

The Northern Lands: Germanic Europe, c.1270-c.1500

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It is a bold historian who, in the 21st century, still advertises, even as subtitle, a history of 'Germanic Europe' in the late Middle Ages. Evidently alarm bells were sounding in the author's own ears, as he uses his first page (p. viii) to insist that 'this book does not revive discredited racist notions based upon a supposedly pristine Germanic antiquity'. And nor does it. Nevertheless, David Nicholas is a man with a mission, and ('Germanic') identity and culture are central to it. These also, as I will suggest, constitute problematic elements within what is without doubt a big, challenging and important book. Nicholas seeks to promote 'the thesis of [a shared] regional identity in the [late medieval] north' (p. x). This 'regional identity', it seems (though he is not always as explicit about this as he should be), helps in turn to account for the relative economic success which Nicholas discerns in the north (relative, that is, to 'the South', namely Mediterranean – or occasionally, 'Roman' – Europe, particularly Italy, though reaching up even into northern France) in the late medieval and early modern periods. Identity was an element in that 'sophisticated regional integration' (p. 351) which the north displayed, underpinned by 'broad structural similarities', which he seeks to trace across the region.

Across *which* region, though? A difficulty with the book is the distinctly variable extent of the titular *Northern Lands* – an ambivalence which seems at times to reflect the presence of two different, never wholly reconciled, projects jockeying for space within the same covers. One of these seeks to explain the consolidation of a single 'economic region', united by 'trading ties' around the late-medieval Baltic and North Sea (p. x), to identify its distinctive strengths, and foreshadow its later importance within an emergent Atlantic economy. Here, then, is a limited, material world, 'not a community of states, but ... a community of goods and services' (p. 350). 'The northern lands thus constituted an informal commercial union in the late Middle Ages.' Large and significant though it was, this consolidating zone of seaways, cargos,

warehouses, and trading towns appears as something substantially less, as well as something more, than the author's 'Germanic Europe'. Let us call it, for ease of reference, 'Northern Lands 1' (henceforth NL 1).

There is a second agenda in play, however, dedicated to rescuing late medieval northerners more generally from contemporary calumnies dismissing them as mere 'gluttonous, malodorous inebriates who spoke incomprehensible languages' (p. ix). Italianate denigration of this kind, Nicholas contends, has found its modern perpetuation in a tendency among students of the period to exaggerate the importance of southern Europe, particularly Italy, both absolutely and as a motor of positive change in the north. Nicholas seeks to counter this by diminishing the significance of north-south contacts and challenging the reality, or at least the relevance, of the south's supposed head-start. His assault upon precocious southern modernity, moreover, aspires to go well beyond economics: the very 'notion of Renaissance' is tantalisingly put up for grabs at the start (p. ix). The twin paradigms of a go-ahead Italy and a moribund, backward-looking ('feudal') north, widely familiar (if also, with the passing years, much revised) from the classic visions of Burckhardt and Huizinga, appear about to be stood on their heads.⁽¹⁾ And 'states', it quickly becomes clear, are very much a part of the story after all.

What of those 'broad structural similarities'? For Nicholas, they lie above all in the sphere of ('Germanic') law, and to a lesser extent language. Law facilitated the development of comparable family structures and forms of social behaviour across the region, while linguistic affinities aided communication, and thus integration. Nicholas's late medieval North wears a face which is more optimistic, and more forward-looking, than the grim gothic demeanour of traditional caricature. Women, he contends, were more visible, more independent, and generally more empowered, than in the south. Elites, at least within the towns, tended to be less entrenched, less landed, and more open, and urban social conflicts less bloody. Even the plague, it seems, wrought less lasting destruction across the 'northern lands' than beyond the Alps. Politics and diplomacy, government, law and language, family structures and inheritance practices, gender relations, and the comparative study of elites, no less than urbanisation and trade, are all therefore drawn within Nicholas's sweeping, detail-rich comparative purview. The book represents a bravura performance, remarkable in its erudition in an array of languages, drawing upon the fruits of a lifetime's accumulated learning, which Nicholas deploys with the aim of calling established accounts of the period fundamentally into question.

Such an ambitious revisionist viewpoint demands a different, geographically and thematically more extended, zone than that traversed by the merchant-adventurer. For Nicholas, this greater north – let us say for convenience 'Northern Lands 2' (NL 2) – embraces in their entirety the kingdom of England, the three Scandinavian realms, the Low Countries, the German-speaking territories of the Holy Roman Empire and, more tentatively, the Baltic domains of the Teutonic Order. Questions nevertheless arise regarding its extent and limits. If Mecklenburg, Pomerania, Sweden and the *Ordensstaat* are all ruled in, why not Poland, whose towns and countryside likewise bore the impress of German legal and cultural forms (with Kraków a member of the Hansa)? If the kingdom of England, why not (geographically more northerly, culturally less southward-facing) Scotland? If the 'colonial' expansion of continental German-speakers in the north and east was integral to the making of Nicholas's extended north, what about the westward and northward advance of English modes and manners into Celtic Britain, here passed over in almost total silence? Of course, one can only ever do so much, and Nicholas, let it be said, has done a tremendous amount. The outcome, nevertheless, is a 'Germanic Europe' of distinctly variable geometry. Discussions of 'state' structures and of urban life lead us south to Augsburg, Munich, Basel, the duchy of Württemberg and, with the Habsburg domains, the marchlands of Hungary itself. He urges (problematically, given the smallness of its German-speaking population and a burgeoning national consciousness among the Czech majority) 'considering [late medieval] Bohemia as German' (p. 80). It is as a fellow-'northerner' that the Bohemian aristocrat Leo of Rozmítal is introduced, commenting on the social mores of the Low Countries (p. 242). And yet – back again now in NL 1 – the reader is cautioned, following a detailed survey of Bruges as a trading centre, that 'the Frankfurt fairs are beyond the scope of this study' (p. 325).

Nicholas's extended north raises a further problem in that, while he remains concerned to identify overarching affinities, the wider his bounds are cast the more conscious the reader becomes of diversities and divergences within them. As soon as we turn away from commercial highways to contemplate territorial

units, these far-flung regions appear as a distinctly mixed bunch. Late medieval population densities, for example, may have ranged from around 45 people per square kilometre in Brabant to as low as two in some of the eastern borderlands of German settlement.⁽²⁾ Urbanisation, about which Nicholas has much to say, likewise varied greatly across the regions, from the large, closely-packed cities of Flanders, to England with its single dominant metropolis, to the immensely diverse regional landscapes of Germany, or to Scandinavia, where towns remained few and small (pp. 274–5). There were regions boasting an ancient urban culture, like that of the Rhine, and others, such as Holland or the southern Baltic, where the towns were new foundations. The diversity of political forms on display is even more startling, encompassing quasi-independent cities, territorial principalities, composite and federal polities, dynastic empires, a crusader-state, and several monarchies of varying antiquity, character and durability. Within and between these categories, as Nicholas makes plain, are to be observed very diverse levels of governmental aspiration and sophistication.

The conclusion which Nicholas draws from his survey of state forms (chapters 1–5) does not appear easily reconcilable with his account of the sources of cultural advance within his more concentrated, seaborne world (NL 1). There, ‘the common civilising characteristics ... came through the commercial linkage of the North and Baltic Seas that was initiated by city-based merchants’ (p. 307). Small – and urban – it seems, was beautiful. When it comes to state-building, however, it is the centralised and bureaucratic kingdom of England which secures first prize, boasting as it did ‘the most sophisticated institutions in the northern lands’ (p. 352). This is a book much impressed by the growth of institutions, particularly those serving the ends of rulers, and one which is recurrently scathing about those regions where such growth did not occur – most notably, the German lands of the Empire. Evidently on account of the absence there of any such overarching framework, we learn that ‘although the German towns had more economic power than the English, they never transformed it into as much political power as the English towns did through Parliament’ (pp. 135–6). These relatively politically-impotent German towns presumably (though this is not made clear) did not include those centres, such as Nuremberg, Ulm, Frankfurt, and Cologne, which developed in the late Middle Ages as effectively independent polities, governing themselves, pursuing their own foreign policies, and in some cases dominating extensive rural hinterlands of a kind otherwise more familiar from Italy. Surprisingly, the highly advanced government of the Teutonic Order, with its elaborate bureaucracy, vast archive, and precocious communications systems, is not examined. Had it been, Nicholas’s contention, that the north’s long-term winners were those polities possessing the most extensive state structures, might look a little less secure.

But does not a survey of the most economically and culturally sophisticated and productive urban landscapes – those places where Nicholas’s ‘common civilising characteristics’ bore their richest fruit – in any case urge a somewhat different conclusion? For these seem to have lain overwhelmingly in regions – Flanders, Brabant, the more urbanised parts of Germany – where power was typically contested, fragmented, and localised. Much-governed England, by contrast, developed no urban culture to compare with the pre-eminent continental centres. The late medieval north’s creative powerhouses – Bruges, Ghent, or Nuremberg, let us say – seem naturally to invite comparison with the great conurbations of (similarly divided and conflict-ridden) northern Italy, rather than with lesser urban landscapes elsewhere in the ‘Germanic’ world. And they perhaps also leave the reader wondering, with Harry Lime, whether peace and good governance within the bosom of the growing state were more often the friends or the foes of certain forms of late medieval creativity (and, indeed, ‘civilisation’).

A principal element of (‘Germanic’) unity within Nicholas’s greater north (NL 2) is law, which he argues underpinned social forms different from those of Mediterranean Europe (p. 143). Underlying affinities were nevertheless combined with very significant regional peculiarities, such the role of statute law in England. Readers will judge for themselves whether deep unities or divergent regional courses of development ultimately mattered more. Choosing to stress the former raises a further difficulty, however, since, as Nicholas acknowledges, ‘Germanic’ modes of law had also been present since the early Middle Ages in regions of Europe where Romance speech came to hold sway, as in much of France. Here as elsewhere, the whole notion of a ‘Germanic’ north appears troublesome, with its inbuilt bias towards sharpening boundaries and rendering differences more absolute than they actually were, while obscuring common elements and ties

with neighbouring and more distant (non-‘Germanic’) regions.

The result, despite Nicholas’s judicious handling of many specific matters, is to conjure up an encompassing Germandom, at once aggressive, beleaguered, and set apart from – apparently equally monolithic – competitors and victims. Foremost among the latter are the eastern ‘Slavic’ peoples (even, by implication, in the lands under the Teutonic Order, where Balts and Finno-Ugrians outnumbered Slavs). The – overwhelmingly peaceful – migration of mainly German-speaking agriculturalists and townspeople into east-central Europe during the high Middle Ages is here bundled together (p. 63) with ‘the eventual reduction of the native Slavic [but by then also German!] peasantry to serfdom’ in the 15th and 16th centuries. Only in rare and untypical instances (the Teutonic Order being the most salient) did German-speakers enter the eastern marchlands of late-medieval Europe as the ‘conquerors’ they are labelled here (pp. 204–5). Much more often they came – as did even the Teutonic Knights themselves – at the invitation of indigenous elites; and most came armed with spades and scythes, not swords. On the southern and western frontiers, meanwhile there is a tendency to treat as plain reportage those constructions of the ‘barbarian’, rooted in antique literary *topoi*, which Italian and French writers for their part projected onto the Germans. Antipathies and antitheses are talked up, although a closer look sometimes suggests more complex mentalities. Enea Silvio’s portrayal of Germany was not *merely* ‘unflattering’ (p. 205): the former secretary to Frederick III, who enjoyed the acquaintance of many important Germans and introduced northerners to Tacitus’s *Germania*, rated himself with some justice as a Germanophile, at least among fellow-Italians.⁽³⁾ The claim (p. 198), that ‘English national consciousness was directed almost entirely against the French’ is debatable. The (here largely absentee) Irish, Welsh and Scots often drew more concentrated vitriol from English pens, while some Englishmen were inclined, even in the heat of war, to admire French chivalric manners and feats of arms.⁽⁴⁾ English commentators never wholly forgot whence the cultural values, as well as the elite language, of their own warrior nobility ultimately came.

Even at the very heart of Nicholas’s ‘northern lands’ the picture is scarcely straightforward. Courtrai (1302) may, as he contends, have ‘save[d] Germanic Flanders from French occupation’ (p. 25); but just how ‘Germanic’ was Flanders anyway? Its counts were French-speaking and their dynastic aspirations southward-facing. Although they were vassals of the Empire as well as the French kings, it was the French connection which counted politically. The Flemish elite shared in the Francophone culture of their rulers, a bond reinforced under the Valois count-dukes in the late 14th and 15th centuries. The institutions and practices of government in Flanders reflected French models to a significant degree. Economic ties with the northern French hinterland were strong. Paris was more quickly reached from Bruges than was Lübeck or Magdeburg. Flemish craftsmen had traditionally made their way to the French princely courts in search of work – until the French court, so to speak, came to them, in the Burgundian era.⁽⁵⁾ The Hundred Years War, here ruled out as ‘peripheral’ to Nicholas’s concerns (p. 7), was central to Flemish as it was to English history.⁽⁶⁾ Nicholas, of course, knows all of this better than most, and refers to much of it at various points in his book.⁽⁷⁾ Indeed, his very scrupulousness on detailed points only reinforces the reader’s sense of the book’s repeated insistence upon ‘Germanic’ primacy in the North as cutting across a reality which in most regions was far more complex.

The over-arching northern ‘identity’ which is the book’s declared goal proves elusive. Indeed, I did not notice a single clear instance of a late medieval northerner expressing a sense of common belonging encompassing even Nicholas’s more limited ‘Germanic’ sphere (NL 1), let alone his larger, territorial-political-legal version (NL 2). Late medieval English chroniclers tended to know more about northern France than Germany, while Germans often had more to say about northern Italy than Scandinavia or the eastern Baltic. While interactions across Nicholas’s northern regions were certainly intensive in some spheres, this was not always the case. Diplomatic relations between England and the Empire, for example, were limited, particularly in the latter part of the period (though a little more might have been said about the range of English contacts with Bohemia under Richard II).⁽⁸⁾ Politically, the Scandinavian kingdoms interacted mostly with one another and with the regional powers of northern Germany. At least within the North Sea-Baltic zone (NL 1), considerable importance is ascribed to language (with England, whose composite Romance-Germanic tongue few continental ‘northerners’ could master, identified as exceptional).

The Low German of the Hansa is highlighted as a common commercial tongue. Partly in consequence, beyond England ‘merchants and other travellers in the northern lands could at least understand and be understood as long as they did not venture far into the interior’ (p. 355). Could they? Perhaps it depends on the level of ‘understanding’ envisaged. At any rate, not all of Nicholas’s evidence points to ease of communication: in the late 14th century, for example, Bruges employed a scribe to translate letters received from the (hardly-remote) city of Cologne (p. 193). Despite the book’s professed concern with ‘identity’, common (‘Germanic’) language is mainly shown functioning not as a builder of self-conscious communities but – with variable effectiveness – as a pragmatic means of, mainly commercial, interaction.

And yet (expanding our gaze outward again to NL 2 proportions), language is highlighted as the main identity-shaping element within the vast central bloc of lands where various forms of German held sway (p. 196). This was because ‘in Germany ideas of nationality were less political and more cultural than elsewhere, given that it was more a federation of territories than a national monarchy’ (p. 203). Yet there is a paradox here, which was not lost on contemporaries. Writing towards the middle of the 14th century, the Bohemian-German abbot Peter von Zittau reflected how strange it was that the Saxon and the Bavarian were both properly called German, when neither understood the other’s speech.⁽⁹⁾ It is a paradox which can only be resolved by reference to politics. Why was a range of often mutually-incomprehensible dialects lumped together in the late Middle Ages as ‘German’, while the Scandinavian tongues – neighbours, as Nicholas emphasises, within a common ‘Germanic’ linguistic family – were not included? The answer, it seems to me, lies primarily in the late-medieval habit of equating the ‘German’ lands with the northern territories of the Holy Roman Empire. The claim that ‘in Germany ... the [imperial] monarchy was largely irrelevant’ (p. 202) cannot, therefore, be extended to the matter of identity-formation.⁽¹⁰⁾

This is a book which functions most happily as a series of ambitious, interconnecting (though not always consonant) thematic studies. As such, it has unique strengths, and readers in search of detailed information on a vast array of topics – many of them hitherto little touched upon by works in English – will come away amply rewarded. It is excellent and all too rare to encounter a medievalist writing serious comparative history; and the comparisons drawn here are often highly illuminating. The huge bibliography alone is a treasure trove. But who *are* those intended readers – and what is the true ‘identity’ of this book? Format and (efficient but basic) source-referencing indicate an advanced-level textbook, whereas the level of detail and intellectual challenge, along with the bold, iconoclastic, underlying arguments, suggest a work of larger and more general importance – with a concomitantly heavier burden of proof. This creates tensions, when readers are told striking and surprising things which they are required to take on trust – such as the statistic, that Hamburg brewers were by the 15th century producing around 37.5 million litres of beer annually (p. 332). How do we know? How solid is this figure (and others)? There is a tendency at times to insert free-standing blocs of material with too little contextualisation. Some might have valued an elucidation of the difference between ‘imperial’ and ‘free’ cities, which appear here unannounced (p. 92). I can imagine my own undergraduates picking this book up with high hopes – and some putting it down well satisfied, but others somewhat frustrated and confused.

In a work of such scope and richness, factual errors and questionable judgements on specific points are unavoidable. Most of those which arise here are of a fairly minor nature. For reasons of space, I list just a selection of the ones which I noticed. The ‘last male of the Přemyslid dynasty’ was Wenceslas III (d. 1306), not Wenceslas II (p. 77). The emperor Sigismund died at Znojmo in Moravia, not in Hungary (p. 90). Conrad IV (d. 1254) did not ‘achieve an imperial coronation’ (p. 77). The radical German pamphleteer from the end of the 15th century is commonly known as the ‘Revolutionary of the Upper [not ‘Lower’] Rhine’ (p. 197). Aachen does not lie ‘on the Rhine’ (p. 198), but around 60 kilometres to the west. It is not true to say that ‘the German kings still lacked a chancery under Rudolf I’ (p. 128): Rudolf did indeed have a settled, if modest, writing office, some of whose personnel can be identified.⁽¹¹⁾ It is premature to date to 1338 the end of papal involvement in German elections (p. 126): Clement VI played a central part in the elevation of Charles IV in 1346. To claim that ‘parts of eastern Germany were not in the [Holy Roman] Empire’ (p. 68), is misleading: by the mid 14th century, only the *Ordenstaat*’s Prussian territory – which few contemporaries would have numbered as ‘German’ anyway – lay outside. Whether the Luxemburg kings and emperors, with

their Francophone roots and Bohemian, Silesian and Hungarian patrimonies, were ‘south German’ (p. 198) is at least debatable. It is also surprising to be told that German humanism ‘was an intellectual movement that had no basis in contemporary political reality’ (p. 204). This sits oddly with the central part taken by that imperial arch-patriot and vigorous dynastic aggrandiser Maximilian I, whose cultural patronage was closely geared to his political schemes and ambitions.⁽¹²⁾ Some will find too sweeping the judgement that the diverse bundle of measures encompassed by imperial reform at the end of the 15th century ‘failed’ (p. 135).

Of the book’s key arguments, those which concentrate on the mercantile Baltic and North-Sea world, its urban interactions and their social underpinnings are the most convincing. Much more problematic is the attempt to delineate a discrete ‘Germanic’ cultural zone, set apart from – and, implicitly, in some ways in advance of – ‘the South’. (And that ‘South’ itself has a strangely spectral, shifting, now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t, quality throughout the book.) Nicholas never convincingly identifies a northern urban culture distinct from that of the nobility, which the towns in their literary and festive life tended to emulate. This aristocratic culture, as Nicholas himself acknowledges, was across much of the north Francophone. Given that, as he argues, northern towns weathered the Plague better than their southern counterparts, their continuing dependence upon noble and courtly models becomes all the more surprising. No attempt is made to locate a self-consciously urban civilisation comparable to that which, drawing on revived classical templates, has been discerned in Italy: the book’s opening flourish against anti-northern ‘Renaissance’ paradigms is taken no further.

This is a book which, even as it invokes culture and mentalities, is happiest in a world of hard and plentiful data, concrete deeds and intentions. There is nothing here on religious life in the northern towns and, while vernacular literature is touched upon, the visual arts are scarcely considered. And a book much concerned with commercial dealings, not to say ‘identities’, has surprisingly little to say about the north’s Jewish communities. There is nothing, in particular, about their recurrent destruction and exile – another arresting common motif across late medieval ‘Germanic Europe’, some might feel. There are no bleeding-host shrines or moving statues here, no worm-eaten cadavers, *danses macabres*, ghastly crucifixions, or gothic grotesques. The conspicuous banishment of the Bad Old North is certainly in some ways a welcome relief. But it also indicates, in a book which clearly aspires to refute Burckhardt’s Italophile heirs and transplant to chillier climes some of the advantages of their sunny south, a significant problem evaded. The Jewish quarters might blaze, and the flagellants chant their anthems; but Nicholas’s cool northern merchant, like the ‘expensive delicate ship’ of Auden’s *Musée des Beaux Arts*, has somewhere to get to and sails calmly on.

Notes

1. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London, 1990); Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. R. J. Payton and U. Mammitzsch (Chicago, 1996).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For these figures, see Peter Moraw, *Von offener Verfassung zu gestalteter Verdichtung: Das Reich im späten Mittelalter 1250–1490* (Berlin, 1985), pp. 49–50.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For his own account of his pro-German reputation, see Pius II, *Commentaries I*, ed. Margaret Meserve and Marcello Simonetta (Cambridge, MA, 2003), pp. 164–5.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For an example, see *The St Albans Chronicle: The Chronica maiora of Thomas Walsingham I: 1376–1394*, ed. John Taylor, Wendy R. Childs and Leslie Watkiss (Oxford, 2003), pp. 284–5.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See Jean C. Wilson, *Painting in Bruges at the Close of the Middle Ages* (University Park, PA, 1998).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. In justifying its exclusion, Nicholas goes on, ‘First, it was not fought continuously’. He never gets to ‘Second’.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Among his numerous previous works in the field see David Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders* (London, 1992).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See Alfred Thomas, *A Blessed Shore: England and Bohemia from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Ithaca, NY, 2007), chs 1–4.[Back to \(8\)](#)

9. *Die Königsaal-er Geschichts-Quellen mit den Zusätzen und der Fortsetzung des Domherrn Franz von Prag*, ed. J. Loserth, *Fontes rerum Austriacarum: Oesterreichische Geschichtsquellen, I Abtheilung 8* (Vienna, 1875), p. 52. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. For the Empire's role in defining a late medieval 'German' community, see Len Scales, 'Late medieval Germany: an under-States nation?', in *Power and the Nation in European History*, ed. Len Scales and Oliver Zimmer (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 166–91. [Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Harry Bresslau, *Handbuch der Urkundenlehre für Deutschland und Italien, I* (2nd ed., Leipzig, 1912), p. 570. [Back to \(11\)](#)
12. See most recently Larry Silver, *Marketing Maximilian: The Visual Ideology of a Holy Roman Emperor* (Princeton, NJ, 2008). [Back to \(12\)](#)

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