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Images of ethnicity in later medieval Europe

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III

CARVING REPUTATIONS IN ENGLAND, FRANCE AND GERMANY

According to Rees Davies, there were three reasons for imposing civilizing notions on ethnic groups in the later Middle Ages. First, Christian Europe wished to impose moralizing norms. Second, the Church specifically wished to impose unifying norms. And third, there was a desire for political uniformity.¹ In addition, we might add that the ‘evolutionary’ concept of civilizing notions justified subjugation of ethnic groups such as the Irish, denying them rights, as Anglo-Norman settlers ‘brought civilization’ to a region marred (from an Anglo-Norman point of view) by a fragmented political organization, a nomadic life, an underdeveloped agricultural production and a generally ‘barbaric’ way of life.

Besides the introduction of the concept of an ‘evolutionary civilizing process’ in the twelfth century, there was a general interest in shaping manners and behaviour. Contemporaneous manuals, as John Gillingham has argued, appeared in this period prescribing courtly manners, including table etiquette and sexual mores – centuries before Norbert Elias’ starting signal for a civilizing process in the sixteenth century.² In the next two chapters I will examine how this new emphasis on cultivating manners might have been relevant to ethnic groups as a norm which they might desire to appropriate. In chapters 7 and 8 I will discuss how images of ethnicity, balancing on various rungs of civilization, might be employed in the French, German and English territories in order to stake a position within Christendom, thus offering degrees of access to social status and power (in Bourdieu’s terms, symbolic capital). Ethnic stereotypes, measured against socio-cultural values, might thus serve as a form of ‘cultural capital’ in order to position ethnic group members within Christendom. The evolving notions of courtliness offered group members a benchmark against which their own reputations might be compared.

Instead of emphasizing the unifying ideal of Christendom, in chapters 7 and 8 I view idealized socio-cultural norms as offering a context in which ethnic groups might compete with one another, depending on their success in accumulating courtly characteristics. If, within Christendom, emphasis might lie on the virtues of restraint, contrasting ethnic stereotypes – such as that of German fury – might weaken any claim to being a defender of Christendom, with its ensuing power. In chapter 7, I examine the expression of chivalric values contrasted in French-German stereotypes, specifically within the framework of the Crusades, as knights competed to serve in God’s militia. In chapter 8 I discuss the notion of English courtliness, contrasted to the Keltish backwardness and French

1 Davies, ‘The Peoples of Britain and Ireland 1100-1400 III. Laws and Customs’, 17-18.

2 John Gillingham, ‘From Civilitas to Civility: Codes of Manners in Medieval and Early Modern England’ in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, sixth series 12 (2002), 267-289; see for example ‘The *Facetus*: or, The Art of Courtly Living’, transl. Alison Goddard Elliott, in *Allegorica* 2 (1977), 27-57; cf. Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 42-83; Elias does acknowledge the existence of earlier twelfth-thirteenth-century manuals (and discusses some sources), yet he believed that the process of ‘internalization’ of these prescriptions was still nascent and the instilling of shame far less potent than in the Renaissance.

chivalry, in an attempt by a rising group of clerics to carve out an acceptable reputation after the humility of the Norman Conquest.

Finally, in chapter 9, I discuss how one specific stereotype – that of drunkenness – based upon cultural practices – might serve as a justification for the conquest of England, caused by God's wrath at his chosen people. As such, stereotypes – within the specific medieval ethnic-religious context of chosenness – might serve to explain the destiny of peoples, as dictated by God. Although there might not exist any notion of a national identity in this period, ethnic character was thus viewed to play a crucial role in the fate of peoples.