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4-1-2005

(Review) The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe

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Recommended Citation

Paxton, FS. "The Myth Of Nations: The Medieval Origins Of Europe." *Speculum-A Journal Of Medieval Studies* 80.2 (n.d.): 573-575. Web.

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Keywords

European identity, Herodotus, Roman empire, Zulu, Middle Ages

Comments

Initially published in *Speculum*, 2005, p.573-5.

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DOI: 10.1017/S0038713400000476

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0038713400000476>

the dramatic action of this play. He supplies stage directions, which Frulovisi did not provide, and he translates glosses of names, which the playwright placed at the head of most scenes. Some of the former, for example, "Putting some moves on him" or "Clerus says 'ooh' and exits," heighten the comic effect. Smith occasionally adds an internal gloss for clarification, too, as when "Quid mihi faciet?" is translated "What will she do for me on credit" or the simple "liberi" becomes "foolish children." Footnotes cite the numerous verbal parallels to ancient Roman comedy, and in one instance the translator has invented a passage of dialogue where a lacuna occurs in the unique manuscript of the plays. Finally, the book's layout is attractive, and misprints are infrequent (e.g., "blanditu" in the note on p. 70 should be "blanditur," while "Fulovisi" on p. 156 must, of course, be "Frulovisi").

A main theme of *Peregrinatio* is fortune. Indeed, *fortuna* and its cognates appear frequently in the text. Given his own generous endowment of ill fortune, it is no wonder that Frulovisi composed such a piece, although he was, as Smith asserts, "his own worst enemy." Perhaps now that his play is brought to light again after its long repose in obscurity, his luck is changing.

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PATRICK J. GEARY, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*. First paperback ed. Princeton, N.J., and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003. Pp. xi, 199. \$16.95.

In this stimulating book, which is aimed at "nonacademics who wonder about the relationship between past and present," Patrick Geary challenges contemporary claims to sovereign territorial rights based on descent from those who settled Europe during "the formative period of European identity that was the first millennium." While his intended audience may sometimes have a hard time following the argument, which assumes, for example, a good grasp of the differences between the early and later Roman Empire, his major point is solidly made. The notion that any modern European people or nation originated as a homogeneous group, related by blood, speaking the same native language, and sharing the same culture, especially if made in the name of the barbarian successor states in post-Roman Europe, is wrong. There were no such groups. The polyglot, multiethnic armies of the barbarian confederations had no common identity until they settled down under successful warrior aristocracies, who then provided for themselves, and those who identified with them, an invented past. Ethnic nationalism has always been rooted in myth, not history. In the present and the past, claims to be a people are really "appeals to *become* a people."

Geary begins with the "crisis of European identity" that has followed the breakup of the Soviet Union and the massive population movements of recent years. In the face of migrations on a scale not seen in centuries, Europeans are once again asking what constitutes national identity. Is it blood or common allegiance? What does it mean to be French, German, or Bosnian? Those who argue that blood is the key have invoked attitudes, like racism and anti-Semitism, and provoked destructive forms of behavior, above all genocide, that most Europeans thought they had left behind. Chapter 1 argues that premodern Europeans had little, if any, sense that ethnicity and sovereignty ought to, or ever did, coincide. The urban/rural divide had more geographical significance than any imagined borders between ethnic groups, and distinctions between lords and peasants more social consequence than those between, for example, Germans and Poles. The nineteenth century changed all that, especially because of the new science of philology, which made language a primary means of defining identity. "National" languages were created, and others disappeared. Political leaders claimed descent from people who had spoken or written earlier forms of the now official language. Ethnoarchaeologists supported these claims with evidence that

ancient peoples had distinct material cultures that corresponded to their common linguistic heritage. As a result, the ethnic nationalist increasingly replaced the republican citizen as the ideal political actor.

While most people today recognize that political ethnicity is a recent invention, many continue to believe that cultural ethnicity is ancient and uncomplicated. In order to show that it is not, Geary turns to the origins of ethnography in antiquity (chapter 2). He begins with Herodotus, who, in his characteristically observant and nonjudgmental manner, described a variety of ways in which ancient peoples formed, reformed, or disappeared. Herodotus's Roman successors, however, disagreed. According to them, there were only two kinds of people: those whose identity arose from their participation in history, that is, in civilization; and the barbarians, who were part of the natural rather than the human world (an attitude that the author notes, tellingly, is still apparent in museums of natural history, which include exhibits on "other" cultures along with minerals, plants, and animals). Jews shared with Romans the notion that they were constituted as a nation under a common law, and Christians inherited both of those constitutional identities. The fluid social conditions of late antiquity then provided fertile soil for combining biological (or ethnic) and constitutional notions of identity into new hybrids through "ethnogenesis." The next three chapters, which trace shifting identities between Romans and barbarians from the third to the eighth centuries, take a detailed look at this process.

In the restructuring that followed the crisis of the third century, the Roman Empire changed its policy in regard to the barbarians. Instead of annihilating them, they were incorporated into the imperial structure as contingents of the military, "the primary vehicle of Romanization, the only truly Roman institution in the empire." Thus barbarian and Roman identities began to merge. In the fourth and fifth centuries, the first of two types of barbarian "nations" appeared. The most successful were the Visigoths and Ostrogoths, who took up stable places in the imperial order but kept separate legal and religious identities. The result was a bipartite social order: "orthodox, Roman, and civilian" on the one hand; "Arian, barbarian, and military" on the other. Their separateness was, however, their undoing. Long-term success came only to the second type, typified by the Franks and Anglo-Saxons, who accepted orthodox Christianity. In the post-Roman kingdoms they founded, the distinction between barbarian and Roman broke down and by the year 600 had all but disappeared. From then on, *barbari* tended to be foreigners, especially pagans, and *Romani* people who lived in Rome itself or in areas under the control of Constantinople. Moreover, regardless of ancestry, elites identified themselves with the ruling social order, whether it called itself Visigothic, Frankish, or Lombard. The "last barbarians," such as the Continental Saxons and the Slavs (and, presumably the Scandinavians, although Geary's geographical and chronological boundaries do not extend quite that far), went through a similar process of ethnogenesis. Byzantine-Slavic wars, for example, led to the emergence of Croats, Serbs, and Bulgars, none of whom had any ethnic identity before their emergence out of defeated military confederations.

In the final chapter Geary turns briefly to how the Carolingians complicated things by giving ethnic laws to subject peoples and to the Frankish elites who were sent to rule over them, thereby creating a "medieval mess." After concluding that "myths of common descent and a shared history . . . masked the radical discontinuity and heterogeneity that characterized late antiquity," Geary then returns to the question of why so many of us still believe myths of ethnic nationalism by turning his sights to Africa and the origins of the Zulu nation. The standard history of the Zulu is, like the history of the peoples of Europe, the creation of nineteenth-century historiography. Its author, A. T. Bryant, was steeped in the same traditions as everyone else in the West: the Bible and Greco-Roman ethnography. Thus he saw the Zulu people as a stable, enduring actor, slowly emerging into a dominant role in southeast Africa over a period of centuries, culminating in the triumph of "the Zulu

Julius Caesar,” King Shaka. Historians of Africa have recently deconstructed that version of Zulu history, and the result is something very much like the new barbarian history Geary describes. As in late antiquity, the influence of power and wealth from a “major external factor”—in this case “the European commercial system”—led to rapid social change, competition, and the rise of new chieftaincies, the most successful of whom, like the Zulu, incorporated others into their identity. The success of Shaka Zulu was so great that in a generation or two the descendants of the conquered were sure that their grandfathers had been Zulu, too.

Geary describes this recent revisioning of Zulu history as “less dependent on European models,” than Bryant’s, but I disagree. It depends on a tradition of scientific scholarship that lets evidence rather than expectations guide us and that is comfortable with contingency and chance—something like the attitude of Herodotus, which is as “European” as the racism and ethnocentrism Geary so rightly fears. It was in these final pages, too, that I had to take exception to another of the author’s assertions. He concludes that “the history of the peoples of Europe in the early Middle Ages cannot be used as an argument for or against any of the political, territorial, and ideological movements of today, any more than the future of KwaZulu-Natal can lie with the ‘correct’ interpretation of the life of King Shaka.” But isn’t that exactly what this book means to do? And why not? If some abuse history to divide and destroy, then I see no reason why historians should not use it as well to counter them, especially if doing so promotes some measure of peace in our all-too-troubled world.

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GERARDUS MAGNUS, *Gerardi Magni Opera omnia, 1/1: Prolegomena ad Gerardi Magni Opera omnia*, by Rudolf Th. M. van Dijk, O.Carm.; 1/2: *Gerardi Magni Contra turrim Traiectensem*, ed. Rijcklof Hofman. (Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis, 192.) Turnhout: Brepols, 2003. Pp. 817; black-and-white figures and tables. €320.

Gerard Grote (1340–84), the primary founder of the Devotio Moderna, was the author of a number of works, which Rudolf van Dijk classifies as follows (p. 433): autobiographical works and excerpts (*Auszüge*), those against *focaristae* (women who cohabit with priests) and against simony, sermons and tracts, letters by and to Grote, Latin and vernacular translations, and the *Book of Hours*. He treats the doubtful and wrongly attributed works as distinct categories. The first modern editions of some of these works were published by T. A. and J. Clarisse in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the 1930s Titus Brandsma made plans to publish all of Grote’s works as part of a larger publication program, entitled *Opera Litteraria Deuotionis Moderna*, but the intervention of World War II and the death of Brandsma in Dachau called a halt to these plans. From its very origin in 1968, the Titus Brandsma Institute for the Study of the History of the Spirituality of the Low Countries in Nijmegen has had as its objective the publication of Grote’s works. However, it was not until 1986 that Rudolf van Dijk, a member of the Titus Brandsma Institute, was given the mandate to make preparations for the publication of Grote’s complete works as part of the *Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis*, series. The Clarisses and Brandsma were just some of the more prominent individuals who intended, but never did manage, to publish all of Grote’s works before the Titus Brandsma Institute once again took up the challenge. Van Dijk (pp. 601–29) offers a comprehensive overview of all the various efforts made since the beginning of the nineteenth century to publish Grote’s *opera omnia*. He concludes with an account of the Titus Brandsma Institute’s plans for its publication of Grote’s works in six volumes, a breakdown of which is found on pages 625–26.