

1. Northern Antiquity: The Ethnology of Liberty in Eighteenth-Century Europe

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Historians of ideas have generally paid scant attention to the ethnological dimension of eighteenth-century political thought. While it is a historiographical commonplace that a kind of speculative anthropology underpinned many central features of eighteenth-century political thought, including contractarianism and stadialism, there has been a reluctance on the part of historians to acknowledge that ethnology – that is, knowledge about ethnicities and races – had any significant part to play in political thought. This is eminently understandable. For it is conventionally understood that the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed a marked disjunction in political discourse, with the displacement of universal humanistic values by dark particularisms, most obviously romantic nationalism and scientific racialism.³ Both of these new strains of discourse accorded a central role to ethnic factors in political analysis and argument. By contrast, so most historians – including this one – believe, the pre-modern world had been largely devoid of nationalist and racialist doctrines; its political thought had focussed upon laws and institutions rather than peoples; and where peoples had been the subject of political inquiry it was in order that they might yield up universal truths about humanity and the political condition.⁴

Prior to the late eighteenth century ethnicity was largely construed as a theological problem, not as a political concern. The principal matter of ethnicity was to be found in chapters ten and eleven of Genesis. These chapters related the peopling of the world by the various descendants of Noah after the universal Flood and the confusion of languages at Babel. Here, orthodox readers of scripture from both Catholic and Protestant confessions believed, was the crucial unimpeachable evidence required for making sense of the world's peoples, cultures and languages. There was some scope for intellectual debate within the parameters of confessional orthodoxy. How many languages had been created at Babel? How were the various races and nations

of the world related through Noah's sons Ham, Shem and Japhet? By the same token, the boundaries of early modern ethnology marked the frontiers of permitted religious speculation. In particular, polygenist suggestions that all the races of the world might stem from a plurality of racial ancestors and might not, therefore, share a common descent from Noah – or ultimately from Adam – were deemed heretical, and, brought forth the anathemas of theologians. Themes of ethnicity, race, culture and language belonged to a realm of discourse adjacent to theology and at a considerable remove from politics. The higher profile enjoyed by these themes within a para-theological sphere contributed, in part, to the limited salience of ethnicity – at least relative to modern expectations – within political analysis and debate.⁵

The traditional concerns of the orthodox with the unity of mankind persisted into the Enlightenment. Indeed, the Enlightenment's attempts to formulate a robust science of society were predicated upon basic uniformities in human nature across races, continents and centuries. Circumstances – environmental, material, and institutional – might change, and with them manners. But the basic stuff of humanity remained the same. Otherwise the comparative method and the conjectural approach to history would become impossibilities; and moral philosophy itself would amount to a fool's errand. The extension of the experimental method from the natural sciences to the human sciences – what has been called the Enlightenment Project – rested upon the underlying unity of human nature. Thus, it was not only conservative clerics who strove to rebut the polygenist heresy associated with the mid-seventeenth-century Biblical critic Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676); so too did the conventional mainstream of the moderate Enlightenment.⁶ Only on the fringes of the Enlightenment – among outspoken critics of priestcraft and Biblical authority such as Voltaire – did polygenesis – the idea of multiple creations of distinct races – gain intellectual purchase. According to Michèle Duchet in his history of eighteenth-century French anthropology, Buffon's scheme of monogenesis was more typical of the French Enlightenment than Voltairean polygenesis.⁷ Similarly, when the Scottish thinker Lord Kames (1696-1782) appeared to toy with a polygenist anthropology, his speculations were drowned out by a chorus of complaint within the Scottish Enlightenment.⁸

Ethnicity was invisible in other ways. Silence reigned in eighteenth-century political thought about the lack of congruence between ethnici-

ties and allegiances in the European states system. Commentators did not judge the inter-state transfers of populations and territories at the Peace of Utrecht in 1713 according to benchmarks of ethnic coherence or by the lights of nationhood. On the other hand, eighteenth-century political theorists did ponder the geographical limits of effective self-government: how big might a republic be before its very size undermined its constitution? Monarchy, conventional wisdom held, was the only form of government capable of effective rule over imperial-sized territories. Some critics did challenge this view. Montesquieu, for instance, was alert to the possibilities inherent within *républiques fédératives* of reconciling self-government with territorial expanse, while Hume questioned received assumptions regarding the politics of extent.⁹ Nevertheless, there was no parallel debate about the ethnic limits of effective governance. Similarly, political commentators did worry about the overconcentration of political power in large, expansive empires; but the issues at stake largely concerned the balance of power, not the cultural and ethnic incoherence of polyethnic, multicultural empire. The ethnic integrity of political communities was not on the agenda of political discussion.

Of course, character stood at the heart of the classical tradition of political thought. Civic humanists or classical republicans obsessed over the character, manners or virtue required of peoples who embarked on the risky enterprise of republican self-rule. Yet this obsession rarely manifested itself in an interest in the ethnic provenance of a people's character, morals or virtue. The histories of the republics of classical antiquity opened a valued window onto the moral and political snares – timeless, non-culturally specific and intrinsic to human nature – which dogged all attempts at self-governance. In his 'Discourses upon Tacitus' – which were translated into French in 1742, and republished again in France in 1749 and twice in 1751¹⁰ – Thomas Gordon (d.1750), a radical whig journalist and historian, argued that ancient communities had experienced drastic internal transformations of character, culture and morality. A declension in virtue or morality could render a people – say the Athenians, the Spartans or the Romans – almost unrecognisable to its ancestors, notwithstanding underlying continuities in culture and ethnicity. For instance, Gordon contrasted the Athenians and Spartans of later centuries with those communities in the virtuous eras of Solon and Lycurgus, contending that successor generations 'seemed afterwards another race of men, though their blood and climate were still

the same.’ The same significant disjunction could be observed, Gordon claimed, in the case of the Romans: ‘Between the Roman people under the commonwealth, and the Roman people under the dominion of the emperors, the difference was as great as between different nations, and they only resembled each other in language and dress. They were indeed as different, or rather as opposite, as men uncorrupted and free are to debauched slaves.’¹¹ Few early modern interpreters read the classics for the illumination they cast upon the ethnic particularities of Greek and Roman political cultures; rather the classics were valued for the insight they afforded into the human predicament and the problems of government in general.

Nevertheless, the message of Tacitus’s *Germania* pointed in another direction, and significantly qualified the conventional non-ethnocentric humanistic legacy of the classics. Written in 98 A.D. Tacitus’s *Germania* was not only a work of ethnography which traced the culture and manners of the Germanic peoples beyond the northern bounds of the Roman Empire; it also made a point of contrasting the vigorous, libertarian way of life enjoyed by the Germans with the declension of post-republican Rome. Indeed, Howard Weinbrot has argued that the *Germania* transformed the reputation of the cynical historian of Roman politics, turning ‘the constitutional historian of the declining European South’ into ‘the constitutional ethnographer of the growing European North.’¹² The *Germania* was one of the foundational texts of early modern European political culture, and it retained this status throughout the eighteenth century.¹³ Its influence in the early modern Germanic world is not difficult to explain, lauding as it did the hardy, freedom-loving culture of the ancient ancestors of the German people.¹⁴ However, the *Germania* was equally central to the political cultures of eighteenth-century Britain and France. According to the English whig cleric and historian Samuel Squire (c.1714-66) ‘so great is the conformity, so exact the resemblance which has been remarked between the customs, laws, and modes of governing in use amongst the several nations...however distinguished from each other by different names, that whatever is affirmed by the ancients of Germany in general, may with equal truth be applied to each particular state of it’.¹⁵ Similarly, Edward Gibbon took the view that the ‘most civilised nations of modern Europe issued from the woods of Germany, and in the rude institutions of those barbarians we may still distinguish the original principles of our present laws and manners.’¹⁶

In both England and France antiquaries traced the origins of their ancestors – the Saxons and the Franks – and, significantly, the origins of their political institutions, back to the *Germania*. Indeed, Samuel Kliger argued that it was because the *Germania* ‘embodied’ a ‘full description’ of Germanic institutions, that it became ‘the most important text in the Gothic tradition in England.’¹⁷ Catherine Volpilhac-Augier has explored the central role played by the *Germania* in eighteenth-century French political culture in the debates between Germanists and Romanists, that is between broad schools of historico-political interpretation of the French state as either a Germanic constitution which took its rise in the customs of the Franks or as a monarchy which – despite the arrival of the Franks – preserved the ancient authority of Roman imperial majesty. The *Germania* – precisely because it offered a full description of the government of the ancient Germans – became the central textual evidence for those French political commentators who believed that there had been a decisive Germanic discontinuity in the ancient history of late Roman Gaul.¹⁸ These parallel national cults of the *Germania* drew strength from the attractive picture the text provided, so its champions claimed, of free proto-Anglo-Saxons and proto-Franks¹⁹ governed not by absolute monarchies but by mixed constitutions in which the power of the monarch was limited. In England the ancient Germanic pedigree of the English nation and its institutions bolstered the case for Whiggish Revolution principles, justifying the enforced abdication of James II in 1688; in France it boosted the arguments of those who argued that – whatever the apparent powers of the French monarchy since the era of Louis XIV – kings of France were bound by an ancient constitution to govern through intermediaries, whether the *noblesse d’épée* or the parlements. These bodies lay at the heart of the two distinct anti-absolutist discourses of eighteenth-century France, which furthered respectively the claims of the grand nobility of the sword and the judicially-robed nobility of the bench; yet as Franklin Ford noted, ‘both the robe and the sword were committed to the Germanic theory of French history’. The history of the Franks was central to political contestation in eighteenth-century France, with Ford counting no fewer than twenty-seven works on the Merovingian period alone published in France between 1715 and 1748.²⁰

It was the proto-Frankish spin imparted to Tacitus’s account of the ancient Germans which made the *Germania* such a canonical text within eighteenth-century French political culture. In 1753 a volume was pub-

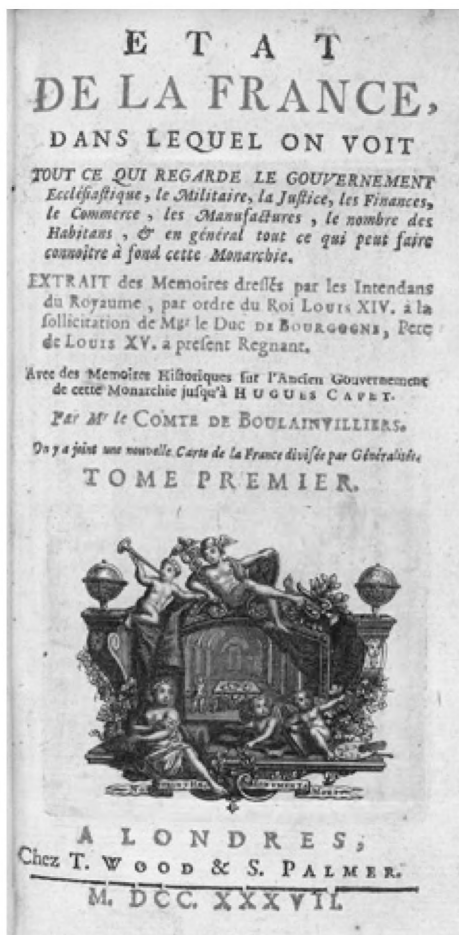
lished in Paris which combined a French translation of the *Germania* with an edition of *Les mœurs et coutumes des François, dans les premiers tems de la monarchie* (1712) by the Abbé Louis Legendre (1655-1733). As Legendre's text made clear, the Franks were a Germanic people, and had been governed by institutions similar to those described by Tacitus in the *Germania*.²¹ The Abbé Rene Aubert de Vertot (1655-1735), one of the most prolific and popular historians operating in eighteenth-century France, published a paper in the proceedings of the Académie des belles-lettres entitled 'Parallèle des mœurs des François avec celles des Germains', which noted close similarities between the manners of the Germans, as described by Tacitus, and those of the Franks described by Gregory of Tours.²² In his 'Remarques sur *la Germanie de Tacite*', the Abbé Jean Philippe Rene de la Bléterie (1696-1772) noted that while there had been undoubted variations in the forms of government found among the ancient Germanic peoples, in general liberty had prevailed in the German world, with the power of kings constrained, for the most part, within narrow bounds. In particular, the ancient kings of the Franks, La Bléterie claimed, had been limited monarchs of this sort.²³

Tacitus's *Germania* was not the only ancient text to inspire interest in the Gothic peoples. The *Getica* or *De Getarum sive Gothorum origine* of the Gothic historian Jordanes, written in 551 A.D. retailed the history of the Gothic peoples. In particular, Jordanes's famous description of Scandza as the *officina gentium*, the storehouse of the Gothic nations, became a common trope of early modern European historiography, with several editions appearing between the late sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries. It served as a check upon national solipsism, reminding historians that the pedigree of parliamentary institutions was to be found Continent-wide in the pan-European wanderings and settlements of the Goths. In addition, the common reception of Tacitus and Jordanes as variant accounts of the same ethnic matter led to some perplexity and vigorous debate over the ethnogenesis of the Germanic or Gothic peoples, but did nothing to undermine the widespread recognition that in these texts was to be found the origins and ancient liberties of the peoples who now comprised the nations of western Europe.

Under the twin inspirations of Tacitus and Jordanes, eighteenth-century England and France witnessed remarkably similar cults of the an-

cient barbarian north. England's Whiggish writers celebrated the wider Gothic heritage from which the English constitution had derived. In his *History of the High Court of Parliament* (1731) the English antiquary Thornhagh Gurdon (1663-1733) asserted that the 'original of the English government' was 'much after the manner of that brought into Germany by the Saxons, by the Franks into Gaul, the Visigoths into Spain'.²⁴ Medieval Europe, in John Oldmixon's vision, had been a patchwork of free Gothic nations: 'The great swarms of people that came out of the North, overran the Roman Empire, and settled themselves in Italy, Spain, Africa, France and England' had controlled their kings, being ruled by the kings' '*concilia magna*, or parliaments, without whose consent no laws were enacted, or scarce anything of importance done.'²⁵

French political culture shared some of the same Gothicist traits. The leading champion of the *thèse nobiliaire* was Henri de Boulainvilliers, comte de Saint-Saire (1658-1722).²⁶ Boulainvilliers's posthumously published works on Frankish history were central to French political debate during the second quarter of the eighteenth century, and were also read in England. Indeed, a French edition of his *Histoire des anciens parlements de France* was published in London in 1737. After all, English Whigs and French constitutionalists alike seemed to draw upon the same matter of northern antiquity, and there were also English editions of the work of Boulainvilliers's sixteenth-century Germanist predecessor, François Hotman. Indeed, Boulainvilliers, like most eighteenth-century Gothicists, had broad pan-European sympathies, and set the ancient Frankish constitution within a wider European context of Gothic liberties. Parliamentary institutions could be found under different names within the several barbarian kingdoms which had arisen in Europe upon the demise of the Roman Empire. Wherever one looked in early medieval European history, there were national assemblies: 'La même institution se trouve par tout, quoique que sous de noms differens, comme ceux de Diètes en Allemagne et en Pologne; de Parlements en Angleterre; d'Etats en France, en Suede et Dannemarc; de Cortès en Arragon, en Portugal et même en Castille'. The pedigree of these various parliamentary institutions Boulainvilliers ascribed to the characteristics of the barbarian peoples, who had come from lands outside the Empire, either 'du fond du Nord, ou des extremités de la Scythie'. In eighteenth-century ethnology, as it happened, Goths and Scythians were overlapping categories of ethnic classification. Boulain-



The title page of Henri de Boulainvilliers *Etat de la France* (London 1737).

villiers conceded that these barbarian peoples had lacked the sophisticated political wisdom of the ancient Greeks; yet, despite their unphilosophical simplicity, they had nonetheless managed to come up with a practical solution to their political needs. They required monarchs to lead them in battle, but, equally, they had been aware of the inconveniences which might ensue from unconstrained monarchical authority, and had established 'assemblées communes' to circumscribe the authority of their kings. Such, of course, had been the case of the ancient Franks. Under the ancient Frankish constitution kings had ruled with the consent of the assemblées générales of the Champ de Mars or the Champ de Mai.²⁷

In a celebrated passage of his *Lettres persanes* Montesquieu traced the origins of Europe's distinctive pattern of government to the various northern nations which had burst out of their Nordic homeland and established barbarian kingdoms upon the ruins of the Roman Empire. What characterised these peoples was their libertarian manners: 'Ces peuples étaient libres; et ils bornaient si fort l'autorité de leurs rois, qu'ils n'étaient proprement que des chefs ou des généraux'. Thus, although founded upon force, the kingdoms of medieval Europe had not been subjected to the yoke of despotic conquerors. Instead these freedom-loving northern nations had established limited monarchy as the basic form of government in post-Roman Europe: 'les peuples du nord, libres dans leur pays, s'emparant des provinces romaines, ne donnèrent point à leurs chefs une grande autorité. Quelques-uns même de ces peuples, comme les Vandales en Afrique, les Goths en Espagne, déposaient leurs rois dès qu'ils n'en étaient pas satisfaits: et, chez les autres, l'autorité du prince était bornée de mille manières différentes: un grand nombre de seigneurs la partageaient avec lui; les guerres n'étaient entreprises que de leur consentement: les dépouilles étaient partagées entre le chef et les soldats; aucun impôt en faveur du prince; les lois étaient faites dans les assemblées de la nation.' Limitations upon monarchy, Montesquieu contended, constituted 'le principe fondamental' of the many states which the northern peoples set up across Europe.²⁸

However, in Britain this pan-European identification with the Goths took on a distinctive patriotic colouring. Britons were acutely conscious that they alone of the Gothic kingdoms of medieval Europe preserved intact their constitutional heritage. The British parliament created by the Anglo-Scottish parliamentary union of 1707 was a continuation of the medieval English parliament – and technically speaking also embodied the liberties of the medieval Scottish parliament – while the English Protestant colonists of Ireland perpetuated the liberties of the medieval Irish parliament. Yet elsewhere in Europe Gothic constitutions had yielded in recent centuries to the nascent powers of fiscal-military despotisms. Britons celebrated their avoidance of such a fate, though an awareness of British exceptionalism was often tinged with a keen sense of anxiety that Britain's ancient Gothic constitution might well be the next to fall. Nevertheless there was a widespread realisation that the recent historical trajectory of Britain's Gothic inheritance diverged widely from that of other kingdoms. In 1698 the Irish

patriot William Molyneux (1656-98) argued that parliamentary government, 'once so universal all over Europe, is now almost vanished from amongst the nations thereof. Our king's dominions are the only supporters of this noble Gothic constitution, save only what little remains may be found thereof in Poland.'²⁹ Similarly, over seventy years later, the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* noted that the 'mixed form of government' bequeathed to medieval Europe by the Goths was 'now driven almost out of Europe, in some parts of which we can hardly find the shadow of liberty left, and in many there is no more than the name of it remaining. France, Spain, Portugal, Denmark and part of Germany, were all, an age or two ago, limited monarchies, governed by princes...But now all their valuable rights are swallowed up by the arbitrary power of their princes: whilst we in Great Britain have happily preserved this noble and ancient Gothic constitution, which all our neighbours once enjoyed.'³⁰

There were other national variations, as one might expect, in the eighteenth-century cult of northern antiquity. In France it took on the colouring of caste politics, the noblesse insisting upon a distinctive ethnic genealogy which distinguished the aristocracy and its privileges from the conquered Gallo-Roman peasantry of the third estate. In England, while there was a major political and legal debate between whigs and tory-royalists over the question of whether the Norman Conquest of 1066 amounted to a significant discontinuity in the history of England's parliament and common law,³¹ this debate did not acquire the caste overtones of the French debate between Germanists and Romanists. In England whigs and tories both avoided the caste implications of the Norman Conquest, and the case against a Norman aristocracy was confined to the radical fringes of political culture where England's prevailing political order was denounced as a Norman Yoke imposed upon the freedom-loving peasantry of Anglo-Saxon England.³² However, one should not exaggerate these local contrasts in the cult of northern antiquity. What now seems so remarkable is that – in spite of the huge differences in political and social structure between eighteenth-century Britain and France – the cult of the Gothic past should enrapture the literati of both cultures in so very similar ways.

Many of the most important issues raised by the cult of northern antiquity surface in one of its most influential texts, Paul-Henri Mallet's *Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarck* (Copenhagen, 1755). Mallet

(1730-1807) was born in Geneva and came to Copenhagen in 1752 as Professor of Belles-Lettres. Absolutist Denmark had since the 1690s enjoyed a bad press, not only among English speakers where its contemporary rottenness had been exposed by Molesworth's *Account of Denmark*,³³ but also in the francophone Enlightenment. Molesworth's black analysis of the Danish descent into despotism had not only gone through various English editions, but had also enjoyed a similar success in French translation. In France as well as England, Denmark had become a by-word for modern despotism. The Danes needed an objective foreign-born historian to put the record straight, ideally in the language of the Enlightenment. Frederick V's chief ministers Johann Bernstorff (1712-72) and Adam Moltke (1710-92) recruited Mallet for this task in the hope that he might present a more nuanced version of Denmark's history to francophone Europe. However, Mallet's *Histoire de Dannemarc* was preceded by a book-length *Introduction* (1755) which explored the manners of the ancient freedom-loving peoples of northern Europe. Mallet's *Introduction* was also followed the next year by a companion volume, *Monumens de la mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes et particulièrement des anciens Scandinaves: pour servir de supplément et de preuves à l'Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc*, in which he published French translations of the Icelandic Edda and various other pieces of Nordic literature. Mallet enjoyed a tremendous success with the *Introduction*, and it, along with its supplement, the *Monumens*, went through further French editions in 1763 and 1787.³⁴ Moreover, Mallet's *Introduction* and *Monumens* were published in a two-volume English translation by the antiquary Thomas Percy (1729-1811) in 1770 under the title *Northern Antiquities*.

In certain ways Mallet's account of northern antiquity in the *Introduction* ran along conventional lines. Most obviously, Tacitus's *Germania* featured prominently in his treatment of the political culture of the ancient north. Tacitus's account of the institutions and freedom-loving manners of the Germans contained, so Mallet wrote, 'toutes les notions principales du gouvernement des anciens Scythes et Celtes'.³⁵ However, Mallet's study of the Edda brought a new dimension to his appreciation of Tacitus. For the Icelandic sagas, so Mallet believed, provided historic corroborating evidence to confirm the hitherto unique ethnographic materials found in the *Germania*. Mallet also became involved in the ongoing antiquarian debate over the origins of the Goths. This debate had originated with the claims of the Swedish antiquary and polymath,

Olaus Rudbeck, in his *Atlantica* (1679-1702), that Gotland had been the Atlantis of the ancients and that all the peoples descended of Japhet had come from ancient Scandinavia. While many antiquaries scoffed at the outrageous claims made by Rudbeck, there was a more serious issue, which drew the attention of figures as eminent as Bishop Edward Stillingfleet (1635-99), Montesquieu, and the poet Thomas Gray (1716-71), about the original homeland of the Goths.³⁶ Some scholars argued that Jordanes had committed a major blunder in confusing the Goths and the Getes, while others, such as the late seventeenth-century English antiquary Robert Sheringham (c.1604-78), argued that the Goths and Getes had indeed been one people.³⁷ Had the Goths come from Scandinavia, as Montesquieu believed, or from Germany itself, or perhaps ultimately from the Scythian regions of west-central Asia? Mallet adopted the third position, arguing that the Getes, an ancient tribe associated with the area around the Black and Caspian Seas were 'sans doute les ancêtres de ceux qui s'établirent ensuite dans le Nord.'³⁸

However, Mallet also touched on other issues which help to parse the eighteenth-century ethnology of liberty. Like other commentators on the libertarian North Mallet argued for the ethnic provenance of European liberties and the institutions in which they were enshrined. But why were the northern peoples different? Did this mean that race was an independent factor in political analysis? Did it carry the further implication that the world was peopled by a plurality of races, each with its own peculiar characteristics? Mallet's ethnological beliefs drew heavily upon Montesquieu's theories of climate and physiology. The distinguishing characteristics of the northern peoples were not the product of innate or aboriginal racial difference, suggested Montesquieu and Mallet; rather they were the product of climatic conditions which had served to invigorate the spirit of the northern peoples. In book xiv of *De l'esprit des lois* Montesquieu set out the physiological mechanics which he believed underpinned significant emotional and moral differences between peoples. Cold air, Montesquieu argued, affected the extremities of the external fibres of the body, rendering them more elastic, which in turn speeded up the blood's return from the extremities of the body to the heart. In addition, cold air also contracted the fibres, as a result also increasing their force. As a result, cold air produced a superiority of strength in the body which, in turn, inspired boldness and courage in the inhabitants of cold regions. The opposite trends took effect in warmer regions.³⁹ Although a disciple of Montesquieu's

in these matters, Mallet nevertheless attempted to answer the irritating puzzle which confounded a straightforward environmentalist explanation of Nordic characteristics. If the principal causes of the ancient libertarian manners of Scandinavia had been the climate, why had the effect of the cold climate not persisted into the present? There were two elements to Mallet's answer. In the first place, Mallet argued that in primitive times manners were the direct result of the climate, but as history unfolded and peoples became less isolated and borrowed more from one another, moral causes complicated and took over from physical causes in determining manners and customs: 'une nation ne cède aveuglement à l'influence du climat que dans le tems de son enfance.' In addition, Mallet also speculated that Europe had been colder in antiquity than it was in modern times. Did not the ancients describe regions such as Germany, Thrace and Pannonia as snow-covered for the majority of the year? Similarly, there were accounts in the ancients of the Loire and Rhone regularly freezing over, and even of the Tiber freezing.⁴⁰

A deeper question, one of the central preoccupations of the eighteenth-century ethnology of liberty, concerned the fundamental contrasts in political life which differentiated the experiences of Europe and Asia. Why were these adjacent continents so markedly different in the underlying patterns of their forms of government? Mallet – like other Gothacists, such as Boulainvilliers – celebrated the Gothic forms of government bequeathed to the various nations of Europe as a pan-continental legacy which served to distinguish European governments – however corrupted in their ancient constitutions – from the dead hand of Asiatic despotism. The manners and spirit of the ancient barbarians of northern Europe had fostered an enduring aversion across Europe to slavery and tyranny. But why did the history of Asia follow such a strikingly different pattern? For, as Mallet noted, the peoples of the adjacent continent had succumbed for most of their history to absolutism: 'tandis qu'à côté d'eux, depuis des tems presque aussi reculés, on voit la plupart des nations de l'Asie, soumises à des maîtres absolus'.⁴¹

It has become a standard assumption in the decades since the late Edward Said began his unmasking of the European Orientalist tradition to ascribe such distinctions to a deep inlaid European caricature of Oriental otherness, whether religious, racist, or cultural. Certainly, Mallet made no attempt to refine his picture of Asiatic despotism, but pre-

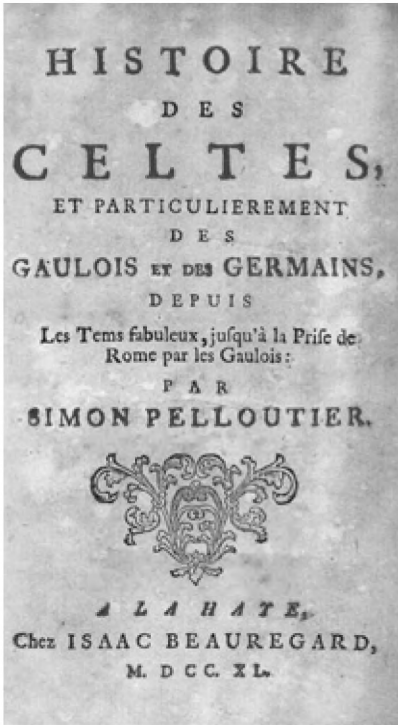
sented it in very stark terms as the alien antithesis of European liberty, a convenient foil for his account of European exceptionalism. Indeed, Oriental despotism became one of the clichés of eighteenth-century political discourse. Yet the differences between Asiatic government and those of Europe also provoked some insightful lines of analysis which operated at some remove from crude Eurocentric prejudice. Montesquieu, for example, in book XVII of *De l'esprit des lois* advanced a geographical explanation of the political contrasts he perceived between the governments of Europe and Asia. Whereas the natural features of the European continent contributed towards the creation of a cluster of states of moderate extent, the great plains of Asia rendered it suitable for imperial government. Thus, while Montesquieu's explanation for the contrast between Asia and Europe, served to qualify the Nordic Gothicism which can be found elsewhere in his work, it also distanced his interpretation of Asiatic despotism from racialism.

However, there was also a neglected current of eighteenth-century thought which ran decidedly counter both to the standard Enlightenment contrast of East and West and to postmodern Orientalist assumptions about European attitudes to the Asiatic Other. Indeed, as John Pocock notes, during the Enlightenment commentators on historical geography treated the North as 'an elastic concept'. For Voltaire it stretched as far east as Siberia; on the other hand, the learned French antiquary and orientalist Joseph de Guignes (1721-1800) seemed to regard Scandinavia, in the words of Pocock, as 'a promontory of northern Asia'.⁴² Given this geographical imprecision, it is perhaps unsurprising that for some eighteenth-century antiquaries northern antiquity was part of a wider Eurasian sphere of libertarian manners and limited governments. Asia, it seemed, had not been a uniform scene of despotic desolation. The Tartar peoples had been different. Indeed, did the Tartars not hail from the North – albeit northern Asia? Moreover, were the manners of the Tartars not Goth-like in certain respects? The English legal antiquary James Ibbetson (1717-81) proposed a Eurasian approach to the history of the northern peoples: 'the Saxon on the shore of the Baltic was not to be distinguished from the Hun on the banks of the Araxes'. Ibbetson contended that 'the various tribes of barbarians that inhabited the northern regions of Europe and Asia were closely connected in their manners, customs, and institutions', perceiving that, although they differed in some minor respects, the same basic characteristics and forms of government were found among the north-

ern barbarians in both Europe and Asia.⁴³ The Scots orientalist John Richardson (1740/1-95) claimed in his *Dissertation on the Languages, Literature and Manners of the Eastern Nations* (1777) that there appeared 'every probability' that Tartary was 'the great *officina gentium*' and that the Gothic institutions which enshrined 'European' liberties were ultimately Asiatic in provenance. Richardson argued that the Tartars had held parliaments called 'kouriltai', which bore 'so near a resemblance to the diets of the Gothic nations', that he suspected that this might provide convincing support for the hypothesis of ancient Tartar settlements in Germany and Scandinavia. Among the 'several strong traces of Gothic government' which he detected among the Tartars, he perceived 'the ruder draughts of states general, of parliaments, of juries'. Similarly, Richardson found close resemblances to Gothic feudal practices in the customs of the Tartars, despite the fact that the pastoral and nomadic Tartars did not have settled land tenures. Indeed, the feudal system, which could still be found, for example, in the 'zayms' and 'timariots' of the Ottoman world, was, he contended, an eastern institution which had been transplanted to Europe and subsequently modified by the situation of a settled landed society.⁴⁴ This connection had also surfaced in the lectures on government delivered by Adam Smith at the University of Glasgow. According to student notes of his lectures Smith took the view that the Gothic constitutions of medieval Europe had taken their 'rise from the same Tartarian species of government'.⁴⁵ Along similar lines, French scholarship also refined traditional renderings of a monolithic Asia. In his massive five-volume *Histoire générale des Huns, des Turcs, des Mogols et des autres Tartares occidentaux* (1756-8) de Guignes subtly rejected the prevailing notion that the history of the Orient was an unedifying and tedious tableau depicting a lethargic political stasis. Rather, the Orient had its own energetic history of barbarian irruptions and 'grandes révolutions'. De Guignes too noted the existence of the couroultai, the 'assemblée générale' of the Mongols.⁴⁶ It was never made entirely clear in these accounts of Eurasian libertarianism whether the close resemblances between the manners of the Goths and Tartars were to be ascribed to ethnicity. Were the Goths and Tartars kindred nations descended from a common northern Eurasian stock? Or had the Goths and Tartars been exposed merely to the same sociological situation as primitive barbarian peoples under the regime of the same kind of cold climate? This ethnological ambiguity remains difficult to unravel.

However, other ethnological ambiguities which had clouded early eighteenth-century knowledge of ethnic relationships were to be decisively clarified in the wake of Mallet's work. Not that Mallet's *Introduction* solved the problem; rather it served to provoke a solution from Mallet's severest critic, his English translator Thomas Percy. While some antiquaries and historians traced the constitutional features of European government back to the libertarian characteristics and parliamentary bodies of the Gothic peoples who had conquered the Roman Empire; others, such as Mallet, contended that these same manners and institutions could also be found among the Celtic peoples of ancient Europe. Indeed, they went further arguing that Goths and Celts were together part of a common ethnic stock, a Celto-Scythian race from which most of the peoples of western Europe descended. Indeed, several eighteenth-century literati took the view that Caesar's *Gallic War* and Tacitus's *Germania* described similar manners and political institutions among the ancient Gauls and Germans, providing confirmation of the assumption that the Celts and Germans were one and the same people.

In his *Introduction* Mallet had drawn heavily upon, and openly acknowledged his debt to, Simon Pelloutier's *Histoire des Celtes, et particulièrement des Gaulois et des Germains* (1740), an influential work which went through further editions in 1750 and 1770-1. Pelloutier (1694-1757) came from an exiled Lyonese Huguenot family. Born in Leipzig, he ministered to the French church in Berlin and also served as librarian of the Berlin Academy. Pelloutier claimed that the ancient Celts had cherished the idea of liberty and had subscribed to the view that 'un peuple libre doit avoir le droit de choisir lui-même ses magistrats, et de leur prescrire les loix par lesquelles il veut être gouverné.' The authority of Celtic leaders had been limited by the powers of 'l'assemblée générale', to which these rulers were held accountable. Within such assemblies all issues had been decided 'à la pluralité des voix', a procedure which Pelloutier identified as 'le plus ferme rempart de la liberté des nations celtiques.' Not only did Pelloutier ascribe Germanic characteristics to the Celtic peoples: he believed, as the title of his work suggested, that the Germanic and the Gaulish peoples had both been parts of the wider Celtic race, and that German was a descendant of the ancient language of the Celts. Indeed, Pelloutier argued that antiquaries should not be misled by the multiple names attaching to ancient nations, noting 'divers noms que les peuples Celtes portoient autre-



The title page of Simon Pelloutier *Histoire des Celtes* (La Haye 1740).

fois', including 'Scythes', 'Iberes', 'Gaulois' and 'Teutons'.⁴⁷ However strange Pelloutier's – or indeed Mallet's – ethnic categories seem to modern eyes, they were intellectually respectable in an age of Enlightenment, when ethnology remained indebted to seventeenth-century paradigms of ethnological and linguistic classification.

Between the early seventeenth century and the mid eighteenth century the dominant paradigm of ethnic classification was that formulated by the German geographer Philip Cluverius (1580-1622). In the Cluverian scheme – set out in his *Germania antiqua* (1616) – the Celts were closely related to the Germans. Europe, Cluverius argued, had been populated by two distinct ethnic groupings, the Sarmatians and the Celts. The Sarmatians were the people we would now describe as the Slavs, while the peoples listed by Cluverius under the rubric of 'Celts' included Gauls, Britons, Germans, Saxons and Scythians.⁴⁸ It became common to treat Germanic and Celtic peoples together as cognate elements in the ethnological history of Europe, as, for example, in the *An-*

tiquitates selectae septentrionales et celticae (Hanover, 1720) of the German antiquary Johann Georg Keyser (1693-1743).

However, it should also be noted that the early modern idea of the Celts differed considerably from our own. Seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century philologists did not always identify the Gaelic peoples as part of the 'Celtic' group. The philological consensus in early modern Europe identified the Goidelic languages – Scots Gaelic and Irish – as distant tongues with no apparent connection to the other languages of Europe, including the Brythonic languages, such as Welsh and Breton (which modern linguistics now groups with Goidelic as the Celtic branch of the Indo-European language group). On the other hand, the Germanic languages were held to be closely related to Brythonic within the vast, baggy and loosely defined Ur-European category of Celtic, or sometimes Scythian, or indeed Celto-Scythian languages and peoples.⁴⁹ No less a figure than Leibniz took the view that the Brythonic languages, the closest surviving relatives of ancient Gaulish, were kin to the Teutonic.⁵⁰ Although such pioneering figures as George Buchanan (1506-82) and Edward Lhuyd (1660-1709) did identify links between the p- and q- branches of the Celtic languages, most early modern philologists tended to group the Brythonic languages with the German as part of a Celto-Scythian supergroup, and tended to miss the connections between the Brythonic languages and the Goidelic languages which often tended to be excluded from the ranks of the Celto-Scythian languages.⁵¹ In other words, it was quite common for the Gaelic peoples to be excluded from the category of Celtic, while it was just as common for the German peoples and languages to be awarded that distinction. However, to complicate matters even further, there were some philologists, such as the German scholar Justus Georg Schottel (1612-72), who did include the Goidelic within the Celto-Scythian grouping, though without overturning the Celtic-Germanic connection.⁵²

Only with the publication in 1770 of Percy's subversive edition of Mallet's *Introduction* did a more familiar distinction between Celts and Germans become an established feature of the currency of literary and ethnological discussion, though the new system of classification had also surfaced in the *Vindiciae Celticae* (1754) of Johann Daniel Schoepflin (1694-1771).⁵³ Indeed, in the late 1750s and early 1760s, as Margaret Clunies Ross notes, Percy had often employed the formulation 'Celtic or Runic' when referring to Old Norse poetry.⁵⁴ Whereas Mallet's in-

fluent work had followed the conventional Cluverian line of Celto-German affinity, the editorial apparatus of Percy's English version – entitled *Northern Antiquities* – broke decidedly from conventional wisdom. Indeed Percy defiantly set out to challenge 'an opinion that has been a great source of mistake and confusion to many learned writers of the ancient history of Europe, viz., that of the ancient Gauls and Germans, the Britons and Saxons, to have been originally one and the same people; thus confounding the antiquities of the Gothic and Celtic nations.' Moreover, Percy insisted that the Celts and Germans had 'differed no less in their institutions and laws' than in their languages and mythologies. In particular, he noted that 'the Celtic nations' did 'not appear to have had that equal plan of liberty, which was the peculiar honour of all the Gothic tribes.'⁵⁵ Percy's disaggregation of the Celts and the Germans and his dismissal of the Celtic association with ancient freedom would lead in time to the new ethnic caricature that the Celts were a slavish people, unfit for liberty, and, ultimately, to the view that the Celts and the Germans were physically of different races. Indeed, within twenty years of the appearance of Percy's *Northern Antiquities* the Scottish antiquary John Pinkerton, a Celtophobe and polygenist in the Voltairean mould, had published *A dissertation on the origin and progress of the Scythians or Goths* (1787), an account of the ethnology and history of Europe centred on the innate racial distinction between freedom-loving Goths and lazy, slavish Celts.⁵⁶ Mallet's ethnology of liberty had been turned inside out and infused with racialist distinctions. However, even in Pinkerton's Scotland the old ethnological paradigm still had its adherents. 'Tacitus ascribes to the old rude Germans all the virtues which Ossian ascribes to his heroes, who were originally the same people, and had the same customs, religion and laws,' wrote the Reverend John Smith of Kilbrandon, whose *Galic Antiquities* (1780) complacently lumped together Scandinavian scalds and Celtic bards.

Mallet's *Introduction* also provided inspiration for another ideological turning point, of much greater significance. The gradual transition towards romantic nationalism was inaugurated during the third quarter of the eighteenth century under the influence of a group of mutually reinforcing texts, of which Mallet's *Introduction* and *Monumens* were of central importance. These texts also included James Macpherson's *Fragments* and his reconstituted Ossianic epics, supposedly from the third century A.D., *Fingal* and *Temora*; Rousseau's *Du contrat social*; the various works of Herder on language and culture; and the discussion

Northern Antiquities:
 O R,
 A DESCRIPTION
 O F T H E
 Manners, Customs, Religion and Laws
 O F T H E
 A N C I E N T D A N E S,
 And other Northern Nations;
 Including those of
 Our own SAXON ANCESTORS.
 W I T H
 A Translation of the EDDA, or
 System of RUNIC MYTHOLOGY,
 A N D
 O T H E R P I E C E S,
 From the Ancient ISLANDIC Tongue.
 I n T W O V O L U M E S.

TRANSLATED
 From Monf. MALLET's *Introduction a l' Histoire
 de Dannemarck, &c.*

With Additional NOTES
 By the English Translator,
 A N D
 Goranson's Latin Version of the EDDA.

V O L U M E I.

L O N D O N :
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The title page of Thomas Percy *Northern Antiquities* (London 1770).

of the vigorous manners and ancient songs of the contemporary Balkan Morlacchi found in the *Viaggio in Dalmazia* (1774) of the enlightened Paduan Abbé Alberto Fortis (1741-1803), which was soon translated into English in 1778 as *Travels into Dalmatia*.⁵⁷ Together these works fostered a new sensibility – perhaps not yet properly romantic or nationalist – whose roots lay not in the classical world of Greco-Roman antiquity, but in the primitive, freedom-loving ethnic cultures of a lost Europe, the North broadly defined, though it stretched as far south as inland Dalmatia. Indeed, Fortis further complicates the eighteenth-century European notion of the Gothic North. He acknowledged not only the Gothic ancestry of northern Italy, but also the deeper Scythian roots shared by the Goths and the Slavic and Asiatic barbarians who had overrun Europe, some of whom had found their way into Dalmatia where they formed the stock of the proud, independent Morlacchi of the interior.⁵⁸ While the roles of Ossian and Herder in this process are widely recognised, the significance of Mallet has not achieved the same degree of historical recognition. Nevertheless a few historians have identified the central role played by Mallet's work in this major cultural shift towards a more explicitly ethnological treatment of politics. Most notably, Franco Venturi argued that Mallet's work stimulated a 'European wave of passionate interest in the mythology and poetry of Nordic peoples, a wave comparable only to the one raised contemporaneously by Ossian'. According to Venturi Mallet had found in the Icelandic Edda 'documents that permitted him to trace the origins of modern political and social liberty'.⁵⁹ Similarly, Anne-Marie Thiesse has also identified the importance of Mallet's work in assisting the emergence of cultural nationalism.⁶⁰ Mallet's work was pivotal in broadening the scope of the cult of northern antiquity to embrace literary and mythological themes, in addition to the traditional humanistic theme of virtuous liberty and the interest in ethnogenesis fostered by the quest to locate Jordanes's *officina gentium*. The Edda; the songs sung by the Morlacchi to the accompaniment of the one-stringed guzla, versions of which – including German reworkings of Morlackisch lyric poetry – Herder would include in his *Volkslieder* of 1778⁶¹; the various other folk songs from several cultures anthologised by Herder; and Macpherson's Ossianic epics – together these exhibited the richness of non-classical cultures which had slipped below the literary radar of an early modern Europe attuned to the universal standards of the classics.

Henceforth ethnology would no longer be quite so marginal to political argument and analysis, but would become for many its very essence. Indeed, as Han Vermeulen has shown, the very nomenclature of 'ethnology' was 'conceptualised' during the 1770s and 1780s at the same period as this new ethnic consciousness first surfaced in European patriotisms. The term 'ethnologia' first appeared, Vermeulen believes, in a Latin treatise published in Vienna in 1783, and rapidly found its way into the European vernaculars as 'ethnologie' in French in 1787 in Lausanne in francophone Switzerland and 'Ethnologie' in German in Halle in the same year. Vermeulen also notes that 'Ethnographie' was coined in Göttingen in 1771 and that 'Volkskunde' appeared in 1782.⁶² The new discourses of ethnology developed rapidly and soon came to assume a central place in European thought. Increasingly environmentalist explanations of national and ethnic differences yielded to theories of innate physical differences between peoples and races. By 1847 when a new edition appeared of Percy's translation of Mallet's *Introduction*, Percy's distinction between the Celts and the Germans had become a physical one. Mallet's new editor, I.A. Blackwell, insisted upon the psychological, anatomical, physiological and craniological differences between Celts and Germans.⁶³ No longer was the ethnic provenance of liberty the effect of climate upon peoples, but of in-eradicable racial differences which marked the Germanic race from their racial inferiors.

The cult of the North remains difficult to parse, not least because it went through a series of overlapping phases between the humanistic reception of Tacitus and Jordanes in the Renaissance era and the emergence of Nordic racialism in the nineteenth century. Not only did the emphasis of septentrionalists shift significantly over this period from textual scholarship to anatomy and craniology, but the ethnic content of the Northern grouping of peoples also changed markedly. Whereas early modern observers identified the French, Spanish and Italian peoples as heirs of Gothic ancestors, by the nineteenth century there was a sharp distinction between the Nordic peoples of northern Europe and the Latins of the south. Nevertheless, the concept of the Northern peoples was always an unstable one, especially within its geographical remit, extending as it did during the eighteenth century to the Celts of western Europe and to the Scythians of the East, and even further beyond to the barbarian peoples of the Asiatic heartland.