contrast to the multitude of Alemannic *reges*, that Suebic groups were predisposed to strong leadership, which could in the case of Suebi in *Hispania* develop into a single kingship. If these Suebi did descend in some way from ancient Suebi, their size and political behaviour had changed to the point of making any connection unrecognizable. Tacitus' Suebi occupied half of Germania and comprised a group of loosely associated *gentes* who possessed their own traditions and names,⁸⁶ but expressed a common Suebic identity by means of a characteristic hair-style.⁸⁷ Degrees of centralization could exist among the constituent *gentes* beneath the Suebic rubric, but Suebi itself conveyed the sense of a broad, loose, federated structure in the second century.

The paucity of information on Suebi of the third and fourth centuries (two brief references), and their restricted location on the Danube, indicates a relatively insignificant people rather than the grand coalition of earlier times. They grew in stature and importance in the late fourth and fifth century, but their relative cohesion contrasts with that of earlier Suebi. No doubt a complicated strand of continuity connected

⁸⁴ Isidore of Seville, *Historia Gothorum Wandalorum Sueborum*, 85–6.

⁸⁵ Jordanes, *Getica*, 277.

⁸⁶ Tacitus, *Germania*, 38.1.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.2.

the two versions of Suebi, but lack of evidence prevents us from knowing the details. Important to note are the differences between Suebic and Alemannic groups in the fifth centuries before they met to form a new gentile entity.

Alemanni and Suebi

The first source to associate Alemanni with Suebi is Jordanes' Gothic history written in the mid-sixth century, which tells of a union between Suebi and Alemanni around 470.⁸⁸ Gregory of Tours, writing in the later sixth century, assumed an equivalence between Alemanni and Suebi in his history of the Franks. He claimed the Suebi who left for *Hispania* in 406 from the Rhine also were called Alemanni.⁸⁹ At what point, then, and how did Alemanni and Suebi become linked in the fifth century?⁹⁰

Claudian's panegyrics to Honorius in 398 and to Stilicho in 400 drew no connection between the two groups. Suebi and Alemanni appear in separate poems, and with respect to different figures: Honorius dealt with Suebi and Stilicho with Alemanni.⁹¹ With the exception of the aforementioned passage in Gregory, Suebi show up in all other accounts of 406 without reference to Alemanni. And after their departure for *Hispania*, sources fail to mention any Suebi in south-west *Germania* for almost seventy years. Further, Isidore's *Historia Sueborum* recognized no relationship between Alemanni and the Suebi in *Hispania*. If Alemannic elements had joined Suebi during their stint along the Rhine, their subsequent history in Galicia reveals they thought of themselves as Suebi, not Alemanni.

Alemanni reappear in 411, after an eleven-year absence, when some

⁸⁸ Jordanes, *Getica* 281: 'Quibus Suavis tunc iuncti aderant etiam Alamanni ipsique Alpes erectos omnino regentes, unde nonnulla fluenta Danubium influunt nimio cum sonu vergentia.'

⁸⁹ Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, 2.2: 'Post haec Wandali a loco suo degressi, cum Gunderico rege in Gallias ruunt. Quibus valde vastatis, Spanias adpetunt. Hos secuti Suebi, id est Alamanni, Gallitiam adprehendunt.'

⁹⁰ On the identification of Alemanni with Suebi in the sources, see H. Keller, 'Alamannen und Sueben [nach den Schriftquellen des 3. bis 7. Jahrhunderts]', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 23 (1989), 89–111, esp. pp. 89–99; and *idem*, 'Probleme der frühen Geschichte der Alamannen', pp. 91–3.

⁹¹ On Honorius and Suebi, see Claudian, *Carmina*, ed. T. Birt, *MGH, AA* (Berlin, 1892). *De III Consulatu Honorii*, vv. 22–8; *De IV consulatu Honorii*, vv. 652, 655; on Stilicho and Alemanni see *ibid.*, *De Consulatu Stilichonis Liber Primus*, vv. 232–6; *De Consulatu Stilichonis Liber Tertius*, *Carmina*, vv. 17–19. *Alamannia* swears allegiance to Honorius in the panegyric of his fourth consulship, but Claudian says this was due to the march of Stilicho, *De IV Consulatu Honorii*, vv. 448–9 and 458–9: '...iuratur Honorius absens/ Imploratque tuum supplex Alamannia nomen ... Quod longis alii bellis potuere mereri/ Hoc tibi dat Stilichonis iter.'

turn up with Franks in the army of Constans, son of Constantine III (407–11).⁹² According to Sozomen, Constans recruited an army from across the Rhine after Maximus usurped his power in *Hispania*.⁹³ Then a long pause ensues until Sidonius Apollinaris alludes in his panegyric on Avitus to Alemanni, who had extended themselves to the west bank of the Rhine in 454.⁹⁴ In 457 he celebrated in a panegyric to Majorian a victory over Alemanni, who had attacked Italy from over the Alps. However, the latter passage reveals little information, since the attack seems the work of a stray band, which Sidonius did his best to puff up into a major victory.⁹⁵ Sidonius does mention Suebi in the Majorian panegyric, but he did not associate them with Alemanni. For him, Suebi apparently resided on the Danube, not in *Alamannia*, since he lists them among eastern peoples.⁹⁶ By all indications, Suebi and Alemanni had not become linked in the minds of writers by the mid-fifth century.⁹⁷ The next reference to both Alemanni and Suebi comes in the aforementioned account of Jordanes which linked the two in an association around 470. We shall now look at the entire passage to sift its difficulties for clues to when and how the association formed.⁹⁸

Hunimundus, *dux Suevorum*, crossed over the Danube from *Suavia*, which was close to Pannonia, plundered Dalmatia and stole some cattle. On his return home, the Gothic king Thiudimer assailed the Suebi and captured Hunimundus. All, including Hunimundus, were sold into slavery, but a merciful Thiudimer adopted the Seuve as his son and returned him *cum suis in Suavia*. Hunimundus soon induced the Sciri to break off their alliance with the Goths and together they made war upon the Gothic *rex* Valamir in 469. Valamir was slain, but the enraged Goths routed the Sciri. The destruction of the Sciri and the growing power of the Goths frightened the Suebi and neighbouring

⁹² Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, 2.9, p. 56.

⁹³ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastica Historia*, ed. J. Bidez, *Kirchengeschichte* (Berlin, 1960), 9.13.2.

⁹⁴ Sidonius Apollinaris, *Carmina*, 7, vv. 372–5.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5, vv. 373–81.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5, vv. 471–8: ‘...rigidum septemplicis Histri/ agmen in arma rapis. Nam quicquid languidus axis/ cardine Sithonio sub Parrhase parturit ursa,/ hoc totum tua signa pavet; Bastarna, Suebus,/ Pannonius, Neurus, Chunus, Geta, Dacus, Halanus,/ Bellonotus, Rugus, Burgundio, Vesus, Alites,/ Baisalta, Ostrogothus, Procrustes, Sarmata, Moschus/ post aquilas venere tuas...’

⁹⁷ The one apparent exception to this is the rhetorician Ausonius’ use of the term Suebi for Alemanni between 365 and 380. However, ‘die Erwähnung der “Sueben” bei Ausonius trägt einen preziösliterarischen, keinen ethnographischen Charakter’, E. Zöllner *Geschichte der Franken bis zur Mitte des 6. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1970), p. 210; see also, Keller, ‘Probleme der frühen Geschichte der Alamannen’, p. 92.

⁹⁸ For two contrasting views on the use of Jordanes as a source of barbarian history see W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History* (Princeton, 1986), pp. 20–111; and P.J. Heather, *Goths and Romans, 332–489* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 3–67.

groups, so Hunimundus and Halaric, *reges Suevorum*, fashioned an alliance of Suebi, Sarmatians, Gepidae, Sciri and Rugi and attacked the Goths at the river Bolia in Pannonia.⁹⁹ Thiudimer won a great victory in 470, and those who survived straggled back to their homelands without glory.¹⁰⁰

After a certain amount of time, Thiudimer crossed the frozen Danube in winter and assaulted the Suebi from behind, 'for that kingdom of the Suebi has Bavarians on the east, Franks on the west, Burgundians to the south and Thuringians to the north'. At the time, Jordanes says, Alemanni ruled in the lofty Alps and were joined to Suebi. Thiudimer devastated the Suebi and Alemanni, who were federated to one another, and nearly conquered them.¹⁰¹

The first two-thirds of the story poses no difficulties. A Suebic group on the Danube, whom we have seen to reside in the area from the third century, assailed the Goths in Pannonia where one would expect. However, a discrepancy arises in the location of the final battle. This Suebic *regio* lay much further west, surrounded by Bavarians, Franks, Burgundians and Thuringians. In short, Jordanes identifies Alamannia. Some have questioned the accuracy of the passage, noting the abrupt, and seemingly impossible, shift of Suebi from the mid-Danube to south-west *Germania*.¹⁰² Further, the second location of Suebi strongly implies an equivalence of Alemanni and Suebi, which is considered unlikely, while at the same time inconsistently maintaining a distinction between the two peoples by relegating Alemanni to the Alps. Some scholars suspect an interpolation from the 500s, when Jordanes reworked Cassiodorus. They argue that the learned of the

⁹⁹ Wolfram identifies this as the Ipel river, which separates Slovakia from Hungary, *History of the Goths*, pp. 266–7.

¹⁰⁰ Jordanes, *Getica* 273–9.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 280–1: 'Post certum vero tempus instanti hiemali frigore amnemque Danubii solite congelato – nam istiusmodi fluvius ille congelascit, ut in silicis modum pedestrem vehat exercitum plaustraque et traculas vel quidquid vehiculi fuerit, nec cumbarum indigeat lintres – sic ergo eum gelatum Thiodimer Gothorum rex cernens pedestrem ducit exercitum emensoque Danubio Suavis inprovisus a tergo apparuit. Nam regio illa Suavorum ab oriente Baibaros habet, ab occidente Francos, a meridie Burgundzones, a septentrione Thuringos. Quibus Suavis tunc iuncti aderant etiam Alamanni ipsique Alpes erectos omnino regentes, unde nonnulla fluenta Danubium influunt nimio cum sonu vergentia. Hic ergo taliterque munito loco rex Thiudimer hiemis tempore Gothorum ductavit exercitum, et tam Suavorum gente quam etiam Alamannorum, utrasque ad invicem foederatas, devicit, vastavit et pene subegit.'

¹⁰² W. Pohl, '[Die] Gepiden [und die *gentes* an der mittleren Donau nach dem Zerfall des Attilareiches], in H. Wolfram and F. Daim (eds) *Die Völker an der mittleren und unteren Donau im fünften und sechsten Jahrhundert* (Vienna, 1980), pp. 239–305, at 275; H. Wolfram, *Die Geburt Mitteleuropas. Geschichte Österreichs vor seiner Entstehung* (Berlin and Vienna, 1987), p. 40. Both Pohl and Wolfram think it more likely that Thiudimir crossed the Danube into Slovakia. Wolfram attributes the discrepancy to poor geographical knowledge on the part of Cassiodorus.

period manufactured an identification of the two tribes, probably out of associating earlier Roman encounters with Suebi, which occurred in the same place, with Alemanni.¹⁰³

Such explanations help little, not only because they lack convincing reasons for interpolation, but because they fail to explain why Jordanes should have distorted only part of the account. Lotter long ago argued persuasively that the passage is a complex mixture of fact and interpolation. Hunimundus did indeed flee west toward Alamannia, but the author described the locus of action according to the ethnographic situation of his own day. This explains, he says, the interpolated presence of Bavarians and the use of the present tense in the description of the geographical setting.¹⁰⁴

To Lotter's argument, can be added still others. At the beginning of the passage, Jordanes speaks of *Suevia*, a region near Pannonia,¹⁰⁵ but as he moves into the last episode, he cues the reader to a switch in the locus of action when he says Thiudimer *post certum tempus* appeared *a tergo, nam regio illa Suavorum ab oriente Baibaros habet, ab occidente Francos, a meridie Burgundzones, a septentrione Thuringos*. That is, *regio illa* lay in south-west *Germania* near the Alemanni. The passage of time (*post certum tempus*), the direction of attack (*a tergo*) and *that* kingdom (*regio illa*) signal a different location. Furthermore, Jordanes appears to be sure about the union of Alemanni and Suebi. He tells us that at the time of Thiudimer's expedition Alemanni were joined to Suebi (*quibus Suavis tunc juncti aderant etiam Alamanni*) and, as if to emphasize the point, mentions in the following sentence that they were mutually federated (*utrasque ad invicem foederatas*). Corroboration for such arguments comes from two passages in Procopius. One distinguishes two Suebic peoples – those living above the Adriatic in the interior near Noricum, that is along the mid-Danube, and those subject to the Franks, in other words those in southwest *Germania*.¹⁰⁶ The other indicates a close association between Alemanni and Suebi, who bordered the Franks on the east.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Geuenich and Keller, 'Alamannen, Alamannien, alamannisch im frühen Mittelalter', pp. 139–40.

¹⁰⁴ Lotter, 'Donausueben', pp. 275–7.

¹⁰⁵ The precise location of *Suevia*, and when the region came to be called *Suevia* are a matter of controversy, see Lotter, 'Donausueben', pp. 277–9; Pohl, 'Gepiden', pp. 274–5. For the present argument, it simply is important to note that the author drew a distinction between two locations.

¹⁰⁶ Procopius, *De Bello Gothico* 1.15.25–7, esp. 26: ὑπερθεν δε αυτων Σισκιαιο τε και Σουαβοι (ουχ οι Φραγγων κατηροοι, αλλα παρα τουτοις ετεροι) χωραν την μεσογειον εχουσι.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.12.10–11: μετα δε αυτους ες τα προς ανισχοντα ηλιον Θωριγγοι βαρβαροι ... Σουαβοι τε υπερ Θωριγγων και ' Αλαμανοι, ισχυρα εθνη. 'Τε και' indicates a close grammatical connection between Suebi and Alemanni.

The equating of Alemanni and Suebi in the sixth century was not engineered by the learned; behind it lay an actual union.¹⁰⁸ If one takes a cue from Lotter and imputes significance to verb tenses, one notices that, while the geographical situation is described in the present, the joining of Alemanni to Suebi is situated in the past (*juncti aderant*). The circumstances leading to this association of Alemanni and Suebi remain unclear. Hagen Keller has posed the hypothesis that an actual union possibly lay behind Jordanes' association of Suebi with Alemanni. He argues from Eugippius' *Vita sancti Severini*, in which a certain Hunimundus appears, that the *rex* Hunimundus of Jordanes' *Getica* fled with Suebi and joined the Alemanni under a certain *rex* Gibuldus at Passau. This would place the Suebi in their final battle with Thiudimer's Goths in Jordanes to the east of the Alemanni. The *Vita* only puts the two figures in proximity to one another and fails to record any treaty or meeting between the two, but a union would help explain the apparent increase in Alemannic power beginning in the 470s and continuing into the early sixth century. The *Ravennatis anonymi cosmographia*, which lists the western cities in the *patria Alamannorum*, and the *Vita Lupi episcopi Trecensis*, in which a *rex* Gebavult of the Alemanni appears, indicate that Alemanni expanded west to Troyes.¹⁰⁹ Further, the closeness in spelling between Gibuldus and Gebavult in the two *vitae* may betray the development of a royal clan.¹¹⁰

Keller's argument is elegant, and it illuminates several problems in Jordanes: the proximity of Alemanni to Suebi, a possible date for their union and a motive in Hunimundus for Thiudimer's last attack. However, problems persist. The *Vita sancti Severini* claims a Hunimundus came to Passau with 'a few barbarians',¹¹¹ hardly enough warriors, as Keller conceded, to have fuelled an Alemannic expansion.¹¹² Second, the presence of Alemanni as far east as Passau

¹⁰⁸ Lotter, at this point, would contend that Alemanni came to be known as Suebi because they were descendants of earlier Suebi, 'Donausueben', pp. 278–9 and 283. Arguments presented earlier in this paper show this to be unlikely. Jaroslav Šašel argues that Suebi was a general term designating Quadi, Marcomanni and Alemanni, though he offers no evidence for the assertion, '*Antiqui Barbari*. Zur Besiedlungsgeschichte Ostnoricums und Pannoniens im 5. und 6. Jahrhundert nach den Schriftquellen', in J. Werner and E. Ewig (eds) *Von der Spätantike zum frühen Mittelalter. Aktuelle Probleme in historischer und archäologischer Sicht* (Sigmaringen, 1979), pp. 125–39, at 130. As a description of the situation, Šašel's point is valid, but the present study offers an *explanation* for how Suebi came to be associated with Alemanni.

¹⁰⁹ Keller, 'Alamannen und Sueben', pp. 97–9. On the flight of Hunimundus to Alamannia, see also Lotter, 'Donausueben', pp. 274–7 and 290–3.

¹¹⁰ Geuenich and Keller, 'Alamannen, Alamannien, alamannisch im frühen Mittelalter', pp. 143–5.

¹¹¹ Eugippius, *Vita sancti Severini*, ed. Hermann Sauppe, *MGH, AA I*, 2 (Berlin, 1877), 22.4.

¹¹² Keller, 'Alamannen und Sueben', p. 99.

shows they had expanded nicely without Hunimundus' help. Lastly, Jordanes fails to mention Hunimundus in Thiudimer's final attack on Suebi. His treachery and scheming against the Goths in the preceding episodes leave one expecting a *coup de grâce*, a final humiliation of the nuisance, which never occurs. If Hunimundus were present and responsible for forging a collaboration between Alemanni and Suebi, the author scarcely could have resisted broadcasting his demise.

More constructively, however, several conclusions may be drawn concerning the association of Alemanni and Suebi. The power of Alemanni certainly did wax in the later sixth century. Some have suggested the development of a single kingship and a ruling dynasty at this time, or at least of a *Heerführer*.¹¹³ Be that as it may, at the least, the expansion of territory and co-ordination of movement reveal a greater cohesion than witnessed in Ammianus' time, whose detailed descriptions of Alemannic activity betray a decentralized aggregate of groups. The Alemanni Clovis and his Franks defeated in 497 were not the roving, unorganized bands of warriors characteristic of the fourth century. One may question Clovis' supposed conversion to Christianity during the battle, but the fact that this conflict was chosen within which to insert such a story indicates the formidability of Clovis' opponents. Gregory's assertion that the Alemanni gave up battle against Clovis when their *rex* fell,¹¹⁴ and the ability of Clovis and Theodoric to manage and control Alemanni through overlordship¹¹⁵ – impossible in the mid-fourth century – reveal a development and consolidation of authority unknown earlier.

So what altered Alemannic political behaviour? We know Suebi came to the Rhine around 400, and that a union of Alemanni and Suebi occurred sometime between 454, when Sidonius wrote his panegyric on Majorian, and 474, when the Gothic king Thiudimer died. The location of the federated people poses problems, since Suebic groups are definitely known to have been either in *Hispania* or on the middle Danube throughout the fifth century. The language of Jordanes' text, however, indicates the presence of Suebic elements – distinct from those on the Danube or in Hispania – living near and united to Alemanni. That they were invented seems improbable. An author

¹¹³ Castritius, 'Von politischer Vielfalt zur Einheit', pp. 81–4; and Geuenich and Keller, 'Alamannen, Alamannien, alamannisch im frühen Mittelalter', p. 145. Geuenich and Keller add that the general absence of any personalities attached to the phrase *rex Alamannorum* in the sources, which treat the subordination of Alemanni to the Franks, raise objections to the notion of an Alemannic *Großkönigtum*.

¹¹⁴ Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, 2.30. p. 76.

¹¹⁵ Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, pp. 316–17.

might substitute or confuse designations for peoples, but a union recognizes a distinction between two parties.

The processes which brought the Suebic groups into an association with Alemanni are difficult to discern. Perhaps refugees from Gothic wars, or prior wars unrecorded, or perhaps even Suebi who remained along the Rhine when their comrades dashed for *Hispania*,¹¹⁶ all joined themselves to Alemanni over a period of time. Thus, one can imagine a quiet period of informal integration unnoticed in sources punctuated by the formal union noted in Jordanes.

In the end, lack of sources denies a clearer picture. Fifth-century chroniclers and pangyricists were preoccupied with the sacks of Rome and the incursions of Goths and Huns, rather than affairs in *Germania*. Though lack of documentation shrouds the precise sequence of events, the arrival in Alamannia of Suebic elements, which had shown a tendency to generate strong kings elsewhere in *Hispania* and along the mid-Danube, coincides with the reconstitution of the Alemannic gentile structure around powerful kings. The term 'Alemanni' probably expressed the most general level of identity, since subsequent documentation in the early sixth century prefers the term Alemanni. Gregory's account of Clovis' battle-conversion of 497 speaks only of Alemannic, not Suebic, adversaries;¹¹⁷ and Theodoric's correspondence to Clovis in 507 concerning Alemannic affairs fails to mention Suebi.¹¹⁸ Apparently, the neutral collective *alamanni* had served its purpose once again. However, Suebic identities were not completely subsumed, for the degree to which their influence transformed Alemannic political organization in the fifth century lingered in later medieval sources, which refer to the upper-Rhine and Danube region as Swabia.

Conclusions

So what was an Alemannus or Suebus? Biologically, some original Alemanni may have derived from second-century Suebic Semnones, others obviously not, since the neutral designation *alamanni* betrays an attempt to forge an identity between disparate elements against the Roman Empire and neighbouring barbarian peoples, yet preserve local identities and centres of authority. The identity of an Aleman, then, probably depended upon the situation and perspective. To outsiders one belonged to the confederation, to insiders (and sometimes outsi-

¹¹⁶ It is doubtful that all the Rhine-Suebi of 406 moved south for Spain. By analogy, Procopius tells of a Vandal remnant that remained behind on the Rhine in 406 and was absorbed by neighbouring peoples, *De Bellis*, 3.22.1-14.

¹¹⁷ Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, 2.30.

¹¹⁸ Cassiodorus, *Variae*, ed. T. Mommsen, *MGH, AA XII* (Berlin, 1894), 2.41.1-2.

ders) one was a *Juthungus*, *Lentiensis*, *Bucinobantis* or follower of Chonodomarius, and so on. A degree of consensus was attainable, as at the battle of Argenteratum in 357, though autonomous *Kleinkönige* often pursued their own policies.

Drastic differences between first- and second-century Suebi and those of the third and fourth century reveal an alteration of the function and meaning of the gentile term 'Suebi' at some point between 180 and 270. The later Danubian Suebi were not the Tacitean Suebi to scale, but a differently and more cohesively organized people, who lived in a different region and were acculturated to the lifestyle of 'steppe' societies. When Alemanni and Suebi, whose customs and political traditions were dissimilar, forged a shared identity in the later fifth century, a union lay behind the association.

What, then, can we surmise about the nature of the shared Alemannic identity of Alemanni and Suebi? Philological evidence indicated that *alamanni* simply meant 'people', with 'ala'-acting as an intensifier. Asinius Quadratus explained that the term Alemanni reflected a hybrid ethnic composition. Combining the linguistic evidence and Asinius Quadratus' third-century observation, which Agathias reasserted in the sixth, with the observed structure and behaviour of Alemanni coming into the fifth century, indicates that at the heart of the Alemannic myth about themselves lay an exaltation of their own heterogeneity. *Alamanni* continued to offer a collective term around which Suebic and Alemannic elements could rally against Germanic or Roman enemies, but which would not impinge on various foci of authority or preclude other traditions of identity. The persistence of Suebic identity in southern Germany well into the Middle Ages indicates as much. A myth of heterogeneity may have held these elements together in times of crisis and sustained the collective as power accrued to fewer individuals in the late fifth century.

We cannot, like Fredrik Barth,¹¹⁹ investigate the precise mechanisms by which the boundaries of Alemannic identity were maintained, or the complex processes which transformed the Alemannic gentile configuration. Yet one can perceive that in the world of Alemanni and Suebi, where movement of peoples was endemic and allegiances often coalesced around human beings, rather than institutions and pieces of land, a common history or identity did not exclude outsiders as it often does in the modern world. Hence, Alemanni and Suebi, who had different traditions and histories, acculturated one another to fashion a new grouping with the familiar term Alemanni. This fluidity of

¹¹⁹ Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Boston, 1969).

identity was arrested with conquest of Alemanni by the Merovingian Franks, who, in Roman fashion, territorialized ethnic consciousness and established *Alamannia* as an administrative district of their realm.¹²⁰

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¹²⁰ P.J. Geary, 'Ethnic Identity as a Situational Construct in the Early Middle Ages', *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien* 113 (1983), pp. 15–26.