

Nation ‘Belongs Exclusively to a Particular, and Historically Recent, Period’: Counteracting Evidence from the Hundred Years War

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A little boy moves the figurine of a fifteenth century knight across his pretend battlefield. He declares his loyalty to England in an exaggerated English accent as he propels the model—kitted out in the Saint George’s Cross—towards his French foe. His friend grabs his own knight and charges it towards the approaching enemy, declaring in a shaky French accent his allegiance to the King of France.

It is easy to make assumptions about the nationality of the soldiers fighting during the Hundred Years War (1337 – 1453). The two sides, however, were not as easily defined as simply ‘French’ and ‘English’. Sources from the period show a multitude of people from different countries fighting for the English cause, therefore the accent of our ‘English’ knight could just as well have been Norman, Welsh or even French. This raises some interesting questions about what the idea of ‘nation’ meant to the medieval soldier, because it does not appear important in dictating their identities and loyalties. This study questions contemporary attitudes to ‘nation’ and nationality during the 1420s and 1430s. It then places the ideas within modern debates about the origin of ‘nations’.

The issue of identity is an important one for any period. All social and political behaviour is based upon interactions between various identities and the desire to fulfil the identity that defines an individual or group. Considering what affected behaviour in the past alongside the impact it had upon society is integral to the understanding of past communities. For communities involved in war between two different countries, the most prominent identity which is likely to impact behaviour is that of *national* identity. In acknowledging what kind of identity the soldier was trying to fulfil on the battlefield one is able to appreciate more fully the events that unfolded.

The historian studying nation and national identity during the Middle Ages, is, however, faced with a near debilitating problem. Some of the most respected and prominent theorists of national identity and the formation of ‘nation’, such as Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm, define a nation as being innately modern.¹ Arguments have grown around this idea, with assertions that a nation *could* not, and *did* not need to exist in a fragmented society where social status and locality defined identity. It is this point in particular that this study will attempt to refute. To make a claim like this ignores one of the key aspects of ‘nation’: it has no definitive definition.

‘Nation’ as a concept is one of continual change and development. It has been institutionalised and utilised in

various ways throughout its history. Consequently, it is not enough to say that nation can only exist in the form it has taken today. National identity can only exist while people believe in its fundamental principles. It is a mental state and a perceived notion rather than an inevitable being. When people no longer believe or conceive of nation it no longer exists².

The Middle Ages had the language to express ideas of nation. Terms such as ‘*gens*’ or ‘*populus*’, meaning tribe or people, existed under an overarching term ‘*natio*’. These terms appeared in classical Latin and continued to be used well into the Middle Ages.³ The idea of what it meant to be a ‘people’ was already in place well before the period in question. Points such as this are ignored when ‘nation’ is defined as being innately modern. By stating that for something to exist it has to take the form it has today is to project modern perceptions of the world onto the past. This interpretation limits understanding and falsely defines ‘*nation*’ as a static concept.

It is important to attempt to establish how the people of this age saw themselves. The fifteenth century muster rolls provide the information to do this.⁴ During the fifteenth century, the muster rolls—registers of men that showed up to fight—recorded the nationality of many soldiers serving in garrisons in France. I have used the information provided by the muster rolls to see if there are any assumptions that can be read into the way the clerks recorded the data they were collecting. I have specifically looked at the relevance of a national identity compared to an identity formed by status in the clerk’s assumptions.

Before trying to tackle the muster rolls themselves, however, it is important to look at the motivation behind recording the nationality of the soldiers. The recording of nationality in the muster rolls was a side effect of attempts to control who could fight for the English army. The desire to regulate the recruitment of soldiers is believed to be a reaction to the success of Joan of Arc at Orleans in May 1429, the victory which paved the way for the coronation of Charles VII at Reims. These events strongly undermined the English position in France. The English began to feel vulnerable, particularly as there seemed to be an upsurge in treasonable activity towards the English. Fears grew that the army could be betrayed from within, and the presence of foreign soldiers

2. Hagan Schulze, *States, Nations and Nationalism: From the Middle Ages to the present*, trans. Tiliam E. Yuill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 98.

3. Johan Huizinga, “Nationalism in the Middle Ages,” in *Nationalism in the Middle Ages*, ed. C. Leon Tipton (New York: Krieger Publishing Company, 1972), 18.

4. This study is indebted to the recording of muster rolls undertaken by the AHRC-funded project, “The Soldier in Later Medieval England Online Database,” <http://www.icmcentre.ac.uk/soldier/database/index.php>, accessed 15 January 2012. With particular thanks to Dr Andy King for supplying the nationality database which enabled this study to go ahead.

1. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, myth and reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 9. Also see: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983), 7.

in the army heightened this fear.⁵

1429, however, was not the first time that the nationality of soldiers was regulated. There are indentures (military contracts) from 1427 which restricted the number of foreign men that the captain could recruit for his retinue. There is no evidence, however, that the earlier indenture clauses were enforced. The first active enforcement was a commission of array that examined the nationality of Sir Richard Merbury's retinue serving in 1430.⁶ The significance of Orleans is therefore obvious because although these ideas existed they were not well regulated until after England lost its position in France.

Post-Orleans indentures also reflect the change. Indentures of September 1430 have much more detail about the nationalities that could be recruited. They state that no more than half the lances recruited could be French, all of the archers had to be English, Irish, Welsh or Gascon, and retainues could not be recruited within the locality of the garrison. The necessity of having different nationalities fighting for the English to maintain their position, however, is reflected through the brevity of the orders. The indentures from 1434 instead allow one eighth of the entire retinue to be French—regardless of their position in the army—making recruitment for the garrisons easier.⁷

The motivation behind recording nationality shows the significance of identity within the arena of war. The muster rolls are able to enlighten us further. The purpose of the muster rolls was primarily to record men that actually fought. The lists proved the soldiers right to pay as well as verifying that the captain was providing enough men to fulfil his contract with the king. By 1415 the mustering of men was fairly frequent.

Despite this, the muster rolls still present the historian with a number of problems as a source as only a portion of the muster rolls survive. Anne Curry estimates that only half of the muster rolls originally produced are still in existence.⁸ This means that the muster rolls cannot provide irrefutable evidence about long term trends of soldiers fighting for England in France. For this study, however, the muster rolls prove to be an invaluable source. On a basic level the recording of nationality in the muster rolls shows the diversity of nationalities that were present in the English army. For example the retinue of James Fiennes serving in Evreux in 1431 had men-at-arms from Normandy, Gascony, Lombardy and Germany serving in his garrison.⁹

James Fiennes' retinue (one of many examples that could have been chosen for this point) also confronts us with another inconsistency that must be recognised when studying the muster rolls: administration. The garrison at Evreux provides a record of foreign men-at-arms, but leaves us in silence

about the archers in the retinue where no nationalities at all are recorded. Soldiers are recorded differently depending on who is recording the information. In some cases the nationality of all the soldiers—including the English—are recorded, such as the retinue of Sir Lewis Despoy serving in Neufchatel in 1432 and 1435 where the nationalities of almost all the soldiers are noted.¹⁰ Nonetheless, in the vast majority of cases, it is only people of foreign nationality that are recorded. The variation means that the historian is left in the dark where the clerk has made an assumption about what needs recording and what does not. For example, where only those of French or German nationality are recorded, does this mean that soldiers of Welsh origin are lumped together with the English? Or does it mean that no Welshmen were serving that year? The purpose of recording the origin of the soldier could be based on the threat they pose to the army. However, it is impossible to know how the clerk measured this threat. The omission imposed on the muster rolls by the clerk's assumptions about nationality leaves a gap in understanding for historians. This study suggests that rather than letting the silences in the source *undermine* the conclusions, they should instead be *exploited* to extract information about contemporary attitudes towards nationality.

Thus the study returns once more to the argument that—because loyalty to a lord blunted the individual's ties to nation—status and locality were the most prominent identities at the time.¹¹ It is a convincing argument. Perhaps it was unnecessary for a concept such as 'nation' to exist because there was no need for an identity to unify the elite of society with the mass of peasantry.¹² If social position was the overarching identity of this period it means that the English would not be recognisable as a single group defined by their 'otherness' to those they were fighting. The different sections of society would exist through opposition and power relations to each other. This study, however, sees this argument as an oversimplification of the purpose and shape that identity can take.

The muster rolls—through their inconsistency—record an element of this attitude. There are two notable cases of this. The first is a muster of Lord Talbot's men in 1428, garrisoned at Coutances. The clerk records the nationality of the men-at-arms and the footmen-at-arms as being English apart from two Normans: John Dargoges and Foquet Ganffes.¹³ For the rest of the garrison the clerk records two Norman and two German archers. The other nationalities of the garrison are left blank. It is challenging to know what to read into this. It is possible that the clerk was only really interested with the upper orders. They reflected a closer link with the establishment, such as the kings and nobles of their country. As representatives of their countries their nationality would have been more obvious than the identity of the archers from the lower orders.

The second example of this issue can be found in the

5. Anne Curry, "The Nationality of Men at Arms Serving in English Armies in Normandy and the Pays de Conquete, 1415 – 1450: A Preliminary Study," *Reading Medieval Studies* 18 (1992): 140.
6. Richard Ager Newhall, *Muster and Review: A Problem of English Military Administration 1420 – 1440*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940), 113 – 115.
7. Anne Curry, "The First English Standing Army? Military Organisation in Lancastrian Normandy 1420 – 1450," in *Patronage, Pedigree and Power in Later Medieval England*, ed. Charles Ross (Gloucester: A. Sutton, 1979), 202.
8. Curry "The Nationality of Men at Arms," 136.
9. Archives Départementales de l'Eure, (Eure, France) IIF/4069/M.

10. Archives Départementales de la Seine Maritime (Seine Maritime, France) [hereafter ADSM], 100J/32/22; and ADSM 100J/32/23.
11. Vivian H. Galbraith, "Language and Nationality," in *Nationalism in the Middle Ages*, ed. C. Leon Tipton (New York: Krieger Publishing Company, 1972), 47.
12. Anthony D. Smith, "National Identity, Modern and Medieval," in *Concepts of National Identity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Simon Forde, Lesley Johnson and Alan V. Murray (Leeds: University of Leeds Press, 1995), 22.
13. British Library (London, UK) [hereafter BL], Add. Ch. 12089.

mustering of Sir John Salvain's men at Dieppe in 1432.¹⁴ Here only the nationalities of the archers are recorded. In this case it is likely that the person recording the nationality of the men assumed that the relationship between the nobles and the king meant they could be trusted, while the archers were considered more of a risk.

To understand what assumptions the clerks were making one must study the examples in more depth. In England the upper orders were closely associated with the king through the role they played in his court and through the international code of chivalry. An example of the king's involvement in chivalric matters is the court of chivalry which derived its legal power directly from the crown, and dealt with matters of arms.¹⁵ The upper orders of society were so closely bound up with the rule of the king that it is possible that their national identity was more apparent because of it.

In the first example this chivalry, dominance and power may have made the knights more obviously of a certain nation and more inspiring to record than the archers. In the second it is likely that this clerk did not feel that they would pose a risk to the realm because of their enhanced identity, and would be unlikely to betray the army to its enemy.

In both of the examples from the muster rolls the person recording the nationalities can be read as acknowledging the idea of multiple identities. The initial assumption in both cases is based upon their communal identity by their social position. The assumption is based on their loyalty to the kingdom of England—and is related to status identity—nationality is more obvious in those closest to the king in the upper orders, and the lower orders are more of a risk to the realm. The archer, John Delacroix of Normandy from Salvain's retinue, is identified as both the *same* and *different* as the other archers from England. Delacroix is the *same* because the clerk places him in the social group that he feels needs recording in such detail. Equally Delacroix is *different* because his identity is '*normain*' and so opposed to the English identity of the other archers.¹⁶ It is impossible to deny that nation existed when nationality was such a prominent part of a person's identity and how people were being defined.

To conclude, this study has attempted to counteract Hobsbawm's assertion that 'nation' 'belongs exclusively to a particular, and historically recent, period'¹⁷. The evidence from the muster rolls has clearly shown that people during the fifteenth century had been nationally conscious, and were often defined by their national identity.

In the process this study is not dismissing the validity of the argument that nation is in some sense modern. Recognising the modern form of nation encourages historians to think differently about the shape that nation may have taken in the past, and to realise the fluidity of nation as a concept. People during the Hundred Years War would not have used the term 'nation' or understood themselves in the way that we do today. Nonetheless, we need to use terms like 'nationality' and 'national identity' to understand the past because they

are the most useful words we have to express the concepts that we are facing.

This paper has also tackled the complex issue of multiple identities. It is misguided to dismiss national identity on the basis that people would have been defined by a different identity simultaneously. The identity of social position is not in opposition to the identity of 'nation' and so cannot be used to dismiss its existence. There is absolutely no question that nationality *did* exist, and that it existed in all levels of society. This paper is not arguing that the elite of society and the peasant farming the land would perceive of 'nation' in the same way. Instead the belief in the communal concept of '*England*' and its character created the concept of 'nation'. Those who say that it would not have reached the lower orders may not fully understand the complexity of medieval society. The lower orders' knowledge of their position and their relationship to the king through their lord is indisputable, as well as their involvement in the Hundred Years War through fighting and raising taxes. Recognising this helps us to interact more fully with the fifteenth century.

14. BL, Add. Ch. 7968.

15. Maurice Keen, *Nobles, Knights and Men at Arms in the Middle Ages* (London: Hambledon, 1996), 151.

16. BL, Add. Ch. 7968.

17. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 9.

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