Nations and National Identities in the Medieval World: An Apologia

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Medieval historians tend to find themselves in a tricky position when there is any discussion of nations and national identities. They are painfully aware that they may be regarded as unwelcome and even improper guests at such a discussion. If the topic can be extended to include the *pre*-history of nations and nationalism, then perhaps they – rather like young children at an adult evening party – can be allowed to introduce themselves briefly before the main business of the evening gets under way and they are asked to withdraw. After all, it is well known that a most impressive galaxy of historians, sociologists and social anthropologists – Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Elie Kedourie, Eric Hobsbawm among them – have affirmed categorically that nations and nationalism, as we know them – an important qualification – are essentially modern, indeed arguably post-1780, phenomena. Moreover critics point out that the essential localism of medieval society on the one hand and the strength of bonds between man and man in their various forms on the other militated against the development of ideas of national identity or at least against giving any substantial priority to them in the scale of human obligations. Faced with this barrage of sceptical criticism, one might expect medieval historians to beat a hasty and rather shamefaced retreat from colloquia such as the present one. Yet they have not done so. On the contrary, they publish books and articles on national identity in the middle ages; claim that nationalism was born at least in the thirteenth, not in the nineteenth century (as current modernist orthodoxy suggests); and seem to have few scruples about employing the word 'nation' to describe the communities of people and the polities of the middle ages. It is well worth exploring this act of historiographical and terminological defiance because it casts light not only on modern approaches to the medieval period but also on the very theoretical and methodological issues which are at the heart of this conference.

Let us start with the concept and term 'nation' itself. In much modern discourse 'nation' and 'nationalism' have been given period-specific and pre-eminently political forms. Having taken up this position, it is then an easy

matter to conclude that earlier forms of human associations and organizations do not qualify to be described as 'nations'. This is not a position which medieval historians or indeed some contemporary historians and sociologists can readily accept. Rather would they agree with the programme notes for this conference in characterizing 'nation' and 'national identity' as 'protean, non-essential phenomena'. Indeed they might well agree with the striking metaphor employed recently by a social anthropologist when he described ethnic identity as "a kind of jellyfish identity, constantly wobbling and never quite fitting into any rigid containers". Jellyfish may be difficult to handle; but at least they are alive. Nations likewise are always in a state of becoming; they are never static. The processes of national and ethnic self-classification never cease. For that very reason we should not foreshorten their history to suit our contemporary terminological convenience.

But the medieval historian might take his theoretical reservations about the modernist characterization of the nation even further. On any *longue durée* view of ethnic and national identity, the modernist emphasis on the political and civic features of nations and nationalism – so natural to us today – surely needs to be balanced by the attention that needs to be given to the ethnic, the cultural and what may be called, by way of shorthand, the genealogical-mythical. National identity is fundamentally multi-dimensional; as historians we should not privilege one of those dimensions. Furthermore, a long-term view of the collectivity we call a nation and of national identity will surely convince us that the claims of any identity – and national identity is, of course, only one of the multiple identities in which humans find, or may find, themselves – are hugely variable in their intensity and form in time and place.

This very historicity and specificity of any meaningful discussion of 'nation' and 'national identity' brings me to a second set of reasons why the medieval historian does not believe that he is gate-crashing improperly into a general conference such as this. Modernist discussions of nations often seem to proceed, consciously or unconsciously, by establishing what are in effect neo-Weberian ideal types of what a nation is or should be. This certainly makes for clarity of definition. But attempts at terminological clarity often lead to a foreshortening and even a distortion of our appreciation of the past. Historians do not have a value-free, technical jargon of their own. They employ the language and concepts of everyday contemporary discourse, in all their inexactitude, to describe yesterday's societies. If they are debarred from using such terms as 'nation' and 'national identity' to describe the collectivities and the sentiments which they recognize in the past on the grounds that they do not correspond to the alleged modern usage of these terms, then what language do they employ?

Let me illustrate my point from the writings of Anthony Smith (1986), precisely and paradoxically because he is a sociologist who has taken the evidence of the medieval and indeed the ancient world on the question of national identity very seriously. At several points in his work Professor Smith offers the following definition of a nation: a named human population, sharing a historical territory, common myths and memories, a mass, public culture, a single economy and common rights and duties for all its members. A medieval historian would have no difficulty in identifying communities which seem to meet the first three of these criteria – a named human population, common myths and memories, and a historical territory (even though he might want to add that the territory in question *might* be an imagined country, in the past and/or the future). But clearly no medieval or indeed pre-late-nineteenth- or twentieth-century collectivity can meet Smith's three remaining criteria – a mass, public culture, a single economy (whatever that means), and common rights and duties for all its members. What is Smith's response to the dilemma he has created for himself by his definitional exercise? It is, on the one hand, to concede that "most nations are relatively recent and are necessarily modern"; it is, on the other, to create a new word in the English language, *ethnie*, to describe what he sees (and very sensitively analyses) as the essential ethnic precursors of modern nations. When one is driven to create a private term to describe a phenomenon, then one may wonder whether definitional exactitude has been bought at the price of good historical sense.

Good historical sense surely demands that we recognise that what appear to be 'nations' and 'national identity' in common parlance take a variety of forms according to the social, economic, political and cultural context of any period. Let me briefly indicate by example the sort of adjustment that may be necessary. We saw earlier that modern historians occasionally stipulate that a print culture, universal literacy and a mass public culture are among the desiderata for entry to the club of nations. Such criteria might well exclude many contemporary countries which are currently members of the United Nations; they would certainly exclude medieval communities and collectivities, even though they were termed *nationes* by contemporaries. There is, I would suggest, a certain present-minded arrogance about such an approach. It assumes that literacy, the printed word and mass culture are pre-conditions for the development and articulation of national identity. In fact oral societies do not necessarily lack the mechanisms for fostering such national identity – notably through the activities of professional remembrancers and genealogists, travelling bards and story-tellers. Nor should we underestimate the capacity of what we may regard as under-developed and remote communities

to foster their sense of national identity in ways which are very different from those of our mass media world.

The medieval historian will also want to insist that we should attempt to understand past societies on their own terms and through the language and concepts they deployed to construct their worlds rather than by our own *a priori* and time-bound criteria. What is immediately clear if we adopt this approach is that medieval people themselves seem to have believed that they indeed all belonged to peoples (*gentes*) and nations (*naciones*). We should respect their view of themselves. We should immediately dismiss the recurrent claim that the word *nacio* has very different connotations in medieval vocabulary from those of modern parlance. It is true that 'nation' has a wide range of meanings in medieval discourse and that a nation (*nacio*) might often contain several peoples (*gentes*). It is also true that *natio* can refer in medieval documents to student groupings at medieval universities or to what the social anthropologist would term extended lineages. But it is also true that *nacio* was often used in medieval documents with a meaning which surely corresponds to the connotations of the word in ordinary parlance today. Thus when the first and last native prince of Wales, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd (d.1282) referred on more than one occasion in his letters to *nostra nacio*, it would surely be a form of pedantry not to translate the phrase as 'our nation'. As Susan Reynolds (1983) has insisted, "medieval ideas about kingdoms and peoples were very like modern ideas about nations".

Indeed in many respects medieval peoples or nations – and for the purposes of my argument I shall equate the two, in spite of the occasional awkwardness of such an equation – had a far greater objective 'reality' than their modern counterparts. Whilst modern ethnicities and nations are ultimately seen as social, cultural and political constructs, medieval peoples were divine creations. The Old Testament was replete with *gentes*; so was the contemporary world. Furthermore, their identity was not a matter of perception or belief; it was a matter of blood. In his encyclopaedia of definitions (so frequently cited by medieval authors) Isidore of Seville defined a *gens* as "a multitude sprung from one principle". It was in the wake of this assumption that medieval authors expended so much ingenuity in tracing the descent of peoples from their eponymous founder and assumed that blood-descent, actual or fictive, was a qualification for membership of a people or nation. We have of course forsworn such racist assumptions in our discussions today; but we should not visit today's sensitivities on yesterday's societies. Nor in our search for political correctness in our language should we forget the power of blood-descent and ethnicity in modern *popular* views of nationhood. Rather in the same vein we now shy away, at least in public statements

and academic discourse, from statements about national or ethnic character; medieval peoples had no such inhibitions. On the contrary, they asserted the individuality of each people as expressed in its speech, laws, customs, dress and so forth. We may take as an example the comment which Bernard, the first Norman bishop of St David's in far south-west Wales, made in a letter to the Pope around 1140: 'the people' of Wales, he remarked, differed by implication from those of England, 'entirely as a nation (*nacione* is the word he uses) in language, laws, habits, modes of judgment and customs'. It is the kind of statement which could have been echoed from any part of medieval Europe. Where it differs from modern definitions of national identity is the lack of reference, or at least centrality that it gives, to political power and what we would call state identity.

Medieval peoples may not correspond to modern nations, but that is precisely because the context of political power and social organisation in which they operate is different – as is true of collectivities at all stages in the past. But medieval *gentes* are no less 'realities' than are the modern politically-defined nations of Hobsbawm's (1990) terminology. Their boundaries were as fiercely guarded by border guards as are modern nations by customs post and visa arrangements. Thus when the Emperor Frederick II warned in 1233 against the dangers of racial or ethnic assimilation (*diversarum mixtura gentium*) or when the English government in Ireland issued recurrent legislation against what it called degeneracy – that is the diluting of the identity of the English *gens* in Ireland by the adoption of the customs and language of the native Irish – we begin to appreciate that membership of a people could have some of the same features and exclusiveness as citizenship of a modern state. Nor should we be condescending in our attitudes towards our medieval ancestors simply because they did not share the same concepts, mythologies and vocabulary as us. Thus when William of Apulia commented that the Norman conquerors of southern Italy "taught their own manners and language to all who came there, so as to create a single people (*gens efficitur ut una*)", or when John of Fordun in late fourteenth-century Scotland described how the peoples (*gentes*) of Northumbria and Cumbria, the *Scoti* and The Danes "were now long since faithfully assimilated as if a single people (*tamquam una gens conglutinata*)", they were both describing what we would immediately recognise in modern parlance as 'nation building'.

My argument so far is partly a plea for identifying the continuum from medieval *gentes* to modern nations (as Anthony Smith has indeed so effectively done). It is also partly a plea for approaching past societies on their own terms and through their own language and concepts rather than by

establishing our own time-specific, historically-determined criteria and terminology. This, I should add, is *in no way* to deny the distinctiveness of modern forms of nationhood and national identity; but to concede such distinctiveness does not require us to deny the value of analysing collective identities in the *longue durée* in a historically sensitive fashion. I now wish to end by moving from the programmatic and the theoretical to a specific case-study of a medieval nation, indeed a medieval nation-state. I refer to England. Historians of medieval England have no reservations about referring to medieval England as a nation and as a state, indeed as a nation-state. Indeed they assert proudly that it is 'the oldest continuously-functioning state in the world' and that it has been the model for all subsequent nation-states until today. If that is the case, then students of modern nations may have a great deal to learn from studying this medieval precursor of the allegedly modern phenomenon. So how was the English nation-state assembled? For the sake of clarity we may arrange our answer under three headings.

The first is the development or articulation of people, or national, self-identity. A nation becomes a nation when it believes itself to be such and gives itself a name to distinguish it from other nations or peoples. The Germanic peoples who settled in Britain no doubt belonged to different ethnic groups and polities and had their own traditions, descent myths and customs. When, then, did they gradually become aware of, or perhaps more correctly invent, a common identity? Common identities are often relational; in other words, they are created over and against other groups. So, at least in part, seems to have been the beginnings of common English identity: it was the identity of *not* being Britons, the pre-existing and now conquered inhabitants of Britain. So it is that the life of St Guthlac in the early eighth century speaks of the Saxon race (*gens Saxonicus*) and the English people (*Anglorum gens*) as implacable enemies of the Britons. The process of ethnogenesis, of creating a people, was taking place. The next step was to give this new people a name by which it could identify itself and be identified by others. Historians have established that it was in the late ninth century that the term *Angelcynn*, English, became common at least in the contemporary Anglo-Saxon chronicle. The timing is significant: this was the very period that the Vikings were posing a mortal threat to the country that would come to be known as England and that a new unitary polity was emerging out of the shattered debris of earlier kingdoms. It is often through the heat of war and the struggle for survival that nations are shaped and consolidated. The English now had a common and commonly-used name; it only remained for the country of this newly-named people likewise to be given a name. That is

what indeed happened: at least by the end of the tenth century the word England, *Engla-lond*, had come into circulation.

Names and self-identification are surely, at all times and in all places, among the essential ingredients in the making of a people or a nation. But if a people is to acquire an acknowledged political identity, its ethnic cohesion needs to be contained within, and cultivated by, some of the institutions of common governance. If this does not happen – as is the case, for example, with the Kurds today – then there is a disjunction, and often acute tension, between ethnic aspiration and governmental power. The great sixteenth-century French commentator, Claude Seyssel, analysed the issue with characteristic acuteness:

> "all nations and reasonable men prefer to be governed by men of their own country and nation – who know their habits, laws and customs and share the same language and life-style as them – than by strangers" (Seyssel cited in Davies, 1994, 1-20).

The best of all solutions is for governmental power to identify itself with ethnic or national identity. The state thereby becomes, as social anthropologists point out, the focus of ethnic identity. Indeed under such circumstances a new ethnic or national identity is forged – in both senses of the word 'forged' in English, viz. fabricated *and* knocked into shape – in the wake of governmental or state power. This is precisely what happened in England and did so at a remarkably early date. And this is why English historians assert that England is a nation-state from an early date.

In that sense English nationhood was a creation of English kingship and of the remarkably extensive and ubiquitous power which its kings came to exercise throughout the country at a remarkably early date. This was the regnal solidarity – to borrow the phrase coined by the English historian, Susan Reynolds (1997) – which was such a vital ingredient in the making of English nationhood. Countries and kingdoms can, of course, be loose, or not so loose, federations of different ethnic groups. That was frequently the case in medieval Europe; it is self-evidently and painfully the case in many modern countries – be it Rwanda or Afghanistan. It is those countries where there is a perceived and accepted match between ethnic or national identity and what we may call state power which are the most resilient units. These are, in the English phrase, nation-states. England was the earliest of them. Its plural ethnic identities – Mercian, West Saxon, Danish and so forth – were merged in a common Englishness, a new and inclusive ethnic or national identity. Furthermore this Englishness, this sense of nationhood, was essentially a civic or political construct. It was not a matter of blood, foundation-legends or even

customs, but of the acceptance of the common rule and allegiance of a single king. It was, if you like, a civic ethnicity, that is a national identity.

We can see as much in several directions. We can see it pre-eminently in the simple title which the king adopted from the tenth century. He was king of the English, *rex Anglorum*. It did not matter than he might have been a Scandinavian or a Norman or an Angevin rather than a native 'Englishman'; nor did it matter that many of his subjects were, or were the descendants of, identifiably different ethnic groups – Angles, Saxons, Normans, Flemings etc. They were now amalgamated – by an act of fiction – into a single, new, streamlined national identity: the English. This was above all a political and governmental achievement manifested, for example, in the common oath of allegiance exacted from all freemen (probably from the tenth century), a common coinage, a common tax and increasingly a common law. England as a nation and a country was a unit invented and created by the experience of a common and powerful kingship and a ubiquitous and penetrative government. The intensity and forms of English national identity would, of course, be transformed over the centuries; but the lineaments of English national identity are surely already firmly in place by the twelfth century, if not earlier. When we find a reference, for example, in 1258 to 'the nation of the kingdom of England' we must surely recognize *both* the sense of national identity (nation) *and* the role of the political structures and power of kingship (kingdom) in forging and framing that identity. That is likewise the message of the preoccupation with, and opposition to, aliens (*alienigenae*) in the political life and documents of thirteenth-century England. One only begins to identify 'aliens' clearly when one has identified one's national identity unambiguously and institutionally and established borderguards to police it.

This brings me to the third and final manifestation of a sense of national identity. Nations must have, and create, a sense of historical identity for themselves, which both bolsters and justifies their sense of distinctiveness. That is what Ernest Renan (1882) had in mind in his famous comment that getting its history wrong was a prerequisite for creating a nation. The English got in on this act very early indeed and created a historical mythology for themselves which has stood them in remarkably good stead for over a millennium. The founding father of the mythology was, of course, the Venerable Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English people (*gens Anglorum*) written c.731. Bede was, in effect, inventing the English people as a concept, endowing it with its own chronology commencing with the coming of the English to Britain (*adventus Saxonum*) and interpreting its history as that of an elect nation, the new Israel. A national mythos was in the making. Of course it might be objected that historical myths of this kind are the preserve

of a few intellectuals and that the recurrent experiences of defeat and invasions might have undermined any incipient English sense of historical destiny. There is a good deal of merit in such objections; but only up to a point. Not only can and do the teachings of intellectuals percolate down the social scale in however mangled a form and are then reinforced by local folk memories and tales; but what is truly remarkable is the way that the historical mythology of the English was revised and updated and that often in the most inauspicious of circumstances.

Let me illustrate the point briefly. There was no greater disaster or breach in the success-story of English nation and kingship than the Norman conquest of 1066. Yet within two or three generations of that disaster, English historical mythology was revised to accommodate and absorb the event. The new Norman kings of England continued to call themselves kings of the English. Even more strikingly, when Henry, archdeacon of Huntington, came to compose a continuous History in the 1120s and 1130s, he simply, and pointedly, called it *Historia Anglorum*, A History of the English. Most strikingly of all when Geffrei Gaimar composed the first surviving history book in French, for a French-speaking lady in Lincolnshire, he likewise called it *Estoire des Engleis*. A country and a people which has such a developed and resilient view of its national saga is surely very well on the way to developing its own well-cultivated sense of its own national identity.

The case of England and the English may, in several respects, be exceptional – both in the precociousness of its institutional development and 'civic' identity, and in the way in which the three elements in the making of the English nation – its self-identification as a separate and unified people, its 'regnal solidarity' as a tightly-textured kingdom, and its effective cultivation of its own historical mythology – were woven tightly together to create a credible 'nation state'. But neither the formula nor the experience were uniquely English. One could argue, for example, that Scotland underwent a not dissimilar experience in many ways, albeit at a later date and in an accelerated fashion. In Scotland's case the traumatic experience of the Wars of Independence (esp. 1296-1328) and a disputed royal succession meant that the process of the forging and articulating of a sense of national identity was compressed in a much shorter period than in England and culminated in the Declaration of Arbroath 1320, which is assuredly one of the most eloquent and remarkable affirmations of national identity in any country in the middle ages.

It is in the individual and often widely differing experiences of particular countries that I would eventually rest my case for taking seriously the case for bringing the medieval period in Europe within the ambit of any discussion

of nations and national identities in history. Whether my case would meet the criteria of modernist sceptics depends, eventually, on how they define, and thereby confine, the terms 'nation' and 'national identity'. It has been my contention that if we approach these terms ecumenically and with a sensitivity to the changes to circumstances, language and social and political expressions which are at the heart of the profession of the historian (whatever may be true of the political sociologist) then indeed the medieval historian should not be prohibited from discussions of 'nations' and 'national identities'. Least of all should he be discouraged from studying the units and collectivities which contemporaries themselves identified and on their own terms. Indeed I would go one step further and claim, almost defiantly, that the medieval evidence can provide – as I have tried to show briefly in the case of England – insightful evidence of the ingredients which may be involved in the creating and inventing of a nation and of national identity and the circumstances and chronologies under which that may – or, equally of course, may not – take place. That is why I welcome your decision to invite a mere medieval historian to attend, even to participate in, your conference.

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Naties en nationale identiteiten in de middeleeuwse wereld: een apologie

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_____ SAMENVATTING _____

Historici van de moderne Europese geschiedenis claimen soms dat de termen 'naties' en 'nationalisme' periode-specifiek zijn en aldus niet gebruikt kunnen worden voor het tijdperk voor 1800. De afwezigheid van de mechanismen van moderne staten en van de drukkunst en geletterdheid voor een groot publiek in deze periode impliceert immers dat 'natie' een anachronistische term is. Historici van de Middeleeuwen zijn het hier niet mee eens. Hoewel ze toegeven dat moderne en hedendaagse naties specifieke kenmerken hebben, vinden ze dat de term wel kan gebruikt worden voor de middeleeuwse periode. Hier hebben ze twee redenen voor. In de eerste plaats percipieerden middeleeuwse mensen hun wereld als opgebouwd uit 'naties' (*naciones*) en 'volkeren' (*gentes*). Dit wereldbeeld moet gerespecteerd worden. In de tweede plaats hebben naties – ook als er geen gemeenschappelijke institutionele macht in voege is – een identiteitsgevoel gebaseerd op historische mythen, gemeenschappelijke wetten en gebruiken, een gemeenschappelijke naam en een identificeerbaar thuisland. Deze 'naties' en 'volkeren' maakten deel uit van de imaginaire gemeenschappen en collectiviteiten van de middeleeuwse periode en worden ook als dusdanig aangeduid in het overgedragen bewijsmateriaal.

Het verhaal van de opmars van Engeland als een natie in de middeleeuwse wereld illustreert dit. Tegen de tiende eeuw verwierven het land en het volk een eigen naam – Engeland en de Engelsen. Een gemeenschappelijke identiteit en naam zijn kenmerken van een natie. Tegen die tijd had Engeland ook verschillende karakteristieken van een gemeenschappelijke institutionele macht, waaronder een specifiek Engels koningschap en een steeds homogener wordend bestuur. Engeland werd stilaan een staat en een natie; in modern taalgebruik was het een natiestaat. Daarenboven creëerde het voor zichzelf een collectief geheugen in de vorm van een historiografisch verhaal en een mythe. Het Engels verhaal is het klassieke voorbeeld van het maken, het uitvinden van een natie in de middeleeuwse wereld.

Nations et identités nationales dans le monde médiéval: une apologie

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_____ RÉSUMÉ_____

Certains spécialistes de l'histoire des Temps modernes européens estiment que les termes 'nations' et 'nationalisme' relèvent uniquement de leur période et ne peuvent donc être utilisés avant 1800. L'absence des mécanismes propres aux États modernes, de l'imprimerie et le taux d'analphabétisme élevé engendrent, en effet, l'usage anachronique du concept 'nation'. Or, ce n'est pas l'avis de certains médiévistes. Bien que, selon eux, des caractéristiques particulières définissent les Nations modernes et contemporaines, le terme peut très bien s'appliquer à la période médiévale. Ils énoncent deux raisons à cet égard. Premièrement, les gens du Moyen âge perçoivent leur univers comme une constellation de 'nations' (*naciones*) et de 'peuples' (*gentes*). Cette vision du monde doit être prise en compte. En second lieu, les nations – même en l'absence d'un pouvoir institutionnel commun – fondent leur sentiment identitaire sur des mythes historiques, des lois et des coutumes communs, une même dénomination et un foyer national identifiable. Au Moyen âge, ces 'nations' et ces 'peuples' participent des communautés et des collectivités imaginaires et sont désignées de la sorte dans les sources.

Le récit du développement de l'Angleterre, comme nation dans le monde médiéval, en est l'illustration. Vers le dixième siècle, le pays et le peuple acquièrent un nom – l'Angleterre et les Anglais. Une Nation se caractérise bien par une identité et un nom communs. À cette époque, l'Angleterre possède, également, les différents caractères d'un pouvoir institutionnel commun, à savoir une royauté propre et un gouvernement de plus en plus homogène. Ainsi, l'État se meut progressivement en Nation, soit, dit dans le langage moderne, en État-Nation. Celui-ci se crée, en outre, une mémoire collective sous la forme d'un récit historique et d'un mythe. L'histoire anglaise constitue donc l'exemple classique de la création, voire de l'invention, d'une nation dans le monde médiéval.