

2016 and All That: Medievalism and Exceptionalism in Brexit Britain

Matthias D. Berger

Since the turn of the century, national exceptionalism narratives underpinned by medieval history have staged a comeback in numerous European countries. Such discursive use of the Middle Ages — so-called ‘medievalism’ — often operates at the interface of politics and culture. In Britain, Eurosceptics increasingly make the Middle Ages speak to present-day concerns of national identity. National medievalism thus played a notable role in preparing the ground for the 2016 Brexit vote. The vote itself and the subsequent Brexit process have been accompanied by medievalist imagery in political propaganda, newspaper coverage, op-eds, online fora and social media, with Leavers in particular insisting on the obligating nature of constitutional ‘precedents’ in the deep past. Many of these medievalisms transport notions of an insular exceptionalism rooted in the earliest ‘English nation’ and stress — often to breaking point — the relevance

of medieval versions of self-determination and statehood for the present-day polity.

This paper explores a set of emotive Brexiteer medievalisms that appeal to a past which makes strong demands on the present. Some of these interventions amount to little more than historically flavoured jingoism, such as the litany of British military, legal and political finest hours recited at a 2017 public event by European Research Group leader Jacob Rees-Mogg. More subtle examples include hard-Brexit frontman Boris Johnson’s tapping into a medievalising trend in contemporary discourses of international relations and national sovereignty when he claimed that there was a danger of Britain going “from a member state to a vassal state” of the EU. Conservative Member of the European Parliament Daniel Hannan in turn offered, already in 2013, a master narrative of ‘Anglo-sphere’ exceptionalism in his book-length polemic *How We*

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Invented Freedom & Why It Matters. Reactivating discredited Whig history, he traces a 'unique continuity' of constitutionally guaranteed freedom back to the Anglo-Saxons. These examples throw into relief the symbolic attractiveness, but also the practical difficulty, of making a medievalist case for a transhistorical Britishness conceived in opposition to the European mainland. For in lionising overwhelmingly *English* history – to the point of eclipsing all but the most recent histories of the other members of the UK – such insular Euroscepticism displays a significant overlap with an English nationalism that potentially threatens British cohesion.

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