

Nick Webber, 'The Evolution of
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Introduction

The defeat of the Viking forces at Chartres c.911 marked the beginning of an important process in Frankish and, indeed, wider European history. The consequent peace, and settlement of a group of Northmen on an area of land around Rouen, proved to be a momentous decision by the Frankish king of the time, Charles the Simple. The Vikings were given land on the seaboard of Francia, on the condition that they would defend it from their countrymen. This method of dealing with the Scandinavian raiders certainly seemed to be a functional solution to the short-term problems that overwhelmed the Frankish administration. Once matters had settled somewhat, Frankish sovereignty could be restored using military force against these relatively small enclaves, and Francia could be reclaimed. It was, in essence, a risky strategy, but one that was to prove its worth. A similar settlement of the Loire proved short-lived, and the new inhabitants of the Rouennais looked to be following suit. These settlers on the Seine proved more resilient, however, and by the end of the tenth century these raiders, known widely as *Normanni*, had come together as a coherent *gens* settled on a (largely) defined territory.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Normans, as they came to be known in English, became a people renowned throughout their new, Frankish homeland and, indeed, in an area stretching from Ireland to the Holy Land. In the west, the Normans became the conquerors of England, after their successful invasion of 1066. When Edward the Confessor died with no direct heir, the throne was seized by Harold Godwinson, whose claim was contested by two invading armies. The first of these, under Harald Hardrada of Norway, was defeated at Stamford Bridge; the second, under Duke William of Normandy, was victorious at Hastings, the battle in which King Harold was slain. William became the next king of England, and his sons were to rule after him. From this period date some of the great artefacts of English medieval history – the Domesday Book and the Bayeux Tapestry.

In the south, there was no formal invasion led by the Norman duke. In the area of southern Italy and Sicily, Norman mercenaries were operative from the early eleventh century, fighting on various sides for various reasons. Over time, certain of these men – the sons of Tancred de Hauteville in particular – built up power bases, and the mixture of their increasing strength and the concerns of the existing local powers culminated in a major battle at Civitate, in 1053. On one side stood the Norman mercenary groups, along with some of their Lombard allies; on the other, the papal forces of Pope Leo IX. The Norman forces were victorious and, by the end of the eleventh century, Norman rulers were comfortably installed in the duchies of Apulia and Calabria, and the newly formed kingdom of Sicily.

the Byzantine emperor of the time, Alexius Comnenus. Bohemond, the son of Robert Guiscard, and Tancred, his cousin, were particularly distinguished among the contingent from the south; Duke Robert Curthose of Normandy admirably represented the Normans of the west.

By the 1150s, however, the time of Norman expansion had passed. Though the descendants of the Normans lived in all these places still, their membership of any group calling itself Norman can be quite reasonably disputed, with the exception of those people living in Normandy, who remain Normans to this day. However, the widespread influences of the Normans left a distinctive mark on the historical record, not only in terms of voluminous historical writing, but also in the form of various fortresses, mausolea, churches and, of course, a rather famous tapestry. These sources, along with those of the Normans' contemporaries – the Franks / French, the English, the Lombards and the Greeks, to name but a few – allow us insight into the Norman people, or *gens Normannorum*, and provide a means of examining the gradual changes taking place in the way that the Normans saw themselves, and in the way that the world saw the Normans.

Before studying such aspects, however, it is necessary to undertake some discussion of the concepts of identity and identity theory that are currently in use, in both history and the social sciences. It is certainly important, given the vague nature of a lot of writing on the subject, that the evolution of identity ideas be clarified before this study is undertaken. Also, there should be some coverage of the way in which ideas of ethnicity (and also those of nation) relate to identity. As identity is not a phenomenon unique to the medieval period, it proves necessary to employ works both relating to both medieval and modern periods of history.

In the last ten or so years, the study of various forms of identity has graced the pages of an increasing number of scholarly works dealing with both the medieval and modern periods. This decade, though marking a seemingly new field of social historical investigation, is rather the culmination of a slow evolution process in the study of group mentalities, an area that has not long been advanced enough to 'deserve' a badge. Some historians examine the influence of ethnic, territorial, religious and other distinctions on both the internal and external elements of societies, while their colleagues, supported by similar work in anthropology and sociology, pursue investigations in the theoretical context. There is, as yet, little or no consistency among these studies, however, and a divide is particularly evident between identity theorists and those who try to apply identity concepts to their chosen period of study. It is not simply that the two approaches are recognised by writers on identity as different, but more that there seems to be a certain lack of communication between the two groups.

The ideas that form the basis of modern identity writing arose initially in the discipline of anthropology in the last century. The orthodoxy created by the anthropologists was one of simple, concrete definitions: an ethnicity (or *ethnie*) could be recognised through its unique racial, linguistic and cultural profile.¹ Though subsequent work suggested that there was more to an ethnicity, including social values, interaction and communication, the perceived concrete nature remained until the

mid-twentieth century.² It is in the post-war period, however, that the study of identity as a complex phenomenon has its roots. After E.R. Leach's study of North Burmese hill tribes (1954) undermined one of the basic precepts of pre-war thinking, the field became open to newer ideas. The existing view had been that cultural features and ethnicity were directly correspondent – namely, if two groups exchanged enough cultural features, then they could be expected to amalgamate into a single ethnic group. Leach challenged this viewpoint, proving that cultural features did not correspond closely enough to ethnicity to make such a generalised statement, and showing that ethnicity was neither simple nor particularly logical.³

In the 1960s, more 'modern' theories of identity began to be expressed. Elie Kedourie's book *Nationalism* gave pre-eminence to language in the construction of identity, drawing heavily on J.G. Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* of 1807–8, and extending these ideas to the constitution of the nation.⁴ It was, however, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, edited by Fredrik Barth, that proved to be the definitive work from this period. This collection of papers advocated a reassessment of the very simplistic model of ethnic identity previously provided. The idea that ethnic identity was an objective reality was no longer considered accurate, and the contributors saw ethnicity as more of a subjective phenomenon. This led them to emphasise the importance of ethnicity as something that was claimed by those within a group, and attributed by those outside it. The focus was, therefore, not on the groups themselves but rather on the boundaries between those groups, and the interactions around and across those boundaries.⁵

The result of this research was the 'instrumentalist' school of thought, which considered ethnicity not as something inherited, but rather something taken on voluntarily – it was a rational choice, and a situational construct. Of course, not everyone agreed with this interpretation, and the strongest reaction against this school of thought is known as 'primordialism'. From the primordialist perspective, ethnic identity is an almost subconscious phenomenon, and one which acts beyond the rationality of thought. Individuals can be inclined to act in a certain manner, based on their affiliation to a group identity / *ethnie*. Sometimes, such actions will go against the dictates of 'material calculation' because the individual's freedom of action is constrained by the membership of the group.⁶ As the former of the two lines of research is based on the study of the group, and the latter on the study of individuals, it seems likely that the solution lies somewhere in between – one's ethnic identity is not a wholly voluntary choice, but is manipulable in some circumstances, and will exercise a more or less powerful hold depending on the context.

As one might expect, the differences of opinion do not end there. In discussions of identity, as applied to both medieval and modern history, few writers are able to agree on what constitutes an *ethnie* or a nation, and how ethnic and national identities

² Peter Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford, 1996), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

⁴ J.G. Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation* (tr. R.F. Jones and G.H. Turnbull, 1922, repr. Westport, CN, 1979); Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 3rd edn (London, 1966; repr. 1979).

⁵ Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organisation of Culture Difference*

relate to these communities. An *ethnie* has been defined as a 'community bound together by belief in common descent and actual common interests', an extension of the *idiom of kinship*, a community that attaches import to its difference from others and reflects this in an ethnonym, or a group of people with a shared cultural identity and spoken language.⁷ Equally, a nation has been said to be a race with a pure language, a community with a spirit of co-operation, or 'a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members'.⁸ With so little similarity between definitions, one wonders if these scholars are even discussing the same thing.

It is inevitable, then, that with such varied descriptions of the *ethnie* and nation, those identities that are constituted by membership of these should also be portrayed with great variety. Whether such identities are believed to be based on language, or reflected in language, or based on culture, or territory, or any number of other criteria, the only clear conclusion that can be drawn is that identity is very much a subjective concept. Perhaps some of the difficulties arise from historians striving to be objective about subjectivity. The aforementioned lack of communication between theory and application further aggravates the difficulties. Some historians, not realising that identity is just as divisive an issue in anthropology as it is in history, support their particular view of identity with passing theory references. For example, one historian writes of how anthropology bases group identity on the political circumstances of the moment, this being called 'instrumental ethnicity'; this is, however, only one aspect of the debate.⁹

The history of early Normandy is no exception to this 'rule', and is possibly one of the more problematic cases. Initially set aside as a 'myth' or literary motif, Norman ethnic identity, so evident in their literature, has been revitalised by the recent moves towards identity study in the medieval period. Unfortunately, some writers have opted not to approach identity as a phenomenon to be explored and understood, but instead have used it as an excuse to make apparently unfounded statements about the nature of 'Norman consciousness'. While identity, it is true, is conceptual and largely abstract, evidence is still the mainstay of the historian's craft. To draw conclusions about a perceived identity based more upon unsupported opinion than on careful analytical work is perhaps a little speculative.

Of course, this criticism is by no means levelled at all the historians who work on this period. A good deal of exciting and informative work has been produced in recent years, with a variety of approaches, from complex and informed literary analysis to more anthropological studies. Some, such as G.A. Loud, have supported their

⁷ Patrick Amory, 'Names, Ethnic Identity, and Community in Fifth- and Sixth-Century Burgundy', *Viator* 25 (1994), 4; Pierre van den Berghe, cited in Hutchinson and Smith, *Nationalism*, 97; Ernest Gellner, *Encounters with Nationalism* (Oxford, 1994), 35; Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood. Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1997), 3.

⁸ Fichte in Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 64–7; Ernest Renan, quoted in P.M. Jones, '1789 and all that. Constructing Identity in Modern France'. Inaugural Lecture at the University of Birmingham (9th May

ideas with reference to contemporary medieval ideas, such as those of the *gens*.¹⁰ In addition, some of the most compelling modern work on medieval societies has used a combination of methods. The most recent work in the Norman sphere has provided useful literary analyses of some of the Norman histories, and Hugh Thomas' recent volume, *The English and the Normans*, undertakes a very full examination of Anglo-Norman integration in the years following the conquest.¹¹ A substantial amount of such work has also been produced for the early medieval period, focusing on, for example, the Goths, the Avars and the Franks.

It is perhaps to such multi-disciplinarians that we should look for an understanding of the meanings of ethnic identity, considering that identity is something that bridges period divides so very easily. Among these writers, there is a general consensus that identities are prone to constant change (and are thus unstable), that ethnicity is not necessarily the only form of community in a society, and that ethnicity need not be the primary form of identity for an individual.¹² The association of identity and cultural features retains currency even in this modern approach, yet it is no longer the simple equivalence denounced by Leach. While Peter Heather views group identity in terms of the historical myth of the group and the group's established social norms, he signals an awareness that these symbols are only an expression of the identity. It is, therefore, not necessarily possible to define identity by reference to these.¹³ While these expressions can help to reinforce the boundaries of an identity, therefore, they are not responsible for shaping that identity.¹⁴ Patrick Amory, also, notes that it is not always easy to determine a subjective ethnic identity from the objectively visible culture.¹⁵

Identity theories in this vein reflect a school of thought within the social sciences that seeks to go further and create 'conceptual frameworks' for the study of identities.¹⁶ Peter Weinrich's 'identity structure analysis' (ISA) is a 'meta-theoretical framework', which integrates a number of perspectives on the development of identity.¹⁷ Weinrich uses psychological, sociological and anthropological tools to take account of both internal (*ego-recognised*) and external (*alter-ascribed*) identity influences,

¹⁰ See G.A. Loud, 'The "Gens Normannorum" – Myth or Reality?', *ANS* 4 (1982), 104–16.

¹¹ Hugh Thomas, *The English and the Normans. Ethnic Hostility, Assimilation, and Identity 1066–c.1220* (Oxford, 2003). For recent literary analyses, see in particular Leah Shopkow, *History and Community. Norman Historical Writing in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Washington, D.C., 1997) and Emily Albu, *The Normans in their Histories: Propaganda, Myth and Subversion* (Woodbridge, 2001).

¹² See, for example, Heather, *Goths*, 6; Patrick Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489–554* (Cambridge, 1997), 13, 16 & 317. Notably, Barth suggested that ethnic identity was superordinate to most other statuses (Barth, *Ethnic Groups*, 17; my italics).

¹³ Heather, *Goths*, 5 & 309.

¹⁴ Thomas draws regular attention to the reinforcement of identity boundaries through such phenomena as religion, culture, stereotypes and history (*English and Normans*, 14, 283, 300–1, 306, 327, 361, 390, 392). Though he reminds us, quite rightly, that identity constructs cannot operate independently of cultural and social realities, he sometimes overstates the case for history, particularly, as a 'shaping' force (*ibid.*, 347–66). The relationship of the historical myth to the creation of ethnicity is also mentioned by Amory (*People and Identity*, 14).

¹⁵ Amory, *People and Identity*, 16.

¹⁶ For the model, see Peter Weinrich, 'The concept of identity structure analysis'.

allowing his model to respond to the changing nature of identity.¹⁸ The model also creates some understanding of identity conflicts (such as those between migrant groups and their neighbours), the causes and effects of such situations, and their role in identity development and redefinition. Perhaps most significantly of all, however, this framework allows the student to 'sketch in some features of complex societies where a generally "superordinate" ethnic community contains within it different "subordinate" ethnic communities', and to investigate the affinities of 'dual socialised' and bilingual individuals.¹⁹ The intention behind this model is to create a dialogue between all areas of identity theory, providing an important framework within which different cases of ethnic phenomena can be related and understood.²⁰

Unfortunately, given the focus of most social sciences, such models have often only been applied to modern society, and have not been considered in a medieval context (and may not work there). Modern frameworks do not, for example, deal with the tradition of the *gens*, which is so prominent in medieval sources, and have not been produced with medieval societies in mind. The modern world is not a place in which one encounters many large monarchies, many empires or many conquests. As a result, the possibility that the models may prove insufficient for the task is always present; the advances and changes in society may have taken their toll. Equally, the possibility remains that the behaviour of humans has not changed very much, and that the passage of one thousand years has not particularly influenced the pressures, challenges and responsibilities found within group membership.

Historians such as Herwig Wolfram have sought to remedy this problem by trying to examine medieval society in its own terms. As the general conclusion had been drawn that a self-conscious *gens* manifests an ethnic identity, Wolfram investigates the meaning of the word *gens* to contemporaries. It seems that *gens* not only came to incorporate a wide spectrum of meanings during the early middle ages, but that it was used in a context similar to our modern *ethnie*.²¹ The criterion for membership of a *gens* was the acknowledgement of the tribal tradition, either through birth or admittance – language was not a barrier.²² Wolfram also notes that, when first formed, a *gens* had no *patria*, but later grew into a *populus*, reflecting Reinhard Wenskus' theory (1961) that a historical ethnicity was a duality of tribal formation and political constitution (*Stammesbildung und Verfassung*).²³ In the long term, the existence of the *gens* was validated by evolution into a *populus*; this was not just the case for Goths, and another example can be seen, by the eighth century, in the Burgundians.²⁴

More recent scholarship has returned to the idea of political constitution of the *gens* as a tool to assist in definition and understanding. As *gentes* evidenced a tendency to establish kingdoms – *regna* – they may be considered as political rather than purely 'ethnic' units. In essence, the *gens* was not a simple community of common biological descent or shared tradition, but something more. Certainly, the *origines gentium*

tended to associate their origins with the reign of kings, reinforcing any perception of a political element in the nature of *gentes*.²⁵ Furthermore, studies on the transformation from *gens* to *regnum* have highlighted the significance of kingship in ethnicity for the early medieval period – the figure of the king, it has been suggested, was a central focus of reference for the people of the *regnum*.²⁶

It is worth noting here, however, that these approaches have not met with universal approval. Caution is advised by, for example, Heather, who warns against overestimating the importance that the Amal dynasty played in shaping the ethnogenesis of the Ostrogoths.²⁷ The significance of kingship, then, cannot be taken as universal. Importantly, also, the lack of clarity implied by *gens* (and, indeed, other antique terms) has prompted concern among a number of historians. The relatively commonplace translation of *gens* as 'tribe' highlights one such problem. The definition of 'tribe' includes the idea of a common descent, but it has been noted that this may be genuinely biological or entirely mythical.²⁸ Indeed, the uncertainties surrounding terms such as *gens* have prompted Amory to argue against their use in this 'naïve' way. He suggests that modern models are rather more helpful to our understanding, as long as we retain an awareness of their limitations.²⁹

These issues are further complicated by the fact that west European *regna* have been analogised to modern nations by a number of historians, owing to their commonality of custom, law and origin myths. Wolfram's thesis supports this, giving the example of Toledo: he comments that the meaning of *gens* changed in this instance to that of a legally constituted 'national people'.³⁰ This theory is also supported by Susan Reynolds who, observing that 'the fundamental premise of nationalist ideas is that nations are objective realities, existing throughout history', views a comparable ideology in the medieval *regnum* (considered as a people with a permanent and objective reality).³¹ But historians of the modern period, writing on the nation and nationalism, could not disagree more. Be it on the provision that nations require such criteria as mass education and media, or a single political culture, modernists are agreed that the nation could not have existed prior to a widely debated date some time between 1600 and 1900.

A number of the modernist arguments against medieval nations can be countered, however. One of the seemingly salient features of the nation is that of territory. It has been said that nation involves a 'named human population sharing an historic territory', and that many nationalisms transfer the focus of their identity from ethnicity to territory.³² As we have already seen, this is not something that is unique to modern

²⁵ Hans-Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut and Walter Pohl (eds), *Regna and Gentes. The Relationship between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World* (Leiden, 2003), 5 & 623.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 624.

²⁷ Peter Heather, 'Gens and regnum among the Ostrogoths', in Goetz, et al., *Regna and Gentes*, 95.

²⁸ J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, 'Gens into regnum: the Vandals', in Goetz, et al., *Regna and Gentes*, 55.

²⁹ Amory, *People and Identity*, p. 18, n.11.

³⁰ Wolfram, *History*, 10.

³¹ Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe 900–1300* (Oxford, 1984; repr. 1986), 251–2. These ideas of identity and its relation to history are similar to those of the philosopher

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 300.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 315–16.

²¹ Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths* (Munich, 1979; tr. Thomas J. Dunlap, Berkeley, 1988), 5–6.

states, but something that occurs readily throughout the medieval period during the process of political constitution. The Burgundians were just one of many groups for which this process apparently took place, transferring their ethnonyms to toponyms in the middle ages, two other obvious examples are the Franks (Francia) and Angles (England).

The close relationship of these toponyms to the identities of these peoples can be seen through the titles adopted by their rulers, the importance of whom to ethnic identity has already been mentioned. The ruling family are often the only members of society who can trace a pure line of descent (however mythical) from their heroic forefathers, and they occupy a place at the top of the social hierarchy. During the medieval period, there are numerous changes of title from, for example, the duke of the Normans (*dux Normannorum*) to the duke of Normandy (*dux Normanniae*). This change reflects a change of emphasis for those people involved in the social order of which the duke is head. The same is true with the king of the Franks (changing to the king of France) and so on. The argument for territory as a mainstay of nation is further refuted by reference to France in the eighteenth century. In this alleged period of nation formation, it is interesting to see the king of France, *le roi de France et de Navarre*, retitle himself *le roi des Français* – the king of a people, not of a territory.³³

The most resounding denunciation of the modernist assertions comes not, however, from a medieval historian, but from a theologian. Adrian Hastings has found evidence for the concept of nation throughout the medieval period, and this not solely in *regna* either. The Latin word *natio* appears throughout the Vulgate in the context of a translation of the Greek *ethnos*. While this shows that at the time of translation, *natio* did not hold the meaning that we attribute to nation today, the fourteenth-century Wycliffite Bible (from the Vulgate) renders this word as *nacioun* (the precursor of our 'nation').³⁴ As elsewhere in Wycliffite literature the same word is used, in such a context as to indicate a modern interpretation of nation, it seems to indicate awareness of the concept of nation in this period. Further support comes from Richard Rolle's edition of the Psalms, also from the fourteenth century, which uses the same word in a similar manner.³⁵ Even the typical modernist argument against the use of the word *natio* as evidence for national ideas can be disproved. Though it is often asserted that *natio* only referred to the administrative divisions within medieval universities, evidence from c.1140 suggests otherwise, as Bernard, bishop of St David's, described the Welsh to the pope as a *natio*, a people distinguished by their 'language, laws, habits, modes of judgement and customs'.³⁶ The pope appears again later as a proving ground for the identity of the nation, in context of the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath, addressed 'to the lord supreme pontiff by the community of Scotland'.³⁷ Hastings further reminds us that, while it is all very well to debate on the applicability of the word nation to Ming China (where it was foreign to society), it is quite another thing to allege that the word was not relevant to people who used it of themselves.³⁸

It seems clear that the study of (ethnic) identity in history is an area riddled with terminological difficulties. The acceptability and application of certain words and ideas seems to vary not just between schools of thought, but also between individual scholars. Yet to avoid using all the group terms that appear in our sources would create rather significant problems during discussion. It is necessary, therefore, to use these terms with a certain element of care, in the manner in which medieval people used them rather than as anthropologically defined elements. However, the aim should be to include not only those practical aspects of identity revealed by the source material, but also a consistent and informed theoretical perspective. Identity is a very informative area of study, but without structured analytical and theoretical guidelines, one can conclude almost anything from a given source. As such, one cannot usefully approach identity from the perspective of a single discipline, but must instead utilise the wide variety of ideas available, in medieval and modern history, in literature, and throughout the social sciences. To do as some have suggested and define our criteria for *ethnos*-based research wholly within a single discipline would be a mistake.³⁹ It is only through a combination of such approaches and ideas that an effective study of identity, ethnicity, nation, and so on can be performed, and unfounded and unevidenced speculation only muddies the already unclear water.

³³ Alfred Cobban, quoted in Hutchinson and Smith, *Nationalism*, 249.

³⁴ Hastings, *Construction*, 15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.