



The Curse of Cain

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Considerations on the Intellectual History of Migration in the Early Modern Period

In 1991, the German medievalist Ludwig Schmugge reviewed the role of “migration”, as an analytical concept, in historical scholarship. Unlike social scientists, he argued, German historians had devoted far too little attention to this crucial term. Schmugge considered it symptomatic that the major historical reference books and encyclopaedias, including the monumental “Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe”, did not any contain lemmata on “mobility” or “migration”.

Twenty years have passed since Schmugge voiced his criticism, and German-speaking historiography has definitely met the challenge. Substantial and far-reaching research has been conducted on migration processes from the middle ages to the present day, exploring numerous facets of human mobility. The verve and the versatility of historical migration research in German academia have recently been documented by the copious “Enzyklopädie Migration in Europa”, published in 2007.

The emphasis of recent research, however, has been placed on the factual migration processes that took place and on the normative and juridical sources that regulated migration. Comparatively few modern historians have, however, considered what scholars of previous centuries themselves thought and wrote on migration. This tendency is not restricted to German-speaking academia: It is indeed striking that recent research papers explicitly devoted to the early history of migration research trace their topic no further back than the 1870s – as if migration theory were a prerogative of modernity. Compared to the extensive research on migration as a socio-historical phenomenon, the history of migration as a concept has been largely neglected. In this sense, Schmugge's verdict still holds true after twenty years.

Man has always been homo migrans, an itinerant being. And as the human nature has, since primordial times, been characterised by mobility, we may safely assume that men have always reflected and commented on the migrations they undertook. With views on migration formulated in illiterate prehistoric societies inaccessible to modern research, the oldest extant sources date from antiquity: The biblical Book of Exodus, most likely compiled in the 5th century BC, provides the classical example of a migration narrative as the focus of ethnic identity. At roughly the same time, Herodotus commented on the nomadic lifestyle of the Scythians.

One of the oldest formal theoretical inquiries into the origins and forms of migration was drafted by Seneca. In *De Consolatione ad Helviam Matrem* (42/43 AD), the Roman philosopher emphasised the importance of migration as a universal constant of human existence: “One thing, in any case, is obvious: None remains at the place of birth. The human race does not cease to change.” Seneca reviewed the various reasons that could cause men to migrate, and many of the categories he introduced – economic refugees, asylum seekers, displaced persons – correspond to the typology of modern migration studies. The allegedly exuberant fertility of barbarian tribes and the resulting overpopulation, aggravated by bad harvests, natural disasters and the primitives' greed for gold and luxury, were perceived by ancient authors as the main reason for the migrations that brought barbarians into conflict with the civilized world of the Mediterranean.

Based on such classical precursors, humanist scholars developed a complex, and highly ambivalent, understanding of human mobility. To early modern scholars, human migration was a crucial phenomenon that had indeed determined the course of history – from the first wanderings of the Noachids after the deluge to the barbarian migrations that shattered the Roman Empire, and up to the present. It is the aim of this project to provide a

conceptual history of migration, in particular tribal migration, *migratio gentium*, between the late 15th and the early 18th century. In particular, I intend to document the ambivalence of migration in early modern thought: migration was seen both as a corrupting influence that caused man to lapse into barbarism, and as an indication for the valour, bravery and piety of colonisers and conquerors.

Comparatively few early modern authors composed treatises exclusively and explicitly dedicated to the topic of migration – yet many of them included perspectives on human mobility in their writings, which are not immediately apparent from the titles or summaries. Reconstructing the early modern concept of migration necessitates an in-depth survey of a wide range of specialised discourses.

The available source material can be roughly divided into three categories:

The first, and quantitatively most important group comprises of historiographical texts that trace and recount past migrations (and also invent fictitious migrations that never took place, but serve to confirm identity and prestige). Such treatises rarely reflect theoretically on the nature and causes of migration, but often include an – explicit or implicit – moral evaluation of the migration and its participants.

Secondly, natural law theory touches upon issues of human mobility on several occasions: Archaic nomadism is regularly described as a feature of a pre-societal state of nature; a natural right to mobility is furthermore implied by the concepts of *ius necessitatis*, which asserts that humans in extreme and unavoidable need hold a right to migrate and by *ius communicationis* which pertains to the right of mobility and trade.

The third category consists of commentaries and exegeses of classical texts on migration and mobility, in particular theological writings concerning biblical Exodus, the punishment of Cain (Genesis IV), the settlement of the Noachids (Genesis X) and the confusion of languages and the dispersal of tribes at the Tower of Babel (Genesis XI); as well as interpretations of secular texts such as Herodotus' *Histories*, Virgils' *Aeneid* or Tacitus' *Germania* (on Scythian nomads, on the prototype of a founding migration and on the notion of autochthony, respectively).

Furthermore, the project has to address the question whether the literature on *migrationes gentium* was influenced by general early modern attitudes towards mobility. As a working hypothesis, one might argue that the denigratory attitude towards vagrants, peddlers and itinerant labourers, as a feature of everyday stereotypes in the early modern age, might have influenced scholarly opinions on the negative effects of tribal migration. Other characteristic forms of and discourses on mobility in the early modern period, such as the aristocratic grand tour, the academic mobility of university students as well as the literature on *ars apodemica* as the art of travelling should be taken into consideration as well. Consciously or unknowingly, these factors contributed to the way how early modern scholars saw and experienced migration.

Addressing the European Population Conference in Geneva in 1993, Dutch diplomat Jan Pronk pointed out that “[t]here is no intrinsic reason why migration should stir up concern”. However, migration does continue to raise concern and cause anxiety, often expressed by irrational and hostile rhetorics that are far detached from the reality of immigration politics. It therefore seems appropriate to trace the term migration to its origins and through its conceptual developments – and, in doing so, trace the ideological and emotional significance that was attached to it. In other words: If 16th century scholars denounced migration as the “Curse of Cain”, does such a condemnation, in any way, relate to or anticipate present-day images, stereotypes and perceptions of migrants?