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Images of ethnicity in later medieval Europe

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Conclusion

Modernists writing about the Middle Ages generally tend to minimize the existence of concepts of ethnicity in this period. Ethnic stereotypes are termed expressions of primitive xenophobia in a society bound together by vassallic loyalty to ruling dynasties.[1] Only with the rise of print capitalism was ethnic consciousness 'nationalized'. Instead, regional identities were strong, and territories and peoples demarcated unsystematically, upon which virtues and vices were grafted at random. In the Middle Ages, according to Joep Leerssen, crude ethnocentrism reigned, employing cartoonesque images of ethnic character.[2]

However, as this study demonstrates, although not embedded in a political ideology, the notion that members of ethnic groups shared characteristics, including innate mental traits, was certainly not an empty concept in the Middle Ages. The elite entertained rather elaborate notions of ethnicity related to sin, the Fall, but also medical knowledge. As such ethnicity was not something simply forced upon a passive people by a political body, but a relevant reference point for the literate, reflecting social and cultural values.

Before the twelfth century, ethnic images represented the 'core essence' of peoples; Isidore of Seville's sixth-century etymologies of ethnic groups drew from their supposed character traits. Images of ethnicity were strongly tied to geography and territory, yet set within a religious framework. Europe might be represented as a blessed, sweet plot of land where Christendom had set foot. Geography, as we have seen, was the stage for the expansion of mankind across the ecumene, from the Orient to the Occident.[3] In medieval thought, events unfolding were explained as signs of God's judgment and wrath as a result (usually) of mankind's sins: avarice, simony, lust, arrogance. Such sinful behaviour was certainly not viewed as the exclusive domain of the religious other, such as Muslims, Jews or (to a degree) Greeks, but also of ethnic groups within Christendom.

Contrary to current beliefs, lists of ethnic vices and vices compiled before the twelfth century were not arbitrary, jumbled catalogues reflective of a lack of systematic categorization, as Michel Foucault once stated.[4] They must not be viewed as simple 'folk taxonomies'. Nor were they merely cognitive tools produced from a desire to bring order to the surrounding world in an oral world. Instead, these lists served as ethical meditative tools for monks to ruminate the diversity and history of mankind from an eschatological perspective. The notion of ethnic or national character in lists did not thus, in my opinion, evolve as a 'fundamental characteristic' in early modern comparative classification schemas, as these lists, dating back to at least the ninth century, should be seen as

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1 Zientara, 'Nationale Strukturen', 304.
2 Leerssen, *National Thought*, 26.
3 Dalché, *Géographie et culture*, 281.
4 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xviii.

monastic tools of introspection. Nor are these lists of ethnic groups an unsystematic mishmash which subsequently evolved into recognizable fixed patterns. They followed a geographical order from East to West – cataloguing the diversity of humanity in accordance with peoples' roles and moral dispositions, in the history from creation to the end of time. Such moral catalogues of peoples' mental qualities epitomize the very opposite of ethnocentrism or utterances of ethnic hatred – they served to introspectively ponder ethnic dispositions, including one's own sinful disposition. Their urgency flowed from their eschatological context – the belief in the world's imminent end brought eternal damnation or acceptance. Such ruminations were religiously, not politically, induced, although the Holy Roman Empire was expected to fulfil a specific role in the advent of the last days. In addition, the extensive attention paid to ethnic vices partly resulted from a condemnation of collective sinful behaviour, which was viewed as a determinant of the destiny of peoples in terms of prosperity or adversity in war. Religious values should thus not be viewed separately from ethnic; ethnic groups assigned themselves distinct roles in the Christian history of salvation.

From the end of the eleventh century, the religious significance of ethnic character was supplemented with the classical theory that environment was a determinant of mental disposition and physical appearance. Although familiarity with the theory was restricted initially to intellectuals able to read Latin medical treatises, who had usually studied at universities, the influence of climate theory gained steady ground in the twelfth century in thinking about ethnicity. At the end of the century Benoît of St Maure already evoked this theory in his vernacular *Chronicles*; from the early thirteenth century, it was enmeshed in the popular encyclopaedic *On the Properties of Things*, written for mendicants as an aid in their efforts to preach to laymen. An unanswered question here is whether these friars subsequently spread knowledge of this theory in their sermons to the lay people, and possibly applied it in their dealings with peoples on the fringes of Europe, when determining their approach and strategies.

The ethnocentric tenets of classical climate theory – which was first developed in ancient Greece – determined that the Mediterranean region was the most temperate climate, which produced balanced humoural dispositions. Accordingly, Greeks and Romans were considered to be intelligent and culturally refined urbanites. With the re-emergence of this theory in the twelfth century, intellectuals in North-West Europe took pains to emphasize their own beneficial environment in the north-west – which in ancient times was viewed as a cold and rather backward area. In order to do so they engaged in a bit of climatic engineering. At the same time geography, environment, religion and notions of civilization started to overlap with the Christianization of Europe, the widening reach of the papacy and efforts of the Church to penetrate more deeply into the religious practices of the inhabitants of Western Europe. A growing notion developed that the geography of the West offered a stage for Christianity, that the two went hand in hand, and that this was a temperate region inhabited, in its core, by white, civilized peoples. Moreover, some intellectuals began to explain physiological differences as the fall-out of original sin. The 'scientific' humoural and climate theory was thus infused with religious-moral overtones.

At the same time, with the rise of the universities, royal bureaucracy and other developments of the twelfth-century 'renaissance', clerics studying in international milieus were exposed not only to people of various ethnic backgrounds, but also to new literary prescripts for stereotyping. In manuals of rhetoric, students were actively encouraged to stereotype, using topical images. Here we see the role of education passing down 'formalized knowledge' of views of the other. However, in the international communities employment of ethnic stereotypes might also alleviate tensions, as use of nasty ethnic jokes allowed students to let off steam.

Within the larger framework of the heightened force of ecclesiastical normative prescriptive, came the burgeoning inclination to impose 'civilizing notions' on ethnic groups in the pursuit of a unified Christian Europe.[5] This notion of embodying 'civilization' was appropriated notably by the Northern French, Normans, and Anglo-Normans within North-West Europe, serving as a convenient justification for the suppression and colonization of peoples and territories on the fringes of Europe: Ireland, the Scandinavian and Baltic North, regions inhabited by men who – from the greedy viewpoint of the core of civilized Europe – failed to steadily ascend the slippery rungs of civilization and true Christian devoutness.[6] The ramification of the convergence of classical and patristic geographical concepts effected the belief that the heart of Western Europe: northern France, was the home of Christendom, chivalry and learning. Earlier, in the ninth century, Carolingian intellectuals had articulated the concept of the *translatio imperii* and *studium*, asserting that power and knowledge had migrated from East to West, from Athens, via Rome to France. In the twelfth century this concept was expanded to include the transfer of chivalry and wealth of commodities. It was undergirded climatologically as France, especially, was pictured as a sweet territory.

The convergence of patristic and classical geography, ethnography and medicine also allowed a socio-evolutionary concept to converge with a religious drive to settle in pagan 'promised lands', divine plots whose inhabitants however remained poised on lower rungs of civilization – pastoral, meat-eating, milk-drinking lawless societies. In twelfth-century England, Anglo-Norman intellectuals such as William of Malmesbury and Gerald of Wales embraced an evolutionary concept – existing in eleventh-century Norman representations of Brittany – that English civilization had progressed from pastoral, via sedentary, agrarian societies, to urbanity. Monastic and clerical intellectuals thus offered a rhetoric to strengthen claims to Anglo-Norman settlement in Ireland, and colonization in the Baltic region.

At least for intellectual clergymen and aristocracy, civilizing notions and the accompanying images of courtliness and chivalry vis-à-vis (pagan) barbarity presented a framework in which they could comfortably nestle. In addition, in courtly culture, churchmen and aristocrats were propagating and embracing the values of restraint, bravery and intelligence. In both Latin and vernacular texts, the nobility was presented a mirror reflecting behavioural ideals, which overlapped with images of

5 Davies, 'The Peoples of Britain and Ireland 1100-1400. III Laws and Customs', 17-18.
6 Gillingham, *The English in the Twelfth Century*, 3-18.

ethnicity. In a social environment efforts to appropriate these ideals offered a passageway to the higher echelons of society, to upward mobility. Especially in Anglo-Norman England, where the growing demand for literate officials offered career opportunities for those of modest backgrounds, successfully adopting these values – presenting oneself as the 'owner' of these values – was something to aspire to. The evolving concept of ethnic character thus bore sufficient significance for Anglo-Norman court clerics to equate their courtliness to Englishness, or conversely, their Englishness to courtliness. The northern French, similarly, held chivalrous behaviour as synonymous to Frenchness.

Although a unified Christendom might be the ideal, 'supranational' values of chivalry and courtliness might also inspire ethnicities to compete. Instead of fostering unity among its members, the universalistic ideal of Christendom might, thus, sharpen ethnic differences within the community of believers in twelfth-century Europe. Just as the gravitation towards unification within the European Union is accompanied by a proliferation of regional and national sentiments today, within twelfth-century Europe the ambitious program of the Church to take charge as the highest authority, both in religious and secular matters, aroused ethnic consciousness among especially its nobility and clergy, on the Crusades and at the schools and universities. These clerics were also active at the courts of France, England, and Germany, entertaining and edifying the secular powers and often contributing to political ideology.

There is a huge vacuum between, on the one hand, modern national consciousness – an awareness and belief of belonging to a nation, occupying a historic territory, sharing historical memories and myths, a common culture, legal rights and duties and a national economy – and its nineteenth-century ideological stance of nationalism (according to which the nation, as a natural atom of human diversity, should be the prime focus of allegiance, and the nation converge with a self-determined sovereign state) and the idea that in medieval times ethnic stereotypes were mere expressions of a primitive 'hatred' of foreigners. This study offers a contribution to bridging this gap. If, among the elite – Latin intellectuals and possibly also the nobility – the idea of a *natio* or *gens* evoked notions of a shared past, geographical homeland, common customs and law, there was also awareness and belief that the elite shared cultural values, which might overlap a 'collective ethnic character'.

According to Susan Reynolds, medieval government relied upon the collective, and was partly dependent upon voluntary submission and loyalty to the monarchy. Territories were perceived to not only belong to kings but also to collective or corporate groups; there were mutual obligations, collective activities and customs. These collectives existed not only on a 'national' level, submitting to the ruling dynasty, but also on lower levels of regional authority. In local governance, the role of custom in common law practices likewise conjured up perceptions of 'ancient and natural communities of common customs and descent'. This emphasis on common descent and foundational myths further helped to construct notions that the units of power were 'natural'. As such, these

power structures were closely aligned with the 'imagined community'.[7] In this period the papacy was increasingly attempting to impose its power over secular authority; the ruling dynasties, entangled in processes of territorial expansion and bureaucratization, were at the same time extending their own power bases. Both the papacy and the monarchies of France and Germany, in this process, took recourse to the same kind of rhetoric of sacralisation of power.[8] Within this process, the employment of ethnic stereotypes in the rhetoric of power could further bind common allegiances of the community to the structures of power, both internally and in bilateral relations. As such, although ethnic groups did not owe allegiance to the *ethnie*, but rather to ruling dynasties, still positive images of ethnicity, adopted by the elite, might be tied to notions of dynastic power.

At the end of the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas re-postulated the Aristotelian idea that a people should, ideally, be governed by laws in accordance with its ethnic character. This is not to argue that in the twelfth century there existed any kind of notion that the nation – as an autonomous entity – had a 'will', as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Herder believed in the eighteenth. On the contrary, ultimately, the overriding concept in medieval times was that the political fate of peoples was in God's hand, with the king representing his power on earth. In the twelfth century, ethnic groups were not abstracted to the degree that the ethnic group could thus act with a 'will' of its own. Ethnic character denoted collectivity, sameness, based upon cultural and 'biological' ties, yet without political implications of sovereignty. Only in the second half of the thirteenth century would classical ideas being to reappear that the fatherland was not in heaven, but a political unit, here on earth. The shift of loyalty from a universal religious community to an ethnic group would have profound impact in the centuries to come. Nonetheless, even within *Christianitas*, ethnic sentiments and images remained a potent force, both vis-à-vis the other, and in relation to the inner self.

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7 Reynolds, 'Idea of the Nation', 56-58.
8 Kantorowizc, *King's Two Bodies*, 193-194; Hoppenbrouwers, 'Dynamics of National Identity', 35-36.