Images of ethnicity in later medieval Europe

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II

CATALOGUES OF HUMAN

DIVERSITY

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Catalogues or lists have been ubiquitous since antiquity: the catalogue of ships in Homer's *Iliad*; Ausonius' list of fishes in the *Mosella*; lists of grapes and wine in Virgil's *Georgics*; lists of places, rivers, philosophers, commodities – attempts to grasp and control chaos and catalogue diversity are persistent, especially in oral societies.[1] The following three chapters are about the early development of just one type of list: the ethnic catalogue. From the tenth century onwards, concise lists summing up the contrasting virtues and vices of peoples suddenly spring up in Latin manuscripts compiled in monasteries in Western Europe. From the end of the eleventh century, these catalogues also form rhetorical devices in poetry, historiography, sermons, and letters written by monks and clerics educated in the liberal arts and frequenting the courts of Western Europe.

Until today, very little research has been conducted on these early types of medieval ethnic catalogues, and no substantial explanation offered for their sudden appearance from the tenth century onwards.[2] According to Joep Leerssen, catalogues of ethnic character sprang forth from the tradition of seventeenth-century neo-Aristotelian poetical writings. Influenced by Aristotle's *Poetics*, a new understanding arose that in drama, a character's actions should be in keeping with his personality. Poetical manuals, for example Julius Caesar Scaliger's posthumously published *Seven Books on Poetics* (1561), thus provided the precepts for plausible characterization through use of stereotypical types with accompanying character traits. His enumeration of ethnic characterizations, says Leerssen, thus 'shows an emerging comparative tendency to arrange moral praise and blame into patterns'.[3] This urge to systematize, to categorize, was to surface in the Renaissance period and imbued seventeenth-century classicist thought, literature and culture. Furthermore, from the end of the seventeenth century, these catalogues evolved into detailed *Völkertafeln* (tables of peoples) in

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1 Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists* (London 2009), 49-50, 81-82. Cf. Homer, *Iliad* II, 483-759; Ausonius, *Mosella,* 75-149; Virgil, *Georgics* II, 89-104. For the copious redundancy in oral societies see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York 2002), 39-41.

2 Although aware of these earlier lists, Franz Karl Stanzel, discussing the birth of catalogues of nations, remarked that it is not possible to trace how these catalogues first arose, and little order has been detected within the catalogues. Franz Karl Stanzel, 'Das Nationalitätenschema in der Literatur und seine Entstehung zu Beginn der Neuzeit', in Blaicher, *Erstarrtes Denken*, 84-96, here at 86-87.They are mentioned in a number of articles yet an explanation for their genesis is generally wholly absent. Cf. Meyvaert, 'Voicing National Antipathy', 747; Brühl, *Die Geburt zweier Völker*, 274; Heinrich Fichtenau, 'Gentiler und europäischer Horizont an der Schwelle des ersten Jahrtausends', in *Römische Historische Mitteilungen* (1981), 80-97, here at 80; Bartlett, 'Concepts of Race and Ethnicity', 49; Stanislaw Kot, 'Old International Insults', 181-209 for the development of these catalogues in the late Middle Ages in Eastern Europe. Franz K. Stanzel, 'Zur literarischen Imagologie. Eine Einführung' in Franz K. Stanzel, Ingomar Weiler and Waldemar Zacharasiewicz (eds), *Europäischer Völkerspiegel: Imagologisch-ethnographische Studien zu den Völkertaflen des frühen 18. Jahrhunderts* (Heidelberg 1999), 9-39, here at 20, notes the relationship between medieval catalogues and virtues and vices, but only in very general terms. Madeleine Jeay, *Le commerce des mots: L'usage des listes dans la littérature médiévale* (Geneva 2006) is a recent study of the rise of lists in medieval literature, but not specifically on ethnic catalogues. Tia M. Kolbaba, *The Byzantine Lists: Errors of the Latins* (Urbana and Chicago 2000) discusses the Latin errors in the eyes of Byzantium in the wake of the eleventh-century schism, but these lists are far more descriptive and do not fall under the definition of lists and catalogues in these chapters.

3 Scaliger's *Poetices libri septem*. Leerssen, *National Thought*, 56-57.

which Europe's prominent nations were presented in tables or matrixes, divided into rows and columns describing among others their 'innate' character, costumes, country, and religion. Two of the most famous examples of such *Völkertafeln* are the copper etching by Friedrich Leopold (1726, made in Augsburg) and the early eighteenth-century painting known as the *Steirischen Völkertafel* (originating from

Styria, Austria), of which several copies exist, and which probably was based upon Leopold's etching.[4]

Steirische Völkertafel, Österreichischen Museums für Volkskunde in Vienna, 18th century

However, the emergence of these lists from the tenth century onwards – and the notion of an intermarriage between type, behaviour and character – cannot be attributed to the influence of Aristotle's *Poetics*, as this text was not translated into Latin before 1278, by William of Moerbeke, four centuries after the appearance of the early lists.[5] Why then did copyists, working in monastery libraries in the tenth century, decide to jot down lists of peoples and their virtues and vices? Why did they emerge so ubiquitously in medieval literature from the twelfth century? What was the purpose of these lists? Are they aligned to a certain schematization or mere random collections of stereotypes? In the following chapters I will discuss their function, epistemology, and the degree or lack of order within these lists. In chapter 4, I will address the early ethnic catalogues, which were arranged in compact lists. These were copied by monks in manuscripts related to encyclopaedic literature and must be viewed within a meditative context, serving as ethical-mnemonic instruments to ruminate the virtues and vices of human diversity in light of the world's transitory nature. In chapter 5, I will examine more elaborate literary catalogues containing contemporary ethnic and geographical characterizations in the context of a new emphasis in twelfth-century rhetorical textbooks on creating literary character types as tools for invention and moral meditation.[6] Such textbooks, used by clerics and monks in the *artes-liberales* program, were both manuals for stereotyping as well as

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4 The development of contrastive lists into *Völkertafeln* in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century has been studied in detail by among others Franz Stanzel, Ingomar Weiler and Joep Leerssen. See Franz K. Stanzel, Ingomar Weiler and Waldemar Zacharasiewicz (eds), *Europäischer Völkerspiegel*. In 'Zur literarischen imagologie', 40-1, in the same publication, Stanzel offers a transcription of these Völkertafeln.

5 Averroes' commentary, written in 1175, was translated into Latin by Hermannus Alemannus in 1256, but it was not until the end of the fifteenth century that a Greek version of the text became available in Italy. See Marvin Theodore Herrick, *The Poetics of Aristotle in England* (New Haven, 1930), 1-13; Lane Cooper, *The Poetics of Aristotle, Its Meaning and Influence* (Boston, 1923), 92-98; Nicolino Applauso, *Curses and Laughter: The Ethics of Political Invective in the Comic Poetry of High and Late Medieval Italy* (unpublished diss., University of Oregon 2010), 23.

6 Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*: *Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (reprint, Cambridge 2003), 123.

repositories of ethnic stereotypes. As will be discussed, in both traditions – the meditative list and the more elaborate literary list – the catalogues are generally arranged geographically from East to West, in concurrence with the Christian path of the history of humanity, power and knowledge coursing in time and space from the Orient to the Occident. In the final part of this section, chapter 6, I will discuss ethnic lists of invective within Western Europe from a social perspective. In these lists of praise, blame and ridicule, both in Latin and the vernacular, ethnic invective can be an indicator of strong feelings of ethnic superiority and awareness of ethnic identity, at the same time affirming and reinforcing ethnic identities, as stereotypes were hurled back and forth in playful or more spiteful verbal jousts. In addition, this form of invective could serve to alleviate ethnic-social tensions within international communities, for example in university towns, as the array of ethnic images was all-inclusive, ridiculing the vices of all the community members.[7]

Pragmatic and poetic catalogues

Before turning to these sources, it is useful however to first offer a cursory discussion of the epistemology of lists. Lists can, in general, reflect a fascination for or wonderment at the diversity of mankind.[8] Indeed, lists of ethnic groups are multifarious, appearing in different forms and contexts such as the biblical genealogies listing the descendants of Noah's progeny, the 72 nations of Genesis 10.[9] In these chapters examples are examined of two types of lists, distinguished by Franz Stanzel (in a discussion of sources of early modernity) as lexicons of epithets – enumerating the ethnic characteristics of one group – and *Nationalitätenschemata*, lists distinguishing behavioural traits and characteristics of ethnic groups in comparative schemas.[10]

The overriding question in relation to these lists is their epistemology. Did they reflect cognitive schemas of the world's diversity? Where did the knowledge come from, why was it listed, what kind of ordering or chaotic principle did these lists reflect? In his *The Infinity of Lists*, Umberto Eco has divided these lists into two categories: the pragmatic and the poetic. Under pragmatic lists Eco understands those which refer to objects in the outside world, with the practical purpose of listing

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7 Applauso, *Curses and Laughter*, 2.
8 Stanzel, 'Nationalitätenschema', 84.
9 See for a wealth of sources material on ethnic genealogies in the Middle Ages, Arno Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel. Geschichte der meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker* (4 vols; Stuttgart 1957-1963); for an early Frankish genealogical table which does not mention ethnic virtues or vices, Walter Goffart, 'The Supposedly Frankish Table of Nations', in *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 17 (1983), 98-130; on ethnic genealogies Susan Reynolds, 'Medieval *Origines Gentium* and the community of the realm', in *History* 68 (1983), 375-390.
10 Stanzel, 'Nationalitätenschema', 84. The lists under discussion here are those circulating as separate lists, and not, for example, those incorporated in Isidore's *Etymologiae* IX in his chapter on languages, where he mentions how climate determines character ('the Romans are serious, the Greeks shallow, the Africans fickle, the Gauls by nature ferocious'). Furthermore, although Nicholas Howe has distinguished between the list, which according to his definition is a 'naming form' which does not elaborate on the subject and often lacks order, and the catalogue, a 'describing form', whose order is clear and didactic, here both are used synonymously, as the lists under consideration here, all contain descriptive epithets. Nicholas Howe, *Old English Catalogue Poems*, 21-22.

them.[11] These record things finite, existent and known (in this case: the known peoples of the world), to which they refer. According to Eco, these lists are unalterable.[12] To give a simple example: a shopping list containing the ingredients for making *spaghetti alla puttanesca* will (or should) contain the items of flour, oil, garlic, onions, anchovies, chili peppers, black olives, capers, tomatoes and oregano, but not Brussels sprouts, gallons of petrol or the imaginary spice *paradisium*, never tasted yet purported to grow in large quantities in a region north of the north pole inaccessible due to its intense heat. Garlic, onions, olives are ingredients of what is in essence spaghetti with a sauce. We can liken this pragmatic list to attempts by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century naturalists engaged in classifying the zoological, botanical and human diversity in taxonomical schematizations.[13] These taxonomies can, in a broad sense, be termed as pragmatic lists, 'classifying' the known and finite peoples of the world (although these classifications of peoples were in reality based on quicksand, given the fact that ethnic groups are constructions and races do not exist but instead emanate from a human tendency to categorize individuals in groups or lumps). By comparing various 'properties' of human beings – hair, eye and skin colour, physiognomy – natural scientists thus tried to tried to subdivide humanity into various 'races' of the species of man (such as the Caucasian type), to which certain nations purportedly belonged.

On the surface level, ethnic descriptions in medieval geographical and encyclopaedic literature would also seem to fall under the category of pragmatic description of the groups inhabiting the world. Lists, for example in Isidore's *Etymologies* of the peoples and languages of the world, can be (and in the past have often been) interpreted as reflecting deficient geographical knowledge of ethnic groups in the Middle Ages (although any taxonomical discussion was totally absent).[14] As will be discussed in chapter 4, however, medieval ethnic catalogues should not be approached in this manner. Neither did they attempt to list all the known, existent peoples, nor did they in this sense serve a pragmatic purpose.

On the other hand, poetic lists enumerate something we cannot grasp; the aim is not to be exhaustive but to portray a part of some greater whole (in the realms of the imagination). In poetic catalogues, the scope of digression is subsequently much greater than in the pragmatic list. Although a distinction is made in these chapters between the early lists within a monastic context (discussed in chapter 4) and the literary catalogues (in chapter 5), both should indeed be placed under the category of the poetic list. However, these medieval ethnic catalogues should be viewed as forming a specific category of poetic lists, offering a rhetorical-ethical mnemonic device for pondering virtues and

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11 *The Infinity of Lists* is itself a marriage of form and content employing the 'topos of ineffability' – something so large that it cannot be grasped, is captured in a list, thus displaying a sample of something infinite. Eco, *Infinity of Lists*, 49.
12 Idem, 113.
13 Leerssen, *National Thought*, 55; Banton, *Racial Theories*, 2-6.
14 See for discussions of medieval empirical-geographical knowledge for example Edson, *Mapping Time and Space*; Lozovsky, *The Earth Is Our Book,* 139-155; Andrew Gow, 'Fra Mauro's World View', in P.D.A. Harvey (red.), *The Hereford World Map. Medieval World Maps and their Context* (London 2006), 405-414.

vices, God's designs for humanity, the fleeting nature of the world and hidden meanings.[15] This must be understood in relation to the specifically medieval notion that all things created – the diversity of flora and fauna, of precious stones, birds, fish, animals, mankind and its division into peoples and languages – emanated as signs of God's providence. As such, medieval peoples each fulfilled their role within the temporal and spatial context of the past creation in the East and future destruction in the West, upon which the earth would end and the Final Judgment would be pronounced. These ethnic catalogues were devised especially to ponder on the fleeting nature of mankind and to conjure up images in the mind of sin or sanctity, using the imagination.[16]

It is this typical form of medieval thinking – that all must be viewed within a historical movement of time and space – which complicates Eco's distinction between the practical and the poetical.[17] For where in his division between practical and poetic, the first category contains those things existent, within a medieval epistemology, all things, both past and present, were viewed within a parallel and simultaneous timeframe of creation, temporality and final events within the narrative of salvation. This concept of time – as both linear and coetaneous – and space is fundamental to understanding both medieval *mappae mundi* and historiography, as well as medieval ethnic catalogues and their meaning. Thus within this temporal-geographical theological narrative, the purpose of ethnic catalogues was not merely to offer pragmatic or poetic lists, but to list things real or imaginary to a moral end – to ruminate on good and evil, picturing it in one's mind, in order to choose good over evil.

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15 Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, 116-171.
16 Idem, 131.
17 Indeed, this division between a finite list of things, or places, or peoples, without the necessity to mention their accidental properties, and those – infinite – with their properties, can be discerned in the many lists of towns, bishoprics, and ecclesiastical provinces. See for example the countless lists in Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia Imperialia* II, which are indeed simply lists without properties, and those of peoples, which are accompanied by epithets. Yet this division is certainly not clear-cut, as the many lists of English towns or counties and their products or characteristics discussed in chapter 5 demonstrate. See Eco, *Infinity of Lists*, 18.