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"United Under the Banner of Medievalism? Medievalism and the Construction of Swiss and British National Identity" (working title)

Abstract

Images of the past have long been fertile soil for the identity politics of subsequent periods. They provide continuity or alterity as needed by a given society, or enable emotional identification. The Middle Ages in particular have proved receptive to this kind of reimagining. Increasingly, medievalists have come to recognise the potency and relevance of such medievalism. Medievalism tends to bespeak the purposes and ideologies underlying a particular evocation of the Middle Ages. Accordingly, the focus of medievalism studies has lately shifted from exposing 'misrepresentations' of the past to considering what medievalism reveals about its present. One pivotal presentist function the Middle Ages have long fulfilled is the construction and consolidation of national identities. The widespread use of medievalism in nineteenth-century nation-building in particular has been extensively researched.

Recent artistic and political examples suggest that medievalism still offers plenty of opportunities for national self-definition, although it no longer determines national identity to the degree it used to. In my project, I intend to research the forms and functions of medievalism in constructing contemporary Swiss and British identities. Nationalist discourses in both countries for instance exhibit some striking parallels in that they use medievalism to invoke exceptionalism in a European context, offering resistance to perceived heteronomy. Also, both Switzerland and the UK are political constructs consisting of a plurality of cultures, whose respective share in the identities proposed in medievalist founding myths varies. Who, then, employs medievalism to construct Swissness and Britishness, and for (or against) whom? What form does such medievalism take, and what are its precise functions? What earlier medievalism is drawn on, and how – and why – is it refunctioned? And what, finally, are we, as medievalists, to make of such (ab)uses of the past?