

Otterbein University

Digital Commons @ Otterbein

Modern Languages & Cultures Faculty
Scholarship

Modern Languages & Cultures

9-2013

The medieval forms and meanings of Francois: The political and cultural vicissitudes of an ethnonym

Levilson C. Reis

Otterbein University, lreis@otterbein.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/mlanguages_fac



Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), [Medieval Studies Commons](#), and the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Reis, Levilson C., "The medieval forms and meanings of Francois: The political and cultural vicissitudes of an ethnonym" (2013). *Modern Languages & Cultures Faculty Scholarship*. 15.

https://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/mlanguages_fac/15

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages & Cultures at Digital Commons @ Otterbein. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages & Cultures Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Otterbein. For more information, please contact digitalcommons07@otterbein.edu.

The Medieval Forms and Meanings of *Francois* [‘French’]:
The Political and Cultural Vicissitudes of an Ethnonym

Levilson C. Reis
Otterbein University

This note brings together insights concerning the medieval ethnonym (people-name) *Francois* [sic] from a range of sources with a view to examining the linguistic, cultural, and political development of an early ‘French’ identity. After a preliminary consideration of semantic range and etymology, I explore the ethno-linguistic uses of *Francois* both as an exonym (a name applied to a group or people by outsiders) and an autonym (a name a group or people apply to themselves).¹ To illuminate these two facets, I first marshal historiographical evidence indicating that fellow western Europeans, chronicling the First Crusade, and their Byzantine and Muslim adversaries used the erstwhile, ethnically distinct ethnonym *Franc* (in its respective Latin, Medieval Greek, and Arabic forms), as a catch-all term to designate western crusaders. Drawing on the real and fictional representations of medieval cross-cultural relations in crusade sources and Arthurian romance, I then consider the implications of what one might think of as a push-pull relation between exonymic and autonymic labelling and cross-cultural attraction and repulsion. While re-examining the effect of the First Crusade conflict on the Franks' sense of self-identity, on the one hand, and reconsidering a friendly Byzantine rivalry with the *Breton* in Chrétien de Troyes' *Cligés*, which singles out the *Francois*, I argue that the ‘British’ also contributed towards the formation of a politically and culturally distinct ‘French’ identity.

As noted in various dictionaries of Old French, the proper noun *Francois* designated a person born in France, especially the Ile-de-France, the domain of the *Regnum Francorum*.² In its earliest vernacular form *Franceis*, as it appeared in *La Chanson de Roland* (c. 1040), *Francois*

was originally a topo-ethnonym, derived from the toponym ‘France’ (< Middle Lat. *Francia*) and etymologically related to the primordial ethnic designation *Franc* (*FEW*, III, 751, s.v. *France*; *REW*, p. 260, s.v. *frank*).³ In the twelfth century, ‘France’ designated however the immediate royal domain of the Capetians as well as a rather expansive sphere of political and cultural influence stretching from the British Isles to Palestine. In this wider context, the ethnonym *Francois* brings into question exclusionary definitions of medieval ‘France’ and its people based on ethnic specificity and socio-political appurtenance.⁴

As a common noun, the term *Francois* also designated the vernacular ‘French’ language, characterizing more specifically a certain way of speaking. As an adjective it similarly expressed a particular way of conceptualizing or doing things – such as, ‘mangier françois’, ‘baptême françois’, ‘tor françois’ (‘certain mouvement du cavalier’), ‘jeu françois’ (‘coût’), ‘vin françois’ (‘vin de l’Ile-de-France, qui était faible’), ‘à la françoise guise’, ‘à une manière françoise’ (*AW*, III, 2208–10, s.v. *françois*; *FEW*, III, 750–52, s.v. *France*) – which remained in usage well past the eighteenth century. Indeed, eschewing reference to nationality, the Académie française, starting with the word’s first appearance in the third edition of its *Dictionnaire* (1740), privileged the ‘particular sense and energy’ the term *Francois* expressed, an emphasis still present in the sixth edition (1835): ‘On ne met pas ici ce mot comme un nom de nation, mais on le met comme un mot qui a une signification et une énergie particulière dans quelques façons de parler’.⁵ It was not until its seventh edition that the *Dictionnaire* (1879) adopted the modern form *Français*, and the ethnonym acquired its modern geographic, political, and cultural acceptations.

Having established the linguistic aspects of the ethnonym, I turn now to the political and cultural application of the term in medieval sources. The ethnonym *Francois* did not gain the terminologically characteristic self-affirming sense of the autonym until the Franks confronted

their ethnic and religious others during the crusades. Inasmuch as the Carolingian Franks would have probably never reached the pinnacle of their imperial power without the challenge posed by the rise of Islam in the Mediterranean, as Henri Pirenne suggests,⁶ the ‘French’, without the encounter with Byzantine and Islamic cultures, would probably not have gained the socio-cultural self-awareness that would lead them to develop an autonomous identity. As chroniclers of the First Crusade attest, the ethnonym *Franci* amalgamated the Franks with crusaders from different European ethnic groups.⁷ As their military engagement with Byzantium and Islam intensified, the Franks became more and more conscious of their own ‘Frankish’ self. The Medieval Greek exonym *Φράγκος* [fráŋgos]/*Φράγκοι* [fráŋgi], transliterated ‘*Francos*’/‘*Frangi*’ in crusade sources in Latin,⁸ served as cultural and political mirrors with the help of which the Franks reaffirmed an autonomous political and cultural identity.

The Franks appear to have indeed redefined themselves against the politically and culturally alien or, as some medievalists claim, against the exonymic identities the Byzantine or Muslim others imposed on them.⁹ In the same vein, I would suggest that the self-understanding the Franks acquired emerged from the complex relationships they developed with not only their Byzantine and Muslim others but also their British counterparts. Bearing in mind that romance often represents historical events through the lens of a fictional Arthurian world, a passage in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Cligés* stands as a good example of this complex triangular relationship in the last words the prince Alexander addresses to his son Cligés: “‘Biaus fiuz Cliges, ja ne savras | Conoitre combien tu avras | De proesce ne de vertu | Se a la cort le roi Artu | Ne te vas esprover einço[i]s | Et as Bretons et as François”’.¹⁰ In the context of a salutary cross-cultural competition for knightly prowess, the juxtaposition of the *Bretons* (a catch-all comprising Arthur’s subjects and the Knights of the Round Table¹¹) with the *Francois*, sets the stage for Chrétien’s investiture

of the victorious Cligés with the latter's politically and culturally distinct guise. Following the Oxford tournament, Cligés' demonstrated worthiness in combat is signalled through his choice of garb when he first appears at Arthur's court '[v]estuz a guise de François [*sic*]' (C, l. 4926). In this context, the concept of 'Frenchness' gains further political and cultural specificity: having defeated all the Knights of the Round Table, Cligés effectively assumes the role of title-holder of a *chevalerie* Chrétien associates in his prologue with 'France' (C, ll. 31–35).

The sartorial and linguistic cross-dressing that Cligés brings into play re-enacts generational and rhetorical antecedents which Chrétien amplifies in *Cligés* both in translation and *translatio*. In a possible example of *copia dicendi*, Chrétien expands on Geoffrey of Monmouth's evocation of the wealth and sophistication of Britain's knights – customarily attired in one colour ('unius colores uestibus atque armis utebatur'¹²) – by representing Cligés' father, Alexander, and his Greek knights in clothes not only of the same colour but same cut: 'D'un drap et d'une taille estoient, | D'un semblant et d'une color' (C, ll. 328–29). For medieval readers of Chrétien familiar with Geoffrey, the first generation of Greek visitors to Arthur's court may thus appear as a silent mirror of the British. Dissimulation to the external audience is also mirrored internally: however strikingly distinctive their appearance, Alexander and his followers all 'look alike' to Chrétien's Arthur and his court.

What this moment may also offer is a counterpoint to the reductive nature of Byzantine exonymic practices. If in Alexander's back-story the ethnonym *Francois* still lacked some ethnic specificity (for him, Arthur's court is comprised primarily of the *Bretons* plus the '*Frangi*'), in the contemporary narrative frame of Cligés' story, it emerges, championed by the son, as a distinct ethnonymic guise. Indeed, the progression from one generation to another may draw in Chrétien's previous romance. Unlike Erec, who turns up for Arthur's hunt of the White Stag

dressed in Byzantine fashion (‘S’ot cote d’un dÿapre noble | Qui fu faiz a Costantenople.’ (E, ll. 97–98)), and, again, unlike Alexander, who appeared before Arthur for the first time dressed in an intertextually disguised western style, Cligés presents himself at Arthur’s court all decked out in ‘French’ style, a guise that – in a manner that might well have appealed to later lexicographers – cannot but be identified as politically and culturally distinctive. The fictional follow-up of a ‘Greek’ Erec by a ‘French’ Cligés, while serving as a *mise en abîme* for the prologue’s message concerning the transfer of *chevalerie* (chivalrous knighthood) to the ‘French’, also conveys a ‘French’ stripe of cultural identity, not to mention the learning (*clergie*) that constitutes the other pillar of the topos of *translatio*.

Understanding the ethnonym *Francois* requires therefore work outside the beaten paths of etymology itself. The well-attested etymology of *Francois* (*frank* > *francus* > *francensis* > *franceis* > *francois* > *françois* > *français*) accounts for only half of the story of the evolution of the ethnonym. So do its semantic variations, be they cultural (‘westerner’, ‘crusader’), political (‘Frank’, ‘French’, ‘Frenchman’) or literary (‘denizen of Arthur’s court’, ‘Knight of the Round Table’). The full story emerges as the context of the Franks’ cross-cultural contact not only with their Byzantine and Muslim but also with their British counterparts come into play. All in all, in the Middle Ages the ethnonym *Francois* had a polyvalence which it has retained despite its modern national and geographical specificity, for to be French remains relative and continues to be a question of international and cross-cultural debate.

¹ The neologisms *ethnonym*, *exonym*, and *autonym* come from James A. Matisoff, ‘The Languages and Dialects of Tibeto-Burman: An Alphabetic/Genetic Listing, with Some Prefatory Remarks on Ethnonymic and Glossonymic Complications’, in *Contributions to Sino-Tibetan*

Studies, presented to Nicholas C. Bodman, ed. by John McCoy and Timothy Light (Leiden: Brill, 1986), pp. 4–6.

² *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch* [hereafter *AW*], ed. by Adolf Tobler and Erhard Lommatzsch, 11 vols (Berlin: Weidmann [vols 1–2]; Wiesbaden: Steiner [vols 3–11], 1925–2002), III (1934), 2211, s.v. *françois*; *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* [hereafter *FEW*], ed. by Walther von Wartburg and others, 25 vols (Bonn: Klopp; most recently, Basel: Zbinden, 1928–2002), IV, 751, s.v. *France*; *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française*, ed. by Frédéric Godefroy, 10 vols (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1969), IX, 655, s.v. *franceis*, and 656, s.v. *françois*; *Romanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* [hereafter *REW*], ed. by Wilhelm Meyer-Lübke (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1911), p. 260, s.v. *frank*.

³ After the addition of the Latin suffix *-ensis* to the *Franc*-stem (< **frank*) to designate ethno-geographical origin, *francensis* became *franceis* as the *e* in *francensis* diphthongized (*e* > *ei*) before nasal sounds and *ns* was reduced to *s* in the transition from Latin to *romanz* during the tenth century. By the eleventh century, *ei* became *oi* and, *franceis*, *francois* (Auguste Brachet, *An Etymological Dictionary of the French Language*, trans. by G. W. Kitchin (Oxford: Clarendon, 1882), pp. lvii–lix and 172, s.v. *français*).

⁴ For a discussion of ‘French’ identity based on the concept of exclusion see François L. Ganshof, ‘L’Étranger dans la monarchie franque’, in *Recueils de la Société Jean Bodin*, 10 (1958), 5–36 (p. 7); Wilfrid Besnardeau, *Représentations littéraires de l'étranger au XII^e siècle: des chansons de geste aux premières mises en roman* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007), pp. 7–15.

⁵ *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 3rd edn, 2 vols (Paris: Jean-Baptiste Coignard, 1740), I, 724, s.v. *françois*.

⁶ ‘Mahomet et Charlemagne’, in *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’Histoire*, 1 (1922), 77–86 (p. 86); id., *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Paris: Nouvelle société d’édition, 1937; repr. Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 1992). More recently see Armelle Leclercq, *Portraits croisés: l’image des Francs et des Musulmans dans les textes sur la Première Croisade: chroniques latines et arabes, chansons de geste françaises des XII^e et XIII^e siècles* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010).

⁷ See, for example, *Fulcheri Carnotensis Historia Hierosolymitana* (1095–1127), ed. by Heinrich Hagenmeyer (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1913); *Gesta Francorum et aliorum Hierosolimitanorum: The Deeds of the Franks and the Other Pilgrims to Jerusalem*, ed. by Rosalind Hill (London: Thomas Nelson, 1962); and Petrus Tudebodus, *Historia de Hierosolymitano itinere*, ed. by John H. Hill and Laurita L. Hill (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1977), where the ethnonym *Franci* most often means ‘western crusaders’ except in specific cases where it means ‘Northern Franks’ (cf. *Fulcheri Carnotensis Historia*, ed. by Hagenmeyer, p. 202 n. 11). For a discussion of the distinct meanings of *Franci* see Bernd Schneidmüller, *Nomen patriae. Die Entstehung Frankreichs in der politisch-geographischen Terminologie (10.–13. Jahrhundert)* (Sigmarigen: Thorbecke, 1987), pp. 106–08.

⁸ *Gesta Francorum*, ed. by R. Hill, p. 46 (‘Micró Francos echomé (hoc est: paucos Francos habemus)’ | (in Greek), “Μικρούς Φράγκους έχομευ” (which means “We have few Franks”)); and Tudebodus, *Historia*, ed. by J. Hill and L. Hill, p. 137 (“Frangi agip salip” [...] “Franci, est bona crux?”). For the semantic and etymological definition of the Greek exonym for the French see *Dictionary of the New Greek Language*, ed. by Georgios Bampiniotes (Athens: Lexicology Centre, 2008), p. 1901, s.v. Φράγκος).

⁹ Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 103; Marcus Bull, ‘Overlapping and

Competing Identities in the Frankish First Crusade', in *Le Concile de Clermont de 1095 et l'appel à la Croisade: Actes du Colloque universitaire international de Clermont-Ferrand (23–25 juin 1995)* (Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 1997), pp. 195–211 (p. 203); and Sharon Kinoshita, 'Crusades and Identity', in *The Cambridge History of French Literature*, ed. by William Burgwinkle, Nicholas Hammond, and Emma Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 93–101 (p. 95).

¹⁰ Chrétien de Troyes, *Romans suivis des 'Chansons', avec, en appendice, 'Philomena'*, ed. by Michel Zink and others, *Classiques Modernes* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1994), ll. 2561–66. Further quotations from *Erec et Enide* (ed. and trans. by Jean-Marie Fritz, hereafter *E*) and *Cligés* (ed. by Charles Méla and Olivier Collet, hereafter *C*) come from this edition.

¹¹ 'Les Bretons sont plus particulièrement les sujets du roi Arthur'; Gérard Taverdet, *Glossaire de Chrétien de Troyes* (Dijon: ABELL, 2004), p. 50, s.v. *Breitaingne*.

¹² *The History of the Kings of Britain: An Edition and Translation of 'De gestis Britonum' ['Historia regum Britanniae']*, ed. by Michael D. Reeve, trans. by Neil Knight, *Arthurian Studies*, 69 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007), p. 111.