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15 Conclusion. New paths to the study of early medieval mobility

How did individuals in the early Middle Ages navigate the challenges of everyday mobility and long-distance travel, fraught as it was with uncertainties ranging from weather and logistical concerns to safety risks? And what scientific approaches and methods do we have to study these movements in their social, cultural and political context? Research into the transformative period of the early Middle Ages is still limited by the scarcity of written and material evidence. This raises the question of innovative approaches that can help us to extend our knowledge beyond the information that the sources can explicitly provide. Discussing the potentials and limitations of such new tools in addressing early medieval mobility was the intention of the present volume. While modern society genuinely relies on mobility in its entire complexity, its role in early medieval society was perhaps more subtle yet nonetheless of great significance. The itinerant court mentioned in the introduction serves as a case in point here: though courtly mobility may appear to have been restricted, in fact it involved the movement of large parts of society. This encompassed not only the movement of people ranging from minor authorities to unfree servants but also entailed the transportation of a diverse array of goods and individuals designated to supply the royal household while on the move, along with associated logistical considerations. Furthermore, the mobility of merchants and craftsmen played a crucial role in sustaining livelihoods and other exchanges required beyond the context of the itinerant court – movement for which we have particularly scant relevant evidence. Sources allowing us to study how people traversed vast distances without detailed maps – relying instead on itineraries, topographical features and local guidance – are largely limited to the later medieval period. If we want to gain further insight, we need to explore other, less familiar approaches and look beyond the boundaries of our own research discipline. The selection of new approaches and methods presented in the present volume still stand as isolated case studies. It appears promising, though, to combine these different research methods in order to obtain a more complete picture. In what follows, some particularly important and recurring themes will be addressed by considering questions about the limitations of relevant approaches and what methods might help overcome these in the future.

The diversity and complexity of mobility and related concepts become evident when looking at the definitions in the above contributions. While Michel Summer defines mobility as “physical movements of persons across longer distances”, Abel de Lorenzo Rodríguez illustrates that even regional displacements were considered sig-

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nificant enough by contemporaries to be applicable as a major punishment. Laury Sarti, in her introduction, stresses the relation between an individual's aptitude and the intensity of any such movement, whereas Tobias Gärtner adds a temporal dimension to the concept by showing that mobility as a "temporary change of location" can be distinguished from other terms such as "migration", a permanent relocation. However, he emphasised that such a distinction is not always applicable in disciplines such as archaeology. The term "mobility" can also refer to more abstract concepts like cultural diplomacy, which involved the exchange of goods and knowledge, as illustrated by Marco Cristini. Russell Ó Ríagáin made it clear that, especially with regard to the movement of objects, it can be useful to think of mobility existing in chains of interaction and not just in long-distance journeys. Thus, the concept of "mobility" can vary considerably depending on the geographical area and scope; the social group being analysed; the academic discipline and approach; and the thematic focus of a specific study.

An important topic that is dealt with in several contributions here is the question of what motives or constraints lead to changes in mobility, be it in relation to people, objects or knowledge. Often, journeys had more than one underlying motive, as demonstrated by Kikuchi in reference to the Carolingian era. This was a means of ensuring that a journey was cost-effective, a criterion that could also be relevant to the choice of a particular road, as Irmela Herzog shows. Royal envoys, endowed with official privileges and support, could also use their status for personal purposes. Furthermore, a distinction can be made not only between primary and secondary goals, but also between short- and long-term goals, as Christini has demonstrated using the example of diplomatic mobility. While the analysis of relevant negotiations usually only reveals short-term goals, the gifts or knowledge and skills transferred by the envoys usually refer to communication strategies that are geared towards long-term goals. Mobility could also be significant for the advancement of individual careers, which is particularly well-attested for clerics. This effect could be achieved in the context of missionary activity, which could ultimately lead to high positions as abbot or bishop, or to the establishment or expansion of church infrastructure, as Summer shows. Gerbert of Rheims's correspondence illustrates the extent to which mobility can also be key in creating or maintaining networks of power relations, as emerges from the study undertaken by Sarti. In Ó Ríagáin's work, the example of the Scandinavian diaspora kings shows the importance of mobility for an elite that was mainly dependent on military power resources. Through invisible chains of interaction, they were able to obtain the latest information on the political situation in a large part of Eurasia, thereby adapting to changing circumstances and retaining their positions. The differentiation of specific mobility motives becomes particularly challenging when the corresponding analysis is based on archaeological material finds, as Gärtner was able to demonstrate. Using the example of Frisian shell pottery, he discusses the possibilities and limitations of such a distinction. Even if this pottery cannot be used to determine who or which ethnic group travelled between certain regions, the finds nevertheless

reveal a trading rather than a migratory context. Meanwhile, de Lorenzo Rodríguez's study illustrates that mobility could also be the result of coercion and was therefore not necessarily associated with desirable consequences, as in the case of exile in the context of punishment. Notably though, exile could also be a voluntary act, for example with the intention of gaining security by escaping a hostile environment.

In principle, any study of early medieval mobility focuses either on what could be termed "historical mobility", consisting of individual journeys documented as having taken place in the sources, or on what could be termed "potential mobility", comprising the sum of travels that once took place within a specific period of time or a particular region. The first is a qualitative approach, which has the advantage of being based on comparatively reliable evidence. It has the disadvantage, however, that any such research only captures a fraction of the wider patterns of past movements, with results that are inevitably selective and coloured by the selection and bias of the available source material. The second is a quantitative approach with the disadvantage that it is inevitably based on conjecture and projection, based on the fragmentary evidence available. Further, all results depend on modern assumptions used to extrapolate information from the sources. By relying on a more systematic analysis, aimed at a comprehensive understanding of what the evidence is able to reveal beyond individual mentions, their findings can provide a better sense of the movements that characterised early medieval societies as a whole. This approach may involve a synthesis of different sources, including archaeological finds, geographical studies and demographic data, which can help us to establish the extent and nature of mobility in the absence of explicit historical records. The combination of both approaches can thus enable a more nuanced understanding of early medieval mobility patterns and issues relating to migration, transport and cultural exchange.

The studies collected in this volume provide examples for both approaches. In the future, these and other approaches could be combined in the framework of genuinely interdisciplinary work. The research on "historical mobility" in the early Middle Ages focuses predominantly on the elites, given that the written sources often overlook the movements of the lower social classes – as the case studies by Summer, Kikuchi, Sarti and Ó Ríagáin show. Sometimes this focus is rooted in the research question itself, as in Cristini's study of cultural diplomacy. However, the selective nature of the evidence concerns not only individuals whose movements can be further analysed, but also topics such as weather and climatic phenomena. Writers of the early Middle Ages focused on the extraordinary rather than the ordinary, which is also evident in the palaeoclimatological work of Michael Kahle and Rüdiger Glaser. Therefore, capturing the everyday events and circumstances usually omitted in the sources poses a significant challenge. Similar difficulties arise when working with archaeological remains, as the elite tended to leave us more material than simple farmers or craftsmen. Using a quantitative approach towards "potential mobility" is also limited by the quality and quantity of the evidence. Sarti demonstrates this using the example of Gerbert of Rheims's letters, in which information about travellers who did not belong to the elite

is largely missing (although it is clear that they existed). As a result, any attempt to quantify mobility in the environment of the respective letter writer is again largely limited to the upper social classes. This is true even if one supplements the information missing from the sources with presumed data in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of contemporary mobilities. The quality and quantity of historical records also has an impact on the study of mobility. This can be seen in the contribution by Bart Holterman, who draws on rutters, which provide a systematic overview of the sea routes used in medieval northern Europe and make it possible to reconstruct related sea routes, even if details of individual voyages are lacking.

Another theme running through the entire volume is the conditions under which mobility took place. While the means of studying the early medieval mobility of people and objects are limited, a combination of digital, geographic, and archaeological methods and approaches has emerged with a promising capacity to explore the infrastructure these travels relied on. Although still in a comparatively early stage – and generally either time- or cost-consuming, or both – they have the potential to significantly enlarge our knowledge beyond the written evidence. They include tools like Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR), Airborne Laser Scanning (ALS), and Least Cost Paths calculations (LCP), which have been treated extensively in the second section of the present volume. They allow the examination and reconstruction of roads and hollow ways, meaning that although individual mobility may not be directly visible, the routes and conditions that shaped their travels more generally become apparent. As these examinations are not limited to major highways, these studies at least allow us to investigate aspects related to everyday travels – including its general conditions and its frameworks – as well as the forms of mobility exercised by a large proportion of society. For example, their results may provide insights into the visibility and safety of travellers on specific routes, as shown in the paper by Herzog. Thus, they offer useful hints that allow us to contextualise and approach questions that might remain due to numerous gaps in information – for example, by allowing us to localise and trace details of specific journeys gleaned from the written sources.

As emerges in particular from Anna Swieder's study on hollow roads, digital landscape analyses using tools like GIS or LiDAR are labour-intensive, meaning that such studies broadly speaking tend to be limited to smaller areas. However, Wouter Verschoof et al. have now elaborated on a possible solution in the form of citizen science. By involving large groups of voluntary non-professionals who collectively analyse LiDAR images, a strategy emerges that allows us to process relevant data significantly faster and on a larger scale. Another challenge is the near-impossibility of dating smaller roads or hollow ways with any certainty. As Swieder demonstrated using the example of the Elbingerode plateau in the German Central Harz region, tangible finds (such as excavated ceramics) are able, occasionally, to offer reliable clues, whereas the dates for the majority of discovered paths remain uncertain. In such cases, it is sometimes possible to establish at least a relative chronology through the examina-

tion of intersections between roads or with the help of other datable landscape elements or archaeological features. Any more specific dating, however, requires further historical information or cartographic data – for example, as exemplified by Verschoof et al. Here, the combination of absolute dating methods, such as Optical Stimulated Luminescence (OSL), with archaeological excavations, historical written sources, and maps, has proven effective for receiving more reliable and contextualised dates. Although citizen science is able to determine locations suitable for such in-depth analysis, this approach cannot be applied universally due to the high costs involved.

In addition to roads and road networks, it is also possible to trace the distribution of settlements, centres of power and royal residences at a specific point in time and thus also chart the possible stages of a journey, as Fütterer demonstrates with the help of GIS. Royal palaces (Königspfalzen), for example, were not only used for royal stays, but were also a place where elites, messengers and merchants could rest, secure their supplies and change horses. Here it becomes clear that seemingly objective travelling conditions – such as roads and stage stops – could be experienced differently depending on the affiliation to a particular population group. This can also be seen in the aforementioned privileges reserved for royal envoys, who travelled under royal protection and were provided with special documents that guaranteed them accommodation and food. Only very few people were able to travel with such security. But being allowed to travel was not a matter of course. As Kikuchi makes clear, lowly clerics and monks were not allowed to travel without the permission of their bishop or abbot according to the canonical and monastic rules of St Benedict, a ruling that lasted well into the Carolingian period. Although not addressed in this volume due to reasons of scope, a traveller's gender also played a role in their mobility alongside their wider affiliation to a class or occupational group. As now, weather and climate change were essential components of external travel conditions. In order to identify certain patterns and impact pathways in the context of climate and mobility, Kahle and Glaser analyse written sources that mentioned relevant climate and weather topics. During the analysis, the criteria of hazards, transport routes, means of transport – as well as the effects and the type of impairment or intensification – could be worked out. These key terms were then used to identify relationships between different elements of travel conditions, which can be visualised using visualisation techniques such as the Parcats diagram type. For example, it became clear that most people were not travelling by wagon or horse, but on foot. Cold and frost are the dominant dangers mentioned in the sources, despite the predominant characterisation of a "medieval warm optimum". In addition, conclusions can also be drawn about cause-effect relationships, for example referring to the intensity of the impact of snowfall on trade and mobility, which impaired people's ability travelling on foot, not to mention transport by wagon and the use of horses.

By researching their mobility, we gain insights into the mentality, way of life and priorities of early medieval societies. Efficient mobility is often an indicator of economic dynamism and development. Mobility is also a crucial prerequisite for cultural

exchange. With current technologies and infrastructures, society today is more mobile than ever before and the pace of travel unimaginably fast compared to the experience of the early medieval traveller – thanks to digital mobility, physical mobility is no longer even a prerequisite for the acquisition of many experiences, images, and impressions. But what did the average person's horizon of experience look like in the early Middle Ages? What perspectives did they have? What value did individual freedom and independence have? Who was granted the right to undertake such journeys? Did mobility promote social integration and cohesion in society, or did it hinder it? This volume has brought together interdisciplinary studies using different approaches, each with distinct advantages and challenges. The combination of scientific, digital and historical methods represents a promising hybrid approach that facilitates a deeper look at the early medieval mobility of people and objects, encouraging scholars to view the associated experiences and challenges from a broader perspective. Ultimately, the study of mobility offers us new ways to better understand the early medieval world and its societies in all their rich and dynamic complexity.