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1 Introduction. Interdisciplinary approaches to early medieval mobility

1.1 Early medieval mobility

Premodern travelling was fundamentally associated with various questions related to weather, health, itinerary, logistics, safety, and other uncertainties. A father from southern England, who pilgrimaged southward around 720 with his two sons, unexpectedly died in Lucca, while his sons later fell ill in Rome – presumably with malaria. Subsequently, only one brother, Willibald, boarded a vessel in Naples – it was an Egyptian slave ship bound for Ephesus. He was the sole member of the party to eventually reach Jerusalem, the original destination of the journey.[1] The absence of detailed road maps forced travellers to navigate their way using itineraries, topographical features (such as roads and rivers), mountains, or the stars, along with directions from others and the assistance of locals. An additional challenge could arise if the destination of the journey was mobile, as in the case of a Muslim ("Persian") delegation, whose members already encountered trouble finding Francia; finally, they reached it via Rome, sailing along the Italian coastline passing Campania, Tuscany, Liguria, and Burgundy. Even when nearing their destination, they were at pains to inquire about Charlemagne's current whereabouts. They eventually found him in Aachen, tired and exhausted after a year's journey with long detours.[2]

Letters offer a wealth of evidence related to medieval mobility. For instance, Alcuin of York – Charlemagne's Northumbrian advisor who left us with 311 epistles – mentions in a letter dated 801 and addressed to Æthelhard, the archbishop of Canterbury, that his addressee was supposed to travel to Rome to meet with Pope Leo III due to disputes regarding his position. On his way there, he was expected to visit Charlemagne's court. Not only was he to be accompanied by clerics on this journey (*ammone socios tuos, maximeque clericos*), but Alcuin also arranged it so that Æthelhard would be able to use his own saddle. The latter was presumably transported to England by the same servant (*puerum meum*) who subsequently accompanied the archbishop on his journey to Rome. Alcuin further suggested that this servant could deliver a letter to Tours, after their travels to Italy, announcing the archbishop's visit.[3] Around the same time, Alcuin wrote another letter, addressed this time to Charle-

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1 Huneberc, Vita Willibaldi 4. Ed. *Holder-Egger*. See also *Guth*, Die Pilgerfahrt (1982).
2 Notker, Gesta Karoli 2.8. Ed. *Haefele*.
3 Alcuin, Epist. 230. Ed. *Dümmler*.

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magne, in which he mentioned an unspecified request that had been conveyed to him by the same Æthelhard from Canterbury, alongside the minister Ceolmund of Mercia, and Torhtmund, a supporter of King Æthelred of Northumbria. Alcuin emphasised that these three individuals, along with their followers, had always supported him during his travels and that they should now be granted the same courtesy in the Frankish kingdom.[4] Upon Æthelhard's return to England, the latter had sent a letter to Alcuin, apparently without the two having met in Tours, which his Northumbrian correspondent nonetheless responded to.[5] These letters thus contain rare, detailed information and clues about more than ten short and long journeys undertaken by various groups for different purposes.

Mobility can be defined as the readiness and ability of an individual or group to move themselves and objects within a geographical space. It encompasses the combined readiness and ability, the frequency of such movements, and the distances covered within this context. Any attempt to investigate early medieval mobility beyond individual journeys – such as those referred to above – or the associated processes and their significance for our understanding of past societies, is limited by the scant information from written sources. Modern society was not only shaped by mobility but also largely dependent on it. The view of an early medieval world largely confined to the homeland has been increasingly challenged since an essay published in 1992 by Gerd Althoff.[6] In addition to the itinerant court (Germ. "Reisekönigtum"), which brought about the mobility of entire royal households with their servants and officials, being on the move was also an existence-sustaining activity for large swathes of the medieval elites as well as for other social strata. For the elites, the class the vast majority of surviving evidence refers to, mobility was an essential instrument through which to assert authority, not only inside their own centre of power. This did not only apply to kings. The mobility of rulers meant that large parts of the elite were in constant motion as well, travelling between their kingdom and the region in which they held a ruling function. Moreover, travelling was an activity that sustained the livelihood of many merchants, and a large proportion of skilled craftsmen as well as other groups. These mobility patterns can be studied relatively easily when it comes to the later Middle Ages, which offers a wide range of sources such as travel reports or private letters. However, any research focussing on the early Middle Ages needs to face the challenge of comparatively scarce written evidence, if at all – as we shall see, many surviving sources contain only brief or insufficient information, with few exceptions related to individual journeys.

The difficulties – as well as the possibilities – of investigating mobility in the early Middle Ages have been impressively demonstrated by Michael McCormick,

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4 Alcuin, Epist. 231. Ed. *Dümmler*.

5 Alcuin, Epist. 255. Ed. *Dümmler*.

6 *Althoff*, Vom Zwang (1992).

whose study on the origins of the European economy from 300 to 900 was published in 2001.[7] Mobility and travel in the Middle Ages are not new fields of research; the former is often associated with questions of migration in the context of the early Middle Ages, as is currently the case in the Tübingen DFG-collegium "Migration and mobility in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages".[8] In recent decades, several edited volumes and monographs have also been published that deal with related topics. Relevant studies focus mainly on the later period, more accessible due to the significantly higher quantity and density of evidence. This has been covered, for example, in Claude Gauvard's essay collections on travelling and travellers,[9] by Marianne O'Doherty and Felicitas Schmieder's work on medieval modes of mobility in their respective contexts,[10] as well as a recent volume by Jenni Kuuliala and Jussi Rantala, which also includes studies related to Antiquity.[11] Other relevant publications include Shayne Aaron Legassie's comprehensive study on medieval travel[12] and Sarah Davis-Secord's monograph, which examines Mediterranean travel between the Muslim and the Christian worlds.[13]

Most studies inevitably deal with mobility within the context of rulership and the elites, which includes research on the itinerant court[14] and Volker Scior's recently-published habilitation thesis on messengers.[15] However, there is also sufficient material available for studying clerical mobility.[16] Worth mentioning are also three relevant dissertations published in the present series "Europa im Mittelalter", which include Dominik Waßenhoven's examination of the mobility of Norsemen through prosopographic studies;[17] Paul Predatsch's study of mobility in and around Carolingian Lucca;[18] and Philipp Winterhager's inquiry into clerical migrants moving from the Greek East to Rome.[19] These examples stand out as concerted attempts to centre the mobility of lower social strata in the early Middle Ages. Further pertinent work stems from research in archaeology and the natural sciences: these disciplines, which have made significant advancements in recent years, now offer important new means

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7 *McCormick,* Origins (2001).

8 See uni-tuebingen.de/fakultaeten/philosophische-fakultaet/fachbereiche/geschichtswissenschaft/forschung/dfg-kolleg-forschungsgruppe-migration-und-mobilitaet-in-spaetantike-und-fruehmittelalter (accessed: 06.03.2024).

9 *Gauvard* (Eds.), Voyages et voyageurs (1996).

10 *O'Doherty/Schmieder,* Travels and mobilities (2015).

11 *Kuuliala/Rantala,* Travel (2020).

12 *Legassie,* The medieval invention (2017).

13 *Davis-Secord,* Migration (2021).

14 E.g., *Bernhardt,* Itinerant kingship (2002); *Fütterer,* Wege und Herrschaft (2016).

15 *Scior,* Boten (2021).

16 See, e.g., *Luckhardt,* The charisma (2020).

17 *Waßenhoven,* Skandinavier unterwegs (2006).

18 *Predatsch,* Migration (2019).

19 *Winterhager,* Migranten und Stadtgesellschaft (2020).

to trace mobility beyond the scope of written evidence – in particular,[20] including developments in research on strontium isotopes[21] that have enabled new ways of tracking the migration of large groups and individuals. Archaeology has also proven valuable for the exploration of medieval roads and road networks, as evidenced by volumes edited by Rainer Christoph Schwinges and Thomas Szabó.[22] The same is true for new approaches from the digital humanities, historical geography and cultural landscape research, as addressed in a volume by Dietrich Denecke and Klaus Fehn.[23] All these different disciplines and related research have already led to genuine interdisciplinary contributions as evidenced by the excellent volume edited by Martin Freudenreich and Pierre Fütterer.[24]

1.2 Volume outline

The present methodologically-oriented volume gathers revised versions of contributions discussed during the international conference "Early medieval mobility – Interdisciplinary approaches", held in September 2022 at the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences as part of the WIN-Conferences.[25] I am deeply grateful to the *Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities* for their generous funding of the conference and for allowing a portion of the remaining funds – after several participants were unable to attend due to COVID and other unforeseen circumstances – to be reallocated towards the publication and the financing of professional proofreading. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to the editors of the series *Europa im Mittelalter* for including this volume in their distinguished collection. My gratitude also goes to Eva Locher and Laura Burlon of De Gruyter for their invaluable assistance and kind help in advancing the publication process. I would also like to express my appreciation to De-Gruyter for recommending the volume to the committee of the *Open Access Transformation Package*, an initiative financed through crowdfunding by 35 scientific libraries and launched by De Gruyter in 2020, which enabled the open-access publication of selected new releases in the field of history, including this volume as one of the nine chosen in 2024.[26]

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20 See, e.g., *Groves* et al., Mobility histories (2013); *Pluskowski*, The archaeology (2013).

21 *Meijer*, Interpreting medieval mobility (2019).

22 *Schwinges*, Straßen- und Verkehrswesen (2007); *Szabó*, Die Welt (2009).

23 *Denecke/Fehn*, Wege (2005).

24 *Freudenreich/Fütterer* et al., WegBegleiter (2019). See also *Fischer*, Straßen (2014).

25 See hadw-bw.de/news/events/fruehmittelalterliche-mobilitaet-interdisziplinaere-zugaenge (accessed: 19.09.2024).

26 See degruyter.com/publishing/publikationen/openaccess/open-access-buecher/open-access-transformationspakete?lang=de (accessed: 19.09.2024).

The papers collected in this volume explore new questions and approaches to studying early medieval mobility, including text-based, archaeological, geographical, climatological, and digital approaches, exploring how they allow us to go beyond what the written evidence explicitly reveals. Besides studies on mobility itself, it includes treatments on the conditions under which any journey had to take place by examining, for example, travel landscapes and topography, road networks and other infrastructures, as well as the impact of climatic conditions on travel. The volume thus comprises a selection of papers with exemplary studies drawing on innovative approaches from the fields of history, archaeology, historical geography, digital humanities, and paleoclimatology. The methodologies utilised by the contributors include network analysis, prosopography, stylistic comparison of burial findings combined with multi-isotopic analysis, digital landscape analysis using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR), and road reconstruction, geodata as means to create digital and interactive maps, and a combination of hermeneutic and statistical approaches. Many of these contributions include evidence from later periods, either to address questions insufficiently documented for earlier periods or because the methods discussed have so far only been applied to later evidence. The palaeoclimatological paper by Michael Kahle and Rüdiger Glaser, for example, uses a new database with relevant information gathered for the period 1000 – onwards to show how long-term shifts in climate dynamics and their impact on mobility and its infrastructure may be studied. This approach, however, still needs to be adapted to the relatively scant body of early medieval evidence in view of any future research. The same is true for the material and methodology discussed in Bart Holterman's paper.

The study of early medieval mobility thus presents numerous methodological challenges that require careful consideration and innovative approaches. Significant bias is already inherent in early medieval written sources, as in the aforementioned lack of references to non-elite individuals. Women are particularly underrepresented, making it difficult to analyse mobility patterns and related questions from a broader social perspective. The selective preservation of relevant information obscures the experiences of a large majority of the population. Furthermore, even where they do make relevant mentions, the sources are often less than explicit. Interpreting fragmentary evidence demands a cautious and nuanced approach that acknowledges the limitations of our knowledge, which is defined not only by the sources themselves but also by ambiguities related to relevant terminology or context. In light of these challenges, interdisciplinary collaboration emerges as a crucial tool for overcoming obstacles in advancing our understanding of early medieval mobility. Bringing together scholars from diverse disciplines, ideally in collaborative research projects focusing on a common topic, may allow us in the future to find complementary methodologies and perspectives, thereby creating new knowledge and developing more nuanced interpretations. Such collaboration would also allow for more comprehensive study of mobility in a specific area or between two defined places by including, for example,

the relevant travelling population, the paths they chose, the travel conditions they had to face in matters of infrastructure and weather, their potential travel speed, and the reasons behind any such movement. Combining different types of evidence and analysis using various disciplines will thus not only allow us to address new questions but also provide a more holistic understanding of mobility in the early medieval period.

The intention of this volume is to stimulate such interdisciplinary dialogue, hopefully finding new means of overcoming some of the limitations emerging from the scant evidence available. By exploring how early medieval mobility can be investigated beyond the information explicitly contained in the written sources, this volume aims to discuss the potential of interdisciplinary approaches in furthering our understanding of the significance, function, and execution of mobility in early medieval societies. To what extent do natural scientific and computer-assisted techniques enable the examination of infrastructure and travel landscapes, and how does the knowledge gained from these techniques relate to the information provided by written sources? How do innovative historical, archaeological, digital, and natural science methods allow us to better comprehend the conditions that characterised early medieval mobility, and the knowledge and material any traveller required to undertake short or long-distance journeys? What do we learn about the motives or constraints that led to the mobility of people or objects? And how do prosopographic studies and network analyses allow us to approach the needs and aspirations that drove such mobility? A deeper comprehension of the circumstances surrounding early medieval mobility allows us, not least, to grasp and value both the individual and collective accomplishments of every participant engaged in any form of exchange or connectivity within their broader context. As it is important to reflect on and be transparent about the possible limitations of any method, the subsequent contributions each include critical discussions of their respective approaches. Although this volume still considers the relative merits of different approaches in isolation as a way into studying these topics, it also invites its readers to further consider how these methods may be genuinely combined in the framework of cross-disciplinary collaboration to address questions that can only be investigated by integrating these different disciplines to explore new topics in a novel way. It thereby aims to open up new methodological approaches to an old field of research, galvanising new questions and ideas.

The following contributions are organised into two groups, each exploring distinct (yet interconnected) aspects relating to mobility during the transformative period now called the early Middle Ages. The first section, on the mobility of people and objects, provides a wide spectrum of reflections on the dynamic exchanges and migrations that shaped the medieval world. Marco Cristini shows how the study of sixth-century exotic gifts in the framework of diplomacy offers insights into state-driven cultural exchanges, the significance of certain cultural elements of prestige, and the long-term goals of diplomatic initiatives in the framework of interregional relations. Michel Summer's contribution re-evaluates the mobility of clerics between Ireland,

Britain, and Francia on the basis of written sources and archaeological evidence, challenging traditional historiographical frameworks by emphasising the complexity and diversity of their roles and interactions within political, ecclesiastical, and cultural contexts. Shigeto Kikuchi highlights how clerical and secular travellers in the Carolingian world balanced personal and official motives while navigating various risks and costs, demonstrating how they efficiently utilised their journeys to accomplish multiple tasks and purposes. This essay is followed by Tobias Gärtner's critical discussion of the potentials and limitations of archaeological evidence in studying the mobility of specific ethnic groups, using the example of the Frisians. By focusing on exiles in Iberia – which often involved relatively short distances of travel – Abel de Lorenzo Rodríguez underscores how it served as both a legal recourse and practical application of the law for various offenses (including murder, treason, and sexual misconduct), evolving into a form of enforced mobility. My own paper then explores the possibilities and drawbacks of using medieval letter collections as a lens through which to understand mobility. Using the example of Gerbert of Reims' letters, I argue how a quantitative approach can offer limited insights into high-born mobility despite the challenges of incomplete information. Russell Ó Ríagáin completes this section with an examination of the shifting patterns of mobility and related social and material practices in the context of the insular Scandinavian diaspora associated with Ireland and Britain. Drawing on three case studies, he offers insights into the interconnectedness of related populations. This section thus illuminates the complex nature of individual and collective movements across the different regions of early medieval Europe and its population.

The second section, on landscapes and infrastructure, delves into the physical and environmental factors influencing medieval mobility, whether by facilitating or hindering travel. It begins with the study by Michael Kahle and Rüdiger Glaser exploring the relationship between climatic conditions and mobility through hermeneutic interpretation and statistical analysis of historical documents which allow them to examine climate's impact on transportation routes, means, and resulting hazards. Pierre Fütterer analyses the settlement structure of a medieval royal landscape using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and databases to scrutinise spatial structures and historical developments in Ottonian centres of authority. Irmela Herzog evaluates the challenges of using Least Cost Paths (LCP) to reconstruct medieval road networks in Germany, identifying appropriate waypoints and considering socio-cultural costs to address inaccuracies in historical maps and accounts. Anna Swieder then focuses on studying early medieval hollow roads (sunken roads created by the repeated passage of carts) on the Elbingerode plateau in the Middle Harz region, examining pathways discernible in the terrain by investigating crossroads and deserted village sites using ceramic finds, slag remains, and digital terrain data like LiDAR to retrace the exact course. A collectively authored paper by Wouter Verschoof-van der Vaart, Eva Kaptijn, Quentin Bourgeois, and Karsten Lambers showcases how the same technique may be used to study medieval transportation

routes. Within the framework of Citizen Science initiatives, LiDAR data is employed in the Heritage Quest project as a means of addressing challenges in manual analysis and mapping hollow roads in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug region of the Netherlands. Bart Holterman concludes this section with a discussion of the challenges and methodologies related to reconstructing maritime networks in premodern northern Europe, emphasising the potential of rutters and early modern sailing instructions for visualisation purposes, while highlighting obstacles such as changes in coastline and vessel size over time. Together, these studies offer a comprehensive overview of a large variety of novel approaches that are now available for the study of mobility, focusing not only on people but also on the infrastructural and environmental context in which related movements took place.

Overall, this volume aims to contribute to the advancement of current research on early medieval mobility as a fundamental aspect of human need and experience by providing a multifaceted exploration of the various dimensions that shaped the movement of people and objects during this transformative period. Through an interdisciplinary lens, the volume not only discusses the motivations and dynamics of individual journeys but also investigates the broader landscapes and infrastructural factors that influenced mobility. By incorporating innovative methodologies from fields such as history, archaeology, digital humanities, and paleoclimatology, the volume expands the scope of inquiry beyond the limitations of written sources, thus shedding new light on the complexities of early medieval travel. Through a diverse range of studies, this volume hopes not only to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms driving mobility but also underscores its profound significance for shaping medieval societies. Ultimately, by inviting readers to consider how these methodologies can be integrated to address new questions, the volume paves the way for continued exploration and discovery in the field of early medieval mobility.

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