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## Civilized Scots? Climate, Race and the Barbarian North in Early Modern Scottish Philosophy

A certain fear of the north seems to have been part of the psychic constitution of Western civilization since Ancient Times. Harsh winters and never-ending nights inspired the medieval imagination to dream up all kinds of ferocious creatures that threatened the civilized world from the unsociable north; imagery that continues to pervade even modern pop-culture<sup>1</sup>. With the north as its barbarian ‘other’, this civilized world, however, was itself subject to several geographical offsets through the ages: while it took its beginnings, according to our collective imagination, in the Mediterranean world, the long sequence of *translationes imperii* shifted its heartland and thus the core of civilization farther and farther – into the north<sup>2</sup>. Hence, when Latin scholars in the late fifteenth century began to reflect on the nature and identity of these core lands and a ‘European’ civilization, they had to face a challenging situation: as they returned, in the spirit of the Renaissance, to classical texts, they encountered a world view whose geographical perspective differed strongly from their own.

In the late fifteenth century, this different perspective became evident on a global level. With the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Christian ‘others’ in the eastern Mediterranean were replaced by an ultimate other, the Ottoman Empire<sup>3</sup>; and with the discovery of the New World the growing European consciousness had to face an almost incommensurably other<sup>4</sup>. The ancient geographical categories and their implicit cultural judgments were turned upside down and needed recalibration, for the very latitudes in which the European civilization was imagined to have exclusively flourished were now found to be populated with presumable brutes and blatant wildlings.

1. Cf. RIX 2015, LARRINGTON 2016, and LAMPINEN (forthcoming). I would like to thank Delphine Conzelmann for her useful comments and a linguistic revision of the text.

2. SCHULZE 2000, pp. 3-5.

3. BISAHA 2004, pp. 60-61.

4. Even if it took some time to draw interest, cf. SETH 2010, pp. 36-45.

But this same recalibration of ancient socio-geography was even more important with regard to the civilized core lands themselves. Given their gradual shift into the north, the northern latitudes had to be taken into account as possible havens of civilization, and in view of the unambiguous verdict about the barbarian north in traditional sources<sup>5</sup>, this was no easy task. It was Aristotle, in particular, who had defined the scenery for the Latin intellectuals, stating in *Politics* VII.6 that “[t]he nations inhabiting the cold places and those of Europe [i.e., the colder lands north of Greece] are full of spirit but somewhat deficient in intelligence and skill, so that they continue comparatively free, but lacking in political organization and capacity to rule their neighbours”<sup>6</sup>. It is true that the Latin West soon applied this climatic judgment not to Europe as such anymore (now including Aristotle’s Greece), but to its north where the courageous, yet less intelligent or skillful nations may have lived<sup>7</sup>. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, however, members of the northern European nations began to consider themselves somewhat prudential, politically organized, and hence civilized, and were no longer willing to stand for these ancient accusations. For the growing community of scholars, philosophers and academics in these northern climates, the problem of a conceptual integration of the north into the civilized world became thus of a particular interest. Yet, what rational strategies and explanations could these scholars produce, in order to intellectually domesticate the rumors about their peripherals, and to integrate themselves into a civilized, learned Europe?

In what follows, I would like to approach this problem of a socio-geographical recalibration with a focus on Early Modern Scottish thinkers. This seems especially promising, since Scottish scholars would decisively shape the course of the Enlightenment. Their answers, rather than being the result of an already existing notion, might thus have actively shaped and informed our modern understanding of a specific European civilization, learnedness, rationality and philosophy<sup>8</sup>. What is more, the Scots had a particularly difficult stand. Beyond the common narratives of the fearsome north, the Latin West was aware of a specific Scottish ‘quality’, a tradition instigated in Late Antiquity by Jerome who attested in *Against Jovinianus*:

“I myself, a youth on a visit to Gaul, heard that the Atticoti [i.e. the Scots], a British tribe, eat human flesh, and that although they find herds of swine, and droves of large or small cattle in the woods, it is their custom to cut off the buttocks of the

5. Besides the classical ones mentioned below there are several biblical references to the “evil from the north” (Ier. 4,6; see also Ier. 13, Ez. 38 or Joel 2); see also below at note 50, and WILLIAMSON 1996, pp. 47-48.

6. ARIST., *Politica*, VII, 6, 1327b23-27, trad. RACKHAM, pp. 564-567. For mentions of this climate theory before Aristotle see WARD 2002, p. 20; for a Late Antique example see below, note 37.

7. For this kind of displacements of the climatic scheme see below, at notes 32 and 64.

8. Cf. BROADIE 2000.

shepherds and the breasts of their women, and to regard them as the greatest delicacies. The Scots have no wives of their own; as though they read Plato's Republic and took Cato for their leader, no man among them has his own wife, but like beasts they indulge their lust to their hearts' content"<sup>9</sup>.

This image of licentious cannibals – reminiscent of later European imagery of the 'savages' in the New World<sup>10</sup> – shaped the perspective on the Scots even in benevolent contributions. Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the later Pope Pius II, wrote in the 1450s in his *De Europa* about Scotland, a land he knew from his own travels:

"SCOTLAND is the farthest tip of the island that contains England; it faces north and is separated from England by rivers of no great size and a mountain range. I was there in the winter, when the sun lit the earth for little more than three hours a day<sup>11</sup>. At that time the king was James, a stocky man weighed down by a fat paunch. He had once been captured in England and spent eleven years in custody. When he was finally released, he took an English wife and returned home, where he executed a good number of chieftains and was finally assassinated himself by members of his own household. After taking revenge on them, his son succeeded to the throne"<sup>12</sup>.

The Scottish were hardly regarded as politically cultivated, and even though no mention of lecherous cannibals is made anymore, the forthright homicides and the gluttonous girth of the king seem to perpetuate the ancient beliefs. What is more, in his *Commentarii rerum memorabilium* Piccolomini noted that the Scottish women were "fair, charming and lusty", for "[i]n Scotland, a woman's kiss means less than a handshake does in Italy"<sup>13</sup>. What else can be expected from a region where a day lasts merely three hours?

On the following pages, I will focus on four Scottish scholars flourishing in two decisive stages of the Early Modern period. First, I will discuss two philosophers from the first third of the sixteenth century who, in historical works, tried to de- and reconstruct the stereotypes about Scotland in order to integrate their homeland into the concept of a European civilization. One of them is John Mair, a scholastic philosopher and theologian who composed a *Historia Maioris Britan-*

9. HIERONYMUS, *Against Jovinianus*, trad. FREMANTLE / LEWIS / MARTLEY, p. 394 (HIERONYMUS, *Adversus Jovinianum*, II,7, ed. J.-P. Migne, col. 296A).

10. Cf. WILLIAMSON 1996, p. 54 and SMITH 2015, p. 36.

11. In his commentaries, however, Piccolomini speaks of "not more than four hours" (*non ultra quattuor horas*) (AENEAS SILVIUS PICCOLOMINI, *Commentarii*, I.6.2, ed. MESERVE / SIMONETTA, pp. 22-23).

12. AENEAS SILVIUS PICCOLOMINI, *Europe (c. 1400-1458)*, trad. BROWN, p. 211 (AENEAS SILVIUS PICCOLOMINI, *De Europa*, 46.166, ed. VAN HECK, pp. 184-185).

13. AENEAS SILVIUS PICCOLOMINI, *Commentarii*, I.6.1, ed. MESERVE / SIMONETTA, pp. 20-21. See I.6.5-6, pp. 24-27 for further examples of the sexual liberty in these northern lands.

*niae*<sup>14</sup>; the other is Hector Boece, a fellow student of Mair, who committed himself more clearly than his scholastic colleague to humanist ideals and wrote a *Scotorum Historiae*<sup>15</sup>. The second focus is set on the mid-eighteenth century and on two Scottish proponents of the Enlightenment: on the one hand on David Hume with his essay *Of National Characters*<sup>16</sup>, and on the other on Adam Ferguson and his *Essay on the History of Civil Society*<sup>17</sup>.

## I. John Mair

Born 1467 near Edinburgh, and deceased 1550 in St. Andrews, John Mair lived not only in Scotland, but spent important years of his career at the University of Paris. There, he taught both philosophy and theology as a determined scholastic, acting decidedly against the humanist fad of his time and defending thus, on the level of scientific language, the presumed scholastic barbarians against the self-proclaimed cultivated humanists<sup>18</sup>. In doing so, he was a close observer of the innovations and reforms of his contemporaries, and he even used the discovery of America as an argument against his eloquent coevals: for, if the seafarers would only have imitated – just as the humanists propose – what classic authors had brought forward, the New World would never have been detected<sup>19</sup>. Despite its rude Latin, Mair considered scholasticism as an enhancement of classic thought and as a sign of progress, just as the seafarers had expanded geographical knowledge. As we will see, he was ready to revise the ancient geographical categories, even though he remained, according to his scholastic principles, conservative with regard to Aristotle.

In 1521, Mair published his *Historia Maioris Britanniae*, a history of Greater Britain (as opposed to Brittany, the *Britannia Minor*<sup>20</sup>). It is a mainly political history, stressing as one of the first the unity of the two kingdoms on the British Islands. Its preface and the first book garnish this political task with more general information about the nature and the manners of its inhabitants. There, Mair could not help approaching the question of the Scots' civilized state. On the very first pages of the preface he reiterated the quarrel between the stylish classical Lat-

14. JOHN MAIR 1892 (JOHN MAIR 1521).

15. HECTOR BOECE 2010a (HECTOR BOECE 1527a).

16. HUME 1987 (the essay first appeared in 1748).

17. FERGUSON 1767.

18. FARGE 2015 and ZAHND 2015, pp. 260-268.

19. JOHN MAIR 1509, f. 2va.

20. This could be seen as a proof that Mair wrote the History for a French audience, but he translates, among others, a French proverb into Latin, see JOHN MAIR 1892, p. 43 (JOHN MAIR 1521, f. 13v). Besides, even though the work was printed in Paris, Mair wrote it in a period when he lived in Scotland, cf. BURNS 1996, pp. 61-62.

in of the Humanists and the barbarian Latin of the Scholastics, bringing into play, this time, the seemingly uncultivated language of the Scots:

“I confess that I might have used a more cultivated style; I question if that style would have been more convenient. For if one should give what would be almost a Latin turn to the names of our own people and places, scarcely should we that were born in Scotland understand what was meant. And inasmuch as our princes have ever aimed rather to act nobly than to speak elegantly, so with those who have given themselves to the pursuit of knowledge it is of more moment to understand aright, and clearly to lay down the truth of any matter, than to use elegant and highly-coloured language. I call to witness two most famous Scots – who bore each of them the name of John – and Bede, and Alcuin, and a hundred more, who, when they first learned Greek and Latin, chose rather so to write that they needed not an interpreter than with a curious research of language”<sup>21</sup>.

One could reproach both the Scots and Scholastics with inelegant, uncultivated language. In both cases, however, this kind of language proved fitting, as it expressed a veracious approach to knowledge, an approach that cared more for the matter itself than for its embellishing presentation. Given Mair’s preference for the scholastic way, this was an implicit appraisal of the Scots. Mair thus combined two ideas that would remain important in the following discussions: First, that progress is a measure to assess excellence, and secondly, that excellence needs to be rooted in primordial truth in order to distinguish itself from decadence.

What is more, Mair reveals in this passage a kind of intellectual nationalism. Of John Duns Scotus, one of his namesakes besides John Scotus Eriugena, he would speak only as his *conterraneus*, even emphasizing at one point that Scotus’ birthplace was only a few miles away from his own<sup>22</sup>. In view all its famous thinkers, there was an undeniable intellectual history of the northern lands (and of Scotland in particular) that went back to the seventh century, and Mair, the great Parisian intellectual, was inscribed into this history. Accordingly, he signed the preface as “John, Major by name, Scot by nation, theologian of the university of Paris by profession” (*Ioannes nomine Maior, natione Scotus, & professione Theologus academie Parisiensis*)<sup>23</sup>, underscoring the facticity of the existence of Scottish intellectuals.

In spite of this intellectual patriotism, Mair tried to keep a critical stance on his subject, and on his sources in particular<sup>24</sup>. In a later passage that deals with “the [m]anners and [c]ustoms of the Scots”, he wrote:

21. JOHN MAIR 1892, p. CXXXV (JOHN MAIR 1521, f. A2v).

22. JOHN MAIR 1892, p. 206 (JOHN MAIR 1521, f. 74r); cf. BROADIE 2000, pp. 10–11.

23. JOHN MAIR 1892, p. CXXXIII (JOHN MAIR 1521, f. A2r). The title-page itself bears a truncated version: “[...] by JOHN MAJOR, by name [read: nation] indeed a Scot, but by profession a Theologian [...]” ([...] *per Ioannem Maiorem, nomine [read: natione] quidem Scotum, professione autem Theologum [...]*).

24. See, e.g., JOHN MAIR 1892, pp. 29–31 (JOHN MAIR 1521, ff. 91r–101r), where Mair criticizes the

“I have read in histories written by Englishmen that the Scots are the worst of traitors, and that this stain is with them inborn. [...] The Scots, on the other hand, call the English the chief of traitors, and, denying that their weapon is a brave man’s sword, affirm that all their victories are won by guile and craft. I, however, am not wont to credit the common Scot in his vituperation of the English, nor yet the Englishman in his vituperation of the Scot. ’Tis the part of a sensible man to use his own eyes, to put far from him at once all inordinate love of his own countrymen and hatred of his enemies, and thereafter to pass judgment, well weighed, in equal scales; he must keep the temper of his mind founded upon right reason (*in ratione fundatum*), and regulate his opinion accordingly. Aristotle observes in the sixth [*sic*] book of his *Politics* that southern peoples excel the northerners in intelligence, and that, on the contrary, northerners have the advantage in warlike virtue. In northern nations, therefore, we need not expect to find craftiness in war, or guile”<sup>25</sup>.

On the surface, Mair presented himself as a prudential, rationally driven historian, employing an empirical methodology when “using his own eyes”. Yet, as is typical for him<sup>26</sup>, in this very passage he turned what seemed like an impartial account into a subtle defense of his favored party, the Scots. Following Aristotle, Mair concedes that the Scots, as a northern people, were unqualified for deceits, so that the contrary accounts of English historians turned into a proof of their actual ruse. This was a way of arguing that can certainly be described as crafty, and thus constitutes in and of itself a performative challenge of Aristotle’s saying, on which Mair seems to have based his whole argument in the first place.

Given that Mair fell back on the climatic scheme at other places in the *Historia*<sup>27</sup>, the tension became obvious: how was it possible to harmonize Aristotle’s denial of northern intelligence and Mair’s account that was *in ratione fundatum*? To be sure, Mair also dealt with other prejudices about Scotland. More than once he criticized Piccolomini and objected that, even in winter time, at least in the south of Scotland, daylight lasts longer than three hours<sup>28</sup>. He even discussed Jerome’s reproach of cannibalism:

“We will now proceed to another charge that is brought against our countrymen. It is said that the Scots were in the habit of eating human flesh, and those who bring this charge shelter themselves under Jerome [...] Well, to this from Jerome I make

(too big) number of universities in Scotland, the lack of priests, and the custom of hiring houses instead of buying them. See also below, note 35, and MASON 2006, pp. 61-62.

25. JOHN MAIR 1892, pp. 40-41 (JOHN MAIR 1521, ff. 12v-13r).

26. Cf. ZAHND 2015, pp. 270-271 and 275-276.

27. JOHN MAIR 1892, p. 32: “To the people of the North God gave less intelligence than to those of the South, but greater strength of body, a more courageous spirit, greater comeliness” (JOHN MAIR 1521, f. 10r); JOHN MAIR 1892, p. 277: “For though the men of northern nations may indeed excel the southrons in strength and valour, yet in that prudence which is a first necessity in warfare they are too often found wanting” (JOHN MAIR 1521, f. 101v). See also below, at note 32.

28. JOHN MAIR 1892, p. 16 (JOHN MAIR 1521, f. 5v); cf. JOHN MAIR 1528, f. 50vb.

answer: Even if all the Scots did so, 't would bring no stain on their posterity: the faithful in Europe are descended from the Gentile and the infidel; the guilt of an ancestor is no disgrace to his children when these have learned to live conformably with reason"<sup>29</sup>.

Once more, it is reason that marks the difference between barbarism and civilization. Hence, the fact that Mair knew of no cannibals among the Scots was both another proof of the emergence of reason in his northern homeland and yet another challenge of Aristotle's account.

But Mair, the Scholastic, was not ready to give up on Aristotle entirely. In order to relieve the tension between his claim for rationality and the Scots' northern heritage he rather decided to introduce a distinction between Scots – and Scots:

"[...] just as among the Scots we find two distinct tongues, so we likewise find two different ways of life and conduct. For some are born in the forests and mountains of the north, and these we call men of the Highland, but the others men of the Lowland. By foreigners the former are called Wild Scots (*sylvestres*), the latter householding Scots (*domestici*). The Irish tongue is in use among the former, the English tongue among the latter. One-half of Scotland speaks Irish, and all these as well as the Islanders we reckon to belong to the Wild Scots"<sup>30</sup>.

Mair referred to the common distinction between Highlanders and Lowlanders<sup>31</sup>. For him, this distinction became apparent primarily on a linguistic level. However it seems further to have relied on cultural differences as the notion of *sylvestres* indicates. It is significant that Mair attributes this last notion first to the linguistic use of foreigners, but then adopts it immediately into his inclusive statement on what "*we* reckon to belong to the Wild Scots". In the subsequent lines, he enforced thence the cultural differences between the *sylvestres* and *domestici*, introducing a clear gradation that is again reminiscent of Aristotle's climatic scheme:

"In dress, in the manner of their outward life, and in good morals, for example, these come behind the householding Scots – yet they are not less, but rather much more, prompt to fight; and this, both because they dwell more towards the north, and because, born as they are in the mountains, and dwellers in forests, their very nature (*suapte natura*) is more combative. It is, however, with the householding Scots that the government and direction of the kingdom is to be found, inasmuch as they understand better, or at least less ill than the others, the nature of a civil polity. [...] the Wild Scots [...] are full of mutual dissensions, and war rather than peace

29. JOHN MAIR 1892, pp. 44-45 (JOHN MAIR 1521, f. 14r).

30. JOHN MAIR 1892, pp. 48-49 (JOHN MAIR 1521, ff. 15v-16r).

31. See also AENEAS SILVIUS PICCOLOMINI, *Commentarii*, I.6.1, ed. MESERVE / SIMONETTA, pp. 22-23.

is their normal condition. [...] On account of their differing speech, these men hate our householding Scots, or quiet and civil-living people – that is, all who lead a decent and reasonable life – as much as they do the English”<sup>32</sup>.

The civil-living, “householding”, politically organized Scots with their better understanding and reasonable lifestyle could only be found in the southern part of Scotland. It is thus by shifting the climatic gap even more into the north, that Mair attempted to harmonize Aristotle’s climatic scheme with these markers of civilization.

But he also adduced a second reason for the cultural difference between High- and Lowlanders (“and this, *both* because [...]”): the concept of differing natures<sup>33</sup>. Apparently, the climatic differences within Scotland were not sufficient to fully account for the cultural ones, and after all, a thorough acceptance of the climatic scheme would still have objected to the civilized state of the southern Scots which continued to belong, from a European perspective, to the far north. The concept of nature appeared more appropriate – at least it could conveniently complement the climatic scheme, relieving from the burden of a similar geographical origin. And as such, it was applicable to other geographic regions as well.

Mair did not further develop in this passage what he understood by this concept of nature. It is important to note that he made no fundamental, so to say speciesist or pre-racist distinction<sup>34</sup> between the natures of Scottish Low- and Highlanders since he stressed, in a later passage, their common origin (together with the Irish) from the Spanish<sup>35</sup>. Nevertheless, the concept of natural differences continued to be relevant. It reappeared in another discussion, not about the Scots and their civilized state, but on the status of the Indians in the newly discovered world. In the second book of his *Commentary on the Sentences*, Mair discussed the question whether a Christian ruler was allowed to conquer and take possession of territories inhabited by pagans. In his answer he distinguished several cases according to the different political systems displayed in pagan tribes (drawing again from Aristotle that the capacity for political organization was the distinctive mark between civilization and barbarism<sup>36</sup>). Mair’s discussion of the last case is especially noteworthy:

32. JOHN MAIR 1892, pp. 49-50, last sentence rearranged (JOHN MAIR 1521, f. 16r). Cf. WILLIAMSON 1996, pp. 59-60.

33. On the importance of this term for Early Modern theories of race see SMITH 2015.

34. On the lack of a distinct conceptual framework of race in the Early Modern Era see KIDD 2006, pp. 54-78.

35. JOHN MAIR 1892, pp. 50-51 (JOHN MAIR 1521, ff. 16v-17r). He rejected, however, to trace the story of their origin further back to the Egyptians, as others would do, JOHN MAIR 1892, pp. 51-52 (JOHN MAIR 1521, f. 17r); see below, note 42).

36. See above, note 6.

“It is yet another [case if] these people live like beasts on either side of the equator. Beneath the poles there are wild men, too, as Ptolemy says in his *Tetrabiblos*<sup>37</sup>, and it has already been demonstrated by experience why the first person to conquer them justly rules over them: because they are by nature slaves as the Philosopher says in the third and fourth chapters of the first book of the *Politics*: ‘It is manifest that some men are by nature slaves, others by nature free [...]’ On this account the Philosopher says in the first chapter of the aforementioned book that this is the reason why the Greeks should be masters over the barbarians, because, ‘by nature, the barbarians and slaves are the same thing’<sup>38</sup>.”

The wild men beneath the poles, the people living like beasts around the equator, barbarians, and slaves – they were all the same, and by nature they were inferior to the conquerors of the more temperate zones. Two things are of a particular interest in this passage. Firstly, the climatic scheme is still present, but more strongly than in Mair’s *Historia* it is bound here to the notion of nature: it is the nature of these wild men, and not the climatic zone they lived in, that constitutes the justification for ruling over them. Secondly, this natural difference is presented as an empirical fact. Just as Mair the historian appealed for using one’s own eyes, Mair the theologian claimed to rely on a “demonstration by experience” – even though the evidence he adduced here is only a citation of Aristotle. But it was the capacity for political organization, the core Aristotelian argument, that was invoked here as the empirical basis of Mair’s own argument, and Mair had noted in the *Historia* that in Scotland only the Lowlanders understood “the nature of a civil polity”<sup>39</sup>. It was by means of this argument that he attempted to prove that it was by nature, and not so much because of climatic circumstances, that these wildlings were barbarians, and more so, that he and the Lowlanders – in spite of their northern dwellings – were capable of civilization.

In his defense of Scottish civilization, Mair employed several explanations that would remain important in the further discussions. Operating still within the climatic scheme, he tried to displace the boundary between civilization and barbarism farther into the north. He then complemented this climatic approach with an essentializing distinction of two types of humans, the barbarians by nature, and those capable of civilization. The latter capacity was expressed, for Mair, in signs of rationality and particularly in a decent political organization. While being thoroughly inspired by Aristotle and his *Politics*, Mair’s innovation consisted thus in an attenuation of the climatic scheme and an intensification of differences by nature.

37. CLAUDIUS PTOLEMAEUS, *Tetrabiblos*, II.2, ed. et trad. ROBBINS, pp. 122-123.

38. JOHN MAIR 1528, f. 114va; the passage first appeared in a slightly different form in 1510. The translation follows PAGDEN 1982, pp. 38-39; cf. ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, trad. RACKHAM, pp. 4-31 (ARIST., *Politica*, I, 1-2, 1252a24-1255b40). See also WILLIAMSON 1996, p. 58.

39. See above, at note 32.

## II. Hector Boece

Hector Boece applied similar legitimizing strategies as Mair did, but with a different perspective. In addition, he presented an argument that was at best adumbrated in Mair when he had stressed the veracity of the Scottish language: the somewhat romantic appreciation of everything primeval. Just as Mair, Boece came from the south of Scotland and had studied in Paris, but he had left France only a few years in, after an encounter with Erasmus. He went on to become an important figure at the newly founded university of Aberdeen<sup>40</sup>, where he died in 1536. One of his most important works, and the most interesting for our purposes, is a history of Scotland in 17 volumes. The first of them begins with detailed *Prolegomena* that offer, among others, a general description of the country and its inhabitants. It is there that Boece also addresses the problem of a Scottish civilization<sup>41</sup>.

In contrast to Mair, Boece does not directly address the negative sayings about the Scots in classical sources. Nevertheless, it is apparent that he also wanted to dispel any doubts about their civilized state, and to this end he chose to highlight the greatness of his nation. Attaching more importance to the origin of the Scots than Mair, he traced it back via Ireland and Spain to the ancient Egyptians whose wisdom he assured to still prevail among the Scots<sup>42</sup>. In a way, this claim for a southern origin was again a concession to the climate scheme. But Boece offered a different, much more relevant response to climatic arguments when he started describing the Scots:

“[...] their bodies are tall and strong, and their other natural endowments are excellent. What should I say about health, which every man [...] ought to prefer to all worldly goods? Their health remains undamaged until extreme old age [...]. Nor is there anyone among them who can in any respect be regarded as of unsound mind. And if it is true (as it indeed is) that wealth consists of being content with what one owns, desiring nothing, need nothing, in no part of the world can wealthier men be found. [...] And so I scarcely believe that these men are to be insulted by ignorant and haughty talk when those who live at the farthest remove from the sun are derided as wretched barbarians, since it has now been shown more clearly than daylight that no mortals anywhere live a better or happier life”<sup>43</sup>.

40. BURNS 1996, pp. 75-76; for his relation to Erasmus see FEINGOLD 2003.

41. HECTOR BOECE 2010, in part. “A description of the realm of Scotland” and “Hector Boece’s very timely exhortation concerning the ancient and modern customs and manners of the Scots” (HECTOR BOECE 1527b, ff. 3r-17r: *Scotorum regni descriptio, per quem & historia* and ff. 17v-20v: *De Scotorum prisicis recentibusque institutis ac moribus parenesis Hectoris Boethii accommodatissima*).

42. HECTOR BOECE 2010, “A description of the realm of Scotland”, #4 (HECTOR BOECE 1527b, ff. 3v-4r); HECTOR BOECE 2010, Book I, ##1-2 (HECTOR BOECE 1527a, f. 1r-v). For Mair’s denial of an Egyptian origin of the Scots see above, note 35.

43. HECTOR BOECE 2010, “A description of the realm of Scotland”, #39 (HECTOR BOECE 1527b, f. 16v).

According to Boece, the apparent strength and health of the Scots is a result of their modesty which, in turn, is conditioned by the Scottish territory. Those who *want* to survive there cannot make great demands, so that those who *can* survive there – such as the Scots – are necessarily happy. Unmistakably, this reversal of the climatic scheme was part of a criticism of Aristotle inspired by humanist thought: It was an ethical ideal, and not the grade of intellectuality; it was the good and content individual life, and not a rational political system that was deciding. This change of focus away from a speculative towards a practical wisdom opened a completely new perspective on the north and allowed for new means to vindicate the Scots. Their climatically conditioned modesty turned them into models of virtuousness:

“In peace and war our ancestors cultivated all the other virtues, and especially temperance, the mother of them all. They were very thrifty in taking their sleep, food and drink from sources easily gained and ready at hand: for they manufactured home-made bread from the grains that grew in any particular district, and employed them as they came from the ground, not making them tastier by careful sifting, since a great part of their nutritional power is lost in this manner. [...] For there is no district so far removed from the sun and condemned to infertility and barrenness, but that, thanks to divine providence, it abounds in all things needful for human employment, if only there exists someone who knows how to use them”<sup>44</sup>.

Once more, modesty and temperance lie at the core of all these other virtues and allow survival in the unsocial region of Scotland. But this modesty is complemented with a specific knowledge about the use and handling of the land's sparse resources; a knowledge which, again, is not so much speculative as it is practical. Hence, the mere fact that the Scots were living in these northern lands, proved their endowment with this kind of practical knowledge, and defied once more the climatic prejudices. For Boece, it became apparent that it must be in the north where the most prudent and virtuous humans live.

A striking detail in this passage is, however, that Boece does not speak here of the Scots as such, but of their ancestors. In the end, this was only a consequence of his argument's logic, as becomes more evident on the subsequent lines. Just as Mair, Boece uses there the distinction between High- and Lowlanders, albeit with an inverse:

“We who have our homes near to the border of England, just as we have learned the language of the Saxons [...] and have lost our own, so we have abandoned all our ancient customs, and, like our language, our old manner of writing is unknown to us. But those who inhabit the Highlands cling most tightly to the old language, and al-

44. HECTOR BOECE 2010, “Hector Boece's very timely exhortation concerning the ancient and modern customs and manners of the Scots”, ##2-7 (HECTOR BOECE 1527b, ff. 17v-19v).

so they preserve nearly all the rest. [...] when we began to have intercourse with the English we also embraced their manners with open arms. At that time our ancestors' ancient virtue began to lose its value [...]"<sup>45</sup>.

Boece also acknowledged a cultural difference between the High- and the Lowlanders. However, he does not attribute it to a greater civilizing progress of the latter, but, on the contrary, to the Lowlanders' cultural concessions to the English, an assimilation Boece regarded as a turning away from the original Scottish culture and thus as a sign of cultural decay. Mair had also identified the conformity with primordial truth as a means to distinguish progress from decadence<sup>46</sup>, but Boece pushed the idea onto new grounds: given their unaffected conservation of ancient virtues, the core of civilization was now represented by the Highlanders, while the more southern regions appeared to be overcome by laziness and effeminacy<sup>47</sup>. Boece did thus not only reverse the climatic scheme, but rather redefined what civilization is: it is not the rational achievement of an adaptive people (that might have even consisted of cannibals at one point) as the progressive scholastic John Mair assumed, but lies with the conservative northerners who remain close to their cultural origins and *fontes*.

One might assume that this conservative, almost romantic perspective on the primordial Scottish culture and its values would have been more open for a positive rethinking of the civilized state of the New World's indigenous people. To be sure, at least in his *Scotorum Historiae* Boece had no interest in the New World, but two aspects are noteworthy. Firstly, given the Scots' assumed Egyptian origin, the Scots' primeval roots remained inscribed in a common, specifically Western story, which, in the long run, even proved to be conformable with the traditional climatic scheme. Secondly, Boece resorted, despite their differences in approach, to the same strategies as Mair when it came to relieve the Scots, at least on an implicit level, from an ancient charge. At the very end of his introduction, a crucial place of his work, and after having presented in detail the virtuousness of the Scots, Boece felt the need to give an account of a story he said to "have heard attested by men of well-tried veracity who were sent on an embassy to the King of France by James IV King of Scots":

"After they set sail, they were driven sideways to Norway by a gale, and when they had landed there they saw, as it seemed, shaggy men such as those popularly called wildmen running about in the mountains not far away, and were brought to a halt, amazed at the marvelous sight. They were soon informed by the locals that these

45. HECTOR BOECE 2010, "Hector Boece's very timely exhortation concerning the ancient and modern customs and manners of the Scots", ##7-8 (HECTOR BOECE 1527b, f. 19v).

46. See above, at note 21.

47. Cf. HECTOR BOECE 2010, "Hector Boece's very timely exhortation concerning the ancient and modern customs and manners of the Scots", ##9-10 (HECTOR BOECE 1527b, f. 20r-v).

were mute beasts possessed of human form, who would attack men out of their great hatred. They were so afraid of the light that they did not dare show themselves to human sight, but rather prowled about at night, when they would invade farmsteads in packs [...] they would knock down doors, rush in, and kill and devour whatever was within”<sup>48</sup>.

The reminiscence of Jerome’s story about Scottish cannibals is as obvious as is Boece’s strategy to defend his countrymen: on the one hand, he simply displaced the setting of the story, since the encounter with the cannibals did not take place in Scotland anymore, but in Norway. In order to justify this shift, he adduced against the ancient authority of Jerome his veracious witnesses’ own experience. On the other hand, the fact that Norway was yet another northern country and that these “shaggy men” seem to have lived as primeval as possible did not challenge Boece’s reassessment, since these “wildmen” were categorized as “beasts possessed of human form” – in all likelihood, their nature or species must have deviated from common humanity.

It is this strategy of relying on speciesist differentiations where the climatic scheme reached its limits, a pattern already present in Mair, that would continue to shape further discussions. For, whether it was employed in its Aristotelian form, as with Mair, or with a humanist twist like Boece suggested, the climatic scheme would remain an inevitable benchmark in the discussions about human civilization, provoking thus further arguments to explore its strengths and weaknesses<sup>49</sup>. In the course of the Reformation, these arguments gained further importance for the Scots. The Catholics, on the one hand, polemically played off the ‘fact’ that the preference of Calvinist doctrines could only be expected from this natural seat of barbarism in the north. The result were several Scottish defenses, such as the disputation of a certain James Maxwell

“touching the seate of Sathan: whether it was to be in the North, as the Romish Doctors doe holde, or in the South, where I prooue against the Romane Doctors by Scripture and nature, by Theologie and Astrologie, by Philosophie and Historie, how that the North is absolutely the most diuine, eminent, and excellent, the very seate of God, and not of Sathan, and the chiefe receptacle of his Church”<sup>50</sup>.

For the Protestants all over Europe, on the other hand, Scotland became a confessional partner, and hence also a cultural one<sup>51</sup>. Now, given that the Scottish reactions to the Catholic polemics brought new resources to light that stressed

48. HECTOR BOECE 2010, “A description of the realm of Scotland”, #41 (HECTOR BOECE 1527b, f. 17r).

49. See e.g. SMITH 2015, pp. 70–91.

50. MAXWELL 1617, f. B2r. Cf. WILLIAMSON 1989, p. 9 and WILLIAMSON 1996, p. 50.

51. WILLIAMSON 1989, pp. 10–11.

both the excellence of the north and the depravity of the south, and in view of the confessional solidarity of more southern Protestants, the pressure to argue for a Scottish civilization despite its northern latitudes decreased. They were now an undeniable part of the European civilization. But the climatic scheme and its implicit threat did not disappear<sup>52</sup>, and more than 200 years after Mair and Boece, it was still worth an argument among Scottish proponents of the Enlightenment.

### III. David Hume

Without doubt, David Hume is the most famous proponent of the Scottish Enlightenment. He dwelt for several years in Paris and in England (where he was exposed to mockeries of his Scottish origin and accent). When he returned to Edinburgh, he published in 1748 a short essay *Of National Characters*. This essay was simply meant to defeat the climatic scheme<sup>53</sup>. Given that, in contrast to the sixteenth century, more profound knowledge about other, non-European cultures had found its way into the European academic discussion, and historical knowledge too had expanded, Hume denied an influence of physical causes on cultures and societies. In a historical perspective, national characters were not immune to change, while similar character traits often reappeared in the most different geographical latitudes<sup>54</sup>. Over time and space the appearance of ‘national’ specificities had proven to be so vicissitudinous that it could not depend on physical geography.

But what then was the reason for cultural differences? Hume specified two factors. On the one hand, he emphasized the “imitative nature” of the human mind, a mimetic disposition that led over the generations to specifically aggregated cultural traits within societies<sup>55</sup>. While Mair (in the positive sense of progress) and Boece (in the negative sense of decay) had introduced the possibility of cultural change as an amendment of the climatic scheme, Hume used it now to supersede the scheme entirely. But as if this was not enough, he stressed that some differences were already introduced “in the infancy of society”, differences that showed a natural bias:

“[...] though nature produces all kinds of temper and understanding in great abundance, it does not follow, that she always produces them in like proportions, and that in every society the ingredients of industry and indolence, valour and cowardice, humanity and brutality, wisdom and folly, will be mixed after the same manner. In the infancy of society, if any of these dispositions be found in greater abundance

52. SEBASTIANI 2013, pp. 23-43.

53. On its context, see SEBASTIANI 2011, pp. 188-189.

54. HUME 1987, pp. 205-206.

55. HUME 1987, pp. 202-203.

than the rest, it will naturally prevail in the composition, and give a tincture to the national character”<sup>56</sup>.

This resort to a natural explanation seems to conflict, however, with the vicissitude of national characters, so that the same arguments that Hume had invoked against the climatic scheme could be used against these ‘natural tinctures’. But Hume had a more important problem: for, by what he considered to be an empirical fact, it appeared that certain populations in specific climatic regions had never been subject to change, so that they seemed to corroborate the climatic scheme:

“And indeed there is some reason to think, that all the nations, which live beyond the polar circles or between the tropics, are inferior to the rest of the species, and are incapable of all the higher attainments of the human mind. The poverty and misery of the northern inhabitants of the globe, and the indolence of the southern, from their few necessities, may, perhaps, account for this remarkable difference, without our having recourse to *physical* causes”<sup>57</sup>.

In the first version of his essay, Hume tried to dismiss this supposed constant inferiority of populations living in the ever same infamous climatic regions with an unspecified reference to other, non-physical causes. But in the second edition, published in 1753, he felt the need to add a ‘clarifying’ footnote:

“I am apt to suspect the negroes[, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds)]<sup>58</sup> to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. [...] Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; though low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly”<sup>59</sup>.

Beyond doubt, this footnote is in modern research the most discussed passage of the entire essay<sup>60</sup>. We need not enter these discussions, since, for our purposes, it is sufficient to note that, again, a speciest differentiation comes into play

56. HUME 1987, p. 203. On this “conjectural” approach see HÖPFL 1978, pp. 24-25.

57. HUME 1987, pp. 207-208.

58. The passage in square brackets was removed in the posthumous edition of 1777, see GARRETT 2000, pp. 171-172.

59. HUME 1987, p. 208.

60. Cf. SEBASTIANI 2013, pp. 35-38.

when the climatic scheme does not suffice anymore. Once more, this detection of natural differences has an empirical pretense, but other than Mair and Boece, Hume does not use it to complement climatic arguments, but to replace them. Given that even the national tinctures originally depended, for Hume, on natural differences, it appears that his desire to leave the climatic scheme behind led him, in the end, into a theory of race.

#### IV. Adam Ferguson

There were other voices among the proponents of the Scottish Enlightenment, and one of them was Adam Ferguson<sup>61</sup>. Born in 1723 near Perth and deceased in 1816 in St. Andrews, Ferguson was a long-standing professor of philosophy at the University of Edinburgh where he published in 1767 an *Essay on the History of Civil Society*<sup>62</sup>. In this text, he argued no less than Hume for the advanced state of European civilization and rationality, but in contrast to Hume he aimed at explaining it with Europe's favorable geographic situation, pursuing thus a climatic argumentation. Hume had tried to dissuade him from doing so in light of his own 'disproof' of the climatic scheme, and so Ferguson had to address the vicissitude and dispersal of cultural achievements around the globe. He attempted to do so with a focus on practical knowledge on the one hand (as Boece already had done) and a belief in civilizing progress (as Mair had promoted):

“When nations succeed one another in the career of discoveries and inquiries, the last is always the most knowing. Systems of science are gradually formed. The globe itself is traversed by degrees, and the history of every age, when past, is an accession of knowledge to those who succeed. The Romans were more knowing than the Greeks; and every scholar of modern Europe is, in this sense, more learned than the most accomplished person that ever bore either of those celebrated names. But is he on that account their superior? Men are to be estimated, not from what they know, but from what they are able to perform; from their skill in adapting materials to the several purposes of life [...]”<sup>63</sup>.

It is not the mere quantity of available knowledge, but its application to “the several purposes of life”, its transfer, so to say, into arts and crafts, that accounts for the quality of a society. Just as Boece had used this focus on practical wisdom to criticize the decadence of pretended civilized southern customs, Ferguson used it to prove that, even if the Europeans would not possess the greatest amount of knowledge, and even if they shared certain achievements with other cultures

61. For further critics of Hume's position on race see GARRETT 2003, p. 88.

62. Cf. SEBASTIANI 2013, pp. 52-55.

63. FERGUSON 1767, pp. 42-43.

around the globe, they had every reason to be reckoned as the most civilized society. But why Europe? Ferguson explained:

“Man, in his animal capacity, is qualified to subsist in every climate. He reigns with the lion and the tyger under the equatorial heats of the sun, or he associates with the bear and the raindeer beyond the polar circle. His versatile disposition fits him to assume the habits of either condition, or his talent for arts enables him to supply its defects. The intermediate climates, however, appear most to favour his nature; and in whatever manner we account for the fact, it cannot be doubted, that this animal has always attained to the principal honours of his species within the temperate zone. The arts, which he has on this scene repeatedly invented, the extent of his reason, the fertility of his fancy, and the force of his genius in literature, commerce, policy, and war, sufficiently declare either a distinguished advantage of situation, or a natural superiority of mind”<sup>64</sup>.

This was the old Aristotelian distinction of the three climates, but it was no threat to the Scots anymore, for, using a strategy well known from Mair, the northern climatic zone was even further dislocated to the lands “beyond the polar circle”. What is more, in the last sentence Ferguson pinpointed more clearly than any other of our Scottish scholars to the exclusive character of the climatic and the speciest alternative. And he left no doubt that he preferred the climatic one. In an implicit reply to Hume he wrote:

“The most remarkable races of men, it is true, have been rude before they were polished. They have in some cases returned to rudeness again; and it is not from the actual possession of arts, science, or policy, that we are to pronounce of their genius. There is a vigour, a reach of capacity, and a sensibility of mind, which may characterise as well the savage as the citizen, the slave as well as the master; and the same powers of the mind may be turned to a variety of purposes”<sup>65</sup>.

This was a clear rejection of Hume’s claim of a total lack of ingeniousness among certain races<sup>66</sup>, and Ferguson thus kept hold of climatic arguments to explain the constant absence of cultural achievements both in the polar and the inner-tropical regions<sup>67</sup>. In his Euro-centric perspective, however, the real challenge was not posed by these border regions as much as by the temperate zones of the

64. FERGUSON 1767, p. 162.

65. FERGUSON 1767, p. 162.

66. With SEBASTIANI 2013, p. 42. See, however, FERGUSON 1767, p. 164: “Great part of Africa has been always unknown; but the silence of fame, on the subject of its revolutions, is an argument, where no other proof can be found, of weakness in the genius of its people”.

67. FERGUSON 1767, p. 167: “[...] under the extremes of heat or of cold, the active range of the human soul appears to be limited; and men are of inferior importance, either as friends, or as enemies. In the one extreme, they are dull and slow, moderate in their desires, regular and pacific in their manner of life; in the other, they are feverish in their passions, weak in their judgements, and addicted by temperament to animal pleasure. In both [...] the spirit is prepared for servitude [...]”.

other continents, where, according to the climatic scheme, one had to assume the existence of cultures as civilized as the European one. But Ferguson approached this problem as well from a climatic perspective:

“The climates of America, though taken under the same parallel, are observed to differ from those of Europe. There, extensive marshes, great lakes, aged, decayed, and crowded forests, with the other circumstances that mark an uncultivated country, are supposed to replenish the air with heavy and noxious vapours, that [...] carry the inconveniencies of the frigid zone far into the temperate. [...] [It is] this unequal distribution of climate, by which the lot, as well as the national character, of the Northern Asiatic may be deemed inferior to that of Europeans who lie under the same parallels [...]”<sup>68</sup>.

A distinctive feature of the American and Asian climate was, according to Ferguson, that the unsociable conditions one could find in the far north of Europe reached well into the southern zones of these continents. Just as he had displaced the European borders of the northern climate zone in order to integrate the Scots into the European civilization, he dislocated it into the south on the other continents in order to deny their cultures European excellence.

\* \* \*

In order to conclude this short survey, let me focus on three points. First, it is interesting to note how, in the Scottish academic milieu of the early sixteenth century, several classical *topoi* were assimilated and sometimes thoroughly transformed in order to incorporate Scotland into the realm of a European civilization. The Aristotelian climatic scheme both provoked and governed these discussions, whether they were informed by the more scholastic and progressive perspective of John Mair, or the humanist and rather conservative one of Hector Boece. Both adapted but did not abandon climatic arguments in order to displace the barbarians. It was only David Hume in the eighteenth century who tried to get rid entirely of the climatic scheme. Second, it appeared that at places where the climatic scheme failed, these early thinkers began to complement it with speciest considerations. For Mair, this complement was particularly important, in order to consider the cultural differences appearing with the New World as much on the longitudes as they were prior known to exist on the latitudes. In the eighteenth century, the two approaches – the climatic and the speciest one – evolved into two distinct alternatives, now used to defend the claim for a European cultural superiority. Hume with his distaste for climatic arguments chose the latter approach and ended up with a theory of races, while Ferguson abode by the climatic scheme and rejected the idea of natural differences between races. Third, in doing so, both Hume and

68. FERGUSON 1767, pp. 173-174.

Ferguson drew on a heuristic framework that had been coined by earlier Scottish thinkers such as Mair and Boece who had struggled for the acknowledgment of a Scottish civilization. In this regard, it appears that these early Scottish reflections about the state of their society shaped and informed our modern understanding of a specific European civilization.

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*Abstract:* Disseminated by biblical and classical sources (and by Aristotle in particular), the image of an uncultivated, barbarian north shaped medieval socio-geography. Based on climatic considerations, it seemed obvious that these cold zones did not allow for the establishment of civilization and rationality. At the end of the Middle Ages, however, Scottish intellectuals who were embarrassed by this prevailing image started to defy it. In order to inscribe themselves into the realm of European civilization, they presented, on the one hand, a sometimes quite creative reshaping of the climatic scheme. On the other hand, they reinforced an alternative explanation for cultural differences and varying states of rationality, resorting to a conception of different natures within the human species. After introducing two exponents of these developments in the 16th century (John Mair and Hector Boece), this paper turns to the Scottish Enlightenment of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Focusing on David Hume and Adam Ferguson, it describes how these same two arguments, based on either climate or inherent nature, still governed the discussion about different states of civilization in this period, the latter alternative having now been developed into a full-fledged theory of race.

*Keywords:* Civilization, Race, Climate, Scottish Enlightenment, John Mair, Hector Boece, David Hume, Adam Ferguson