

[59] Medieval Europe – Object and Ideology¹

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1. Introduction

From the medievalist's point of view, writing about "Europe in the Middle Ages" can only be considered an ambivalent endeavour. Of course, the notion of Europe already existed during the pre-modern period in its Greek or Latin variants (*Europa*) and their numerous vernacular counterparts: *Europe* in English and French, *Europa* in German, *Eorpa* in Irish (Karageorgos 1992; Oschema 2001). In spite of this obvious fact and the existence of cartographic representations of the continent – albeit usually as part of the known *oecumene* –, there have been intensive discussions about the question if this purely "notional" existence of Europe equally implied a more tangible reality of a "concept" of Europe that formed part of the conscious self-fashioning of the continent's inhabitants' identities (Reuter 1992). Most of the historians who tackled this question in the course of the twentieth century tended to answer in the negative: although the name of the continent could be found in their sources, its frequency was – in their eyes – nearly negligible. Even more important, however, was that the notion did not play a discernible role in the contemporary discussions about what we would call in modern terminology "political" concepts.

The logical consequence was presented three decades ago by Peter Brown, who answered his rhetorical question "Did Europe Exist before 1700?" in the negative (Brown 1980/81): His opinion, formulated in the most clear-cut way, reflects the perspective of an historian who works on the modern period. He can thus compare the elaborate models of institutional organization, proposed by a series of early modern philosophers and statesman in order to overcome the incessant interior conflicts of the European nations, with the more or less vague connotations that might have been ventilated by the usually brief and unspecific allusions to Europe made by medieval authors.

2. The Notion of Europe in the Middle Ages – *idées reçues*

In fact, the general assumptions about the relevance of Europe for the Middle Ages and vice versa are quite clear: particularly non-specialists are frequently quite eager to refer to the formation of the Carolingian Frankish empire in the eighth and ninth centuries as some kind of historical pre-figuration of modern Europe (e.g. Dufeu 2005: 30, n. 15; cf. Tielker 2003: 106 f.). As a consequence, the designation of Charlemagne as the "father of Europe" (*pater Europae*), a citation

¹ The material, on which this contribution builds upon, is part of a larger research project on "Images of Europe in the Middle Ages" which I pursued from 2009 to 2011 at the University of Berne (Switzerland) and which was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. In accordance with the overall character of the contributions to the conference "Ideas of/for Europe", I retained the essayistic character of the following presentation. I would like to thank the organizers of the conference for the opportunity to discuss aspects of my work in this context. – The results of my research project are now available in Oschema 2013.

[60] from the anonymous epic poem describing Pope Leo III's visit to the Frankish king at Paderborn in 799 (Brunhölzl 1966: 70; cf. Leyser 1992; Riché 1998), enjoys a high degree of popularity.

Medievalists, on the other hand, unanimously hold that the concept and idea of Europe were actually of minor importance – if of any at all – for the time between 500 and 1500: Although the notion of Europe itself can be found in sources from the entire period, it did not become a central concept for contemporary discussions about what we would call, in our modern terminology, “politics”, “culture” or “identity”. To a certain degree, the Carolingian period constitutes an exception to this general rule, since several authors of panegyrics, but also of historiographical texts, referred to Charlemagne and his successors as rulers of Europe, thus identifying the continent with the realm under Frankish dominion (Fischer 1957: 86-98). If we want to interpret these texts, however, we have to consider, that their authors apparently used the notion of Europe in two different ways that seem to be independent from each other: While Europe could be identified with the Carolingian realm, other passages written by the same authors clearly refer to the established spatial unity of the third *pars mundi* that occupied the north-western regions of the known and habitable world, thereby including vast territories that had never been submitted to Frankish rule. Moreover, most of the authors who spoke of Europe in the late eighth and ninth centuries seem to have come to the Frankish court from the British Isles (Schneidmüller 1997: 10). Hence it is quite possible that they represented a kind of “eccentric” perspective onto the realms on the continent, inducing a certain predilection for the application of the generalizing notion of Europe (Serejski 1937: 170 f.)².

Following a chronological order, we can generally say that medievalists since the 1950s assume that the notion of Europe and its use had been reduced to a purely “geographical” meaning after the Carolingian and Ottonian period, that is from the eleventh century onwards (Fischer 1957: 115; Hay 1968: 51 f.)³. Europe would then simply have designated that part of the known world which occupied the territory between the ocean in the North and in the West, the Mediterranean in the South and finally the border formed by the Bosphorus, the Black Sea and the river Don in the East. As a matter of fact, the eastern border with all the difficulties its identification presents to us today (Schultz 2005), had been the object of a more or less canonical position between the seventh and fifteenth centuries, in spite of all the political and religious developments (Oschema 2001: 198 f.).

Still according to the general opinion, Europe finally acquired a more prominent political meaning in the writings and speeches of Enea Silvio Piccolomini, who was to become pope under the name of Pius II, in the second half of the fifteenth century. The new political and ideological scope of the continent's name is usually explained in the context of humanism, on the one hand, and of the threat that the Ottoman advance in Greece and south-eastern Europe posed for the Christian communities, on the other (Oschema 2001: 221-226; Helmrath 2005; Fischer 2007). As in previous times, when Europe had been referred to by individual authors who wanted to create the idea of a defensive community against intruders or enemies from the outside – one might think of the anonymous Spanish chronicler who used the collective noun *Europeenses* in the context of the battle

² The quoted study being written in Polish, my quotation refers to the author's French summary.

³ It has to be noted, however, that this established position is currently being re-examined and revised. Cf. the critical remarks in Gautier Dalché 2008.

of Poitiers in 732 (Fischer 1957: 50 f.) – Europe became, once [61] again, an emblematic name that could be used in order to evoke a sense of the common destiny (Höfert 2007: 211 ff.).

If we accepted this well-established narrative, our object would seem to be quite unproblematic. The underlying historical developments would not only follow a quite intelligible evolutionary pattern which can be explained with relatively obvious and discernible causalities, but they would also conveniently rule out the necessity to consider in too much detail the phenomena of the medieval period. Unfortunately, this would mean to oversimplify the situation as it can be reconstructed by looking at our sources.

3. Critical Elements in Current Research

If it were the case that “Europe [as a concept] did not exist during the Middle Ages” but “rather replaced the Middle Ages”, as Rudolf Hiestand put it roughly two decades ago (Hiestand 1991: 36; cf. already Hübinger 1990 [1954], 41-43), where could the interest of a Medievalist’s contribution to this topic lie? In order to answer this question, we have to take a closer look at the historiographical tradition and its interrelations with genuinely historical methodological positions (and their development). Equally important is the broader field that is being constituted by the general social and political conditions of the period in which the historical analyses in question have been elaborated. Both dimensions contributed to the shaping of nowadays widely accepted positions that must, however, seem unsatisfactory from a critical point of view.

First of all, I am not convinced that the interpretation of Europe as an “a-political” and “purely geographical” term in the period from the eleventh to the fifteenth century constitutes a satisfying description of the phenomena we can reconstruct.⁴ In fact, the categories of the “political” and the “geographical” tend to become problematic when they are applied to the interpretation of medieval material, since they do not harmonize with the categories and the contextual framework of our sources. In contrast to our own time, medieval authors did not have distinctive discursive formations at their disposal that would have allowed them to develop genuinely political or geographical reflections independent of religious, moral or social considerations and ideas. As a consequence, a large number of passages that use the notion of Europe in a so-called “purely geographical” manner appear in the introductory chapters to chronicles or further texts of historiographical character. In this context, their function was to give the reader a certain idea of the spatial framework in which the historical events occurred that were related in the text. Since history itself was mainly perceived as “Heilsgeschichte”, the perceivable series of events accompanying mankind’s road towards salvation and the manifestation of God’s actions in the material world, we can assume that the elements that formed the spatial framework for historical events had equally been charged with particular values in the eyes of the contemporaries. [62]

The same effects can be seen when looking for genuinely “political” uses of the word. The discursive formation itself having been unknown before the thirteenth-century rediscovery of Aristotelian political theory, medieval political ideas and concepts must painstakingly be

⁴ The critical re-evaluation of the way these two concepts were applied to the historical material in medievalists’ analyses of the concept of Europe in the Middle Ages constitutes an important aspect of my current research project (cf. n. 1)

reconstructed from a broad variety of texts of mainly theological and moral character. When several contributions of medievalists' were published during the 1950s and 1960s, a period that witnessed an increased interest in this subject for reasons that were immediately connected with the political situation of the time (Oschema 2006: 22 f.), the interplay of the medieval particularities and the historians' heuristic strategies and interests thus had severe consequences. In addition, the theoretical and methodological approaches of their time led the authors in question to focus in their analyses on "high-profiled texts",⁵ thereby introducing another element that further narrowed down the scope of their potential results according to a modern (and thus anachronistic) criterion.

As a consequence, we can say that at least a certain amount of the difficulties (and sometimes shortcomings) of medievalists' research on "Europe in the Middle Ages" are not primarily caused by the nature of evidence or a lack of available sources. Rather, they rather suffer from a lack of critical reflection of the parameters of the historian's activity when investigating the "nature" of Europe. In the following, I would like to present a brief outline of arguments that seem to be crucial for the current constructions of "medieval Europe". My approach will be based on a twofold distinction: Looking at the historical evidence, we will first have to distinguish between the explicit expression of cultural, religious and political identity, on the one hand, and what we might call the "material history" of individuals and groups, on the other. The following reflections are thus based on the assumption that we have to account for major differences between the factual existence of a collective entity that is only perceivable to an analyzing observer and remains virtually unknown to the members of the group themselves, and the existence of a group that actively constructs its identity on the basis of a conscious reference to given elements (cf. Assmann 2002: 132; Münkler 1996: 101). In a second step, we should reflect on the criteria which govern our interpretation of the available sources. In this particular case, the central question seems to be if we, when talking about the notion and idea of Europe in a given period, organize our data and material under the heading of "Europe" because this denomination is particularly apt to serve as an analytical category, or if we rather project onto the past in an anachronistic way a set of ideas and concepts that are deeply rooted in our time?

This minimal set of questions can serve as a basis for a short *aperçu* of the results yielded by medievalists' enquiries into the question of medieval Europe. I have already outlined the established ideas on the history of the concept. Therefore let us now turn to the "material" image of Europe conveyed by the relevant studies. Unsurprisingly enough, the numbers of publications were particularly elevated during the years that followed the central turning points of European history in the twentieth century – the two World Wars and the events of 1989 and 1990 with the subsequent reintegration of eastern and [63] western Europe (Oschema 2006: 21 and 27 f.). While it seems natural that those developments attracted a high level of interest, the material content of the analyses is quite revealing: especially during the 1950s, a period that witnessed the publication of several fundamental studies (Fischer 1957; Hay 1968 [1957]; Gollwitzer 1951), western European medievalists tended to emphasize the formative influence of the Carolingian Empire (Heimpel 1949: 20 f.; Barraclough 1964: 1-16). Their perspective was profoundly influenced by contemporary needs in at least two ways: firstly, they wanted to explore the nature and history of a possible "European" unity in order to overcome the largely discredited national paradigm (Hübinger 1954:

⁵ This concentration on "high-profiled texts" (*Höhenkammtexzte*) has been particularly criticized when the monumental seven-volume publication of the "Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe" appeared in print, which represents one of the major achievements of the German tradition in the "History of Concepts".

53 f.). Secondly, they were mostly interested in political history. Both aspects led them to stress the European perspective of Charlemagne's rule, thereby justifying (at least indirectly) the new frontier of the "iron curtain" by way of excluding the Slavic peoples that still had to be Christianized at the time of the Frankish emperor. The argumentative force of this model mainly resided in its conformity with contemporary needs that resulted in the construction of an "occidental" Europe, based on the Germanic and Romanic peoples who supposedly had inherited the Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian Tradition (Dannenbauer 1959: 1) – an idea already present in Leopold von Ranke's work (von Ranke 1824: iii f. and xxxix). In this perspective, Europe was identified with the Occident, the German "Abendland" (cf. Faber 2002; Schildt 1999: 21-82), and acquired its particular historical identity through a series of distinctions, amongst which the separation from the Eastern Church occupied a pivotal position (Dawson 1932; Barraclough 1964: 14 and 25; Brague 1993: 14 f. and 20 f.).

After the profound political changes that followed the fall of the Berlin wall, Europe became an interesting object of debate once again,⁶ and historians did their best in order to contribute to the ongoing debates about European identity. Medievalists equally orientated their work accordingly and this focalization doubtlessly constituted a legitimate consequence insofar as it reacted to the demands of the societies they were (and are) part of. However, some results of their renewed efforts must be considered peculiar, since studies that were based on new corpora of source material remained the exception, as far as the history of the concept and the idea of Europe are concerned. As a consequence, a large number of recent articles on "Europe in the Middle Ages" largely relied on the evidence that had already been presented in the studies published by Gollwitzer, Hay and Fischer in the 1950s. Although several authors proposed precise and critical re-evaluations of this material (Segl 1994; Schneidmüller 1997; Müller 2001), it must remain surprising, to which extent some interpretations differed from their predecessors'.

A single example might suffice to demonstrate the ensuing effects: In the year 2000, the 27th exhibition under the patronage of the European Council was dedicated to the "Centre of Europe in the year 1000". Less than 20 years earlier most histo- [64] rians would have been unsure about the location of such a centre and the tentative to identify it would probably have led to vivid discussions (cf. already Halecki 1950). What can be said with certainty, however, is that they presumably would not have situated it in the region where it was now emphatically declared to reside, i.e. in the territories that are today occupied by the states of Hungary, the Czech Republic and the German state of Bavaria (Wieczorek/Hinz 2000). The re-evaluation of the historical material according to the parameters of the contemporary worldview thus led to profound modifications. While many western (!) medievalists who wrote in the 1950s and 1960s emphasized the differences between the Latin, Rome-centred, occidental regions of the continent and their eastern, Greek and Slavic counterparts, a large number of historians now prefers to apply an inclusive model which suggests that Byzantium and the countries of what is today called "Eastern

⁶ This does, of course, not mean that the notion of Europe has been absent from titles and contents of publications on medieval subjects during the 1970s and 1980s. It seems, however, that in this period the notion was mostly used in order to delimit the spatial framework in which particular topics were to be explored, in the sense of "Music in Medieval Europe", "Historical Writing in Medieval Europe" etc. Contributions that directly addressed the history of the concept remained rare, with very few exceptions, e.g. Fleckenstein 1986.

Central Europe” (cf. Boia 2008: 101-103), like Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria etc., have always constituted integral parts of European history and identity.⁷

4. New Ways to Complete a Difficult task

What can be learnt from this observation? While we might welcome the construction of a perspective that includes the new members of the politically institutionalized European Union, as well as potential candidates for future integration, we should also reflect upon the methodological and theoretical implications of such a profound paradigmatic shift. If the interpretation of a given corpus of material within the same discipline can vary to a degree that allows the elaboration of diametrically opposed positions, we have to ask not only what the reasons might be, but also what options we have to overcome this unsatisfactory situation. Although I will not pretend to have a definitive answer, I believe that we can actually limit the apparent arbitrariness by way of a more conscientious approach that strictly distinguishes between a descriptive analysis and the critical use of contemporary categories, such as “Europe”, “nation” etc. While the application of the latter can be of enormous value for the interpretation of historical material when consciously applied, it can equally become misleading if it confounds descriptive and normative aspects.

This is, I believe, the case in the current use of the category “Europe” in a historical dimension: During the last years, numerous publications struggled with the precise description or definition of elements which characterize what we could call the “Europeanicity” (cf. Schmale 2002; Schmale 2003) of a given society or culture. Although the notion itself might still strike the reader as a recent, learned invention, the underlying idea surfaced in medieval studies quite a long time ago: In spite of the general consensus that “Europe” did not constitute an essential concept for the worldview of the Middle Ages, medievalists frequently stressed (and continue to do so) that a distinct “European culture” existed throughout most parts of the period.⁸ Explicit evidence for the existence of this position (and not only its implicit effects by way of Eurocentric reasoning) can already be found in historical studies published in the interwar period (cf. Woolf 2004: 54). One might think of the extremely successful study of Oswald Spengler (Spengler 1918-1922), who applied this very technique (even though he preferred the category of the “Occident”), but also of the more specialized contributions by Christopher Dawson (e.g. Dawson 1932).

After the Second World War, the German medievalist Hermann Heimpel explicitly addressed the question of the foundations of Europe in the Middle Ages and identified a set of phenomena he considered to be characteristic. In this list he included, amongst others, the “feudal system”, the development of towns and urban societies, universities etc. (Heimpel 1949). Only a few years ago, Jacques Le Goff constructed his own narrative of the “Birth of Europe in the Middle Ages” along very similar lines (Le Goff 2003). Even though Le Goff did not refer explicitly to Heimpel’s work –

⁷ By emphasizing this effect, I obviously do not want to argue against the “Europeanicity” of these countries – I merely would like to indicate the radical change of perspective that has taken place. As far as the presentation of European history in a “material” sense is concerned, the recent efforts to give the countries in question appropriate attention can only be appreciated, cf. Borgolte 2002, North 2007. See also the elucidating comments in Davies 1996: 19-46.

⁸ Since this position constitutes a rather obvious result of firmly established “Eurocentric” mentalities, it seems to be futile to present a large body of evidence. For a pertinent critique (that does not focus on medieval history) see Blaut 2000.

in fact the latter's short text does not even figure amongst the bibliographical references –, the entire structure of his book confirms the longevity of well-established traditions of thinking and their metaphorical realization: Hence he uses the *motive* of the continent's "birth", thereby applying an organic metaphor to the history he presents. According to this logic, "Europe" can be born, it can "grow", it has its history and it can thus be (in an emphatic sense) prior to its being baptized with the name we use today.

Such an approach might actually help to clarify what we perceive today as particularly European characteristics, by reminding us of the conditions in earlier periods that successively (albeit contingently) led to our own time. It might thus even be helpful when applied to historical material – provided that we remain aware of the fact that the resulting descriptions rely on the use of a model that is by definition anachronistic and purely heuristic in character. Frequently enough, however, the application of this approach leads to the reproduction of essentialist models that we learned to abandon in the context of national history and that are now being transferred to the European level: While most historians would currently agree that nations must basically be described as "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983), current analyses of Europe frequently tend to construct a peculiar essentialist image. Instead of seizing the opportunities of a new "European History" that enlarges our insights into cultural processes and the creation of collective identities, this tendency risks to reproduce the superficial development that partly resulted from post-war uncertainties in the late 1940s, when for example the German Medievalist Peter Rassow propagated (in 1946) "to leave German history behind and to get into European history" ("Fort aus der deutschen und hinein in die europäische Geschichte"; cf. Schulze 1997: 35) – not because he saw the potential of a new framework of historical enquiries, but in order to ensure the reintegration of Germans into the international community of Historians after the war (Schulze 1989: 159-161). Accordingly, the new focus would not have followed the discovery of "European history" as a potentially fruitful object of analysis, but rather ideological motives that governed the historians' contemporary environment. [66]

To be able to fully explore the positive potential of the "material" approach, we should complement it with a renewed enquiry into the contemporary use of the notion of Europe in the societies we analyze, in order to highlight the constructed and culturally determined character of the notion and its associated concepts. This work can actually build on the fundamental studies of Jürgen Fischer, who studied the use of the notion in late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, and Denys Hay, who presented a survey of the medieval period with a certain emphasis on the Renaissance. While both authors' works remain important, a new analysis on the basis of a broader variety of source-material can help to clarify, to complement, and sometimes to correct their conclusions. Given the practical limits of the present contribution, I just want to illustrate this by a brief outline of two aspects that certainly merit a more profound analysis: the idea of Europe as a "Christian continent", and the references to Europe in the context of the crusades.

In current political debates, politicians as well as historians frequently refer to the "Christian" character of European culture (e.g. Brague 1993: 153-155; Laqueur 2007) – an argument that is often coupled with references to the medieval period. As a matter of fact, medieval exegetical tradition indeed established a conceptual relation between Europe and Christianity. This bond remained, however, quite frail and vague for a long time: Although the Jewish author Flavius Josephus already proposed a link between the tripartite structure of the known world, that was

traditionally divided into Asia, Europe and Africa or Libya, and the biblical account of the three sons of Noah (Sem, Ham, and Japheth), Christian authors seem to have been reluctant to adopt this view. In the seventh century, Isidore of Seville did not directly relate Europe and Christianity, although Sulpicius Severus, who wrote two centuries earlier, had already established the dignity of this *pars mundi* that had produced as important a saint as Martin of Tours (Fischer 1957: 14 and 42-47). At the Carolingian court, Alcuin seems to have favoured a direct identification of the peoples of Europe with the descendants of Japheth, but his proposition did not engender a stable tradition until the twelfth century (Oschema 2001, 200-202).

Only then, and thus after the initial success of the first crusade, a number of texts actually presented Europe as the continent that was primarily inhabited by Christians. Several authors, like Honorius Augustodunensis, Petrus Comestor and others even transposed the tripartite structure of a society that was subdivided into free men, warriors and servants onto the account provided by Genesis 9: Hence Sem became the ancestor of the free men, Japheth (whose descendants peopled Europe) of the warriors, and Ham of the servants: *Huius tempore divisum est genus humanum in .iii. in liberos, in milites, in servos. Liberi de Sem, milites de Iaphet, servi de Cham* (cf. Oschema 2001: 201).

But even now our sources constantly remind us of the subtle differentiations between the prevalent religious world-view and the peoples inhabiting the *partes mundi*. In the 1180s, Godfrey of Viterbo thus called Europe the region “where now there are Christians”:

Sem autem cum 27 filiis suis venit in Asiam versus ortum solis iuxta mare. Cham cum 22 filiis suis venit in Africam versus meridiem, Iaphet vero cum 23 filiis suis venit in Europam, *ubi nunc sunt christiani*. [And one manuscript even completes:] Et dicit Onorius, hoc tempore divisum esse genus humanum in tria, in liberos, qui de Sem, in milites, qui de Iafet, in servos, qui de Cham (Godfrey of Viterbo, ed. Waitz 1872: 32; emphasis added by the author).

One century later, the German cleric Alexander of Roes explained, that he wanted to write about the “regions of Europe and the Christian people” (*terminis Europe et de populo christiano*; Oschema 2001: 211; cf. Fuhrmann 1994: 26-34), thereby implying a coextensive meaning of these notions, on the one hand, but simultaneously distinguishing them, on the other. So probably neither of these authors would have agreed with a simple identification of Europe with Christianity: Not only would such an identification have entailed a conceptual limitation of the claims made by the ideally universal (and thereby “unlimited”) church, but Latin authors were quite aware that Europe was also inhabited by adherents of other religions, as was made explicit for example by Roger Bacon in his *Opus majus*, written before 1268 (Roger Bacon, ed. Bridges 1897: 359f.). Even if the continent could sometimes be depicted as the last region of the inhabited world in which the Christian faith dominated – for example in the context of crusade propaganda (Oschema 2010) – this characterization did not lead the respective authors to a complete identification of Europe and Christianity.

This picture becomes even more complex if we take into account the internal fractures and animosities between the different Christian churches. In the context of the crusades, for example, Armenian authors distinguished between the Latin Christians, Greek Orthodoxy, and their own Armenian Church (RHC 1869: 407; cf. Bozoyan 2007). Conversely, pilgrims who travelled from their occidental homes to the Holy Land could not help noticing the complex landscape formed by different Christian communities that shared the churches in Jerusalem (e.g. Anonymus Coloniensis, ed. Röhricht/Meisner 1887: 9). In spite of all the polemical reproaches and the ongoing scepticism with which members of the different Christian communities tended to meet each other, Europe

could not simply be identified with Christianity. Not only did practical experience preclude such an identification, for example in the domains of the Spanish kingdoms during the entire phase of the Reconquista, but even more important was the ideological dimension of Christianity which would not limit its claims to only one part of the world exclusively. Although Europe and Christianity were frequently mentioned side by side in high and late medieval texts, it would mean to grossly oversimplify its usage if we were to condense it into the image of Europe as a “Christian continent”.

The ensuing complexities can be illustrated by a brief look at the use of the notion of Europe in the context of the crusades. Since I recently analyzed this relation in more detail elsewhere (for the following see Oschema 2010, and Oschema 2007), I will only point out some aspects that I consider to be especially important. First of all, we have to acknowledge that in a global perspective, the context of the crusades reflects the general particularities which govern the use of the notion of Europe throughout the entire Middle Ages: Even though the word appears with a certain regularity, it does not seem to become a particularly central notion for the majority of authors who either describe the history of the “armed pilgrimages” of Latin Christians towards the East, or try to arouse their audience’s religious fervour through the preaching of the cross.

Nevertheless, it seems to be revealing that already in the early years of the twelfth century the English chronicler William of Malmesbury fashioned Europe as a central notion in his version of the speech pope Urban II had given at Clermont in 1095. For [68] William, the Christian peoples had been cornered in Europe, from where they should now organize the active re-dissemination of their religion. A series of contemporary chroniclers accepted this depiction of the resulting military campaigns as a “united action of Europe” against the infidel – which it definitively was not, as we know today. Even so, it becomes obvious that these authors regarded Europe as a convenient and adequate concept for their purpose, and its relative success in the historiographical tradition demonstrates that this perspective did not seem entirely inappropriate in the eyes of their contemporaries (Oschema 2007: 28-30 and 35).

Rather than using the analysis of medieval references to Europe in order to demonstrate a historical genealogy of the concept and to discover its “original” roots that could still have valid implications for us today, it seems that this latter aspect, i.e. the flexible use and the potential usefulness, constitutes the most enlightening detail of the history of the concept of Europe in the Middle Ages of current value. The few examples just cited should have made clear, that not even medieval authors construed Europe as the “Christian continent” par excellence. Perhaps one should say, that these authors were actually least likely to do so, in spite of the more conservative branches of the romantic tradition that mourns the loss of European/Christian unity for over two centuries now (Littlejohns 2007; Schulze 1997: 58). The widespread image of a uniform and homogeneous European culture that allegedly existed during the Middle Ages could not be further from the truth – and this is even more so if one considers the level of conscious identity. But although medieval Europe does not provide us with an easily applicable model of either practical supra-national political organization of the continent or at least the “original” meaning of European culture, it can still become a valuable laboratory that allows us to analyze the potential of the discursive uses of the notion of Europe.

In fact, the analysis of these discursive practices is not less illuminating than the probably rather futile tentative to discover an original layer of historical “Europeanness” in pre-modern occidental

cultures. If we adjust our enquiries accordingly, we are able to discover that Europe might not have constituted an ahistorical stronghold of defence against eastern, Asiatic influences, but that the notion itself could nevertheless serve in order to mobilize large numbers of individuals for coordinated and collective action. Not all of the authors who referred to Europe in this sense had been successful in the sense that they actually succeeded in motivating their audience to do what they proposed: In 1454, Enea Silvio Piccolomini held his famous speech at the imperial diet of Frankfurt, in which he declared that the Christians were “now”, i.e. after the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, being attacked in their own homeland Europe (Helmrath 2005). At that moment, the name of the continent became charged with emotional content and the restitution of its borders figured explicitly among the aims envisaged for the planned imperial war (Oschema 2007: 31 f.) – only this particular military enterprise against the Turks was never to take place.

However one might judge the chances of success that Enea’s initiative might have had in the first place – his presentation makes clear that he designed Europe first and foremost in a defensive manner. In his speech in 1454, he identified the borders of the continent with the legitimate minimal extension of Christian dominion and envisaged their restitution. Europe thus acquired a normative character, just as it had already [69] done in the texts by previous authors who stated from the twelfth century onwards, albeit more matter-of-factly than the fifteenth century orator, that Europe was the part of the world where Christians lived (Oschema 2010). But if Humbert of Romanis declared in the late thirteenth century that Europe was the part of the world “where we live” (*in qua nos sumus*), he did not settle for this statement. Rather, he pointed out that God had chosen neither Europe nor Africa as the place of His incarnation, but Judea. Humbert’s final aim consequently transcended the frontiers of his “home” and envisaged the re-conquest of the Holy Land (Humbert de Romanis, ed. Jensen 2007). In this detail, his reasoning harmonizes with William of Malmesbury’s version of Urban II’s speech in Clermont: In the eyes of both authors, Europe might have represented the part of the world where the adherents of the Christian faith had successfully defended their religion against the spreading of Islam. But if it had become the home of the Christians in the course of this historic process, this did not elevate it into a particularly relevant position *per se*. Instead of celebrating the Christian character of Europe, the believers who inhabited the continent were urged to transcend its borders and to re-conquer the cradle of their religion.

The examples of Humbert and Enea Silvio confront us once again with the obvious arbitrariness as far as the concrete application and interpretation of the notion of Europe is concerned. Both authors’ efforts show, however, that they themselves deemed their respective strategies to be promising and convincing for the intended audience. Even if the meaning and the material content they invested into the concept of Europe varied enormously, their positions met on the more important level of the Christian claim to universality and the promise of salvation for all peoples. Or as Enea Silvio himself put it so eloquently in a prayer that concludes his crusade bull *Ezechielis prophete* in 1463:

Oh lord, give us victory over your enemies, so that we, after we have regained Greece, may sing worthy songs to you *in the whole of Europe* and that the *whole world* might adore you and sing your name in all eternity. (Guillaume Fillastre, ed. Prietzel 2003: 204; emphasis added by the author)

So if the search for a “substance” or “essence” of Europe seems to be prone to fail, the results that a careful analysis of the notion’s history can yield remain of great interest to us today. Although we might not find a convincing defining “core” of the notion’s content and its connotations, we are

able to identify the strategies with which several authors tried to shape it into a normative concept that could transport the values of an appeal (Schneidmüller 1997: 14 f.). In this sense, the observation that Europe had frequently been referred to in situations in which the occidental community of nations and peoples had been endangered by external opponents, whereas it had either been forgotten or become the object of conflictive debate during other periods (Barraclough 1964: 51), seems to miss one of the central aspects of our subject: If we consider the contexts and strategies of the word's use as well as its shaping as a normative concept that could be used in order to formulate political appeals, we have to admit that it never described a factual reality but rather an ideological goal. But in this case, there would have been nothing to "forget" in the absence of exterior threats, since the notion did never refer to an enduring "essential" reality (cf. Morin 1990: 23). [70]

5. Europe or not? Research and Ideology

At the end of this brief overview, we have reached a point where two spheres of uncertainty overlap: Not only does modern historical investigation into the concept of "Europe in the Middle Ages" reflect the influence of the historians' political and social surrounding and convictions, but the notion itself has also, in its use, always been characterized by discursive strategies that modelled it as an ideological rather than a descriptive category (cf. Borgolte 2001: 17). It would thus seem quite inadequate to inquire into the "historical semantics" of Europe in order to find either an essential and defining core or a stable tradition that would directly lead to our own present, thereby revealing the "organical" roots of our own civilization (cf. Veyne 2007: 249-268). In fact, the dangers of ideological distortion are far too obvious and they continue to produce regrettable effects, even in medieval studies, a discipline that generally seems to be rather unaffected from attempts to instrumentalize it politically nowadays. These potential distortions can clearly be seen in the frequent description of the famous peace projects proposed by Pierre Dubois at the beginning of the fourteenth century, and by the Czech king George of Podiebrad in the second half of the fifteenth century as "European peace projects" (cf. Oschema 2001: 227-229; problematic e.g. Kreis 2008). Both projects can indeed be considered to be highly original, as they proposed "modern" solutions for the interior pacification of the occidental Christian communities. They did, however, not envisage the intended peace as an end in its own, but as a necessary precondition for the successful realization of plans for the recovery of the Holy Land (Dubois) and the war against the Turks (Podiebrad; cf. Monnet [forthcoming]). More importantly, neither of the two authors even once used the word Europe itself!

To sum up briefly, medieval Europe constitutes a paradoxical object for present-day medievalists: The quantitative and qualitative characteristics of its presence in our sources would probably not suffice to arouse the historians' interest. Europe was no key-concept of medieval thinkers and sometimes even in the few examples some historians like to present as precursors of modern ideas of supranational cooperation, the word "Europe" does not appear at all, as is the case in the famous peace projects of Dubois and Podiebrad. If medievalists enquire about Europe in the Middle Ages, their interest is mainly induced by questions that result from their own time and surrounding world – which is doubtlessly legitimate, since it secures the social relevance of scientific research in this specific discipline. At the same time, the knowledge about this particular

interrelation between past and present should remind us that we ought to be cautious in order not to project our needs and wishes onto the historical material.

In spite of the inherent uncertainties of the subject, the conscientious analysis of the use of the word Europe in the Middle Ages can provide us with important insights into the flexibility and adaptability of a concept that is dear to us today. If we can learn anything from its history, it may be the understanding of its constructed and undetermined character. As a matter of fact, the deeper we look into the history of the word, the more uncertain its meaning becomes. This does not mean that we ought to avoid it entirely; it merely demonstrates that we cannot hope for definite answers by looking into the historical material, but that we rather have to shape its meaning for ourselves. [71]

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