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Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations, the Medieval Origins of Europe*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002. x + 199 pp. Notes, suggestions for further reading, and index. \$24.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-691-09054-8.

Review by Steven Fanning, University of Illinois at Chicago.

It is not often that scholars of the early middle ages have an opportunity to provide insight that is of relevance to contemporary history. However, proponents of the revived ethnic nationalism in the later twentieth century, particularly in central, eastern, and southeastern Europe, often appealed to the historical record for validation. They assumed both that a particular people of Europe has a distinct identity, language, and culture that can be traced back into antiquity (or even prehistory) and that a specific geographic territory is that people's original homeland. "Ethnogenesis," the historical processes by which various individuals and groups come together into what at some point is recognized as a distinct people, has been an area of rather intense scholarly research for late antiquity and the early middle ages for over the past thirty years, especially in the work of Reinhard Wenskus and Herwig Wolfram. Historians of the early middle ages are now well aware of the fluid, heterogenous nature of the germanic tribes of the migration period and are unlikely to see them as anything more than peoples constantly in the making, ever being reconceptualized. Patrick Geary made extensive use of the insights of this research on ethnogenesis in his 1988 work, *Before France and Germany*, and now, in *The Myth of Nations*, he applies it to the assumptions of ethnic nationalism in order to correct its pseudo-history. He establishes firmly that the peoples of Europe are all relatively recent constructions, dating generally to after the year 1000, with none of them possessing the ethnic distinctiveness claimed by nationalists.

Geary begins with a presentation of the origin of ethnic nationalism, whereby nation-states based on ethnicity—"imagined communities"—were created in the minds of intellectuals and politicians. In the eighteenth century and before, claims of national origin tended to focus on the ancient past (Greece, Rome, Troy) and to see different origins for nobles and commoners. However, in the wake of the upheavals associated with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era, there was a tendency to shift the focus to a shared cultural tradition for all classes in a particular state. Germany was central in this development, as intellectuals such as Freiherr vom Stein, Klopstein, Herder, Lessing, and Fichte promoted the idea of German identity by emphasizing the continuity of both language and geographical settlement of its speakers. The central role of language was emphasized when Stein founded the Gesellschaft für ältere deutsche Geschichtskunde, which began the publication of the documents of German history in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, and the Germany whose monuments were to be published came to incorporate all germanic peoples of the migration period.

The new field of scientific Indo-European philology assisted this effort by equating peoples with their languages. This view permitted the identification of linguistic communities far back in time, much earlier than the political existence of those peoples; that is, it provided a people with a cultural ethnicity far older than any political existence. This period was seen as the time of "primary acquisition," when the ancestors of modern nations first appeared. At the same time, the field of ethnoarchaeology joined with philology to discover and analyze the material culture of the supposed linguistic groups, which allowed modern states to claim as their own these supposed original homelands of the linguistic groups.

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Thus the sciences of philology and archaeology seemed to root in the distant past the imagined elements of nationhood, namely, language, territory, and a distinct culture.

Examining how peoples were imagined in antiquity, Geary notes that there were two primary models, the biological nation, based on a common ancestry and common culture (what might be called ethnicity), and the constitutional nation, based on a common law and common allegiance, such as the Roman people. Although Herodotus saw peoples as tending to be the result more of geographical groupings than common descent, later historians of antiquity generally scorned alien nations as possessing distinct and, of course, inferior customs. These “others” had an origin far back in the mists of time, with membership based on birth. But for the Romans, citizenship was the basis of nationality, not customs or descent from a common ancestor, and this criterion was easily shared by both Jews and Christians because adherence to God’s law, not birth, determined membership in the group. In the later Roman Empire, regional and local identities often came to outweigh the somewhat vague Roman citizenship as a basis for identity, and Romans came to be viewed simply as comprising another *gens* alongside the germanic *gentes* that were now located inside the Roman Empire.

For the early third century, Geary finds that fluidity of membership in a people was prominent among both Romans and barbarians. Within the empire, attachments were based more on region and city than on abstract Romanness: old and new Roman families associated according to social class, and lower classes tended to identify with their wealthy patrons. Even the army was open to all classes of the population, and eventually to non-Romans as well. Outside the empire, barbarian *gentes* experienced fluidity of population as the norm: new peoples coalesced out of elements of previous groupings, and ruling families of the newer peoples often promoted unity and cohesiveness by attempting to transform their own histories into the history of the people. Most of the barbarian *gentes* were marked by numerous subdivisions, which for individuals often could be the primary focus of identification more than the *gens* itself. Thus, neither the Roman population nor the barbarian *gentes* was a homogeneous people who enjoyed a shared common culture.

In the fourth and fifth centuries, this heterogeneity intensified. The Hunnic confederation was made up of a number of disparate bands, and groups tended to break off, often entering the Roman Empire. Once in the empire, the groups began to coalesce into new peoples. At the same time, Roman peasants often joined with the barbarians, while Roman and barbarian aristocrats tended to identify more with each other than with the lower classes of their respective peoples. The barbarian rulers of the new states inside the Roman Empire struggled to impose a common identity on the heterogeneous populations through legal codes and making their own royal lineages into the common ancestry of the entire group. In Gaul, Roman, celtic, and germanic elements began to fuse, and within a few generations after Clovis all those living north of Loire would consider themselves Franks. In Britain, the Anglo-Saxons represented an amalgamation of invaders and the indigenous population. The social realities behind the names of Saxon or Frank thus underwent a radical transformation over the course of a few centuries.

The blurring of differentiation between Roman and barbarian continued in the sixth century. In Italy, Lombard and Roman became amalgamated so that virtually all came to be regarded as Lombards; those who were called Romans were inhabitants of imperial Italy. In Visigothic Spain, the “Goths” came to include those of germanic descent from a number of different peoples; those called Romans comprised Greeks, Syrians, North Africans, and Hispano-Romans. At the same time, in Gaul new regional identities were formed, such as Neustria, Austrasia, Burgundy, etc. Regionalism became even more pronounced east of Rhine as the Saxons formed into a new society in seventh century. Farther to the east, the steppe federation of Avars exercised hegemony over many disparate peoples, and their political and military structures provided the impetus for the ethnogenesis of the specific Slavic groups of Croats and Serbs, which came into existence only after their domination by Avars. By the eighth century, terms such as Saxon in England, Roman in Italy, and Thuringian, Bavarian, Frisian, Alaman in the Carolingian world were merely provincial designations, not tribal ones.

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The states of the early eighth century are presented as the product of regionalism, dominated by local elites and made up of new mixtures of peoples. The Carolingians created a new kind of European ethnicity based on an individual's own legal code rather than ancestry or culture. In the end Geary finds that ethnic terms are not pure, but rather are characterized by discontinuity, heterogeneity, flux, complexity, and repeated change. The peoples of Europe are works in progress, and always must be. Geary provides a coda on Zulu ethnogenesis as a model for this historical process. He illustrates how Europeans, highly influenced by the biblical Exodus and their own nationalism, as well as over reliant on oral history as a trustworthy guide, rationalized Zulu history to create an artificial and inaccurate picture of the homogeneous Nguni people as the origin of the Zulu.

*The Myth of Nations* is presented as a general work for non-specialists. It is thus only lightly footnoted and is unlikely to contain much that is surprising to scholars of the early middle ages. However, for readers less familiar with the research on ethnogenesis or with the general history of late antiquity and the early middle ages, Geary has provided a convenient survey of the fluid concepts relating to the identification of nations and peoples in those periods. Moreover, medievalists less conversant on nineteenth-century nationalism can profit from the introductory chapter. As is often the case with a general treatment of a large topic, there are many questionable assertions and overly broad statements and generalizations, to the extent that readers should be cautioned not to rely unquestioningly on this text as a source of basic information. Geary's central thesis and general presentation, however, are unaffected by those problems. As a contribution to a better understanding of the historical bases of the issue of nationalism and national origins, *The Myth of Nations* is a readable and informative work.

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