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Identity under Treat: Origin Myths as a Device of National Affirmation in Catalonia and Scotland
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IDENTITY UNDER THREAT: ORIGIN MYTHS AS A DEVICE OF NATIONAL AFFIRMATION IN CATALONIA AND SCOTLAND¹

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All nations have endeavoured to forge an image of their own, an image which is loved and in which everybody believes even if it does not necessarily correspond to reality. An image constructed upon an ideological framework of myths, legends and symbols. [...] A kind of humanist, the historian-politician, has played an essential role in the formulation of this ideological construction.² (Duran 7)

While Eulàlia Duran's statement can be applied to most creations of national identities in the late Middle Ages, it will be demonstrated — more specifically — that the reformulation of both the Catalan and Scottish national consciousness was prompted by historical threats of foreign overrule. In the hiatus of power during the succession processes in Catalonia (1410-12) and Scotland (1290-96), the Castilian and the English respectively exerted their political influence for their preferred candidates to be elected. Pere Tomic's *Històries e conquestes dels reys d'Aragó e comtes de Catalunya* (1428)³ is an immediate response to this situation; whereas John Fordun's *Chronica Gentis Scotorum* (1363-85) reflects a resistance to the continued English ambitions over Scotland. These two texts will be analysed to show how the mythological pasts of both countries were codified as an affirmation of alterity against their Castilian and English neighbours. I shall first briefly explain how the concept of 'nation' can be applied to medieval Catalonia and Scotland. Second, I shall sketch the common elements of their historical situations, despite their different periods in time. Then, the way in which both chroniclers present the threat to their identity as a people will be investigated. Finally, the intermingling of history, religion and literary motifs in the construction of the myths

1. I would like to thank R.D.S. Jack and Cordelia Beattie (University of Edinburgh) for commenting on drafts of this article and Josep Pujol (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) for giving me very useful references on Catalan materials.

2. All quotations from Catalan texts are my translations unless otherwise stated.

3. The reader will note two different spellings for the historian's surname: Tomic and Tomich. Tomic corresponds to contemporary and normalized writing conventions. On the other hand, Tomich is the old spelling, which is used in the edition quoted, a facsimile of a 1534 edition.

of Gaythelos and Scots in Scotland and of Otger Cataló and the Nine Knights of Fame in Catalonia will be discussed.

MEDIEVAL NATIONS

To regard Catalonia and Scotland as nations in the late Middle Ages may seem problematic and anachronistic. Nation might be seen as a modern, political notion, which does not fit with the idea of a feudal society. Benedict Anderson, for example, argues that the concept of national entities only started to develop during the industrial revolution. For Anderson, "the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation" (49). Yet, other theorists, such as Walker Connor or Anthony D. Smith, state that nations existed in pre-capitalist times. Smith claims that "a nation can [...] be defined as a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members" (14). This understanding of nations as having ethnic foundations allows us to regard Catalonia and Scotland as such in the late Middle Ages. In the two texts that I shall discuss, nationalism does not stem from the defence of the interests of the bourgeoisie, but from the reaction of the nobility, when deprived of their ancestral class privileges, against foreign overlordship. Such were the circumstances in late fourteenth-century Scotland and early fifteenth-century Catalonia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From the beginning of the territorial formation of Catalonia in the late ninth century (when Charles the Bald made Wilfred the Hairy first Count of Barcelona) to 1410, the lineage of the House of Barcelona that had governed the country had held sway first in Catalonia and then in Aragon, Valencia and Majorca. Consequently, there was no need to write a history of the country going back to mythological times as no real threat to national identity existed. Self-affirmation in the face of a foreign invader was not required or even thought of. Yet in 1410, Martí the Humane died without a direct heir. Jaume II of Urgell, a descendant of the House of Barcelona, preferred by some of the Catalan representatives, was the candidate best positioned at first. Nevertheless, Fernando of Antequera, a Castilian noble, was elected

King of Aragon and Count of Barcelona by the Treaty of Casp in 1412.⁴ For the first time in the history of Catalonia, a non-native person ruled over the nation. This led to many tensions and conflicts among the Catalan nobility.

In this context, although universal histories were abundant in the late Middle Ages, in Catalonia the four great chronicles which precede Tomic's focus on discrete periods of time.⁵ Ideologically, these four historical texts only had to account for the count-kings' way of action and policies in the present or recent past. This situation points to the existence of reasons, other than the purely literary, which compel Tomic to delineate Catalonia's mythological genesis. According to Cortadellas, popular legends of oral origin, such as the mythologization of Wilfred the Hairy, the story of Hercules in Catalonia or that of Otger Cataló, were excluded from chronicles "until the political and cultural circumstances of the country—a period of decadence of the autochthonous cultural values, a need for national affirmation"—caused the historians to include these materials (50).

Likewise in Scotland, from 1058 with the reign of Malcolm III to the death of Alexander III (1286) and her daughter Margaret (1290), the Canmore dynasty had reigned. With the death of the last member of the Canmores, the English king Edward I saw an opportunity to impose his power on Scotland, as he had already done in Wales. In the succession, refereed by Edward I, John Balliol was elected King of Scots. Soon afterwards, however, the English King forced him to pay fealty to him for the Kingdom of Scotland. This led to the Wars of Independence (1296-1314), which ended with the victory of Robert I of Scotland in the Battle of Bannockburn (1314). Subsequently, the Declaration of Arbroath (1320) and the Treaty of Northampton (1328) secured English recognition of Scotland's independence. Yet these documents did not guarantee a peaceful future in the Anglo-Scots relationships. After the death of Robert I, his successors, David II and Robert II proved to be a rather weak sovereign who had to face not only the English menace, but also strong opposition on the part of the

4. For a detailed account of the process, see F. Soldevila, 487-648. This remains a valid study of the origins and consequences of the dynastic change: it points out the influence of the Western Schism (1379) after the death of Gregory XI and explains Catalan loss of territories and political power in the Mediterranean as causes of both the weakening of the House of Barcelona and the final resolution in the Parliament of Casp.

5. "Medieval Catalan Historiography possesses four fundamental texts, the chronicles of Jaume I, Bernat Desclot, Ramon Muntaner and Pere the Ceremonious. Apart from their extraordinary value as historical documents, [...] they are wonderful pieces from a literary and linguistic perspective. All four [were] composed between the end of the thirteenth century and through the fourteenth century" (Riquer, I: 394).

Scottish nobility. It is in this context of political instability that Fordun's *Chronica* and John Barbour's *Bruce* (c. 1375),⁶ a romance dealing with the life and deeds of Robert I, were composed.

TOMIC'S AND FORDUN'S PROBLEMATIZATION OF THE THREAT TO NATIONAL HEGEMONY

In Catalonia, owing to the abovementioned divergences between the newly crowned monarch and the Catalan nobility, the rise of universal histories seeking to establish the origins of Catalan identity in the distant past is not surprising. Tomic's description of Fernando of Antequera in his *Històries* reflects this. His report of the succession is surprisingly laconic notwithstanding its paramount relevance to Catalonia's future. After naming the different representatives from Aragon, Catalonia, and Valencia, the chronicler relates the main legal and official reasons for Fernando being preferred to Jaume: Fernando "era nèt del Rey en Pere, fill de la filla e nebot dels dos Reys don Johan e don Martí, fill de lur germana e lo rey"⁷ (128). However, at this juncture, Tomic avoids criticising the final resolution. His motives for doing so might be explained, not by his overt approval of the Castilian noble's accession to the throne, but because manifest criticism would have jeopardised the position at court of the chronicler's lord, Bernat Galceran de Pinós. The text reveals that Bernat Galceran de Pinós and his ancestors were members of the retinue of both King Fernando and his son, King Joan, which can justify Tomic's lack of explicit reference to the succession.

Although harsh disapprobation is never present, Tomic does mention the sense of loss of identity and political power among the Catalan nobility during Fernando and his son's reigns. His censorship of the count-king's arbitrariness in his government of Catalonia is reflected in the complaint of his counsellors and the noblemen. Fernando rebukes them lightly with words that "no vull açí recitar,"⁸ as the author says (130). Tomic's silence is even more meaningful than a depiction of the facts in so far as it implies the authoritarianism of the

6. David II commissioned Barbour to write *The Bruce*, not only to extol Scotland's recent heroic past, but to persuade the nobles to be loyal to the king. The second most important character is James Douglas, whose loyalty to Robert I is emphasized very often. Historically, the Douglasses were the most powerful noble family in Scotland after the royals. They used this position to challenge the king's authority more than once.

7. [was grandson of King Peter, son of his [Peter's] daughter and nephew of the kings Joan and Martí, of her sister and the king].

8. [I do not want to relate here]

Castilian lineage now governing Catalonia. Muteness is imposed, since a direct critique may bring about reprisals against the chronicler or his lord. Likewise, about a delegation which Fernando sends to Sicily commanded by his heir Joan, Tomic makes a brief but very significant comment: Joan "ve acompanyat de gent de Castellans e pochs de Catalans que sinó los nobles mossèn Bernat de Santellas, mossèn Ramon de Perallós no y havia de nostra nació" (130). These two quotations serve to underline the discomfort and unease of the Catalan nobility towards the newly arrived foreign ruler. The ancestral rulers and administrators of the country feel displaced from their traditional roles. A menace to their hegemony can only bring about the growth of national consciousness.

In contrast with Catalonia, when Fordun composed his *Chronica* England no longer had Scotland in subjection. He could, therefore, criticize the previous English invasion in a much freer way than Tomic could protest against Fernando. In Fordun's Prologue to his work, we learn that, during the Wars of Independence, the English king Edward I had stolen as many historical records and chronicles as he could find. From the beginning, then, the chronicler assigns himself a double authoritative and authorial role: he emerges as the saviour of the nation's history and memory and, at the same time, is assigned the task of re-creating and codifying past records. He will reorganize numerous and diffuse sources with their diverse meanings and intentions into a powerful, unifying narrative which will concentrate on differentiating and antagonizing the origins and historical evolution of the country's most feared enemy, England. Goldstein suggests that Fordun transformed the old heroic legends into a new account which engaged with the political realities of his contemporaries (121).

MYTHS OF ORIGINS

In the case of Catalonia, the founder's origins are inspired by literature, concretely by the French hero Ogier of Denmark who, according to Coll i Alentorn was the literary figure from which the founder's name, Otger Cataló, was taken (13)¹⁰. The choice of Ogier le

9. [is accompanied by many people from Castile and few Catalans. Only Sir Bernat de Santellas and Sir Ramon de Perallós represented our nation]

10. Coll i Alentorn also points out that Tomic was the first historian to bring the two independent versions of Otger's *aventure* together (22). He assigns the names of etymological and genealogical legends to both independent versions of the story. See his article for full explanation.

Danois reveals the political intentionality of the myth.¹¹ In the *Chanson de Roland* (c. 1090) and in *Le Chevalerie d'Ogier de Danemarche* (twelfth century), the way in which he is most commonly described is as Ogier the Dane. While epic attributes are normally associated with the other peers of Charlemagne, Ogier's main characteristic is consigned to his origin. Even when Ogier is fighting alongside Charlemagne, he is represented as an outsider in the Frankish Emperor's retinue.¹² In *Le Chevalerie*, Charlemagne invades the kingdom of Ogier's father. Ogier, who had been taken hostage and dubbed knight by the Emperor, rebels against his mentor. Out of Charlemagne's knights, then, Ogier is the only one who overtly challenges the Frankish Emperor's authority.

The Danish knight offered the perfect thematic fabric for the Catalan myth to be developed. First, Ogier's association with Otger enriched the heroic worth and ideological significance of the latter: Otger is not only the founder of Catalonia, but also a symbolic reminder of resistance against foreign rule. Second, the figure of the rebellious Ogier also operates in a broader historical context. In the Catalonia contemporary to Tomic, the foreign rule of Charlemagne in Denmark could be easily transposed to Fernando's regime in Catalonia, in which the native Catalan rulers felt as strangers in their country, just like Ogier. Similarly, Ogier's refusal to pay fealty to the Franks compares to Borrell II's breaking of ties with Hugh Capet of France in the late tenth century. This event is regarded as the historical origin of Catalonia as an independent country. Referentially, Ogier *le Danois* amalgamates the most important characteristics of the mythological and historical geneses of the country.

Although Duran asserts that the two main objectives of the myth of Otger Cataló are "to explain the origin of the word Catalan and of the Catalan language" (14), there are other equally important connotations which should be noted. Even before introducing the hero, the chronicler's nationalistic aims are clearly postulated in the way he arranges his *Historia Universalis* of Catalonia. From chapter nine to chapter thirteen, Tomic relates the origin of the different peoples and kingdoms of Hispania, first Castile and Leon, then Portugal and Navarre, and finally Aragon. To all of them, the author attributes a Gothic origin. At this point, one might expect that he

11. I am not assuming or suggesting that everyone reading Tomic's *Històries* was familiar with the literary figure of Ogier, but the choice of the hero himself indicates that the epic narratives dealing with him were well-known in Catalonia. Therefore, the political references were certainly present in the text.

12. Significantly, Ogier only fights under Charlemagne's orders when they are confronting the heathen. His Christian features are stressed.

would refer to Catalonia. Instead, he strategically opens the following chapter with the sentence: "Capítol .xiiiij. qui tracta de quin linatge són descendents los Reys de França" (34).¹³ By doing so, the Catalan genesis as a people is deliberately disconnected from the other inhabitants of the Peninsula. The Gothic element common to all other peninsular settlers is deleted from Catalan history and a Frankish one is put in its place.¹⁴

When Otger Cataló conquers Catalonia, this distinction is further accentuated. Otger is said to be a German prince at the service of the French monarch. His German birth is not as strange as it might seem, since as Cortadellas states, from "the second half of the fourteenth century [...] the Catalan chronicles started to recollect legends of nobles which refer to the German or French origin of the main families in the country" (18). Tomic, then, only follows an existing tradition. At the same time, he codifies the creation of the country along the lines of a sacred war against the heathen: Otger is represented as the perfect incarnation of the *Miles Christi* and the birth of Catalonia is thus enshrined. As in *chansons de geste* dealing with Charlemagne, the hero transcends chivalric or feudal confrontations to fulfil a christianizing role; war is also translated into a sacred crusade. With the help of the Nine Knights of Fame, another obvious literary element borrowed from the Nine Worthies *topos*, Otger defeats the Arabs: "E con hagueren acabat de fer los dits castells establiren les fortalises de gents e dexaren aquí les mullers e los fills [...] e d'altre part edificaren sglésias on hoÿssen missas e altres divinals officis per tal que aquí fos loat lo nom de Jesu Christ"¹⁵ (38)."

Christianization takes place through the establishment of towns and the populating of the land with "wives and children," who symbolically guarantee the perpetuation of that faith in the newly founded nation. Significantly, after the death of Otger, it is Charlemagne himself who is said to complete the conquest of Catalonia.¹⁶

13. [Chapter fourteen which deals with the lineage of the Kings of France]

14. It is noteworthy that, as Tomic himself claims, his source for this part of his chronicle was the influent work by Rodrigo Ximenes de Rada's *De Rebus Hispaniae* (1243). Tomic strategically transforms the Castilian historian's geographical disposition of Hispania in a political manifesto of distinct identity in the context of fifteenth-century Catalonia.

15. [And when they had finished building the aforesaid castles, they established strongholds for the people and left here their wives and children [...] and, on the other hand, they built churches to hear mass and other divine offices so that Jesus Christ's name might be praised here]

16. Although Otger's death may seem a bit anti-climactic (he dies from natural causes, p. 38), the place where he perishes, Empúries, is of the greatest significance as it was

Otger's image as a heroic character is reassessed and elevated to the status of the great Frankish emperor.

As in the case of Catalonia, history and literary motifs intermingle in Fordun's recreation of Gaythelos and Scota. Re-elaborating collected material, Fordun established what would become the authoritative version of the myth of founders of the Scottish race Gaythelos and Scota. At the same time, he saw the need to rebuke Geoffrey of Monmouth's arguments, advocating the unity of the British Isles from ancient times. In his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136), Geoffrey established the common origin of all the inhabitants of Britain through the progeny of Brute, the mythological founder of the British nation. The pseudo-historical chronicles of Wace and Layamon and different versions of *The Brut* in English, which date from 1440 to 1528, contributed to the development of the myth. In them, the political overtones were further developed to accommodate and justify the ambitions of the Plantagenets. In his *Historia*, Geoffrey re-elaborates the history of the British people including the figures of Brute and Arthur for the first time:

At that time the name of the island was Albion, and of none was it inhabited save only a few giants [...]. Whereof, after exploring certain districts of the land, they drove the giants they found to take refuge in the caverns of the mountains, and divided the country among them by lot according as the Duke made grant thereof. They began to till the fields, and to build them houses in such sort that after a brief space ye might have thought it had been inhabited from time immemorial. Then at last, Brute calleth the island Britain, and his companions Britons, after his own name. (I: xvi)

The text's political and ideological purposes become clear from the very first lines. Geoffrey introduces the criteria of sovereignty and invasion. The Trojan Brute conquers the whole "island," which would legitimize his descendants' (the Kings of England) claims over Wales and Scotland. As a colonizer, he uproots the culture of the former inhabitants by changing the country's name after his own, Britain.¹⁷ Consequently, Brute vassals build their own towns and the lands are divided among them. Nevertheless, the colonial discourse is sagacious enough to negate any kind of former civilization since only "a few giants" lived there. The British colonisation of Britain is no

the first Greek settlement in the Iberian Peninsula. Therefore, his death occurs in the place where the first signs of Western civilisation are located.

17. Corineus, the best of Brute's warriors, also names Cornwall after himself (I: xvi) and the future London is called "New Troy" (I: xvii). A very typical practice of invaders throughout history is to rename the newly conquered lands according to their own language and culture.

longer an invasion but a civilizing act. As in a *locus classicus* of chivalric romance, the British become the civilizing knights who bring light to a primitive land.

While in Catalonia the myth of origins goes back to the Carolingian times,¹⁸ in Scotland the need to create a counter-myth as ancient as that of Brute also obliged the Scots to elaborate an ancestry from the classical period. Fordun locates Gaythelos' birth in Greece in diametrical opposition to Brute's Italian-Trojan origins in Geoffrey's *Historia*:

In the third Age, in the days of Moses, a certain king of one of the countries of Greece, Neolus, or Heolus, by name, has a son, beautiful in countenance, but wayward in spirit, called Gaythelos, to whom he allowed no authority in the kingdom. Roused to anger, and backed by a numerous band of youths, he disturbed his father's kingdom by many cruel misdeeds, and angered his father and his people by his insolence. He was, therefore, driven out by force from his native land and sailed to Egypt, where, being distinguished by courage and daring, and being of royal birth, he married Scota, the daughter of the Pharaoh. (I: viii)¹⁹

Although Fordun gives several accounts of the same story, two particular points deserve our attention. First, Fordun constructs Gaythelos' *persona* along the lines of epic heroes: his confrontation with the king or ruler is a characteristic trait of epic poetry. As Jackson points out:

Whatever his social rank, even if he is the son of a king, he [the hero] has no responsibility for the society into which he intrudes. He has only one object, the establishing of his own reputation. His responsibility extends at most to his immediate followers. [...] His conduct may be often detrimental to the society in which he moves and may be disturbing to the form of that society and the power and position of its leader. (12-13)

18. Tomic does refer to Hercules and Julius Caesar's foundation of Catalan cities and towns (chapters vi-vii). Yet, these allusions lack any kind of ideological component.

19. Although the abovementioned Declaration of Arbroath does not explicitly refer to Gaythelos and Scota, it does mention the legendary journey of the Scots through Greece and Spain until they arrive in Scotland:

We learn from the deeds and records of the men of old, that among peoples of renown our Scottish people have been distinguished by many tributes to their fame. Passing from Greater Scythia over the Tyrrhenian Sea and by the pillars of Hercules, abiding for long courses of time in Spain among the fiercest of warriors, by none how barbaric soever could they be anywhere brought under the yoke. And thence coming, twelve hundred years after the setting forth of the people of Israel, they won for themselves by victory after victory and travail upon travail the abodes in the west which now they hold, the Britons expelled, the Picts utterly destroyed, assailed again and again by Norseman, Dane and Angle; and this is their home, as the histories of the ancients bear witness, they kept evermore free from any servitude. (Dickinson et al. I: 132)

These attributes accurately mirror the image of Gaythelos: his rebellion is explained through his lack of power and authority in the realm. He is fighting for recognition and status at the expense of his own country. As a consequence, he is sent into exile, which is another typical feature of an epic hero.²⁰ The opposition between Neolus, symbolically representing the old and Greece, and Gaythelos, as the new emerging power standing for the future Scotland also works on a broader referential level. There is a confrontation not only between father and son, but also between the superseded classical world and the new nations of medieval Europe as epitomized by Scotland. The second point strengthens the first: Fordun's references to "the days of Moses" and Gaythelos' exile to Egypt are not gratuitous or arbitrary. Both examples anticipate the arrival of *Christiana Tempora* in contrast with the pagan times of old Greece and Neolus. In the Scottish milieu, if in *The Bruce* Robert I is typologically related to Judas Maccabeus and the Scots to the Maccabees,²¹ Fordun introduces the typology of Moses and Gaythelos, Israel and Scotland:²² "For the forty years, therefore, that the children of Israel dwelt in the desert, under Moses, Gaythelos himself, also, with his followers, wandered, now here now there, through many lands; but at length, leaving Africa, he embarked in such ships as he could then get, and went over into Spain, near the islands of Gades." (I: xii)

These typological elements are rounded off by Gaythelos' escape to Egypt, the same place the Holy Family had to flee to when chased by Herod.²³ Therefore, the author accomplishes two objectives at once: he consolidates the mythological origins of Scotland as different

20. It is noteworthy that Geoffrey also constructs Brute along the lines of an epic hero's problematic youth. In I.iii, he is said to kill his father accidentally, a fact that forced him to emigrate: "upon the death of his father, he was driven out of Italy, his kinsfolk being wroth with him for having wrought a deed so dreadful."

21. Yai war lik to ye Machabeyis
Yat as men in ye bibill seys
Throw yar gret worschip and walour
Fawcht in-to mony stalwart stour
For to delyuer yar countre
Fra folk yat throw iniquite
Held yaim and yairis in thrillage.
(Barbour I: 465-71)

22. Goldstein also notes this parallelism and compares it to that in the Declaration of Arbroath between Robert I and Judas Maccabeus (115).

23. "After they have gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, and said to him, 'Rise up, take the child and his mother to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the child to do away with him.' So Joseph rose from sleep, and taking mother and child by night he went away with them to Egypt" (Matthew 2.13-14).

and diametrically opposed to those of England and allegorically prefigures the Christianization of the Scottish people.

CONCLUSION

Fordun's *Chronica Gentis Scotorum* and Tomic's *Històries e conquestes dels reys d'Aragó e comtes de Catalunya* developed in different historical contexts. At the time of the composition of Fordun's chronicle, Scotland was again governed by Scottish monarchs. Thus, although both works operate as a response to the English and Castilian territorial ambitions, Fordun's criticism of the English is much more overt than Tomic's subtle reproach of Fernando and Joan. To counter the existing myth of Brute, Fordun's story of Gaythelos and Scota also needed to be as ancient as the English one; whereas Otger Cataló worked the nearer milieu of Carolingian France. Despite these two obvious differences, the historical moments and the ideological and rhetorical framework of the texts emanate a set of significant similarities. In both Scotland and Catalonia, dynastic crises, which developed into threats to national identity, inspired the codification of the past. Tomic and Fordun made use of similar literary strategies to establish a nationalistic discourse by re-elaborating existing mythology. History, myth, religion, as well as epic and chivalric *topoi*, come together to construct narratives of origin in Catalonia and Scotland, which operate as a political device of self-affirmation as much as of resistance. The outcome is a historicised literary fiction which creates a powerful, differentiating whole.

SERGI MAINER

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