Ethnic Identification and Stereotypes in Western Europe, circa 1100–1300

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Abstract

The central Middle Ages witnessed a remarkable upsurge in sources containing ethnic stereotypes. Should we interpret the increase in ethnic images as evidence that people identified more strongly with ethnic or national groups from the 12th century onwards? And to which extent was ethnic identity informed by cultural, religious, and medical discourses, as well as forged by political elites as part of a state-formation process? Addressing these questions from a broad range of perspectives and incorporating a wide body of research, this article offers a review of the scholarship on ethnic identity formation and the relevance of ethnic stereotyping in religious-eschatological thought, medical science, and political rhetoric from the 12th century. It challenges the notion that ethnic stereotyping reflected random expressions of hatred, or, conversely, expressions of nationalist patriotism in the later Middle Ages.

Who or what crafted ethnic groups and nations, when, why, and how, is one of the most hotly debated topics in political, sociological, and anthropological studies. To date, there have been relatively few attempts to integrate research on ethnic identity in the Middle Ages with theoretical discussions on nationhood. Until recently, the predominant approach was to apply the modernist, post-Second World War instrumentalist view – that political elites craft nations – to premodernity. Mediaeval scholars have thus tracked the construction of the nation to, for example, 12th-century state-formation processes and the territorialisation of power. However, fresh research in the field of medical history has recently revealed how Hippocratic medical theory helped establish new beliefs about the nature of ethnic groups from the end of the 11th century. Furthermore, from circa 1000, lists of ethnic characteristics were appearing in monastic circles within a religious-eschatological context. It is therefore necessary to examine utterances about the nature of and identification with ethnic groups from a cultural, religious, social, and political perspective. Research should take a multi-facetted and longue-durée approach, in which political processes and structures are viewed as both forming and feeding off pre-existing cultural, religious – and from the 12th century also medical – customs, beliefs, and knowledge, in a social environment shaped by linguistic and legal distinctions. First, then, I will briefly discuss the role of politics and ideology in ethnic discourse; afterwards, I will turn to mediaeval beliefs about the make-up of ethnic groups, the influence of medical theory in ethnic stereotyping, and ideas about religion and ethnicity. Finally, I will present some ideas about possible new fields of research.

Political Structures and Ethnic Group Formation

Scholars of the mediaeval era have often looked towards the growing bureaucracies and tightening judicial apparatus to partly explain the formation of nations from the 12th century onwards. For example, Adrian Hastings stated that ethnic groups, as oral communities, became nations in 14th-century England when they began to produce a vernacular literature in script and were affected by the ‘pressures of the state’. Susan Reynolds especially focused on the role...
that political units played in nation formation. Emphasizing the collective nature of mediaeval government, Reynolds argued that political structures helped shape natural communities, although these might cut across regional or local natural units of custom and descent. As she states, ‘new units of government created new peoples with their own sense of natural boundaries and identity’, as laws were enforced and taxes imposed. Tapping into arguments of kinship, shared customs, the possession of a historical territory and a sense of belonging, mediaeval political elites were thus already shaping nations. Wars accelerated this process. At the same time, monarchies underwent territorialisation, as for example in France, where from the early 13th century kings began to issue documents stating that they ruled over Francia instead of the Franks.

In addition, scholars have often focused on the role of political ideology and the role of nationalism. The modernist position, represented among others by Ernest Gellner, states that nationalism is ‘primarily a principle that holds that the political and national unit should be congruent.’ As such, modernists argue, nationalism helped invent nations especially in the 19th-century urban class societies, although some pre-existing cultural markers were necessary to advance this process. Some historians of pre-modernity have similarly traced a fundamental change in thinking about ethnicity and power structures to the end of the 13th century. As Joachim Ehlers put forward, in this period, intellectuals termed natio and lingua as the font of communities, from which loyalty to the provincia and regnum flowed. According to Bernard Guenée, intellectuals began to view the political community (populus) as theoretically emanating from the nation, in contrast with earlier Augustinian thought. Furthermore, focusing on concepts of national honour and purity, Caspar Hirschi recently argued that mediaeval nationalism survived as an ideological-linguistic inheritance of Roman imperialism.

On the coattails of romantic nationalism, the early 20th-century mediaevalists also sought to establish expressions of ‘nationalism’ and ‘national sentiment’ in the Middle Ages in the broader sense of a ‘patriotic feeling’, i.e. an emotional sentiment of attachment. Especially in the 19th- and early 20th-century discourse of ‘self-historicization’, this teleological approach was enounced in the term ‘proto’: proto-nations, proto-nationalism, and so forth. Paul Kim’s Aus der Frühzeit des Nationalgefühls, published during the Second World War, is a typical example in this field, collecting examples of expressions of ‘national sentiment’ from the eighth to 13th centuries in Western Europe. In his substantial article about ethnic consciousness, Johan Huizinga also spoke of mediaeval nationalism and patriotism in the broadest sense of the meaning.

To some extent, however, this remains a semantic battle over the definition of nationalism, which is generally defined as an ideology of national aspiration or a policy of national independence, providing a criterion for populations to enjoy an exclusive government and legitimizing state power. In this light, whether mediaeval expressions of ethnic sentiment should be examined within such a political-ideological framework is highly dependent on the (political) context of the sources. The fact that many historiographical and political writings were produced by and for an intellectual elite also raises the question of inclusivity. Who participated in discussions on power and ethnicity? And if power arose from a natio, did this for example include serfs? Generally, members of ethnic communities lacked any constitutional form of power in shaping governments in mediaeval times. Moreover, the web of legal distinctions, organized along social, ethnic, religious, and gendered lines, makes it difficult to speak of ‘a’ mediaeval population. Further complications arise when regional and local power structures, the partial autonomy of urban communities, and geographical differences are taken into account. For this reason, in order to reflect the fractured fabric of mediaeval political communities, the term ‘ethnic’ is preferable to ‘national’ when speaking of mediaeval peoples. Anthony Smith thus defined an ethnic group as having a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry,
shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, an association with a homeland, and a sense of solidarity among significant sectors of the population. Nations, on the other hand, he defines as sharing common legal rights and duties for all members and a common economy – elements which are clearly lacking in the mediaeval period.14

*Elements of Mediaeval Ethnic Identification*

Despite sometimes speaking of nationalism, mediaevalists have generally been careful to emphasize the differences between mediaeval and modern expressions of ethnic sentiment.15 The concurring opinion among mediaevalists is that self-conscious national-political communities developed in Europe in the *longue durée*.16 This does not, however, mean that ethnic identification was an empty shell in the Middle Ages. Two publications argued extensively that from circa 1000, mediaeval people *themselves believed* that ethnic groups formed kinship groups with a shared past, culture and customs, common laws, and in some cases a common language. In a series of four articles, Rees Davies discussed ethnic identity in the British Isles in relation to names, boundaries, regnal solidarities, laws and customs, language, and historical myths.17 Furthermore, Robert Bartlett devoted much attention to the significance of dress fashions, haircuts, beards, eating and drinking habits, music cultures, festivities, and social practices and values in ethnic identity formation. Weaponry and manners in warfare were important badges of ethnicity.18 Nonetheless, as Davies concluded, ‘the medieval world was a world of peoples’ whose boundaries did not necessarily coincide with political structures.19

Despite the fact that ethnicities are in reality constructions, mediaeval people did thus lend value to ties of kinship, descent, or ‘blood’.20 Indeed, the very words *gens* and *natio* bear the connotations of birth and generation (from the verbs *nasci* and *gignere*).21 In this light, historians have also emphasized the role of origin myths in shaping beliefs in a shared past and common descent. Myths claimed that ethnic groups descended from the progeny of among others ancient Trojan or Scandinavian leaders who had wandered across Europe.22 Presenting princes as the offspring of the eponymous founders of peoples, writers thus created strong ties between royal dynasties and ethnic groups, in a language of kinship and rooted in ancient times.23 More broadly speaking, the world’s peoples were clustered as descendants of Abraham’s progeny Sem, Japheth, and Ham, who had spread across Asia, Europe, and Africa.24

Evoking the past could also emphasize the predestined role of ethnic groups in prophetic history. From the 11th century, competition heated up between West Frankish and German dynasties over Charlemagne’s legacy as world emperor.25 Intellectuals described the German and French territories as the new homes of (imperial) power and knowledge. The transmission, known as the *translatio imperii et studii* from East to West, harked back to the prophecies of Daniel.26 In the 12th century, texts related the reception of power and knowledge, as well as chivalry and economic prosperity, to ethnic images such as German strength and French finesse. As for example Matthew Gabriele and Mary Garrison discussed, the reception of the past found further expression in claims to Frankish, Anglo-Saxon, Norman, and other groups’ chosenness as New Israelites dwelling on sacred – Christian – land.27

Scholars such as Guido Kisch have also pointed to the role of language and law in ethnic thinking.28 Robert Bartlett, among others, has made a case for the significance of linguistic differences in the shaping of identities.29 František Graus, for example, has examined the role of linguistic factors in identity processes in mediaeval Bohemia.30 Language differences accentuated ethnic divisions in social relations; in Anglo-Norman cosmopolitan circles, foreigners were ridiculed for their attempts to speak French.31 Before the 12th century, sources especially recorded derogatory utterances about Romance- and Germanic-speaking peoples, referring to the harshness of the German tongue. Yet the extent to which language played a decisive role in
ethnic thinking has been questioned by among others Rees Davies. Possibly, mediaeval sources remained relatively silent on the problem of language because the clerics and monks producing these texts lived in a bilingual world, themselves communicating in the lingua franca of Latin. This perhaps changed when the vernacularization process set in from the 13th century onwards.

Scholars have also researched political-legal concepts such as loyalty to a patria. Thomas Eichenberger’s study of the patria addresses the degree in which peoples imagined that they inhabited a geographic space as an object of attachment, towards which one feels a sense of entitlement. Significantly, before the 12th century (as well as during and afterwards), patria could simply refer to a person’s region of birth (patria nativitatis, pays), without necessarily taking on an abstract geopolitical meaning. On the other hand, the religious concept of the communis patria, headed by Rome, referred to the universal Christian community. Augustine had equated patria with heaven, and in the 12th century, crusaders thus left behind their own patria out of a ‘charitable love’ for the heavenly fatherland. However, as Gaines Post has demonstrated, from the early 13th century, intellectuals, under the influence of Roman law, began to discuss the patria as an earthly fatherland to which one owed loyalty. Especially emotive are the classical notions of fighting (pugna pro patria) and dying (pro patria mori) for a fatherland, whether as a heavenly or earthly abode.

Ethnosymbolism, Medicine, and Religion

Unravelling the complexities of nation building and ethnic identification thus calls to attention social, cultural, legal, political, economic, religious, and regional factors and variables relevant to each and every community. These complexities, the fact that the sources are predominantly elite-produced, and the wish not to succumb to a teleological search for the ‘birth’ of the nation, have consequently inspired new fields of research on the intricacies of ethnic identity and identification. A fruitful approach, championed by Anthony Smith, is known as ethnosymbolism. This looks at how people defined and perceived themselves through myths and symbols, and how these myths and symbols were employed throughout various periods in relation to politics, ideologies, economic, and social developments. Myth–symbol complexes are both constitutive, helping to structure an ethnic group’s social relations and cultural institutions, and subjective, appealing to members’ perceptions and beliefs. Distinctive clusters of symbolic components delineate and guard the boundaries of ethnies. Ethnosymbolism is a productive approach as it partly circumvents the pitfalls of teleological thinking, instead advocating to look at the continuous constitutive and subjective components of ethnic identity formation in successive periods. Studying myths and symbols in social relations – alongside the role of language, politics, the formation of a bureaucratic-judicial apparatus, and legal distinctions among others – thus offers an additional, fruitful approach to researching identity formation processes.

Ethnic stereotypes reflect mental images of group members and symbolically represent beliefs about the nature of peoples. As such, they can be viewed as ethnosymbols which feed off and into social structures. The 12th century witnessed a surge of written sources attesting to ethnic stereotyping. Assumptions about ethnic character crop up in all kinds of contexts: in medical texts, encyclopaedias, works of ethnography and geography, computus material, rhetorical manuals, poetry, and sayings. Their function and employment stretch from the religious-eschatological and political to the rhetorical and social, shaped by classical and biblical traditions of knowledge, including medical theory. Instead of viewing ethnic stereotypes as either emotional expressions of xenophobia – as for example Carlrichard Brühl asserted – or expressions of patriotism, recent research, especially by Len Scales, has thus re-evaluated the function of mediaeval stereotypes from fresh perspectives.
indeed far more widespread and ‘stable’ than some scholars have assumed, and not just a matter of occasional political manipulation. Instead, stereotypes bear meaning as markers of identity reflecting or juxtaposing religious, social, and cultural values as a form of sociocultural capital.

To date, mediaevalists have turned their attention especially to the role of stereotypes in the rhetoric of conquest and colonization. In such a rhetoric, stereotypes reflecting group behaviour, customs, and manners were set off against prevailing social values. Manners were placed on the rungs of culture and civilization, economic and social organization (agriculturists versus pastoralists, pirates, and plunderers), and law. Politically, references to an ethnic group’s supposed manners – often drawn from classical sources – served to validate what John Gillingham has termed the ‘imperial politics’ of the Anglo-Norman royal government. The 12th-century Irish and Welsh, for example, were thus sometimes depicted as barely Christian barbarians. The northern and eastern border regions of the German territories were similarly subject to colonization and missionary activities, attempting to bring the ‘fringes’ of Europe within the Christian fold: the Scandinavian regions and Baltic North. These regions were inhabited by people who – from the greedy viewpoint of the core of civilized Europe – failed to steadily ascend the slippery rungs of civilization and display ‘true Christian devoutness’. Ethnography and geography thus served as an informative tool to determine and justify colonization and conquest.

Scholars such as Robert Bartlett and Rees Davies emphasized that manners (mores) and customs (consuetudines) often referred to an exterior ‘way of life’. However, fresh research on the influence of medical-humoural and climate theory has underlined the mediaeval belief in a perceived psychosomatic relationship between the inner and outer self. Robert Bartlett has additionally questioned the relevance of biological thinking and belief in fixed descent groups, focusing on the value of acculturation and environmental influences. However, in an important recent collection of articles, The Origins of Racism in the West, scholars have brought to our attention how ethnic differences were increasingly ‘embodied’ with the late-11th century advance of climate theory and treats about humoural complexes. Climate theory presented a scientific model to explain the character of peoples on geographical-environmental grounds. Moreover, from the early 13th century, scientific thinkers sporadically began to apply humoural theory – categorizing individuals as phlegmatic, sanguine, choleric, or melancholic – to entire ethnic groups as a hereditary feature. Specific ethnic, religious, social, and gendered groups were thus endowed with specific temperaments – northern Europeans and women were phlegmatic; Jews, heretics, serfs and lepers were melancholic. Benjamin Isaac labelled this application of climate and humoral theory to ethnic groups in antiquity as a form of racial thought. Indeed, geographical determinism generally made it difficult for, for example, a phlegmatic Slav to shake off his supposedly sluggish temperament, even if it was theoretically possible. Moreover, humoural temperaments involved emotive states which could be evaluated negatively or positively. Discussions about skin colour also entered the medical sphere.

In essence, however, ethnic dispositions were considered to be both fixed and fluent, as they were tied up with concepts of sin, inequality, and God’s grace. Customs might evolve into nature, and natural dispositions could be modified by environmental circumstances, but also religious beliefs. In fact, as Denise Buell has argued, the rhetoric of early Christianity prescribed compulsory mutability, as its language was steeped in terms of embodiment and rebirth in Christ. Moreover, ethnic character as a vitium – a vice inherited from the Fall or as a result of a humoural complexion – was not just a ‘manner of life’ but could be the subject of moral introspection. As Rudi Künzel has argued, the absence of a guilt culture in the early Middle Ages is contestable; rather, guilt was viewed to invoke God’s wrath, whereas (external) shame was considered a worldly matter. Especially in a religious sphere, people were thus incited to recall their vices, vitia, caused by emotions such as anger, lust, or greed, in order to repent,
thus invoking feelings of inner guilt. The ethnic proclivity to succumb to certain vices – as an ‘ethnic character trait’ – was thus viewed as a hereditary stain which man was urged to wipe out.

Ethnic character was thus viewed as a factor determining the very outcome of ethnic groups’ capacity to embrace Christendom, their fate in history, and the history of mankind itself. Here, ethnography, history, and religious thinking became intertwined. Especially Evelyn Edson and A.H. Merrills have emphasized the relation between historical time, geographic space, and the role of peoples in mapmaking and historiography. The world was seen as a stage for the expansion of the ecumenicity, from the Orient to the Occident, in time and space.\(^53\) In mediaeval thought, events unfolding were explained as signs of God’s judgement and wrath as a result (usually) of mankind’s sins. Lists of ethnic vices and vices compiled before the 12th century thus served as ethical meditative tools for monks to ruminate the ethnic diversity and history of mankind from an eschatological perspective.\(^54\) Thus, they were not arbitrary, jumbled catalogues reflecting a lack of systematic categorization, as Michel Foucault once stated.\(^55\) Nor were they merely cognitive tools produced out of a desire to bring order to the surrounding world in an oral society. Instead, these lists of ethnic characteristics were arranged spatially from East to West – cataloguing the diversity of humanity in accordance with peoples’ roles and moral dispositions in history from the creation to the end of time. Images of ethnicity were thus strongly tied to geography and territory, yet set within a religious framework, wherein Europe was represented as a blessed, sweet plot of land where Christendom had set foot. In concurrence, as Mary Garrison has argued, various ethnic groups, notably the Franks and Anglo-Saxons, played with the notion of chosenness, furrowing the Christian body with deeper ethnic fissures.\(^56\) The concept of ethnic chosenness, drawn from the Old Testament, was essentially contradictory to the Church’s notion of a ‘New Israel’, whose members, reformed in baptism, should know no distinctions of ethnicity or class.

Ideas about the role of climate and humoural theory from the 11th century offered an additional scientific framework for explaining ethnic-religious differences. From the 13th century, some groups such as Jews were increasingly denied the potentiality to convert into ‘New Israelites’; Jewishness was also embodied as medical documents discussed how Jews suffered from hemorrhoidal or monthly bleeding.\(^57\) This intertwining of medical theory with ideas about ethnicity and religion thus presented an additional armature for ideas about the fixed or fluent nature of members of ethnic and religious groups. How these ideas were shaped by, interacted with, and influenced political, legal, and social processes of ethnic identity formation, is the subject of further research.

**New Departures**

Research on the dynamics of ethnic identity formation should take place against the backdrop of religious, political, judicial, socio-cultural, and scientific concepts of ethnicity. Although the literature on mediaeval ethnicity is indeed extensive, further research thus may concentrate especially on the embodiment of ethnic thinking in the later Middle Ages, notably in relation to the concept of the political and social body, the corruption of society, liminality, and marginalization.\(^58\) In the late middle ages, the metaphor of the body politic gained wide popularity and was applied to both kingdoms and city states. How ethnic, social, and religious others were considered as corrupting the ‘healthy’ body politic is one field of research, which is still relatively underexplored. This approach will shed additional light on the perceived ‘danger’ of liminal groups, such as converted Jews or Lombard money lenders in Western society, in relation to notions of an uncorrupted social fabric.\(^59\) Were notions of embodied otherness subsequently translated into legal, political, and spatial distinctions? Another underexplored question is whether ethnic groups were perceived to retain their ‘original’ characteristics upon migration,
miscegenation, acculturation, or religious conversion. Also still in its infancy is research on the employment of images of ethnicity in judicial cases, whether pertaining to criminal or personal law. More archival research needs to be done on the social and economic effects of legal statuses in multi-ethnic communities where merchants, students, or settlers mixed with people from various backgrounds.60

Both political and legal structures shaping relations in a social reality, intellectual ideas about the nature of ethnic groups, the foundations of power and the concept of the body politic, and ideas about the role of ethnic groups in the history of salvation should be examined in conjunction with existing cultural perceptions and contemporary medical beliefs. These structures, processes, ideas, and beliefs should be researched within the framework of a socially dynamic world. Heightened contacts between various groups would have strengthened awareness of the ethnic other. The relational aspect of ethnicity thus invited Ludwig Schmugge to assert that in the 12th century, stereotyping increased through contacts during the crusades, at the universities, and on pilgrimages.61 Recent research has further brought to light how for example handbooks of rhetoric and poetry actually fed clerics at university centres with examples of how to ethnically stereotype in order to create convincing characterizations; the examples used reflected the predominant stereotypes of their day, which subsequently slipped into new representations of the ethnic other.62 These stereotypes featured in many different sources, including vernacular sayings and songs.63 Literary-cultural precepts might thus further vividly paint images of ethnic groups, which were passed on through educational curricula. Socially, insults hurled back and forth might heighten tensions but also create a release valve, as ethnic slander might serve as a form of disciplined aggression.64

Research on ethnic identification in later mediaeval Europe from a combined medical, cultural, social, legal, and political perspective can thus offer new insights into how communities grappled with and took advantage of ethnic, religious, and social diversity in multifaceted and very complex ways. Besides the fact that ethnic stereotypes were employed in political discourse, researchers should also look to the conscious use of images of ethnicity in other fields such as literary manuals and medical documents in order to examine the interplay of politics and culture in social processes.

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Short Biography

Claire Weeda is lecturer in Medieval History at the University of Amsterdam whose main fields of interest include ethnic stereotyping, the history of the body, and social and religious ethics in later mediaeval Europe. She is currently preparing her PhD dissertation Images of Ethnicity in Later Medieval Western Europe for publication. In it, she examines the fundamental shift in thinking about ethnic character from the 12th century in Western Europe. In the burgeoning educational and courtly centres, where standards of ‘civilized’ behaviour were being set, ideas about ethnicity were increasingly enounced in medical-humoural theory. From an introspective religious-ethical tool to ruminate the sins of mankind in light of eschatological expectations, notions about ethnicity were thus embodied within a religious discourse of hereditary sin. Current research involves the development and preaching of medical theory by the mendicants in late mediaeval urban centres, ethnic exclusion, violence, and concepts of health and environment. She has taught cultural history at the University of Amsterdam and the Rijksuniversiteit.
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Notes

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2 For example, Clanchy, England and its Rulers, 1066–1272; Ehlers, Die Entstehung des deutschen Reiches.

3 Hastings, The Construction of Nationhood, chapters 1 and 2.

4 Reynolds, ‘The Idea of the Nation as a Political Community’, 60–1; Reynolds, Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe 900–1300, 224, 234, 243, 261. The quotation is on p. 238.


8 Guenée, States and Rulers in Later Medieval Europe, 49, 53–4, 64.


10 Kohl, ‘The Dawn of Nationalism in Europe’, 265–80; Coulton, ‘Nationalism in the Middle Ages’, 15–40; Tipton et al., Nationalism in the Middle Ages for approaches to ‘nationalism’ from the perspectives of national consciousness, language, law, feudalism, the papacy, and legal theory; Mohr, ‘Zur Frage des Nationalismus im Mittelalter’, 106–16.

11 Kim, Aus der Frühzeit des Nationalgefühls. For other examples in the late 19th- and early 20th-century German scholarship, see Scales, The Shaping of German Identity, 16–52.


13 Breuilly, Nationalism and the State, 2.

14 Smith, National Identity, 14, 21.


20 Guenée, States and Rulers, 49–65.


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Graus, Lehendige Vergangenheit, 226–9.

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