Chapter One

The Dynamics of National Identity in the Later Middle Ages

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Nations and ethnies

Nation and identity surely are among the most frequently discussed concepts in recent historiography, but this does not allow an historian to take these two key terms for granted.¹ So, what are nations, and how do they shape identities? To paraphrase one of Anthony Smith’s many definitions, a nation is a people living in some well-defined territory that shares an awareness of a common past as well as expectations about a common future.² In this generalised sense a nation is not that different from an ethnic group, or ethnic community/ethnie—the terms Smith prefers to describe ‘a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members.’³ Both terms refer to a people; the main difference is in a nation’s higher degree of territorialisation and politicisation. Nations are politicised expressions of ethnicity. Or, seen from yet another angle, while ethnies are more cultural entities, nations are more political. And whereas ethnies display ‘some

¹ A Google search on Identity AND History gave almost 70 million hits, a search on Nation AND History almost 24 million. National AND Identity produced circa 153 million hits.

² Cf. Anthony D. Smith, The antiquity of nations (Cambridge/Malden MA, 2004), 245: ‘The concept of “nation”…may be defined as a named human population occupying a historic territory, and sharing common myths and memories, a distinctive public culture, common laws and customs’. On page 129 of the same book there is an even more elaborate definition.

³ John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, ‘Introduction’, in Ethnicity, ed. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (Oxford/New York, 1996), 3–14, at 6. Obviously, ‘people’ has a more general, and for that reason also more ambiguous, meaning than either nation or ethnic group, because ‘people’ can refer to both the citizens of a nation-state, the members of a nation and the members of an ethnic community.
sentiments of solidarity, at least among the elites’, nations are characterised by clear, far less noncommittal, ‘common rights and duties for all members’. By implication, nations, eventually, are in need of heavier ideological support than ethnic groups. And although one can speak of ethnocentrism as an ideological drive to preserve a specific (ethnic) culture, such a movement will by definition be less powerful than ‘nationalism’, which aims to attain and maintain ‘autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a group deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential “nation”’.

Nations can originate along two different tracks. They may arise as ethnic groups striving for their own autonomy or state, as with the Kurdish nation or people. This process is usually called ‘the politicisation of ethnicity’. An alternative process, referred to as ‘national integration’ arises from multi-ethnic polities posing as mono-ethnic peoples. A good example here is the American nation or people. Each of these paths or processes generates a different type of nation with its own form of nationalism. National integration breeds political/civic nations because, here, national identification is centred on political and/or civic values; its concomitant ‘civic’ nationalism focusses on a common commitment to civil society, its values, its institutions, its way of life, and its expectations of a (bright) common future. Politicisation of ethnicity, on the other hand, generates ethnic/cultural nations because in the self-understanding of non-state nations ethnic and cultural values prevail. Their ethnic (i.e. cultural) nationalism focusses on

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4 Smith, Antiquity, 18.