CHAPTER THREE

THE IMAGINED COMMUNITY OF FRIESLAND
IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

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Introduction

In his influential companion to medieval historiography in the northern Low Countries, which appeared in 1932, Jan Romein presented a gloomy view of fifteenth-century Frisian historiography. He described it as ‘extremely poor and insignificant, especially when compared with the historiography of Holland and Guelders or with the great activity in the circles of the Modern Devotion in the same century’.¹

Romein’s judgment, based on modern arguments such as style and value for the factual reconstruction of the past, did not encourage the study of Frisian chronicles of this period, to say the least. To the present day these works have received little attention.² They are of great interest, however, for the student of identities, or mental attitudes in general. For this type of research, factual errors, mythical elements or stylistic clumsiness are either irrelevant, or precisely the material one is seeking. In this respect, late medieval Frisian historiography contains extremely valuable material. Indeed, a closer look at this ‘poor’ historiography reveals pronounced images of the Frisian land and people. Some of these images even appear to be unique when compared

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¹ Translated from Jan Romein, Geschiedenis van de Noord-Nederlandse geschiedschrijving in de Middeleeuwen. Bijdrage tot de beschavingsgeschiedenis (Haarlem, 1932), 143.

² For surveys of Frisian medieval historiography (see also n. 1) see J. Bolhuis van Zeeburgh, Kritiek der Friesche geschiedschrijving ('s-Gravenhage, 1873); H. Bruch, Kroniek der Friese kronieken. Antikritiek op Bolhuis’ Kritiek (Leeuwarden, 1952); R. Steensma, Het klooster Thabor bij Sneek en zijn nagelaten geschriften (Leeuwarden, 1970). Focusing on a later period, but still relevant for fifteenth-century historiography is E.H. Waterbolk, Twee eeuwen Friese geschiedschrijving. Opkomst, bloei en verval van de Friese historiografie in de zestiende en zeventiende eeuw (Groningen, 1952).
with the historiography of the Low Countries or of Europe in general and therefore deserve our full attention.

In this contribution I shall concentrate on some of the fifteenth-century historiographical representations of the Frisian land and people, with the aim of gaining a deeper insight into the development of a collective Frisian self-image and identity.3 I shall argue that two types of discourse or narrative existed in late medieval Frisian historiography, which I have labelled ‘mythical’ and ‘contemporary’, on account of their very different approaches and the contrasting images they produced. These labels are comparable to the distinction sometimes made between Vergangenheitsgeschichte and Zeitgeschichte.4 In the mythical narrative, the representation of the past was transformed into a mythology of the Frisian people, while the contemporary approach ignored the legendary traditions completely and focussed on the contingencies in the not too distant past instead. As we shall see, these mythical and contemporary discourses were complementary in their assessment of the Frisian land and people, and can be seen as an expression of the different levels of solidarity existing within their community.

For my argument, I have analysed two fifteenth-century textual traditions as instances of the mythical and contemporary discourses. The mythical narrative will be represented by the case of the Gesta-cycle, consisting of a group of closely interrelated texts. The ‘Sneek’ annalistic tradition, consisting of two short fifteenth-century texts, the Sneker Kroniekje (‘Sneek Chronicle’) and the Vriesche Aenteyckeninge (‘Frisian Accounts’) will illustrate the contemporary discourse. In my textual analysis I focus on the use of three types of images or representations of identity:

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3 I am indebted here to the views of Benedict Anderson who considered identity development as the construction of an ‘imagined community’ of people by means of images or representations; Benedict Anderson, Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism (2nd edition; London, 1991). The issue of the existence of a ‘national identity’ or ‘nation’, which is central to Anderson’s theory, has been avoided here and replaced by the broader and more culturally defined concept of a ‘collective identity’. For the discussion and adoption of Anderson’s ideas in a medieval context, see, e.g., Véronique Lambert, ‘Methodologische beschouwingen bij het onderzoek naar de concepten “natie”, “nationalisme” en “nationale identiteit” in de Middeleeuwen’, Jaarboek voor middeleeuwse geschiedenis 4 (2001), 66–85; Lesley Johnson, ‘Imagining communities: medieval and modern’, in Concepts of national identity in the Middle Ages, ed. Simon Forde, Lesley Johnson and Alan V. Murray (Leeds, 1995), 1–19; and the contribution by Peter Hoppenbrouwers in the present volume.

4 Compare the introduction of Robert Stein in the present volume.