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Norwegian Identity in the Late Middle Ages, Regnal or National?

'Regnalism', 'Nation' and 'National Identities' in Pre-Modern Societies?, S. ■■■. — Susan Reynolds, S. ■■■. — Anthony D. Smith, S. ■■■. — Adrian Hastings and Aviel Roshwald, S. ■■■. — Norway – a late medieval nation?, S. ■■■. — Conclusion, S. ■■■.

Inspired by Susan Reynold's seminal book, 'Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe 900–1300', Swedish historian Harald Gustafsson has categorically discounted the possibility that nationalism lay behind expressions of Swedish identity and Swedish political goals in the late Middle Ages, maintaining that 'nation' and 'nationalism' are strictly modern phenomena. Earlier periods bred what Gustafsson characterizes as "pre-national (*not proto-national*) imagined communities". These communities, he maintains, were rooted in or engendered by the kingdom or realm, that being the territorial enclave encompassing the community's inhabitants. The realm was a morally commanding community in which all constituents, but especially the leading affiliates, the 'men of the Realm', were bound to serve as 'good members of the Realm'. In the case of Sweden, their obligation was to serve 'as good Swedish men'.¹

'REGNALISM', 'NATION' AND 'NATIONAL IDENTITIES' IN PRE-MODERN SOCIETIES?

Applying the terminology first advanced by Reynolds in her aforementioned work, Gustafsson describes this form of affiliation as 'regnalism' or 'regnal ideology'. Regnalism, he maintains, was not an early form of nationalism, for it lacked the latter's biological and cultural connotations. Instead, the ideology was deeply embedded in a contemporary Christian worldview. It was not, he adds, a fixed ideological system, and it is unclear how pervasively it resounded among the common people of the realm². For years, Gustafsson has advocated the exclusive modernity of 'national identity'. From a decidedly modernist perspective, he dismisses any possibility of continuity between modern national consciousness and pre-modern identities, characterizing Scandinavia before the nineteenth-century as pre-national. Although Gustafsson has modulated his position in recent years, he sustains the supposition that there is qualitative difference

¹ HARALD GUSTAFSSON, Vad Sten Sture kan lära oss om svenskhet, in: Svenska Dagbladet, 16 February 2016.

² Ibid.

between pre-modern identities and modern national ones³. Assuming this fundamental disparity to be universal, and not exclusively Swedish, he has also advanced that Norwegian identity in the pre-modern era is of another type than the Norwegian national identity familiar to modern observers⁴.

I am the first to assert that there are differences between Norwegian identity in 2016 and, for instance, in 1416. Nevertheless, this article questions the fruitfulness of reserving the term ‘national identity’ for the modern age and, by extension, rejecting any connection between pre-modern and modern identities. Building upon an initial review of the term and its usage, the second part illustrates my arguments vis-à-vis specific cases from late medieval Norway. This discussion is initiated upon two premises: first, that it is a central objective of historians to identify the past origins of contemporary phenomena, and second, that historians are tasked with contextualizing each of those phenomena. In other words, they must analyse them with respect to the historical periods within they were manifest. The term ‘nation’ (*natio*), for instance, is old, dating to antiquity⁵, while the terms ‘Norway’ and ‘Norwegians’ have their origins in the Middle Ages. The use of these expressions in pre-modern times is undeniable. More pertinent are questions concerning their content, influence, significance and dissemination in pre-modern societies. With this in mind, the following advances a third premise: the demand for an alternative to the ‘modernist’ theory on ‘national identity’ and ‘nationalism’ in pre-modern eras may lead us to a dead end, as it would presuppose acceptance of too many modernists’ premises⁶. How can one argue that a phenomenon is not invariably modern when it is strictly defined as invariably modern?⁷

SUSAN REYNOLDS

We may begin by turning to Susan Reynolds, a historian who Gustafsson expressly credits with inspiring his own theories. Reynolds addresses questions of medieval

³ Cf. ID., *Gamla riken, nya stater. Statsbildning, politisk kultur och identitet under Kalmarunionens upplösningsskede 1512–1541*, Stockholm 2000; ID., *Att testa gränser*, in: ID. – HANNE SANDERS (eds.), *Integration och identiteter I det förnationella Norden* (Centrum för Danmarksstudier 10) Göteborg – Stockholm 2006, pp. 7–18; ID., *De överlappande pusslen. Om partikularistiska och multietniska konglomeratstater i tidigmoderna Europa*, in: MAX ENGMAN – NILS ERIK VILLSTRAND (eds.), *Maktens mosaikk. Enhet, särart och självbild i det svenska riket*, Helsingfors – Stockholm 2008, pp. 59–73.

⁴ HARALD GUSTAFSSON, *Review on Kåre Lundén. Norsk grälöysing. Norsk nasjonalisme 1770–1814*, in: *Historisk tidskrift* (Sweden) 1, 1994, p. 171.

⁵ Cf. SUSAN REYNOLDS, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe 900–1300*, Oxford 1986, pp. 254–256.

⁶ Cf. AVIEL ROSHWALD, *The Endurance of Nationalism. Ancient Roots and Modern Dilemmas*, Cambridge 2006; ADRIAN HASTINGS, *The Construction of Nationhood. Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Wiles Lectures Given at the Queen’s University of Belfast) Cambridge 2007, and CASPAR HIRSCHI, *The Origins of Nationalism. An Alternative History from Ancient Rome to Early Modern Germany*, Cambridge 2012.

⁷ Cf. ERNEST GELLNER, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford – Cambridge 1983; ERIC HOBBSBAWM, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge et al. 1990, and BENEDICT ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities*, London – New York 1991.

nations and national identities in her seminal study of 'Kingdoms and Communities'. Perhaps surprising to some, Reynolds states there that the notion of permanent and objectively real nations was not foreign to the Middle Ages. The problem or challenge for historians seeking to examine identities in this era is that the medieval conception of the 'nation' closely resembles the medieval idea of the kingdom, an entity comprising a people with a similarly permanent and objective reality. Recognizing that not all kingdoms of the Middle Ages were fated to become modern states, and in order to avoid both tautological and teleological perspectives and modern connotations, Reynolds prefers to employ the term 'regnal' whenever describing that which pertains to a kingdom or kingdoms in the Middle Ages⁸. In contrast to Gustafsson, however, Reynolds does not favour the term 'regnal' over 'national' because she regards the Middle Ages as fundamentally 'pre-national'. Rather, the decisive consideration was rooted in her awareness of kingdoms and political units in the Middle Ages that later vanished, yet were as cohesive and embossed with solidarity among its inhabitants as those that later developed into modern states. She emphasizes that nations are the product of history rather than its building blocks⁹. In other words, nations and nation-building is an ongoing process in history, and this process did not begin in the nineteenth-century. This aligns with the views advanced by a number of other scholars, including Adrian Hastings and Patrick Geary¹⁰. As Geary advances, "[p]eoples of Europe, like peoples of Africa, America or Asia, are processes formed and re-formed by history, not the atomic structures of history itself."¹¹

Reynolds later revised her conclusion somewhat as the term 'national' began circulating in academic discourse. Maintaining her previous position, she declared in a later work that the various modern conceptions of nationalism, which emphasize the objective reality of nations and peoples as communities with collective political rights, shared histories and common cultures, were equally tangible to people in pre-modern societies. For Reynolds, the idea of nations as political communities seems much older than most students of modern nationalism assume. The crucial point is that the impact of this idea of nationhood changed as it came to be associated with other, quite different ideas about the structure of society and government, as well as with different economies and different technologies.

In Reynolds' view, it was the advent of such external factors, and not a change in the basic idea of nations or peoples as political communities, that gave rise to modern nationalism. However, it is by her reasoning quite irrelevant whether one chooses to portray this concept of nationhood as a form of nationalism. For Reynolds, terms matter less in this context than the concepts or notions that resounded in the minds of

⁸ Cf. NORMAN DAVIES, *Vanished Kingdoms. The Rise and Fall of States and Nations*, London 2011.

⁹ REYNOLDS, *Kingdoms and Communities* (as note 5) pp. 252–256.

¹⁰ HASTINGS, *The Construction of Nationhood* (as note 6); PATRICK GEARY, *The Myth of Nations. The Medieval Origins of Europe*, Princeton – Oxford 2002.

¹¹ GEARY, *The Myth of Nations* (as note 10) p. 174; see also HASTINGS, *The Construction of Nationhood* (as note 6) pp. 11–12.

those who use them, and the external phenomena to which they seem to refer. She wastes no time quibbling about words – nation, people, *gens*, *populus* and nationality. The particular terminologies used in any particular language are immaterial, for while pre-modern and modern societies may share a common set of expressions, we cannot assume those expressions to connote identical concepts and notions as perceived in the minds of different people in different chronological and social contexts¹². Drawing on my understanding of Reynold's exposition, I advance that, if conscious of the premises laid out above, there is nothing unique about our source material that should prevent us from using the terms 'nation' and 'national' when speaking of medieval societies, nor is there any valid argument for reserving these terms for modern times.

Reynold's focus is directed toward natural communities of descent and culture that also understood and represented themselves as political communities with political rights. Such communities could emerge despite lacking full independence; in other words, it mattered little whether they developed as states or other, more-or-less independent polities¹³. As the American political scientist Walker Connor, among others, has advocated over the years, it is essential, from an analytical standpoint to distinguish between state and nation¹⁴. Reynolds herself polemicizes against the British historical sociologist Anthony D. Smith, one of the founders of the interdisciplinary field of nationalism studies. She emphasizes that her use of the term 'regnal', rather than 'national', when discussing medieval loyalties, was not rooted in a disbelief that medieval communities were in any way akin to nations in a modern sense, as Smith seemed to believe; she rather used the term 'regnal' because the word 'national' tends to draw the observer's attention toward modern 'nation-states' with modern boundaries. On the contrary, the manifestation of medieval power structures and the ideas they seem to reflect suggest to Reynolds that medieval kingdoms were frequently perceived as something quite similar to nations in a modern sense, as originally defined by Smith¹⁵. She acknowledges that medieval kingdoms fail to fulfil later definitions of nationhood put forth by Smith, which include "common rights and duties for all members" as essential criteria; however, if women are to be regarded as members, she commented laconically, then the nineteenth-century communities that historians of nationalism so willingly accept as nations would also fall short of those standards¹⁶.

In general, Reynolds sketches a picture of pre-modern collective identities that is fundamentally and qualitatively different from Gustafsson's, even if the latter claims to have been inspired by the former. This is accentuated when reflecting on Gustafsson's claim that medieval regnalism lacked the biological and cultural notions of nationalism. As Reynolds points out, most of the myths of collective origin that circulated in

¹² SUSAN REYNOLDS, The Idea of the Nation as a Political Community, in: LEN SCALES – OLIVER ZIMMER (eds.), *Power and the Nation in European History*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 54–66, p. 55.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ WALKER CONNOR, *Ethnonationalism. The Quest for Understanding*, Princeton 1994.

¹⁵ ANTHONY D. SMITH, *Theories of Nationalism*, London 1983.

¹⁶ REYNOLDS, The Idea of the Nation (as note 12) pp. 55–56.

medieval Europe pertained to inhabitants of kingdoms or other polities who, like the fourteenth-century Scots, were extremely unlikely to have shared a common descent of any antiquity. As political realities changed, stories were adapted to fit them. Because medieval observers assumed that inhabitants of kingdoms coalesced as unified peoples, aggregated by custom, law, descent, and (if expedient) language, old stories about kingdoms were recited even as those kingdoms or other units were altered. Furthermore, medieval ideas and assumptions about peoples tended to amalgamate cultural features – customs, language and religion – with genetic and biological ones; before the advent of modern genetics, there was an assumed correlation between the two. To some degree, this assumption was rooted in the reality that social structures and habits could proliferate cultural features, for example when people tended to marry within, rather than between communities. If cultural groups may be seen in rough correspondence to breeding populations, the inhabitants of nation-states, or those who wish to form a nation-state, did not comprise distinct ‘races’ insofar as the term is understood to pertain to groups with common and distinctive physical characteristics. Medieval observers seem to have perceived inherited physical differences much less than they are in modern societies and, as such, could not draw distinction between races and nations, racism and nationalism¹⁷.

ANTHONY D. SMITH

Although Susan Reynolds has engaged in polemic discourse with Anthony D. Smith, the latter has in fact revised his definition of a ‘nation’. Smith’s extensive publications on ‘nationalism’ are not easy to decipher. Nevertheless, he revised his original, modernist definition of ‘nation’ by removing a single territorial economy and common rights and duties for all members as determining criteria. Presenting a more neutral definition, Smith advanced that the foundational or ideal expression of ‘nationhood’ as a collective cultural identity entailed a named human community, residing in a perceived homeland, with common myths, a shared history, a distinct public culture, and common laws and customs for all members¹⁸. Smith finally concluded that his original, modernistic definition characterized the narrower, Western form of modern nationhood. The modernist conception, he argued, has an ethnocentric tilt, for it is not only delimited by a modern chronology, but was also constructed from identifiably Western European and American characteristics. Although this Western ‘civic’ model of the nation is something of a minority in a global context, modernists have nevertheless adopted it as the norm, applying it as the yardstick by which to measure and understand all ‘modern’ nations.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 59–60.

¹⁸ ANTHONY D. SMITH, *Nationalism (Polity Key Concepts in the Social Sciences Series)* Cambridge 2010, p. 13; cf. ID., *When is a Nation?*, in: *Geopolitics* 7, 2002, pp. 5–32, p. 15.

Yet, as Smith argues, this approach is, at the very least, myopic or, at worst, misleading¹⁹. If the criterion of ‘mass participation’ is felt to be determinative for the concept of the ‘nation’, or if the analyst is only concerned with ‘mass nations’, then any enquiry into the historical dating of nationhood is foreclosed. This is, Smith explains, a conclusion with which only the most hardened of modernists would be entirely satisfied. Fixation on one criterion, however important, tends to divert attention from other, perhaps equally significant criteria such as territory and public culture.

In questioning the existence of nations, Smith also rejected the idea that we might identify a ‘magic moment’ at which nations reached fruition. The concept of the nation involves a series of intermingling processes. As such, it becomes a matter of judgement, both by the participants involved in these processes and the analysts observing them, as to whether these processes reach a stage of fruition, when both the participants and analysts may tentatively speak of nationhood as being perceived in the hearts and minds of people, on the one hand, and as an institutional expression of that perception, on the other. Smith emphasized the latter, i. e. the institutional expression of subjective attachments, aspirations and imaginations felt by groups of individuals. These provide concrete and durable embodiments for ethno-symbols such as recorded myths, memories, traditions, icons, values and various styles of art, music, literature, law, ritual and activity. In attempting to trace the pedigrees of particular nations or different types of nation, Smith maintained that we must also turn to these institutionalized expressions, and not merely rely on the more subjective ethno-symbolic approach²⁰.

Smith’s model for identifying the origins of nationhood thus entail both subjective and objective elements in what can be regarded as a continuous process. Nations can develop and disappear in both geographical and temporal space, in both diachronic and synchronic order. Yet, within this ongoing process, there is a preliminary foundation for nation-building which Smith referred to as an ‘ethnie’ and defined as a named human community rooted in a homeland, possessing common myths of ancestry, shared memories, one or more elements of shared culture and a measure of solidarity, at least among elites²¹. Although Smith appreciated the diffusivity between his concepts of ‘ethnie’ and ‘nation’, he also emphasized the impossibility of delineating sharp divisions between them. This is due in part to the fluidity of all historical processes, but more to the fact that the concept of nationhood, in addition to creating categories, also acts as an ideal that, at least for nationalists, is never fully and finally attained. Whereas both ‘nations’ and ‘ethnies’ are, unlike states, expressions of cultural community, ‘ethnies’ are broader, looser and more akin to perceived bonds of kinship, while ‘nations’ incorporate territorial, legal and public features lacking in ethnies²².

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 8.

²⁰ Ibid. pp. 29–30.

²¹ SMITH, Nationalism (as note 18) p. 13. Cf. ID., When is a Nation? (as note 18) pp. 15, 25; HASTINGS, The Construction of Nationhood (as note 6) pp. 11–12.

²² SMITH, When is a Nation? (as note 18) p. 16.

It is important to reiterate that Smith's model of 'nation building' is not teleological. Nothing has to occur or stop in an established nation. Reynolds, on the other hand, has contested Smith's argument that ethnic solidarities preceded true political nationalism, arguing that medieval evidence in fact suggests that ethnicity, the belief in common descent and customs etc., was quite often the result of, rather than the impetus for, political unity²³. The medieval Scottish kingdom, with its multitude of ethnic groups and languages, can be regarded as confirmation of Reynolds' interpretation²⁴.

Nevertheless, both authors are receptive to the existence of nations in pre-modern times. It is, as Smith admits, difficult to satisfactorily determine the existence of national consciousness in the hearts and minds of people in the pre-modern societies, and any answer regarding mentalities in these settings remain extremely tentative, at least as it concerns societies prior to the eighteenth century. At best, we may infer the possibility of national consciousness from records drawn from a small portion of the elite. At the same time, the mere silence of the wider populace in pre-modern societies with regard to these, as well as many other issues should not lead us to the conclusion that people, at least the elites, never entertained conceptions of nationhood prior to the modern period²⁵. Reynolds articulated this premise when she, in her characteristically direct tenor, advanced that "we do not need to deduce the absence of transpersonal or collective relations from the absence of evidence about them."²⁶

ADRIAN HASTINGS AND AVIEL ROSHWALD

Both Adrian Hastings and Aviel Roshwald have argued that literacy – not the art of printing – is the decisive premise for and basis upon which national communities are constituted²⁷. According to Roshwald, the availability of impersonal mechanisms for the broad dissemination – both across the living community and between its generations – of standardized myths, traditions, memories, values, and laws is a prerequisite for the formation and survival of any national community. The primary channels of communication need not be directly accessible to every member of the community; rather, it is enough to have a geographically dispersed elite that is directly tethered to the information flow. Personal contact and oral communication between communal leaders and common people may, at the very least, suffice for transmission at the local level. It is the networking of cultural, social, and political elites that is the *conditio sine qua non* – the necessary condition – of any nationalist enterprise²⁸. On the

²³ REYNOLDS, *The Idea of the Nation* (as note 12) p. 60.

²⁴ Cf. BRUCE WEBSTER, *Medieval Scotland. The Making of an Identity* (British History in Perspective Series) Basingstoke – London 1997.

²⁵ SMITH, *When is a Nation?* (as note 18) p. 29.

²⁶ REYNOLDS, *Kingdoms and Communities* (as note 5) p. xlvi.

²⁷ ROSHWALD, *The Endurance of Nationalism* (as note 6); HASTINGS, *The Construction of Nationhood* (as note 6).

²⁸ Cf. REYNOLD, *The Idea of the Nation* (as note 12) p. 57.

other hand, the more widely accessible the impersonal medium of communication is, according to Roshwald, the more likely nationalist consciousness is to become the preeminent and most pervasive source of social and political cohesion. Even if the literate remained a small minority of the overall population, he continues, the growth of literacy among social elites is likely to have had a ripple effect, by way of oral transmission of written information, on broader segments of society²⁹. As Hastings pointed out, the social impact of written literature may even be greater in predominantly illiterate societies³⁰.

Whereas Harald Gustafsson argued that medieval regnalism, in contrast to nationalism, was deeply anchored in a Christian worldview, both Hastings and Roshwald regard the Bible as central in the process of shaping European conceptions of nationhood in the Middle Ages. In the Bible, kinship, language, and territory are explicitly and formulaically identified as interconnected elements comprising the fundamental and universal rubric of collective identity – of peoplehood and nationhood – throughout the world. The biblical formulation entails mutually defining and supporting elements, including a myth of common origin, an elaborately defined sense of territoriality, a conception of political legitimacy rooted in the principle of equality of all members within the community (the monarch included) before the law, and the overarching framework of Covenantal law. These elements form an institutional and ideological nexus that, according to Roshwald, bears all the marks of a politicized, national-territorial identity or, in other words, all the marks of nationalism³¹.

NORWAY – A LATE MEDIEVAL NATION?

Let us now move from the theoretical to the empirical level by directing our attention to several incidents in fifteenth-century Norway. It is my contention that these cases provide evidence for the existence of a late medieval Norwegian national identity and community in accordance with the theories advanced by Reynolds, Smith, Hastings and Roshwald. A distinct feature of the late Middle Ages, not only in Norway, but across much of Europe, is the recurrence of so called ‘peasant revolts’. Norway and the rest of Scandinavia witnessed riots, uprisings and what we may regard as rebellions against governing authorities and their representatives, both local and regional, throughout the fifteenth and much of the sixteenth centuries. In Norway, unrest began with civil disturbances and localized riots in the 1420s. These initial disturbances were only the tip of an iceberg, engendered by swelling tensions between the local population and their governing superiors. United within the so-called Union of Kalmar since 1397, the three Scandinavian kingdoms, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, fell subject to the rule of a union monarchy whose policies were increasingly dictated by Danish interests and

²⁹ ROSHWALD, *The Endurance of Nationalism* (as note 6) pp. 13–14.

³⁰ HASTINGS, *The Construction of Nationhood* (as note 6) p. 23.

³¹ *Ibid.* pp. 14–21.

executed by Danish and German aristocrats appointed to administrative posts in both Norway and Sweden.

In 1436, an uprising, which may be reasonably termed a rebellion, broke out in the central part of Southeast Norway under the leadership of Amund Sigurdsson (Bolt), a Norwegian aristocrat. A strikingly similar uprising had erupted in Sweden under the command of Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson two years prior, and there is reason to regard this earlier unrest as an inspiration for activism in the neighbouring kingdom³². Although the Norwegian rebels advanced and enjoyed initial military success, a gradual weakening of their position eventually forced their surrender and the signing of a provisional truce later that same year³³. Notwithstanding their surrender, the rebels obtained a favourable peace treaty with the Norwegian Council of the Realm several months later in 1437³⁴. Complaints concerning the appointment of foreigners in the administration were central both in the 1437 treaty and in the preceding truce of 1436. The truce had declared that ‘Danish men’ should vacate the country within a fixed timeframe, although the deadline for departure was postponed for two named individuals³⁵. In the concluding treaty, the Council of the Realm pledged to appeal to the king, Eric III, never again to appoint foreigners in administrative posts in Norway, be they of a clerical or secular capacity. The text elaborates that the population of Norway had agreed at every ‘thing’ (communal assembly) that foreigners should leave the country due to “the great injustice and burdens” (*then stora orett och thunga*) they had imposed upon monasteries and churches as well as on learned and lay people of Norway³⁶. Exceptions were granted to those foreigners married into a Norwegian family, who could remain for life, yet without any “power” (*waldb*) and under a pledge of loyalty to the king, the realm and the men of the realm³⁷. The uprising of 1436/1437 cast open the floodgates to multiple waves of rebellion and riot across the country throughout the remainder of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

This was manifest with the outbreak of a new insurrection just two years later. Although we know much less about this revolt than the previous one, the motives for action appear to have been rooted in social and economic tensions amongst the common people. Unlike their predecessors two years earlier, the rebels in this case were offered no compromises by governing authorities. Following the insurrection’s crushing defeat in the winter of 1438, the commander of the royal castle in Oslo, Olav Bukk, a native Norwegian aristocrat with a German father, issued a declaration to the people of Skienssysla, the district in which the rebellion had begun³⁸. In his declaration, Olav deems the rebellion to have been a violation of the truce and peace treaty agreed upon

³² LARS HAMRE, *Norsk historie frå omlag år 1400*, Oslo 1968, p. 107.

³³ *Norges gamle Love. Anden Række*, vol. 1, ed. GUSTAV STORM, Christiania 1912, no. 86, pp. 149–151.

³⁴ *Ibid.* no. 90, pp. 173–178.

³⁵ *Ibid.* no. 86, p. 151.

³⁶ *Ibid.* no. 90, p. 176.

³⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 176–177.

³⁸ *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, vol. 3, ed. CHRISTIAN CHISTOPH ANDREAS LANGE – CARL RICHARD UNGER, Christiania 1855, no. 754, pp. 543–546.

in the wake of rebellion two years earlier. This new uprising had inflicted harm and suffering upon all social groups in Norway, rich and poor, clerical and lay, native and foreign, women and men, and had caused great and irreparable damage to both the king and the kingdom. In the wake of rebellion, the king had ordered the Council of the Realm to re-establish peace and justice to all corners of the realm, and this would, Olav maintains, strengthen the realm, restoring to the king and the Norwegian people, “every one of us, rich and poor, learned and lay [...] peace and welfare, like that done and made by all of our ancestors in times immemorial in Norway.”³⁹ The great dissension and disagreement had endured too long and brought defeat and considerable disgrace to native-born men. Olav thus advised and bade the people of the rebellious district, whom he called “dear friends” (*kiære vinir*), to settle everything in good order, to honour the king, promote the realm and bring peace and salvation to them and all other inhabitants of Norway. Olav appealed here to a Norwegian sense of community: it was crucial for them and all other native-born men, so that both they and all good Norwegians could restore the virtuous reputation attributed to their ancestors in times immemorial. Olav closes his address with an appeal to Norway’s patron saint, Saint Olav, writing that “by this, I hand you over to God and to lord Saint Olav the king.”⁴⁰

Roughly ten years later, the Danish King Christian I, originally a German prince, and King Karl VIII of Sweden were locked in struggle for the Norwegian throne. Christian strove to re-unite the three Nordic kingdoms under his sceptre, while Karl envisioned the establishment of a more exclusive union between the kingdoms of Sweden and Norway. Although the struggle caused great division among the Norwegian people, the majority of the aristocracy and general population ultimately favoured and supported Karl’s campaign. Erik Sæmundsson, a knight and commander of Tunsberg Castle, a principal royal stronghold in Southeast Norway, emerged as one of Karl’s most prominent and ardent supporters. Erik issued an open letter to the people of Agder, the southernmost region of Norway, on 19 May 1449⁴¹, declaring that the Norwegian councillors of the Realm who supported Christian were traitors, for they strove to elevate a “Danish and German king” (*tydyskæ oc danske konnunge*) to the Norwegian throne⁴². As this would, he warned, condemn the “poor Norwegians” (*fatike Nordmen*) to eternal slavery, Erik beseeched his countrymen to contemplate their own welfare and that of their children and descendants⁴³. As “good, trustworthy Norwegians” (*gothe, trøste Nordhmen*), they were obliged to support him in his struggle for Norway’s rights and freedom⁴⁴. In another open letter issued several months later, Erik invoked Norway’s

³⁹ Ibid. p. 544: *oss ollom rikom oc fatikom, lærdhom oc laiktom til aro fridh oc vælfærdh, som allæ ydbræ forfædher hafua haft oc gjort af alder j Norighe.*

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 46: *oc hær medh befaler ek yder gudh oc herre sancto Olafuo konnunge.* See ERIK OPSAHL, *Fantes det et norsk fellesskap på 1400-tallet?*, in: Arr. Idéhistorisk tidsskrift 1, 2014, pp. 15–25.

⁴¹ *Norges gamle Love. Anden Række*, vol. 2, ed. OSCAR ALBERT JOHNSEN – OLUF KOLSRUD – ABSALON TARANGER, Oslo 1934, no. 3, appendix 1, pp. 12–13.

⁴² Ibid. p. 12.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

patron in much the same way as Olav Bukk had done years earlier, addressing the recipients, the people of several districts in Southeast Norway, not only with God's greetings, but also those of "Saint Olav the king" (*sancta Olaf konungh*)⁴⁵.

Given the limited scope of this paper, we cannot delve into the complex background and context of the letters in focus. Rather, we shall concentrate on the question asked earlier in this study, namely whether these letters reveal the existence of a national community and identity in fifteenth-century Norway in accordance with concepts and criteria for nationhood laid out by Reynolds, Smith, Hastings and Roshwald. There is, in my view, strong evidence affirming that, indeed, they are reflective of national sentiment. The letters reveal a Norwegian community of descent and culture that is also territorially defined and maintained as a political entity *vis-à-vis* a common set of political rights. Despite the unification of their monarchy with neighbouring kingdoms, Norwegians regarded their realm as an independent polity with its own rights and interests, particularly with respect to foreign realms and their inhabitants, including their neighbours in Denmark and Sweden. Fifteenth-century Norwegians had an unmistakable appreciation of common myths and a shared history, a distinct public culture and common laws and customs for all members. The cohesion of, and communication within the community were upheld through literacy and networks of persons throughout the country⁴⁶.

CONCLUSION

Norway in the fifteenth century has been described as a realm and community in ruins, tattered by the epidemics and economic crises of the fourteenth century and subsumed into political unions with stronger neighbouring countries⁴⁷. The national nadir was reached in 1537, when Norway fully submitted to Danish authority, and an autonomous Norwegian national state would not be established before 1814. This discontinuity in political independence is quite typical for small and mid-sized European polities. Denmark and, to a certain degree, Sweden were exceptions to this trend, for despite their relatively small size, they enjoyed long and stable political fortunes as the centres of sovereign conglomerate states. Does this suggest that these kingdoms were 'national monarchies' with greater national solidarity in the late Middle Ages as were countries, such as Norway, that did not endure as independent states or, like many others, failed to regain autonomy in modern times? Not necessarily. As Reynolds has noted, neither medieval France nor medieval England possessed a more objectively national character or developed as more natural forerunners to the French and English nation-states of

⁴⁵ Ibid. no. 9, p. 32.

⁴⁶ See ERIK OPSAHL, Conflict and Alliance. The Question of a National Kingdom – Political Attitudes of Norwegian Gentry and Farmers in the Late Middle Ages, in: *Scandinavian Journal of History* 33, 2008, pp. 161–182.

⁴⁷ SVERRE STEEN, *Ferd og fest*, Oslo 1942, pp. 207–209; STEINAR IMSEN – JØRN SANDNES, *Norges historie*, vol. 4: *Avfolkning og union*, Oslo 1977, p. 391.

the modern era as did other kingdoms that failed to ‘survive’ the political changes of the later Middle Ages⁴⁸.

This cannot, of course, be appreciated analytically as there are essentially no uncompromised continuities between the medieval kingdoms of France and England and the modern French and British ‘national-states’⁴⁹. Reynolds’ concern, which I endorse, is to draw attention to distinct medieval conditions and thus avoid teleology. Social and political conditions have changed considerably since the Middle Ages. Nations and national identities in the late Middle Ages were not identical to their modern counterparts. However, as Reynolds concludes, any concept of a nation as a new political community or a new unit of ethnic solidarity at a given point in time demands appreciation for the evidence of ideas that preceded it. Unlike that witnessed in the Norwegian case examined above, the monumental changes of the nineteenth century, often referred to as ‘the rise of nationalism’, did not entail a conception of the nation as a natural community – a self – with its own common culture, myths, history and destiny, which by its very existence has the right to self-determination. Yet, closer examination of earlier ideas about politics and earlier practices of governance can encourage greater distinction between what was truly novel about modern nationalism and what was derived from other strands of thought⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ REYNOLDS, *The Idea of the Nation* (as note 12) p. 59.

⁴⁹ As Charles Tilly has pointed out, the term ‘national state’ does not necessarily mean ‘nation-state’, a state whose people share a strong linguistic, religious and symbolic identity; very few European national states have ever qualified as nation-states. CHARLES TILLY, *Coercion, Capital and European States AD 990–1990* (Studies in Social Discontinuity) Oxford 1990, pp. 2–3. See also SAMUEL CLARK, *State and Status. The Rise of the State and Aristocratic Power in Western Europe*, Cardiff 1995, pp. 10–11; CONNOR, *Ethnonationalism* (as note 14).

⁵⁰ REYNOLDS, *The Idea of the Nation* (as note 12) p. 64.