ON A CONJECTURE OF LE BRUYN

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Abstract. Given a generic field extension F/k of degree $n > 3$ (i.e. the Galois group of the normal closure of F is isomorphic to the symmetric group S_n), we prove that the norm torus, defined as the kernel of the norm map $N\colon R_{F/k}(\mathbb{G}\ _{textm}) \to \mathbb{G}_{\mathrm{m}}$, is not rational over k.

Given an arbitrary field k, we call a separable extension F/k of degree n *generic* if the Galois group $G = \mathrm{Gal}(L/k)$ of the normal closure L of F over k is isomorphic to the symmetric group S_n. We consider the norm map $N\colon F^* \to k^*$. The kernel of N can be regarded as the set of k-points of an affine algebraic k-variety T called *norm torus.* Using the Weil symbol of restriction of scalars, we write T as the kernel of $R_{F/k}(\mathbb{G}_{\mathrm{m}}) \to \mathbb{G}_{\mathrm{m},k}$ where $\mathbb{G}_{\mathrm{m}}$ stands for the multiplicative group. If the extension F/k is generic, the norm torus is also called generic and is denoted by $T_{F/k}$, or just T_n if it does not lead to any confusion.

In [LB], assuming $n > 3$, Le Bruyn proves that the generic norm torus T_n is non-rational over k whenever n is prime, and states a conjecture that T_n is never k-rational except, possibly, for $n = 6$. Our goal is to prove the above conjecture (including the case $n = 6$). Recall that T is called *stably rational* if there is a rational variety T' such that $T \times T'$ is rational.

Theorem. *With the above notation, $T_n (n > 3)$ is never stably rational over k.*

Remark. The result might look a little bit surprising in view of good arithmetic properties of generic norm tori: in particular, if k is a number field, they are known to satisfy weak approximation property and their principal homogeneous spaces satisfy the Hasse principle. Moreover, for the case when n is prime, T_n is known to be a direct factor of a rational variety [CT/S2]. Note that the result cannot be ameliorated in the sense that for $n = 2$ or 3 the torus T_n is of dimensio n 1 or 2 and hence rational [V], 4.73, 4.74.

The proof follows from the lemmas below. Throughout we denote by $M_n = \mathrm{Hom}(T_n, \mathbb{G}_{\mathrm{m}})$ the group of rational characters of T_n viewed as a G-module. By definition, there is an exact sequence of G-modules

$$0 \to \mathbb{Z} \to P_n \to M_n \to 0 \tag{1}$$

1991 *Mathematics Subject Classification.* 20G05.

Research of the second named author was partially supported by the Ministry of Absorption (Israel) and The Israel Science Foundation founded by the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

Typeset by $\mathcal{AMS}$-TEX

where $P_n = \mathbb{Z}[G/H]$ is a permutation module, $G = S_n$, $H = \mathrm{Gal}(L/F)$ is isomorphic to S_{n-1}. The following lemma is the key one.

Lemma 1. *Let $n = rs$ with arbitrary $r, s > 1$, and let F/k be a generic extension of degree n. If $T_{F/k} = T_n$ is stably rational over k, there is a generic extension K/E of degree r such that $T_{K/E} = T_r$ is stably rational over E.*

Proof. Take a subgroup $U = S_r \subset S_n$ embedded in such a way that P_n restricted to U is a direct sum $\underbrace{P_r \oplus \cdots \oplus P_r}_{s \text{ times}}$. (This simply means that we partition $\{1, \dots, n\}$ into s disjoint subset s of cardinality r and let U act in a standard way on each of these subsets.) We then regard (1) as a sequence of U-modules and notice that M_n restricted to U splits into a direct sum:

$$(M_n)|_U = M_r \oplus \underbrace{P_r \oplus \cdots \oplus P_r}_{(s-1) \text{ times}}. \tag{2}$$

In the language of tori, (2) reads as follows: let $E = L^U$ be the fixed subfield of U, then the E-torus $T_E = T \times_k E$ is isomorphic to a direct product of $T_r = \ker[R_{K/E}(\mathbb{G}_{\mathrm{m}}) \to \mathbb{G}_{\mathrm{m},E}]$ and a quasi-split torus $S = \prod_{i=1}^{s-1} R_{K/E}(\mathbb{G}_{\mathrm{m}})$ where K/E is a generic extension of degree r, $K = L^V$, $V \subset U$, $V \cong S_{r-1}$. By assumption, T is stably rational over k, hence T_E is stably rational over E. Since any quasi-split torus is rational, we are done. $\square$

Lemma 2 (Le Bruyn). *If $n > 3$ is a prime number, T_n is not stably rational.*

Proof. See [LB]. $\square$

Before stating the next lemma, we recall that the group

$$Ш^2_\omega(G, M) = \ker[H^2(G, M) \to \prod_{g \in G} H^2(\langle g \rangle, M)]$$

(where M stands for the character module of an algebraic torus T defined over k and split over L, $G = \mathrm{Gal}(L/k)$), is a birational invariant of T. To be more precise, this group is zero whenever T is stably rational over k. Here is another useful description of the above invariant: consider a flasque resolution of M, i.e. an exact sequence of G-modules

$$0 \to M \to S \to N \to 0$$

where S is a permutation module and N is a flasque module (the latter means that $H^{-1}(G', N) = 0$ for all subgroups $G' \subseteq G$), then $Ш^2_\omega(G, M) \cong H^1(G, N)$. See [V], 4.61, [CT/S1] for more details.

Lemma 3. *If n is a square, T_n is not stably rational.*

Proof. Let $n = m^2$. Take a subgroup $U = \mathbb{Z}/m\mathbb{Z} \times \mathbb{Z}/m\mathbb{Z} \subset S_n$ embedded in such a way that the module P from sequence (1) viewed as a U-module is isomorphic to $\mathbb{Z}[U]$. In other words, we choose U generated by

$$\sigma = (1 \quad 2 \dots m)(m+1 \quad m+2 \dots 2m) \dots (n-m+1 \quad n-m+2 \dots n),$$
$$\tau = (1 \quad m+1 \dots n-m+1)(2 \quad m+2 \dots n-m+2) \dots (m \quad 2m \dots m^2).$$

Then M_n, regarded as a U-module, is none other than $\hat{J} = \mathbb{Z}[U]/\mathbb{Z}$, the character module of the norm torus $J = \ker[R_{L/E}(\mathbb{G}_{\mathrm{m}}) \to \mathbb{G}_{\mathrm{m},E}]$ where $E = L^U$. It is well known that J is not rational over E because $\text{Ш}^2_\omega(U, \hat{J}) = \mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z}$. Since $T_n \times_k E = J$, we conclude that T_n cannot be stably rational over k. □

Corollary (Saltman, Snider). *If n is divisible by a square, T_n is not stably rational.*

Proof. Combine Lemma 1 and Lemma 3. □

Lemma 4. *The torus T_6 is not stably rational.*

Proof. Take $U = \mathbb{Z}/2 \times \mathbb{Z}/2 \subset S_6$ generated by (12)(34) and (34)(56). We observe that U coincides with the Sylow 2-subgroup of the alternating group A_4 embedded into S_6 via its action on the edges of tetrahedron. Let $M = M_6$ be the module of characters of T_6 defined by sequence (1) with $G = S_6$, $H = S_5$. It is known that $\text{Ш}^2_\omega(A_4, M) = \mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z}$ ([D/P], Lemma 13). This implies $\text{Ш}^2_\omega(U, M) \neq 0$. Indeed, assume the contrary. Then, since any Sylow 3-subgroup V of A_4 is cyclic, one has $\text{Ш}^2_\omega(V, M) = 0$, and vanishing of $\text{Ш}^2_\omega(U, M)$ would imply vanishing of $\text{Ш}^2_\omega(A_4, M)$ (one may apply the above interpretation of $\text{Ш}^2_\omega(G, M)$ as $H^1(G, N)$ to the case $G = A_6$ and use the fact that the restriction to a Sylow p-subgroup is injective on the p-component of H^1). □

Remark. Of course, one may give a more direct proof of Lemma 4 without referring to [D/P], either by a straightforward computation of $\text{Ш}^2_\omega(U, M)$ (which goes much simpler than for A_4), or by constructing an exact sequence of U-m odules

$$0 \to M_a \to M \to \mathbb{Z} \oplus \mathbb{Z} \to 0$$

with M_a the character module of an anisotropic torus T_a which, in our case, turns out to be $\mathbb{Z}[U]/\mathbb{Z}$; by [V], 4.22, the latter exact sequence induces a birational equivalence of tori $T_n \sim T_a \times \mathbb{G}^2_{\mathrm{m}}$, whence the result.

Proof of the Theorem. We are now ready to prove the Theorem. Indeed, the above Corollary reduces the problem to the case when n is square-free, and Lemmas 1 and 2 englobe all n having a prime divisor greater than 3. We thus have to apply Lemma 4 for the only remaining case $n = 6$. □

Concluding remark. Our theorem can (and should) be viewed in a broader context. Namely, one can extend it to generic tori in (almost absolutely) simple groups. Indeed, the above result corresponds to the case of an inner form of a simply connected group of type A_{n-1}. Such a generalization to the other types of inner and outer forms of simply connected and adjoint groups is the subject of our forthcoming paper.

Acknowledgement. This work was done while the second named author was visiting Université de Franche-Comté at Besançon. B. Kunyavskii thanks this institution for its hospitality.

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