

The City-State in Europe, 1000-1600 Hinterland, Territory, Region

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Hitherto, the historiography of 'city-states' has in general not been comparative, preferring to focus on one city, or one region, rather than taking a European perspective. However, the book under review intends to fill this gap and provide a basis for further discussion as to the nature of the city-state in Europe.⁽¹⁾ European city-states were to be found mainly in a belt stretching from northern Italy, through the Alps and southern Germany, to the Low Countries, and these regions are accordingly the focus of this study, although there is also some discussion of outliers such as Barcelona, Dubrovnik, and Novgorod. City-states in Italy and their counterparts north of the Alps had different origins, and also divergent forms of political and social organisation. The Italian city-states initially arose in ancient cities, most of which were also the seats of bishoprics, which administered spiritually, even if in no other way, some of the surrounding countryside. The city-state in Italy grew out of a need to control the sources of food supply in the hinterlands, and most Italian cities and city-states became wealthy because of trade. In the north, in contrast, most city-states were relatively new foundations, and generally not coterminous with ecclesiastical boundaries; while northern cities were also concerned with ensuring supplies of subsistence items, many northern cities' wealth was based rather more on trade in locally produced goods, as well as textiles produced in their hinterlands, rather than on long-distance trade and banking, as was the case in Italy.

The Italian city-states came into being earlier than their northern counterparts, with communes starting to be formed in the 11th century; these were also much larger in population than contemporary northern cities. In the initial expansion, the extent of the cities' territories tended to coincide with the areas where they got their food supplies from, though Scott points out that this was not the case with Venice, Genoa, Milan, and Florence – surely rather significant exceptions. Cities also invested in the countryside to increase

productivity and improve the flow of goods, not just from the countryside to the city, but also on routes of long-distance trade. Inevitably, cities tended to come into conflict with rural landlords, but in Italy, the latter often themselves became citizens and moved into the cities and entered their politics, something that happened rarely in Germany and the Low Countries (though the largest northern city-state, Bern, long remained dominated by landed aristocrats and agrarian in its economic base). The defining aspect in the external political life of the cities (at least in Italy) between c.1150 and c.1300 was the conflict between emperor and pope, in which the cities became embroiled not least because of their efforts to retain independence from both; this larger struggle was generally inextricable from the clashes between cities themselves. The reasons for desiring expansion in this period are not examined in much detail by Scott, but have to do not least with the growing populations of the cities, as well as their need to secure trade routes and supplies, which often necessitated either taking over the competition, or entering into a federation or league of some sort (more common north of the Alps than in Italy). Italian cities also often freed the serfs in their hinterlands; Scott rightly stresses that this was not because of any democratic instinct, but simply because serfs did not pay taxes, and the cities wished to increase their tax base. This is another (unexplained) difference between north and south: German cities did not tend to free serfs in their hinterlands, and it remains unclear why in some instances feudal levies, and elsewhere taxes, were seen as more beneficial. The differing means of control might have been one factor; the prior history of landholding and serfdom in the countryside must surely also play a part, though that is something that takes us far beyond town–country relations.

As the Italian city-states expanded, they also lost their quasi-democratic character, succumbing to dynastic rule – something that never happened in the long term in northern cities, which remained controlled by (admittedly limited and often inbred) oligarchies. Between c.1200 and c.1300, city-states of a different sort from those in Italy came into being in the Low Countries and in Germany. Here domination of the hinterlands often tended to take the form of granting citizenship rights (which also meant acquiring some jurisdictional rights over them) to *Ausbürger* or *buitenpoorter* – ‘outburghers’ – and controlling rural craft production (and often trade as well). While crafts were restricted in the Italian countryside too, the symbiosis of town and country in the putting-out system was much stronger in the north than in Italy, and outburghers amongst the non-nobility were hardly known in the south. In Italy, city-states often founded new, free cities – *borghi nuovi* or *borghi franchi* – in which new settlers from the countryside would be granted freedom (rural settlers in established cities did not enjoy this privilege); in the north, city-states were not only not responsible for new urban foundations, they also normally ruled over no subordinate towns of significance in their hinterlands. In the north, particularly in Germany, there was an early tendency – much stronger and often longer lasting than in Italy – for towns to form self-help leagues, ranging from the Wendish League or the Rhenish Town League to the Hansa, though only one such association eventually evolved into a coherent overarching polity itself, namely Switzerland. While the motivation to form leagues was something that survived, the leagues themselves were often short-lived, and were intended to be so. Nevertheless, this seems to indicate either less competition between city-states, or at least a greater ability to overcome such competition, than was the case in Italy; Scott does not provide any explanation for this difference.

The central sections of this book are two long chapters on the south and the north in the later Middle Ages (1300–1450), a period which might be (and has been) seen as the apogee of the city-state in Europe. Italian cities continued to expand, which often resulted in the consolidation of several city-states into one larger entity; this in turn tended to be characterised by dynastic rule, and by a complete and often heavy-handed dominance of the rural hinterlands. In the same period there arose a system of public finance based on public debt, again a peculiarity of the Italian cities (at least in this period). There were differences between the Italian cities too: Genoa, for example, was more interested in ensuring the viability of trading outposts than in acquiring a very large hinterland, in contrast to, say, Florence; Florence and Milan were more domineering over the cities they conquered than was Venice; in general, Tuscany, although later falling completely under Florentine control, was characterised by fewer challenges posed to each other by the various city-states than was the case in Lombardy – a difference Scott believes probably has to do primarily with topography. In all cases, this was a period of aggressive expansion, often by means of war; in the method of expansion, the Italian city-states are similar to those of the Swiss confederation, but differ from

their German and Flemish counterparts.

In the north, the chronology of expansion was, to use Scott's term, 'compacted', with little taking place before c.1300 and after c.1500, whereas in Italy it was a much longer process. The importance of leagues did not diminish, culminating in the rise of the Swiss Confederation. Some cities in the north (Cologne; Augsburg) never formally acquired territories, but were nevertheless, because of their economic clout and independence, their size, and their considerable economic dominance over their hinterlands, 'indubitably city-states' (p. 130), a judgement that might lead some to wonder what exactly it is that makes a place deserve to be called a city-state; for Scott, dominance over a rural hinterland, even if neither jurisdictional nor political, seems to be sufficient. Northern cities also continued to extend citizens' rights to rural dwellers, though as Scott points out, this has little to do with anything like an end to feudalism: there was no blanket extension of citizenship and abolition of serfdom. There are significant differences between northern regions: in the Low Countries, the major cities were relatively close to each other, and did not have to deal with the sort of overwhelming aristocratic power in the countryside that most German cities faced; they also never developed the kind of aggressive military policies of the Swiss cities. They tended to expand by the acquisition of outburghers and jurisdictional rights, including the rights to control markets and control trade in their hinterlands. While the German cities also acquired outburghers, in northern Germany many cities acquired hinterlands through mortgages, and later also by individual purchases of citizens. In southern Germany, individual purchase tended to be combined with large-scale corporate acquisitions, generally somewhat disguised, as lands were acquired by urban hospitals under the control of town council. The northern German cities tended to be more interested in their immediate victualling needs and their trade routes; the Flemish, and particularly the south German cities, in contrast, were increasingly dominating their hinterlands through the putting-out industries that rose to prominence from the 14th century. Many of the German cities, particularly in the south, were advantaged by their 'free imperial' status; they had no overweening noble lords to contend with, though in their expansion into the countryside they came into frequent conflict with the nobility, particularly with regard to the contested jurisdictions arising from the purchase of land but not necessarily personal jurisdiction, and the freedoms granted to outburghers that undermined the claims over them of their personal lords (Scott believes, however, that the extent of conflict has been exaggerated by earlier scholarship). All over Germany, urban patricians also bought land individually, and there was a trend of such persons rising into the ranks of the country nobility or at least retiring into a *rentier* lifestyle (this might have merited further attention that it receives); many purchases that had been individual holdings were 'silently absorbed into the council's collective overlordship' (p. 150), a development Scott does not examine, nor indeed explain.

Overall, there seems to be no way to bracket German cities under one common denominator with regard to their policies – something which is, however, roughly true of Italy as well. One thing the German cities had in common that differentiates them from Italian cities was the defensive nature of their policies: they were rarely aggressively expansionist, but rather more concerned with securing trade routes and market rights, as well as controlling the growth of rural industry to their advantage. Partly for this reason, Scott believes that they, unlike Italian city-states, should be seen less as areal territories than as associations of a more personal or corporate nature. The divergence from this northern pattern was provided by the Swiss cities, which did pursue an aggressively expansionist policy, for reasons that are not entirely clear; in many cases, the expansion was largely brought about by military means. The Swiss cities also, rather like their Italian counterparts if in different ways, but unlike the German and Flemish cities, pursued policies of 'maximizing revenue while hobbling the rural economy' (p. 173), largely through heavy taxation.

In the late 15th and 16th centuries, the Swiss cities survived 'by attraction', in Scott's phrase, coming together to ensure their survival; while many southern German cities might have wanted to join the party, most could not, and the causes for this might merit further analysis (the Reformation is surely not a sufficient cause, despite Scott's suggestion at p. 197). Other cities – notably Antwerp – survived by working out power-sharing arrangements with rural lords. In Italy, many city-states adopted a more monarchical form of rule, which is one reason why many feel that they might no longer merit the term 'city-state', though Scott is surely right to point out that this is hardly a sufficient criterion by which to decide whether or not the

term is legitimate. Scott makes the important point that apart from a few isolated cases ‘no European city-state “disappeared” in the sense that it was stripped of its territory’ in the 16th century, or indeed until much later in many cases (p. 193). This may be true, but it is also a matter of definitions: were the ‘city-states’ of the Swiss confederation still city-states by 1600? Clearly, they retained a great deal of autonomy; clearly also, they were subordinate to a larger polity. Similarly, the city-state of Florence became the Duchy of Tuscany; Scott is of course right that viewed from one perspective, the Duchy of Tuscany was still in many ways the city-state of Florence. But what, precisely, is the difference between a city-state ruling its hinterland, and a principality dominated by a capital city?

Scott concludes that it is not possible to propose any ‘overarching template of the city-state in medieval Europe which would embrace both north and south’ (p. 234); from his exposition, it is clear that no ideal-type of a city-state can find a reflection in the realities of this period. Scott believes, correctly I think, that the best means of understanding and comparing city-states is to examine them within the framework of interactions with hinterland, territory, and region, and in this framework he finds four kinds of city-states: those that dominated hinterlands, but acquired no territory; those that used jurisdictional as well as economic means to dominate their hinterlands; those that had territories in often distant places (city-empires like Genoa); and those that acquired territories in their hinterlands. Scott concedes that those city-states that came under dynastic rule might have pursued a more aggressive territorial policy, though he correctly points out that the Swiss cities were very aggressive while remaining non-dynastic. This makes it rather hard to generalise about the form of the city-state on the basis of internal politics, and is an issue that might be worthy of more detailed study. In both instances, however, primarily commercial concerns ‘came to be overlaid and relegated by fiscal, military, and administrative considerations’ (p. 239).

At a broader level, there are four areas in which north and south differed: the role of the Church; the form of landownership; rural citizenship; and jurisdiction. In the north, there was no congruity between the diocese and the city-state: bishops tended to be expelled in the north, and where they were not and remained powerful, cities tended not to become city-states. (This assumes that control over the countryside exercised by a bishop whose seat is in a city – Salzburg, for example – disqualifies that city from being called a city-state; this is an ecclesiastical lordship, which cannot, in Scott’s terms, be coterminous with a city-state. Some might find this view in need of further justification than this book provides. Of course Salzburg was not ruled by a town council; nor was the Duchy of Tuscany or even the early city-state of Florence.) In the south, while bishops lost their power to rule cities, the territories were initially established within the boundaries of, and using many of the jurisdictional rights vested in, existing dioceses. The second difference is more difficult, as bourgeois landownership in the countryside was ubiquitous across Europe. In the north, cities took different routes to dominating the countryside, and the landownership of individuals often had little to do with the eventual dominance of the city-state; there is, however, no consistent pattern to this. In Italy, bourgeois landownership seems to have been more closely related to urban policies of expansion, and had also the overall effect of destroying economic independence and prosperity; this is something that relates closely to the rise of sharecropping on large farms (the *mezzadria podereale*), which was generally unknown in the north, and thus not discussed by Scott. As we have seen, the third divergence emerges quite clearly, in that commoners in Italy almost never achieved citizenship, whereas they did so quite often in many northern regions. Finally, Italian city-states achieved complete jurisdictional dominance over their hinterlands, something that did not happen north of the Alps – but, as Scott stresses, did indeed happen *in* the Alps, namely in the Swiss city-states.

This book is an excellent survey of an important topic in medieval European history, and will prove very useful for both scholars and students who wish to look at the city-state in comparative perspective. Its conciseness (there are just 240 pages of text; though the bibliography of almost 700 items is another very useful aspect of this book) is in many respects a great virtue. If it was the author’s purpose both to present a survey and, in doing so, to provoke some questions, he has done so very effectively. Some of the issues arising have already been posed above, but I should like to conclude by raising a few more questions. These are not, however, intended as criticisms of this book: it is clear enough that Scott did not intend to provide answers to these questions, though given his expertise and past publications (these are certainly issues he has

addressed with a great deal of insight earlier, albeit with regard to a single region), one might wish that he had tackled them at some length. We have already seen that the form of internal political organisation does not directly correlate with the emergence of a (particular sort of) city-state. But how do extrinsic political factors affect the nature of the city-state? In fact, is it not legitimate to ask if this might be a key to whether or not one can define a polity as a city-state? If a city-state is simply a city that dominates its hinterland, should we not find that (southern) England was (and is) part of the city-state of London? London clearly exercised (and exercises) both economic and political dominance over a large region, and had (and continues to have) a massive influence on lifestyles, economies, prices, supply-lines, demographic and settlement patterns – and is also the centre of governance. And that last is perhaps why London is not a city-state: it is a capital instead. But then why cannot Florence by the late 16th century be similarly called the capital of Tuscany, rather than calling Tuscany all a part of the Florentine city-state? (It might be an unfair remark, but I cannot help wishing that in a book about the ‘city-state’, there had been some discussion of what constitutes a ‘state’; without understanding this, how can we understand what sets a city apart from a city-state?) Scott believes that city-states emerged from ‘an existential need to harness the resources of their hinterlands’ (p. 236); there existed, however, other ‘cities as poles of demographic concentration’ (p. 236) that did not seem to have any such existential need, or at any rate, not to such an extent that they became city-states: this is something that requires some further explanation. What is it that made some regions more prone to this form of urban control over food supply than others? I suspect that the wider political context had an important role to play in this. It seems to me that the forms of external political organisation and the divergent effects of these need a good deal of further analysis, as they surely relate to the success, size, and nature of the city-state.

A related and even broader issue, and one that Scott has cogently addressed in earlier publications [\(2\)](#), has to do with the place of the European city-state (however broadly or narrowly defined) within the larger narratives of state formation and the transition to capitalism. These are aspects of the city-state that have been variously addressed for individual regions, and Italian city-states have figured prominently in narratives about the rise of early commercial capitalism or (more recently) the ‘undevelopment’ of capitalism; similarly, the city-states of the Low Countries have also been claimed as motors of transition, and a recent monograph has called Bruges the ‘cradle of capitalism’.[\(3\)](#) Yet in the longer term, the earliest places where capitalism seems to have emerged are generally thought to have been England and the Netherlands (though this is a consensus that might also need some questioning), and England seems to have been most successful in establishing, earlier than elsewhere in Europe, a strong and centralised state. Did the differing forms of the city-state have anything to do with these diverging outcomes? How much does England’s precocity – if indeed England was as precocious as is normally assumed – relate to the ‘city-state-ness’ of London, which exerted a huge influence on its hinterland in many respects?[\(4\)](#) Equally important is the issue of sharecropping and the nature of the rural economy in the hinterlands: sharecropping was rare in the hinterlands of the northern cities (though it was by no means unknown in the north, albeit in less debilitating forms than in Italy), which were characterised by putting-out, by intensive cash-cropping, and by an increasingly commercialised agriculture that responded to demands arising from the cities, but was not directly controlled by them, in the manner that the Italian countryside appears to have been. Where did these differences arise from, and what consequences did they have on long-term divergences between Italy on the one hand, and southern Germany and the Low Countries on the other? The form of the city-state and its trajectory is clearly one of the elements that must be brought to bear on any comparative analysis of long-term economic change. Although these issues are scarcely present in this book, Scott has given us an excellent, very stimulating starting point, which any future effort to examine economic and political transformation from the Middle Ages to modernity will surely want to take account of.

Notes

1. Readers may also wish to read Scott’s article on the Italian city-states, which provides in very concise form some of the arguments contained in this book, as well as a detailed historiographical critique: Tom Scott, ‘A historian of Germany looks at the Italian city-state’, *Storica*, 47 (2010), 7–59.[Back to \(1\)](#)

2. I am thinking primarily of his second monograph: *Regional Identity and Economic Change: The Upper Rhine, 1450–1600* (Oxford, 1997), but other works are also pertinent, including his first book: *Freiburg and the Breisgau: Town – Country Relations in the Age of Reformation and the Peasants’ War* (Oxford, 1986); and in particular two recent articles: ‘The German Peasants’ War and the “crisis of feudalism”: reflections on a neglected theme’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, 6 (2002), 265–95; and ‘South-west German serfdom reconsidered’, in *Forms of Servitude in Northern and Central Europe: Decline, Resistance, and Expansion*, ed. Paul Freedman and Monique Bourin (Turnhout, 2005), pp. 115–28.[Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. Rebecca Jean Emigh, *The Undevelopment of Capitalism: Sectors and Markets in Fifteenth-Century Tuscany* (Philadelphia, PA, 2009); James M. Murray, *Bruges: Cradle of Capitalism* (Cambridge, 2005).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. See e.g. Bruce M. S. Campbell et al, *A Medieval Capital and Its Grain Supply* ([London], 1993), for an example of one way in which London influences its hinterland.[Back to \(4\)](#)
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