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Preface

CHRISTOPHER Wheeler’s unexpected invitation to edit this Handbook came towards the end of a career largely spent teaching early modern European history in British universities. It also arrived when I was spending a sabbatical year in the United States, which made me aware, fully for the first time, of the very different forms of ‘early modern’ history which thrived on the other side of the Atlantic. After some initial hesitation over whether to accept, I came to see both the opportunity presented by the Handbook to take stock of what early modern European history was and is, how and why it has developed, and where it might be going, at a time when its study is becoming less central to university and college teaching than between the 1970s and the 1990s. Yet the subject’s remarkable growth during my own professional lifetime has been such that, even within the considerable space generously allocated by Oxford University Press, difficult choices have had to be made.

The overall aim was to produce a coherent and accessible guide to the many approaches to early modern European history which have thrived during the past four or five decades. Defining the overall framework and even establishing the period to be covered, however, proved to be more problematical than I had anticipated. In the planning and commissioning stage I was fortunate to have the benefit of advice from two associate editors: Liam Brockey (Michigan State University) and Regina Grafe (European University Institute), and both helped to shape the book in important ways. Aware of contrasting approaches to this period, the scheme was then submitted to several friends for their scrutiny: I am grateful to Carlo Capra, Stuart Clark, Bill Doyle, John Elliott, David Moon, Martin Powers, and Ted Rabb, as well as Oxford University Press’s anonymous referees, for their incisive and constructive suggestions. Subsequently Sheilagh Ogilvie was a generous source of advice on economic history.
My debt to the contributors is even greater. All have responded positively and uncomplainingly to suggestions for revision intended to strengthen the unity of the two volumes, and have patiently waited for all the authors and the editor to complete their contributions. Any enterprise involving over fifty scholars is bound to have a bumpy ride to the finishing line, and I have been particularly grateful to several contributors who completed their articles despite adverse professional or personal circumstances. When it seemed likely that the volume might be deprived of a crucial chapter on ‘Historical Demography’, the editors and publisher of the Journal of Interdisciplinary History graciously allowed Anne McCants to expand and update her article, ‘Historical Demography and the Crisis of the Seventeenth Century’, which originally appeared in that journal [40 (2009), 195–214] and now appears in this Handbook in a substantially (p. x) revised version. I am deeply grateful to the journal’s editors and publisher for permitting this reprinting, and especially to Ted Rabb for swiftly facilitating this arrangement. The last-minute withdrawal of the scholar who had undertaken to write the chapter on ‘Travel and Communications’ threatened that another key topic might be omitted, and in the circumstances I decided at very short notice to write a replacement chapter myself.

The production of two such large volumes has been surprisingly easy, thanks to the skill and professionalism of the History team at Oxford University Press: Christopher Wheeler (before his retirement), his successor Stephanie Ireland, Rachel Naum and, above all, Cathryn Steele whose support and encouragement during the final stages has been particularly important. Elissa Connor skillfully copy-edited the articles, and Deepika Mercilee, Tharani Ramachandran, and Michael dela Cruz have together made the transition from electronic files to printed book much smoother than it might have been: my debt to them is considerable. It is even greater to Nancy Bailey who—as in previous books which I have published—has not merely handled the computing side, but has provided continual encouragement and advice, and caught more of my slips than I like to remember! The presence in Glasgow of two contributors, Sam Cohn and Thomas Munck, has been a particular advantage. Both have offered wisdom and encouragement, and been ready to listen to me thinking out the problems which emerged during the editing. Alex Shephard has also been a local source of welcome guidance and practical help. Julia Smith has helped most of all, with sound advice, injunctions to press on, reviving cups of coffee, and quite remarkable toleration of my preoccupation, particularly during recent months.

Hamish Scott

December 2014
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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter reviews the origins of present-day understandings of humanism, the principal intellectual movement of the period 1350 to 1650, as they were shaped by major European thinkers of the twentieth century, and distinguishes nine themes or dimensions of humanism that characterize the movement, while exploring its relations with religion, philosophy, science, and the arts. It emphasizes the grounding of the humanist movement in the classical tradition, resulting in the development of a new curriculum, the studia humanitatis (‘studies of humanity’) that not only binds together the humanist community into a respublica litterarum (‘republic of letters’), but guides the intellectual formation of European elites into the nineteenth century. By restoring antiquity to their contemporary world, and interweaving it with enduring Christian and medieval traditions, the humanists lay the foundations of modern thought.

Keywords: Humanism, Renaissance, classical tradition, studia humanitatis, respublica litterarum

Without a doubt, humanism constituted the most important strand of intellectual culture during the period from 1350 to 1650—roughly the era of the Renaissance. It was fuelled by an impassioned recovery of ancient thought and sensibility—the return to the ancient world queried in the title of this chapter—but it was more. It established the curriculum of studies for European elites that would endure into the nineteenth century. It affirmed the value of human activity in society and in the cosmos, and allowed for the assertion of the worth of women as intellectual and moral actors. It interacted dynamically with the major philosophical schools of the era—Aristotelian, Platonist, and Hermetic or occult—without being identified completely with any one of them, and so prepared the foundations for modern philosophy and science, its offspring. It created a lay culture that would be interwoven with the clerical culture of the Middle Ages and the contemporaneously unfolding movements for religious reform of every stripe and texture. It invented the tools of modern scholarship: the critical analysis of texts; the historical contextualization of literary works and authors; the abandonment of literal translation for translation according to sense; the emendation and stabilization of texts for scribal publication, at first, and in time print; the standardization of the components of the book; then utilizing all these tools, it conveyed to the modern world nearly all it now possesses of the most extensive cultural product of any ancient civilization, the corpus of Greek and Latin literature, history, philosophy, and science.

And yet, humanism is often misunderstood. It is dismissed by some as elitist, vacuous, and pedantic, and hyperbolized by others as the matrix of modern republicanism and individualism. Even those who do not dismiss it find humanism stubbornly difficult to define. In these few pages, an attempt is made to sketch what humanism is and is not, and to identify its main themes and vectors.
What Humanism is, and isn’t

Two powerful misconceptions in particular interfere with a clear sense of the humanist movement: first, the conflation of humanism with a romantic theory of the Renaissance; and second, the identification of the humanism of the Renaissance era with the modern ideology of secular humanism.

Historians and critics of the Romantic era invented the two terms ‘Renaissance’ and ‘humanism’—both related to, yet distinct from, terms actually in use during the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries. ‘Renaissance’, for these neologists, denoted a period of cataclysmic change, when European civilization seemed, in their view, to be ‘born again’ after a near-millennium of stagnation and obscurity. ‘Humanism’, likewise, signified the discovery of human potential after a period in which it had been suppressed, liberating the individual from the constraints of institutional and intellectual hierarchies.

Although neither concept is entirely without merit, both have required considerable revision over the last two centuries. The Renaissance—when the term is not entirely avoided—is now generally understood to describe the changes in artistic and intellectual culture occurring during the fourteenth through early seventeenth centuries. Humanism is now understood as an intellectual movement originating in the urbanized enclave of northern Italy, energized by the intense study and imitation of the Greco-Roman, or classical tradition.

The modern ideology of ‘secular humanism’, sometimes simply called ‘humanism’, or as some adherents prefer, ‘Humanism’, capitalized, derives from Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment misreadings of Renaissance humanism. It is concerned with the celebration and advancement of human existence, which it sees as self-sufficient, unbounded by philosophical limits or, emphatically, by interventions from the divine realm. It has recently been the target of conservative Christian polemic, which construes modern, secular humanism as inherently inimical to a Christian worldview. Yet Renaissance humanism was most certainly not secular—nor was any other cultural movement in the era of the Renaissance—but rather saturated with Christian thought and sensibility.

What then was the humanism of the Renaissance? At its core was a commitment to the classical tradition, the literary and philosophical legacy of Greek and Latin antiquity. The Christian authors of the last three centuries of the Roman era had known this tradition thoroughly, and integrated it with the burgeoning Christian one, accomplishing the fusion of the classical and Christian traditions. Their devotional and theological works transmitted that hybrid culture to readers who could access them between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries: the era, roughly, of the Middle Ages.

Medieval scholars also encountered directly those works available to them from the ancient, pre-Christian past. In eastern Europe, the study of Greek texts, now lodged in a Christian framework, continued uninterruptedly from ancient times. In western Europe, where knowledge of Greek was largely lost, Latin survived, though a reduced and impoverished Latin, as a common means of communication. At the same time, monastic scribes copied and recopied the ancient books that had been stored in monastic libraries, producing manuscript versions, the oldest of which are the first versions of Latin works that we now possess.

And so the classical tradition endured in the West: stowed in monastic repositories, embedded in the thought of Christian theologians, displayed in a handful of frequently read and widely circulated Latin books (Cicero, Seneca, and Virgil the favoured authors). Periodically, enthusiasm for the classics crested in brief episodes identified as ‘Renaissances’ or ‘proto-Renaissances’: a Carolingian Renaissance in the eighth century; an Ottonian Renaissance in the ninth; a ‘Renaissance of the twelfth century’, so profound that, for some scholars, it not only anticipated but pre-empted the later Italian-born Renaissance that is our present concern.

The twelfth-century Renaissance entailed, in addition to a renewed interest in classical texts, the study and elaboration, in Italy, of the books of Roman civil law; and the translation into Latin from Greek and Arabic versions of most of the works of Aristotle. These Aristotelian works transformed the structures of university study especially in France and England, giving birth to the characteristically medieval phase of European philosophical thought known as ‘scholasticism’. Scholasticism, it
should be noted, was thus born of the same surge of interest in the literary residue of classical antiquity that would also give birth to humanism.

Renaissance humanism began in northern Italy in the last decades of the thirteenth century, with—one again—the intensified study and imitation of classical texts: a ‘return’ to the ancients, not in the sense of going back to a past time, but of its ‘recovery’ or ‘rebirth’; the German Wiederbelebung, ‘a coming to life’, says it well. In probing, digesting, and imitating the work of the ancients, mostly Latin, but also Greek, Renaissance humanists transformed European civilization, completing the synthesis of Greco-Roman and Christian culture begun by the Church fathers in the last centuries of the ancient world, and invigorating nearly every dimension of culture, including politics, philosophy, religion, and the arts. From Italy, where humanism flourished in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the movement travelled beyond the Alps to dominate much of Europe in the sixteenth century, taking different form and coloration in multifarious social, political, and cultural settings. By the late sixteenth century, as Charles Nauert has said, humanism ‘was everywhere’, implicated in the cultural product of creators of all kinds who were not, strictly speaking, humanists; while those few who were humanists by profession had turned to specialization in classical and philological studies, so anticipating the professionalization of those fields of the humanities deeply familiar to the readers of this book.

The Three Giants

The understanding of Renaissance humanism surveyed in the last few paragraphs is the product of a historiographical tradition originating more than a century ago. In 1859, the German scholar Georg Voigt described the humanist movement as a Wiederbelebung—a new ‘coming to life’—of classical antiquity. The Italian scholar Remigio Sabbadini published a similar work in 1905–14, tracing the steps by which classical texts were discovered, copied, and analysed in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy. These important investigations laid the groundwork for the more sophisticated discussions of humanism that followed by three pre-eminent scholars, born respectively in 1900, 1905, and 1909: the Germans Hans Baron and Paul Oskar Kristeller, and the Italian Eugenio Garin. The careers of all three were impacted in young adulthood by the rise of Nazism and Fascism, which thereby came to impassion their constructions of humanism, in which all three saw a rebuke to totalitarianism. In the late 1930s, Baron and Kristeller, both Jews, migrated to the United States from the European maelstrom, and died in their adopted homeland at advanced ages in 1988 and 1999. Remote from the centre during the Fascist period, Garin taught at high school level in Sicily and Sardinia, moved after the war to Florence and Pisa, and died in Florence in 2004, four years into the twenty-first century. All three were expert classicists, who not only wrote about humanism but identified, edited, translated, and expounded humanist works. Their views differed, but each of their visions of the humanist event, unfolded in many publications, was deeply rooted in the study of texts and a profound understanding of the past. Their longevity and continued productivity into advanced old age further ensured their domination of the field of humanist studies.

Kristeller’s reading of humanism is the broadest. Resisting a forest of easy formulations, he precisely maps its relations to precursor and contemporary intellectual movements—to classicism and to scholasticism—as well as to other cultural streams such as philosophy and the arts. Fundamental is his distinction between scholasticism and humanism. These he juxtaposes not as sequential, but as contemporary intellectual movements enlisting different participants for different objects. The scholastics were a university-based elite engaged in metaphysical speculation, to whom the Aristotelian corpus offered an invaluable framework. The humanists were a loose network of teachers, public officials and secretaries, learned clerics, and aristocratic amateurs, connected by their interests rather than by class or profession. Scholasticism and humanism related to each other, then, not as past versus present, or as obscurantism versus enlightenment, but as competing disciplines do within a university faculty.

By drawing this line between scholasticism and humanism—horizontally, as it were, rather than vertically—Kristeller avoids, and implicitly challenges the Romantic concept of humanism and Renaissance alike. Equally important, he identifies what it is in the Renaissance humanist encounter with the classical tradition that distinguishes it from earlier ones. It lies in the
construction of a new framework of study. The traditional framework identified seven disciplines that constituted the ‘liberal arts’, as codified in late antiquity—the three verbal arts of the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and four mathematical arts of the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music)—which preceded the higher studies of philosophy and theology. The humanists redefined the ‘liberal arts’ as consisting of five disciplines, which they called the studia humanitatis (‘studies of humanity’)—the phrase from which, appropriately, the terms (p. 7) ‘humanist’ and ‘humanism’ would evolve. Those five were grammar and rhetoric, two of the traditional trivium, plus poetry, history, and moral philosophy.

What sleight of hand! Mathematics, astronomy, and logic all eliminated, disciplines preparatory to the study of philosophy and theology in the university curricula! The humanists elevated those studies engrossed with words, and useful for understanding the experience of daily living, over those that might yield knowledge of the cosmos and of eternity. And Kristeller, by highlighting this curricular shift as the fulcrum of the humanist movement, has explained why thinkers fascinated with the past yet introduce something entirely new into the mainstream of European civilization. Humanism offers a medium for the discussion of human existence as lived in the present moment, and detaches itself from the investigation—still valid and useful, but different—of ultimate things.

Kristeller, then, locates in the studia humanitatis a cultural programme that is common to the humanists, and so, rather than any set of shared ideas, unites the movement. Garin and Baron, in contrast, identify what they see as humanism’s intellectual core, which they trace to the northern Italian context within which the movement originated.

An Italian native, Garin is especially aware of the intersection between the ideas the humanists articulated and the civic setting from which they came. Even patterns of thought that were not explicitly political—as seen in works concerned with social or philosophical questions—can be recognized, as Garin presents them, as having been fuelled by the energy and pragmatism of an urban environment, which evoked an interest in the daily existence of humans, more than in their religious destiny.

Baron goes further. For him, humanism is essentially ‘civic humanism’. It is concerned with the political and social world of the northern Italian cities, with specific works seen as triggered by specific events—as when, famously, the humanist Leonardo Bruni responded to the crisis of 1402, when the forces of the tyrant of Milan encircled and threatened Florence. Baronian humanism, in fact, conditioned by contemporary political events, becomes an ideology, if not a philosophy, valorizing the republican ideals especially of Florence, the epicentre of the humanist movement.

As the Kristellerian, Garinian, and Baronian constructions of humanism absorbed American scholars in the postwar era, controversy ensued—the three authors of those constructs remaining nonetheless on the best of terms. Adherents of the ‘civic humanism’ model resisted the neutral and cautious definitions and distinctions posed by Kristeller, while Kristeller disciples on both sides of the Atlantic, engaged in the archaeology of manuscript traditions and the preparation of critical editions, largely ignored the politically laden and Florence-centred views of Baron, while they welcomed Garin’s less imperious formulations.

All three of these visions have weaknesses and strengths. Only Kristeller’s, however, is able to account for the trajectory of the humanist movement as it vaults over the Alps to infiltrate and animate the whole of European culture. Baron’s theory is illuminating for Florence, but cannot explain the versions of humanism that emerged in nearby Venice or Rome, let alone Nuremberg or Paris. Garin offers a broader synthesis, but his range is still principally Italian, rooted in that region’s unique and precocious urbanization. (p. 8) Kristeller alone describes a humanism that it is recognizable in its sixteenth-century German or seventeenth-century English manifestations. The humanist movement was malleable: it displayed different characteristics in different regions, political environments, cultural settings, and social strata. It was regionally, sociologically, and ideologically diverse.

Humanist Diversity
Baron, Kristeller, and Garin were polymaths equipped to wrangle with the mammoth problem of the nature of humanism that Voigt had first addressed. Their students and followers since the 1960s have largely avoided this challenge, choosing instead to fill out the contours of humanism older experts had bestowed upon them. Exceptions are Albert Rabil, Jr., whose 1989 three-volume collection of essays offers in the sum a rich profile of humanism as then understood, and Donald Kelley and Charles Nauert, whose syntheses of current understandings of humanism published initially in 1991 and 1995 (second edition 2006) do likewise, in smaller compass. But most students of humanism have hared off in multiple directions, rooting out the characteristics of humanism in its sundry settings and aspects. They have studied humanism not only in Florence, but also in Venice, Milan, Naples, and Rome; not only in Italy, but also in Germany, Iberia, France, England, the Low Countries, Poland, and Croatia. They have studied humanism and the law, humanism and the Reformation, humanism and historiography, and humanism and pedagogy, and more. They have produced a raft of monographs on individual humanists, and gathered, edited, and translated the works of the humanists.

These efforts have culminated in multi-volume collections of the works of Thomas More (Yale University Press, from 1963); Desiderius Erasmus in Latin (North-Holland [Amsterdam], from 1969) and English (University of Toronto Press, from 1974); and Juan Luis Vives (Brill [Leiden], from 1987). In addition, the I Tatti Renaissance Library series edited by Kristeller’s student James Hankins for Harvard University Press (sixty-eight volumes to date, from 2001) aims to publish all the most important works of many humanists in bilingual versions modelled on the Loeb Classical Library; and the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe series, edited by Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr., includes among its ninety-five volumes completed to date English translations of the writings of all the major women humanists and of several male humanists on the condition of women (University of Chicago Press and the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies/ITER, University of Toronto, 1996–). Especially in Italy, finally, the works of several humanists have been made available in facsimile versions of their best sixteenth- to eighteenth-century editions, accompanied by a modern critical analysis. In these various efforts at the standardization and publication of the humanist canon, contemporary scholars mimic their Renaissance forebears who performed that same service for the classics of Greece and Rome.

The monographs that have proliferated since the 1960s, moreover, must convince even a reluctant audience about the diversity of humanism. The regional differences present themselves immediately. Whereas the humanists of Florence, the creators of the civic humanism Baron so admired, were typically lawyers and notaries, or state chancellors and secretaries, in Venice the patriciate dominated the development of humanist culture both in number and activity, writing themselves the defining texts, and recruiting and patronizing the subalterns, often foreign-born, who filled out the roster of the intellectual elite. In Milan, humanism was a restricted phenomenon centred immediately on the figure of the duke whose victories required celebration. In Naples, likewise, humanists drawn from different localities clustered around the prince, a generous patron of a wide range of intellectual and artistic endeavours. In Rome, the humanists were mostly clerics, the prelates and bureaucrats connected to the papal court, who developed a version of humanism that suited the needs of an international ecclesiastical state.

In Germany and the Low Countries, humanist sodalities developed early schools, universities, and monasteries, as well as in some towns and princely courts. In these regions after 1520, humanism was deeply imbricated with the Reformation, whose leaders, propagandists, and teachers were overwhelmingly humanists by training. In the Low Countries, even before the arrival of the great Erasmus, the Hellenist, Hebraist, and dialectician Rudolf Agricola (c. 1443–85) set the pattern for advanced classical studies. Later the region was distinguished by the Collegium Trilingue (trilingual, that is: Latin, Greek, and Hebrew) established in Louvain in 1518, dedicated to the spread of humanist learning, and by such humanists as Justus Lipsius (1547–1606), an advocate of Stoicism, and the classical scholar Joseph Scaliger (1540–1609), of Italian descent, who took refuge in Leiden during the last decades of his life. The pre-Reformation German lands were home to the Hebraist Johann Reuchlin (1455–1522) and the “arch-humanist”, as he was called, and poet Conrad Celtis (1459–1508), while the Lutheran revolution imposed the task of creating a new educational system, at once evangelical and humanistic, on Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560) and Johannes Sturm (1507–89), among others.

In England, humanism was centred on the universities and the royal court. During the reign of Henry VII, John Colet (1467–
1519) and others of the circle of so-called Oxford Reformers solidly instituted the study of the classics. Their work was continued in the stormier reign of Henry VIII by Thomas More (1478–1535), a humanist and statesman of broad interests although remembered today primarily for his visionary *Utopia*, and his sensational martyrdom. His younger contemporary also circulated around the royal court—Thomas Elyot (1490–1546), author of *The Boke Named the Governor* (1531), detailing the proper rearing of the elites who were destined to lead the realm—while the classicist Roger Ascham (1515–68), author of the pedagogical classic *The Scholemaster* (1570), was tutor to the future queen Elizabeth Tudor.

In France, humanism focused on the law, history, and political theory. Here Guillaume Budé (1467–1540) undertook a massive ‘restitution’, as he considered it, of Roman law, purging it of medieval accretions and setting it within historical context. The prolific and many-faceted Jean Bodin (1530–96), amid the chaos of the religious wars, wrote both a manual on the writing of history and a monumental work of political theory, the (p. 10) *Six Books on the Republic* (1576), arguing the importance of the sovereignty of the state, responsible only, and directly, to God. In Iberia, after an initial fifteenth-century phase of vernacular humanism, which imitated in the Castilian tongue Italian Latin humanism, humanists embraced the Erasmian model—and then dropped it suddenly when the Inquisition discredited Erasmianism and the humanism of which it was the defining face.

As well as to these more familiar Western regions of the continent, humanism reached as far as Bohemia, Poland, Croatia, and Hungary, implanted by natives who had studied abroad as much as by Italian emissaries and refugees. Its best known manifestation is, perhaps, the Biblioteca Corviniana, the library of precious classical and humanist manuscripts assembled with the assistance of his humanist advisers by the king of Hungary and Croatia, Matthias Corvinus (r. 1458–90). In their humanist pursuits, Slavic and Hungarian intellectuals reaffirmed their connection to the Latin core of European culture, to which they were profoundly committed.

In these various settings, humanists derived from different social strata ranging from the modest middle classes to aristocratic elites. They practised different professions: they were lawyers, notaries, state employees, bishops and cardinals, teachers, printers, clergies, merchants, diplomats, and courtiers. The centres of intellectual discussion were the homes of wealthy amateurs and patrons; or schools, universities, or monasteries; or the courts of kings and great nobles. They were Catholics, Protestants, and religious radicals. They were both male and female—but mostly male. They wrote about politics, the law, history, and the arts; about the lives of saints, wealth and poverty, and Plato and Aristotle; about marriage, women, children, and education; and about new and imaginary worlds. Not only did they not share a unified ideological vision, but their intellectual interests ranged across all the categories listed by the Dewey Decimal System of library classification. They were not all civic humanists, or philologists, or reformers. They were not all any one thing. Donald Kelley writes with some desperation: ‘the interplay of humanism with other disciplines and doctrines makes it almost impossible to identify it in any meaningful way’.5

This protean nature of humanism, however, does not mean that it had no content, and no prominent themes. The following pages turn from a discussion of what humanism was and was not to what humanists thought, said, and did.

**Dear Cicero: Voices Across Time**

The humanists read ancient authors as their predecessors had not: as though they were alive and immediately present. A case in point is the letter written in 1345 by Francesco Petrarca (1304–74; Anglicized as Petrarch) to Cicero, the Roman statesman, orator, and thinker who had been dead for nearly fourteen centuries. Together with nine other letters (among them a second to Cicero) to famous and learned ancients, it appears at the end of his *Epistolae familiares* (‘Letters to his Friends’), deliberately selected and positioned by the author himself. The letter displays Petrarch’s attitude toward antiquity, (p. 11) and exemplifies the passionate commitment to classical studies that characterizes the humanists in general. In it, Petrarch takes Cicero to task for involving himself in the deteriorating situation following Caesar’s assassination in 44 B.C.E.—for Cicero had confronted the rising tyrant Mark Antony, when Petrarch would have preferred him to stay in his country
village and write philosophical commentaries. Petrarch speaks to Cicero as to a friend, indeed a soulmate: a citizen of the same Roman world of which the northern Italy of Petrarch’s time was a remnant. Petrarch does not so much return to Cicero’s world as he pulls Cicero into his own, insisting that Cicero recognize Petrarch’s coordinates of time and place. So much we learn from the closing words of the letter: ‘Written in the land of the living, on the right bank of the Adige, in the city of Verona in Italy north of the Po, on the sixteenth of June, in the thirteen hundred and forty-fifth year since the birth of that God whom you never knew.’

Petrarch’s younger contemporary and friend Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75), a poet and storyteller as well as a classical scholar, shares this passion for recovering the lost past. Although Boccaccio wrote no letters to dead poets and philosophers, he laboured mightily to bring their world to life in his massive encyclopaedias of the pagan gods and of the mountains, seas, and rivers of antiquity. While both of these served as aids to the reading of classical literature, they were more, especially the first: it was explicitly a defence of the incorporation of classical literature into a Christian civilization. The deceptions and adulteries of the gods were not the point: behind those shenanigans lay a realm of perception that needed to be accessed by contemporary thinkers. Petrarch and Boccaccio also summoned the classical past to the notice of contemporaries by writing collective biographies: Petrarch’s *De viris illustribus* (‘On Famous Men’, 1330s/1350s) matched, and even surpassed in originality and influence by Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus* (‘On Famous Women’, 1374).

In addition to studying, imitating, translating, and commenting upon ancient works, the humanists scoured the libraries of Europe to find classical works known to have existed—for they were referred to by other ancient authors—but that had fallen out of sight. Here Petrarch, as well, was a pioneer, locating in the cathedral library of Verona a volume of Cicero’s letters to Atticus: revealing texts, that served as a model for Petrarch’s own epistolography. Another important find, in 1416, was Quintilian’s *Institutiones oratoriae* (‘Rudiments of Rhetoric’), the most important rhetorical textbook of Latin antiquity and a resource for humanist authors of the Renaissance. Quintilian was recovered, the finders report, from a ‘dungeon’ in the monastery of St. Gallen (Switzerland), one of those miraculous islands of scribal culture in the early Middle Ages, whose magnificent library housed great numbers of ancient books copied by the resident monks.

The location and circulation of ‘lost’ classical texts, or of better versions of texts already known, occupied the early humanists. That activity gave way, by the late fifteenth century, to the meticulous editing of ancient works, with the goal of establishing authoritative texts. That effort coincided with the burgeoning importance of print, so that by the last years of the century, Aldus Manutius in Venice, who employed a bevy of proofreaders and copyeditors and native scholars of Greek, could publish nearly the whole of the classical corpus, Greek and Latin, in accurate, compact, and affordable editions. With that accomplished, the (p. 12) voices of the past were rescued from history and perpetuated for the benefit of future generations, so that they could converse with the ancients as Petrarch had, or as Ermolao Barbaro (1453/1454–92) wished his students to be able to do in their study of Aristotle: to speak with that ancient philosopher ‘as though he himself were alive and standing before us’.

The *Studia Humanitatis*: The Ties that Bound

It took a village to execute the humanist project: a community of actors bound by their common education, an immersion in the *studia humanitatis*, or ‘studies of humanity’, the ancestor of our ‘humanities’. The changed curriculum, or the new breed of schoolmasters, forged a society of those who had undergone the experience of early Latin learning and the reading of a classical canon—a group who, thus equipped, would as advisers, courtiers, or wielders of power affect the governance of churches and states.

The curricular transformation was profound, as has been seen. Petrarch offers insight into this shift of disciplinary preferences in his amusing treatise *On His Own Ignorance and that of Many Others* (1367). Here he records a recent encounter in Venice with four Aristotelians who pronounced him, the pet of the aristocracy, to be a ‘good man’ but without learning. To this charge, Petrarch responds—at length—that it is better to be a good man than a learned one, in the first
place, for it is better ‘to will the good than to know the truth’; and that, secondly, his kind of learning, which contributed to leading a good life in the world rather than to landing academic prizes or wrangling over minutiae, was preferable to theirs.\(^6\)

Here is the roadmap for the formulation of the *studia humanitatis*, which is accomplished most effectively by Pier Paolo Vergerio (1370–1444/1445), in his treatise *De ingenuis moribus et liberalibus adolescetiae studiis* (‘On Liberal Studies and the Moral Education of the Free-Born Youth’, 1402/1403), written for the reigning lord of Padua, the father of the youth with whose instruction the author had been charged. Vergerio not only defines the *studia humanitatis* but provides sound reasons for making them the armature of the education of a noble youth: for they enlarge the soul and teach one how to live. ‘When we are alone . . . and free from all our many obligations, what better thing can we do than to summon forth our books, in which are found all things either most pleasant to know or most useful for living a good and worthy life?’\(^7\)

Vergerio was a pioneer of a new phenomenon, the humanist schoolmaster. He and his successors were cherished by their pupils, who on leaving school became writers and thinkers themselves, or else statesmen, cardinals, and princes. As adults, they corresponded in mountains of letters, circulated their own writings or those of others, engaged in pleasant symposia where they discussed philosophical topics, or wrote orations for each other’s marriages and promotions. The humanist curriculum may not have created a virtuous elite, as Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine effectively demonstrated in their 1986 *From Humanism to the Humanities* to those who thought that virtue could be taught, but it created the European elite and its colonial offspring: formed its ethos, cemented its ties, up to the end of the nineteenth century, when modern pragmatists produced a new curriculum that displaced it. It is unlikely that these leaders of Western civilization who graduated from the humanist academies—along with far too many pedants and hypocrites, as has been charged—would have been more admirable had they not received classical educations.

The importance of schoolboy ties is compellingly illustrated by two series of *Colloquia* (‘Colloques’, or ‘Conversations’) published by the sixteenth-century humanists Desiderius Erasmus (1469–1536; *Colloquia* published beginning 1518) and Juan Luis Vives (1493–1540; *Colloquia* published 1538). These were men of learning of the highest rank: Erasmus the arch-humanist, the most important figure since Petrarch; Vives no mean second, a prolific author of unique originality and insight. Yet both paused in their other work to write scores of brief colloquies for the instruction of the young, which modelled correct Latin while prodding their pupils to challenge religious, social, and political orthodoxies. These colloquies, used as textbooks long after their authors’ demise, shaped the mentality of generations of students.

The *Colloquies* employed a rhetorical device, the informal dialogue, to teach the rhetorical skills required for the master of Latin prose. Rhetoric is, indeed, the common thread of humanistic production. It is a method which the humanists preferred to dialectic, or formal logic, for the exploration of ideas. It is deliberately open-ended—truths are raised for consideration, not proved; diverse positions are entertained, none embraced—where dialectic is closed, seeking only to prove that a proposition has been demonstrated. The genres of humanist composition share these characteristics: dialogues that, like the student colloquies of Erasmus and Vives, introduce possibilities but do not arrive at certainties; treatises that explore the many aspects of a problem; orations that present models of excellence in an array of circumstances—they celebrate generals, the partners in a marriage, the signing of a treaty, the opening of the academic year—and not just in intellution; letters, a favourite format, that describe cataclysms cheek-by-jowl with reports of a good dinner; and poems that range from the lyric to the erotic to the epic. The humanists do not merely employ rhetoric, but their whole outlook is rhetorical: open, questing, provocative, elusive. This preference makes the Renaissance, as Kristeller puts it, ‘an age of fermentation rather than of synthesis’\(^8\), as it binds the humanists into a society of seekers: a society to which Francesco Barbaro gave a name that stuck: the *respublica litterarum*, a ‘republic of letters’ other than, uncontained by, any social or national or professional entity.\(^9\)

**Dignitas Hominis: The Human Condition**

The youngsters reared on the *studia humanitatis* digested a literature that mirrored life in ancient times, mostly in Rome
from the last century of the Republic through the (p. 14) second century of the Empire. Embedded in this corpus were ideals of service to the state, of companionship and loyalty, of refined leisure, of heroism, justice, and autonomy, different in kind and differently expressed than those of their own time. Implicit in the studia humanitatis, as well, to push this thought further, was a preference for activism, voluntarism, and freedom over the contrasting ideals of the university or the monastery for quietude, contemplation, and surrender to authority.

Such a preference is surely in Vergerio’s mind when he defines the liberal arts (the artes liberales) as those suited for a free man (liber). It is expressed by Lorenzo Valla (1406–57) in his work on pleasure, which valorizes human sense experience and activity; as well as by several humanists writing on the superiority of the active life to the contemplative, the civic to the monastic, and even the discipline of law, which is useful in public affairs, to that of medicine. From the classical studies they pursued, the humanists—not all of them, but some notable figures—derived a new anthropology: as Kristeller described it, a new ‘philosophy of man’. Curiously, in his celebration of the new individualism that he saw as a keynote of the Renaissance era he famously defined in his classic work The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (1860), the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt did not attribute to humanism a leading role in its creation. Nonetheless, although not all humanists attended to that issue, those who did must be recognized as the first to articulate the Renaissance concept of man.

Two works in particular introduce this humanist anthropology: Giannozzo Manetti’s (1396–1459) De dignitate et excellentia hominis (‘On the Dignity and Excellence of Man’, 1452/1453), and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s (1463–94) Oratio de dignitate hominis (‘Oration on the Dignity of Man’, 1486).

In his treatise, Manetti refuted the conventional pessimism about humankind—that it was born to misery, subject to bodily pains and external assaults, prone to sin and thereby likely doomed to eternal suffering. Instead, he pointed to the many pleasures yielded by the senses, by the accomplishment of creative tasks, and by the human faculty of reason, a source of the most profound satisfaction: for ‘. . . man is in a state of continuous pleasure throughout his life, at every moment from birth to death’. As for our pains and sufferings, they will be cancelled out when we experience our bodily resurrection: ‘For when we rise again, our bodies will be restored to us . . . renewed, lacking all sin, all corruption, all weakness, all deformity . . .’

Where Manetti reversed the prevailing sour view of the human condition by pointing to the delights of human existence in this world and beyond, Giovanni Pico, the brilliant young count of Mirandola, identified the human capacity for freedom as the quality from which human excellence derived. In the opening pages of his 1486 oration—never delivered because of the furore aroused by the propositions he enunciated—Pico offered that argument in the form of a revised narrative of divine creation. Over five days, God had created the heavens and earth and all living things by actuating the patterns, or archetypes, stored in his mind. As the sixth day dawned, his creation should have been finished: but he lamented that he had crafted no creature who could admire the glories of his creation, and there remained in the divine mind no archetype from which to model such a being. And so God created man as a totality of all of creation, a manifestation of all the divine archetypes at once, a creature of ‘indeterminate form’, whom he placed ‘at the midpoint of the world’, and instructed him thus: ‘We have given to thee, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift peculiarly thine, that thou mayest feel as thine own, have as thine own, possess as thine own the seat, the form, the gifts which thou shalt desire.’ All other creatures were limited by nature; only the human being ‘[i]n conformity with [his] free judgment, in whose hands I have placed [him], [is] confined by no bounds; and [will] fix limits of nature for [himself]’. The essence of human existence for Pico is that it is completely undetermined, so that each human being may form and define himself.

Gifted with creative and rational powers and above all with the capacity to act and so shape his destiny, the human being newly envisioned by the humanists approached Promethean dimensions. It is no surprise, then, that a grounding in the studia humanitatis also encouraged women to reflect upon who they were, and to defend their right to exercise their reason and free will.
The Worth of Women: Women and Humanism

Humanism was a male pursuit. The mastery of Latin it required was mainly available to elite males, most of them clerics. The urban schools that cropped up in Italy, whose orientation was secular, not religious, ironically delivered instruction that was more specifically male-gendered; for within the Church, at least, in convents and other female communities, a few women learned Latin sufficiently to keep records, write chronicles, and create original works, while there was no such institutional context for female intellectual activity within the humanist domain. The classical works that fired the imaginations of the humanists, finally, largely concerned masculine forms of activity: political rule and military achievement.

Why were women attracted to the world of humanism? How could they enter into it?

But in fifteenth-century Italy, they did. About a dozen women in this setting, all the daughters of professional or aristocratic families, by some accident of family structure or heritage acquired a Latin education. They entered into humanist coteries, composing works in the usual humanist genres. Occasionally they were reviled; more often, they were welcomed. Still, what they spoke and wrote about was centred on their experience as women. The misogyny of the inherited intellectual tradition was so potent a force that these women, equipped with the tools of learning and eloquence, felt compelled to confront it.

Such was the case with the two major fifteenth-century women humanists introduced here.

The Veronese noblewoman Isotta Nogarola (1418–66) entered when still adolescent into Venetian and Veneto humanist circles, and refusing to marry, continued her studies lifelong. She was befriended by the prominent Venetian statesman Ludovico Foscarini, a frequent visitor to her native Verona, and a man of considerable learning. Stemming from their friendship comes one of the most important works by a woman humanist: Nogarola’s dialogue on the relative culpability of Adam and Eve for the Original Sin, as Christian theologians termed it, that they committed by defying the divine command and eating forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. In the dialogue, whose interlocutors are Nogarola and Foscarini, Nogarola defends Eve on the grounds of her innate inferiority, as a woman, to Adam, a man. Thus she denigrates the woman in order to save her from responsibility for the downfall of humankind, a pillar of contemporary misogyny. It is a triumph, if an ironic one: for unless Eve could be vindicated, women would forever bear the burden of the Fall of Man.

Educated in a convent school and by her learned father, a Brescian magistrate, Laura Cereta (1469–99) was both married and widowed by age 17, and so was able for the next three years, after which she lapsed into silence, to pursue her literary studies unburdened by the restrictions Nogarola had faced. Yet she had many critics, the malevolence of their charges measured by the ferocity of Cereta’s responses. In her biting letters to both male and female critics, she defends women’s capacity for learning, and rebukes the ‘gabbing and babbling women’ who ‘hunt down with their bilious poison those women who rise to greater distinction than they’.

Thus the Italian female humanists of the fifteenth century reflected on the condition of women, finding them capable of pursuing, and gaining from the same intellectual experience that men cherished. They had successors, especially in England: a few women of royal and noble birth, and those from the circle of Thomas More, including the latter’s daughter Margaret More Roper, received humanist educations and produced some translations and other literary works. They also had male defenders: around 1520, the humanists Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535) and Juan Luis Vives wrote, respectively, on the ‘superiority’ of the female sex and on the education of women—the latter the first full-scale work on that topic ever written.

As their numbers increased, learned women became their own advocates. Around 1600, the Venetian female authors Moderata Fonte (1555–92) and Lucrezia Marinella (1571–1653) published widely circulated works in the vernacular asserting the ‘worth’ and the ‘nobility’ of women, and indeed their superiority to men. In the seventeenth century, the Dutch scholar Anna Maria van Schurman (1607–78), and the French author Marie de Gournay (1565–1645), aroused the attention of all of Europe with their works: respectively, a defence of the education of women, and a treatise asserting the equality of the sexes. This literary campaign did not secure for women the rights that they finally realized in the twentieth century. But that later triumph could not have been realized without the foundational work of advocates for women’s moral and
intellectual equality with men that began with the women humanists of the fifteenth century.

**Civic Humanism: The Urban Context**

Humanism arose in most densely urbanized regions of Europe. Most were ancient in origin, survivors of the fallen Roman empire. From around 1100, after centuries of depopulation and economic contraction, they grew proud and wealthy once again. In the twelfth century, many of these cities came together in the Lombard League to defy and defeat the German emperor Frederick Barbarossa, their nominal overlord. Thus they won their autonomy; or, as the rhetoric of the Lombard League termed it, their ‘liberty’.

‘Liberty’ in the cradle of humanism meant the freedom of each city to rule itself and determine its destiny. In the hands of the humanists, this core meaning of liberty lingered, but other concepts, derived from ancient political writings they had read, were layered upon it. The humanists of the Florentine republic wielded the term ‘liberty’ much as moderns have done: to denote freedom in a broad sense, including individual freedom. The writings of these humanists are the principal components of ‘civic humanism’, of which two exemplars are considered here.

In 1404, the humanist Leonardo Bruni (1369–1444)—born in nearby Arezzo, but Florentine by allegiance and profession—composed a not-to-be-delivered oration in praise of Florence based on the ancient prototype of Greek orator Aelius Aristides, who had written a panegyric of Athens. Bruni depicted a community of free citizens, whose creativity, unrestrained by a tyrannous state, expressed itself in splendid and varied architecture, street systems, and commercial activity. They governed themselves by electing officials who managed all matters well, delivering equal justice to rich and poor, so that ‘nowhere else does freedom grow so vigorously, and nowhere else are rich and poor alike treated with such equality’.

Two generations later, the republican governance Bruni had described—which even then, in truth, was dominated by a narrow oligarchy—had been co-opted by one family, the Medici, one of the wealthiest and surely the most adept of the powerful families that pulled the strings of power. A disgruntled member of the old oligarchy, the humanist Alamanno Rinuccini (1426–99), wrote in 1479 a dialogue *De libertate* (‘On Liberty’), which critiqued the Medici regime and recalled the days when liberty truly prevailed in Florence: which ensured ‘that the wealthy not oppress the poor, or equally that the poor not assault the rich, but that each may preserve what is his safe from the aggression of others’.

Civic humanism flourished in republican Florence, even after its republican machinery had been taken over by the velvet hand of the Medici. In other cities, humanists wrote on civic, that is to say, political themes as well: but here, they tended to write in support of regimes, even when the rhetoric of ‘liberty’ was employed. Such was the case in Venice, a republic in its distribution of power to elected councils, but in fact a tight oligarchy governed by a hereditary nobility. The principal Venetian humanists were themselves nobles and statesmen, but also eloquent defenders of the triumphant Venetian empire. It was also the case in Milan and Naples, where humanists danced to the tune set by the prince. In papal Rome, as well, humanists figured among the clerical courtiers who surrounded the Pope, and were staunch supporters of papal and ecclesiastical authority.

Both humanism and the Renaissance reached an apogee in the first decades of the sixteenth century, a period, ironically, of extraordinary political turbulence. Two of the monumental authors of the era—the Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), humanistically trained if not, technically, a humanist, and the Netherlander Desiderius Erasmus—responded to that turbulence with treatises on the ideal prince.

An ardent defender of republicanism for most of his career, Machiavelli had the misfortune to live into an era when princes were in the ascendant. Even as he composed his multi-volume *Discourses*, a commentary on the work of the Roman historian Livy, constituting a close analysis of the political behaviour of republican Rome, he produced his diminutive guidebook *The Prince* (composed 1513, published posthumously in 1532), which detailed how a ruler must seize and hold
power. Had he despaired of the possibility of political liberty? Or had he cynically concocted *The Prince*, whose principles were fundamentally alien to the ideals he had long espoused? Or had he abandoned his hopes for republican governance, if only a capable autocrat could be found to secure the liberty of the Italian nation?

Three years later, Erasmus wrote his *Institutio christiani principis* (‘Education of a Christian Prince’, 1516) for the young man who would become Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor (r. 1519–56). Princes dominated Erasmus’s world, so he entertained no visions of civic or national liberty. But he hoped that the prince, if properly educated as a humanist and a Christian, would rule not to acquire more wealth or power, but to advance the welfare of his subjects. Above all, he would avoid wars, the worst disaster that can befall a nation. Erasmus— unrealistically, needless to say—envisions the prince as a servant of his subjects, whose prosperity and safety, as much as their liberty, is his overriding concern.

Clearly, the civic liberty enjoyed formerly by the Italian cities had receded into the past by the early sixteenth century. Yet humanist notions of a well-run state had entered the mainstream of political thought, and would not thereafter go away.

**Transforming Norms: Humanists on Society**

Civic humanism was not confined to political works. The dynamic urban setting of northern Italy that the humanists inhabited also propelled a changed understanding of social norms. Even though the humanists, on the whole, conformed—as they needed to do—to prevailing standards of thought and behaviour, yet in some areas relating to family, money, and social rank, among others, they opened up new perspectives, which were developed further by later thinkers.

The Venetian statesman Francesco Barbaro (1390–1454) as a young man still unmarried, challenged common marriage practice in his treatise *De re uxoria* (‘On Marriage’, 1415). In European society, marriage lay at the heart of dynastic strategy. Princes, nobles, and wealthy burghers alike chose wives to advance familial interests, seeking to acquire material and social advantage from marriage alliances. The Venetian nobility (p. 19) was exceptional in many ways, but it shared the same dynastic anxieties as other elites. Yet Barbaro, though a nobleman himself, posed a different standard for the choice of a wife: she was to possess an innate nobility, understood as moral character, so that she could bear and rear children who were themselves noble. The quality of nobility Barbaro views as transmitted both biologically, through the maternal blood, and culturally, by maternal example and instruction. The ability of a noble class to create noble descendents, he argues, depends on the women adopted into the lineage, whose inherent quality of mind and spirit mattered more than wealth or status.

Barbaro’s critique of marriage implicitly resists the importance of wealth, even as the moral bar to the acquisition of wealth had crumbled in the commercial zone of northern Italy. The elites of Renaissance society acquired staggering wealth, and spent it lavishly on material goods, some of the highest artistic merit. An eloquent defence of the acquisition of such wealth is articulated by the second of two interlocutors in the dialogue *De avaritia* (‘On Avarice’, 1428/1429) by Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459). The fictive speaker Antonio Loschi (a real-life humanist) defends greed as a positive force driving risk-takers to create the useful and beautiful things that render urban life worthwhile. If these avaricious (that is, creative) men were expelled, as some moralists thundered they should be, ‘then you might as well . . . forsake and raze the cities’, or indeed whole states or kingdoms: for what are these, ‘if you consider it carefully, if not the workshops of avarice?’

In another dialogue *De nobilitate* (‘On Nobility’, 1440), Poggio Bracciolini engaged in a wider controversy on the issue of nobility. As the European elite developed from a warrior aristocracy in the centuries following the fall of Rome to a social caste claiming to possess inherent superiority, transmitted through the male line—the bloodline, that is, conceived as male, not female, as Barbaro uniquely had understood it. This view some of the humanists supported—both those who were by rank noble themselves, or those allied ideologically with that group. Others resisted it, not denying the existence of the quality of ‘nobility’, but seeing it as grounded in moral and intellectual virtue, rather than birth and descent.

These discussions of marriage, wealth, and nobility engaged live issues in fifteenth-century Italian society. As humanism
moved northward after 1500, other social issues drew the attention of humanist authors, including the major figures Erasmus and Vives. Erasmus addressed several in his many works, but the message of his *De civilitate morum puerilium* (‘On Good Manners’, 1530) is perhaps most striking. Here he instructs middle-class youths in the manners of elite society: to sit quietly without distracting bodily motion, to dine neatly in company, to avoid nose-blowing and worse. This treatise marks a transition from a world where cultivated manners are the monopoly of a court-based nobility, and become, with proper guidance, the possession of those in professional and commercial social ranks.

Vives confronts the predicament of a rising tide of the urban poor, as the dispossessed of the countryside swelled the population of cities that could not employ or care for them. His *De subventione pauperum* (‘On Assistance to the Poor’, 1526), which recommended the separation of the able-bodied from the dependent, and the creation of (p. 20) hostels to prepare the latter for useful employment, became a model for poor relief followed in several northern cities and larger jurisdictions, including England’s.

Not only in their dialogues and treatises, but in the hundreds of orations they delivered celebrating marriages, victories, promotions, and civic events, humanists posited expectations for social behaviour that reverberated in Renaissance society. Not all humanists addressed social issues in their works, of course, just as not all of them pursued political matters. But enough did to suggest that the intellectual ferment that was humanism’s particular characteristic opened pathways to the reconsideration of social norms not ordinarily questioned.

**Philosophia Christi: Humanism and Religion**

Civic humanism, a major component of the humanist movement, was not the whole of it: for many humanists—among whom quite a few were clerics by vocation—occupied themselves with religious or philosophical matters that lie well outside the political or social sphere. For that matter, some civic humanists, if they may be so called, were not only themselves conspicuously pious, but had a good deal to say about religion.

Like their contemporaries in a Europe that still understood itself as conterminous with *Christianitas*, or Christendom, the humanists were practising Christians, and sometimes ardent practitioners of the faith. Several Florentine humanists participated in the religious confraternities that flourished in that city as centres of lay pious activity, and some, including Pico della Mirandola, became ardent followers of the prophetic Dominican Girolamo Savonarola who dominated the city from 1492 to 1496. In Venice, similarly, humanists were enrolled in the charitable organizations called *scuole*; several were engaged in ecclesiastical reform; and one—Leonardo Giustiniani, brother of the city’s first Patriarch—aside from his Latin humanist works, composed in the vernacular devotional lyrics called *laude* that were widely popular.

The papal curia in Rome, further, was a magnet for humanists, both lay and clerical, whose skills were essential for its operations. Outside the official church, the leaders of the various reform movements that developed from the late fifteenth century in Italy, some bordering on the heretical, included humanists both clerical and lay. Further north, humanists were numerous among early Lutheran, Zwinglian, and Calvinist reformers, and active among the leaders of England’s Henrician reform and the Puritan dissenters to the resulting Anglican settlement. Equally, they lent their support to the Catholic Counter-Reformation, especially visible in the new order of Jesuits, who not only engaged in missionary efforts, but built a Europe-wide network of schools that embraced a humanist curriculum.

Humanists, then, were fully engaged with the religious activities and institutions of the day. Some, in addition, thought and wrote about religion. Petrarch did so in all his (p. 21) works, but most movingly in his introspective *Secretum* (‘Secret’, 1347–53), a dialogue between himself and an imagined Saint Augustine. In his *On the Dignity of Man*, as has been seen, Manetti saw the promise of bodily resurrection as one of the excellences of the human condition, along with the capacity for reason and the use of the senses. Lorenzo Valla, previously seen as an advocate of the Epicurean ethic of pleasure, was also the debunker of papal claims to territorial sovereignty in his *Donatio Constantini* (‘On the Donation of Constantine’,
1440), and the author of *Adnotationes in Novum Testamentum* (‘Annotations on the New Testament’), a critical examination based on the comparison of Greek and Latin manuscript versions. The career of Marsilio Ficino (1433–99), whom we shall soon encounter as a Platonic philosopher, culminated in his *Theologia platonica* (‘Platonic Theology’, 1469/1474), which integrated Platonism and Christianity.

Humanists wrote numerous lives of the saints and consolatory treatises holding up the promise of salvation as a remedy for grief. Figures as diverse as the Camaldolese monk Ambrogio Traversari (1386–1439) and the Spanish-born Vives, the son of Jewish converts, translated and commented upon works of the church fathers Gregory of Nazianzen and Augustine, while Erasmus edited the letters of Jerome. Erasmus and Luther both consulted Valla’s biblical *Annotations*, which informed their own monumental works of Biblical scholarship: Erasmus’s edition and translation of the New Testament from the original Greek, and Luther’s German translation of both Testaments from their ancient originals.

Erasmus, arguably, was the humanist who made the greatest contribution to religious thought. Shaped by the mystical and New Devout traditions of his native Netherlands, his Christianity was both profound and practical. In several of his works, but especially in his *Enchiridion militis christiani* (‘Handbook of the Christian Soldier’, 1501), he proposed the new ideal of the *philosophia Christi*, a ‘philosophy of Christ’, that minimized the importance of rituals, formulas, and the apparatus of church hierarchy, and urged an inward and spontaneous religious devotion.

Although Erasmus and many of the northern humanists are considered to be ‘Christian humanists’ because of the centrality of religious issues in their work, the Italian humanists who preceded them were by no means hostile to Christianity. They inhabited a Christian universe, and accommodated their classical studies to the Christian worldview that they could not in that era—if they had wished to—escape.

### Questions Concerning the Mind: Humanism, Philosophy, and Science

As in religion, the humanists interested themselves in philosophy. Moral philosophy, as has been seen, constituted one of the five *studia humanitatis*, the building blocks of the humanist curriculum. Moral philosophy has to do with human action in the world, includes ethics, concerning personal behaviour; economics, concerning the management of resources by a household or society; and politics, concerning the management of power. All these issues the humanists addressed, both by editing and translating ancient texts and by writing original treatises. Humanists also advanced into other philosophical domains, including metaphysics, precisely that branch of philosophy that dominated in the university study of theology, the precinct of scholasticism. They even read Aristotle, whose works were the bedrock of scholastic thought.

Unlike the scholastic philosophers, however, the humanists approached the discipline from the vantage point of the text. Leonardo Bruni’s translations of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* (as well as the pseudo-Aristotelian *Economics*) exemplify this humanist approach. Not only does Bruni’s direct access to the Greek text lead to a novel version, but it embodies a new principle of translation: translation, that is, *ad sensum* rather than *ad litteram*: according to the sense, rather than to the letter of the original.

The reintroduction of Aristotle to western Europe, unhindered by the accretions of Islamic thought and the distortions of translators unfamiliar with the context of the original text, was a major event in the history of philosophy. Even more important, arguably, was the translation of the works of Plato by the Florentine Marsilio Ficino, the son of the physician to Cosimo de Medici, the city’s unofficial ruler. With the exception of the *Timaeus, Phaedo*, and *Meno*, all available in translation, Plato’s works were unknown in western Europe. A skilled Hellenist, Ficino undertook the translation project with Medici support, completing it in 1468: a total of thirty-six dialogues in the version that remained standard into the nineteenth century. Nor did Ficino merely translate Plato, but in his treatises and letters, he explicated Platonic thought and integrated it with the prevailing Christian worldview, a process that culminated in his *Platonic Theology*. He also conferred upon Europe
the concept of Platonic love, which sustained the craft of lyric poetry for the next four centuries.

Ficino’s younger colleague Pico della Mirandola constructed in 1486, as has been seen, 900 philosophical propositions that he challenged the philosophers of Europe to debate with him in Rome—a phenomenal event that did not come to be, because of papal disapproval. They illustrate, nonetheless, how deeply the young thinker had absorbed not only Ficino’s Platonism, but also his Christian Platonism, together with the late ancient schools of Neoplatonism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism, and other philosophical traditions that were by that date circulating: the Hermetic, based on the presumed writings of Hermes Trismegistus, but actually derived from late Hellenistic texts; and the Kabbalistic, based on a medieval mystical Jewish work. Pico’s outreach to all these philosophical traditions is embodied in his notion of ‘one truth’, a convergence of all philosophical truths in a cosmic ‘peace of philosophy’.

Ficino and Pico, among others, conferred this enriched philosophical corpus, embracing both Aristotelianism and Platonism as well as Hermetic and various other occult traditions, upon the thinkers of the next century. The immediate beneficiaries were Italians such as Pietro Pomponazzi (1452–1525), an Aristotelian who famously argued against the immortality of the soul; Francesco Patrizi (1529–97), the Platonist who developed a mathematized physics utilized by Galileo; and the visionary thinkers (p. 23) Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), renowned for his hypothesis of an infinity of inhabited worlds, one of several heretical propositions which proved to be fatal; and Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639), an astrologer, empiricist, and early advocate of socialism. By 1600, however, the year Bruno was burned at the stake, the natural sciences had taken their place alongside speculative philosophy.

Philosophy, as understood in the Renaissance era, included what we call science; and some pioneers of modern science benefitted from the humanist project of providing to their contemporaries correct ancient philosophical texts. Among these were Nicholas Copernicus (1473–1543), proponent of the heliocentric theory of the planetary system, and Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), who defended and proved it. A native of Toruń in western Poland, Copernicus studied in Italy during the years 1496 to 1503, where, working with humanist mentors, he learned Greek and explored Greek scientific works. There he encountered an early proposal of heliocentrism, which he later developed, based on his own observations and deductions, into the hypothesis presented in his *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (‘On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres’, 1543).

More than half a century later, the humanistically educated Italian philosopher Galileo not only found the Copernican theory persuasive, but demonstrated its truth: a demonstration made possible by the use of the telescope, his invention. Challenged by churchmen who believed the Copernican hypothesis was contradicted by statements in the Bible, Galileo wrote in his 1615 letter to the Medicean grandduchess Cristina of Lorraine an extensive defence of independent scientific exploration. The Bible offers truths about religious matters, he argued, but truths about the natural world are learned by the analysis of evidence gathered by the senses. It is for that purpose that God gave them to us: ‘the same God who has given us senses, language, and intellect’ does not wish us to set them aside ‘so that we would deny our senses and reason even in the case of those physical conclusions which are placed before our eyes and intellect by our sense experiences or by necessary demonstrations . . .’.

Here Galileo employs the characteristically humanist genre of the letter, and the rhetorical devices of the humanists, to defend the autonomy of scientific knowledge. Humanism was not, for him, an activity in itself, but a resource to be used in his work as philosopher, mathematician, and astronomer. For by the time of Galileo, humanism had merged with other intellectual endeavours, its outlooks and methods diffusing into the realms of philosophy, science, law, history, and theology.

**Humanism and the Arts: Separate but Equal**

Humanism may have been the characteristic intellectual movement of the Renaissance, but the arts were its heart and soul. The term ‘Renaissance’ conjures up for most people the sensuous forms and colours displayed on frescoes and canvases
rather than a classical Latin scholar. In truth, the cultural streams are parallel, separate but equal in their originality and their impact on later European civilization. And not only parallel: because they also intersect.

In origin, Renaissance art, like Renaissance humanism, was intoxicated by antiquity. Around 1400, the sculptors Donatello and Filippo Brunelleschi journeyed to Rome, to see first-hand the ruins of Roman columns and pedestals and sarcophagi which had, of course, been lying about in ruins for nearly a millennium, but did not heretofore have intense appeal. These items they carefully sketched, and then reproduced as episodes in their own original creations. They are followed by many more, so that Renaissance painting and sculpture alike constitute a kind of replay of classical antiquity, where saints and heroes are displayed amid an assemblage of ancient vestiges, and even ancient inscriptions are meticulously reproduced on painted surfaces.

Like the humanists, as well, the Renaissance artists elevate and dignify the human figure. The human form, already stout and solid in the hands of Giotto in the early fourteenth century, has by the late fifteenth developed a complete musculature, visible both in painting and sculpture—a musculature that becomes ever more prominent and accurate after the anatomical explorations of Andreas Vesalius in the early sixteenth century. Strikingly, too, the portrait emerges as a genre for the first time since antiquity: at first, plain painted profile views executed with exacting detail; later, realistic depictions of robed ambassadors or richly dressed matrons which lavish attention on skin colour, the textures of textiles, and numerous accoutrements. In one other dimension of these representations the artists are the partners of the humanists: in the depiction of human psychology, as seen unmistakably in Masaccio’s despairing Adam and Eve as they are cast out of Eden; or Donatello’s pensive equestrian soldier Gattamelata; or Michelangelo’s yearning and innocent Sistine Chapel Adam.

Although the humanists themselves were rarely wealthy enough to be patrons of the arts, they consulted with patrons who committed fabulous resources to the painting of an altarpiece or the fresco programme of a private study. Among the many who funded such enterprises, perhaps Isabella d’Este (1474–1539) comes first to mind: the marchesa of Mantua, who sometimes managed the finances of her small state, or ruled it in her husband’s absence, all the while decorating every surface that surrounded her and acquiring every elegant and splendid prop that could reflect her glory. Herself a learned woman, yet she drew on the assistance of humanist advisers to concoct iconographic programmes for her projects in which pagan and Christian worlds were seamlessly intertwined.

As the humanists, moreover, read and commented on ancient philosophical and scientific works, so too did Renaissance artists—a handful of them, whose study of the Greek geometer Euclid and whose own experience of painting allowed them to develop the technique of linear perspective, which permitted the realistic representation of three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface. The humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72), to choose a premier example, a practising architect himself, as well as a poet and writer of Latin treatises, famously composed his Della pittura (‘On Painting’, (p. 25) 1435) to instruct the craftsman–artist in the intricacies of perspective science: for ‘he who has not diligently mastered all we have said, will never be a good artist’.

This latter figure brings us to a final point about the relation between humanism and the arts. As the Renaissance progressed, and the market for art blossomed, the figure of the artist underwent a transition. In the age of Giotto and for some decades thereafter, he was an artisan in a workshop, possibly literate in the vernacular and thus able to access Alberti’s manual. But by 1500, he had become a genius of Promethean scale, a prize sought after by competing wealthy patrons. The social origins of the artist evolved, therefore, until he became at least the social equal of the humanist, generally originating from burgher or patrician strata.

These intersections between humanism and the arts are provocative, and suggest some kinship of creative spirit underlies both movements. By 1500, humanism had been married with the arts as with philosophy and religion, with history and law, and every imaginable discipline; for humanism, as Nauert had said, was now ‘everywhere’.

Conclusion
Humanism ceases to be a separate intellectual movement by the early seventeenth century, but becomes a component of multiple intersecting strands of thought—at about the same time that the term ‘Renaissance’ ceases to be useful in describing a particular phase of European civilization. Before that curtain falls, however, humanism plays a part in the reception of knowledge about new lands across the Atlantic and remote ancient lands newly apprehended in southern and eastern Asia. Fittingly, it is in a characteristically humanist letter of 1502/1503, written by Amerigo Vespucci (1454–1512) to his Medici patron, that he announces to Europeans the discovery of an entirely new continent, a *mundus novus*—a ‘new world’.

How great an irony lies here! For humanism had begun as an inquiry into antiquity, an attempt to capture in contemporary language the outlook and values of the Greek and Roman past. Now the language of humanism was applied to the consideration of the new worlds of the Atlantic and Pacific shores. Beyond the letters of Columbus and Vespucci, a large literature would develop as part of the exploration of lands new to European consciousness. It would include plain prose travel narratives in the vernacular, but also learned treatises on the peoples, flora, and fauna of the new worlds; discussions of geography and cartography, along with the publication of a wholly new kind of world map; visions of Utopias, alternative societies strewn about the seven seas, a genre launched by the humanist Thomas More but quickly followed up with other versions by Tommaso Campanella, Francis Bacon, and Margaret Cavendish; accounts of missionary activity; and an apology, in epic form, for the expansion of empire. In 1572, Luís Vaz de Camões (1524–80) published his *Os Lusíadas* (‘The Lusiads’), an epic celebration of Vasco da Gama, who had first sailed around, and named, the Cape of Good Hope at Africa’s southern tip, and of the Portuguese empire his journey opened up. In this *refined* late humanist product, written in imitation of that quintessential classical work, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, humanism is married to imperialism in a grand celebration of conquest and power.

Amid all these manifestations of humanism, it was at its core centred on the dialogue between thinkers of the period from 1350 to 1650 with the great minds of antiquity, whose insights and sensibility they incorporated into their own, new, and different mental world. Perhaps they thought, as Petrarch sometimes did, they wished to return to the past. What happens instead is far more important for the subsequent development of European civilization: they restore antiquity to their contemporary culture, interweaving it with enduring Christian and medieval traditions, and so lay the foundations of modern thought.

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(2.) The works named in this overview are cited in full in the bibliography.


(14.) Pico della Mirandola, On the Dignity of Man, 34.


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Abstract and Keywords

Early modern political thought was conducted in several different idioms of politics, which can nevertheless be seen to be in dialogue over a range of key political issues that engaged all of Europe. A central theme was the nature of the political community itself and of power within it, leading to the development of a new language of sovereignty and the state alongside the older vocabulary of respublica or ‘commonwealth’. Debate raged over the legitimacy of different forms of government and especially of monarchy, and its place in relation to commonwealth. The language of natural law and natural rights formed another central idiom of politics, leading to seventeenth-century accounts of the formation of the civil state from the state of nature through a covenant or contract. Finally, political thought also stretched outside the question of the state and its legitimacy, to conceptualize the international order, war and imperial formations.

Keywords: State, sovereignty, commonwealth, absolutism, constitutionalism, republicanism, natural rights, empire, law of nations

Introduction: The Study of Political Thought

The way we study the history of political thought has changed significantly over the past half century or so, stemming from attempts in the 1950s and 1960s to think again about what it might mean to study political thought historically. These attempts are associated with the ‘Cambridge School’, a term generally taken to indicate a group of authors, in particular Quentin Skinner, John Pocock, and John Dunn, who shared broadly similar concerns. Their objective was to study works of political thought for what they meant at the time, rather than—in the first instance, at least—for what they might mean now, let alone for any ‘timeless’ meaning. The project sparked extensive debate over the correct way to approach past works of political (and not only political) philosophy. For all the controversy, however, the methods they suggested for recovering past meaning have had a major impact on the way we approach the history of political thought. Essentially, these involve changing the object of study from thought, in the sense of ‘ideas in the mind’, to language. Again, language is here taken not as the ‘dress’ or expression of thought, but as constitutive of the thought itself insofar as it is an object of historical study. This does not mean that we must do away with all talk of thinking, concepts, notions, or even ideas. It means only that the historian cannot consider such things other than as articulated within a language or other symbolic system (iconography, for example), and that to understand them is to understand that articulation.

The concept of a ‘language’ involved here draws on the Wittgensteinian notion of a ‘language game’, a shared system of signs and ‘the actions into which [that system] is woven’. A ‘language of political thought’—which we might otherwise term an ‘idiom’, or a ‘rhetoric’—is thus a web or matrix of interconnecting terms, in which the elements of vocabulary do
not signify in isolation but in relation to one another. Taken together, the different elements mutually articulate a distinctive conception of the political sphere. As (p. 30) the emphasis on ‘actions’ suggests, these languages are interwoven with specific political, religious, and social contexts: they are ways of speaking for ways of acting, in which action constantly informs and shapes speech simultaneously as speech informs and shapes action. In an analogy highly resonant for the history of political thought, Wittgenstein said that ‘[o]ur language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses’. The history of political thought explores the old streets and squares of past languages; but as it does so it needs to explore those old buildings and spaces in a literal sense, the parliament buildings, council chambers, churches, universities, residences, piazzas, studies, libraries, and infinite others—for this is where the languages were at home, where they constituted part of practice, where they had their meaning. To look at early modern European political languages is thus to look at early modern Europe itself, at the myriad spaces in which people talked and wrote and read and practised ‘politics’: not presuming one stable referent for that term or for its Latin and vernacular equivalents, but understanding that what was and was not political was constituted through those very languages and practices.

We do not want to make the picture too domestic, however. The languages with which we are concerned are not exclusive to one context: we should not imagine a map of discrete political languages in discrete political spaces, even granted that those political spaces were much more varied than we are liable to think of today. Early modern Europe was a world on the move, and words travelled too: with political, diplomatic, religious, academic actors, but also in letters and in printed books. These could be translated into different national languages, bought and sold, printed or reprinted miles from their origin, and sometimes with no clear origin at all, since works could be published with false or indeed imaginary places of publication, and anonymously or pseudonymously. Literate Europeans could be literate in several political languages just as they were in several national languages, as well as in Latin and (although more rarely) in Greek. Moreover, the printing press widened the sphere of participation in the political conversation, putting tracts and books into the hands of those who might not be educated in the discursive conventions within which a text was written, but who could see in it possibilities for their own purposes.

Consideration of purpose brings us to another feature that complicates the picture, which is the deliberate manipulation of linguistic conventions to legitimate political actions. Actors wanting to persuade people of a particular position or course of action often needed to push at the limits of standard political vocabulary, stretching terms beyond their original reference or importing words and tropes from other political vocabularies. In an age of intense conflict—political, military, religious, often all three rolled into one—the stakes were high and the pen was indeed a mighty sword. Characteristic of the period is the extent to which local arguments exploded into pan-European polemics, as events in one country recoiled on the politics of another. The result of this war of words was constant interface and interchange between different vocabularies, with a consequent instability of meaning. But that unsettled verbal situation offered rich opportunities for writers and speakers in Europe-wide dialogue actively to craft political language as they sought to craft their world. It is this activity (p. 31) that the history of political thought studies, tracing the articulation and deployment, rearticulation and redeployment of a manifold political vocabulary during the early modern period. Within it we can identify certain key themes and concepts even while we appreciate that those themes and concepts never existed in any pure form. Wherever we find them, they are always being constructed or taken apart.

All surveys of this kind must face the inevitable problem of deciding what is ‘early modern’ and what is not, and political thought is no exception. As in other fields, the boundary-lines are contested. Continuity exists between late-medieval and early modern political thought in several areas: in arguments over the government of the Church, in scholastic Aristotelian political philosophy, in the language of natural law, in the vocabulary of civic liberty. Late-medieval forms of argumentation undoubtedly affected the way in which early modern debates were formulated. And yet, those inherited forms were also differently inflected under pressure of the early modern events and changes that are the subject of this book as a whole. The development of centralized monarchical government put the legitimacy of monarchy under scrutiny in ways it had never been before. The outward reach of European polities into Asia and America made contemporaries think and argue
differently about the boundaries of the political. The movement that we know as ‘humanism’ broke the intellectual stranglehold of the medieval universities, creating a new way of speaking, new speakers (scholars, courtiers, secretaries, diplomats, princes and princesses themselves), and a new space of scholarship, the nascent ‘republic of letters’. Partly in synergy with this expansion of learning, the Reformation created both new ways of thinking about the relationship between temporal and spiritual government, and new institutions and forms of exchange in which that thinking took place.

The two centuries between about 1500 and about 1700 thus saw the development of a range of powerful and distinctive concepts that would shape the political thinking of the Enlightenment just as they had themselves been shaped by the heritage of medieval thought. In what follows I take only a handful of the most central and try to show what was at stake therein. The reader will notice that, in the face of linguistic change, I often initially anchor a concept in its Latin terminology, Latin being a language that was written and read across learned Europe and the common coin of linguistic exchange. But I have tried at the same time to suggest the critical importance of the developing national languages. Classical and vernacular terms fed into one another constantly to create meaning, the Latin not always having priority. In some sense, early modern political discourse was always a conversation in translation.

Sovereignty, State, and Commonwealth

If one had to identify two definitively early modern political concepts, they would surely be those of sovereignty and the state. Both of these words are sixteenth-century coinages which fully came into their own in the seventeenth century. Both are originally vernacular terms with no direct equivalents in Latin, although authors created equivalents in the course of working out what they meant. Both seem to mark a decisive break (p. 32) with the political organization of the medieval world, the end of feudalism on the one hand and the universal claims of pope and emperor on the other, and the beginning of a modern political world of formally independent political entities characterized by a centralized power over their subjects.

State and sovereignty go together: the state is a sovereign state. As we shall see, however, the development of these interrelated concepts involved a third term that is central to early modern political thought: respublica, or ‘commonwealth’. ‘State’ and ‘sovereignty’ are negotiations within the complex field of that term, and find their sense only in that relation.

Sovereignty—originally the French ‘souveraineté’, but quickly translated into other vernaculars, for example Italian ‘sovrannità’, early modern English ‘soveraigntie’, German ‘Souveränität’—was flung to the centre of European political discourse in Jean Bodin’s Les Six Livres de la République, published in French in 1576 and then revised by the author in Latin in 1586. The Six Livres was written in the midst of the French wars of religion which were also civil wars, a moment of profound crisis for the French body politic as Protestants (Huguenots) and Catholics fought each other over the nature, power, and legitimacy of the French monarchy. It was a defining moment for early modern political thought. In his powerful intervention, immediately commanding the attention of contemporaries, Bodin famously articulated a clear conception of sovereignty as a power that is superior to any other power within the body politic. The first ‘mark’ of this sovereignty was the power to legislate, to create a law that binds all members of the body politic universally, but which does not bind the sovereign power itself. Other marks of sovereignty included the power to declare war (to which we shall return later), the power to appoint the judiciary, and so on. Sovereignty was necessarily indivisible: sovereign power could not be distributed in different elements of the body politic without ceasing to be sovereignty at all. It was possible, however, for the sovereignty and the administration to be in different hands.

Bodin’s definition of sovereignty resonated with the troubled context of contemporary France. Here was a conception of sovereign power that was neutral in respect of religious division, purely political or politique. However, the work had ambitions far beyond the French context, to intervene in a Europe-wide debate about the very nature of a polity. The work advertises itself as being ‘de la République’, ‘concerning the . . . ’—the what? Bodin defined it in the very first sentence of the 1576 version of Book I: ‘République is an upright [droit] government of many families, and of that which is common [commun] to them, with sovereign power’. This was no restatement of an accepted truth; it was a polemical move within an established tradition of discourse. ‘République’ is the Latin respublica (or res publica), literally the ‘public thing’. In
early modern English this was translated ‘commonwealth’ or ‘commonweal’, and carried distinctly normative overtones. Respublica could mean the body politic as a whole, a mutual political community with a structure of government, in which case it was broadly synonymous with the Latin civitas or the Greek polis (English ‘city’), both of which were defined not simply as urban environments but as communities of citizens. It could also mean the structure of government itself, in which case it translated the Greek politeia, what we call the ‘constitution’. Finally, it could mean a particular form of constitution, a ‘republic’ as opposed to a (p.33) ‘principate’, just as the Roman republic differed from the Roman principate. The boundary line between these different senses of respublica was neither clear nor accepted: it was in fact one of the central points of contestation. Thus, in contemporary English terms, was it an implication of the contrast between republic and principate that a monarchy was not a common (or ‘publique’) weal at all, but a private dominion? If not, did the monarchy at least have to be of a certain, ‘constitutional’ type, in order to satisfy the criterion of commonwealth? Was absolute monarchy by definition tyranny? These are questions that we shall look at in more detail in the following section. For the present they show the very complex issues involved in defining a body politic at all. Our present political vocabulary gives us no problem in skimming off the notion of a state from the constitution of that state. But in the early modern period, there was no clear, politically neutral vocabulary in which to do so.

Returning to Bodin, we can see that in his definition he decidedly aligned himself with that sense of ‘république’ which means the structure of government itself. The normative element is there in ‘droit’ and in ‘commun’, although interestingly he defined the commonality in terms of families rather than individuals. Centrally for our purposes at present, however, he insisted that the government in question had to be characterized by sovereign power. On this basis he distinguished between a ‘cité’ and a ‘république’, civitas and respublica: there could be a city in the classical sense, a community of citizens, that was not a ‘république’, just as the cities of the Veneto, subject to the Republic (precisely) of Venice, were not themselves ‘républiques’. In making cities (non-sovereign but nevertheless political bodies) and ‘républiques’ two different entities, Bodin was deliberately attacking the Aristotelian tradition of political discourse, the dominant tradition of medieval political thought and still one of the main ‘languages’ of political theory in early modern Europe. For Aristotle and Aristotelians, a respublica as a structure of government would be the structure of government of a city, and that city itself could, as a whole, be termed a respublica. Bodin’s charge against them was effectively that Aristotelianism was an antique political theory geared to theorizing an ancient Greek world of small independent cities, but with no purchase at all on large modern political formations which included cities within them.

Contemporary Aristotelians responded with fury. They argued that Aristotle already had a clear conception of sovereign power within his understanding of respublica. They did not need Bodin for that. But another part of their response was that they too began to split the city from the respublica: not in the same way as Bodin had done, but so as to conceive the city as merely the material aspect of the respublica. If that were the case, and the city were no longer a political entity in itself, then its size was no longer any limitation on the size of a possible respublica. The German Protestant university philosopher Henning Arnisaeus, in his anti-Bodinian De republica of 1615, defined this respublica, the formal aspect of a political entity, as a status, with a deliberate reference to the Italian sense of lo stato, ‘the state’.

Arnisaeus thereby self-consciously connected a concept elaborated within an Aristotelian idiom to a very different discourse. The Latin term status and its vernacular equivalents—stato, estado, état, in English both ‘state’ and ‘estate’, in German (p. 34) likewise both Stund (estate) and Staat (state)—were a familiar part of the social and political vocabulary of the time. But they did not mean ‘the state’ in the sense of the sovereign political state with which we are familiar. This was an evolution that had, as Arnisaeus recognized, a particular debt to vernacular Italian political thought. Niccolò Machiavelli, in his The Prince of 1513 (first published 1532), had used ‘stato’ primarily to refer to the ‘state’ of the prince: when the prince was called to ‘maintain the state’, what he was to do was to maintain his princely state in the sense of princely status or estate. But in the first sentence of that book, he had also declared that ‘All the states [Ogni stato], all the dominions that have held sway over men, have been either republics or principalities’, here using ‘state’ more generically for something like ‘structure of government’.\(^5\) Notoriously, and as we shall explore more fully in the next section, he argued that maintaining the state required the prince to be prepared to depart from the conventional understanding of virtue according to the time and tide of political circumstances.
In the wake of Machiavelli—although its relation to his thought was and still is contested—a discourse of *ragion di stato* or ‘reason of state’ developed: a prudential account of what a ruler must do out of necessity or reason of state. The first explicit work of the genre was Giovanni Botero’s *Della ragion di stato* of 1589, in which he began by defining *stato*: ‘State is secure rule [*dominio fermo*] over peoples’. Another key work in founding this new way of talking about politics was the Flemish humanist Justus Lipsius’s *Politicorum libri sex*, published in the same year of 1589 and translated into English in 1594 as *Six Books of Politickes*. This work was indebted to Machiavellian thought as well as to the Roman historian Tacitus’s disabused analysis of the operations of power in the Roman empire, which Lipsius himself had done so much to revive through his translation of Tacitus’s histories. Lipsius was careful to posit two guides to political success, virtue and prudence, not prudence alone. But a glance at the opening of Book II shows that we are a long way from an understanding of commonwealth as a mutual body politic. Here he declared that civil society consists in two things, *Commercium*, which the contemporary English translation rendered ‘Traffique’, and *Imperium*, which that translation rendered ‘Government’, but which more accurately means ‘sway’ or ‘command’ and, with that, the power to command. This *Imperium* he defined as a ‘rod of Circe’, which ‘out of a savage mass, makes them obedient individuals, using everyone’s particular fears’.

This new, late-humanist language of reason of state became extraordinarily fashionable very quickly among the political elites of Europe. It was linguistically very sophisticated, appealing to the verbal dexterity in which aristocrats and men of letters were trained. But it was regarded with extreme distrust in some quarters. As a mode of thought geared to maintaining *dominio fermo*, it seemed to cut loose from the teleology of political rule that Aristotle had articulated in his *Politics*: ‘the city exists for the sake of living well’, ‘living well’ meaning living a life of virtue in common with others. The condition of fulfilling this purpose was government for the common good rather than for private advantage. But the new language of the state seemed to disregard the common good—the end of political rule—and to focus solely on the rule itself. Cardinal William Allen, in his *A True, Sincere, and Modest Defence of English Catholics*, published in 1584 (p. 35) to protest the loyalty of Elizabeth’s Catholic subjects, voiced the suspicion that the language of state, released from religion, was simply a cover for the private gain of powerful Protestants: ‘Now this condition and present fortune of certaine men, that have by her Maiesties lenitie, and by alteration of the Catholique religion into Heresie, thus advaunced their particular; is by these men, called the State: and their abundance, peace, and prosperitie; the happines of the whole Realme’. Protestant anti-Machiavellians made exactly the same charge against Catholics: the end of true religion and the end of true politics.

Allen’s perspective was a product of the scholastic Aristotelian tradition handed down from Thomas Aquinas, in which ‘living well’ had two dimensions, and two communities, one temporal, the other spiritual. This distinction structured the way in which political power was conceived. In contradistinction to power within the ecclesiastical commonwealth or Church, which was directed towards spiritual well-being, power within the civil commonwealth was directed towards temporal well-being. Continuing the medieval organic analogy of the body politic, the community was thought of as a unity, a ‘whole’. It was conceived to have coalesced from human beings who, by the light of natural reason which was natural law, sought society with one another because the good life was unavailable to them in isolation. Political power—*potestas* in the Latin—was then a global power inherent in the body politic to ensure its common good. Operating primarily through civil law, this power had two dimensions: ‘directive’, directing members of the body to the common good, and ‘coercive’, compelling them to it if necessary. Thus, although, as for Bodin, this power was primarily ‘marked’ (in his language) by the capacity to pass law binding all members of the body politic universally, and although it was the power to enact anything deemed necessary to the common good, the teleological element distinguished it from a Bodinian understanding of sovereignty. Superiority was a function of the teleology of power, and since that teleology ultimately directed human beings to a supernatural end, civil power was necessarily twinned with ecclesiastical power in the ‘regimen’ of men. Power, for the scholastics, was never one thing concentrated in one place. Nor was theirs a discourse of ‘state’. The ‘body’ or entitative conception of the commonwealth kept the old link between *res publica* and *civitas*. Scholastics could certainly distinguish between the two, but they were part of one thing.

This early modern articulation of Catholic natural law discourse, originating at the University of Salamanca in Spain in the early sixteenth century, came to dominate the colleges and universities of Catholic Europe, including Louvain where Allen studied. It offered a strong and compelling account of the genesis, nature, and legitimacy of the commonwealth and its
power. As we shall explore further later, however, it was tied to a salvation narrative that was by this time distinctively Catholic, and twinned with an account of ecclesiastical power that was equally so. Beginning with Martin Luther’s associate Philip Melanchthon, Protestants had begun to draft their own version of natural law, one that did not imply the salvific role of natural law but still provided a clear account of it as a rule of human behaviour accessible to natural reason. A Protestant political Aristotelian tradition also began to flourish, again beginning with Melanchthon; we have already seen some of the fruits of this in Arnisaeus. But it was not until the work of the Dutchman Hugo Grotius in the early seventeenth century that they had anything to rival the Catholic natural law account of the genesis of the commonwealth and its power. Grotius, in his *De Iure Belli ac Pacis* (*The Law of War and Peace*) of 1625, provided such an account, partly by drawing heavily on the Catholic scholastic tradition. He offered the same narrative of individuals coming together to form a commonwealth in which power was inherent. But, while he used the scholastic language of *potestas*, he was also clearly thinking in terms of *summum imperium*, sovereignty, in a way that the scholastics were not: Book I, Chapter III, which considered the authority necessary for a public war, was subtitled ‘Explicatio summii imperii’, ‘An explanation of sovereignty’. The languages did not fuse seamlessly in his work; the joins were evident. But he had provided the basis on which later Protestant theorists could build a natural law theory, not just of the commonwealth, but of the state.

The key figure here was undoubtedly Thomas Hobbes. In his *Leviathan* of 1651, he declared ringingly that ‘by Art is created that great Leviathan called a Commonwealth, or State, (in latein Civitas)’. The structure and rhetoric of this sentence throw all the weight towards the beginning: ‘by art’—that is, not by nature, as the Aristotelians suggest. But the tail of it is no less significant. As we have seen, writers before Hobbes tended either to run together commonwealth (*respublica*) and *civitas*, as the political entity or body politic, or to run together commonwealth (*respublica*) and state as a structure of government. But here Hobbes deliberately and polemically collapsed all three terms into one. Sovereignty was key to his thinking about the state, termed *summum imperium* in the Latin of his 1642 *De cive* (‘On the Citizen’). For Hobbes, a state exists where there exists a sovereign, which can be one man or a body of men; every state is thus a particular regime. This was the continuity between Hobbes and earlier understandings of the state. But—and here was the crucial discontinuity—Hobbes argued that to construct this power is at the same time to construct the *civitas*, the united association of citizens, for they are united in the person of the sovereign and have no unity otherwise. Thus, Hobbes fused the conception of the state as a particular structure of government, characterized by sovereign power, with the conception of the commonwealth as a body politic, an entity, and an agent—although he is clear that it can only act through its sovereign representative, because it only exists as an entity through that same sovereign representative. With Hobbes, then, we have a theory of the state in a recognizably modern sense, as a sovereign political entity that can have acts attributed to it, and citizens who are citizens of the state.

Why, then, wasn’t the monster of Malmesbury welcomed with open arms? The collapse of the *civitas* into the state was hugely controversial, cutting out whole areas of politics that had been held dear when *respublica* was finely balanced between state on the one hand and *civitas* on the other. The concentration of political agency in the state, and therefore in its representative, the sovereign, meant that no agency that was not in accordance with the will of the sovereign counted as ‘political’ at all: it was simply enemy action, the hostility of the state of nature. Likewise, freedom, a key value of *civitas* in the ancient tradition—as Hobbes was well aware—was also radically depoliticized: citizenship was not about liberty but about subjection. With that collapse, too, other normative values of *civitas* were lost as a criterion of good and bad regimes: there was no good state or bad state, just the state. In the next three sections, we examine these regimes, or what we call ‘constitutions’, in more detail, exploring the continuing commitment to the idea that the regime of a commonwealth was part of what it was to be a commonwealth, and that therefore some regimes did not qualify as commonwealths at all.

**Constitutionalism, Absolutism, and Republicanism**

In the last section we began with two words that were genuine early modern coinages. In this we take three words that are modern inventions, mapped onto the political languages of early modern Europe for purposes of analysis. Are they a good...
fit? Considering the answer depends upon the initial realization that the issue revolves around monarchy, the key political institution of early modern Europe. The question was fundamentally one of the legitimacy of monarchical government.

Early modern writers were undoubtedly deeply concerned with ‘forms of government’ (formae regiminiis) or ‘states of commonwealth’ (status reipublicae): different regimes distinguished by different holers of power. They had inherited from Aristotle a six-fold classification of what we call ‘constitutions’ (in Greek, politeiai, remembering that in Latin this would be a six-fold classification of respublicae, ‘commonwealths’). Political power could rest with either the one, the few, or the many, and these basic forms could be either good or bad, depending on whether or not they served the common good. The good ones were monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. These forms of government aimed at the private good of the ruler(s). This provided a key synergy between the Greek and Latin idioms of politics, because to aim at private good was contrary to res publica, the ‘public thing’. In these forms, then, the respublica had been corrupted, or, at the extreme, completely destroyed. Although the analysis of political corruption was shared, however, the Latin tradition was in general less insistent on this typology of good and bad forms of government. It tended to distinguish between status popularis, ‘popular state’, status optimatum, literally ‘state of the best’ or aristocracy, and the government of one. By the seventeenth century it had become common to pull the Greek idiom into line with the Latin, positing monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy as the three main forms of government, forgetting about Aristotle’s ‘polity’ which had been pretty obscure in the first place. One element of how Aristotle described polity in Book IV of his Politics did survive, however, which was the idea of the ‘mixed constitution’. Aristotle had had in mind mixing oligarchy and democracy, but the Greek historian of Rome, Polybius, had popularized the idea in a different sense by praising the Roman constitution as containing elements of all three main forms of government, thus ensuring its stability: no element of the civitas felt deprived of political power, and yet it still (p. 38) had the decisive government which was generally thought to be the key advantage of a monarchical constitution.

The heritage of the classical, and indeed the medieval tradition, therefore, was that monarchy was not contrary to respublica. The accommodation between the two was encapsulated in the standard contrast between the good prince and the tyrant, which, at its most basic, went like this: The good prince governs to the common good rather than his own; he respects the liberty and the property of his subjects rather than treating them as slaves; he governs with the aid of counsellors, who, he being a good prince, are not afraid to tell him uncomfortable truths about the state of his realm, or to advise him on the best course of action; he dispenses true justice, and on top of that he exercises the princely virtues of mercy and generosity; as a result the commonwealth flourishes and everybody loves him. Just the reverse for the tyrant: he governs to his own private good, not the common; he plunders the property of his subjects and deprives them of liberty; he does not listen to counsel, or, if so, only to the flattering voices of toadies; his ‘justice’ is warped, he disregards the laws, he is cruel and avaricious; as a result the commonwealth goes to ruin and everybody hates him. The moral, political, and rhetorical purchase of this basic contrast, even among authors who thought in far more sophisticated terms, was immense. It depends on the idea that the commonwealth exists independently of the prince; he does not own it; he is there to serve it. Even where there is no formal political role for any other part of the body politic, it is politically present through the office of the counsellors and in the teleology of the prince’s rule which is for it rather than for him. We find the praise of this kind of monarchy, not only as a legitimate, but as the best form of government, across a wide range of humanist political literature throughout the sixteenth century. It was best because it looked directly to the common good, whereas more popular forms of government were held to be riven with faction, demagoguery, and private interests more generally, as well as the ignorance and fickleness of the uneducated and indeed all the common vices.

We have already seen one way in which this humanist, essentially virtue-based account of monarchy came under pressure from humanist scholars themselves. Machiavelli argued that it was a ‘fantasy’ and that if a prince always practised the standard princely virtues he would lose his state. Inherent in the argument is that ‘principate’ as a stato, a distinctive structure of rule, is not any kind of office or service of the commonwealth or respublica. Rather, as we shall see in more detail later, Machiavelli insisted instead that a principato and a repubblica are two different and mutually exclusive types of state, the latter being politically preferable. Thomas More, in his dialogue Utopia of 1516, likewise had one of the participants, ‘More’, suggest that the standard philosophy of monarchy was ‘academic’ (philosophia scholaristica). Another
philosophy, ‘more suited to civil life’ (*philosophia civilior*), would accept and deal with the existence of corruption in court and counsel, compromising on a politics of virtue but not abandoning it. However, More also gave the other participant, ‘Hythloday’, a fundamental institutional critique of virtue politics altogether. We have seen that the institution of property was an important element in the portrait of good government, and it would be so throughout (p. 39) the English ‘commonwealth’ tradition of the sixteenth century. But, through Hythloday, More suggested that the dynamic of human relations was driven by the vice of pride, a ‘suckfish from hell’ that fed on inequality. Where there was any private property, the prideful drive to appropriate or ‘enclose’ ever more of it pushed more and more people out of property altogether, and annihilated any ‘public thing’ or commonwealth. Hythloday’s alternative to the corrupt European ‘commonwealths’ was the island of Utopia, in which private property had been abolished and there was an elective system of government.

Despite More’s derogatory reference, the ‘virtue’ account was also under pressure in the scholastic tradition, but in a different way. They shared the same kind of view of monarchy as the best form of government, partly inherited from Aquinas, who had provided an image of the ideal king as the analogue of God in the universe, the shepherd in the flock, the father in the household. But Aquinas’s delicately balanced virtue-politics was drowned out by the acerbic controversy at the turn of the fourteenth century over the respective powers of temporal ruler (king or emperor) and pope. Thereafter power, rather than virtue, was what was centrally at issue in this discourse. It is here that we begin to tread on the territory of ‘constitutionalism’.

**Constitutionalism**

As we have seen, power for the early modern scholastics was inherent in the body politic, the community that comes together for the sake of the good life. This community, however, was prior to any particular regime or form of government, and it needed to place its power in the hands of some body (monarch, senate, or popular assembly) for the sake of effective government. At the beginning of our period, in 1511, the Sorbonne theologian Jacques Almain argued that that transfer must always be revocable, whatever the regime. The power belongs originally within the community, and, should the ruler fail to provide for the common good of the body politic, it reverts to the community, to depose the ruler if necessary. Thus, power is never alienated to the ruler; in some sense, the community always has it, while the ruler merely exercises it on behalf of the community. Showing the intimate link between questions of temporal and of ecclesiastical government that characterizes the early modern period, Almain argued for this structure within the political community in order to argue the same for the Church, and thereby to vindicate the power of the general council over the Pope. In this conception, there is no difference between forms of government except for the number of individuals who exercise power: they do not exercise a different power in each, nor does the power reside in different places according to regime. Power is always the people’s power. A response from a contemporary Italian, Giovanni Francesco Poggio in his *De potestate papae et concilii* of c. 1512, shows the radical nature of this argument, and the difficulty contemporaries had with it. A monarchy that did no more than exercise the people’s power was simply not a monarchy. Whatever the case with an aristocracy, which one could concede was merely a delegated form of government, in a true monarchy power must belong to the monarch and not the community. Thus, in the Church, which Christ founded as a monarchy, power must reside with the Pope and not the general council.

The power of this contrast was equally strongly felt in the political polemics of the seventeenth century. King James VI of Scotland and I of England distinguished between ‘such free Monarchies as our king is’ and the ‘dukes of Venice’, whose ‘Aristocratick and limited government, is nothing like to free Monarchies’. His son, Charles I, would inherit and deploy the same rhetoric against any perceived diminutions of his royal authority. The apparent similarity between these arguments led to a famous thesis in the history of political thought, ‘the road from Constance to 1688’. That is, the conciliar position first articulated at the Council of Constance in 1414–16 was the direct antecedent of the constitutional monarchy supposedly enshrined in the Glorious Revolution. This story of continuity is undoubtedly exaggerated. But that does not mean that we have to do with pure discontinuity either. The ‘languages’ approach to the history of political thought does not require, indeed militates against, any such sharp either/or. As argued in the Introduction, linguistic hybridity is key to the development of early modern political thought. Elements of scholastic vocabulary and formulations—linguistic ‘motifs’—could be found in combination with others of very different origin. Abandoning any definitive sense of ‘constitutionalism’, then, or even
abandoning the term altogether, we can see scholastic language as one element interleaved with others in the fervid polemics that ran throughout the civil wars of Europe in the early modern period.

The name that traditional scholarship gave to the ‘constitutionalist’ position was ‘monarchomach’, literally ‘monarch-fighting’. As in many cases, it was originally a pejorative term bestowed on their adversaries by supporters of royal rule. Under this heading are grouped a range of principally French, Scottish, German, and Dutch, but also some Spanish, writers of the late sixteen and early seventeenth centuries. The majority of them were Calvinist, seeking to accuse the Catholic monarchs who opposed them of tyranny, and thus of being illegitimate rulers who could and should be deposed, even by death. Some of their arguments were religious, denouncing heresy, the corruption of relations between man and God, as a corruption of respublica itself. But the other salient feature to note is the strongly legal tone of many of these tracts. A reformed jurisprudence was key to a reformed articulation of political relations. Roman law provided the central notion of the universitas, the corporation, on behalf of which particular individuals could act, but which they could not rule. Medieval conciliarists had already made use of the notion against the Pope, but it acquired a different resonance in the hands of Calvinist lawyers. Rex maior singulis, minor universis—'the king is greater than people taken individually, but lesser than the people taken as a whole'—was a defining statement. It was coupled with a historical argument concerning the originally elective nature of monarchy. Reformed jurisprudence was critically indebted to legal humanism, the historical study of the Roman law, bent on stripping away the accretions of centuries to return to the original meaning of the texts. Turned on the local law of particular monarchies, these same techniques were used to unearth an ancient state of the realm (in England, the ‘Ancient Constitution’), in which political power rested in a gathering of the people, the original of the parliaments or estates-general of the modern world, now (p. 41) tyrannously deprived of their powers by corrupt monarchs. The revolutionary force of this kind of legal antiquarianism crossed the continent of Europe through a network of humanist scholars, the nascent republic of letters already showing its political teeth.

We should not, however, think that ‘monarchomach’ voices were purely Protestant, or humanist, and their opponents Catholic monarchs. Some Catholic and scholastic writers were equally suspect to monarchs both Catholic and Protestant. As we have seen, the scholastic tradition in its entirety held that political power was originally vested in the community, and had then to be transferred to a particular form of government. That transfer was seen as a pact of some sort, which was originally on the people’s terms. The Jesuit Francisco Suárez argued that this pact could be full-blown alienation to a monarch, in which case the people no longer had any residual power; but his theory would not allow him to say that it had to be.16 Others among his fellow Jesuits, while undoubtedly holding that monarchy was the best form of government, could be quite critical of the tendency of kings to try to grasp as much power as they could despite the original terms of the transfer. All of them endorsed the legitimacy of tyrannicide in certain circumstances. We need to be cautious here: that endorsement was for the most part muted and theoretical, and wildly exaggerated in Protestant polemics. But, when the tide in France turned for the Huguenots and their candidate for the throne, Henry of Navarre, some French Catholics did adopt equally as strenuous a ‘monarchomach’ position as had their Calvinist adversaries. And when in 1610 Henry was assassinated by a French Catholic unconvinced of his 1594 conversion to Catholicism, the work of the Spanish Jesuit Juan de Mariana was publicly burned for its more affirmative legitimation of tyrannicide.

Absolutism

With some sense of the terms of debate, then, we turn to the opposing position of ‘absolutism’. We can see now that this is a position about monarchy, and thus that although it overlaps with the question of sovereignty, it is not the same, because sovereignty can be vested in any ruling body. Unlike with the term ‘constitutionalism’, we come quite close to ‘absolutism’ in two contemporary locations, one legal, the other originally theological. Certain texts of the Roman law described the prince (originally the Roman emperor) as legibus solutus, ‘unbound by the laws’. Some early modern lawyers, for example John Cowell in his Interpreter of 1607, revived this legal doctrine as an ideological position. Coupled with this was an early modern revival of the late-medieval theological distinction between God’s absolute and his ordained or ordinary power (potestas absoluta and ordinata). God was held normally to act within the order that he had created, but in virtue of his absolute power he could override it. These two locations could be fused, as they were by the exiled Italian Protestant lawyer
Alberico Gentili in *De potestate absoluta regis* (‘On the Absolute Power of the King’), one of his *Disputationes regales tres* (‘Three Royal Disputations’) of 1605. Together they yielded a position in which the prince was above the civil law of the realm although not above the law of nations or above natural law. The limitation of the law of nations was not a small one, for property in the Roman legal tradition was held to be an institution of the law of nations, and thus immune from the power of the prince. But Gentili himself had earlier flirted with the obvious objection: if the prince can change the civil law, and if it is the civil law which decides what actions are granted for the recovery of property, then what does that immunity amount to in fact? We shall return to the law of nations later. Meanwhile, it is not a coincidence that both of these works by Cowell and Gentili were published in the reign of James VI of Scotland and I of England, a king, as we have already hinted, particularly concerned with the defence of his royal authority.

Our survey of ‘monarchomach’ thought also shows us, however, that, whatever learned lawyers might assert, in terms of political rhetoric it was not enough simply to describe a legal position. The strength of the opposing theory lay in the narrative it offered of power originally in the people. If royalists were to deny that monarchs were the people’s creatures, they had to offer a compelling counter-narrative about the source of their power. Thus, ‘absolutism’ describes not only the civil law argument, but those accounts of the origins of royal power that bypass the people and the people’s consent. Essentially, in early modern terms, there were two alternative possibilities for such a source: God, and nature (even if the argument from nature ultimately went back to its creator, God). The first possibility, that the power of the monarch came directly from God—which we know in English as the ‘divine right of kings’—was espoused by James VI and I himself in his theoretical writings, by his son Charles I, and elsewhere in Europe too. It had very strong scriptural support in the letter of St Paul to the Romans, Chapter 13: ‘the powers that be are ordained of God’, a text with peculiar resonance in Protestant theology which enjoined obedience to secular rulers as the necessary ‘sword’ to curtail evil, even if it could not create goodness. But the divine sanction of kingship was also a feature of Catholic monarchist writing, especially in seventeenth-century France.

It was both Catholics and Protestants, then, who combatted the papal claim, defended by scholastic theologians and most notoriously the Jesuits, of the ‘indirect power’ of the Pope in temporal matters. This claim rested, again, on the teleology of power that characterized scholastic thinking: if the temporal realm is part of salvation, then it must be subject to some kind of supervision by the spiritual ruler, the Pope. Jesuits like Cardinal Robert Bellarmine and Francisco Suárez argued that this did not detract from the political power of the monarch. But to their adversaries, it seemed an obvious infringement of absolute royal power, since the king would thereby have a superior, the Pope. Equally threateningly, the people, who on this theory made the king in the first place, would have an object of higher allegiance. The issue exploded in England over the ‘Oath of Allegiance’ to the Crown that King James demanded from his Catholic subjects after the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, but soon involved the whole of Europe. The logical counter-position to the papal argument was to claim the monarch, not the Pope, as head of the Church. But in Protestant lands, this would lead to opposition among some of the Reformed faith who thought very differently about the Church and its government. The thorny and often acrid polemics involved lie beyond this survey. They showed the dangers, however, in the appeal to God as the foundation of royal authority.

(p. 43) Locating royal authority in nature did not seem obvious either. Jacques Almain at the Sorbonne had declared emphatically that ‘no one is naturally born a king’, *nullus naturaliter nascitur rex*. The monarchomachs had also insisted, as we have seen, that the king is made by the people. But James VI and I, again, argued in contrast that ‘By the Law of Nature the King becomes a natural Father to all his Lieges at his Coronation’. Sir Robert Filmer and others put forward a stronger thesis, which we know as patriarchalism: the idea that the ‘original’ of royal authority was the natural authority of the father, and indeed of the first father, Adam, over his children. Again, Scripture provided crucial support, and it was shored up by the ubiquitous early modern deployment of the father as a symbol of good government. But the idea that kingly government grew from patriarchal government could also claim some historical plausibility. Filmer in his *Patriarcha* used it to attack as a fiction the idea that the people originally set up its own government, an idea which he saw as stemming from the scholastics but now widely diffused across all the churches and embraced by the common multitude. For Filmer, instead, we are all born subject, already under government. First published by royalists in 1680 to defend the succession of the future James II to Charles II against attempts to exclude him from it, *Patriarcha* was the key target of John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*. Before we look at this celebrated work of ‘constitutionalism’, however, we need to turn to a third
modern ‘ism’: republicanism.

Republicanism

We are familiar by now with the general early modern understanding of respublica, and we have seen that it is compatible with monarchy but not with tyranny. Here we are interested in the interplay between this sense of respublica and that in which it means a government without a prince. According to one classic account, the latter sense of respublica acquired new force in Italy during the conflict, around the turn of the fifteenth century, between Florence, a commune, and Milan, a signoria or lordship of the Visconti family.19 Florence, originally a colony of the Roman republic, looked back to republican Rome for a communal ideology to pit against its princely enemy. Two central figures in this story were Leonardo Bruni, author of a panegyric on the city of Florence, and Coluccio Salutati, author of De tyranno (‘On the Tyrant’) of 1402. A key part of the ideology they articulated was civic liberty, and it essentially implied citizen self-government as opposed to being governed by a signore or lord. This ideology was termed ‘civic humanism’—humanist because its protagonists were literate in the classics and used ancient sources to reconstruct the heroic figure, and the heroic virtues, of the republican free citizen. A repubblica in this sense is incompatible with lordship, which equates to tyranny precisely because it is contrary to liberty.

The idea that republican liberty in the early modern period meant liberty as citizen self-government has been questioned, however. On another reading, the liberty in question is liberty in the sense of not being subject to the arbitrary will of another.20 While the former interpretation sees the sources of republican language in a broadly classical (p. 44) tradition, both Greek and Latin, this reading lays stress on the presence of the Roman legal language of ownership in the early modern texts. Dominus is the Latin term for a master over a slave, one who can simply subject the slave to his own caprice. The slave is owned, ‘dominated’; crucially, therefore, he is not ‘his own man’, and consequently he will lack the characteristic virtues of a free citizen. Popular participation in government is certainly a mark of a republic, or ‘free state’, but not because that participation is itself liberty; rather, because it is required to secure liberty. On this understanding, while republicanism is still incompatible with tyranny and with rule by personal fiat, it is not incompatible with a monarchy that is bound by laws that it does not itself make. The republicanism that is opposed to any form of monarchy is a narrower phenomenon, ‘exclusive republicanism’, which did exist but was a specific ideology within this broader conception. This second understanding brings republicanism much closer to the broad sense of ‘commonwealth’ and to the idea of a ‘mixed constitution’, and makes republicanism a much more widespread early modern European ideology than had previously been thought.

Here, as with ‘constitutionalism’, the recognition of linguistic slippage and hybridity, and a willingness to abandon labels, are key assets in the history of political thought. A distinctive tradition of thinking about republics as opposed to monarchies certainly existed. Its origins go back beyond Bruni and Salutati to a late-medieval Italian discourse on the merits of communal government. A sophisticated exposition, although at the same time a reconstruction, of this understanding of a republic and of the institutions required to maintain it in freedom, could be found in the work of another Florentine, Machiavelli, in his Discourses on the Roman historian Livy, published in 1531. This is his work on republics as opposed to principalities; from its perspective, the prince of The Prince is, precisely, a tyrant, albeit again a reconstructed one whose action escapes the rigid vice of the standard portrait. But Machiavelli’s attitude to monarchy in the Discourses was equally nuanced. A kingdom, regno, figures as in principle a good thing, and the kingdom of France receives special praise for its laws and institutions. Rome itself was originally a kingdom, founded by one man, Romulus, who established its institutions to be like those of a free state.21 Although he never called France a repubblica, then—because it was a regno—Machiavelli allowed for a monarchy that is not a tyranny, one that could be, indeed, quasi-republican in its constitution.

Influential as Machiavelli’s Discourses subsequently became, the example of Venice, the serenissima repubblica, was also critically important to the republican tradition, the more so since Florence did not maintain its free status and surrendered to the signoria of the Medici. As a seafaring republic, and as a more aristocratic version of republican government than the Florentine, it appealed to elites both in Holland and in England as a model of government that was both stable and free. We have already seen Charles I accuse his opponents of treating him like a Venetian doge, not a king, and indeed the language of liberty as freedom from arbitrary government, of ownership rather than slavery, was rife among opponents of the king in
the period leading up to the civil war in England. But it was only a small number among them who eventually argued for the ‘exclusive’ form of republicanism, the execution of the king as a tyrant (p. 45) but also the abolition of monarchy as tyrannous by definition and not just as practised by a bad king. The ‘free state’ established in the wake of the execution was called ‘the Commonwealth’: commonwealth, that is, *respublica*, that is, a republic; because monarchy, as tyranny, is opposed to commonwealth, just as in the traditional picture. The classic work of this way of thinking was James Harrington’s work of 1656, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*.

At the end of this long and conflict-ridden road, let us take a look at John Locke’s second *Treatise of Government*, written in 1681–82 to call for revolutionary action after the failure of his party’s parliamentary bid to exclude James, the Catholic brother of Charles II, from the succession. This is a work which has strong continuities with the ‘monarchomach’ tradition, and can indeed be seen as the last of the Protestant ‘resistance theories’. It too appeals to a body of the people, and to a power vested in the legislative body—parliament—as the ‘Supream Power’ in the land: sovereign, in other words. But it also deploys the distinctive language of liberty as freedom from arbitrary will, which characterized the civil war period, as a key aspect of its rhetorical strategy. Nevertheless, Locke did not call for the abolition of monarchy. In his view, an ‘executive power’ is an ineliminable part of the constitution, and it must have ‘prerogative’, including the power to summon and to dismiss the legislative power. Thus, although Locke’s work tends to be thought of as a classic of constitutionalism, it is in fact equally about the limits of any constitution. In the case of intolerable abuse of either legislative or executive power, there is no constitutional remedy, ‘no Judge on Earth’: the only course is to act extra-constitutionally, to ‘Appeal to Heaven’ and its divine judge.22

**Natural Law, Natural Rights, and States of Nature**

Locke’s second *Treatise* is thus, like so many of the great works of early modern political thought, hybrid between different political languages: powerfully creative but also tense with potential slippage. It is this that gives them their excitement and urgency, which both reflects and is part of the excitement and urgency of the political contest in which they take place. We turn now to another of its aspects, its use of the language of natural rights. The notion of natural rights is one of the most distinctive motifs of early modern political thought, and one of the most controversial, held variously to mark the beginning of individualism, liberalism, bourgeois capitalism, and political modernity more generally, whether this is seen as a good thing or a bad thing. In this section our focus is rather on how they functioned in early modern political discourse and what accounted for their peculiar appeal. To see this we need to start by thinking about the political appeal of nature more generally.

We have already encountered, from a different angle, the drive of early modern political thought to ground political authority somewhere, to refer to—that is, to (p. 46) construct—an ‘Original of Government’, in Locke’s phrase. Few early modern theorists thought of politics and the political sphere as self-legitimating. This is not to say that none of them did. Some of the most brilliant—Machiavelli, Bodin, and Hobbes (in a different way, to which we shall return)—thought of the order created by the state as enough to justify it. Part of the persuasive power of their arguments, however, lay in their picture of what lay outside it: a jumble of war and slaughter. The pervasive, ferocious, and destructive warfare that characterized early modern Europe is clearly in the background here. But in painting this picture, Machiavelli and Hobbes, at least, were also indebted to the continuing development of humanist scholarship, in this case the revival of Epicureanism. The Greek philosopher Epicurus, and the Roman poet of his system, Lucretius, had not only described a universe made up of atoms in which the gods are remote and play no providential role; they had also described human nature as animalistic, continually clashing, with no notion of justice (that key political virtue, as we have seen) until human beings invented an arbitrary one by mutual pact. Reviled throughout Christian late antiquity and the Middle Ages, Epicureanism continued to shock the majority of early modern Europeans. But to a range of thinkers, equally reviled by their contemporaries, Epicurean nature offered a way out of the suffocating bind in which political thought, and thus politics itself, was enmeshed: unable to ground itself, and therefore dependent either on religion to shore it up (but religion, for these thinkers, precisely tore it down), or on a normative conception of human nature that was either itself dependent on religion, or a mere platitude continually defied by the dismal
evidence all around.

My description of these thinkers is inherently sympathetic: they come out as heroes, and indeed, in some sense, they are. We could not think the way we do were it not for their iconoclastic interventions. But we need to be equally sympathetic to their opponents. For them, the constraints of religion and of human nature as a norm, not just as a brute fact, were not a suffocating bind for politics; rather, they were the condition of any properly political life at all. The normative force of nature was encapsulated in the premise that human nature of itself supplied some kind of law, a ‘natural law’.

The notion that there existed a natural law was a heritage of both ancient thought and of the medieval scholastic tradition. Its most famous medieval exponent was the theologian Thomas Aquinas, from whom the Catholic scholastics of the early modern period derived and developed it. Aquinas had seen natural law as one among four different laws, which together guided the human being back to his ultimate end in God. Natural law was the light of human reason, which discerns basic rules of good human actions in view of human ends, including the ultimate end. On the basis of those rules, human beings could work out two further kinds of law by which they govern themselves, the law of nations and the laws of particular commonwealths. Natural law was thus the normative foundation for the entirety of human political life, but its teleology stretched beyond it. In following natural law we follow, as much as we can through our own natural resources, our path back to God; that same path, however, leads to and through the sacraments of the Catholic Church.

(p. 47) The Protestant theology of Martin Luther, based on salvation through faith alone, could not accommodate natural law in the Catholic understanding. But it was too powerful a resource to be left solely to their adversaries. A circle of jurists around Philip Melanchthon, and subsequently a whole series of influential lawyers both Lutheran and Calvinist, working at the newly formed or reformed universities, elaborated a Protestant version of natural law. As befitted the humanist training of many of them, they looked to classical accounts, in Cicero, in the ancient Stoics, and in Roman law itself, to develop their conception. It was similar to the Catholic in its emphasis on natural human reason, also characterized as a ‘light’. But the ‘good’ to which it directed was a purely external good, the good of peaceful social interaction, rather than the internal good of the soul. It was, in that sense, a more political conception of natural law, and it became entrenched at the Protestant universities of northern Europe to train a newly formed civil elite in the ethos and administration of the state.

The notion that human beings possess natural rights was not an automatic corollary of the notion that they are guided by natural law. It was a late-medieval development, its primary context being the anomalous situation of Franciscan friars who had taken a vow of poverty. Given that they did not own, under civil law, the food and other things that they consumed, then by what right did they do so? One answer was, by the natural right of consuming the things of the earth. As the Book of Genesis testified, God gave the earth and all its fruits to mankind in common. The civil law of property was overlaid upon this natural situation, but was incapable of overriding it when an individual was in need. This conception was taken up by early modern Catholic scholastics in an elaborate theology of dominium or ownership. Liberty was incorporated into this theology as a kind of dominium over oneself, and it too was argued to belong to human beings by nature. But their language of natural rights was multi-stranded: rights could be seen as licences to act operating within the permissive spaces of natural law; or as rights to the goods which natural law enjoined, especially the good of self-preservation.

As for the Protestant tradition, it did not immediately take up the language of natural rights; its focus was far more on the sociable relations between human beings than on the individuals themselves. Here again, however, Hugo Grotius in his 1625 work De Iure Belli ac Pacis was key in appropriating a scholastic language of natural rights and implanting it within a Protestant framework. Natural rights then become the moral powers that individuals naturally had over themselves (their liberty), over their goods (their property), and over what was owed to them (their credit), with the caveat that those powers must be exercised within the confines of what was naturally lawful—that is, what was conducive to peaceable social relations. Differently from the Catholic tradition, Grotius characterized this conception with the Ciceronian, and more broadly humanist, language of the utile (the advantageous or the profitable) and the honestum (the honourable, the morally upright). Natural rights are fundamentally part of the individual’s utile. Natural law and the sociability it enjoins are the inter-personal honestum within which the individual utile must be pursued.
Catholic and Protestant discourses differed, too, in the political use to which the idea of natural rights was put. A notion of temporal priority was built into the conception (p. 48) that the former had inherited from late-medieval theology: natural rights were fundamentally the rights that human beings had in the ‘state of innocence’, that is, the time before the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Thereafter, with the important exception of the right of self-preservation and one or two others that were so intimately connected with the goods of natural law as to be inalienable, these rights were subject to restriction and modification by human arrangements for the sake of mutual human life. This time of modification and restriction was the time of the law of nations, not of the law of nature. It was within this time that the commonwealth, in part an institution of the law of nations, was created. But, almost universally, the Catholic scholastics, true to their Aristotelian roots, never saw the commonwealth as a purely voluntary foundation. They always held that human beings, out of natural inclination, naturally gathered together, not only into families or other groupings, but into cities, structured political communities. Thus there was not much space for a time of the law of nations that was not the time of commonwealths, and they saw no need for any strenuously contractual narrative based on the transfer or surrender of natural rights.

By contrast, what we find with the Protestant tradition is a conception of a ‘state’ or ‘condition’ of nature, in which individuals use their natural rights to pursue what is advantageous to them. This state is governed by natural law, and under it valid contracts, ‘pacts’, of all kinds can be made, that is, transfers of natural rights. Thus, much of what the scholastics saw as the law of nations was contained in natural law, or in the law of nations understood as a natural law. But in this story, what individuals find is that in this state they are not secure in the advantages they have pursued. The natural *honestum*—the natural social relations of human beings, governed by natural law—is not enough: despite the key command of natural law, ‘keep your contracts’, enough violation occurs to destabilize the natural state. They therefore make the biggest and most important compact of them all, which is to create a commonwealth, a civil state, in which they lose some of their liberty but are more secure in their goods. This is the deal, and it is perhaps the most celebrated, and the most notorious, of all the ‘origins’ stories that we have considered so far. Political authority rests on a ground, or source, outside itself, but that source is not God, or nature, or even (directly) the natural law, but the will of the individual undertaking a contract. We find this account of the origins of the state embryonically in Grotius, and thereafter in Hobbes, in the German natural law philosopher Samuel Pufendorf, in Locke, and it echoes on throughout the eighteenth century. The twist in Hobbes was his combination of the argument from natural law and natural rights with his Epicurean picture of human life outside the state. In the war of all against all, human beings have a natural right to any advantage they can pursue, without the Grotian caveat of consistency with social relations because there are no social relations: the law of nature does not check external behaviour, though it may still check the conscience. Rather, individuals create the social relations of natural law at the very same time as they create the sovereign and thus the state. It was all part of the Hobbesian collapse that contemporaries found so deeply troubling.

While part of the success of this story of an original compact undoubtedly lay in its imaginative appeal, it also provided a very powerful solution to the problem of political obligation and its limits that bedevilled an era riven with civil war. Individuals were bound to obey their sovereign because they voluntarily entered into an undertaking to do so, but their obligation was conditioned by the terms of the original deal: should these in some way be broken or voided, obligation was at an end. Compelling though this narrative was, however, it was open to an equally powerful objection: that there never was such a state of nature, nor any such free decision to institute a government. Filmer’s ‘Original of Government’ in paternal authority did indeed seem, historically, to be much more likely. Part of Locke’s answer, like that of others, was to point to America. He used it both to illustrate the state of nature and to suggest that primitive groups which might look purely familial were, in fact, embryonically political. Locke saw America as the state of nature in another way, too: in the absence of any large-scale enclosure of the ‘commons’ with which God had gifted mankind in Genesis, and thus of any extensive property in the land. That being so, this great commons lay open still. In the next and final section, we turn to look in more detail at how the experience of European expansion—conquest, colonization, and commerce—shaped the political thought of early modern Europe.

**Empire, War, and the International Order**
In this section we are again confronted with modern vocabulary that has an uneasy fit with early modern discourse. ‘Empire’ is the English form of the Latin word *imperium*, which could mean both the power to command within a political body and the territorial extension of that power outside it. We have already seen the former sense in widespread deployment; it is there too in Henry VIII’s famous declaration in the 1533 Act in Restraint of Appeals to Rome, ‘This realm of England is an empire’. What he meant was that the king, and no one else, held dominion or sway in that kingdom. Early modern Europe also inherited, however, the other sense of the term, principally through the existence of the political body known as the Holy Roman Empire, the heir (or so it claimed) to the Roman empire itself. Even here, however, the two senses were not entirely distinct, because part of the ideology of the medieval empire was that no other political entity was an empire: it was *the* empire, the sole *imperium* in all Christendom. Empire meant both the expanse and the rule, something more like our sense of ‘dominion’. As for ‘international’, that term has no early modern equivalent, importing as it does the world with which we are familiar, one of sovereign nation states in their non-subordinate (so the ideology, at least) relations with each other. But as we have seen, the sovereign state was a late development in our period, and the closest equivalent term to ‘nations’, the Latin *gentes*, meant something more like ‘peoples’, non-committal as to whether these peoples were formed into commonwealths or not. For all the difficulties in finding an appropriate terminology, however, the relation of bodies politic both to what was seen (p. 50) as a non-political ‘outside’, and to other bodies politic, was in the early modern period an increasingly crucial part of talking about those bodies politic themselves.

The election in 1519 of Charles I, King of Spain, as the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, was a heady moment for Spanish writers within his circle. Humanist scholars many of them, they looked back beyond the medieval and Germanic empire to ancient Rome to fashion a new, neo-classical ideology of empire as the bringer of peace and civilization to the world. It was critical to their understanding that ‘the world’ was no longer simply the borders of the old Roman empire, with a fabled idea of India and China on the edges of the known. The Portuguese and Spanish ‘discoveries’ of the previous century meant that the potential reach of empire was truly global. Although the papal Bulls of Donation of 1493 and the subsequent Treaty of Tordesillas had given the East to Portugal and the West to Spain, Spanish writers of the early sixteenth century were unimpeded in the ‘lordship of all the world’ that they envisaged and claimed for Charles; indeed, the papal charge, the spread of the Christian faith, was an important part of the rhetoric of legitimation. The period of Spanish dominion over Portugal (1580–1640) made such ‘universal monarchy’ even more of a plausible reality (and a threat to its opponents), the Italian Tommaso Campanella’s *Monarchia di Spagna*, written c. 1600–1, being perhaps the most potent elaboration of this vision. But it would be wrong to characterize this Spanish humanist discourse of empire as entirely laudatory and indeed messianic. Antonio de Guevara was a counsellor of Charles V, and his 1529 *Libro aureo di Marco Aurelio*, translated into English in 1557 as *A Diall of Princes*, offered, through a fictional series of letters from the philosophical Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, a highly sophisticated and not always comfortable meditation on empire in both its senses. It contained the story of ‘el villano del Danubio’, a peasant from the borders of the Danube described in such a way as to hint at an American Indian, come to the Roman senate to complain of the abuse of Roman jurisdiction in his country.

Empire in the sense of universal monarchy was attacked head-on, however, by the theologians of the University of Salamanca and subsequently elsewhere in the Iberian peninsula. They used their theology of law, which we have already encountered in different contexts, to annihilate the possibility. Francisco de Vitoria’s lecture *On the American Indians* of 1539 contains the classic statement of this position. In it he argued forcefully that to be legitimate, such lordship would have to rest on either natural, human, or divine law. It could not rest on natural or divine law, because, as we have seen, all temporal lordship comes from human beings gathered into a commonwealth. But there neither is, nor was, a universal commonwealth that could transfer its power to a single ruler in this way. The emperor was not, then, ‘lord of all the world’. Importantly, neither was the Pope; he had, as we have also seen, an indirect power in temporals, but no direct power. Thus, he could not give dominion of the world to either the Spanish or the Portuguese, because it was not his to give. At the same time, Vitoria argued that the American Indians, prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, had had true jurisdiction over their peoples as well as true property in their goods. Since both of these were institutions of the law of nations, it was not legitimate, under the law of nations, to conquer or to dispossess them without a just title of war. The simple fact that they were not Christian did not constitute such a title.
So far it would seem, then, that this scholastic natural law discourse was critical of empire. But it was a double-edged sword, as Vitoria then proceeded to give a list of just titles of war. Most notoriously that list included violation of the *ius communicandi*, the ‘right of communication’, which included the right to travel and to settle in the lands of others, and to appropriate whatever goods within those lands had not been ‘occupied’, or had been abandoned, by the native inhabitants—pearls or gold, for example.25 Although this right was denied by many of his Spanish colleagues, its essential features were taken up and enshrined as part of the law of nations within the Protestant natural law tradition. Grotius in his *De Iure Belli ac Pacis* coupled the *ius communicandi* with an argument for the freedom of the high seas, meaning that any ships of any country could sail, fish, and trade where they pleased.26 He also allowed for the possibility of unoccupied land within another commonwealth, which made it legitimate for settlers from another place to occupy it themselves provided they submit to the jurisdiction of the native inhabitants. This argument found its successor in Locke and in many others, the proviso offering very little protection especially if the native inhabitants were not understood to have a true commonwealth at all.

We began this survey of early modern political thought in the midst of war, the civil wars of religion over the future of the kingdom of France. Now, in the final section, we are confronted with war again, this time on the part of (but also between) the political entities of Europe over control of the space outside them, both on land and on sea. In both cases, the law of war was a key idiom for the theoretical construction and legitimation both of relations between states and of states themselves. The ‘just war’ tradition had a long history running back through medieval theology to St. Augustine, and it was reworked in the early modern period as a fundamental element of the law of nations in both Catholic and Protestant natural jurisprudence. The central premise of this way of thinking was that war, if practised justly, was a means of rectifying a violation of right (*iniuria*) in the absence of any judicial superior. In this sense, the legitimacy of war always ‘tracked’ sovereignty. But divergences opened up as to what this actually entailed. It was generally agreed that war could be either defensive, an act of self-defence against unjustified aggression, or offensive, in which case it was an act of punishment or vindicatory justice for such aggression. Writers in the Catholic tradition were absolutely clear that only public persons, that is, rulers of commonwealths or their appointed judges, could carry out an act of punishment. Offensive war was therefore the preserve of the ruler of the commonwealth (since inferior judges had a superior). They were aware that this made him judge in his own case—uneasily, because it was part of the self-same theory that this should not be the situation for any private person. The almost inevitable self-partiality of that person would prevent the secure pursuit of justice. They argued, however, that no better arrangement could be found for violations of right that concerned the commonwealth itself.

By contrast, Hugo Grotius allowed a much wider scope for private war than the self-defence that had always been considered licit under natural law. He gave private persons in certain circumstances outside the commonwealth the right to punish and therefore to engage in offensive war, a position that was taken up by Locke in his deliberately ‘Very Strange Doctrine’ of an individual right to punish in the state of nature.27 This right (p. 52) therefore limned the boundary between inside and outside the state, ‘outside’ meaning both before, in what Locke (though not Grotius) called the state of nature, and beyond. It could potentially justify a huge range of actions involving force on the part of traders and settlers—both individuals and companies—abroad, while simultaneously defining the sovereign as the one with the exclusive right to wage a public war at home. Not all writers in the Protestant natural law tradition followed this path, however. Alberico Gentili, the professor of Roman law whom we met earlier defending the absolute sovereignty of James VI and I, defined war in his *De Iure Belli* (The Law of War) of 1598 instead as ‘a solemn contest of public arms’. His innovation lay in seeing war as a formal, legal way in which sovereign states as public actors resolved conflicts, rather than as an act of justice. Getting out from under the traditional discourse of ‘just war’, he allowed for war to be undertaken pre-emptively, without any prior violation of right, and he also argued that war could be just on both sides: not because every belligerent was always justified, but because the wavering light of the law of nature in the darkness of the human condition did not allow human beings to judge on the absolute justice of the case.28 For Thomas Hobbes, however, all war was by definition just, for all war was undertaken in the condition of nature—or rather, as we have seen, war was the condition of nature—and in that condition, all men have the right to all things. But not merely all men: all states too, which Hobbes directly pictured as the analogue of individuals. International space thus became, theoretically speaking, the analogue of the condition of nature between individuals. But Hobbes’s language for that space was interestingly different. Instead of the ‘wolves’ of the individual
condition of nature in the dedicatory epistle to On the Citizen, sovereigns in Leviathan face each other like ‘gladiators’.\textsuperscript{29} The simile suggests an international arena in which conflict is a recognized, and to that extent manageable, phenomenon.

The theories of Gentili and Hobbes, though couched in a juridical idiom, both defied the just war tradition in a much more thoroughgoing way that those of Grotius and Locke. This brings them in some respects, though not all, closer to the understanding of war and expansion that was concurrently being explored in the idiom of ‘reason of state’. Here again, in its ‘international’ dimension, this language developed in the wake of Machiavelli. War was central to Machiavelli’s analysis of statecraft in The Prince: the terrain of politics was both temporal and spatial, and war was a necessary and decisive intervention in both. This was likewise the case in his Discourses, but here war was coupled with another term, grandezza or ‘greatness’. Part of Machiavelli’s admiration for republics lay in their expansive dynamism, the collective virtue of a body of free citizens both enabling and compelling them to conquer space and thereby to achieve greatness.\textsuperscript{30} Liberty at home fed on empire abroad, and vice versa. Stripped of a necessary connection with a republican constitution, the greatness of states and how to achieve it became an object of sustained analysis. The new ‘reason of state’ of greatness included such things as money, manpower, weaponry, fortifications, and colonial strategy that had never before formed a central part of political discourse. Citizen virtue was not entirely forgotten, especially the martial valour required to fight successfully.\textsuperscript{31} But, although this discourse was expansive and indeed imperial in one of its dimensions, in another it was conservative. The focus it had inherited on the state as something (to (p. 53) be maintained, both in its internal and in its external relations, led to the development, in embryonic form, of a concept of an international equilibrium or ‘balance of powers’. States would inevitably go to war, but the dynamics of a plurality of states all competing for space would cancel out the overwhelming expansion of one.

In this space outside or between states, we seem largely to have left behind the language of commonwealth that figured so strongly earlier in our discussion. This was not entirely the case; Francisco de Vitoria, for example, in an early lecture On Civil Power (1528), argued that ‘the whole world’, as the legislator of the law of nations, formed ‘in a sense a commonwealth’.\textsuperscript{32} The ancient Stoic philosophy of the ‘world city’, cosmopolis, in which all are equally citizens whatever their status in any particular city, continued to exert imaginative force, as did the idea of an original commons and a natural unity of mankind which subsequent division should not cancel out. These ideas were embedded in early modern natural law and law of nations. In an age of European expansion, however, the appeal to a ‘society of the human race’ served more often to legitimate European incursion into other polities than to vindicate the rights of other polities against Europeans, and it would be a long time before the voices of non-European peoples could be heard within the conversation. The overall aim of this survey has nevertheless been to suggest the complex, imaginative, and dynamic texture of early modern European political discourse, vitally shaping the contemporary political world as well as leaving a rich legacy for future political thought.

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**Notes:**


(9.) William Allen, *A True, Sincere, and Modest Defence of English Catholics* (Rouen, 1584), ch. 8, 175 (my emphasis).


(31.) See, for example, Francis Bacon, ‘Of the True Greatness of Kingdoms and Estates’, in *Francis Bacon. The Essays* (Harmondsworth, 1985).

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter presents a historiographical and historical overview of the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It surveys historical writing on the Scientific Revolution from the triumphalist accounts of the early twentieth century that glorified the scientific heroes of physics and astronomy, to the more sceptical and nuanced accounts of the later twentieth and early twenty-first century. Modern work gives attention to subjects like astrology and alchemy and incorporates a diverse range of contributors, including women and men, artisans and scholars, Islamic and indigenous peoples, as well as Europeans. This chapter discusses some of the dramatic shifts in understanding the natural world that took place during the early modern period, focusing particularly on the shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric cosmology and on the rise of experimental methods.

Keywords: Scientific Revolution, cosmology, experimental method, artisans, Islamic science, women in science, indigenous knowledge, alchemy, astrology, astronomy

Introduction

In 1500, most educated Europeans believed that the earth was the centre of the universe; that the sun, moon, planets, and stars rotated around the earth with uniform, circular motion; and that heavy objects fell because they were made of the element earth and the natural place of the element earth was the centre of the cosmos. In 1800, most educated Europeans believed that the sun was the centre of the planetary system; that the earth and other planets moved around the sun in elliptical orbits; and that heavy objects fell because they were acted upon by the force of gravity. This chapter explores how these dramatic changes in worldview came about. I will discuss some of the key individuals, as well as the social and cultural forces that shaped new ways of thinking about and engaging with the natural world.

In the 1940s, the French historian and philosopher Alexandre Koyré coined the term ‘Scientific Revolution’ to refer to this period and to the striking changes in understandings of the natural world that occurred then. Since then, the concept of the Scientific Revolution has become deeply ingrained in the history of science. But the concept has also been highly controversial almost since its origin in the mid-twentieth century. Thus, before I launch into a discussion of the intellectual shifts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I will begin with an overview of the history of the concept of the Scientific Revolution and its place in the development of the history of science.

The history of science began to develop as a distinct academic specialty in the mid-twentieth century. At this time, it was often more clearly aligned with the sciences than with history. Indeed, many early historians of science were originally
trained as scientists. In its formative years, a central part of the raison d’être of history of science was the belief that science was one of the most powerful forces in contemporary society. Scholars who had witnessed the development of the atomic bomb and penicillin during the Second World War, and saw the increasingly rapid pace of scientific and technological change, were convinced that they had a vital role to play in creating a scientifically literate public, one that would support and value scientific research. Historians of science sought to foster appreciation for the work of scientists in a world in which the vast majority of scientific work was incomprehensible even to a highly educated non-scientist. Further, they were convinced that a ‘scientific’ approach to the world was a defining characteristic of modern Western society. One of the most important questions to be answered was thus when and how modern science, and the modern mentality that went with it, emerged, and the answer seemed to lie in the period roughly between 1500 and 1800. At this time, the study and understanding of the natural world began to assume certain recognizably modern features: a heliocentric universe, a mathematical and experimental methodology, and reliance on direct observation of nature rather than on textual authority.

This first generation of historians of science were interested only in those aspects of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century science that most resembled modern science, and this had implications for the way they wrote history. They tended to focus on what great men like Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton got ‘right’ and not what they got ‘wrong’. By ‘right’, I mean what was true and correct by modern standards. These historians glossed over the facts that Copernicus and Galileo both still believed that planets were embedded in solid transparent spheres, that Galileo believed the tides were caused by the motion of the earth, and that Newton was a practising alchemist. In focusing exclusively on the particular elements of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century science that appeared to lead directly to modern science, they took these elements out of context and frequently distorted them. Further, these mid-twentieth-century historians tended to see anyone who opposed the new and ‘correct’ ideas of the heroes of the Scientific Revolution as irrational. Because they believed that heliocentrism, the experimental method, and mathematical analysis were all eminently rational, they regarded any historical figure who argued against them as motivated by something irrational, such as religious dogma or simply a stubborn unwillingness to abandon tradition.

By far the most widely read book on the history and philosophy of science produced in the mid-twentieth century was Thomas Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Kuhn’s central claim was that science advances through non-cumulative change as one scientific ‘paradigm’ is overthrown and replaced by another. A scientific paradigm is the constellation of theories and methodologies common to a particular field of science and agreed upon by all its practitioners. The process of switching from one paradigm to another entails not simply the accumulation of newer and better data, but a conceptual shift that allows one to see old data in a new way. So, for example, an Aristotelian and a Newtonian could both observe an apple falling, but the Aristotelian would see an earthly object trying to reach its natural place at the centre of the universe, while the Newtonian would see an object acted on by the force of gravity. Kuhn’s approach to older scientific paradigms was different from other contemporary historians of science because he presumed that outdated theories could be rational and that they were based on observation and experiential evidence. Kuhn has had an important albeit complicated influence on the history of science. Certainly later historians have drawn on his work to justify the study of ‘failed’ theories. And Kuhn’s emphasis on the ways communities of scientists cohere around specific paradigms was an important source for the sociology of science. However, somewhat paradoxically, his account of ‘scientific revolutions’ works least well for the changes in cosmology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In other words, the Scientific Revolution does not follow the pattern of a Kuhnian scientific revolution.

Since at least the 1980s, historians of science have tended to come more from the ranks of historians than from scientists. And this younger cohort, coming of age during Cold War fears of nuclear annihilation and facing the devastating impact of global climate change, is far more apt to be critical of science and technology than their predecessors, and far less likely to associate science with rationality, progress, or democracy. They view science as a cultural product, analogous to art, literature, and music, and seek to understand the contexts, social, political, and cultural, in which scientific ideas developed. They are far more interested in failed experiments and ‘wrong’ ideas and less likely to dismiss opponents of the ‘right’ ideas as bound by religious dogma and intellectual inertia.
As cultural context has become more important, historians of science have re-evaluated the role of religion in the Scientific Revolution. While older work treated religion (especially Catholicism) as at best irrelevant and at worst a hindrance to scientific development, newer work often argues that the Catholic and Protestant Churches did a great deal to encourage the study of nature. Almost all early modern natural philosophers saw what they were doing as a pious activity because it involved exploring and contemplating the created works of God. The trial of Galileo has ceased to be a representative example of relations between theologians and scientists and is now frequently treated as an anomaly that needs to be explained.

Historians now give much greater attention to the social and institutional settings in which scientific investigations were carried out. Royal and aristocratic courts are recognized as some of the most important sites for this work. Princely patrons were not bound by university statutes or traditions and frequently supported scientific practitioners who had no established place in universities. In universities, theoretical knowledge was valued more highly than practical know-how, but this was not the case at courts. Many rulers were interested in highly practical subjects like agriculture, engineering, and navigation. Courts became places where scholars (those with theoretical knowledge) and artisans (those with practical know-how) could interact, with profound implications for the development of modern science. Further, courts, unlike universities, were not exclusively male spaces. Women as well as men might obtain patronage for their scientific work, and women often acted as patrons of scientists.

Newer work in the history of science looks at subject areas, like astrology, alchemy, and natural history that mid-twentieth-century historians of science ignored. Astrology and alchemy were once dismissed as ‘pseudo-sciences’ and as holdovers from the superstitious Middle Ages. They were, if anything, obstacles to the progress of rational thought, and thus not part of the triumphal narrative of the rise of modern science. Natural history, with its seemingly eclectic and chaotic collection of information about (p. 59) plants, animals, and minerals from a range of textual sources and personal observations, was seen as a far cry from modern biology. It too was an obstacle that had to be overcome before a properly ‘modern’ study of the natural world could begin. Since the 1980s, astrology, alchemy, and natural history have all become lively areas of scholarship in the history of science. Scholars today recognize these subjects as integral parts of the intellectual culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and contend that they played a crucial role in the development of modern science.

A final problem with older accounts of the Scientific Revolution is that they are profoundly Eurocentric. Historians of science used to regard science as a uniquely Western achievement. Although science and the scientific method were subsequently imported to the rest of the world, they were in their origins exclusively European. While some historians of science acknowledged the contribution scholars in the Islamic world made to European intellectual life in the late Middle Ages, most dismissed the possibility of ongoing influence and exchange in the sixteenth century. They believed that Islamic culture had already peaked and was in decline by then and Europeans had no more to learn from the Arabic-speaking world. Further, although Europeans began making contact with the civilizations of Africa, the Caribbean, and North and South America in the late fifteenth century, none of the first generation of historians of science considered that these encounters had any significant impact on the development of science in the sixteenth century. More recent scholarship has challenged the presumption that the Scientific Revolution occurred without meaningful influence and interaction between Europe and either the East or the West.

I have chosen to use the word ‘science’ throughout this chapter to denote the activities of early modern men and women who were engaged in investigating the natural world, and this choice requires some explanation. During the 1980s and 1990s, many historians of science argued that the word ‘science’ only came to be used in its modern sense in the nineteenth century, and that it was anachronistic to use the word in work on earlier periods. These historians preferred the term ‘natural philosophy’, which had the advantages of being an actor’s category (it was the term men like Newton and Galileo used to describe their work) and of highlighting the differences rather than the similarities between early modern and modern investigations of nature. Natural philosophy was, in contrast to modern science, a profoundly pious endeavour whose practitioners sought to fathom the wonders of God’s created world. However, in more recent years scholars have pointed out that the term ‘science’ actually was in use in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, albeit in vernacular languages, not
in Latin. In fact, it was in this period, rather than in the nineteenth century, that the word came to have something like its modern meanings. For example, Deborah Harkness argues that in sixteenth-century English, ‘the term [science] was used to denote both a study of the natural world and a manipulation of the natural world for productive and profitable ends’. In Elizabethan England, the word ‘science’ was routinely used by authors of books on a range of subjects, including astronomy, astrology, surgery, alchemy, metallurgy, and mathematics. What was true of English was true of other vernaculars. Galileo called his final book on mechanics and motion *Two New Sciences (Due Nuove Scienze)* (1638). A very popular sixth-century French astronomy text referred to knowledge of the structure and motions of the heavens as ‘these beautiful sciences’ (tant belles sciences). Although it is certainly true that early modern uses of the word ‘science’ do not overlap perfectly with modern uses, there is enough commonality that I have chosen to use the word ‘science’ in this chapter.

As this brief summary makes clear, the field of the history of science has expanded dramatically in the past half century. But while we now have much more historically rich and textured accounts of the intellectual developments of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we have lost a central narrative of the Scientific Revolution that might link all of these accounts together. The field may be far broader, deeper, and more inclusive than it once was, but it is also more fragmented, which presents a challenge to any attempt to provide a coherent and concise survey of the origins of modern science. My approach in this chapter will be to address two major topics: the development of experimental methods and the shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric view of the cosmos. These subjects have long been recognized as key features of the Scientific Revolution, but both have received new evaluations and explanations in recent scholarship. My aims are to introduce the reader to some of the most important intellectual developments of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to illustrate how the field of the history of science has changed over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and to indicate ongoing areas of research.

**The Development of Experimental Methods**

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, experiments became far more important modes of studying the natural world than they had been in the past. And the results of experiments were used to challenge the authority of ancient texts. Experimental methods developed in opposition to Aristotelian methodology and entailed the breakdown of certain Aristotelian categories and ways of producing knowledge. First of all, in Aristotelian methodology, knowledge claims about the natural world could be made on the basis of ‘experience’, but not on the basis of ‘experiment’. A statement such as ‘heavy bodies fall’ was an appropriate basis for knowledge claims because it represented a universal experience. A statement such as ‘On such-and-such a date in such-and-such a place I rolled a ball down a smooth plane with a certain angle of inclination and calculated the velocity’ was not appropriate because singular, unusual, contrived events such as this could not reveal the normal functioning of the natural world. Nature could only be known by observing the regular course of events and processes, not by studying artificially created conditions. Further, the results of experiments could not be trusted because they could be anomalies or misperceptions on the part of the individual observer. There are many different arguments about the origins of experimental method. Given the diversity of historical explanations, I have chosen to refer to this section as the development of ‘experimental methods’, rather than the rise of ‘experimental philosophy’, a term that suggests a unified set of ideas and practices.

A seminal work in the history of experiment is Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer’s *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*. In this book, they analysed the work of Robert Boyle (1627–91), the English scientist famous for his experiments with the air pump, an elaborate and expensive piece of equipment consisting of a large glass globe that he could pump the air out of, thus creating a vacuum. Boyle performed numerous experiments with this apparatus that he deployed to challenge Aristotelian ideas about the nature of air and the impossibility of a vacuum. Some of the experiments led to his formulation of the ‘gas law’ that still bears his name. (Boyle’s Law states that, at a constant temperature, the volume of a gas varies inversely with its pressure.) An earlier generation of historians of science had lauded Boyle as the ‘father’ of experimental method.
and Schaffer’s approach was different because they focused on the ways that Boyle defended and legitimated his new experimental methods. Shapin and Schaffer situated Boyle’s experimental practices in the context of ‘gentlemanly culture’. They argued that the process of turning single, contrived events into the basis of knowledge claims was accomplished by the process of ‘witnessing’. ‘Experiments’ were transformed into common ‘experiences’ by being performed in the quasi-public space of the rooms of the Royal Society, and being witnessed by ‘gentlemen’. Social status and epistemological legitimation are inextricably connected in their account.

A number of scholars, such as Peter Dear, Pamela Long, and Matteo Valleriani, have argued that experimental methods developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the ‘mixed mathematical’ sciences. These were subjects that included both theoretical and practical components. Such mixed mathematical subjects included engineering, navigation, cartography, and ballistics. These mixed mathematical sciences were subject areas that fostered interactions between practical men and scholars. Practical men, like architects, engineers, navigators, and military leaders, were far more inclined than university-trained scholars to engage in hands-on testing of processes and to be willing to learn through trial and error. In the Middle Ages these two groups were generally separated socially and institutionally as well as epistemologically. Scholars worked in universities and artisans in workshops. But in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, princely and royal courts frequently fostered new kinds of interaction and collaboration between scholars and artisans. This new historical work on the connections between scholars and artisans builds on the earlier contributions of Edgar Zilsel, an Austrian philosopher and sociologist who, in the 1940s, argued that artisans and artisanal culture played a key role in the Scientific Revolution. Zilsel’s work was generally ignored by historians of science until the 1990s, but has experienced a definite revival since then.

One of the most fruitful areas of historical inquiry into the development of experimental methods has been the study of early modern alchemy. An earlier generation of historians of science dismissed alchemy as a ‘pseudo-science’ and accorded it little importance in the great intellectual transformations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The fact that Tycho Brahe, Robert Boyle, and Isaac Newton all pursued (p. 62) alchemy was ignored or acknowledged in apologetic asides. But alchemy has in recent decades become a particularly lively area within the field of early modern science. Two of the leading historians of alchemy, Lawrence Principe and William Newman, have argued that alchemy was not a mystical or religious subject, but a serious, rational investigation of the natural world. Alchemical transformation was not, pace Carl Jung, a metaphor for the spiritual transformation of the soul, but a set of actual material practices carried out in laboratories using specialized equipment. Indeed, the word ‘laboratory’ was originally used to designate the space where alchemists worked. Newman argues that experimental method was born in the alchemists’ laboratory.

Medieval alchemy was concerned almost exclusively with the formation—and transformation—of metals. It was based on an underlying theory about the nature of metals, as well as practical techniques for transforming ‘base’ metals like lead into ‘noble’ metals like gold. Alchemists believed that all metals were made of two basic substances, sulphur and mercury. The mixture of sulphur and mercury took place underground, under the influence of the natural heat of the earth. Metals were thought to develop in the earth in a manner analogous to a biological process, like seeds developing into plants. The proportions of sulphur and mercury, their purity, and the conditions under which the mixture ‘incubated’ determined which metals resulted. Ideal conditions produced the noble metals gold and silver. Less ideal conditions produced base metals such as lead. Alchemists claimed not only to have knowledge of the natural process of the formation of metals, but to have the know-how to be able to manipulate this process artificially in their laboratories. They could break down metals into their constituent parts of sulphur and mercury, purify these substances and then reconstitute them as better, more valuable metals. This combination of theoretical knowledge and practical know-how was very similar to that found in the mixed mathematical sciences discussed earlier.

In the Middle Ages, alchemy remained confined to the relatively narrow realm of metallurgy. However, in the sixteenth century, alchemy became a much more wide-ranging subject. The person most responsible for this transformation of alchemy and its rise to greater prominence was Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, better known as Paracelsus (1493–1541). Paracelsus made two major changes to alchemical theory and practice. First, he posited that
there were three basic elements instead of two. These elements were sulphur, mercury, and salt. Second, Paracelsus argued that sulphur, mercury, and salt were not just the fundamental components of metals, but of all bodies—that is, the entire cosmos, plants, animals, and the human body, as well as metals and minerals, were composed of salt, sulphur, and mercury. Whereas medieval alchemy had been solely about the formation and transformation of metals, Paracelsian alchemy was about the entire natural world.

Paracelsian alchemy did not displace the older system. Some alchemists rejected the addition of salt and the expansion of alchemy beyond the subject of metals. Others added two more elements, phlegm and earth, to the Paracelsian triad to make a pentad. These different alchemical theories, and others, co-existed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Paracelsus himself was relatively uninterested in the transformation of metals, and far more interested in the medical applications of his theory. He argued that the human body was composed of the three primary substances and that he could diagnose disease by detecting these substances in the urine. Although analysis of urine was a highly traditional mode of diagnosis, Paracelsus advocated a totally different method. Instead of examining the appearance of the urine, he distilled it and diagnosed disease based on the different amounts of salt, sulphur, and mercury in the precipitate. Paracelsus also advised the use of chemical remedies, such as mercury and arsenic, rather than the traditional herbal remedies. More broadly, Paracelsian alchemy led to a new web of connections between ‘organic’ and ‘inorganic’ processes. Medieval alchemists had compared the formation of metals under the earth to the formation of babies in the womb, but these comparisons remained at the level of metaphor. For Paracelsus, and alchemists inspired by him, these comparisons were literal. For example, the alchemist Anna Zieglerin (c. 1550–75) claimed to have discovered a ‘tincture’ that could both turn base metals into gold and cause a woman to become pregnant.

As alchemical theory expanded to include all aspects of the natural world, the experimental approach that had long characterized the study of metals was applied to a much wider range of subjects.

As the example of Anna Zieglerin indicates, alchemy was not a field confined to men. It was not a subject taught in universities, which were exclusively male in this period. Rather, the primary sites of alchemical activities were princely courts, spaces that were open to both men and women. Zieglerin enjoyed the patronage of Duke Julius of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (1528–89). Although her career as an alchemist was rather short-lived—she was accused of fraud and attempted poisoning and executed—it is clear that women as well as men participated in the new experimental culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Alisha Rankin’s recent study of the chemical activities of German noblewomen in the sixteenth century provides further evidence of the contribution of women to the development of experimental methods. Aristocratic women like Dorothea of Mansfeld (1493–1578) and Anna of Saxony (1532–85) prepared elaborate medicines that they distributed (generally in the form of gifts) all over Europe. They had distilling houses with highly specialized (and expensive) chemical equipment and they employed assistants to carry out the day-to-day operations of their ‘laboratories’. They sought to improve their medicines by experimenting with different ingredients and different preparation processes, tested their recipes on patients, and recorded the results. They communicated and discussed their findings with large correspondence networks that included other aristocrats as well as physicians and natural philosophers.

Another exciting area of research in the history of science is the impact of European encounters with new lands and new peoples on ideas about the natural world and ways of studying nature. Antonio Barrera-Osorio and Maria Portuondo argue that new empirical and experimental approaches to nature developed earliest among Spaniards dealing with the problems of exploring and exploiting new lands with hitherto unknown flora and fauna. The Spanish Crown actively supported institutions like the ‘House of Trade’, where astronomers, cosmographers, navigators, and sailors—that is, scholars as well as practical men—interacted and collaborated to produce better maps, navigation charts, and inventories of natural resources for newly discovered parts of the world. The Spanish were the first European nation to openly and actively encourage and provide financial incentive for the invention of new instruments and techniques for exploiting the resources of the new world, and they required experimental verification of these technologies.
A striking example of the interactions between Spaniards and indigenous peoples is the story of a Spaniard named Antonio de Villasante, who moved to Santo Domingo (now the capital of the Dominican Republic) and married a local Taíno woman referred to in Spanish sources as Catalina de Ayahibex. Villasante described his wife as a ‘cacica’, a Spanish word derived from the Taíno term for chief or leader, and as a converted Christian. In 1528, Villasante reported to the Spanish Crown about several medicinal plants indigenous to Santo Domingo. He had learned of the properties and uses of these plants from his wife and in-laws. He reported that he had personally conducted experiments on these plants and he sent samples to physicians back in Spain, who in turn performed their own experiments on the healing powers of these New World plants. The Spanish monarch supported such experimental work because if the plants turned out to be useful they would be valuable commodities. This story of a scientific collaboration between a Spanish colonist and a Taíno chief illustrates the ways in which an experimental approach to nature developed and flourished in the context of European desire for commercial gain and contact with indigenous people.

A figure that I have consciously omitted from this discussion of the rise of experimental methods is Francis Bacon (1561–1626). The English natural philosopher’s enthusiastic endorsement of experimental and inductive methods, and his vigorous critique of Aristotle and other ancient authorities earned him the attention and admiration of mid-twentieth-century historians of science. Indeed, Bacon was revered as the ‘father’ of experimental science as early as the eighteenth century. However, the newer scholarship that I have discussed in this section makes clear that Bacon’s ideas were hardly as novel as they once appeared, and that they were not the exclusive purview of the gentlemen of the Royal Society. Rather, experimental methods were the creation of a diverse group of women and men, artisans and scholars, non-Europeans and Europeans.

From a Geocentric to a Heliocentric Cosmos

Perhaps the most obvious and dramatic change that occurred between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries was the shift from a geocentric cosmos to a heliocentric cosmos. Indeed, this shift has long been seen as the most important, if not the fundamental and defining, feature of the Scientific Revolution. The Scientific Revolution is often said to have started in 1543, the date Nicholas Copernicus (1473–1543) published *De revolutionibus*, and ended in 1687, the date Isaac Newton (1642–1727) published his *Principia*. It is thus bookended by the first sustained argument since antiquity for a heliocentric cosmos, and by its final synthesis and demonstration. More recent historical work has shed new light on the context and motivations of early modern astronomers.

It is necessary to begin with a description of the geocentric cosmos that was replaced—very gradually—by the heliocentric cosmos. In 1500, most educated Europeans shared a view of the universe that derived from the ancient Greeks, especially Aristotle and Ptolemy. The cosmos was a finite sphere. The earth was also a sphere, and it rested motionless at the exact centre of the cosmos. The heavens, including the moon, sun, and five visible planets, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, rotated around the earth. The cosmos was divided into two distinct realms, the terrestrial and the celestial. Everything in the terrestrial realm was made of the four elements: earth, water, air, and fire. The natural motion of these elements was in straight lines, either up, that is, toward the periphery of the cosmos, or down, that is, toward the centre of the cosmos. In Aristotelian physics, each element had a natural place and it moved towards that natural place. The terrestrial realm was inherently unstable. It was constantly changing as elements combined, broke apart, and formed new combinations. The terrestrial realm was characterized by constant change, by birth, growth, decay, and death. For Aristotle, and for subsequent generations of medieval followers, the mutability of the terrestrial realm meant that it was imperfect. Some Christian theologians taught that hell was at the centre of the earth, the very heart of the terrestrial realm.

By contrast, the celestial realm was unchanging and hence perfect. The celestial realm was made up of only one element, sometimes called ether or quintessence (literally ‘fifth essence’). The natural motion of the ether was uniform circular motion, which was held to be a more perfect motion than the rectilinear motion of the terrestrial elements because it had no beginning and no end. The heavens were divided into nested spheres composed of ether. These spheres, or orbs, were solid but transparent. The moon, sun, planets, and stars were all made also of ether and were embedded in different orbs.
Although they were made of the same substance, the heavenly bodies were opaque and shining so they could be seen by observers on earth. These orbs, with the heavenly bodies attached to them, rotated around the stationary earth with perfect uniform circular motion.

Aristotle’s physics provided a coherent and satisfactory explanation of motion in the heavens and on the earth, an explanation that fitted observation and experience and made logical sense. However, unlike modern (that is, post-Newtonian) physics, Aristotle’s physics did not provide a mathematical description of terrestrial motion, which only began in the thirteenth century, and would reach its acme in the work of Galileo and Newton. But the mathematical description of celestial motion was of pressing importance in the ancient world both before and after Aristotle. The ability to calculate the position of different celestial bodies at different points in time was crucial to making astrological predictions, as well as for accurate calendars and maps. Accordingly, the very formidable talents of Greek mathematicians were turned to the problem of creating mathematical models of the motions of the stars, sun, moon, and planets that would allow accurate calculation and prediction of their position. These models allowed astronomers to figure out where each of the celestial bodies had been at some time in the past, where each was in the present (because they were not all visible in the night sky), and where they would be at some point in the future.

The ability to make accurate predictions of the positions of heavenly bodies was crucial to the Greeks because they were convinced that life in the terrestrial realm was influenced by the sun, moon, planets, and stars, and that this influence changed depending on the celestial body’s position in the heavens. In other words, from at least the second century B.C.E., the Greeks practised astrology. Indeed, one of the most important motivations for developing accurate mathematical models of motion in the heavens was to be able to make astrological predictions. Since the eighteenth century astrology has ceased to be considered a ‘science’ and has entered the intellectually marginal realm of the occult and pseudo-sciences. But from the Roman period through to the seventeenth century astrology was an integral part of natural philosophy and was closely connected to astronomy.

Greek astronomy and astrology reached their synthesis and culmination in the work of Claudius Ptolemy (c. 100–c. 175 C.E.). Ptolemy produced the most comprehensive and accurate models of celestial motion in antiquity, models that allowed readers accurately to predict celestial events like lunar and solar eclipses and to know when a planet would be in a particular sign of the zodiac. Ptolemy laid out these models in a work called the *Mathematical Syntaxis*. Because this work reached European scholars in the twelfth century through a translation from Arabic, it was (and is) known as the *Almagest*, a name derived from its title in Arabic. In his great astrological text, the *Tetrabiblos*, Ptolemy provided an equally exhaustive foundation for astrology.

Centuries before they were translated into Latin, Ptolemy’s books were translated into Arabic and studied by scholars in the Islamic world. These scholars developed more accurate instruments for astronomical observations, made improved observations, and corrected defects in the Ptolemaic models. Their work, along with Ptolemy’s *Almagest*, was translated into Latin during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and was rapidly assimilated into European university curricula and intellectual culture more generally.

One important dimension of this cultural appropriation was that the Greek geocentric view of the cosmos was firmly incorporated into Christian interpretations of the Bible, and into religious writing and imagery more broadly. Medieval European theologians, for example, generally included material from Greek and Arabic astronomy texts in their commentaries on the story of creation from Genesis. They imagined God creating a spherical cosmos with a spherical earth at the centre, and they read Genesis as describing exactly that. Images of a spherical geocentric cosmos appeared in illustrated Bibles and other religious books. This view of the cosmos permeated European culture quite broadly, as references to celestial spheres in the work of Dante, Shakespeare, and many other authors demonstrate.

By the late fifteenth century, when Copernicus was studying astronomy, first at Cracow and later at various Italian universities, there was broad consensus about the general structure and substance of the cosmos. However, the study of the heavens was hardly static, and there were several questions and controversies that are directly relevant to
understanding Copernicus’s momentous decision to shift the sun to the centre of the cosmos and to set the earth in motion around it. Using the mathematical models derived from Ptolemy, predictions of phenomena like eclipses and conjunctions were frequently off by several days. This lack of accuracy was a problem for making astrological predictions. It was also a serious problem for the Spanish and Portuguese, who by the fifteenth century had begun to embark upon voyages of exploration and conquest. Precise astronomical information was crucial to accurate navigation. Most astronomers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries believed that Ptolemy’s models needed correction, but they believed that this could be accomplished by making newer and more accurate observations of celestial events and using them to adjust the existing models.

In addition to problems with the accuracy of the predictions, there were important debates among astronomers about the architecture of the cosmos. One controversy was over the ordering of the planets. The ordering of the outer planets, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, was generally agreed upon. Saturn was farthest away from the earth because it had the longest period of rotation. Jupiter had the second longest and Mars the third. And there was no question that the moon was the celestial body closest to the earth. However, the ordering of the remaining three heavenly objects, the sun, Mercury, and Venus, was a subject of debate. While the moon, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn fell into a neat order based on their periods, in a geocentric cosmos, the sun, Mercury, and Venus all have periods of about a year. Thus, the rationale for putting Mercury after the moon, followed by Venus, followed by the sun, as Ptolemy did, was rather shaky, and not everyone agreed with this ordering. This lack of clarity on the ordering of the inner planets had serious ramifications for astrology, where the distance of each planet from the earth affected its influence.

This intellectual context does not, of course, fully explain why Copernicus rejected the centuries old geocentric model of the cosmos. His education and influences were not at all unusual and yet he alone of all of his contemporaries proposed a heliocentric model of the cosmos. However, it is important to see his system as an answer to questions astronomers of his time were asking, even if his answer was one nobody expected and few accepted at first.

Copernicus described his system in preliminary form around 1514 in a manuscript known as the Commentariolus. In this manuscript, he asserted that the sun is stationary at the centre of the cosmos and that the earth, and five planets rotated around the sun. (The moon still rotated around the earth.) Mercury was the closest planet to the sun, followed by Venus, the earth/moon system, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and the ‘fixed’ stars on the outermost sphere. Thus the apparent motion of the sun around the earth, which had defined the solar year, was actually caused by the motion of the earth around the sun, a motion that took one year. Not only did the earth rotate around the sun, but it rotated once every twenty-four hours around an axis passing through the north and south poles. This diurnal rotation accounted for the daily rising and setting of the celestial bodies. All the planets, like the earth, moved around the sun in the same direction though at various rates. Copernicus eventually worked out mathematical models for each planet, including the earth, that would allow their positions at any point in time to be calculated. He finally published his complete system in 1543 as On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres. Copernicus died in the year it was published, and thus was unable to witness reactions to his work or to respond to criticisms.

Copernicus made few new observations of the heavens. His accomplishment was to reinterpret existing data in a radical new way. Why did he propose his heliocentric model to replace the geocentric one? Two plausible motivations have been suggested. One explanation is that Copernicus was troubled by the fact that Ptolemy’s mathematical models seemed to violate the Aristotelian principle that motion in the heavens was uniform and circular. Copernicus was offended by a mathematical device of Ptolemy’s called the equant. In the equant model, a planet sweeps out equal angles in equal times as measured from what is called the ‘equant point’, which is not the centre of the circle. To be clear, if the planet was moving with uniform circular motion, it would sweep out equal angles in equal times as measured from the centre of the circle. The equant point is some distance from the centre, which means that the planet actually moves with varying speed around the geometrical centre. This, to Copernicus, and indeed to many of his Islamic predecessors and European successors, did not seem to fit the requirement that planetary motions be combinations of uniform circular motion. By putting the sun at the centre, and the earth in motion, and by employing mathematical models devised by Arabic astronomers and mathematicians,
Copernicus was able to eliminate the equants from his models of celestial motion.

The second motivation has to do with the ordering of the planets. As I noted earlier, the ordering of Mercury, Venus, and the sun was the subject of some debate in Copernicus’s day. In a 2002 article, Bernard Goldstein proposed that Copernicus adopted the heliocentric system because it allowed him to order the planets according to their periods of rotation. In a heliocentric system, all the planets have different periods of rotation around the sun and thus can be neatly arranged. In 2011, Robert Westman proposed an even bolder thesis. He argued that Copernicus was stimulated to solve the problem of how to order the planets by debates about astrological theory and practice that he encountered while studying in Italy. Specifically, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94) wrote a scathing attack on astrology in which he cited the lack of agreement among astronomers about the correct ordering of Mercury, Venus, and the sun as a strong reason for doubting the claims of astrologers. Westman sees Copernicus’s adoption of heliocentrism as a move to defend the legitimacy of astrology.

The case of Copernicus provides the best-documented historical example of the ongoing influence of Arabic science and mathematics in early modern Europe. There are strong similarities between Copernicus’s models for the moon and other planets and those of the Damascene astronomer Ibn al-Shatir (1304–75). Further, one of the diagrams Copernicus used is identical to a diagram devised about three hundred years earlier by Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (d. 1274). This diagram shows a mathematical device, now known as a Tusi couple, which generates linear motion from multiple circular motions. In fact, Copernicus may be just the tip of the iceberg. Research into the scientific connections between Europe and the Islamic world in the early modern period is still very much in its infancy.

Copernicus’s models were somewhat easier to use than Ptolemy’s, although not necessarily more accurate, so there was certainly incentive to use them for astrological predictions, as well as calendrical calculations and navigation. However, almost nobody in the first four or five decades following the publication of *On the Revolutions* accepted the physical reality of Copernicus’s heliocentric model of the cosmos. To a twenty-first-century reader, it may be natural to assume that there were religious objections to Copernicus’s work on the grounds that it was contrary to the Bible. However, this was not the case for several decades to come. In fact, Copernicus dedicated the work to the reigning pontiff, Pope Paul III, and referred in the dedicatory preface to his friendships with Nicholas Schönberg, cardinal of Capua, and Tiedemann Giese, bishop of Chelmo. The major reason for rejecting heliocentrism was that it violated known and accepted physics. The geocentric cosmos was supported by Aristotelian physics, with its clear distinction between the celestial and terrestrial realms. Objects in the celestial realm moved in circles because they were made of ether, and it was in the nature of the fifth element to move with uniform circular motion. Why would the earth, which was quite obviously not made of ether, move with circular motion? Objects in the terrestrial realm moved down if they were made of earth because the natural place of the element earth was at the centre of the cosmos. If the earth was not the centre of the cosmos, why did these objects move toward the centre of the earth? In sum, anyone who adopted the Copernican view of the cosmos would be unable to explain why and how the earth moved through the heavens, and why and how heavy bodies fell to earth. No reasonable person would reject a cosmos in which motion could be explained for one in which motion was a mystery to be solved.

Further, in the Copernican cosmos, there was an absolutely enormous gap between the sphere of Saturn and the sphere of the fixed stars. In the Copernican cosmos, the sphere of the fixed stars on the outer edge of the cosmos is stationary, because the daily rising and setting of the stars and other celestial bodies is accounted for by the daily rotation of the earth about its own axis. Because the earth is moving around the sun, these fixed stars should appear to change position relative to a fixed direction, a phenomenon known as stellar parallax. The fact that they are not observed to change position can only be accounted for if the sphere of the fixed stars is extremely far away from the earth. Later in the sixteenth century, the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe (1546–1601) calculated that the sphere of the fixed stars would have to be at least 700 times further away from the earth than the sphere of Saturn in order to avoid stellar parallax. But this would mean that well over 99 per cent of the cosmos was empty space. It seemed wildly improbable to most thoughtful Christians that God would have created a cosmos that was almost entirely unoccupied.
It was not until the latter half of the sixteenth century that astronomers actually observed phenomena in the heavens that did not accord with the Aristotelian view of the cosmos. These observations did not immediately confirm the Copernican view, but they began, for the first time, to cast doubt on the traditional Aristotelian worldview. The first such observation was a new star that appeared in the constellation of Cassiopeia in early November 1572, and the second was a comet in 1577. These objects aroused considerable consternation and controversy because, according to Aristotelian physics, the celestial realm was unchanging. The most important observer of the new star and the comet was Tycho Brahe, a Danish nobleman who devoted his life to collecting more accurate observations and data on celestial phenomena. To this end, he designed numerous astronomical instruments that allowed him to measure the positions of celestial bodies with an unprecedented level of precision and accuracy. On the basis of his observations of the new star and the comet, Tycho confirmed that these objects were indeed in the supposedly perfect and immutable celestial realm, and could not be dismissed as atmospheric phenomena.

Tycho’s findings led him to reject the traditional geocentric cosmos. Although he gave serious consideration to the Copernican model, in the end he rejected this as well. He was bothered, in part, by the enormous size and almost complete emptiness of the heliocentric cosmos. Instead, Tycho proposed his own system as a rival to both the Aristotelian/Ptolemaic and the Copernican systems. In the Tychonic system, the earth is stationary at the centre of the cosmos. The sphere of the fixed stars (and all the celestial bodies) rotated around the earth once every twenty-four hours, thus accounting for the daily rising and setting of the sun, moon, and stars. The moon and sun rotate around the earth in periods of one month and one year respectively. The five planets all rotate around the sun. When Tycho first devised this system, he was still thinking of celestial bodies being embedded in solid orbs. However, he found that in his geo-heliocentric system, the orb of Mars intersected the orb of the sun. This led Tycho to take a momentous step: he rejected Aristotelian physics with its solid spheres and revived an old rival to Aristotelian physics, that of the Stoics. Stoic natural philosophers, including the Roman writers Lucretius (c. 99 B.C.E.–c. 55 B.C.E.) and Seneca (c. 4 B.C.E.–65 C.E.), had asserted that the heavens were fluid rather than solid and that planets moved through the heavens like fish through water or birds through air. Tycho’s system is often treated rather disparagingly as a sort of transitional system between the Ptolemaic and the Copernican. However, Tycho’s abandonment of solid celestial spheres was in its own way no less radical than Copernicus’s abandonment of geocentrism, and of nearly equal importance to the further development of astronomy. It led to sustained debate in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries about the reality of the celestial spheres, a debate that was not satisfactorily resolved until the work of Isaac Newton.

One of the very first people to accept the physical reality of the Copernican system was the German astronomer and mathematician Johannes Kepler (1571–1630). In 1600, Tycho invited Kepler to the court of the Emperor Rudolph II in Prague, where Tycho had recently been appointed imperial astronomer. Kepler arrived in Prague in 1600 and Tycho asked him to develop a more accurate model for the motion of Mars using the newer and better observational data Tycho had accumulated. In 1609, Kepler published the results of his study of Mars in a ground-breaking book aptly titled New Astronomy (Astronomia Nova). In the New Astronomy, Kepler broke with the nearly 2,000-year-old tradition of uniform circular motion in the heavens. He declared that Mars moved in an ellipse with the sun at one focus. And he asserted that Mars moved in such a way that a line drawn from Mars to the sun swept out equal areas in equal times. This meant that Mars moved faster when it was closer to the sun and slower when it was farther away. These are now known as Kepler’s first and second laws of planetary motion. In subsequent work he demonstrated their applicability to all the planets.

The New Astronomy is also significant because in it Kepler introduced the concept of an orbit. All the astronomers whose work I have discussed so far used the term ‘orb’ (Latin: orbis), a term that signified a hollow sphere in which a celestial body was embedded. The entire orb rotated around the earth (or the sun). Kepler was the first to employ the term ‘orbit’ (Latin: orbita), signifying the path of a planet through the heavens. By the time he wrote the New Astronomy, Kepler had adopted Tycho’s position that the heavens are fluid and that planets move themselves through the heavens, although he also added a propulsive force radiating from the sun.

In the early seventeenth century, the Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) dealt further blows to the credibility of
the Aristotelian/Ptolemaic worldview. In 1609, Galileo turned the telescope, an instrument recently invented in the Netherlands, to the heavens and made a number of startling discoveries. A year later, in 1610, he published the first account of his telescopic observations, *The Starry Messenger.* Galileo reported that, seen through the telescope, the moon was rough and craggy, with mountains and valleys, like the earth. In fact, the mountains on the moon seemed to him to be even bigger than the largest mountains on the earth. Now clearly, in an Aristotelian cosmos, there should not be an earth-like body in the celestial realm. Galileo’s other discovery was just as shocking. Training his telescope on Jupiter, he discovered four satellites circling this planet. The moons of Jupiter did not fit into the Aristotelian view of the cosmos where the only centre of rotation was the earth. In *The Starry Messenger,* Galileo describes his observations with a bare minimum of discussion about their implications for cosmology and only a passing reference to Copernicus. However, these observations clearly strengthened Galileo’s growing conviction that the Copernican system was true and fuelled his further telescopic research.

At this point, the question of the congruence of the two new astronomical systems, the Tychonic and the Copernican, with the Bible became a real issue. Before the work of Tycho and Galileo, there was no physical evidence that seriously challenged the prevailing view of the structure of the cosmos. By 1610, there was, and theologians and religious leaders needed to consider whether or not passages of the Bible that had been interpreted using Aristotelian physics and cosmology needed to be reinterpreted. At particular issue were certain passages of the Bible that referred to the earth as stationary.

Both Kepler and Galileo pointed out in their defences of Copernicanism that there were passages in the Bible that referred to the earth as flat. Yet no one read these passages literally because experience and reason demonstrated that the earth was a globe. Kepler and Galileo both argued that Biblical passages about a stationary earth should also be read in a non-literal way. Galileo did this most famously in his ‘Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina’ of 1615, a document that played an important role in the Catholic debate over this issue. In the end, however, despite the vigorous advocacy of Galileo and several other Italian Catholic astronomers and philosophers, the Catholic Church rejected the argument for a non-literal reading of the Bible and, in 1616, placed Copernicus’s *On the Revolutions* on the Index of Prohibited Books. It was placed on the Index ‘until corrected’, which meant that it was still legal for Catholics to own, read, and even teach the book as long as a few offending passages were amended. These passages were ones that asserted that the earth moves and that the sun is stationary at the centre of the world. The mathematical models could still be used to make calculations for astrology and navigation. Galileo himself was personally cautioned not to hold or defend the physical reality of the Copernican system.

It is worth considering why the Church made this decision in 1616. After all, the argument that not every passage of the Bible could be read literally was universally accepted by theologians and had been clearly articulated by no less an authority than the great Church Father Augustine (354–430). There was even some precedent for non-literal readings of the passages that referred to a stationary earth. In the fourteenth century, the French theologian Nicole Oresme (c. 1325–82) had argued that a moving earth was compatible with both scripture and physics. A significant factor in the decision of 1616 was the crisis of authority in which the Church found itself. Almost 100 years earlier the German monk Martin Luther (1483–1546) had nailed ninety-five theses to the door of the university chapel in Wittenberg, unleashing the enormous religious, political, and social upheaval known as the Reformation. The Catholic Church was still dealing with the effects of the Reformation, and there was a felt need to reassert the authority of the Catholic Church to be the sole arbiter on questions of Biblical interpretation, and to defend the interpretations of traditional authorities like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, men who had presumed the earth was stationary.

Although Galileo was explicitly told not to defend the reality of the Copernican system, none of his work, including his telescopic findings, was censured. Galileo’s telescopic discoveries certainly challenged the traditional Aristotelian model of the universe, but they hardly constituted proof that the Copernican system was the true physical structure of the cosmos. Indeed his observations fit equally well into the Tychonic system, and in the years following the ban on Copernicus, many leading Catholic scholars adopted the Dane’s system in which the earth remained stationary at the centre of the cosmos.

The events leading to Galileo’s trial for heresy were set in motion in 1623 when Cardinal Maffeo Barberini (1568–1644) was
elicted pope. Barberini, who took the name Urban VIII, was an old friend of Galileo’s. He was highly educated, and he was interested in astronomy. When he became pope, Galileo clearly thought he had a chance to reopen the question of the congruence of heliocentrism with scripture. He secured permission from the new pope to write about the Copernican system so long as he treated it as an unproven hypothesis and so long as he gave equal weight to the Aristotelian/Ptolemaic system. The resulting work, The Dialogue on the Two Chief World Systems, followed the letter but not spirit of the Pope’s injunction to treat the Copernican and Ptolemaic systems equally. The whole work was framed as a dialogue between three interlocutors: Salvati, who represented the Copernican view; Simplicio, who represented the Aristotelian view; and Sagredo, who acted as a neutral third party who asked questions of the other two. Although the name Simplicio could be taken to refer to a late antique commentator on Aristotle, Simplicius (c. 490–c. 560), it also had the connotation in Italian of simpleton. And in fact, throughout the Dialogue, Simplicio does appear foolish and his arguments in defence of Aristotle are made to seem ridiculous. The Pope was reportedly highly offended at Galileo’s temerity. Further, the Dialogue was not published until 1632, and by this time Urban was under attack from several factions, both in Rome and abroad. He was under considerable pressure to defend both his own personal authority as pontiff as well as the authority of the Catholic Church. In this volatile context, the Dialogue was more than just tactless, it was positively incendiary. Galileo was summoned before the Offices of the Inquisition in 1633, tried and found to be ‘vehemently suspected of heresy’. He was forced to abjure, that is to deny the physical reality of the Copernican system, and sentenced to prison, though this was rapidly commuted to house arrest. The Dialogue was placed on the Index of Prohibited Books.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, astronomers had accumulated a significant amount of observational evidence that did not fit into the traditional Aristotelian model of the cosmos. The distance of comets from the earth, the appearance of the moon as seen through the telescope, and the discovery of the satellites of Jupiter were serious blows to the authority of Aristotle. However, supporters of the Copernican system were hampered by the fact that there was no observational evidence that decisively proved that the earth was in motion and no satisfactory physics for a heliocentric cosmos. In the seventeenth century, there were attempts to create a new physics—that is, a new science of motion—that would replace Aristotelian physics. Two of the most important figures in this development were Galileo and the French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650). Both were committed Copernicans and both proposed new ways of understanding motion in the heavens and on the earth that were compatible with a heliocentric model of the cosmos.

One of Galileo’s major challenges to Aristotle’s physics was his claim that objects could have more than one motion. Aristotle had asserted that an object, like a rock or a planet, could only have one motion. The only motion a planet could have was circular motion, as this was the natural motion of the ether. The natural motion of a rock, as an earthy body, was in a straight line down to the centre of the cosmos, because the centre of the cosmos was the natural place of the element earth. It was possible to impart a violent or unnatural motion to the rock, if you threw it up in the air or parallel to the ground. But at some point, the violent motion would dissipate and be replaced by the natural motion, and the rock would fall back toward the earth. Aristotle’s understanding of motion, and his assumption that objects could only have one type of motion at a time, were critical to his argument that the earth was stationary. If a person stands on the top of a tower and drops a rock, the rock falls straight down and lands next to the tower, directly under where the person released it. If the earth was spinning on its axis, Aristotle’s followers claimed, then the tower would move while the rock was falling and the rock would land some distance from the tower. Similarly, if the earth was in motion and you threw a rock in the direction of the earth’s motion, it ought to go further than if you threw it in the direction opposite to the earth’s motion. None of these phenomena are ever observed and Aristotelians took this as evidence for the stability of the earth.

(p. 74) One of Galileo’s major innovations was to assert that an object could have two motions. If a person stood on a tower holding a rock, and the earth was spinning on its axis, then the person, the rock and the tower were all moving with circular motion. If the person dropped the rock, the rock would fall straight down, but it would also continue to move in a circle. That is, the tower and the person continued to move with circular motion and the rock moved with a combination of circular and straight-line motion. The rock only appeared to move in a straight line. In reality its path was a combination of circle and straight line (a path that Galileo later calculated was a parabola). Galileo could not prove that the earth actually was in motion, but he cast doubt on one of the main Aristotelian proofs that it was not. Further, Galileo began to break down the
distinction between terrestrial and celestial motion that was fundamental to Aristotelian physics. He saw no inherent reason to deny circular motion to the terrestrial realm.

Another of Galileo’s significant achievements was to begin to develop the concept of inertia. In Aristotelian physics, rest was a normal state; motion required an explanation. If you dropped an earthly object like a rock, it stopped moving when it reached the ground, because this was as close as it could get to its natural place at the centre of the cosmos. Once an object reached its natural place, it had no tendency to move any more. This was part of Aristotle’s argument for the stability of the earth. Since the natural place of the element earth was at the centre of the cosmos, and the globe of the earth (composed largely of the element earth) was located at the centre of the cosmos, it had no tendency to move. This had long been an argument against attributing a daily rotation on its axis to the earth, and it was certainly an objection to setting the earth in motion around the sun. Any advocate of the Copernican system would have to explain what made the earth move.

Galileo proposed such an explanation. First, he argued that neither rest nor motion are ‘normal’. It was not the case that motion required an explanation and rest did not. Instead, what required explanation was a change in state. If an object at rest began to move, this required explanation. And if an object in motion stopped moving, this too required an explanation. Galileo suggested that the planetary orbs were perfectly smooth spherical surfaces, and that the planets themselves (including the earth and its accompanying atmosphere) were perfectly smooth balls. God had set all the planets in motion rolling around and around these orbs and, as there was no friction or resistance in the heavens, they continued moving and would continue to move until God chose to stop them. Galileo’s explanation of the motion of the earth and the other planets challenged traditional Aristotelian physics, but it required him to reject Tycho’s argument for fluid heavens and Kepler’s for elliptical orbits. Galileo’s physics, like Aristotle’s, required solid spherical planetary orbs. Galileo even rejected Tycho’s discovery that comets were celestial phenomena because his physics could not account for non-circular motion in the heavens.

Descartes made an even more radical break with Aristotelian physics than did Galileo. He abandoned the notion of the four elements with their associated qualities and their natural places. Instead, Descartes posited that all matter was made up of particles in motion. He divided matter into three elements: fire, air, and earth. The smallest, fastest-moving particles were the element fire. Air particles were larger and slower than fire particles. And earth particles were the largest and slowest of all. The entire cosmos (p. 75) was made of these three elements. Further, the entire cosmos was filled with matter; there was no empty or void space. All particles of all the elements were constantly in motion. As one particle moved, it displaced another particle, which in turn displaced another particle, which displaced another, and so forth. Eventually, somewhere in this chain, a particle would have to take the place of the first particle.

Descartes posited that the sun and stars were made of fire. The heavens were made almost entirely of air, although they contained a small amount of the element fire. The earth, the other planets, and comets were made of earth. Each star was the centre of its own heaven, meaning that the sun was the centre of our heaven, as Copernicus had argued, and also that there were an indefinite number of other heavens, possibly with planets and inhabitants like our own. The second element, air, swirled around the central fire, carrying the planets with it. The motion of the air not only moved the planets around the sun, but also caused them to rotate on their own axes. The air closest to the sun moved fastest, while that at the periphery of the heavens moved slowest, so that the planet closest to the sun, Mercury, moved fastest, and the most distant, Saturn, moved slowest. Comets were earthly objects that moved between different heavens, hence their far more irregular appearance and path. Mixed bodies, that is, those composed of all three elements, were only found on the surface of the earth, and they were produced by the agitation and mixing of the matter of the surrounding heavens. In sum, all terrestrial and celestial phenomena were produced by particles of matter colliding with each other, pushing each other and resisting each other. Descartes’s physics had the advantage of being considerably more comprehensive than Galileo’s, and of accommodating phenomena like comets and the rotation of the earth on its axis in more logically consistent ways. For a time, Cartesian physics achieved considerable prominence and inspired other natural philosophers eager to replace Aristotelian physics.

Descartes and Galileo could both be described as ‘mechanical philosophers’, a new type of natural philosopher in the
seventeenth century. Mechanical philosophers generally held that natural phenomena were the result of mechanical forces, that is, bodies acting on other bodies, like Descartes’s particles of matter or Galileo’s balls rolling on smooth planes. Many mechanical philosophers espoused theories of matter similar to Descartes’s, although some proposed theories more akin to those of the ancient atomists, where particles of matter (atoms or corpuscles) moved through a void. Mechanical philosophers also tended to think of natural phenomena as capable of being described mathematically rather than purely qualitatively as in Aristotelian physics. Many mechanical philosophers favoured an experimental, rather than a strictly observational approach to studying the natural world. Finally, mechanical philosophers eschewed ‘occult’ or hidden forces. These were forces that acted between two objects that were not in physical contact. Thus Descartes proposed a mechanical explanation for magnetism, based on the action of particles of matter in contact with each other. And Galileo denied that the moon had any effect on the tides, insisting instead that the tides were caused by the motion of the earth.

The work of the English scientist Isaac Newton (1642–1727) has long been regarded as the culmination of the revolution in astronomy and physics that began in the sixteenth century. Indeed, he was regarded this way in his own lifetime. The English poet Alexander Pope (1688–1744) penned the following epitaph for him:

Nature and Nature’s laws lay hid in night:  
God said, ‘Let Newton be!’ and all was light.

In his *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687), more commonly known as the *Principia*, Newton decisively solved the problem of creating a physics that explained motion in a heliocentric cosmos. The text is generally considered to be the foundation of modern physics. In the *Principia*, Newton begins by defining fundamental concepts, such as mass, quantity of motion, inertia, impressed force, and centripetal force. He then proposes three laws of motion. The first of these laws is the law of inertia. Newton’s concept of inertia was different from Galileo’s because Newton posited that all natural motion was rectilinear. Galileo’s concept of inertia states that an object (like a planet) that is set in motion on a perfectly smooth spherical surface will continue moving indefinitely unless acted on by some external force. In other words, Galileo still posited that the natural motion of planets was in circles. Newton asserted that an object continues to move in a straight line unless acted upon by some force. Newton’s second law was the proportionality of force and motion, that is, that a change in motion is proportional to the impressed force. His third law was the equivalence of action and reaction, often stated as: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Newton built on the work of the mechanical philosophers of the seventeenth century, and his mathematical approach to natural phenomena would certainly not have been possible without theirs. However, he also broke with one of the fundamental tenets of mechanical philosophy and posited an ‘occult’ force: gravity. Gravity was occult because it was a force acting between two bodies, such as the sun and the earth or the earth and the moon, that were not in physical contact.

Newton’s laws of motion made no distinction between the heavens and the earth. The same force, gravity, that caused objects to fall to the surface of the earth, kept the planets in motion around the sun. One of the great triumphs of Newton’s physics was that it provided an explanation for Kepler’s laws of planetary motion, which had not been widely accepted. Newton demonstrated that the elliptical shape of planetary orbits was caused by the combined forces of inertia and gravity. Planets, like every other object in the cosmos, tended to move in straight lines. They were pulled out of these straight lines by the force of gravity acting between the planet and the sun. Newton, like Galileo, Descartes, and other natural philosophers of his day, presumed that God had set the planets in motion at the beginning of time. But it was inertia and gravity that determined their ongoing movement.

**Conclusion**

I have chosen to focus in this chapter on the development of experimental methods to study the natural world and on the transition from an earth-centred view of the cosmos to a sun-centred view. In the mid-twentieth century, members of the newly emerging discipline of the history of science described these epistemological and epistemic shifts as
‘revolutionary’ and as constituting a fundamental break with the ‘pre-modern’ worldview. A generation of increasingly sophisticated historical scholarship has given us a richer and more nuanced picture of the rise of experimental methods and heliocentrism. It is no longer possible to bracket off the ‘pseudo-sciences’ of alchemy and astrology, to draw a sharp distinction between ‘science’ and ‘religion’ in this period, or to ignore the contributions of Arabic scholars, indigenous peoples, women, and artisans. The new narrative of the Scientific Revolution that is beginning to emerge from the scholarship of the last half century is more global, more inclusive, and more attuned to the ways in which knowledge is historically and culturally situated.

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Find this resource:

Find this resource:

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(4.) A particularly notorious example of this scholarship is Andrew Dickson White’s *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom: From Creation to the Victory of Scientific and Literary Methods* (London, 1896).


(12.) An exception to this is the pioneering work of B. J. T. Dobbs, *The Foundations of Newton’s Alchemy* (Cambridge, 1983).


(22.) This general picture of the cosmos and Aristotle’s account of the four elements can be found in *De caelo*, Book I, parts 2 and 3.


(24.) For those wishing to understand the mathematical models of the Greeks in more detail, see Michael J. Crowe, *Theories of the World from Antiquity to the Copernican Revolution*, 2nd rev. edn. (London, 2001).

(25.) For example, see Nicholas Steneck, *Science and Creation in the Middle Ages: Henry of Langenstein (d. 1397) on Genesis* (Notre Dame, IN, 1977), esp. ch. IV.

(26.) On navigation, see Portuondo, *Secret Science*.


(28.) Copernicus was the first European astronomer to raise the problem of the equant. It had been discussed and indeed solved in several different ways by Islamic astronomers over the previous 300 years. See George Saliba, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).


(30.) Robert S. Westman, *The Copernican Question: Prognostication, Skepticism, and Celestial Order* (Berkeley and
Los Angeles, 2011).


(34.) The new star was a supernova, the explosion of a dying star. Supernovae fade from view after several weeks or months. The supernova of 1572 remained visible until 1574. It was one of only eight historical supernovae visible to the naked eye.


(37.) Bernard R. Goldstein and Giora Hon. ‘Kepler’s Move from Orbs to Orbits: Documenting a Revolutionary Scientific Concept’, *Perspectives on Science*, 13 (2005), 74–111.

(38.) Historians of science have not always appreciated the significance of the distinction between orbs and orbits. For example, the only available English translation of Copernicus’s *On the Revolutions* is by the late Edward Rosen, who consistently translated orbis as orbit, a glaring anachronism, and one that has contributed to the misperception that Copernicus rejected the notion of solid celestial orbs.


(40.) Finocchiaro, *The Essential Galileo*, 83.


(42.) More specifically, a committee appointed by the Roman Inquisition to decide whether the Copernican system was or was not heretical.


(44.) For a modern translation, see Galileo Galilei, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, trans. Stillman Drake (Berkeley, 1953).


(46.) For short overview of the political situation in Rome in this period, see Michael H. Shank, ‘Setting the Stage: Galileo in Tuscany, the Veneto, and Rome’, in Ernan McMullin, ed., *The Church and Galileo* (Notre Dame, IN, 2005), 57–87, esp. 69–79.

(47.) This account of Galileo’s physics is drawn from his *Dialogue*.


(49.) On Galileo’s explanation of comets, see Tofigh Heidarzadeh, *A History of Physical Theories of Comets*, From ....
Aristotle to Whipple (Dordrecht, 2008), 61–64.

(50.) The following account of Descartes’s physics is drawn from his *Traité de la lumière* (1664). I have used the translation in René Descartes, *The World and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Stephen Gaukroger (Cambridge, 1998), 3–75.

(51.) By the surface of the earth, Descartes meant the crust, extending some way underground. Mixed objects included metals and minerals. Descartes, *The World and Other Writings*, 20.


(53.) I have done this at the expense of subjects such as natural history, anatomy, and natural magic, all of which were actively pursued in the early modern period, and all of which have vigorous scholarly literatures. I have included references to scholarship in these areas in my suggestions for further reading.

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**Kathleen Crowther**

This chapter traces the revolution in style and taste that swept over the visual arts as a result of the movement we call the Renaissance. Not only was there a transformation in subject matter, which was almost entirely religious at our starting-point, around 1450, but also in style, in the status of the artist, in the types of art that were produced, in patronage, and in the market for paintings and engravings. To follow these changes, the period has been divided into four broad periods: 1350–1520, the age of the Renaissance; 1520–1600, the age of Mannerism; 1600–70, the age of Baroque; and 1670–1759, the age of Rococo. In each segment the main developments in painting, sculpture, and architecture are outlined; the principal figures are identified; and changes discussed.

Keywords: International Gothic, Renaissance, humanism, Mannerism, Baroque, Rococo

The revolution in taste that swept art and architecture was as profound as any of the changes that Europe experienced over the course of these four centuries.1 So far-reaching were the transformations during the first half of the period, often inspired by the wish to bring back to life the achievements of antiquity, that they came to be called a Renaissance, or rebirth—a name that is often applied to the age as a whole. And the new directions were visible not only in aesthetic principles and aims, but also in the status of the artist, the forms of patronage, and the role of the arts in the wider society. To trace these, we will begin with a look at the situation in 1350, and then explore developments in four successive periods: roughly 1350–1520, 1520–1600, 1600–70, and 1670–1750.

Art and Architecture in 1350

The dominant influence on the production of art in the fourteenth century was religion, a cause that was advanced by all the major patrons of the day, at princely courts and in the Church. Whether in massive cathedrals, enlivened by stained glass, mosaics, and sculptured figures; in the tapestries and decorations that adorned palaces; in glowing altarpieces and frescoes; and in tiny manuscript illuminations, it was above all the expression of the Christian faith that determined subject matter and inspired creativity. If one looks at some of the major achievements of the age—encompassing a time that extends from the late 1200s to the early 1400s—one soon sees how pervasive was the power of devotion and belief.

The general name often given to the artistic style of this period is International Gothic, but it seems most distinctive in sculpture and architecture. Most of the sculpture that has survived—on the tombs of prominent people or in representations of saintly figures and scenes from Christian history—emphasizes the elegance, the occasionally (p. 82) elongated figures, and
the reverent devotion that mark the style. As for architecture, while there are notable castles and fortifications that can still be seen, it is the churches that are the most visible monuments of the age. Enormous constructions, with vaulting that drew the eye ever upward, and with gleaming colours in tall glass windows, they represented the final flowering of a style of construction that had spread throughout Europe. The term often applied to these masterpieces is ‘Rayonnant’, from the French for the radiating structure of the rose-shaped stained glass windows that were one of their most distinctive features. What is important to note, however, is that one finds notable exemplars of the style in cities as far apart as Milan, Rouen, and Cologne. Moreover, the persistence of traditional forms of art far into the 1400s is particularly evident in architecture. In England this late phase was known as Perpendicular style, and construction of one of its most dazzling examples, King’s College Chapel in Cambridge, did not begin until the 1440s.

Another medium important at the time, though produced primarily in a small area of what is now northern France and Belgium, was tapestry. This large hanging provided both warmth and decoration, and was remarkable not only for many secular scenes, such as battles, but also for a fondness for nature and for symbolism. Requiring many skilled hands to weave, it was an essential part of courtly life. As late as the mid-sixteenth century, the Emperor Charles V insisted, as he crisscrossed his many domains, that his tapestries always accompany him, even in his tents.

As we look to the future, though, it is in painting that the clearest indications arise of the changes to come. For large works the most notable practitioners were Italians, especially natives of the central Italian area of Tuscany. Here the two richest cities, Florence and Siena, were also the principal seats of the arts, though the wealth of northern cities, especially Padua and Venice (which ruled Padua from 1405, and was already notable for the blend of Moorish and Gothic styles in its architecture), also attracted leading artists. Florence had long been a noted producer of luxury goods such as silk and leather, which nurtured talents in design and in aesthetic values. Siena, a centre of banking and the wool trade, was known for its wealth and especially for the ambition and craftsmanship of its magnificent cathedral, completed the previous century. From these cities came the men who are regarded as the dominant figures in painting during the first half of the fourteenth century.

It was a Florentine, Giotto di Bondone (d. 1337), who was the most important inspiration for the centuries to come. He was celebrated throughout northern Italy, and his masterpiece, the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua—adorned with some fifty frescoes of Biblical scenes—was a milestone in the development of the new interests that were to shape Renaissance art (see Figure 4.1). In particular, his depiction of human emotions, and his interest in showing depth in a landscape, are the most famous early steps in the new directions that Renaissance painting was to pursue.

Though less influential, two Sienese masters, Simone Martini (d. 1344) and Ambrogio Lorenzetti (d. 1348), were also beginning to move from the focus on calm, spiritual, and symbolic images characteristic of the time. Martini, for instance, showed an interest in landscape settings that suggested the changes that lay ahead. And Lorenzetti’s most remarkable work explored, in a series of allegories on the walls of the town hall in Siena, the nature of good and bad government. These paintings not only evoked an entire city, (p. 83) but focused on a secular theme that indicated the breadth of subject matter that art could address.

Further north, the most prominent examples of the period’s painting were small scale: the illumination of manuscripts and the meticulous illustration of books. In particular, the three Limbourg brothers (d. c. 1416) were renowned for their work on a devotional book commissioned by the Burgundian Duc de Berry. Portable art was a major interest of patrons, who liked
small altarpieces as well as tapestries and books that they could carry on their travels. It is notable, too, that a number of Books of Hours were commissioned by women for their devotional practices. The Burgundian Duke’s Book of Hours, like others in the genre, contained pieces of liturgy, psalms, and other spiritual readings, but was transformed by its illuminations into a vivid record of the world he knew—a portrayal that was to be greatly enlarged and developed in the centuries to come.

**Revolution in Art, 1350–1520**

By then, however, a transformation in the arts had begun in the cities of the two most prosperous areas in Europe, northern Italy and the Netherlands. In Italy one of the driving forces was the demand by Francesco Petrarch (d. 1374), a poet and diplomat, to study the ancient Romans as models of behaviour. He believed that standards of morality and cultural achievement had deteriorated for centuries, and he wanted them raised by a study of antiquity—a call that launched a scholarly and educational initiative usually known as humanism. Though Petrarch hoped for a revival of the values of a distant past, he saw his own age as mired in ignorance: ‘in the middle, in our time, you see the confluence of wretches and ignominy’. It was the ambition of artists as well as writers to make his hopes for renewal come true in the years that followed.

Although that effort consisted primarily of the development of new forms of representation and new subject matter, it is worth noting that the revolutionary changes that were about to unfold encompassed method as well as content. In architecture the revival of domes required new machinery and new techniques. In sculpture the tradition of carving in stone was expanded by difficult and not always successful experiments in metal casting, especially bronze. And for two-dimensional depictions there was a cornucopia of new forms. Water-based tempera paints were gradually superseded by oils. Canvas replaced wood panels. Multiple copies were made on paper through woodcuts and then printed engravings. And drawings on paper in pencil and chalk became popular. At the same time, the growing fame of individual artists, and the demands on their work, led to the creation of elaborate workshops. Raphael, for example, had over fifty artists working for him as he raced to complete commissions all over Rome, outlining figures and scenes, adding finishing touches where needed, but less and less completing a painting from start to finish.

But that lay far ahead. For the beginnings of the revolution it has been traditional, since the time of Giorgio Vasari (d. 1574), the first major writer about the history of art, to start the story with three friends from Florence: the painter Masaccio (d. 1428), the sculptor Donatello (d. 1466), and the architect Brunelleschi (d. 1446). All three went to Rome in the early 1400s to study ancient relics, and the visit transformed their art. As will be apparent in the remainder of this chapter, it is through the creations of a small handful of masters that the changes of the time are most clearly observed. All were shaped by the prevalent ideas and interests of their contemporaries, especially the patrons who paid for their work, but the best way to understand artistic developments is through the achievements of individuals, and in this respect we will be following Vasari’s lead.

Masaccio’s masterpiece is the decoration of the Brancacci chapel in Florence. In these Biblical scenes, landscapes have a depth and people have individual expressions that move us away from the symbolic art of previous generations. Adam and Eve are naked figures, agonized by their expulsion from Eden, which they have just left through a Roman archway. The concern with perspective, and the attempt to represent nature and the human body in realistic fashion, made the Brancacci chapel a shrine for artists for generations.

Donatello’s achievements were along the same lines. His extraordinary bronze sculpture of the young David after he has killed Goliath (see Figure 4.2) was the first free-standing nude crafted since ancient times. The perfection of the human form, and the way the statue captures the warrior in deep thought—it was a Renaissance ideal to combine the contemplative and the active life—inspired a new vigour among sculptors. And an equestrian monument in Padua, celebrating a military leader, created an image of heroism that set new standards for a secular theme. (p. 85)
promise to complete Florence’s new Cathedral (which was intended to outshine its rival in Siena) by raising a huge dome. Nothing like it had been built since antiquity, and Brunelleschi’s achievement, inspired by his study of Roman structures, and requiring him to invent machines for raising great weights, remains one of the most spectacular examples of Renaissance creativity.

For the next few decades, experimentation was the order of the day. Brunelleschi had explored the use of perspective as a means of adding depth to two-dimensional representation, and that technique, as well as efforts to portray objects and people as naturalistically as possible, remained prominent in Italian painting for the remainder of the century. In sculpture the most notable figure was Andrea Verocchio (d. 1488), who not only tackled complex issues of bronze casting but also sought to add a sense of power to the mastery of figures that had set Donatello apart. Asked to create a monument to one of the military commanders who had served the Venetian state, Bartolomeo Colleoni, he fashioned a life-size equestrian statue that captures the vigour and sense of forward motion of a man in battle. Both horse and rider suggest the fierceness of the warrior—a secular subject brought to life by the new interests of the artist.

The most influential figure in architecture in the decades following Brunelleschi was Leon Battista Alberti (d. 1472). Author of fiction, plays, a book on the family, and studies of painting, sculpture, and architecture, he added to his theoretical treatises architectural works that served as models for centuries. Asked to adapt a Gothic church in Rimini to conform to the ideals of humanism, he transformed the facade into a vision of a Greek temple. He did the same for the facade of the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, which was emulated by other architects for centuries.

The ferment of new ideas spread quickly throughout Italy. Essential to the success of artists was the devotion to humanist ideals of a number of princely families, who presided over brilliant courts in various cities, including Ferrara, Mantua, Milan, and Urbino. The commissions from these patrons not only expanded the market for art but provided backing for subject matter, such as portraits and mythological scenes, that had not previously been a major interest. There were painters who came to be recognized as masters primarily because of the works they created at these courts. In turn, the patrons were made famous by those whose works they commissioned. The Medici of Florence, for example, gained European-wide renown for their support of the leading artistic figures of the time.

Typical were three artists who added lustre to the princely courts they served. The oldest, Pisanello (d. 1455), was celebrated for his medals. Echoing the coins of antiquity, these portraits in bronze, often embellished with symbols and words, were a favourite way of ensuring the fame of the person depicted. When a Byzantine emperor visited Italy, his likeness was enshrined forever in the commemorative medal that Pisanello struck. But he also received commissions for paintings that took him from Venice and Mantua in the north to Rome and Naples in the south. Many of his frescoes, painted on the walls of churches and palaces, have been lost, but two panels that have survived indicate his versatility. One is a colourful portrait of a princess from the Este family of Ferrara, surrounded by flowers. The other reflects his fascination with the natural world. (p. 87) It shows St. Eustace, a huntsman who held back when he saw a cross between the antlers of a stag, surrounded by animals in a rocky landscape.

More cerebral was Pisanello’s younger contemporary, Piero della Francesca (d. 1492). Piero wrote treatises on mathematics and geometry, and scholars have analysed how he applied these skills to his art, especially in his organization of space. For most viewers, though, it is the calm demeanour of his figures, the command of perspective, the delicate colours,
the detailed precision of his landscapes, and the originality of his subject matter that makes him a unique presence in fifteenth-century art. His portraits of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino, and his frescos in a church in Arezzo displaying nine episodes from the legendary story of the finding of the true cross, have become landmarks of the new interest by Renaissance artists in the human form and the natural world.

The youngest of the three, Andrea Mantegna (d. 1506), was associated mainly with the court of the Gonzaga family in Mantua. To this day his patrons seem almost alive in the group portrait he painted on the walls of their palace. But his best known work was probably a series of nine paintings entitled The Triumphs of Caesar. Engravings of the Scene, which show a Roman military procession, circulated widely, and embodied the reverence for antiquity of the Renaissance artist. That enthusiasm reached a climax in the work of a younger contemporary, the Florentine Sandro Botticelli (d. 1510), whose scenes of ancient myths, such as The Birth of Venus (see Figure 4.3), were regarded by a modern scholar, Erwin Panofsky, as the moment when the ‘renaissance’ finally happened —when a fifteenth-century painter was able to present a classical story in the same style as his ancient forebears.

Mantegna also had a connection with the other major Italian centre of art in this period, Venice. His father-in-law was Jacopo Bellini (d. 1470), the patriarch of a family of painters who established a tradition of vivid painting in Italy’s richest city. Venice had long been known for her mosaics, one of the chief forms of medieval art. But thanks to Bellini’s two sons, Gentile (d. 1507) and Giovanni (d. 1516), and Gentile’s pupil Vittore Carpaccio (d. 1525), she now became a leader in the new artistic commitments of the age.

Many innovations have been associated with the Bellinis and Carpaccio, but a few bear emphasizing. Most striking is their devotion to their city. Gentile Bellini’s Corpus Christi Day Procession uses the occasion of an annual festival to celebrate Venice’s central square and her leading citizens as well as the ritual of the day. So specific is the depiction of St. Mark’s Square, the spectators, and the figures in the procession that it is even possible to see the musical notes on the sheets held by musicians. And Carpaccio’s Miracle of the True Cross is a densely packed study of buildings, chimneys, and the Rialto Bridge that is a mine of information about the appearance of his city. This uniquely intense attention to physical appearance was the urban equivalent of the evocation of the natural world that was so prominent in Renaissance art.

But that interest was also there. The Venetians, unlike their contemporaries in Florence who sought to create idealized figures and settings, often made it possible to see what the weather was like in a picture. Not only did Carpaccio fill many of his scenes with flowers and animals but the Bellinis sometimes let their landscapes overwhelm their religious subjects. And richness of colours became a mark of Venetian painting, helping to create a distinctive strand within the innovations of Italian Renaissance art.

The climax of the changes of the 1400s came in the years around 1500, which are often referred to as the period of the High Renaissance. A new centre of patronage had risen to prominence: the city of Rome, the home of the papacy. Since the mid-fifteenth century, when individual popes had become caught up by humanism—one of their achievements was the founding of the Vatican Library, with major holdings of the ancient classics—they had become increasingly interested in the latest ideas. By the early 1500s they had become major patrons of the arts, an interest that intensified when two members of the Medici family, the most visible sponsor of new painting, sculpture, and architecture in Italy, ascended the papal throne.

Three artists are particularly associated with this moment, and in various ways have come to be seen as the pinnacle of the experimentation and innovation of the previous century: Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael. All three were shaped by their Florentine predecessors, though Raphael was the only one not born in Tuscany, and all three spent important
years in Rome—they were there at the same time in the mid-1510s. But their legacies differed markedly.

The oldest, Leonardo (d. 1519), undertook so many projects, in so many different areas, that he has come to be regarded as the embodiment of his age. His explorations of technology, anatomy, physiognomy, geology, and other subjects occupied as much of his time as his art, but it is the admiration for his drawings and paintings that has been the heart of his fame. Restless, and often unable to complete projects, he left less than twenty paintings, some of them unfinished or damaged—because of his experiments with techniques—over time. But his Mona Lisa and Last Supper, though marred by deteriorating surfaces, have become symbols of their age. The facial expression and the fantastic background of the portrait, and the elegant composition of the Supper, have remained models of the mastery of the human form, of nature, and of perspective that Renaissance artists sought.

Michelangelo (d. 1564) remained a force for change long past 1520, and we will encounter him in the next section. Though a prolific maker of drawings, like Leonardo, and a memorable painter—the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, with its depiction of The Creation of Adam, is one of the best known images of the High Renaissance—he regarded himself primarily as a sculptor. When commissioned to produce a statue of David for a public space in Florence, he determined to outdo Donatello and fashioned a potent, muscular nude David, larger than life size, looking into the distance as he prepares the slingshot that will kill Goliath. The latent power of the human body was Michelangelo’s hallmark, as was versatility—though he created hundreds of figures, he never repeated a pose. Still to come after 1520 was yet another side to his genius, architecture. The principal architect in Rome when Michelangelo was there in the early 1500s, Bramante (d. 1514), had built a small circular temple, the Tempietto, that was considered an exemplary combination of ancient features—columns, a balustrade, a dome—into a harmonious building. Bramante also began to design a new St. Peter’s basilica, but it was to be Michelangelo who completed it.

The youngest of the trio, Raphael (d. 1520), was only 37 when he died, yet in his short lifetime he was thought to have attained the calm, idealized perfection towards which painters had been aiming ever since Giotto and Masaccio. In the last decade of his life he was the Pope’s favourite painter, decorating some of the main rooms of the Vatican with mythological and religious scenes. He also was admired as an architect, serving briefly as successor to Bramante for St. Peter’s, but his few projects have either been destroyed or were never finished. Above all, it was the perfection of his Madonnas and saints, circulated in engravings throughout Europe, that won him the admiration of artists for generations. Yet there was often a light-hearted touch in his works. In a scene of Athenian philosophers he included portraits of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and himself, and his serene Sistine Madonna is viewed by two naughty-looking cherubs.

One other aspect of these decades, when the Italians created a new aesthetic for the visual arts, has to be mentioned. Without the transformation of patronage that accompanied the many achievements, few of them would have been possible. For centuries, Europe’s elites had justified their status by their wealth and military prowess. With the rise of humanism, and also the invention of gunpowder, which made death on the battlefield a matter of technical skill rather than bravery, new values came into being. These were summed up by Baldassare Castiglione, an aristocrat, diplomat, and author of The Book of the Courtier (1528). He emphasized that, although a gentleman still had to shine as a warrior, he now had to cultivate refinement, elegance, and a taste for literature and the arts. Fame, he argued, no longer came from stories of valour, but rather from the poets and painters who could extol one’s virtues for posterity. That belief expanded enormously the patronage of artists. Portraits proliferated, and so too did magnificent new buildings, statues, and other decorations that carried the name of benefactors far and wide. The Renaissance transformed the market for art as well as art itself.

That was the story in Italy. Yet there was also a transformation of the arts to the north, in the Netherlands and Germany, that has been called the northern Renaissance. Although not driven by a broad programme of intellectual reform like the one launched by Petrarch, the innovations spread in the 1400s, as they did in Italy, and in recent years scholars have identified ways in which these two quite distinct centres of activity learned from one another and influenced each other.

The cities of the southern Netherlands, the area known as Flanders, were, like Florence and Venice, major trading centres. Two of the wealthiest were Bruges, which exported cloth (whose manufacture was a local speciality) to all of Europe, and
Brussels, which was a favourite seat of the powerful Dukes of Burgundy. It was here that the two seminal figures of Netherlandish art, Jan Van Eyck (d. 1441) and Rogier van der Weyden (d. 1464), spent most of their careers.

Van Eyck is often associated with the use of oil in painting. The technique, which permitted easy correction and a new brightness of colour, had probably been invented in East Asia centuries earlier. But it had migrated across the continents, and Jan and his older brother Hubert brought it to a prominence it had not had before. We know very little about Hubert, though it is clear that he began a major work that his brother finished: The Ghent Altarpiece in that city’s church of St. Bavo. The altarpiece is immensely complicated, because eight of its panels are hinged, and when closed they show twelve scenes, and another twelve when opened. When open to its full width (15 feet wide and 11 feet high), there is a continuous scene across the bottom five panels that shows a large crowd, on horseback, on foot, and kneeling, adoring the mystic Lamb of God—a devotional practice that derives from a Biblical passage in which Christ is called the lamb of God. Though clearly a work of deep religious feeling, the figures and the setting throughout the altarpiece reveal a mastery of perspective, of the human form and the natural world, and of the depiction of emotion, that matched the finest achievement of Van Eyck’s Italian contemporaries.

One difference between north and south in works of faith is that the northerners sometimes retained the traditional practice of adjusting the size of figures to reflect their symbolic holiness. Thus a Virgin Mary almost fills an entire church. But in showing physical reality, whether the folds in a robe or an entire city in a background, there was a precision to Van Eyck’s painting that marked a new era in the representation of reality. And he did not avoid secular themes. Long before the Italians produced full-length portraits, he showed an Italian merchant, Arnolfini, and his wife, standing in their bedroom. The picture has been interpreted as full of religious references, but its appeal as a painting that brings two fifteenth-century people to life has been almost universal (see Figure 4.4). We know who owned it over the centuries, and can follow its travels to Spain, its moment as a trophy after a battle, and eventually its move to London, where it now hangs in the National Gallery.

Van Eyck’s younger contemporary, van der Weyden, worked mainly in Brussels, under the patronage of the Dukes of Burgundy. Also renowned for his portraits and his religious scenes, he gained an international audience, to some extent because of the presence of Flemish merchants at the international fairs that were a large part of European-wide commerce in this period. One of the most important was held at Medina del Campo in Spain, where Spanish wool from huge local flocks of sheep was sold to Flemings for manufacture into cloth back home. Though we do not know for sure, this is probably why Flemish art became much sought after in Spain. One of van der Weyden’s most important commissions came from the king of Castile, and it is significant that the Prado Museum in Madrid has over a thousand Flemish paintings. To this day, the Spanish architecture of the period, including some magnificent churches and castles, is known as Hispano–Flemish. Van der Weyden may also have travelled to Italy, because patrons there, including the Medici family in Florence, sought his work. In both portraiture and religious scenes, he was a crucial influence in spreading the techniques of the Flemings to other areas of Europe.

The new interests of Netherlandish painters continued into the next generations. The leading figure in Bruges after van Eyck was Hans Memling (d. 1494), who produced an altarpiece with hinged panels almost as complicated as the one in Ghent for the German city of Lübeck. It was his portraits, though—infusing his subjects with life; setting them amidst elegant
landscape backgrounds and meticulously crafted material objects; and using the versatility of oil paint to create effects of light and shade and a three-dimensionality that brought viewers into his pictures—that deeply influenced portraiture both in Italy and in the north. More unusual was the work of a younger artist who lived a few miles north of Bruges, Hieronymus Bosch (d. 1516). Though his settings were recognizable landscapes, he filled them with symbolic figures who represented the spiritual yearnings and turmoil of the age. Frightening demons and ghastly creatures tempted or punished mankind, while serene holy men and women suggested the rewards that were possible for the believer. Art was serving religious faith in ways that no Italian painter would have pursued.

Two Flemings of the next generation opened other new directions. Joachim Patinir (d. 1524) developed the birds’ eye view that became a staple of Flemish painting. Looking across an immense landscape, the viewer sees a specific scene—usually a religious subject—as part of an overarching countryside. Mountains, trees, rivers, and clouds turn Patinir’s paintings into celebrations of nature as well as sacred events. And Jan Gossaert (d. 1532), who travelled to Italy in the entourage of an aristocrat, deliberately brought home elements of the styles he had encountered. In his work classical architecture and idealized protagonists stand beside traditional Flemish figures. The integration of the two forms of Renaissance art, the Italian and the northern, was clearly underway.

That integration was notably advanced by the leading artist of the age in Germany, Albrecht Dürer (d. 1528). The difference between his work and that of his almost exact contemporary, Matthias Grünewald (d. 1528), who lived only 100 miles away, could (p. 93) hardly be wider. Grünewald was the last of the great masters working in the tradition of van Eyck, and his most famous painting, the powerful Isenheim Altarpiece, has eighteen traditional religious scenes on its hinged panels, ranging from the agonies of the crucifixion to Bosch-like demons assaulting the sinner. There is little hint of the Italian aesthetic that Dürer was to bring into German art.

One reason for the shift was that Dürer’s home city, Nuremberg, had become a centre of humanism in the late 1400s. Prominent among his friends were advocates of the ‘new learning’ that Petrarch and his followers had championed, and it may well have been at their urging that, first in his twenties and then for a longer period in his thirties, Dürer spent a number of years in Venice. Here he not only absorbed the latest ideas but also enjoyed being welcomed as an admired visitor. His self-portrait as a fine gentleman, in rich clothes, and with a landscape in the background, indicates how thoroughly he was able to adopt idealizing Italian styles.

But Dürer’s importance was not just as a superb painter. More than any other single person, he made the engraving—the incising of a picture into wood or metal so that it could be inked and reproduced many times, thanks to that new invention, printing—into a major art form. While still in his twenties he had the idea of taking advantage of the recent invention of printing to produce an illustrated Book of the Apocalypse. He brought out editions in both Latin and German, adorned with fifteen woodcuts, amongst which The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse was merely the best known of a series that demonstrated how effective and elegant an engraving could be, and the book made Dürer famous (see Figure 4.5). He also wrote about the theory of art, and showed that an artist could make a living in the marketplace. Engravings were more difficult in copper, but also more refined, and he made sure they sold for more than woodcuts. As he travelled through Europe, it was often his wife who was out selling her husband’s engraved prints from a cart while he was being feted by local notables. Though he took commissions from royal patrons, Dürer remained in Nuremberg all his life, proud of his ability to make a career as an independent artist.
He was not alone in his attention to printmaking. His contemporary Lucas van Leyden (d. 1533) was even more prolific, and no less skilled, but it was Dürer’s fame that made engravings into a significant form of art. His career, both within Italy and in northern Europe, made him a fitting climax to the transformations associated with Renaissance art.

The Revolution Elaborated, 1520–1600

The new aesthetic and the new social prominence of artists that we associate with the Renaissance was to develop broadly during the period that followed. The name often given to the work of these generations is Mannerism, and we will see that it does help to link a number of the trends of the time. But there was more than one way that the age was coming to terms with the advances of the previous centuries, as we will also see. (p. 94)

(p. 95) The term Mannerism has always proved elusive. Vasari wrote of ‘bella maniera’—beautiful style—but this seemed to have more to do with quality than particular forms. Over the centuries, though, it has come to be seen as a self-conscious effort to go beyond the perfection of the High Renaissance. Now, especially in sophisticated aristocratic circles, the emphasis was on a highly cultured elegance, with unusual compositions—sometimes spilling beyond the edge of a canvas—and distended figures in artificial poses that suggested a refinement that went beyond reality. One painting is even called The Madonna of the Long Neck, and shows the Virgin of the title with spectators crammed into one side of the painting, an odd distant perspective on the other side, and a child that looks as though it is about to slip off its mother’s lap. The painter, Parmigianino (d. 1540), lived only thirty-seven years, but is seen as the embodiment of the style. Unsatisfied with mere representation, he painted—to give another example—a self-portrait in a convex mirror that showed an exaggeratedly large hand in the forefront.

One effect of Mannerist art was to disconcert the viewer. Much had happened to Europeans in the decades before 1520 to disturb comfortable assumptions: the discovery of a new continent and peoples in America, the splitting apart of the Church by the Reformation, and the wars of religion that followed. An art that was neither sedate nor peaceful seemed to fit right in.

Raphael’s most famous pupil, Giulio Romano (d. 1546), for instance, built and decorated a new pleasure palace for the Duke in Mantua, the Palazzo Te. Though at first they look strictly classical, the facades are in fact not quite symmetrical, and the columns are not evenly spaced. Inside, moreover, in addition to a room full of erotic images, and another filled with portraits of the Duke’s horses, there is a vertiginous room whose ceiling and walls are covered with a fresco showing Zeus orchestrating The Fall of the Giants. One almost rears back as one enters the room, surrounded by huge figures crashing to the ground, a disorientation intensified by an illusory dome Romano painted on the ceiling.

Though his purposes were much clearer, Michelangelo was not immune to the shift Mannerism represented. When he was in his sixties, in the mid-1530s, he returned to the scene of his earlier triumphs, the Sistine Chapel, to paint an immense Last Judgement. A huge, swirling fresco, spilling over with bodies, often naked, in almost every conceivable position, and centred on an avenging figure of Christ, the power of the scene was unmistakable. Agonized souls, hurrying to their doom, were watched over by anxious saints, and no hint remained of joy or celebration. Worried by the nudity, church leaders had segments painted over, and these additions were not removed until the 1980s. The work may have owed much to an extraordinary series of frescos about the Day of Judgement that had been executed in the early 1500s in the nearby cathedral of Orvieto by Luca Signorelli (d. 1523), but Signorelli never again attained the intensity of his masterpiece. In Michelangelo’s case, though, The Last Judgement was but one of a series of widely influential works he completed from the 1520s onward.

Mannerism was also reflected in his sculpture. The tombs he made for the Medici family, for instance, featured recumbent nude figures who, lying in stretched-out positions, convey a latent power that overwhelms the commemorative purpose of the tombs. (p. 96) Another series of sculptures shows tormented captives struggling to emerge from blocks of marble. And a late
Pietà is rough-hewn and dominated, not by the Madonna, but by a hooded St. Joseph and by the twisted, emaciated body of the dead Christ. Michelangelo had become as intent on disturbing his audience as any Mannerist.

A similar progression can be seen in Michelangelo’s contemporary, Titian (d. 1576). Sought after as a portraitist by monarchs from Germany to Spain, he was knighted by the Emperor Charles V and lived like a patrician in Venice. In his early years he had been a leading exponent of High Renaissance style. Trained as a mosaicist and then as a student of Giovanni Bellini, he had attracted wide attention in the 1510s with an enormous, colourful altarpiece, The Assumption of the Virgin, in the Frari church in Venice. His work from this period has the brightness, the elegance, and the stable compositions of the High Renaissance. But later in life his palette began to darken, and there was a more sombre tone to his work. The Death of Actaeon, set in a gloomy landscape, shows a horrific scene of a man turned into a stag and torn apart by dogs; and The Flaying of Marsyas tells the even more gruesome story of Marsyas, hung upside down as his skin is methodically cut away. Even classical mythology, revived in the Renaissance as uplifting, had become a disturbing presence.

Two younger contemporaries of Titian in Venice, Tintoretto (d. 1594) and Veronese (d. 1588), helped make the city a centre of memorable creativity in these years, comparable to the Florence of a century earlier. Tintoretto was a furiously prolific painter. In one major undertaking alone—the decoration of the halls of a charity devoted to San Rocco—he finished more than fifty large canvases. One of these, an immense Crucifixion, over 15 feet high and 40 feet wide, teems with figures and horses, and has been called the only picture that can stand comparison with Michelangelo’s Last Judgement. Vigour, movement, and fraught atmospheres came naturally to Tintoretto; his restlessness encapsulated his time.

Veronese was more relaxed. Famous for huge banqueting scenes (one of which got him into trouble with the Inquisition because he showed the Last Supper as a splendid secular feast in a palace), he filled his canvases with figures rarely moved by strong emotion. He might show bodies at odd angles, or crowded scenes, but the impression is always of a lush, colourful, and essentially untroubled world. A mastery of sumptuous gowns and glittering jewels, and a fondness for spectacle, made his work a foretaste of the more dramatic styles that lay in the future rather than the uneasiness of his own times.

Venice was also home to some of the most notable achievements of sixteenth-century architecture. This was a result of the growing influence of ancient styles, which Michelangelo was applying to major projects in Rome. His two most important undertakings, the dome of St. Peter’s basilica, and the three palaces forming the Campidoglio square on the Capitoline hill, were not completed in his lifetime, but they were exemplars of the classicizing movement. In both cases, what is unmistakable, despite the large scale of the buildings, is the sense of stability and harmony they project. Balustrades and rows of statues create a settled look, while symmetrical details—arches, windows, pediments—extending across the facades give a reassuring sense of unity and completeness. It is as if one could not add a detail without disturbing the whole.

(p. 97) This ‘Romanizing’ programme also transformed the appearance of Venice. There were some who opposed the shift away from the Gothic/Moorish appearance of the city to grander, classicizing buildings, but the growing interest in humanism proved decisive. It was apparent, for instance, in the warm welcome given to a refugee from the siege and sack of Rome in 1527, Jacopo Sansovino (d. 1570), who was asked to design large new public buildings, notably a library adjacent to the main square. The scale on which he worked, and his reliance on symmetrical rows of arches, pediments, and windows, set in motion a basic change in the city’s appearance. The somewhat younger Andrea Palladio (d. 1580), a close student of the writings of the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius, helped spread classical forms not only throughout the city but also into the surrounding countryside. His balanced church facades bring to mind Greek temples, while his arches and columns deliberately echo Greek and Roman buildings. Perfect
symmetry was one of his trademarks, marking his Redentore church in Venice and the many villas he built in the surrounding area. These rural retreats for aristocrats, notably his Villa Rotonda near Vicenza (see Figure 4.6), became models for country houses throughout Europe, and inspired Palladian buildings in America as well.

The admiration for classical forms affected the design of major buildings far beyond Italy in the sixteenth century. This was an age of economic growth, and the resultant construction boom prompted large-scale undertakings in many lands. In Spain both an unfinished palace commissioned by the emperor Charles V in Granada (an effort to overshadow the Muslim Alhambra next door) and the Escorial, a gigantic palace-cum-monastery built near Madrid by his son Philip II, were deeply influenced by the ancient style revived during the Renaissance. In France, a sumptuous series of royal residences arose, both in and around Paris and along the river Loire. No longer seen as defensive bulwarks, now that gunpowder had made the castle obsolete, these elegant mansions, with their columns, their arches, their decorated windows, and their symmetries, marked the spread of the Renaissance into France just as surely as did the migration of leading artists, such as Leonardo, to the northern kingdom. In England the influence was less obvious, as the transition from the castle to the elegant residence seemed to be marked primarily by the development of large glass windows. Yet the splendid new country houses of the time—Longleat, Montacute, Hardwick—also relied on the balustrades and the symmetries that were features of the classical style. And the influence of the new ideas also travelled eastward. Poland’s capital city for much of the sixteenth century was Krakow, where King Sigismund transformed his royal palace, Wawel Castle, with delicate archways and arcades to reflect the styles that had been developed in Italy.

In sculpture, the spread of ideas was signalled by the fact that Michelangelo’s two main disciples were northerners, Giambologna (d. 1608) and Adrian de Vries (d. 1626). Though both worked in Florence, Adrian became a prominent figure at the court of Emperor Rudolf II in Prague. Their adoption of Mannerism, which in sculpture produced twisted figures, corkscrew compositions, and contorted human forms, brought the style far beyond Italy.

The last of the great exponents of Mannerism was also not Italian: El Greco (d. 1614). Though he spent ten years in Italy, he was born in Crete, and lived for nearly forty years in Spain. Attuned to the mystic beliefs of his new countrymen, he used cramped canvases, elongated and gesticulating figures, eerie lighting, and dashes of bright colour to suggest the mysteries of faith. Even a mythological subject like Laocöön, and a view of the city of Toledo, are unsettling scenes. Though also an elegant portraitist, El Greco’s distinctive, other-worldly vision is anything but serene.

Except in Prague, the predilections of the Mannerists had only minor echoes in northern Europe. The chronicler of Luther’s Reformation, Lucas Cranach (d. 1553), for example, came straight out of a northern tradition of unsentimental portraits, moralizing scenes, and austere depictions of the classics. Even his nudes seem emaciated. His younger contemporary, Hans Holbein (d. 1543), also a German, was one of the supreme portraitists of European art. He spent a number of years in England, where his paintings and drawings gave a reality to the courtiers of King Henry VIII that is unique in the history of the English monarchy. What is noteworthy is that Holbein’s reputation is based as much on admiration for his drawings as for his paintings. Just as engravings were becoming an important new art form in the sixteenth century, so too were drawings. More than preparatory sketches for other works, they were coming to be regarded—especially when carefully finished, and even enlivened with touches of colour—as sought-after creations in their own right.

One artist from these years defies all categories: Pieter Brueghel (d. 1569). Though he travelled to Italy, he remained closely tied to his native Netherlands, and it was his fellow countrymen who filled his canvases. His scenes of village life, as well as Biblical parables like The Blind leading the Blind, were populated by contemporaries from every walk of life. If his message was not always clear, as in his scene of Children’s Games, all of which are being played by adults, there was no mistaking his affection for ordinary people, or his concern at their brutal treatment by their rulers, which is only minimally disguised by a title taken from the Bible: The Massacre of the Innocents (see Figure 4.7). In his social commentary, Brueghel was not only the pioneer of a new subject matter in the arts but also a figure unique in his time.
The Age of Baroque, 1600–70

The transformations of the Renaissance may represent one of the most fundamental reorientations in the history of Western art, but new dimensions were to be added to the interests of Europe’s artists during the era of the Baroque. Though this last word has taken on many meanings, as a visual style it is usually described as grandiose, intense, theatrical, and emotional—qualities that were much less visible in earlier works. As the religious and political upheavals of the previous century moved toward a climax, the arts seemed determined to overwhelm doubt and uncertainty with displays of sensuous and dramatic impact. And the effects were visible in sculpture and architecture as well as painting.

One of the features of seventeenth-century art was the erosion of the divide between north and south. Now the chief distinction was between Catholic lands (which extended to the Dutch border) and Protestant. And it was in Catholic Europe, starting in Italy, that the Baroque took hold. To some degree this was because of the Church itself. Responding to the austerity and scorn for images proclaimed by many leading Protestants, the Catholic leadership, assembled at Trent to define contested doctrines, issued a decree in 1564 that encouraged the use of art to strengthen the faith of believers. And churchmen were not alone. Ambitious political powers, convinced that visual propaganda could enhance their authority, also sought to put the arts to use. Yet it was not only a shift in the aims of patrons that launched the new style. As the seventeenth century began, one could find artists who, unsatisfied by the artificialities of Mannerism, were seeking new goals for their work.

If we can again focus on a few artists who were central to the establishment and spread of Baroque, and then stood for the style at its height, we can focus on two Italians, a Fleming, and a Spaniard. The exemplars, in order of age, were Annibale Carracci (d. 1609), Caravaggio (d. 1610), Rubens (d. 1640), and Velázquez (d. 1660).

Carracci came from a family of painters in the north Italian city of Bologna. The least flamboyant of the innovators of the age, and the most dependent on the heritage of the High Renaissance, he nevertheless brought a new immediacy and sense of purpose to his painting. For a religious scene, for instance, he took the moment when St. Peter, fleeing execution, meets the resurrected Jesus and asks him where he is going. The vigorous Jesus, carrying a cross, and ready for a second crucifixion, stretches out his arm and points back to the city. The setting is serene, but the action is pure drama. Carracci’s most famous work, a ceiling fresco in Rome, teems with pagan gods. In one scene, a furious Polyphemus, about to hurl a rock, personifies the sense of power and the theatrical atmosphere that were about to transform the arts.

The most vivid exponent of those qualities was Caravaggio, whose controversial works and turbulent life as a fugitive from the law have helped establish his reputation as a heroic rebel. He was certainly volatile and quick to quarrel, but also immensely talented. He liked spending time in Rome’s seedier neighbourhoods, finding models as well as excitement in its
grimier districts. By bringing ordinary life into holy scenes, though, he soon aroused criticism. A pilgrim with dirty feet, for instance, was considered unfit as a worshipper kneeling before the Madonna, especially since Mary herself looked like an ordinary girl from the streets. Caravaggio’s aim was immediacy. If Judith was slicing off the head of Holofernes (see Figure 4.8), one almost felt the blood splashing out. If Jesus was being laid into his tomb, one sensed directly the anguish of his family. Intensity of emotion, sharp contrasts between light and dark, and moments of high tension were his stock in trade. He could also convey the delicacy of plants, the lushness of bodies, and the ravages of age, but above all it was the ability to move the viewer that characterized his work. For him, art had to have impact and striking effect, and during the next generation, until tastes began to change, he had dozens of disciples, including Artemisia Gentileschi (d. 1656) who was able—despite the strong prejudice against a woman becoming an artist—to forge a successful career in a profession dominated by men.

Peter Paul Rubens could hardly have had a more different career. A courtier and diplomat, widely admired and the master of a large workshop in Antwerp, he was a celebrator of aristocrats and monarchs. His sweeping paintings were as capable of drama as Caravaggio’s, but he also painted peaceful landscapes and dazzling portraits. An ardent copier of previous artists, mainly Italians, he brought a grandeur and a magnificence to his subjects that was another essential quality of the Baroque. In his depictions of the leaders of his day, in his mythological scenes, and in his deeply felt religious works, he achieved a power and a sense of drama that made him the most sought-after painter of the time.

In the next generation the dominant presence was Velázquez. After starting out with luminous portrayals of the ordinary people of his home town, Seville, Velázquez rose to become the favourite painter of the king of Spain, Philip IV. Commissioned to undertake portraits, to capture court life and public occasions, and to explore mythological and religious subjects, he achieved a grandeur typical of the Baroque while at the same time displaying an insight into human character and a mastery of form that have won him a unique stature in the history of European art. His Las Meninas, which shows him painting a portrait of a princess, surrounded by her attendants, suggests both the immense spaces and the daily routine of the court. His Surrender of Breda lays out a vast vista to commemorate an important military victory (see Figure 4.9). And his paintings of the ruling figures of the time give them a majesty that reinforces their authority no less than his religious scenes emphasize the power of faith.

Bernini (d. 1680) was the epitome of the Baroque in sculpture and architecture. Grandeur, theatricality, and intense action were second nature to him, though he was also capable of a light touch—as in a charming statue of a little elephant with an obelisk on its back in a Roman square. Rome was his chief arena. His elaborate fountains still adorn its public spaces, as do his contributions to St. Peter’s, especially the vast curving colonnade that defines the square in front of the basilica; his elegant churches; and his many sculptures throughout the city. In one chapel he caught St. Teresa at a moment of ecstasy, when she had a vision of an angel piercing her heart with an arrow. To emphasize the drama of the scene, he carved theatrical boxes at the side of the chapel, from which his patrons observe the vision (see Figure 4.10). When he came to

Bernini showed him in action, not at rest, hurling the slingshot that will kill Goliath. Movement, action, and exuberant liveliness were his hallmarks.

The attempt, during the era of the Baroque, to overwhelm audiences echoed the new art form of the time, opera, which combined all of the arts—literature, images, architectural sets, dance, and music—to dazzle its spectators. Gradually, however, the turbulence of the age began to subside, as political and religious upheaval died down after mid-century, and one can see a counter-movement beginning to take hold in Rome herself. The city was beginning to move from Spanish to French dominance in mid-century, as power relations in Europe began to shift, and the military supremacy Spain had long enjoyed began to give way to France’s growing might. Reflecting this change was the work of two Frenchmen who spent long years in Rome, Nicolas Poussin (d. 1665), and Claude Lorrain (d. 1682).

What Poussin represented was a return to a more formal version of classicism. Rejecting the vivacity of much Baroque painting, he sought to restore strict adherence to the values of ancient art. There was a larger movement in the thought of the time, anti-enthusiasm, which rejected the fervour and disruptions that had accompanied the wars and revolts of the 1640s. Poussin reflected that movement in dignified figures, tranquil settings, and evocations of the stoic qualities of ancient Romans. His younger colleague, Claude, produced calm landscapes, delicate explorations of the effects of sunlight, and quiet Biblical and mythological scenes. Both of them were pointing towards the less fevered, more relaxed styles of the next century.

The other major source of new directions was an outburst of creativity in the newly founded Dutch Republic that only tangentially reflected the outpourings of the Baroque. The seven United Provinces that were to form the new state had begun a revolt against their Spanish rulers in 1568, and did not win their independence until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. But already by the early seventeenth century they were the richest trading area in Europe, and their wealth was used to an unprecedented degree to buy works of art. It has been estimated that, by the middle of the century, a million paintings were sold in a decade in the Netherlands; this amounted to almost one painting per inhabitant. This avid purchasing of art prompted a surge of creativity on a scale never before seen.

What has been called the Golden Age of Dutch art witnessed an extraordinary outpouring of talent. Perhaps because they were Protestants and under the rule of a republic rather than a princely court, the Dutch were little caught up by the quest for grandeur and drama that was so notable in the Baroque. Instead, driven by a fascination with the world that their new nation was shaping, painters found beauty in the most humble scenes, and in many cases remained with a small range of subject matter throughout their careers. Thus Hendrick Avercamp (d. 1634) painted dozens of winter scenes, often showing skaters on the frozen canals and ponds that dotted the countryside. The uncle and nephew Salomon and Jacob van Ruysdael (d. 1670 and 1682) became famous for their atmospheric and detailed renderings of local landscapes. There was also broad interest in the trappings of daily existence, as it was conducted in the rooms, the courtyards, and the streets of Dutch towns. As a result, we have a better sense of what the people and places of the time looked like than in any earlier time. There were not only remarkable portraitists like Frans Hals (d. 1666), observers of peasant life like Adriaen van Ostade (d. 1685), and merry devotees of parties and tavern scenes like Jan Steen (d. 1679), but also luminous recorders of the routines of ordinary households like Gabriel Metsu (d. 1667) and Jan Vermeer (d. 1675).

One artist, however, seemed to transcend his age and his setting, Rembrandt van Rijn (d. 1669). Rembrandt’s drawings, etchings, and oils address every subject matter of the time: portraits, landscapes, religion, myth, and even the new science.
His dramatic use of dark and light links him to the Baroque, but above all it is the warmth of feeling and the sense of character that draws viewers to his work. A remarkable series of self-portraits, for example, show the artist moving from confident youth to the height of success and on to old age, trouble, and sorrow. The sensitivity to the feelings of ordinary individuals, to the play of light, and to the atmosphere of place set him apart even from the masters of the everyday in the Dutch Golden Age.

Two final aspects of this period deserve mention. First, as Europeans established a presence throughout the world, so their artists began to show an interest in cultures other than their own. A Dutchman, Frans Post (d. 1680), spent a number of years in Brazil, and he sought to evoke the colours as well as the landscapes of the New World. The leading portraitist of the age, Anthony van Dyck (d. 1641), depicted an Englishman, Sir Robert Shirley, who had settled in Persia, in the magnificent robes and turban of a Persian courtier. And the distinctively designed carpets of the Middle East regularly figured in paintings. Though such influences were not yet a major part of European art, the door had been opened to images from outside the West. At the same time, tastes began to show a uniformity throughout Europe. Queen Christina of Sweden, for instance, had herself painted by a Frenchman, and made sure her victorious troops, when occupying Prague (650 miles away) in 1648, shipped home dozens of treasured paintings from local collections—which is why Stockholm’s museum is a major repository of Renaissance and Baroque pictures to this day.

The other aspect is the rise of a market for art. In the vanguard were the prominent figures who were winning a new respectability in society. After Dürer being feted by city fathers, and Titian living like a patrician, there were knightships and other honours for the likes of Rubens, van Dyck, and Velázquez. They could command substantial prices and salaries. But humbler practitioners could also find buyers, especially at the frequent public sales in the Netherlands, where paintings and prints at all prices were regularly sold in markets and even at auctions. Other areas of Europe were less advanced, but they still offered artists venues to sell their works. In Rome barbers often had a sideline dealing in pictures, and there were districts where barrows and stands for this purpose were set up every day. Even Caravaggio as a young man sold his productions in this way. And research has revealed that in many regions even fairly humble homes could afford to hang a picture or two—usually a print—on their walls. Europe was becoming a consumer society, and the quest for independence from patrons that we first noted with Dürer had become, by the late seventeenth century, an ambition for hundreds of artists.

(p.106) **The Age of Rococo, 1670–1750**

The chief features of the arts in the last period in this survey were a fondness for decoration and embellishment, and in general a turning away from the vast aspirations of the Baroque. Though the meaning of the term Rococo is much contested, it does suggest the ornamental and often elaborate designs of the dominant style of the age.

The decorative arts and architecture are the best arenas in which to understand the term Rococo. It was in this period that household furniture became a self-consciously ornate creation, and that cabinetmakers, such as the Frenchman André-Charles Boulle (d. 1732) and the Englishman Thomas Chippendale (d. 1779), became famous as more than craftsmen. Bringing curves, filigree shapes, and marquetry decorations to wooden bookcases, dressing tables, chests, chairs, and dining tables, they fashioned an aura of extravagance and even playfulness for the homes of the wealthy.

Much the same was true of the smaller objects that filled those homes. Clocks, for example, became flamboyant constructions of wood, metal, and china. And it was in 1710 that the manufacture of delicate and lavishly decorated porcelain began in the town of Meissen in Germany, an enterprise that was to be emulated by dozens of firms throughout Europe. Not only dishes, bowls, and vases, but the furnishings of entire rooms were made of this fragile yet colourful material. It soon came to be called china, not only because that was where its manufacture originated, but also because the designs became a major example of other cultures influencing European artists. Indeed, the French term ‘chinoiserie’ entered the vocabulary in the late seventeenth century, with painters as well as porcelain makers reflecting the interest in non-European aesthetics.
The taste for ornateness was one of the marks of the Rococo. Where architecture was concerned, this led to some of the most elaborately decorated churches and houses ever built. Especially in southern Germany and Austria, home of devout Catholicism and extravagant princes, a riot of colours and ornament took over the interior of buildings that might have looked simple and restrained on the outside, but dazzled the visitor in the interior. This was as true of a hunting lodge like the Amalienburg, near Munich, as it was of a religious shrine like the Wies church, nearby in Bavaria. Large areas of every indoor surface were covered by colourful adornments—leaves and curlicues, wreaths, vines, frames, and shields, often finished in silver or gold. The impression of sheer enjoyment and excess, of a rejection of Protestant austerity taken to an extreme, is overwhelming.

Yet Rococo was but one of the elements in the architecture of the time. Many of the buildings of the period extended the practices of the previous century, to make the monumentality of the Baroque and the classicism of Palladio the dominant styles of eighteenth-century Europe. The largest edifice of the age was the new palace constructed for King Louis XIV near Paris, at Versailles. Its architect, Jules Hardouin-Mansart (d. 1708), took the surname of his great-uncle, François Mansart, who had introduced classical style into France, but Jules became an important figure in his own right, receiving commissions that have helped define the appearance of Paris to this day. But his chief masterpiece was Versailles, an enormous palace, containing some 700 rooms, and surrounded by over 250 acres of formal gardens, designed in classic symmetry by André Le Nôtre (d. 1700). The building, too, is a model of regularity and harmony, its long facades divided by arches, pilasters, and windows that give dignity and grace to the enormous structure.

Across the Channel the leading figure was Christopher Wren (d. 1723). Earlier in the century Inigo Jones (d. 1652) had brought Vitruvian and Palladian ideas into England, and these, together with the ambitions of the Baroque, were further developed by Wren. His two masterpieces, St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, and the Greenwich Hospital on the bank of the Thames (see Figure 4.11), are epitomes of the new style that had swept Europe, with stately domes, columns, balustrades, and pediments, all united in an elegant symmetry. In these years, and for the remainder of the eighteenth century, England’s landscape was transformed by country houses built in the Palladian mode. At Blenheim, at Chatsworth, and at dozens of other locations, houses arose that expanded and embellished the models that had been established by the villas that surrounded Venice.

One other major architect of the age deserves a mention: Johann Fischer von Erlach (d. 1723), the equivalent in Austria of Wren in England. The palace he designed for the Emperors Leopold I and Joseph I in Vienna, Schönbrunn, was intended to be even larger than Versailles, though the full concept was never finished. The magnificent dome and temple-like entryway of the Karlskirche (St. Charles Church), also in Vienna, echoed St. Peter’s, as had St. Paul’s, but here the classical connection was emphasized by a pair of tall separate columns at the front which were derived from the ancient Column of Trajan in Rome. Fischer von Erlach also published An Outline of Historical Architecture, a richly illustrated volume that was the first ever attempt at a comparative history of architecture. But most important of all was his success in giving the Palladian and Baroque styles a prominent place in much of central Europe.

They were also being spread beyond Europe. Along the banks of the James River in Virginia, wealthy landowners were building grand homes that reflected, on a smaller scale, the country houses of England. And throughout the lands that the Spaniards (p. 108) controlled in the Americas, churches and missions were being constructed that echoed the Baroque and Palladian structures of their homeland. The architectural forms that had been made familiar throughout Europe were taking on an inter-continental role.
In painting, what is notable about this period is the shift from the traditional centres of innovation in Italy and the Netherlands to the newly powerful countries of France and England. There were still artists in Italy whose work was sought by foreigners, especially the practitioners of a genre known as ‘vedute’ (views), whose large renditions of recognizable city scenes were readily bought by tourists who wanted lively mementoes of their travels. And in the figure of Giovanni Baptista Tiepolo (d. 1770), who was sought in Spain and Germany as well his native Venice, there was one of the most renowned masters of the lightness and grace of Rococo style. But the inspiration of Italy was largely from its past; the developers of new traditions were French and English.

In France, two artists helped define the Rococo style—Antoine Watteau (d. 1721) and François Boucher (d. 1770)—while a third—Jean-Baptiste Chardin (d. 1779)—explored new directions in the depiction of ordinary objects and the daily life of the time. Though he found patrons only among wealthy businessmen, Watteau captured the languid elegance of the aristocrats of his day. Influenced by Rubens, he nevertheless avoided high drama and strong emotion, preferring instead the light-hearted and sometimes melancholy figures of the relaxed social circles that spent sunny days in the countryside, had quiet encounters, or enjoyed the entertainments of travelling players. A master of drawings, pastels, and oils, Watteau created a colourful but muted world of idealized, peaceful, and sometimes wistful scenes.

Boucher, who became a leading figure at the royal court, was more deliberately extravagant. His nudes and mythological scenes were openly sensuous, and his bright colours and numerous decorative touches in portraits and domestic scenes suggested the frivolities of the aristocrats with whom he consorted. Gone were the strivings of the Baroque. In their place were slightly risqué offerings of delight, charm, and easy appeal.

Chardin was made of sterner stuff. Drawn to the tradition of painting everyday objects that had been an important part of the repertoire of artists in the Netherlands and Spain in the seventeenth century, he became a master of the still life. To this day, his kitchen utensils, foods, and fruit, usually placed in an almost flat brown setting, seem almost to leap off the canvas. And his ordinary people, whether a governess or a girl playing badminton, achieve a sober presence that recalls the Dutch Golden Age rather than the gaiety of Rococo France.

Despite the differences among these three artists, all were involved with a new institution founded by an interventionist monarchy that sought to lay down guidelines for the arts in France: the Academy of Painting and Sculpture. Artists had for centuries organized themselves in guilds that protected their interests and regulated their activities. But this was an institution imposed from above. Founded in 1648 (there were also academies for music and architecture), the Academy became a means of setting an official stamp of approval on the work of individuals. Though it offered certain advantages, especially social respectability and improved chances of patronage, and was welcomed for some two centuries for the subsidies and support it provided, the Academy eventually came to be seen as a restrictive force, damping down the creativity of the arts. It was indicative of how much more closely French society was focused on the court that the English equivalent, the Royal Academy of Arts, was not founded until 1768, and then without funding from the government.

The principal flowering of English painting did not begin until the late eighteenth century, when portraitists, explorers of landscape and light, and caricaturists combined in a distinctive burst of achievement that England, more attuned to literature, had not witnessed, except in architecture, throughout her long history. Yet the country’s avid interest in the arts, offering important patronage to such major figures as Holbein, Rubens, and van Dyck, and encouraging its young aristocrats to study and buy sculptures and paintings during a Grand Tour of the continent, created a community of discerning patrons. One nobleman purchased twenty-four views of Venice by the leading ‘vedute’ painter in the city, Canaletto (d. 1768). If the flowering of native production lay in the future, however, the groundwork was being laid by a remarkable observer and critic of the social scene, William Hogarth (d. 1764).

Although there had been critiques of human folly in art, nobody before Hogarth had been so savagely determined to expose the corruption and decadence of his fellow countrymen. Three series of paintings, in particular—The Rake’s Progress, The Harlot’s Progress, and Marriage à la Mode—which became widely available as prints, were merciless denunciations of the debaucheries and other moral failings of his contemporaries (see Figure 4.12). In other prints, Hogarth...
made the caricature into an art form, lambasting the extravagances and stupidities of his time. Although he was also known for elegant and evocative portraits, it was his satire that gave him a distinctive place in eighteenth-century art. What also sets him apart is that his art points unmistakably to the future, to an era when painters, sculptors, and architects saw themselves as the vanguard of revolutions, and no longer as the followers either of ideas others had formulated or of the wishes of their patrons.

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Notes:

(1) The author wishes to record his thanks to Tracy Cooper for invaluable discussions of this chapter, especially the early sections.

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Music

Thomas Munck
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Abstract and Keywords

Music was a more significant component in late medieval and early modern society than most historians have acknowledged. It provided one of the most versatile means of communication, and like some other forms of art, did not have to rely on words. It readily crossed both social and cultural boundaries, and allowed practitioners (whether musically literate or not) to express both collective and individual creativity in ways that were infinitely variable, to suit different sensibilities and different social contexts. Music was everywhere, and although it could be used to reinforce social distinction and religious messages, it could also create scope for social mobility and even the blurring of gender roles. Musical training and performance required specific forms of social organization, and quality instruments relied on highly sophisticated technical infrastructures and skills. This chapter explores how far a study of music can enrich our understanding of the society which created it.

Keywords: Popular culture, elite culture, liturgical music, devotional music, music printing, musicians’ guilds, patronage, opera, concerts, women and music

In late medieval and early modern Europe music served essentially three broad functions: as an element in religious worship, as entertainment in elite households or at other ostentatious occasions, and more informally to liven up gatherings in markets, inns, or individual households. The boundaries between these three functions were always blurred—not least because it would be normal for some participants to engage in at least two, if not all three, of these arenas. But since music is a transient art form inherently difficult to describe, record, or interpret, the surviving historical evidence is exceptionally problematic. It is worth reminding ourselves that musical notation itself was slow in developing, and—being in effect no more than a sketch of the composer’s intentions—has never been able to provide more than a small part of the information needed by a performer. What we see on paper is certainly no closer to a convincing performance than the printed text of a Shakespeare play is to its original stage production.¹ Outside the elite, musical literacy was probably not very widespread, since it offered far fewer practical incentives to prospective learners than did for example textual literacy; but, then as now, lack of musical literacy was no barrier to playing or singing from memory.

For historians, the difficulties of assessing actual musical content and performance practice are compounded by the uneven circumstantial evidence concerning the role of music in society: because musicians were either amateurs, or professionals of mostly low social standing, surviving records are quite sparse regarding the social or contractual conditions under which formal music was performed, who was involved, what instruments were used, what was expected by either participants or audience, and what role music was perceived to fulfil both in formal and casual contexts. This may help to explain why music history, perhaps even more so than the history of other kinds of art, has tended to be pursued by specialists (in this case musicologists and performers) in isolation from what we might for convenience describe as mainstream historical research and debate. The early music movement became a major growth area in the late 1960s,² but its technical
requirements have tended to keep it distinct from cognate areas of academic research.

At the same time, the value of any kind of historical understanding, especially of art forms as subjective as music, has been challenged by post-modernist arguments that ‘authenticity’ and accurate recreation of something past is unattainable and probably meaningless. Such theoretical positions, however, should not obscure the fact that new research continues to change the way we see composers and performers in their particular context, interpret surviving source material, and evaluate the impact and circulation of individual pieces of music and styles of performance. As a result, there is now some scope for contextualizing the role music played as a highly distinctive part of the consumer market, and hence as an incentive to significant organizational change (notably regards the formation of bands of musicians, the context and perceived significance of performance, or the specific demands of instrument technology and music-printing).

It would be a mistake to assume either that music was little more than a peripheral ornament in early modern Europe, or that it has only marginal potential value to historians. With all music being necessarily ‘live’, and with scope for a socially diverse range of participants, its role in affirming collective identities may have been nearly as important as a common language, or as religious beliefs. As Christopher Marsh has recently reminded us in respect of early modern England, in a world with far fewer visual images, and much less ambient noise than today, several distinct sound-worlds acquired special significance. Whether in communal singing during religious services (the most effective way of reinforcing beliefs and knowledge of specific texts in a society with limited reading skills) or in the more subversive realm of ballads, ‘bawdy’ songs (often using similar melodies) and dancing, there was universal scope for participation. Everyone within earshot would have stopped to listen to itinerant minstrels delivering news and stories through accompanied song, just as they would have recognized the sounds of civic or military entertainments proclaiming power and status. Music was thus the most widespread form of art, both in terms of participation and access.

Yet, to go beyond basic communal singing, more significant organization and resources were often needed. For example, many musical instruments were evolving into highly complex and carefully designed objects, sustaining highly specialist wood- and metal-working crafts; equally, skilled musical performance demanded substantial training. Even more collective engagement was required to sustain the skills and technology required in the casting, tuning, and installation of church bells, or the building of organs—work linked directly to the huge effort put into the building of churches in the first place, and serving to enhance a prominent landmark and focus for each community. We know as little about the identity and aspirations of most of the musicians who worked in these buildings as we do about the craftsmen and architects who designed them.

The best formal training and career possibilities were in the Church, as ‘singing men’, and this remained the case after the Reformation (except in those parts of Europe where purist forms of worship minimized the role of music). Wealthy cathedrals and monasteries offered ambitious training for a large number of choirboys, complete with instrumental coaching and overall educational provision. Many lesser ecclesiastical foundations, parish churches, and confraternities—and eventually also princely (p. 113) chapels and courts, and even wealthy cities—funded training and educational travel to secure the kind of young musicians they needed (and organized searches for singing talent in ordinary schools). Doing so no doubt depended on a range of factors, including financial resources and concern for reputation, but it is striking to observe how uneven the results appear to have been across Europe. An exceptionally fertile musical culture emerged in the Low Countries and north-eastern France in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which in turn fostered very distinctive developments both in Renaissance Italy and in England from the time of Henry VIII. We can also discern a powerful musical response in Lutheran Germany after the Reformation, and a less sustained one in Counter-Reformation Spain. By the end of our period, whilst court patronage had weakened in England and grown impressively in France, the leading musical trends were still set by German and Italian cities and principalities. As contemporary observers noted, the musical landscape across Europe was far from uniform.

That said, in all but the most isolated rural communities and individuals, life without music would have been difficult to imagine. Precisely what such creativity may have meant to the individual participant or listener is more difficult to perceive. In the Netherlands, the high levels of prosperity and urbanization no doubt provided exceptionally fertile ground for all kinds
of music-making (alongside the other arts). But in the contorted scenes of Hieronymous Bosch (d. 1516), or the slightly less disturbing paintings by Pieter Brueghel (c. 1525–69) and his descendants, musicians appear in all kinds of roles, impersonating the devil, or enhancing both paradise and purgatory, as often as they appear in more predictable roles accompanying merriment at village weddings or in inns. A few generations later we are onto slightly firmer ground: thus the blind Dutch carillonneur Jacob van Eyck (c. 1589–1657) played his recorder to promenaders in one of the churchyards in Utrecht, extemporizing on psalter melodies and popular tunes that would have been familiar to everyone. Exceptionally, his playing was also noted down and published as Der Fluyten Lusthof (1646), giving a much clearer impression of the kind of simple outdoor music that everyone might have enjoyed. Not all cities would have had a sufficiently strong consumer market to sustain actual publications of this kind, but they would certainly have had similar scope for the music-making that it represents.

Music in a Hierarchical Society

Historians of early modern Europe have for some time debated the extent to which a distinction can be made between elite and popular culture. With respect to music, the evidence is particularly problematic. There is of course a wide difference of musical sophistication (and expected training) between, say, van Eyck’s outdoor variations and the elaborate dramatic madrigals of his slightly older contemporary Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643) in Venice; or between the noise made by a begging hurdy-gurdy player and that of a lutenist in an aristocratic household. But when the deeply religious composer William Byrd (1540–1623) incorporated the popular secular tune ‘Browning’ into one of his astonishingly virtuosic compositions for a consort of five viols, he was making the most of popular cross-fertilization, in a way that players and listeners alike would have found both natural and delightful.

Improvisation was a major part of most music-making at all levels. Byrd’s ‘Browning’ is a particularly complex composition woven round a recurrent popular tune, precisely the kind of framework that might have come about initially as an improvisatory piece, but was now written out because of its extreme complexity. The earliest notated instrumental music is often built around variations (divisions) on a well-established tune, and may well represent the culmination of a long tradition of extemporized variations played from memory. Significantly, the extensive repertoire of this kind from the sixteenth century onwards, notably for lute or keyboard and ranging from simple to advanced technical demands, suggests no obvious demarcation between amateur and professional musicians. Moreover, an increasing number of books were published from the later sixteenth century giving detailed examples of improvisatory patterns and explaining how to achieve them within the norms of good taste—an obvious indicator that such improvisation (within tight frameworks) was considered an essential part of a good performance. Singing, too, would have relied on a number of common tunes, often with interchangeable secular and religious texts to suit different occasions. Music intended for liturgical use, however, was far more carefully regulated, and (as we shall see) the recurrent subject of more acrimonious debate, some of which had socially divisive consequences. In larger churches and cathedrals, in particular, the presence of trained choirs perpetuated the long-standing distinctions between simple congregational singing and more complex music performed solely by a select group, who were often physically separated from the laity. Such visible distinction, however, does not fit comfortably with the generic contrast between popular and elite art forms, especially since congregational singing cannot be regarded as ‘popular’ in the same sense as the performance by a street musician might.

We know very little about the kinds of music heard in popular venues, primarily because it was not notated and only rarely described in any detail. Paris acquired its first purpose-built theatre in 1548 to house what was already a long-standing tradition of varied popular spectacle, derived in part from mystery plays and religious drama, though now often decidedly secular in tone. Shakespearean London clearly had similar forms of entertainment, with music an integral part of the show. Some indication of popular tastes and practices, both in street and high-art arenas, may be found in ballads. Essentially songs with a narrative or descriptive content, ballads evolved from the late thirteenth century onwards across many parts of Europe. As a common form of popular entertainment, easily transmitted, adapted, and recycled for different contexts, ballads
could exploit a range of themes from heroic or mock-heroic adventure to social satire and subversion, or from sexual escapades to the more formalized rituals of courtly or tragic love. The dramatic plot would enhance listener focus, and also facilitate memorization.

While the texts were circulated in cheap prints and broadsheets from the sixteenth century onwards, the likely musical form is less certain. Music was much more difficult to print, and notation was rarely added to ballads before the eighteenth century: judging from what little early evidence there is, the tunes are likely to have been commonly known ones, often based on refrain and repetition, so that the text could be shortened or lengthened to suit any occasion, and the tune itself ornamented to fit variant texts. The overlap with instrumental music is again very strong, and John Playford’s *The English Dancing Master* (1651, with numerous reprints) exploited both ballad tunes and more instrumental dance forms in his successful bid to tap into a growing popular market. The tradition was so successful that, by the early eighteenth century, theatres staged ‘ballad operas’ such as John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728) in London, and *opéras comiques* in Paris.

By this stage publishers were producing large anthologies of ballads with notated music, and the genre contributed significantly to long-term developments reaching as far as the German *Lieder* of Schubert. Here again it seems pointless to impose an arbitrary dividing line between ‘low’ and ‘high’ art, or between the popular and ‘elite’ market that sustained these entertainments.

That said, for those making a living out of music-making, the requirements of training, regulation of working practices, and development of career potential had by the fourteenth century led all over Europe to the formation of guilds and other professional associations similar to those which already existed for artists and craftsmen, and based on similar assumptions regarding the social standing of members. Guilds retained a prominent role in the economic and social organization of early modern European towns right through this period, their mix of supportive, regulatory, and restrictive functions not substantially challenged until new ideas in economics and political economy gained wider acceptance from the later eighteenth century onwards. The regulations adopted by various music guilds usually determined admission procedures, necessary qualifications, pay, fees for playing at weddings and other private functions, training of apprentices, and internal discipline. As in other trades, functional distinctions were closely defined in order to avoid demarcation disputes: the main groups thus defined included city waits (*Stadtpfeifer*, developing from the traditional role of watchmen) and other urban ceremonial musicians, cathedral and church musicians (trained as singers and instrumentallists to support worship), and military musicians (playing ‘loud’ outdoor music on brass, wind, and percussion instruments). Nor should we forget the many specialized trades relating to the manufacture and maintenance of an increasingly diverse range of musical instruments (organ builders, fine cabinetmakers, metalworkers, wire-drawers, and many others).

In the nature of guild organization and the frequent disputes that tended to erupt, these specializations are relatively well documented in notarial records, financial accounts, and correspondence. Thus, in some Italian cities we know that the musicians who formed the *pifferi* were also often practising craftsmen holding membership of other well-established guilds. Such flexibility made sense when there was little functional overlap, or not enough work to support a musician full-time. But in more complex markets, cognate associations might in practice pursue interminable demarcation disputes: the enormously lucrative market for musical celebrations in wealthy cities such as Venice regularly triggered disputes between municipal musicians and the church musicians employed at St. Mark’s, both groups claiming the right to perform at the celebrations hosted by the extraordinarily rich confraternities and patrician households of the city. The combination of talent and social skills did create extraordinary possibilities for the individual to break free of his or her family background—for women, typically on the basis of exceptional qualities as a singer—but for the majority of professional musicians, as we shall see, a reasonably secure living was as much as could be hoped for.

While the guilds provided both a nominal validation of standards and an approved hierarchy for apprentices, journeymen, and masters, they did not of course secure actual work. Then, as now, there was limited scope for musicians to work on their own, and long-term partnerships required contractual arrangements which, in the form of notarial documents, have survived. In early seventeenth-century Paris, for example, quite complex contracts were drawn up between guild musicians to form bands which would offer their collective services at weddings, betrothals, morning serenading, banquets, *mascarades*, and...
other festivities. A contract from 1602 bound eight master musicians for a period of five years, each partner specializing on at least two instruments (violin, tenor or bass violin for indoor purposes, with fifes, cornets, oboes, or bass oboes for louder outdoor events). It also specified how each member would negotiate offers of work on behalf of the whole group, and how the earnings would be carefully recorded so that they could be shared equally at weekly business meetings. Arrangements were made for fines payable to anyone failing to turn up for a gig, and members were not allowed to play in other bands without express permission. A clause noted that anyone ‘swearing or blaspheming the name of God, in anger or otherwise, or behaving in a quarrelsome way with the rest of the group’ would be fined and forfeit their share of the fees, whilst the contract also specified the collective process whereby other players might be admitted, resignations accepted, or members evicted if they failed to learn their parts properly. Less detailed, but still formal, contracts might be drawn up to secure music at special municipal ceremonies, or to set up a programme of regular music lessons given by master musicians to members of the wealthier middling sorts aspiring to hold their own on an instrument or to learn the essentials of dancing. Such sources give at least a hint of the wealth of musical experience available outside the confines of elite households, and, since it was worth taking the trouble of making formal contracts, suggest that significant earnings could be made by freelance groups in the city. Other material, such as inventories detailing instruments or evaluating collections of sheet music, confirm this impression.

Such records may help us locate frameworks for music-making in late medieval and early modern society, but they do not help to explain how music and its communicative powers might be understood by contemporaries at any level of society. We should not expect too much: even for social groups who used less cryptic forms of expression than musicians, historians disagree how far ideas of individual identity and ‘self’ (which we now take for granted) can be located reliably in the much more precarious societies of earlier periods. Nevertheless it is disappointing that we have so few personal accounts (p. 117) from composers or listeners (and hardly any from performers) from before 1600, and not many even for the seventeenth century. The exceptions demonstrate how much we are missing. Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300–77), at the very start of our period, was not only the most creative, prolific, and influential composer of his age, but also an accomplished poet, whilst serving as an administrative clerk to several major princes, mostly in north-eastern France and Luxembourg, and as a canon at Reims cathedral. His motets, ballades, lais, virelais, and other vocal settings combine extraordinarily expressive rhythmic and melodic effects with poetry, and some of the texts may offer partly autobiographical (and certainly personal) commentary, notably in his extended but ambivalent Voir dit, describing the poet’s love for a much younger woman. Machaut is also remarkable for the trouble he took, late in life, not only to organize both his poetic and musical work for posterity, but also to explain in his Prologue (1372) how it is made up from rhetoric, music, and meaning (in almost a modern sense of that word). Although his musical output is located primarily in courtly and ecclesiastical circles, his writings suggest that it might well have been performed instrumentally in other contexts too.

Such personal textual explanations offer rare insights not only into the creative process, but also towards uncovering the purpose music was meant to serve in terms of communicating to the listener. More than two centuries later, the Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi, in regular correspondence with one of his former patrons and librettists at the Mantuan court, Count Alessandro Striggio, could from the safety of his new and secure post in Venice be relatively frank. In describing a libretto which he had been sent from Mantua, he noted on 9 December 1616 that ‘. . . as to the story as a whole—as far as my no little ignorance is concerned—I do not feel that it moves me at all (moreover I find it hard to understand), nor do I feel that it carries me in a natural manner to an end that moves me. Arianna led to a just lament, and Orfeo to a righteous prayer, but this fable leads me I don’t know to what end. So what does Your Lordship want the music to be able to do? . . .’ Always the consummate dramatist, and aware of his own stature as a composer, Monteverdi, here and elsewhere in his richly illuminating letters, provides a wealth of information regarding his use of music to enhance a message, something which applies to his secular and religious music alike.

**Reinforcing Religious Beliefs**
Most religions employ music to reinforce collective worship—so much so, in early modern Europe, that the Church was in effect the main driver in the initial development of music as a highly complex and sophisticated art form. Within the medieval Christian Churches (Catholic and Eastern Orthodox) communal chants and psalm singing were essential components in worship (lay or monastic), just as they were in public processions or festivals. Such singing readily led to embellishments of various kinds, notably by means of an added bass drone, long melismatic ornamentation, simple harmonization, or antiphonal settings (using several groups of singers). In the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches, such developments are difficult to locate chronologically, not least because of major uncertainties surrounding the interpretation of early notation systems and changing performance practices. It seems likely that the fall of Constantinople in 1453, as well as the profound political instability in much of eastern Europe which lasted into the seventeenth century, will have fostered strongly conservative traditions. In the case of the Russian Church, reforming initiatives even led to outright schism: the efforts by Patriarch Nikon in the 1650s to impose various reforms (including the full use of polyphony in church, but as yet no instrumental music) led to implacable hostility and entrenchment amongst groups of traditionalists (various groups of Old Believers), which in turn left little scope for artistic innovation even amongst those willing to accept limited liturgical innovation. In the West, by contrast, the 1378 schism in the papacy (with several concurrent rival Popes until 1417) appears to have had the opposite effect, allowing a greater diversity of local liturgical practices, many of which outlived successive reforming papal councils. Starting even before the papal schism, the proliferation of heretical sects and reform movements—stretching from John Wycliffe and the Lollards in England or Jan Hus in Bohemia to the major Reformation movements of the early sixteenth century—ensured the permanent disunity of Western Christianity in terms of its liturgical practices, foundation texts, and willingness (or otherwise) to use visual or musical imagery.

The relationship between music, text, and context was bound to be a sensitive issue in any composition intended for religious services. There were several related problems: the specific choice of text (whether Biblical extracts or sections from devotional commentary), the type of musical expression appropriate for a particular religious message, and the extent to which the musical structure might obscure the audibility of the text (either because a line might be decorated with long melismas on each word, or because separate lines did not move sufficiently homophonically to allow the text to be heard as clearly as desired). The recurrent acrimonious divisions within and between different alignments in Western Christianity (particularly from the thirteenth century through to the Reformation and beyond) touched on all these issues, questioned the level of congregational participation in devotional singing, and polarized opinion concerning the desirability both of more ‘artful’ singing and of various forms of instrumental accompaniment. The liturgical and technical details are not in themselves relevant in the present context, but were sufficiently significant for contemporary critics to expound the problems in great detail in various forms of documentation.

Polyphony (the addition of one or more voices which are rhythmically independent of the original line) was a persistent area of contention: it could be seen either as a beautifying embellishment enhancing the power of the text, or as a distracting departure from the original plainchant. Polyphony had become accepted practice in some Western religious contexts well before ways of notating it developed from the eleventh century. It created almost unlimited possibilities not only for structural innovation but also for an extraordinary complexity of harmony, as each voice moved with great rhythmic independence, from consonance through passing dissonance and back, in relation to anything from two to five (or more) other voices. At influential centres such as the Paris Notre Dame, (p. 119) notational techniques were developed to cope with these complexities, as explained in Philippe de Vitry’s Ars Nova of 1322. The risk of obscuring the core texts led in 1324 to a formal papal denunciation of the use of excessively florid and rhythmically complex music in the liturgy, thereby providing a formal reference point in a long-running conflict. Machaut himself, as canon at Reims, took care to avoid the problem when he composed his unique full-scale polyphonic setting of the mass (probably in the early 1360s), but took more liberties in his other output. Like his contemporaries and successors over the next two centuries, Machaut found the creative potential of complex polyphony and counterpoint artistically irresistible, as did his patrons and many listeners.

The perceived conflict between expressive and innovative music on the one hand, and the clarity of a religious text on the other, in effect amounted to disagreement over both the means of communication and the message itself. Music was not the only potential problem: those seeking a return to a simpler form of devotion found much to criticize at various times—
whether in the ornate decoration of ecclesiastical buildings, the remoteness or inappropriate behaviour of the clergy, the interpretation of traditional Latin texts, or the over-elaborate ritual. Above all, there were interminable arguments over the appropriate level of participation by the whole congregation. But whereas it was possible to question aspects of the traditional liturgy on the basis of textual analysis—pursuing lines of arguments that eventually led to humanism, the Reformation, and to the fundamental questioning of the Bible itself by radical thinkers in the seventeenth century—the abstract language of music was much more ambiguous in what it might communicate, and much more difficult to harness to a particular cause. As the means of expression available to composers and performers expanded, music became a language of its own, capable of conveying complex ideas whilst remaining liable to highly subjective responses, even in core parts of the liturgy.

A growing number of composers from the early fifteenth century onwards experimented with large-scale polyphonic settings of the mass itself (or sections of it) including John Dunstable in England, and a brilliant cluster of Franco–Flemish musicians from Guillaume Dufay, Gilles Binchois, and Johannes Ockeghem right through to Heinrich Isaac, Josquin des Prez, Jacob Obrecht, and others active in the decades immediately before the Lutheran Reformation. Some of these mass settings made recurrent use of a few key melodies such as the tune *L’homme armé* or Ockeghem’s *Fors seulement*. Other composers (such as Josquin) incorporated a wider range of popular tunes (with varied associations) in their mass settings, and such thematic inspiration provided a strong link between religious and secular music. An example of such extraordinary creativity is the way a chant used in the ‘In nomine Domini’ section of John Taverner’s mass *Gloria tibi Trinitas* (c. 1530) was removed from its original context and used as the basis for more than 150 instrumental compositions in England over the next century and a half, especially for keyboard and for consorts of viols. Although many of these ‘In Nomine’ settings at first retained deliberate Biblical associations (as in Christopher Tye’s setting *Rachell’s Weepinge* for viol consort), they eventually appeared to lose all explicit religious meaning, as in the astonishing seventeenth-century settings by William Lawes (1602–45) and Henry Purcell (1659–95).

Neither the origins and connotations of particular melodies, nor the effect on the listener of more complex polyphonic setting could be defined with any clarity. So whilst congregational singing might be regulated, no durable solution was possible in respect of the more artful religious music intended to be sung by the choir alone. Disagreements were no doubt aggravated by overall religious uncertainty, and seem to have been particularly bitter during the last decades of the fifteenth century, during the Protestant Reformation itself, and to a lesser extent within the reformist debates at the Council of Trent (1545–63). On the Catholic side, composers such as Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–94) and Tomas Luis de Victoria (1548–1611) have been held up as exponents of clearer liturgical music in the spirit of the Counter-Reformation, but in reality the Council of Trent did not pronounce explicitly against musical innovation or expressiveness, preferring instead to leave specific regulation to the local ecclesiastical authorities. Amongst the main Protestant groups a very clear polarity arose between the Lutheran Church, with its wholehearted commitment to musical innovation as an aid to worship, and the far more puritan Calvinist and Reformed Churches (and some smaller groups) which for a time reduced church music to traditional unison congregational singing, banned organs and other instruments from church, and risked rejecting anything that might corrupt or distract from what was assumed to be the literal meaning of Biblical texts. The consolidation of divisions within the Western Churches has had a lasting impact on liturgical music: in both Catholic and Lutheran church services music has remained an integral and artistically evolving component, in striking contrast to the rejection of anything more than basic devotional psalm-singing by the more purist reformed and radical religious groups. In confirmation of the power of full-scale polyphony to reaffirm religious faith, the Catholic Church even exported its musical culture to Latin America, where (for example in the cathedral cities of Mexico and Puebla) it acquired a significant home-grown impetus and creativity of its own.

The perceived threat of heresy (or at least diversity) within sixteenth-century Western Christianity inevitably led to vigilant efforts to constrain religious opinion amongst the laity within narrow parameters; but there were also some strikingly creative and sometimes mildly rebellious responses. The unique enthusiasm for music in the German Lutheran Churches encouraged a remarkable line of outstanding musicians from Heinrich Schütz (1585–1672) and Dietrich Buxtehude (c. 1637–1707) to J. S. Bach (1685–1750), all exploiting the generous provision of instrumental musicians, choirs, and soloists available in every
substantial church. The organ chorale, originally intended as a means of reminding congregations of major liturgical melodies (also sung by the whole congregation in a simple harmonized form), was increasingly exploited by organists as a framework for colourful improvisations using the massive resources of the north-German baroque organ—sometimes to such elaborate effect that the ecclesiastical authorities felt obliged to reprimand the musician for confusing the congregation. It is understandable why, even in the eighteenth century, some of the more strait-laced churchgoers in Leipzig were even more disturbed when listening to one of Bach’s cantatas where the union of the soul in Christ was expressed as a devotional aria between a low and a high voice, such as might be conducive to thoughts of a more worldly kind. Needless to say, such risks could not be eliminated altogether even by relying on approved core texts alone, and extracts from the Bible continued to provide a shared source of inspiration all over western Europe. It is interesting to note, for example, how the much darker and sombre mood of the Lamentations of Jeremiah proved particularly inspiring, adopted to overwhelming effect by composers ranging from Orlando Lassus or Robert Whyte in the later sixteenth century, to the French high baroque of Charpentier’s setting, or Francois Couperin’s unforgettable *Leçons de ténèbres* (1703–05).

Texts and musical context, however, were not always what they seemed to be, and an abstract language such as music could offer interesting potential for ambiguity in an age where dissimulation and self-censorship were an essential part of communication. Late Tudor and early Stuart England offers a particularly illuminating case study. Several of the monarchs had more than a superficial interest in music, and some were competent performers in their own right—not least Henry VIII, who built up an eclectic retinue of court musicians (including many foreigners) and a vast royal collection of musical instruments. However, composing religious music for the English court must have been quite a delicate task, as religious affiliations changed substantially within and between each reign: Henry’s own reformation had both Lutheran and Calvinist elements, veering towards the latter during the brief reign of his son Edward, followed by an uncompromising and violent reversion to Catholicism during Mary’s reign, in turn reversed in the more carefully balanced Protestant settlement of Elizabeth. With more changes imposed by the Stuarts, and a civil war at least in part about religion, it is not surprising that the expression ‘Anglican Church’ is not a very meaningful concept until after 1660 or even 1689. For those in prominent positions, the worst phases of this breath-taking religious instability would have required considerable dexterity. Compared to actual texts, the more abstract language of music may have allowed greater freedom. For example, Thomas Tallis (c. 1505–85) distinguished himself by serving four monarchs in the Chapel Royal without leaving any clear evidence of his personal religious inclinations. Others, however, were less self-effacing in this respect, notable amongst them his brilliant pupil and younger colleague, William Byrd. Despite mixed family allegiances, Byrd’s household had clear Catholic leanings, and he associated with some noted Catholic patrons such as the Petre family.

For those with a strict sense of loyalty, the dilemma was acute. The Elizabethan church settlement of 1559 required regular attendance at normal services in the parish church (recusancy, the failure to attend, was definable in law and liable to a fine). But a papal decree of 1566 had explicitly prohibited Catholics from attending established church services under the Elizabethan regime. After the Queen was excommunicated by the Pope in 1570, plots against her posed an increasing threat, made more serious with the involvement of the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots in the Babington Plot of 1586. Legislation banning Catholic and especially Jesuit missionary activity in England brought some very high-profile treason trials and executions, including that of Edmund Campion in 1581, and no fewer than thirty-one priests in 1588 alone, the year of the Armada. The fines for recusancy were raised to prohibitively high levels in 1581 (£20 per month, at a time when the normal annual salary in the Chapel Royal was £30). Such extreme pressures, and the acute vigilance of the state against signs of potentially treasonous activity, must have made conscientious objection extremely difficult and dangerous. As a pragmatist, Elizabeth had made clear in 1570 that as long as her subjects observed the requirements of the law, she did not mean ‘to have any of them molested by any inquisition or examination of their consciences in causes of religion’.15

This was a remarkable statement in its own right, but Byrd, personally prominent as a member of the Chapel Royal from 1572, was in increasingly visible breach of the law as his links to various Catholic networks gradually became clear. We may well wonder how he managed to pay those fines for recusancy to which he was subjected by 1584, and one can only assume that Elizabeth, who genuinely valued the quality of his music (including the Latin church music which was kept in use at court), knew him well enough to turn a blind eye. Byrd could probably not be blamed for the fairly demonstrative lament...
for Mary Queen of Scots after her execution in 1587, in the consort song *In angel’s weeds*: the text was by Edward Paston, and may have been applied to an existing song by Byrd, rather than composed specifically. Far more significant—though only quite recently demonstrated—is the fact that some of Byrd’s Latin motets from this period used Biblical quotations which constituted the last words uttered by those uncompromising Catholics whose trial and execution for treason allowed them to be portrayed as martyrs. Their words were often conventional extracts from the Bible, so to outsiders would present no problems, and might not attract any particular notice. But to those aware of the context, the musical setting which Byrd had created would acquire an overwhelmingly powerful spiritual meaning. In short, Byrd created works which meant different things to different people: sombre religious reflection to those who did not want to look any further—but, to those who knew the associations of the text, a powerful emotional appeal, where the Babylonian captivity, the plight of Jerusalem, and martyrdom itself, constituted clear references to the present predicament. It is of course important to emphasize that, to his contemporaries, death in martyrdom would be regarded as a liberation—and a mark of distinction—not a grievous punishment. But his setting for example of *Haec dicit Dominus* (published in 1591 as part of his *Cantiones Sacrae*) uses lines from Jeremiah, and the music will have appeared deeply disturbing to those who heard it, whatever their particular religious affiliation. It is music such as this which raised Byrd above the specific circumstances which had triggered his outcry, into a musician who could speak to each person on his or her own terms.

Such figurative ambiguity (both religious and political) was of course precisely what both the ecclesiastical and political authorities wanted to eliminate. No doubt the subversive potential of unregulated popular singing—not least the proven popularity of critical and satirical texts fitted to well-known melodies (as in sung ballads), capable of reaching a much wider audience than a text alone could do—was so strong as to compel church leaders either to reject or to attempt to harness this powerful means of communication. Musically speaking, the only safe way to reinforce homogeneity and ostensible unanimity was to go the way of the Swiss reformers (Calvin and Zwingli) and other more radical religious groups, insisting on unison congregational singing in church, and confining musical creativity to simple harmonized psalm-settings for domestic and private (p. 123) use. In a wealthy Calvinist-governed city like Amsterdam, Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562–1621) followed that route: he did contribute to the already generous provision of basic harmonized psalm settings, and wrote secular vocal music, but otherwise reserved his freer musical talents for fantasias and variations on particular tunes which he performed on the organ. Sweelinck was employed by the city, not the Church, and although his performances were sometimes scheduled immediately before or after a church service, they were not part of it. All in all, church authorities everywhere recognized music as a powerful means of expression which was difficult to control, and only the Catholic and Lutheran Churches were fully prepared to take the risk; but for those who might be near the limits of conventional religious conformism, or who even harboured heretical or latitudinarian views, music could serve as an effective outlet, provided its more elusive messages were either (if vocal) cloaked in a Biblical text, or (if instrumental) left to the listener.

**Employment: Courts, Noble Households, and Cities**

Before the emergence of public concert promotion in the late seventeenth century, work opportunities for musicians outside the church were limited. One option was as part of the domestic staff in an elite household, giving some (albeit unpredictable) security but usually not much social status. Employment at princely courts and in the large households of landowning families created great scope for artistic exuberance, but under less stable conditions than in the church. By contrast, municipal employment was (in all but the richest cities) more limiting and occasional, but developed in the course of the early modern period into an attractive option, providing greater stability and much more economic independence than the household servant could hope for. In each of these situations, the musician was usually placed much like any of the other employees whose work focused on ceremonial, presentation, and entertainment, and the main purpose of such display was plain for all to see. The underlying contractual and artistic relationships, however, are more deeply rooted in the unspoken power structures of early modern society: change came only very gradually, in those parts of urbanized Europe where an emergent consumer market began to create opportunities for freelance work.
Every princely court, and by extension any substantial aristocratic household, needed both formal and incidental music (alongside grand building projects, furniture, and art) in order to enhance impressions of grandeur, wealth, and power. Although appreciation of the arts was a normal part of elite education, inevitably some heads of household were far more discerning patrons than others. Royal households, being the centre of political patronage and power, tended to provide the greatest number of posts and the highest levels of social prestige—though by no means always the best conditions of employment. Inevitably, conditions were closely dependent on family fortune and political skill. Many royal and major aristocratic households remained essentially or partly itinerant, their ‘progress’ from one residence to the next invariably accompanied by a vast and time-consuming removal of essential household equipment, including musical instruments. For most household staff, unpredictability was the norm. Work might suddenly cease altogether, or shift to a totally different location—as when the Scottish court moved to England at the union of the crowns in 1603, or when a member of a different family was elected to the Polish throne. Particular dynastic family strategies were also vulnerable to personal or economic misjudgements, notably during the religious conflicts and major political disruptions affecting many parts of Europe from the mid-sixteenth century through the 1640s and 50s. In France civil war in the later sixteenth century clearly blighted musical creativity, as it did in many parts of the German lands in the half century up to 1660.

Whilst there is rarely enough evidence to trace the career patterns of the majority of rank-and-file musicians, the restrictions of court employment (and the unpredictability of recovering overdue payments) do seem to have been common aggravations even outside the many conflict arenas. Ludwig Senfl (1486–1543) had a long-running dispute with the imperial court of Charles V, concerning promised employment, but had to make do with a lesser post in Munich. Even the exceptionally gifted lutenist John Dowland failed to secure a court post in Elizabethan England but was equally unable to retain his lucrative contract with Christian IV of Denmark. There are enough less famous examples to indicate how marginal survival as a musician could be, and it is no surprise to find the Elizabethan Vagrancy Act of 1597–98 explicitly listing, amongst those it was targeting as idle and suspect, not just fortune-tellers, jugglers, petty chapmen, and many other groups, but also ‘common Players of Enterludes and Minstrells wandring abroade (other than Players . . . belonging to any Baron of this Realme, or any other honorable Personage of greater Degree, to be auctoryzed to play, under the Hand and Seale of Armes of such Baron or Personage) . . .’ Clearly, there were opportunities for itinerant musicians and entertainers, but they might easily become vulnerable to accusations of vagrancy, and the violently repressive punishments that might follow.

The benefits and problems of working in princely households are perhaps best illustrated by comparing relatively well-documented examples. Amongst the most musically active was the Tudor and early Stuart court in England, for which detailed records are readily available. The oldest clearly defined section was the Chapel Royal (characteristically run as part of the royal household, not the Church, and funded through the Lord Chamberlain): it had between twenty and thirty-two salaried adult singers and twelve boarding trainee choirboys, all provided with appropriate livery as well as travel costs to cover the routine movements of the court round the country. Similar terms, but rather more variable numbers of posts, were on offer in the King’s Music, consisting of well-defined groups of string, wind, brass, percussion, keyboard, harp, and lute players, as well as some singers not in the Chapel Royal. Intended to provide ceremony and entertainment at all kinds of court events (though hardly ever as a single band), the King’s Music amounted to more than fifty full-time posts by the 1540s, was reduced slightly under the more parsimonious Elizabeth, but expanded again to over sixty in the early seventeenth century. Competition for vacant posts was acute, but even so, some distinguished musicians succeeded in establishing remarkable dynasties over several generations. Since most of the monarchs appear to have had a genuine interest in music (Henry VIII, Elizabeth, and Charles I all being competent performers), employment at the English court before 1642 must have been one of the best positions available anywhere. Royal patronage also ensured the composition and preservation of large collections of vocal and instrumental music in manuscript, which give an impression of the range of music enjoyed at court, including songs, dances, solo keyboard works, and a wealth of intimate music for viol consort by the best composers of the age.

For many other royal courts the archival evidence is much less complete. In France, for example, the division of royal musicians in the 1530s into chamber, chapel, and military functions gave a structural framework, but the detail is more difficult to unravel from the complicated system of venal office-holding and post-sharing between several individuals on a
three- or six-monthly rotating system. There is no doubt that once the court had moved permanently to Versailles, in the middle of Louis XIV’s reign, musical patronage became an even more prominent part of the king’s self-projection—though vulnerable as the other arts to both the poor financial management of the king’s military ambitions, and the incessant struggles for influence amongst the courtiers themselves. The tightening grip exercised by the supremely successful social climber Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–87), a favourite of Louis who in 1662 was promoted to the role of master of the royal music, in effect imposed monopolies on key types of court music and opera. Lully had a very fruitful collaboration with the playwright Molière (until the two fell out), but also came to control both patronage and income to such an extent that other talented composers such as the slightly younger Marc-Antoine Charpentier (c. 1650–1704) had to seek work in the private aristocratic household of the Guise family.

This dependence on personal contacts and favour was no doubt characteristic of all early modern society, exacerbated at princely courts all over Europe by the very high stakes of essentially unlimited political authority, combined with a clearly uneven commitment to the arts. Thus the most gifted composer in early seventeenth-century Germany, Heinrich Schütz, who masterminded the centenary celebrations of the Lutheran Reformation at the court of the Elector of Saxony in 1617, was by the 1630s reduced to writing begging letters to the Elector because the musicians were literally starving and unpaid, in no fit state to perform even small-scale music adequately. Significantly, when the end of the Thirty Years’ War in 1648 brought some respite from the worst wartime disruption, very little was done: the Elector clearly had no genuine interest in music beyond its (now defunct) display value. Chronic arrears of pay (which had been substantial even before the war) were allowed to persist, so that by 1651 merely three of the last sixteen quarterly payments to musicians had been honoured. The succession of a new Elector of Saxony in 1656 helped, but ten years later Schütz, now 81 years old, was still having to petition for arrears and plead for permission to retire completely. Similar difficulties are recorded across Europe: in the 1630s and ’40s, experiences were no better at the court of the highly image-conscious Christian IV of Denmark, or at the bloated courts of the Spanish kings Philip III and IV. Similarly, in Restoration England, Charles II seems to have attempted to weather his own financial difficulties by routinely withholding the pay of his household staff for years on end: the diarist Samuel Pepys noted on 19 December 1666 that the court harpist, Evans, had died from want, and would have had a pauper’s night-time funeral had one of the other musicians not bought a few candles for the procession.19

For many musicians, growing cities came to offer increasingly attractive alternatives. In the German lands, for example, flourishing trading centres such as Hamburg could attract anyone they wanted, including a number of the most distinguished pupils of Schütz, followed some decades later by that supremely versatile musical entrepreneur of the baroque, Telemann (1681–1767), and the keyboard virtuoso Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–88) when he left the service of Frederick the Great of Prussia. J. S. Bach’s terms and conditions at Leipzig from 1723 to 1750 seem significantly less generous, and certainly generated recurrent friction, but at least he had spacious free accommodation as Cantor and music director at the St. Thomas school, and as much scope for city concerts and teaching as he could fit into his busy schedule. Joseph Haydn (1732–1809), too, was greatly invigorated by his belated freedom during two long visits to London (1791–92 and 1794–95), in contrast to the constrained role he had to fulfil, before and afterwards, as Kapellmeister (Master of Music) at the princely court of the Eszterhazy family in the Habsburg monarchy.

Direct comparison between different kinds of patronage are rare but instructive. We have already noted the unusual detail of the correspondence of Claudio Monteverdi: he was equally acute in his observation of the unpredictability of princely patronage, which he had known at first hand at the court of the Gonzagas in Mantua before moving to the politically and financially more austere city-republic of Venice in 1613. In response to an offer from Mantua to entice him back to his old post, Monteverdi in 1620 observed that in Venice he was offered twice the salary of his predecessor, 400 ducats annually for life, with scope for substantial additional earnings in the many city confraternities and patrician households. He also secured formal contracts for the thirty-two musicians employed at St. Marks, whose appointments and duties he controlled. Monteverdi observed that if he did not collect his salary at the appointed time, it was brought round to his house—in contrast with the payments he had received from the Mantuan treasury, ‘which dry up on the death of a duke or at his slightest ill humour’. He added bitterly that ‘I have never in my life suffered greater affliction of mind than when I had to go and ask for my pay, almost for the love of God, from signor Treasurer. I would sooner be content to go begging than return to such
All growing cities had potential as musical consumer markets, but Venice remained in every sense exceptional, and it is easy to see why so many creative artists of all kinds would be attracted there. Throughout the late medieval and early modern period, it was a city of extraordinary commercial wealth and legendary political stability: it may have lost some of its competitive edge by the seventeenth century, but not its sense of independence and difference. Never entirely under the control of the Church in Rome, and never fully subject to the Roman Inquisition, its patrician and merchant families dominated a complex structure of institutions and networks which safeguarded some degree of collective responsibility even down to the middle layers of society. Civic and corporate pride, as well as individual extravagance, ensured that art and music patronage thrived at all levels: individual musicians could for example combine a post in one of the 100 or so churches (and the many confraternities) with freelance work at the innumerable saints’ day celebrations that punctuated the year, at civic functions, and in celebrations in the larger private households.

When the first-ever opera house opened in 1637, in a patrician palace in Venice, a new trend for secular entertainment was created—though this venture arguably merely institutionalized the production of secular musical drama which already enlivened wealthy private households. Monteverdi, despite the religious focus of his duties in St. Marks, had become well aware of the demand for this kind of music when he started publishing sets of madrigals in 1587, while still at Mantua. The madrigal (a musical setting of a secular poem, usually relying on word-painting to reinforce the text) had evolved in Italy from the early sixteenth century as a highly versatile and accessible form. Monteverdi pushed its dramatic potential into wholly new territory, focusing on human psychology and emotions, sometimes creating virtual miniature operas with full potential for theatrical effect. The most famous of his madrigals, Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda of 1624 (published in Book 8, Madrigals of War and Love, in 1638), called for a fully acted performance of Tasso’s poem with a substantial band of musicians, a narrator, and the two main protagonists locked in vividly represented combat—only resolved when one is mortally wounded, and they belatedly discover each other’s identity.

This dramatic style had emerged around the turn of the century, with Monteverdi, Caccini, and a few others determinedly breaking the rules of sixteenth-century polyphony and counterpoint. They aimed at a direct representation of the action of the text in music (fast runs, harmonic clashes, plucked strings for percussive effects, sudden changes in dynamics), combined with highly emotionally charged vocal lines and clashing discords that did not resolve where expected. In the preface to his Fifth Book of Madrigals of 1605, Monteverdi boldly proclaimed his new style as the seconda pratica (second practice, in contrast to the much more controlled dissonance and formal structures of his predecessors). In 1600, a traditionalist music theorist, Giovanni Maria Artusi, launched an attack on the new music, quoting some of Monteverdi’s work. Others joined in, on both sides, leading to an unprecedented and highly public debate in print between old and new schools. Arguably, Monteverdi was merely notating the kind of improvised dramatization of musical performance that may well have been normal performance practice amongst the best musicians, but his emphatic use of dissonance, elaborate notated trills, unconventional chords, and melodic leaps created what most contemporaries saw as a break with the past. The artistic implications were further highlighted in Monteverdi’s first opera, L’Orfeo, produced in Mantua in 1607, which appealed directly to the emotions of the audience by expressing characterization and narrative tension in ways that could leave no listener cold. Even though some of his madrigals, and of course his church music, continued to conform to the more traditional norms that some of his patrons expected, it is hardly surprising that the new potent combination of poetry, theatre, and music (whether as madrigal or as full-scale opera) was ideally suited to the most spectacular court and household entertainments. Their considerable demands on performers were no obstacle for ambitious patrons: technical training for the singers (who were no longer expected to blend with the other voices), new skills of accompaniment (making the continuous bass line the harmonic anchor), and precise attention to instrumentation, characterization, and staging were all part of the appeal of the new style.

**Opera, Concerts, and the Emergence of a ‘Public’**
Clearly, formal music was recognized not merely as a decorative sound element in religious or secular events, but as a vehicle for reinforcing more complex ideas. During the sixteenth century, as court ceremony became more elaborate, various forms of celebratory festival were created: pageants and allegorical representations based on classical mythological themes, masked dances, pastorals, *intermedi* (intermezzos) put on at Italian courts to enhance major events, the various forms of *ballets de cour* popular at the French Valois and Bourbon courts (in which Lully also made his name), dance pantomimes, and many other forms of entertainment. Many of these were ideally suited to the disguises, elaborate costumes, and symbolic staging that became an essential part also of early opera. At the English court, for example, masques became a feature of Tudor entertainment, with increasingly elaborate stage effects woven round stories loaded with allegorical and political meaning. A post of Master of the Revels was created in 1545 specifically to organize such events. Under Elizabeth and James VI/I, considerable talent and imagination continued to be devoted to the masque, culminating in the early seventeenth century in the extravagant Whitehall and Banqueting House performances based on poetry by Ben Johnson, consummate design and staging by Inigo Jones, and elaborate musical effects. Charles I, influenced by his French queen, Henrietta Maria, and by artistic trends in Italy, was particularly keen on masques—their flexibility of organization and lack of real narrative plot making them particularly suitable for the propagation of political symbolism and royal grandeur through allegorical tableaux and formal dances. The music not only magnified the impact of the whole show, but also set the tone in ways that the king personally valued. Significantly, the masque as a genre had by mid-century become so popular that it continued in a different form after the overthrow of the monarchy itself, and was revived at the Restoration.

Opera itself is best seen as a creative (if frequently problematic) combination of several components: the music (not always making the biggest impact), the poetry and its theatrical dramatization (in one sense always ‘public’, even if only to an invited audience), and the visual spectacle of scene design, choreography, and staging in a specific space (extravagance and innovation being essential in public performances, but inevitably outdone at princely courts). On the grounds of cost as well as spatial resources, (p. 129) opera was ideally suited to princely patronage—as in Mantua and elsewhere, including Rome during the papacy of Urban VIII from 1623—yet the nature of aristocratic aspiration in early modern society ensured that members of the wealthiest elite inevitably wanted to hold similar entertainments in their own right. The Venice opera house of 1637 was just such a venture, ideal for a very wealthy city with no princely court: predictably, tickets were offered at prices that guaranteed a socially exclusive audience. But from the point of view of musicians, actors, and theatre staff the Venice venture marked a significant development because it helped to create a pattern of recurrent performances of the same work (not unique performances, as at princely celebrations) and even to some extent consolidated the experience of a standard repertoire to meet a continuing demand.

Another wealthy and independent city, Hamburg, set up a commercial opera house in 1678 along similar lines, but fierce resistance from the church authorities ensured that the repertoire was initially based solely on Biblical stories: its whole approach to performance remained more constrained than in Italy, even after Telemann gave it fresh musical impetus in the 1720s. Elsewhere, new ventures tended to rely on various combinations of sponsorship and patronage as well as commercial ticket sales: in Bologna, Genoa, and Milan, the main support came from an elite audience, but a broader public was admitted with cheaper tickets, especially towards the end of a series of performances. Outside Italy, the style and presentation associated with the Italian stage was indispensable. When Schütz launched his musical drama *Dafne* in Dresden in 1627, it was inspired by what he had just experienced during his visit to Italy. Italian influences also prevailed when Cardinal Mazarin brought opera to the French court (in 1645, just before the outbreak of the Fronde), and even more so when Leopold I exploited its potential in Vienna (notably with Cesti’s *Il pomo d’oro*, 1666). Further afield, opera was slower in catching on: in England, Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* (1689) was an exception, but Handel’s *Rinaldo* (1711), the first Italian opera specifically for London, had fifteen performances in a few months, and paved the way for the composer’s permanent move to London.

*Rinaldo* was an Italian opera written by a German for the London stage, a fact which reminds us that the sheer scale of opera production across many parts of Europe from the second half of the seventeenth century onwards makes generalization quite difficult. There were significant regional differences in emphasis, for example in the balance between music and text (the French placing particular emphasis on the latter), or between the kind of grand mythological/historical
themes typical of court performances compared with the more light-hearted human stories favoured by the wider public, or between tragic opera (and opera seria) as opposed to comic opera. These differences were in part determined by political context—as in the contrast between Mantua and Venice—but also by more haphazard factors such as the influence of local aristocratic patrons, or the skills of favourite singers (demanding bravura arias to display their skills to please the audience). By the eighteenth century, substantial reputations could be made by star singers, leading librettists (for example Pietro Metastasio), or even composers (Alessandro Scarlatti, Rameau, Mozart). But audiences remained (p. 130) difficult to please: castrato singers were deemed too decadent in some parts of Europe (including France), whilst female virtuoso singers were often regarded as disreputable. The Hamburg opera made only limited use of star singers, in conformity with the preferences of its more strait-laced clientele.

The social functions of early modern opera, with its reliance either on directive court patronage or on a volatile consumer market, can be analysed from a variety of different perspectives. Ticket sales (for public performances) are rarely well documented, but do suggest that even though opera was hugely popular, production costs were also very substantial, and profits hence far from certain. Characteristically, there were brawls in Paris in 1671 when some nobles still expected their retinue to be admitted free of charge—so much so that Lully obtained an explicit royal authorization to charge, and posted armed bouncers to prevent forced entry. Subscription series, exclusive boxes, and other forms of display for the richest patrons (including in some cases the right to sit close to the performers, on or at the side of the stage itself) heightened the attraction of a night in the opera even for those who had little interest in the show but wanted to be seen. With such methods of attracting custom, it is hardly surprising that, as contemporary descriptions of performances indicate, people conducted conversations (and engaged in all kinds of other encounters) right through a performance, often paying no attention to what was happening on stage. Similarly, it seems that disturbances, jeering, fights, and even riots amongst the audience were by no means infrequent during the eighteenth century.

Audience appeal was essential, even if that meant introducing implausible divine interventions to get a ‘good’ ending, or creating set-piece scenes of slapstick and disguise for light relief, or drastically simplifying the story to compensate for the expected set-piece arias which tended to slow down or stall the action: novelty, variety, and effect were what attracted most patrons. Although reforms were attempted (notably by Gluck, in Orfeo ed Euridice, 1762)—aiming for a clearer dramatic momentum and better integration of plot and music—it took real bravery and talent to experiment with the content when failure was so costly. If some of the Arcadian and mythological themes prominent in early opera were abandoned during the late Enlightenment in favour of more credible and human themes, elaborate stage effects remained indispensable. In all but the best hands, therefore, opera was liable to become convention-bound, reliant on visual effects, and artistically unmemorable. Its historical interest thus lies not so much in the relevance of its message, or its communicative powers, but as a manifestation of the growth of specific forms of social interaction and display. This makes the exceptions all the more remarkable: Mozart (1756–91), in his Marriage of Figaro of 1786, combined a substantive message, real dramatic momentum, and musical brilliance, using a libretto based on the supremely successful play by Beaumarchais.

The varying financial turns of Mozart’s career, and his attempts to attain some measure of independence, are well known.23 Historians have become wary of too modern a perspective: it was, after all, an age when few individuals ever had economic security, let alone personal rights. Nevertheless the growth of consumer and leisure markets in the more prosperous parts of Europe created some scope for musicians to work independently of a single patron. Performing to a diverse audience had always been (p. 131) commonplace for church musicians, street performers, or even court musicians at major open events, but putting on concerts with the sole purpose of attracting a paying audience was the kind of initiative that seems to have closely paralleled the emergence of public opera. The earliest known ventures are those of the French harpsichordist Jacques Champion de Chambonnières, forming a group of ten musicians to give twice-weekly concerts in Paris in 1641. This experiment seems to have had enough success to encourage other freelance groups in Paris from the 1650s onwards.

Elsewhere, there were similar initiatives: in Hamburg, Mathias Weckmann’s Collegium musicum gave concerts in the cathedral refectory from 1660 onwards, and in London, the violinist John Bannister put on informal series from 1672. Such events had probably already happened in halls, inns, and alehouses in many prosperous cities, but Bannister’s venture was
significant because it relied on the promotion of virtuoso performers, and entry for anyone who could pay—hence accentuating a growing distinction between enthusiastic amateur and professional in respect both of composition and performance. Some preferred less overt commercialization: in the wealthy north-German city of Lübeck, evening concerts were from the late 1640s sponsored by the merchant community and put on by the organist in the Marienkirche, Franz Tunder, on the model of those of Sweelinck in Amsterdam. These were such a success that Tunder’s successor from 1668, Buxtehude, expanded the series whilst maintaining the strong devotional component (by means of church cantatas and oratorios) which clearly appealed both to wealthy sponsors and to a wider public.

Musicians rarely became rich, whatever their way of earning a living, yet the exceptions are illuminating. At his premature death in 1687, Lully’s estate was valued at over 800,000 livres—a staggering sum which would have been unthinkable without his single-minded exploitation of the many exclusive privileges and rights that Louis XIV had showered on him since his rise into royal service, from humble origins, in the 1650s. By the eighteenth century, something like an independent career was possible in wealthy cities, at least for those with exceptional creative originality: we have already noted how Hamburg could provide a very comfortable living for both Telemann and his successor C. P. E. Bach, notably through public concerts, private commissions, and music-publishing for the domestic market. By then, London had even greater potential for enterprising musicians, its rapid expansion and unrestrained wealth creating major opportunities ranging from theatres and concert halls to river barges and the pleasure gardens at Vauxhall and Ranelagh. Handel (1685–1759), after settling there permanently in 1712, did have a court appointment and some wealthy private patrons, but achieved his most remarkable successes as an independent agent, exploiting the mechanisms of subscription series and individual ticket sales not only for his harpsichord, organ, and chamber music concerts, but also on a much bigger scale. His hugely successful Italian operas, performed by a Royal Academy set up for the purpose in 1719 (reorganized in 1729), became a major social attraction for wealthier London society, and his large-scale oratorios equally so from the 1730s. Handel’s ventures soon faced strong competition in London, and his success was far from uniform. But from the 1720s to his death in 1759 he demonstrated how lucrative and creative this kind of independent work could be (p. 132) when the market was right. Handel made generous donations to the London Foundling Hospital (where he became a governor, and initiated an annual benefit performance of Messiah), and supported various other good causes, yet on his death still managed to leave an enormous estate rated at nearly £20,000.

**Transgressing Conventional Boundaries**

Significantly, the proliferation of privately run concert series, music societies, and musical salons in major cities from the later seventeenth century onwards opened up some rare opportunities for women to appear in public as performing musicians. Italy had once again been crucial in the emergence of professional female musicians, initially as singers, but in some cases also as instrumentalists and even composers—albeit usually under the firm control of a male ‘protector’. In Ferrara, Duke Alfonso II had in the 1570s created a private chamber ensemble known as the *musica secreta*, in which skilled members of the court (men and women) often performed as amateur musicians. From 1580 the emphasis shifted decisively towards professional female singers, and the ensemble gained widespread recognition as the *Concerto delle donne*, with music specially composed for them by the leading composers of the day (including Luzzaschi, Giaches de Wert, Gesualdo, and others). The pay and reputation of these women was determined primarily by their skills as virtuoso soprano singers, but several of them were also proficient on the lute and viol, so could provide instrumental accompaniment for themselves. By the time of the Duke’s death in 1597, women fortunate enough to gain recognition in court circles had thus demonstrated that they could legitimately aspire to something beyond amateur music-making.

Although women remained banned from church choirs, by the seventeenth century other independent career pathways are increasingly well documented, furthered by the interest in opera and other forms of secular dramatic music. We know that Monteverdi and his wife (herself a professional singer) housed and trained the most famous female singer at Mantua, Caterina Martinelli—and that her sudden death from smallpox in 1608 (at the age of 19) was little short of a calamity since
she was to have been the outstanding attraction at the wedding of the crown prince that year. In Venice, Barbara Strozzi (1619–77) made a reputation for herself not just as a singer but also as a published composer of settings of her father Giulio Strozzi’s love poetry—though not without stirring some gossip, none of which has been substantiated fully. By the time male castrato singers became an essential attraction in Italian opera (culminating in the early eighteenth century), lead female singers were equally well established, and indeed capable of commanding comparable fees.

Amongst amateurs, of course, women musicians had figured prominently for a long time, and music was assumed to be a central component of a good upbringing. There is incidental evidence from Catholic countries of nuns performing and composing music, and the patron saint of music, St. Cecilia, is often portrayed in a directing role in devout music. In his first official post, providing musical training for the orphaned or abandoned girls of the Pio Ospedale della Pietà in Venice, Vivaldi (1678–1741) must have been a considerable success judging both from the demands of the music itself and the popularity of the performances which featured so prominently in the religious services there.

In recent years, it has become apparent just how often women were major musicians in their own right, and not just in secondary roles. The great dynasty of French musicians, the Couperin family, included Margueritte-Antoinette Couperin (1705–78), daughter of the most famous of the Couperins, François: exceptionally, she was allowed in effect to serve as court harpsichordist in her own right in succession to her father. The irascible French bass viol virtuoso, Antoine Forqueray, married the harpsichordist Henriette-Angélique Houssu and gave concerts with her (but violently obstructed the career of his even more talented son, Jean-Baptiste). The keyboard, like the lute, was an uncontroversial instrument for women to play, but other instruments were more contentious (and wind instruments mostly out of the question). One of the younger Forqueray’s distinguished pupils was Princess Henriette-Anne, daughter of Louis XV, whose great passion for music is clear in her portrait (painted by Nattier, after her premature death from smallpox in 1752) where she plays her magnificent bass viol, wearing such a freely flowing and richly ornate dress that one might not notice that she held the viol between her legs, as is necessary for real musicianship but in conflict with strict decorum at the time. For some women, a particular interest in music might be held against her, even in relatively liberal London: around 1760, for example, Ann Ford was painted by Gainsborough, holding a decorous small cittern-shaped guitar, but on the wall behind her hangs the bass viol on which she also performed in public concerts, in spite of the fact that her disapproving father had attempted to disrupt her first public concert.

Geographic boundaries were easier to cross. Music notation was, if not uniform across Europe, normally sufficiently standardized to allow musicians to travel freely, work wherever they could, and read music from anywhere on the continent. The international reputation of Franco–Flemish musicians in the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was sufficient for a number of them to secure key posts in major Italian cities; in the seventeenth century the pattern changed, as Italian musicians (later also French ones) were welcomed (and sometimes parodied) abroad as exponents of the latest musical trends. Musicians were ready-made cultural transmitters. Thus the leading early seventeenth-century German composer Heinrich Schütz was paid by his patron to study in Italy, especially in Venice, and was able to buy up Cremona violins to bring back to the court of the Elector of Saxony. At the French court, Lully himself was the most prominent Italian import; whilst Samuel Pepys in his Diary noted (critically) how French musicians were all the rage at the Restoration court of Charles II.

Particularly amongst French and German musicians, ‘national’ characteristics proved a fertile source of inspiration and of fierce debate in the years before and after 1700, exploited with characteristic elegance by François Couperin (1668–1733) in his instrumental suite Les goûts réunis (1724)—which included formal acknowledgement of current fashion in his L’apothéose de Corelli—and with equally characteristic humour by Telemann in his Gulliver Suite (1728), ‘Polish’ concertos, and other character pieces. Naturally, musical representation of the Turks was a great favourite, culminating in Mozart’s Singspiel of 1782, Die Entführung aus dem Serail. But the dramatic potential was limitless: in 1717, in his fourth book of music for bass viol, Marin Marais included a ‘Suite in foreign style’ which included everything from a Tartar March, an ‘American’, an Arabesque, a muzette in popular style, not to mention a Labyrinth exploring strange keys and exotic instrumental effects that still have the capacity to surprise. Exploiting the exotic was not a new trend in music: battle pieces
had created great scope since the sixteenth century, alongside other titled but textless settings of particular themes. Around 1676 Heinrich Biber (1644–1704) completed his Mystery or Rosary Sonatas, where extraordinary tunings of the violin strings, the resulting tonal colours, and even the visual imagery of the musical notation on the page, strikingly brought out the religious meaning of the music. Three generations later, C. P. E. Bach explored a different range of human emotions in his programmatic instrumental trio *Sanguineus und melancholicus* (1751), heralding the musical equivalent of the early-Romantic movement of *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) which in the 1770s found clear expression in the symphonies of Haydn, Vanhal, and their contemporaries.

Such experimental works reminded contemporaries of another kind of boundary, which defined both the social and intellectual role of music. As we have already noted, musical training depended very much on social status: fully trained professional musicians were almost always male, and invariably of relatively modest social background, whilst for the wealthy (of either gender) music was never meant to be more than a polite accomplishment or private interest. At the same time, work on the theory of music as an intellectual challenge (and as one of the sciences) was strictly for the elite, regarded (like other forms of high-level knowledge) as something that could only be pursued by those with the necessary educational and philosophical attainments. Music theory was a science, not an art. As such, up to the sixteenth century, it was pursued as part of a grand system of knowledge founded on the classics (notably Pythagoras, Aristotle, and Ptolemy), supplemented by St. Augustine’s fear of the potential corrupting influence of music on those who did not keep it firmly subsidiary to the text it was meant to serve. Despite a number of theoretical works appearing during the sixteenth century, the most significant break came only with the incorporation of new empirical knowledge by Michael Praetorius (*Syntagma Musicum*, 1615–20) and Marin Mersenne (*Harmonie universelle*, 1636). This helped music to acquire a significant auxiliary role in the development of the mathematical and empirical sciences of the Scientific Revolution. It also meant that the more traditional reliance on cosmography and magic (as in the musical theories of Robert Fludd, 1617–21, and Athanasius Kircher, 1650) came to be viewed as too abstract.

It is interesting to note that several writers had already attempted to bridge the gap between music as a theoretical science and music as a practical craft, prominent amongst them Gioseffo Zarlino in his *Le istitutioni harmoniche* (1558). Of more lasting significance was Nicola Vicentino’s extraordinary exploration of microtonality in his *L’antica musica ridotta alla moderna prattica* (published in 1555), which he implemented in practice by constructing an arcicembalo. This instrument was a harpsichord where each octave was divided not into the customary twelve semitones of the modern keyboard, but thirty-five, to allow most chromatic scales to be played in pure intonation. The musical effect, in his own madrigals or those by Carlo Gesualdo (Prince of Venosa, c. 1561–1613), is still quite unnerving. Despite the technical challenge of playing such an instrument, the practical experiment demonstrated the expressive potential of deliberately breaking out of standard Western systems of musical intonation.

Redefining of the boundaries of music was hugely important during the Baroque—from the viol consorts of William Lawes at the court of Charles I, to the monumental late experimental works by J. S. Bach (notably the B minor mass and the Art of the Fugue). In France Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764) created new aesthetic standards in his stage works, whilst at the same time explaining the theory in his influential *Traité de l’harmonie universelle* (1722—a work the full title of which translates as *Treatise of universal harmony reduced to its natural principles*—that is, the mathematical and physical properties of sound). Evidently the distinction between the intellectual music theorist and the creative practitioner could no longer be taken for granted.

At the same time, the search for the darker and irrational sides of human life, and for expressive forms to match, naturally led to significant new demands both on the human voice itself and on the technical design of musical instruments. Professional musicians with exceptional talent could respond as star singers in courtly musical establishments and in opera, as peripatetic virtuosi, or, in the case of Mozart at the end of our period, as a child prodigy. The demands placed on singers had increased dramatically from the time of Monteverdi, and culminated in the coloratura pyrotechnics of the Queen of the Night in Mozart’s *Magic Flute*. With such developments came very substantial changes in the use of court orchestras, instrumental ensembles, and individual styles of playing—all tending to reinforce the divergence between amateur and
professional performer that we noted earlier. The search for dazzling dramatic effect also led to the need for formal conducting, stronger ensemble training, and large-scale orchestras, visible for example in Haydn’s music for his London stays in the early 1790s, his late work *The Creation* (1798), and of course in Beethoven’s symphonies and piano concertos.

Although beyond the limits of this chapter, these changes also help to explain why the violin family displaced the quieter viola da gamba, the fortepiano replaced the harpsichord, recorders disappeared altogether, whilst wind and brass instruments underwent continuous experimentation to enhance their range, dynamics, and chromatic potential. Surprisingly, no similar developments occurred in the printing of music: although experiments had been made with movable type music-printing, the results were not satisfactory, and most sheet music continued to be printed using time-consuming and expensive copperplate engraving—a limitation equivalent to (but more restrictive than) the technical limits on the printing of texts, and likewise tending to keep prices relatively high. For professional musicians, much of the repertoire remained solely in manuscript copies, and there was no reliable way of meeting amateur demand except (p. 136) for the wealthy top end of the market. Telemann and Handel both took great care over the publishing of their music, and could make some money from it, but neither they, nor Mozart or Beethoven, could make a substantial income from publishing their domestic and non-professional music.

**Conclusions**

There are many questions which continue to challenge historians of this period, and the social history of the performing arts has to confront particular challenges arising from their intrinsic transitory nature and the limitations of the evidence. We should nevertheless recognize that music, as both a personal and a collective form of expression, has the capacity to throw unexpected light on social organization, artistic creativity, communal celebration, and changing personal aspiration within different cultural environments. In the later Middle Ages and the early modern period music was both an integral part of European life at all levels of society, and an expressive outlet rich with exploratory and creative potential. Less restricted by public controls and censorship than text and visual art, music allowed considerable scope for individuality in a world not otherwise known for its tolerance. Like the best works of fiction or pictorial art, music could speak at different levels simultaneously, yet its precise meaning was sufficiently indefinable to escape objective control or effective constraint—its message of comfort or subversion fundamentally contingent on the medium, and liable to highly subjective reception dependent on performer, rendition, context, and listener. Despite the scope for formal notation, music was always to some extent improvisatory, its creative and individualistic expression being an essential part of its impact.

That said, high-quality music (including that of itinerant folk musicians) required substantial investment of time, effort, training, and sometimes organization. Just as print culture depended on a complex array of craftsmen, authors, enthusiasts, and market networks, so instrumental musicians relied on a wide array of highly specialized subsidiary industries with European-wide supply networks operating within changing markets. Musicians might perform simply for their own enjoyment or entertainment, but they could also make a living contributing to large-scale ceremonial, political, creative, or commercial demands, most obviously at court or in towns, but also in village communities—in doing so, illuminating the cultural, social, and economic realities of their time. It is frustrating for the historian that, during this period, it is quite rare to get any real glimpse of how musicians saw their own role, other than through the surviving music of those who actually composed. Their art rarely raised them to high social status in a deeply hierarchical society, and although musicians had enormous scope for social and geographic mobility, they did not leave extensive written records. Even for the later part of our period, personal reflections have survived only for a few of them—and there is as always a clear risk of reading too much into such rare descriptions, or assuming they represent something new or different. What is beyond doubt, however, is the fact (p. 137) that music, formal or otherwise, was an integral part of the fabric of every European community.

**Further Reading**

Find this resource:

Burney, C. The Present State of Music in France and Italy: or, the Journal of a Tour through those Countries (London, 1771); and The present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands and the United Provinces: or, the Journal of a Tour through these Countries (London, 1773) (both available in various modern editions).

Find this resource:


Find this resource:

Fenlon, I. ed. The Renaissance from the 1470s to the End of the Sixteenth Century (Basingstoke and London, 1989).

Find this resource:


Find this resource:


Find this resource:


Find this resource:

Price, C. The Early Baroque Era from the Late Sixteenth Century to the 1660s (Basingstoke and London, 1993).

Find this resource:


Find this resource:


Find this resource:

Salmen, W., ed. The Social Status of the Professional Musician from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1983).

Find this resource:

Staufer, G. B., ed. The World of Baroque Music (Bloomington, IN, 2006; includes two CDs).

Find this resource:


Find this resource:


Find this resource:

Notes:

(1.) It is beyond the scope of this chapter to consider the vigorous debate about historically informed performance. For stimulating discussion, see notably B. Haynes, The End of Early Music: a Period Performer’s History of Music for the Twenty-first Century (Oxford, 2007), and J. Butt, Playing with History: the Historical Approach to Musical Performance (Cambridge, 2002).

(2.) Obvious examples include the pioneering work at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis (founded in 1933, and attracting major
international attention from the 1960s); the charismatic work of David Munrow in innovative performances, from the late 1960s until his premature death in 1976, and in accessible scholarship such as his illustrated *Instruments of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Oxford, 1976); the establishment of degree programmes in early music at some universities by the early 1970s; and the launch of the journal *Early Music* in 1973.


(4.) The use of singing, as a vehicle for instruction in elementary schools, appears to have been common across Europe, but at least until the seventeenth century may (as with reading skills) have focused on memorization rather than actual training in the rudiments of music: see J. Willis, *Church Music and Protestantism in Post-Reformation England* (Farnham, 2010), 163–180; R. W. Oetinger, *Music as Propaganda in the German Reformation* (Aldershot, 2001), 41–50; S. F. Weiss, ‘Musical Pedagogy in the German Renaissance’, in J. Van Horn Melton, ed., *Cultures of Communication from Reformation to Enlightenment* (Aldershot, 2002), 198–224.

(5.) The main lines of argument separating popular and elite culture were indicated by Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978). In the case of music, from a modern perspective such a distinction might appear well founded, but (as we shall see) is liable to misrepresent the organizational structures of music-making in the early modern period.

(6.) The hurdy-gurdy was an instrument commonly associated with street musicians and vagrants. It consists of a robust resonating box with strings activated by a wheel cranked by hand. There were usually several drones, alongside one or two melody strings worked by means of a keyboard, producing a sound resembling that of the bagpipes. The lute, a delicate double-strung plucked instrument adopted from Arabic music, was the predominant instrument for the accompaniment of songs and for instrumental solo playing. Larger relatives (archlute, theorbo, chitarrone) were also developed for ensemble playing. Until the 1630s, the lute might also be combined with the viol (viola da gamba), a bowed six-string instrument derived from the Spanish/Arabic vihuela. The viol was first used as a consort instrument (typically three or more instruments of different sizes playing together) in Italy in the 1490s, then widely adopted across Europe for small-scale chamber music and later as a solo instrument.

(7.) Important published examples include Sylvestro di Ganassi’s *Opera intitulata Fontegara* (Venice, 1535) for the recorder, Diego Ortiz’s *Trattado de glosas* (Rome, 1553) for the viol, and Christopher Simpson’s *The Division-viol, or the Art of Playing Extempore upon a Ground* (London, 1659, with a second edition in 1667, containing detailed explanation in English and Latin parallel texts). There were many more, for a variety of instruments, over the following century.


(13.) R. C. Wegman, *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe 1470–1530* (London, 2005), provides detailed documentation on the nature of this debate, including the pamphlets and petitions used to highlight the perceived problems. For England, see also J. Willis, *Church Music and Protestantism in Post-Reformation England* (Farnham, 2010).


(24.) The oratorio was introduced to England by Handel, but had existed in Catholic Europe since the early seventeenth century as a kind of religious opera, complete with narrative action and arias, but without staged dramatic enactment—essentially to tell a religious story (as in the Lutheran *historia* and the later Passion) and hence suitable for Lent when theatres were closed and operas could not be put on. In Paris, the *concert spirituel* (from 1725) provided smaller-scale music also suitable for Lent.

(26.) The value of music in education (at least for men) was questioned by John Locke in his tract, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), but was accepted by most other theorists.

(27.) Some forms of tablature (shorthand notation) were more cryptic, especially those used by specialist musicians (such as North-German organists) or those deployed in folk music. Printed music, on the other hand, clearly had an uninhibited international market.

(28.) It is no doubt significant in this context that neither Fludd nor Kircher appear to have been serious practising musicians, whilst Praetorius and Mersenne emphatically were. For a full discussion see P. Gouk, *Music, Science and Natural Magic in Seventeenth-century England* (New Haven and London, 1999); T. Christensen, ed., *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory* (Cambridge, 2002).

(29.) Music printing by movable type was first developed commercially by Petrucci in Venice in 1501, but remained technically difficult. Cheaper methods, notably using woodblock printing, were less satisfactory, so the preferred method for quality printing remained the relatively expensive copperplate engraving. It is likely that printed music therefore spread less rapidly than printed text, in the early modern period, but we lack detailed studies to confirm such assumptions. See S. Boorman, *Studies in the Printing, Publishing and Performance of Music in the Sixteenth Century* (Farnham, 2005); S. Rose, ‘Music, Print and Presentation in Saxony During the Seventeenth Century’, *German History*, 23 (2005), 1–19, indicates that music publishing declined during the later seventeenth century, but this may in part have been the result of the changing demands of the amateur market.

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**Thomas Munck**

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This chapter begins by outlining the ways in which ‘Enlightenment’ has been constructed, by contemporaries, philosophers, and historians. Historical study of Enlightenment only began in earnest in the second half of the twentieth century, but developed rapidly from the 1970s, expanding its scope geographically, socially, and intellectually. Since 1989 there has been a reaction against the multiplication of ‘Enlightenments’, as historians have become anxious to defend the Enlightenment’s ‘modernity’. This chapter, however, resists the equation of Enlightenment with modernity, arguing that historical reconstruction of Europe’s Enlightenment should be grounded in its eighteenth-century contexts. Successive sections are devoted to re-assessing its contributions to the critique of religion and the defence of toleration, to the understanding of human nature, society and political economy, and to the growth of a ‘public sphere’ and the formation of ‘public opinion’. The conclusion is that there was no high road from Enlightenment to Revolution.

Keywords: Enlightenment, modernity, political thought, public sphere, religion, society

Constructions of Enlightenment

The phenomenon known as the Enlightenment has always been a construction. In the eighteenth century several European vernacular terms were in use which are now regarded as broadly equivalent, and are translated into English as ‘Enlightenment’: les lumières, i lumi, ilustración, Aufklärung. While their usage in their different linguistic contexts was by no means identical, all referred to new developments in thought, and their propagation to a wider audience. The invocation of ‘light’ was of course not new: ‘light’ had well-established connotations, both religious and philosophical. Christ was the light of the world, shining on men’s souls and offering redemption from sin. Still older was the ancient philosophical equation of light with understanding. In Plato’s formulation, we ascend to the light of truth as we leave the cave in which we are trapped in prejudice and misconception. It was this ancient philosophical connotation which was picked up in the eighteenth-century usages of enlightenment. Of these, the two most prominent were les lumières and Aufklärung.

Early in the eighteenth century, the long-lived Bernard de Fontenelle (1657–1757), Secretary of the Académie Royale des Sciences in Paris, hailed the advent of ‘un esprit philosophique’ that was ‘almost entirely new’. He was referring to the transformation of philosophy which occurred alongside and in response to the surge in the study of nature in the seventeenth century—to the impact of Bacon, Descartes, Newton, and Locke on their contemporaries. This sense of a new philosophical awakening was reinforced by the contemporary Querelle, or ‘quarrel’ between the Ancients and the Moderns. Although the
subject-matter of the quarrel was as much literary as philosophical, the controversy, Dan Edelstein has argued, served to create a narrative of innovation in which the ‘philosophy’ associated with recent advances in the understanding of nature became the key to the enhanced ability of the ‘moderns’ to understand all human activity.¹

The publication which more than any other would enshrine this association of ‘philosophy’ with ‘lumières’ was, however, the Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, edited by Jean D’Alembert (1717–83) and Denis Diderot (1713–84). Its first volume appeared in 1751, and it would be completed, in a total of seventeen volumes of text and a further eleven of plates, in 1772. In his ‘Preliminary Discourse’ to Volume I, D’Alembert re-traced some of the ground of the ‘Ancients and Moderns’ debate, before explicitly identifying the Encyclopedia with the philosophy of Locke and Newton rather than Descartes. Rejecting the Cartesian propositions of innate ideas and a divinely underwritten human reason, D’Alembert affirmed that the basis of knowledge was sense-experience, where possible tested by experiment.

A comparable association of Enlightenment with philosophy emerged in Germany later in the eighteenth century. As use of the term ‘Aufklärung’ became more common, a contributor to the Berlinische Monatschrift in 1783 enquired of fellow readers ‘Was ist Aufklärung?’—‘What is Enlightenment?’ Among the respondents in the following year were Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86), the leading Jewish philosopher of the time, and, most famously, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). For Mendelssohn ‘enlightenment’ was the teaching of philosophy apart from religion, separating the two realms of truth; for Kant it meant more specifically the application of a philosophy of critical reason in public debate, with the object of dissolving prejudice and advancing the public benefit.² Kant’s a priori, rationalist philosophy was very different from the sense-based account of knowledge championed by D’Alembert, following Locke. At the same time, Kant’s concept of Aufklärung was clearly indicative of a process of enlightenment, one which he wished to see continued after the death of the reigning King of Prussia, Frederick II. By contrast, les lumières suggested a movement of thought, with the contributors to the Encyclopedia at its head. In either case, however, ‘enlightenment’ was a construction, an adaptation of a term with existing connotations.

These contemporary usages of les lumières and Aufklärung provide an obvious justification for their continued use by historians to re-construct Enlightenment. But they have also made it difficult to arrive at a common, generally accepted definition of the phenomenon they are used to describe. That difficulty has been compounded by two more, of which historians have been reluctant to take proper account. The first is that philosophy and lumières had acquired a strongly negative connotation even before the end of the eighteenth century, through the charge that they were jointly responsible for the French Revolution. The second is that the negative association of philosophy with Enlightenment (both les lumières and Aufklärung) was perpetuated within philosophy itself, giving rise in the nineteenth century to a powerful tradition of philosophic critique of Enlightenment.

Attacks on ‘philosophy’ and on the philosophes or the ‘Encyclopædic school’ began in France as early as the 1760s; they intensified in the 1780s, as hostility to the Church, the monarchy, and the aristocracy grew, and their defenders sought to identify the culprits. Once revolution had broken out and the Terror had done its worst, the case against the philosophes hardened into the accusation of conspiracy, most notoriously articulated by the Abbé Barruel in 1797. Nor did the criticism cease after Napoleon began to roll back the Revolution; it was renewed when the Bourbons were restored in 1815, becoming the dominant explanatory narrative of the Revolution, which Liberals down to Tocqueville (p. 143) strove to refute. Even if les lumières were not the primary target of the critique, they were tainted by association. In such a climate, Enlightenment was by no means a subject for sympathetic historical investigation.

Perception that Enlightenment was a subject for critique rather than history was reinforced by an intellectual reaction against the specific philosophies associated with both les lumières and, especially, Aufklärung. Hegel set the agenda when he took as his primary target the philosophy of Kant, and associated it with the now superseded era of ‘Enlightenment’. That this was a gross historical simplification was not the point: Aufklärung was the province of philosophers, not historians. Later nineteenth-century Idealism reiterated the critique—and extended the philosophers’ claim to the concept by translating Aufklärung into the one language from which a corresponding term had hitherto been absent, coining the English word
‘Enlightenment’. By the end of the nineteenth century, it is true, histories of Enlightenment philosophy were being written which were favourable towards their subject: these culminated in Ernst Cassirer’s *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, written under the shadow of the Nazi rise to power, and first published in German in 1932. But although its postwar translation and publication in America in 1951 would bring it an extensive readership, Cassirer’s book never convinced the philosophers, who renewed their critique of Enlightenment in the middle of the twentieth century.

First came Max Horkheimer and Teodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), a work at times barely comprehensible, but whose theme was the extent to which Enlightenment philosophy reproduced the ancient Greek myths of domination over nature, compounding, not resolving, the contradictions of liberalism, and opening the way to the evils of technocratic authoritarianism it purported to oppose. Thus renewed, the tradition of philosophic critique would prove as persistent as it was varied in its expression. In Germany Reinhart Koselleck accused the Enlightenment of failing to grasp the implications of the modern principle of state sovereignty. In Britain Isaiah Berlin constructed a ‘Counter-Enlightenment’ which, while presented as a series of historical studies of individual philosophers—Vico, Hamann, and Herder—is best understood as a philosopher’s critique of the Enlightenment’s supposedly excessive rationalism and tendency to utopianism. In the 1970s the baton passed to an equally heterogeneous group of philosophers who for one reason or another would be regarded as ‘Postmodernists’—Michel Foucault, Alasdair MacIntyre, Richard Rorty. Again the grounds of the critique varied. Foucault began by renewing the charge of domination implicit in the ambition to re-order human affairs for the better—only later, in his essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’ (1983), to suggest that Enlightenment might also be equated with the individual will to challenge authority. Both MacIntyre and Rorty associated Enlightenment with a misplaced commitment to uncovering truth by human reason; but where MacIntyre believed that truth must have a metaphysical foundation, and identified this in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, Rorty argued against any foundationalism, any ultimate ‘truth’.

Historians, meanwhile, stood aside from this tradition of philosophic critique for most of the twentieth century. Until the 1980s they largely ignored it; insofar as it was noticed, it was with bemusement and irritation. But it matters to understanding the historiography of the Enlightenment that it was a philosophers’ subject before it became one for historians too. ‘Johnny-come-lately’ to Enlightenment studies, historians for too long failed to acknowledge the conceptual loading of ‘Enlightenment’; since they became aware of it, after 1989, many of them have swung to the opposite extreme, being only too keen to assert the Enlightenment’s association with ‘modernity’. Since ‘modernity’ is precisely what the philosophic critique has put in question, historians are at risk of appearing conceptually naïve and uncritical.

As it was, the first works to engage in a scholarly, historical manner with the subject-matter of Enlightenment were not published until the 1930s. Their authors were Daniel Mornet and Paul Hazard, pupils of the French literary historian, Gustave Lanson. Their approach to *les lumières* was still oblique: Mornet explored the ‘intellectual origins’ of the French Revolution, laying to rest the *philosophe* conspiracy thesis, while Hazard focused on the ‘crisis of the European mind’ at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which preceded Enlightenment proper. But these works set a new standard of historical enquiry, and may be regarded as pioneers in Enlightenment studies in both French literature and in intellectual history. Among those who followed their lead in Paris in the later 1930s was the young Italian, Franco Venturi, who had joined his father, an art historian, in exile from Fascism: Venturi’s earliest, pre-war works were studies of the young Diderot and of the origins of the *Encyclopédie.*

Historical study of the Enlightenment took off following the Second World War. Historians and literary scholars across continental Europe were now in search of a better past, one free of association with the horrors of National Socialism and genocide. Since nationalism and racial doctrines were all too prominent features of the nineteenth century, scholars looked back a century further, and found ‘the Enlightenment’. The lead was taken by Venturi, who returned in the early 1950s to his pre-war interests, and focused now on Enlightenment in his native Italy. Gradually others followed, until by the early 1960s the numbers of literary and historical scholars with Enlightenment interests justified the calling of the first of a series of international congresses on the subject, at Geneva in 1963. To Venturi’s frustration, French historians played a relatively minor role, the hegemony of the *Annales* ‘school’ in its most social-scientific period crushing almost all interest in intellectual history, until Daniel Roche found a way of combining numbers with ideas, or at least with the institutions which fostered
them, in his study of the French provincial academies. In fact, much of this immediate postwar scholarship was underpinned by a commitment to modernization theory, whether of a Weberian or Marxist variety. But most historians were content to leave their conceptual presuppositions unexamined; Venturi was exceptional in using the agency shown by Enlightenment reformers explicitly to challenge sociological determinism.

The Enlightenment which emerged from these early historical enquiries was a broad movement of *philosophes* and their allies, with representatives in all the major European countries. It was a movement of ideas, and also of reform, whose prospects of success were understood to lie in the philosophers’ relations with would-be enlightened rulers, above all the absolutist monarchies of Prussia, Austria, Russia, and France. (p. 145) Thus conceived, the Enlightenment was clearly a historians’ reconstruction. It was a reconstruction which derived legitimacy from the contemporary, eighteenth-century usages of the term, but which constituted an Enlightenment more extended, and with a more definite intellectual and political existence, than had been conveyed either by *les lumières* or by *Aufklärung*. There was nothing methodologically wrong with this: all historians use concepts to shape the past, and adjust the concepts they have adopted to fit the evidence on which they have focused. But the difference between the contemporary and the historians’ use of ‘Enlightenment’ and its equivalents ensured that the new definition was always open to challenge in the name of its eighteenth-century predecessors. More positively, the process of reconstruction, once begun, could not be halted at any given definition: having constructed ‘the Enlightenment’ anew in the 1950s and 1960s, historians have since been free to develop and expand what they mean by the term.

Expansion began in the 1970s, occurring more or less simultaneously on three fronts. One was the extension of its geographical scope. Venturi had led the way, when he shifted his attention from France back to Enlightenment in his native Italy; by 1970 Spain, Scotland, and Britain’s North American colonies had also been identified as contexts for Enlightenment. Thereafter, the ‘national context’ became the favoured setting for Enlightenment across the European world. For some time England stood out as an exception, perhaps because its historians felt less need for a better past after the War. But the omission was rectified in the 1980s by Roy Porter, in the opening essay of the volume whose title enshrined the new approach, *The Enlightenment in National Context* (1981). The title might imply continued acceptance of one Enlightenment, but the tendency to identify distinct national Enlightenments quickly encouraged explicit pluralization. Soon it was difficult to limit the relevant context to the national, encouraging further fragmentation. It was more plausible to think of the Milanese or Neapolitan Enlightenments than of a single Italian Enlightenment; less so, but still possible, to sub-divide the Scottish Enlightenment into the Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Aberdeen Enlightenments.

Expansion was no less marked in exploration of the social framework of Enlightenment. The need to add a social dimension to the history of Enlightenment thought was a major theme of the first full-scale synthesis of the subject, Peter Gay’s *The Enlightenment—An Interpretation* (1966–69). But for the young Robert Darnton, Gay had not gone nearly far enough. There was an urgent need, Darnton argued, to get beyond the confines of the ‘High Enlightenment’ of the *philosophes*, to explore the underworld of publishers and less celebrated, Grub-Street authors whose books and pamphlets sold in far greater numbers than those of all but the most famous *philosophes*. Only gradually did it become clear that Darnton’s agenda was more restricted than it had appeared: he did not so much wish to popularize the Enlightenment as to return the focus of enquiry to the origins of the French Revolution, asking, as Mornet had done fifty years earlier, ‘do books cause revolutions?’ By then, however, the idea of a social history of the Enlightenment had taken firm hold, and scholars were busy exploring the many institutions which supported Enlightenment authors and their causes.

The third area in which Enlightenment scholarship expanded after 1970 was its intellectual history. Initially, the ideas of the Enlightenment were identified with the contents of the books which the *philosophes* and their associates wrote—an approach which ensured a wide range of subject-matter, but tended to discount research into the conceptual and disciplinary threads which connected them. But as the Enlightenment grew in scholarly prestige, exponents of different sub-disciplines within intellectual history began to assert their claims. Among the first and most pressing were historians of science, who saw an opportunity to extend the story of the transformation of natural philosophy in the seventeenth century into the eighteenth, under the new and progressive label of Enlightenment. But others soon followed suit, until it became hard to
exclude any eighteenth-century subject of enquiry from association with Enlightenment, and likewise often difficult to draw
the line between Enlightenment thinkers and their seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century predecessors. Here too,
accordingly, pluralization seemed to be the answer: there was no need for a single, inclusive definition of the Enlightenment’s
intellectual interests. The point was formalized by John Pocock in post-Wittgensteinian terms: we do better to think of
Enlightenment thought as a series of languages or discourses, philosophical and historical, moral, aesthetic, political, and
economic, each of which overlapped with others, but which had no common core.\textsuperscript{13}

By the end of the 1980s, after two decades of expansion, historians were in a position to offer an unprecedentedly rich
understanding of Europe’s Enlightenment. But it was a highly fragmented understanding. In the face of so much geographic,
social, and intellectual variety, it was now hard to think in terms of one Enlightenment, ‘the’ Enlightenment: far easier to
accept that there were many Enlightenments. Such a conclusion was not only academically convenient; it also offered
historians a simple defence against the postmodernists, and their charge that the ‘Enlightenment project’ had been
responsible for many of the ills of modernity. Since there had been no single, unified Enlightenment, there could have been no
‘Enlightenment project’. It was not an answer likely to trouble the philosophers; but at this point there was little sign that
historians felt a pressing need to make a positive case for their subject.

This would change in the 1990s, and by the beginning of the twenty-first century leading historians of Enlightenment were
much more confident. In retrospect, the turn-around can be dated to 1989, and two events that year. One was the fall of the
Berlin Wall, and with it much of the intellectual credibility of Marxism. Enlightenment values and aspirations, about which
Marxism had always been ambivalent, could now be seen as independent foundations of modern liberal and social politics.
The second event of 1989 was the appearance in English translation of Jürgen Habermas’s \textit{The Structural Transformation
of the Public Sphere}.\textsuperscript{14} When first published in German in 1962 the book had been a contribution to the philosophical
debate over Enlightenment—an answer to the critique by Habermas’s Frankfurt School predecessors, Horkheimer and
Adorno. In 1989, however, it was historians to whom it appealed, for two main reasons. On the one hand, Habermas’s
nostalgia for the eighteenth-century public sphere offered an attractive alternative to nineteenth-century models of socialism;
on the other, the concept of the ‘public sphere’ gave scholars a new framework in which to write the social history (p. 147)
of Enlightenment, one which would foster study of institutions and groups (notably women) slighted by Darnton’s focus on
books and revolution.

Fortified by these developments, leading historians of Enlightenment now began to put the case for Enlightenment as the
standard-bearer of ‘modernity’. No longer need the accusations of the postmodernists be deflected: they could be challenged
head-on. One of the first to see the potential of Habermas’s thesis was Margaret Jacob, long a champion of the
Enlightenment’s radicalism.\textsuperscript{15} But the most energetic and persistent champion of the Enlightenment’s ‘modernity’ has of
course been Jonathan Israel, in a sequence of expansive volumes beginning in 2001 with \textit{Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy
and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750}, and continued in (to date) three further instalments, each exceeding 800 pages.\textsuperscript{16} Many other scholars have followed Israel’s example, enshrining the equation of Enlightenment and
modernity in their conclusions, if not their titles. As I have suggested, it is far from clear that historians understand the
philosophical tradition of critique of Enlightenment which they are now so confidently refuting; they would do better to
recognize that the critique has its own history, whose exponents have good reason to question the very ‘modernity’ which
the historians proclaim. But there is no denying that Israel’s work, and others like it, has re-set the agenda of Enlightenment
scholarship.

In what follows, I resist the temptation to identify Enlightenment with ‘modernity’, and suggest instead ways in which
Enlightenment should be studied in its eighteenth-century contexts. I do so under three heads: the engagement with religion;
enquiry into human nature and the progress of society; and the Enlightenment and its public. In each case scholarship is
being revivified by new concepts and approaches, as well as by the confidence that this is a subject which, in Anthony
Pagden’s words, ‘still matters’.\textsuperscript{17}
The Critique of Religion

One of the most striking features of Enlightenment scholarship in the past twenty-five years has been the return of religion to the top of the agenda of enquiry. Earlier it was a strong theme in Peter Gay’s study—the first volume of which was subtitled The Rise of Modern Paganism—while the suggestion that the Enlightenment had ‘religious origins’ in Socinian heterodoxy had been canvassed in an essay by Hugh Trevor-Roper. As study of Enlightenment gathered pace in the 1970s, however, religion was no longer so prominent. Its new-found importance since 1990 has undoubtedly been stimulated by the return of religious violence to the contemporary world, in the Middle East and in the West, and more particularly by the rise of a starkly intolerant version of Islam. In response, scholars have once again found in the Enlightenment clear statements of the values of toleration, warnings of the dangers of religious ‘enthusiasm’, and early intimations of the process of ‘secularization’, by which religious beliefs and practices come to be regarded as optional, not essential features of daily human life. For many scholars, study of these aspects of Enlightenment has meant a focus on thinkers who were openly sceptical of religious beliefs, and critical of politics conducted in religious terms. But at least as many scholars have been sympathetic to religion, and keen to explore the contributions of clergy and lay believers to Enlightenment thinking on subjects both religious and secular. The idea of a ‘religious Enlightenment’ is by no means an oxymoron.

The historian most associated with the return of religion to Enlightenment studies has been Jonathan Israel. In Radical Enlightenment, he focused attention on the contribution of a group of later seventeenth-century Dutch thinkers, headed by the Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza (1632–77), who explicitly challenged many of the shibboleths of revealed religion, and the theology of orthodox Calvinism in particular. From these Israel traced lines of heterodox and irreligious thinking outwards into Germany, France, and Italy, and, in subsequent volumes, forwards into the mid- and later eighteenth century. Yet while Israel made no secret of his sympathy for this radical, irreligious Enlightenment, his approach also offered encouragement to those who are committed to the existence of a religious Enlightenment. Precisely by distinguishing, as he did in his second volume, Enlightenment Contested, between ‘radical’ and ‘moderate’ Enlightenments, Israel provided the proponents of religious Enlightenment with a congenial framework in which to develop their case. For all the criticism which his binary opposition of radical and moderate has provoked, it has also won tacit acceptance.

Israel was by no means the first to explore the idea of a radical, irreligious Enlightenment. Two who preceded him were the American scholars Ira Wade and Margaret Jacob. Wade was a pioneering researcher of the clandestine circulation of irreligious literature in the early eighteenth century; Jacob, whose first study was of Newtonianism as the bearer of a consciously moderate political and religious message, went on to uncover radical Enlightenment in a group of journalists and publishers in the United Provinces, whom she believed were responsible for the aggressively irreligious Traité des trois imposteurs (1721). Israel was likewise indebted to a long tradition of anti-clerical scholarship in Italy, and increasingly also to German scholarship. What Israel added to this portrayal of the radical Enlightenment, besides the neglected Dutch contemporaries of Spinoza, was an insistence on the importance of Spinoza’s monist metaphysics as its philosophical foundation. Interpreting the proposition that God and Nature are one substance as subsuming God into nature (rather than elevating nature to the divine), Israel suggested that such a metaphysics was the necessary foundation for Enlightenment arguments for toleration, human rights, gender equality, and even democracy.

The prevalence of a Spinozist metaphysics is very much open to question. Interest in Spinoza’s philosophy was certainly widespread, but few adopted it wholesale, and the label ‘Spinozist’ was frequently used as a pejorative without serious attention to the arguments of the author so labelled. With or without that metaphysics, however, the radicalism of a number of critics of religious orthodoxy is undeniable. Among the Dutch, the brothers Adriaen and Johannes Koerbagh (1632–69, 1634–72) denied the divinity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity more emphatically than the Socinians; Lodewijk Meyer (1629–81) argued that the Bible must be interpreted as philosophy if it was to make any sense; and Balthasar Becker (1634–98) denounced the very idea of the Devil, along with demons, spirits, and witchcraft, as the inventions of priests who would keep the people in thrall by superstition. At the same time, in the early 1680s, Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), a French Huguenot living in exile in Rotterdam, advanced the suggestion, which most contemporaries found horrifying if not
incomprehensible, that a society made up of atheists was at least as conceivable as one of idolaters: indeed since atheists were more likely to acknowledge that men were driven by their passions rather than by their opinions, their society would be the more stable. Later, in his great *Dictionnaire, historique et critique* (1697, 1702), Bayle turned to the problem of evil, repeatedly exploring the proposition that the amount of evil in the world was incompatible with a benevolent God. The authors of *Les trois imposteurs* propagated the image of Spinoza the virtuous atheist, translated a section of his *Ethics*, and combined it with selected passages from even more irreligious works, including those which suggested that Moses, Christ, and Muhammad were impostors. In England, a group of radicals once known as ‘Deists’, including Anthony Collins, Matthew Tindal, and John Toland (1670–1722), probed at the difference between Christ’s message and the law of nature, and origins of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. A little later Conyers Middleton (1683–1750), who it is now clear was no deist, launched a withering attack on the credibility of post-Apostolic miracles.

Radical as they were, however, it is clear that these writers were heavily indebted to recent and contemporary lines of theological and historical enquiry into the ancient Hebrews, the early Christian Church, and several of the world’s other major religions. Indeed several of those identified above were as much participants in those enquiries as they were critics of religion’s excesses. One such line of enquiry, attracting increasing attention in the seventeenth century, was into natural religion. The suggestion that religious belief and practice were natural to man, and might exist independent of genuine revelation, was not meant to offer an alternative to Christianity; rather, it had come to be seen as essential to making sense of paganism, ancient and contemporary. Worship of gods other than the God of the Bible was by Biblical definition idolatry; but it was not necessary to understand it as the work of the devil. As the Jesuits and the (rather fewer) Protestant missionaries realized, their work was a great deal easier to envisage when conceived as bringing the naturally religious to the higher level of belief required for the Christian revelation. Similarly, the concept of natural religion made it possible for scholars to study pagan religions, particularly those which had existed alongside, and in important respects seemed to have influenced, the religious practices of the ancient Hebrews.

A second line of scholarly enquiry concerned revealed religion and its principal witness, the Bible. A long tradition of Jewish and Christian scholarly enquiry into the languages, versions, and content of the Bible was accelerated in the mid- and later seventeenth century, culminating in the major works of linguistic and textual criticism by the Protestants Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), Louis Cappel (1585–1658), and Jean Le Clerc (1657–1736) and the Catholic Richard Simon (1638–1712). The outcome of this scholarship was an understanding of the Bible as a composite work, whose authors could not (p. 150) have been those whose names were attached to its ‘books’—most controversially, it was almost impossible that Moses could have written the whole of the Pentateuch—and whose chronologies were irreparably inconsistent. The Word of God was pluri-vocal, and in any case had not survived in an ‘original’ version. To understand its content, and make sense of its chronologies, it had to be studied comparatively, using information gathered from the parallel investigation of the histories and philosophies of the Hebrews’ contemporaries, the Egyptians and the Chaldeans.

However bold and disturbing their conclusions for those in ecclesiastical authority, these scholars were men of faith, their motives constructive. Radical critics of Christianity like the authors of the *Trois imposteurs*, Toland and Tindal could certainly exploit their findings, but others who used them, like Bayle and Middleton, were scholars in their own right, and make the line between scholarship and criticism hard to draw. Moreover the work of the scholars also opened up new avenues of theological–political enquiry, complicating the distinction between critique and enquiry still further.

An example was the interest in sacred history as a resource for studying the formation of the earliest human societies. At a time when texts were still the most highly valued form of evidence, the Bible stood out as the earliest written record of history, and therefore as the primary source for those who would explain human sociability. The pioneer of this enquiry was indeed Spinoza—but Spinoza the author of the *Theological–Political Treatise* (1670), not the metaphysician. In this extraordinarily original work, Spinoza explained how the Biblical narrative framed the religion of the Hebrews as a set of social conventions, and constituted them a people through their history. Even if the Babylonian exile had marked the end of their existence as a people, as Spinoza believed, Christ had later propagated the same laws and conventions on a universal basis. It was through religion (Jewish, then Christian), in other words, that natural (European) man had been socialized.23
A similar enquiry was undertaken in the 1730s by the Neapolitan historian Pietro Giannone (1676–1748), in the first volume of his Triregno, devoted to the ‘earthly’ kingdom of the Hebrews. The manuscript of the Triregno was seized by Papal agents before it could be published, but the same fate did not befall the masterwork of Giannone’s Neapolitan contemporary, Giambattista Vico (1668–1744). Vico took the precaution of proclaiming the orthodoxy of his Scienza Nuova (1725, with further editions in 1730 and 1744), but this too used the framework of the Bible to tell the story of human socialization through religion—except that in Vico’s case his subjects were not the Hebrews, but the Gentile offspring of Ham and Japhet, and it was not by worship of the true God but by idolatry that these had been brought into society. As he pointed out, this refuted Bayle’s hypothesis of a society of atheists; but it also accorded Christ far less of a role in the story than either Spinoza or Giannone had allowed him. A comparable, if more awkward, attempt to harness scholarship to refute Bayle and explain the role of religion in forming the earliest societies was made by the English theologian, William Warburton (1698–1779), in his Divine Legation of Moses (1738, 1741).

Arguments for toleration have also been associated particularly with radical Enlightenment. Again, however, the story is more complicated. Here the findings of contemporary scholarship were less important than theological propositions about the nature of religious belief and the requirements for individual salvation. By the mid-seventeenth century, the advisability of toleration where it seemed necessary in order to secure civil peace was accepted by rulers on both sides of the main confessional divide. For Catholics it was ‘politique’ and for Protestants it was ‘Erastian’ to entrust the maintenance of order in religious observation to the civil magistrate, whether he chose to do by imposing uniformity or by tolerating specific groups of religious dissidents. After Louis XIV had chosen the option of uniformity by revoking the Edict of Nantes in 1685, however, there was a clear need for stronger arguments on behalf of toleration. They were forthcoming from John Locke (1632–1704) and Pierre Bayle.

In his Letter on Toleration (1685), Locke argued that the law of nature imposed a duty on all men to worship God in a way which did not threaten civil peace; but that it was for the individual to decide which form of worship would conduce to her or his salvation. Bayle went even further, insisting on the liberty of the individual conscience, whatever beliefs were held; in Bayle’s view, it is not our beliefs but our passions which determine our behaviour, and they will ensure that we remain sociable. These are now regarded as classic arguments for toleration, high points of Enlightenment—but it should be recognized that they were fundamentally Protestant in their emphasis on the rights and responsibilities of the individual conscience. Given this emphasis, the arguments of Locke and Bayle would not carry the same conviction with Catholics, let alone non-Christians.

The thinkers so far considered as forming the radical Enlightenment, along with the scholars on whose work they relied, were all active in the hundred years between 1640 and 1740, before the period more usually associated with the Enlightenment, between 1740 and 1790. For this reason, radical Enlightenment is also equated with ‘early’ Enlightenment, as distinct from the later ‘high’ Enlightenment. The distinction is useful, but needs qualification. While those associated with radical Enlightenment cannot be understood apart from their contemporaries in the larger group of scholars and philosophers interested in religion and its history, many of the latter had little to do with Enlightenment, of any description. By the same token, it is a mistake to confine radical Enlightenment to the period before 1740 (as Israel was initially inclined to do). In the story of the Enlightenment’s engagement with religion, the contributions of two of Israel’s high Enlightenment ‘moderates’, Voltaire and Hume, were among the most radical.

Voltaire (1694–1778) was radical in his treatment of both sacred history and toleration. The starting point of his universal history, the Essai sur les moeurs (1756), was not Genesis, but the earliest chronicles of the Chinese. It was there, in the Far, not the Middle, East, that history should be taken to have begun. From China he worked westwards, through India and Islamic Arabia, eventually reaching the Hebrews and the emergence of Christianity. At each stage he treated the prevailing religions, not as manifestations of natural idolatry, but as integral features of their distinctive civilizations. Voltaire’s arguments for toleration, set out in a Traité sur la tolerance (1763) written immediately after his intervention in the case of Jean Calas, likewise denied any priority to Christianity, and dispensed entirely with theological principle. In a modern society, in which manners had softened behaviour and philosophy had disarmed superstition, intolerance of the kind displayed
by the judges of Calas was a repugnant anachronism: a civilized society was one which had learned to tolerate religious
difference.27

David Hume (1711–76) first displayed his radicalism towards religion in his philosophy. Directly in the *Enquiry concerning
Human Understanding* (1748), teasingly but more thoroughly in the posthumous *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*
(1779), he mounted a critique of the coherence of the argument for the existence of a divine creator from the design of the
world. In between, in the *Natural History of Religion* (1757), he challenged not simply the priority of Jewish and Christian
sacred history, but the superiority of monotheism over polytheism. The latter was the original religion of men; it was also
inherently more tolerant than monotheism. And no monotheism was worse, Hume implied, than Christianity, supported as it
was by a morality of self-denial, the antithesis of what we naturally find ‘useful and agreeable’ in this world.28

These radical positions, however, are not the whole story of the high Enlightenment’s engagement with religion. For the lines
of scholarly, historical enquiry which had been so important in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries continued
to be followed in the later eighteenth century. In Biblical scholarship the focus shifted from questions of authorship (now
considered unresolvable) and chronology to the culture of the ancient Hebrews. One approach was through the study of
Hebrew poetry. Lectures by the Oxford scholar Robert Lowth (1710–87) were heard by the young German scholar Johann
David Michaelis (1717–91), inspiring his work on the Hebrew language; later J. G. Herder (1744–1803) treated Hebrew
poetry as a key to understanding the ‘national’ identity of the ancient Hebrews. Another approach, pursued by Michaelis,
was the collection of evidence on the inhabitants of modern Arabia, interpreting it as if they were contemporaries of the
Biblical peoples.29

The contribution of religious beliefs and practices to the formation of societies also continued to be explored. The key
development here was a fresh assessment of the role of religion in mediating between natural and civil history. In *
L’Antiquité dévoilée—Antiquity unveiled*—(1766), Nicholas-Antoine Boulanger (1722–59) traced the presence of the
Flood myth in all the world’s major religions, treating this as a key to the social organization of their followers. In turn this
material was combined by the foremost thinker of the later Neapolitan Enlightenment, Francesco Mario Pagano (1748–99),
with an explicitly Vichian interest in ancient mythologies to compose a sweeping new account of the emergence of
society.30

But the most distinctive expression of the Enlightenment’s engagement with religion remains Edward Gibbon’s (1737–94)
*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88). To the majority of his contemporaries, and many since, the *Decline
and Fall* was an attack on Christianity, as one of the twin forces of ‘barbarism and religion’ which brought down the Roman
empire. The critical edge of Gibbon’s prose is most obvious in the concluding chapters (15 and 16) of Volume I, where he
ostentatiously restricted himself to the ‘secondary causes’ of Christianity’s ascent, setting aside its providential truth. As the
history proceeds, however, it is arguable that Gibbon’s treatment of the history of the Church (p. 153) becomes more subtle,
even respectful, as he grew to understand (if not to believe in) the theology which constituted and sustained its existence. In
the final volumes of the work, moreover, it becomes clear that Gibbon meant more by ‘religion’ than Christianity alone: Islam
had been just as important to the fate of the empire in the East, and fascinated Gibbon rather more than the medieval
papacy.31 In its ever-shifting combination of scepticism, criticism, and scholarly understanding, Gibbon’s portrayal of religion
was emblematic of Enlightenment at its intellectual best.

**Human Nature and the Progress of Society**

At the same time as religion has returned to the forefront of understanding of the Enlightenment, a consensus has emerged
among intellectual historians that Enlightenment thinkers also stand out for their interest in ‘society’.32 As we shall see in the
final section, there is a symmetry between this consensus and the social historians’ enthusiasm for associating Enlightenment
with the idea of the ‘public sphere’. But the intellectual historians have their own reasons for suggesting that the
Enlightenment be particularly associated with the definition and analysis of ‘society’. These stem from the realization that
political thinking in the eighteenth century was much less preoccupied than it had been in the seventeenth and would be in the nineteenth centuries with the concept of the ‘state’ and the related early modern concept of ‘sovereign power’.

‘Government’ and its forms were of concern, but in relation to the ‘society’ of which it was a part; further, a complex of factors, including geography, climate, the structure of property ownership, the economic activities of its inhabitants, and the character of their ‘manners’ (an insufficient translation of the French ‘moeurs’), should be studied to understand any given ‘society’.

This preoccupation with ‘society’ is seen by historians to have been based on a renewed interest in the study of ‘human nature’, its composition and distinctive attributes. Three interconnected lines of enquiry were particularly characteristic of Enlightenment thinking about human nature: the distinction between humans and animals, the relation in humans of the passions to reason, and the origins, uses, and possible abuses of language. These in turn had radical implications for the development of moral philosophy over the eighteenth century.

The distinction between men and animals had been thrown into question by natural philosophers in the seventeenth century. One dimension of the enquiry concentrated on physical attributes. In 1699 the English naturalist Edward Tyson represented the ‘orang-outang’ (in fact a young chimpanzee) as able to walk on its hind legs and as possessing organs of speech. Subsequently both the Swedish naturalist Linnaeus (1707–78) and Buffon had produced series of types of man, whose effect was to blur the distinction between human and animal. A consequence of such classifications, however, was that differences between types of human were accentuated, with a marked tendency to place white Europeans at the higher end of the spectrum, and black Africans at the lower, closest to the ‘orang-outang’. If this were combined with the heterodox thought that there must have been men in the world before Adam, and hence that human origins were polygenetic rather than monogenetic, it permitted what now looks all too like a racial hierarchy. It should be emphasized, however, that racial thinking was not pervasive or particularly prominent in Enlightenment treatments of human nature; it was occasional in its incidence, and by no means necessarily led those (like David Hume) who thought ‘negroes’ inferior to whites to justify the former’s slavery.

A second provocative approach to the relation of animals to humans had been that of Descartes, who identified similarity in the mechanical operation of the passions. Here, the disturbing implication for human nature was the thought that the passions might be stronger than reason, casting doubt on the capacity for reason as the distinguishing human characteristic. Descartes, treating reason as divinely underwritten, did not take this step; but many in the seventeenth century did. In the event, this line of enquiry was to prove far richer than that based on physical or even racial differences between men: the power of the passions was the dominant motif in the Enlightenment enquiry into human nature, with far-reaching consequences for the broader enquiry into ‘society’. Intellectual historians offer various possible explanations for this emphasis on the passions; in doing so, they give an account of Enlightenment radically at odds with the philosophers’ long-standing belief that the Enlightenment was an ‘age of reason’.

Prominent among the explanations for the primacy of the passions is the growth of interest in the Hellenistic philosophies of Stoicism and Epicureanism. As with all appropriations of ancient thought, the interest in these philosophies combined varying proportions of textual reception with conceptual adaptation: what seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers understood by ‘Stoicism’ and ‘Epicureanism’ was not confined to their reading of the source texts of the two traditions. In both cases, ancient concepts were pressed into the service of modern agendas. Of the two, moreover, it was ‘Epicureanism’ which was particularly associated with recognition of the power of the passions. In part this was because of its association with ‘libertine’ self-indulgence; but what interested late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers was the connection in ancient Epicureanism between the passions and the pursuit of the ‘useful’ and the ‘agreeable’ in life, the utile and the dulce of the poet Horace. Conversely, Stoicism, which had been in vogue early in the seventeenth century as a philosophy adapted to the imposition of ‘discipline’ by absolute rulers, returned to favour in the early eighteenth century in response to Epicureanism, this time as a philosophy of moderate, sociable virtue, capable of restraining the self-interested passions, and fostering our ability to acknowledge the passions of others.
But the contest was not simply between these Hellenistic philosophies: what tipped the scales, enabling Epicureanism to set the agenda of the eighteenth-century enquiry into human nature, was the convergence between its emphasis on the passions and a revived Augustinianism, preoccupied with human sinfulness, and with the consequent inability of men and women to suppress their concupiscent urges. The new Augustinianism of the later seventeenth century was Catholic rather than Protestant, articulated by the group of French theologians and philosophers led by Blaise Pascal and Pierre Nicole and known as ‘Jansenists’. Renewing the interest in introspection previously cultivated by Montaigne, the Augustinians were fascinated by the way in which human self-interest manifested itself as ‘amour propre’, a desire to distinguish oneself from others, even if this required deception. The ends to which Augustinian moral theology aspired might be diametrically opposite to those of Epicureanism: salvation in the next life as opposed to the useful and agreeable in this one. But the weight they both attached to the passions made it impossible to think of human nature as readily subordinating itself either to reason or to virtue.

Epicureanism also made a powerful contribution to a third aspect of the eighteenth-century study of human nature—the origins and uses of language. In the sacred–historical perspective of the Bible, language was God’s gift to Adam, a gift renewed but multiplied at the Tower of Babel. By the end of the seventeenth century, an alternative, Epicurean narrative was increasingly added to or even substituted for the Biblical story: in this, language had developed in response to need, as humans articulated their desire to associate in order to defend themselves against wild animals and, increasingly, each other. In this perspective, adopted for their very different purposes by Samuel Pufendorf and Richard Simon, language too was a creature of the passions. At the same time, language was rendered by philosophers of the understanding, most influentially Locke, as signifier, more or less accurately—or arbitrarily—representing what the senses perceived. Finally, the Augustinians, and the moralists most influenced by them, notably La Rochefoucauld, accentuated the scope for language to serve amour propre, to act as the instrument by which humans continually deceive each other in search of advantage at others’ expense.

What connected these new lines of enquiry into human nature with the study of society was a complex, long-running, and enormously fertile debate over human ‘sociability’. The instigator of the debate was Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), who in his De Cive repudiated as ‘false’ Aristotle’s axiom that man was naturally fitted for society. Instead, Hobbes argued, there and still more evocatively in Leviathan (1651), humans were naturally unsociable. In their natural condition, competition for scarce resources, diffidence of each other’s intentions, and the desire for ‘glory’ together made men seek their preservation at the expense of others, putting them in a state of constant incipient conflict. They were, in short, driven by their passions. The arbitrariness of language only compounded the problem: men in this condition could have no confidence that they shared a common moral language, even if it was reasonable to suppose (as Hobbes apparently did) that such a language existed, in the form of the Law of Nature. Hobbes thus overthrew the assumption of his contemporary Hugo Grotius that the formation of society and the civitas occurred naturally by contract, arguing instead that only an indefeasible sovereign power could constitute ‘civil society’. Grotius had explicitly invoked Stoic concepts to reinforce his account of sociability; Hobbes, unsurprisingly, was perceived to be an ‘Epicurean’.

(p.156) Within the broad field of moral philosophy, there were three main lines of response to the problem posed by Hobbes. (A fourth, deploying the resources of sacred history, was mentioned in the previous section.) The first emerged from within Protestant natural law, in a series of attempts to rehabilitate the Grotian account of society. The lead was taken by Samuel Pufendorf (1632–94): accepting Hobbes’s point that man in his natural condition would not have the resources to act according to the law of nature, Pufendorf envisaged a gradual acquisition of the institutions—family, language, property—which made society possible, prior to establishing a civitas. In other words, Pufendorf inserted a temporal sequence into the process of socialization. His approach was followed by Christian Thomasius (1655–1728) at Halle, and provided the basis for the teaching of moral philosophy in universities across Protestant Europe. John Locke, meanwhile, gave an account of the institution of property, and subsequently of government, which attempted to combine a normative argument from the state of nature with the historical evidence of the Bible and conjectures derived from reports of the native peoples of America. Both Pufendorf and Locke conceded ground to the thesis of natural unsociability. But their early eighteenth-century successors, including the Swiss Jean Barbeyrac (1674–1744), the Scot Gershom Carmichael (1672–1729), and his successor in the chair
of moral philosophy at Glasgow, the Irish presbyterian Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), were less defensive, restoring the case for natural sociability.  

Hutcheson was able to do this because he had earlier aligned himself with a second strand in the response to Hobbes, one explicitly indebted to Stoicism, and most fully articulated by the Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713). Shaftesbury reasserted the capacity for virtue by identifying it with civilized manners; Hutcheson took this further, suggesting that humans naturally possessed a ‘moral sense’ additional to the external senses, a sense which ensured their sociability. Hutcheson was a key figure in the development of both a moral and an aesthetic philosophy based in the sentiments, with a particularly strong following in Germany well into the second half of the eighteenth century.

The third approach to the problem of sociability began by accepting and even reinforcing the thesis that it was unnatural. The key move was that of Pierre Nicole, adding Augustinian *amour propre* to Hobbes’s ‘Epicurean’ account of the self-interested passions. What Nicole, and after him Bayle, observed was that *amour propre* actually depended on society for its satisfaction: natural unsociability would yield sociability, through the very artifices by which individuals sought to take advantage of each other. The possibilities of this approach were dramatically realized a generation later, by Bernard Mandeville (1670–1733), who argued that it was precisely the vices (the lack of self-restraint) of men and (no less) women, which ensured the existence and flourishing of modern society. As evidence, Mandeville pointed to his adopted city of London, where pleasure went hand-in-hand with hypocrisy. But the most thorough-going philosophical treatment of the acquisition of sociability in the first half of the eighteenth century was that of David Hume. Provoked by Mandeville’s cavalier unconcern for the moral consequences of his analysis, Hume set about explaining not only how we might best understand the acquisition of sociability over time, but whence we derive the moral values which hold sociability in place. Crucially, justice must be regarded as an artifice; (p. 157) there could be no rescuing the Grotian account of justice as an expression of natural human sociability.

By 1750, therefore, the debate over sociability had unfolded in several different directions. Within five years, however, all existing treatments of the subject faced a fresh challenge: Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s (1712–78) *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755). There were indeed no grounds for supposing society to be natural, Rousseau argued, in terms many regarded as ‘Epicurean’: man’s natural condition must be supposed to have been one of solitude, with reproduction occurring only as a result of fleeting encounters of the sexes. Scarcity, however, must eventually have driven men and women to cooperate and divide their labour, until by the abuse of language a few had persuaded the many to accept the institution of property, and with it inequality. Inequality in turn gave free rein to *amour propre*, leading to still greater inequality and, in the end, despotism. The outcome of the Epicurean–Augustinian account of sociability derived from the passions, therefore, was not, after all, a life ‘useful and agreeable’; it was a state of ever greater moral corruption.

The moral philosophy of the later Enlightenment may be understood as a protracted attempt to find a convincing response to Rousseau’s *Discourse*. One of the earliest to recognize the force of Rousseau’s intervention was Adam Smith (1727–90), whose *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) included a defence of inequality as fostering the universal desire to ‘better our condition’. But not even Smith was confident he had succeeded. In the last edition of the work he was able to revise (1790), he admitted that admiration of the rich was indeed corrupting; only a very few, capable of achieving the stand-point of the ‘Impartial Spectator’, could be expected to rise above this danger. Still more thorough-going was Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Instead of associating morals with the acquisition of sociability, Kant insisted that moral principles must be formulated a priori, and understood as willed by reason: moral values were those which satisfied the ‘categorical imperative’—act in accordance with a maxim that can at the same time make itself a universal moral law. Separating morals from sociability, however, did not resolve the problem of what Kant himself called ‘unsocial sociability’. Only if history were endowed with providential purpose would we be able to imagine a reconciliation between the society formed from the ‘crooked timber’ of our passions, and the moral universe prescribed by the categorical imperative.

A rather different approach to the understanding of society was taken by Montesquieu (1689–1755), and, in many cases
under his influence, by the major narrative historians of the Enlightenment. Forms of government were still of primary concern to Montesquieu: at the heart of the *Esprit des Lois* (1748) was an interrogation of the respective merits of the monarchy of France and the hybrid, quasi-republican monarchy of England. But Montesquieu was convinced that the important questions concerning government could no longer be answered from the resources of natural law. What was needed was a comprehensive historical and social vision, in which physical circumstances, including the greater or lesser extent of a country and its access to the sea, property-holding arrangements, and prevailing moral values, were all considered relevant to understanding both the history and the future prospects of a government and its citizens.41

(p. 158) A similar point would be made by Voltaire in his *Essai sur les moeurs* (1756), which despite its title was nothing less than a ‘universal history’; it had likewise informed his histories of the age of Louis XIV and of Charles XII of Sweden. David Hume’s *History of England* (1754–61) and William Robertson’s (1721–93) *History of Scotland* (1759) were both written in the conviction that a political narrative had to be framed by the patterns of property-holding and the progress of the arts and sciences. To these Hume added an acute analysis of the political effects of religious ‘enthusiasm’, so important to the outbreak and course of the British civil wars, and an awareness of historical distance, juggling with different perspectives in the attempt to do justice to the trial and execution of Charles I.42

An extension of the interest in the social framework of history was the recourse to an explicitly ‘stadicl’ theory of social change, or ‘the progress of society’. The two main ways of conceptualizing these stages were cultural and economic: either ‘savage’, ‘barbarian’, and ‘civilized’, or ‘hunting’, ‘pastoral’, ‘agricultural’, and ‘commercial’. But they were often combined, and it was common for hunters to be identified as savages, herders as barbarians. Responding to Rousseau, Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) invoked the martial virtues of those early societies as a warning to the ‘civilized’, commercial states of the late eighteenth century; Adam Smith, by contrast, deployed the four-stages theory to explain how commercial societies had come to dominate Europe and, by maritime expansion, much of the rest of the world as well. Others to make fruitful use of stadial theory were the German universal historians of Göttingen, J. G. Gatterer, and A. L. Schlözer.43

As this implies, stadial theory could seem all too adaptable to the ideological purpose of justifying European empire in Asia and the Americas. In several cases, as in Robertson’s *History of America* (1777), it did indeed serve that purpose. But the Enlightenment historians’ starting point was curiosity: why was Europe more advanced than other societies elsewhere in the world, and in particular, so much more prosperous than the native peoples of America? What is now called ‘the great divergence’ was the Enlightenment’s problem too. Moreover, many Enlightenment historians were critical of European aggression towards others. The sharpest critique was developed in the Abbé Raynal’s *Histoire des deux Indes* (1770–80), much of which was in fact written by Diderot. But Adam Smith exposed the harm done by the great European monopoly companies in the East Indies, and both Herder and Kant were vehement in denouncing the damage inflicted by Europeans on other cultures and societies. The most searching of all Enlightenment studies of empire, even so, was Gibbon’s history of Rome. As a universal monarchy with a cultural monopoly from which no dissident could hide, Rome represented a past from which Europe had been fortunate to escape, even at the cost of the temporary triumph of barbarism and religion. If Gibbon was over-confident in supposing that such an empire would never threaten Europe again, his hostility to the imperial idea was exemplary of Enlightenment historical opinion.44

Understanding why commerce had made Europe so prosperous was the final and perhaps most distinctively Enlightenment aspect of the broader enquiry into society. Economic analysis was not of course new: it was present in ancient Greek and Scholastic moral thinking. Economic writing emerged as a separate genre in the seventeenth (p. 159) century, with works in French (in which the term ‘économic politique’ was first coined), Italian, German, Dutch, and, most prolifically, English. By the end of the century English writers such as Nicholas Barbon, John Cary, and Henry Marten were publicly debating the prospects of surpassing the trade of the Dutch as well as the French, and arguing over the extent to which English manufactures should be protected against imports by the major overseas trading companies. Simultaneously but more privately, French critics of Louis XIV’s monarchy were discussing whether to drop Colbert’s policy in favour of manufactures for an assertion of the primacy of agriculture.
Despite this caution, it was French economic writing whose publication did most to shape political economy in the first half of the eighteenth century. The key text was Jean-François Melon’s (1675–1738) *Essai politique sur le commerce* (1734), which combined analysis of the optimum internal ‘balance’ between agriculture and manufactures with an argument that an agricultural nation such as France should be at an advantage in competitive international trade. Melon’s *Essai* quickly established itself across Europe as a manual of economic argument, and a strategy for agricultural nations to adopt in response to the commercial superiority of the Dutch and the English. French leadership in the dissemination of political economy was reinforced by the activities of Vincent de Gournay (1712–59), who promoted the translation of works of earlier and contemporary economic writers, Spanish and particularly English; in turn several of these translations were themselves the basis for further translations, into Italian, Spanish, and German. A notable example of the process was the repeated translation of John Cary’s *Essay on the State of England*, originally published in 1695, expanded and rendered into French by members of the Gournay circle in 1755, and thence translated into Italian in 1757.45

At the end of this line of French economists were the Physiocrats, led by François Quesnay (1694–1774). These accentuated the primacy of agriculture, giving it additional analytical support; they also campaigned for the wholesale liberalization of the grain trade. The explicit sectarianism of the Physiocrats gave them a prominence which has encouraged historians to identify them as the only French economists of note. This is a mistake; rather, their contribution was to refine and radicalize a continuous tradition of argument initiated by the critics of Louis XIV.

Outside France, important schools of political economy developed in Italy, Spain, and Germany. The most original of the Italians was the Milanese economist Pietro Verri; the most embattled were the Neapolitans, headed by Antonio Genovesi, who found that the advance of political economy was at the mercy of the entrenched power of feudal landownership. With its antecedents in seventeenth-century Cameralism, the German treatment of political economy was the most distinctive; by the later eighteenth century, it had become a key component of the *Staatswissenschaften*, or ‘State Sciences’.

Nevertheless, it was the Scots, David Hume and Adam Smith, who offered the most thorough-going alternative to the French emphasis on the primacy of agriculture. Taking Melon as his foil, Hume denied that there was an analytic difference between agricultural and commercial economies: all economies depended on commerce to enable manufacturers to provide agriculturalists with the incentive to improve their productivity, and to encourage manufacturers to imitate and provide alternatives to goods. Even if poorer countries never caught up on their richer trading partners, commerce was still the key to their prosperity. Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776) echoed and elaborated these and other arguments for commerce, but devoted particular attention to the problems caused by what Hume had called ‘jealousy of trade’, or economic competition between nations. Setting off what he called the ‘natural progress of opulence’ against Europe’s actual, historical development, Smith explained why Europe had come to exceed everywhere else in its prosperity—and yet was ever more endangered by the narrow self-interest of its merchants and the gullibility of its governments.46

This concern notwithstanding, Hume and Smith were confident of the benefits of commerce to society, at every level. Even if inequality in commercial society was greater than at any previous stage of development, the poor in such a society were better off than before. Rousseau may have been right, as even Smith acknowledged, in his conviction that inequality corrupts; but the compensating benefit of general human betterment was undeniable. Along with the great majority of Enlightenment thinkers, neither Hume nor Smith believed in the possibility of unlimited progress, to the point that scarcity would be overcome. It was enough that participation in commercial society enabled every rank of men to ‘better their condition’ while on earth. Here, not in the critique of religion, was the Enlightenment’s greatest contribution to understanding human society and its prospects.

**Enlightenment in the Public Sphere**

In the last twenty-five years, study of the social and institutional framework of Enlightenment has been transformed by the concept of the ‘public sphere’. As we have seen, the book whose translation in 1989 coined the term, Jürgen Habermas’s...
The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, became an inspiration to historians, enabling them to use the concept of the ‘public sphere’ to capture and organize several recent developments in the study of the Enlightenment’s social history. As with any historical concept successfully applied to one period, scholars from other periods have been quick to lay claim to the idea, and argue that a public sphere existed much earlier than the eighteenth century. But Habermas’s concept was historically specific. His point was that from the second half of the seventeenth century there developed institutions which were more or less independent of those of the princely court and government, institutions within which the urban upper and middling classes could meet and discuss ideas free from oversight by the authorities. At first these institutions supported (only) a ‘literary’ public sphere; but by the end of the century this public sphere was increasingly ‘political’ as well. Habermas drew his evidence overwhelmingly from the English case, where evidence for the early development of institutions such as the coffee house was particularly clear; arguably, he overlooked the extent to which the English public sphere was also politicized throughout the eighteenth century. But this oversight may (p. 161) actually enhance the applicability of the concept to continental Europe, where it is more plausible to think of the public sphere as relatively unpolitical and ‘literary’ for most of the century.

The institutions which historians have particularly associated with an enlightened public sphere were the coffee house, the masonic lodge, and the literary salon. Coffee houses were introduced into Britain and northern Europe in the mid-seventeenth century, quickly becoming popular with customers. What connects them with Enlightenment is their association with a literary genre, the weekly journal whose model was Joseph Addison’s The Spectator (1711–12). Addison’s initiative was not without political purpose, to divert attention away from the issues of church and state on which the Tories were at that time dominant; his genius, however, was to develop a journal whose content mimicked and informed the conversational topics of coffee house patrons, from the latest fashions to country pursuits to matters of everyday concern to the reasonably well-off, such as the investment opportunities created by new methods of public finance.

Although its membership was drawn from a smaller section of society (and usually excluded women), Freemasonry spread as far and wide across Europe as the coffee house: by the end of the century there were many thousands of lodges. Better than the coffee house, Freemasonry testified to the enthusiasm for voluntary association apart from court and government, which were often suspicious of it, especially in Roman Catholic southern Europe; less evident, however, was its contribution to Enlightenment. The secrecy of Masonic ritual was hardly consistent with the idea of a public sphere, while its lore does not seem congenial to Enlightenment intellectual priorities. If many men of letters were masons, there were also public sceptics, Voltaire, Mandeville, and Hume among them.

Far fewer could be members of the salons of Paris; nevertheless these have carried a higher burden of expectation among historians than any other institution associated with the public sphere. In a spirited riposte to what she took to be Darnton’s slighting of women’s role, Dena Goodman argued that the salons offered their female directors, the salonnières, the opportunity to set the agenda of the republic of letters through conversation and letter-writing. Attractive as it may be, however, Goodman’s case has been answered by Antoine Lilti, with a demonstration that the salons remained institutions of ancien régime society, wedded to an ideal of mondanité which left the men of letters in a subordinate position as little more than purveyors of polite intellectual entertainment, and the salonnières as agents of a limited measure of social mobility. Unlike their seventeenth-century literary predecessors, the salons of the later eighteenth century now seem to have flattered to deceive the cause of Enlightenment.

A far better candidate to embody the Enlightenment’s presence in the public sphere, it has emerged, were Europe’s universities. In Scotland, the United Provinces, Germany (Catholic as well as Protestant), Italy, and the Iberian peninsula, ancient universities were reformed and new ones founded in order to provide a higher education for administrators, lawyers, and doctors. Many of these would enter government service—the expectation that they would do so ensuring the universities’ funding; but they would do so with an education, not least in modern natural law, which accustomed them to intellectual curiosity and engagement with issues of social and economic improvement. As more enlightened rulers, such as Prussia’s Frederick II, appreciated, officials were the better not only for a university education, but also for continued exposure to a ‘public sphere’ of informed debate in periodicals, pamphlets, and the longer treatises of their
Another traditional institution successfully adapted to Enlightenment and the public sphere was the learned academy. Many of these, especially in capital cities, were the creation of rulers: the several academies of Paris were royal institutions, founded in the seventeenth century, as were the Royal Academy of Sciences and Belles Lettres in Berlin (1700, re-founded 1744) and the Royal Academy of Sciences in Turin, a late foundation in 1783. As such, they enjoyed as much or as little intellectual latitude as their royal masters allowed: considerable in Frederick II’s Berlin, limited in Vittorio Amedeo III’s Turin. Authority over provincial academies might be contested between the Crown and local elites; but there was scope for initiative too. Like the Berlin Academy, several French academies organized prize essay contests: the most famous were those of the Academy of Dijon, through their association with Rousseau. In Spain, the Real Sociedad Bascongada de los Amigos del País was very much a vehicle for Basque patriots committed to the province’s economic improvement. Voluntary societies such as the Dublin Society (1731), the Select Society of Edinburgh (1754), and the many Literary and Philosophical Societies of provincial England possessed the greatest freedom of initiative. Directly or indirectly through subsidiary societies, these enabled an educated public to join men of letters in discussing new economic and social principles, and applying them to the betterment of agriculture and manufactures.

As Darnton has argued all along, however, the Enlightenment’s ability to create and connect with a public owed most of all to the printers of eighteenth-century Europe. The rapid growth in the industry was not due to technological innovation; rather enterprising publishers anticipated and exploited a market. Their position was strengthened in the major centres by better protection of copyright, statutory in England from 1710, as well as by various trade privileges; even so, there were plenty of enterprises in smaller states—in Germany or, within the United Kingdoms, in Ireland—ready to meet demand by ‘pirate’ editions. The leading metropolitan publishers in London and Paris duly complained; but they also cut deals with their rivals and learned more about potential demand. Two of the most successful publishing initiatives were the great Encyclopédie, published in France and in Neuchatel, by the Société Typographique de Neuchatel, and the histories of Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon, along with the works of Adam Smith, published by the London–Scottish partnership of William Strahan and Thomas Cadell.

The increasing size and scale of the publishing industry not only meant more books; it also undermined the attempts of the authorities to control the trade and exert censorship over content. Only in Britain did the authorities effectively give up, allowing the Licensing Act to lapse in 1695. By contrast France had two censoring authorities, the Director of the Book Trade and the Parlement of Paris, as well as a dedicated police force for the trade. Yet these were as likely to contradict each other as to work together: the ingenuity of Malesherbes, Director of the Book Trade between 1750 and 1763, in enabling the Encyclopédie to begin publication in 1751, was overthrown when the Parlement forced suspension of publication in 1757—only for publication to resume in the 1760s. Even the Index of Prohibited Books in Rome adopted a new approach under Pope Benedict XIV, seeking to guide the reading of the faithful instead of simply preventing its access to heretical work.

Publishers, of course, were responding to—but also cultivating—the tastes of readers. Rising literacy rates were essential: in France literacy increased from just above a quarter to just below a half of the population; in the United Kingdom, literacy was over 60 per cent. But as important was the quality of eighteenth-century readers. In this respect, female readers were crucial: they were the primary market for novels, but were also attracted, as David Hume realized, to history. In other fields, such as political economy, popularization, often by women authors, made the ideas accessible to a wider readership than those with an academic or technical interest in the subject. A further benefit offered by eighteenth-century publishers was the opportunity to answer back. In Paris, as Emma Spary has demonstrated, eating and drinking (coffee again) were the subjects of lively debate, scientific as well as gastronomic, involving scholars and consumers alike, the role of enlightened expert being precisely what was at stake.

It was what publishers did for authors, however, which was of greatest benefit to Enlightenment. Increasingly, authors were named on the title page. Where funds were available, or profits expected, an engraved portrait of the author would serve as
a frontispiece. Authors’ access to readers was enlarged by publishers’ willingness to vary format: a serious work of philosophy or history might begin as a quarto; but subsequent editions in octavo would be cheaper and available in greater quantity. Above all, publishers were prepared to reward authors directly for their work, cultivating their acquaintance and improving their financial offers. Among the most successful were the Scottish historians, Hume and Robertson; but Adam Smith was also paid handsomely for the *Wealth of Nations*. So too were the prolific Voltaire and the apparently impecunious Rousseau.

What such rewards made possible was a new degree of independence for the man of letters. Not many, it is true, became financially self-sufficient, as David Hume did upon publishing his *History*. Most combined authorship with a professional, professorial, or government career. But independence had a more specific meaning for the eighteenth-century man of letters: freedom from dependence on an individual patron. A position such as Hobbes had held, as a lifelong retainer of the Devonshire family, was now regarded as demeaning. A man of letters might still take employment as a tutor, as Adam Smith did to the young Duke of Buccleuch; but the terms of his contract combined good remuneration with a life pension, whatever Smith chose to do next (which was to return home to concentrate on writing the *Wealth of Nations*).

With independence came an attribute even more important to an Enlightenment author: authority. When they published, or spoke in an academy or a voluntary society such as the Select Society of Edinburgh, men of letters did so on the basis of their intellectual standing, with a consequent sense of entitlement to educate the wider public. It was this conviction which informed Voltaire’s intervention in the Calas case, and Hume’s self-conscious leadership of Edinburgh literary and intellectual life following his decision (p. 164) to live in the city in 1751. The new authority of the man of letters had limits: it was intellectual and moral, rather than directly political. When Hume tried to teach the political classes in London ‘a lesson in moderation’ through his essays and the *History*, he was perplexed to find his work treated as just as partisan as that of any other political writer. But an indirect approach to politics was much more characteristic of Enlightenment.

Alongside the men of letters were a few women of letters—but not nearly as many as might be suggested by the proportion of women among the Enlightenment’s readers. Research into women has been a major feature of Enlightenment scholarship since the 1990s: the project directed by Barbara Taylor and culminating in the substantial volume edited with Sarah Knott opened many new angles on the subject, taking it far beyond the earlier preoccupation with the salons. Female writers achieved particular prominence in England, where the literary marketplace was open to their contributions across a range of genres, most obviously the novel, but more immediately history, literary criticism, and popular economics. Two groups stand out: the ‘Bluestockings’, headed by the Shakespeare critic Elizabeth Montague, and the radicals, most notably Catherine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft. Women contributing to the Enlightenment have also been identified in France, Spain, and Italy. But it is not clear that Enlightenment accorded significant new agency to women as authors and thinkers, as opposed to readers. The Enlightenment was overwhelmingly a movement of men of letters.

Habermas’s suggestion that the public sphere was literary before it became political might suggest that the Enlightenment remained unpolitical. This is clearly untrue, as the well-known examples of philosophers advising Europe’s leading monarchs testify. Voltaire was summoned by Frederick II to Potsdam; Diderot further still, to St. Petersburg by Catherine II. But it is arguable that Enlightenment thinkers differed from their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century predecessors in casting themselves less as counsellors of princes (the traditional humanist image of the man of letters) than as educators of public opinion. It was increasingly acknowledged that ‘opinion’ rather than force was what governed modern politics, while political economy made it clear that it was the priorities of individual agents which determined economic outcomes in a commercial society, not those of ‘reason of state’. Accordingly governments now needed to be constrained by public opinion, so that they understood the limits of the possible and the desirable; in turn, it was for men of letters to use their new intellectual authority to inform that opinion. This was Kant’s conception of Enlightenment in *What is Enlightenment?*; at the opposite end of Europe, it was also that of the Neapolitans Antonio Genovesi and Gaetano Filangieri. In placing the emphasis on public opinion as an indirect constraint on government, Enlightenment men of letters were not projecting themselves as Plato’s philosopher-kings; nor were they anticipating modern democracy. Rather, they were identifying Enlightenment with a leading role for philosophers and political economists in public life.
The corollary of this conception of the philosopher’s role in the public sphere is that there was no high road from Enlightenment to Revolution, and in particular to the revolution which broke out in France in 1789. Of course Enlightenment authors and readers had contributed to the debates which eventually discredited the ancien régime in France. (p. 165) But as Darnton and others have pointed out, so did the libelles and pornographic novels allegedly depicting the corruption of Louis XVI’s court.58 Many individual men of letters, from Condorcet to Pagano, chose to become revolutionaries, and took the consequences. Issues which had been actively debated before the Revolution continued to exercise those in power afterwards, not least the issue of public finance. The political thinking of the Abbé Sieyès, who framed the options facing the revolutionaries, owed an obvious debt to Montesquieu, Rousseau, and many others.59 But revolutionary politics was the antithesis of Enlightenment politics, direct where Enlightenment was indirect, using force rather than persuasion to re-frame opinion and to seize the initiative. It might even be said that revolution was the revenge of politics upon the Enlightenment. What happened in 1789 and over the succeeding twenty-five years transformed the context of intellectual life as well as the nature of politics; as a result, the Enlightenment was left behind, consigned and confined to the eighteenth century. Its intellectual legacy to the nineteenth and subsequent centuries would be rich, if disputed; but as a historically existing movement of men, women, and ideas, Europe’s Enlightenment was over.

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**Notes:**


(8.) As in *Illuministi italiani. III Riformatori lombardi, piemontesi e toscani; and V Riformatori napoletani* (Milan and Naples, 1958, 1962).


(20.) See n 16.


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(58.) R. Darnton, *Forbidden Best-sellers*.


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Abstract and Keywords

From unpromising starting points in Atlantic-side Europe, during a period of plague and cold, in a region that was poor and, by comparison with civilizations of maritime Asia, technically backward, explorers worked out the wind-systems of the world, and opened routes of commerce, conquest, colonization, contagion, and cultural and ecological exchange between formerly sundered regions and continents. This chapter narrates their achievements and approaches the problems of how and why Europeans’ breakthrough to much of the rest of the world happened when it did. The emphasis is on explorers’ mental as well as material equipment, and on the environmental constraints and challenges that shaped their efforts.

Keywords: Exploration, navigation, routes, winds, currents, exchange

‘Lady, if you please’, begged the sons of the enchantress-queen Mélusine, ‘it seems the time has come for us to undertake a journey, so as to learn of foreign lands, kingdoms and places and win honour and good renown on distant frontiers . . . There we shall learn what is different about distant lands and what they have in common with our own. And then, if fortune or good luck is willing to befriend us, we would dearly like to conquer lands and realms.’¹ The would-be adventurers were fictional characters in a late fourteenth-century novel—representative of an extensive genre in western Europe in the late Middle Ages: tales of knight errantry and derring-do, in which protagonists, frustrated by the limitations of an unnavigable acceptance world at home, sought wealth, fame, and power by setting out on long-distance adventures, usually by sea, discovering new lands, contending with monsters, and typically achieving a fade-out involving marriage with a native princess and elevation to rulership.

In real life, from the fourteenth century to the early seventeenth, explorers from Europe’s Atlantic edge emulated these heroes, seeking and, surprisingly, realizing similar trajectories of their own.

The results were stupendous. Sometimes deliberately, sometimes by accident, explorers, with the traders and colonists who followed or accompanied them, carried biota across oceans, reversing the divergent pattern of evolution of distinctive life-forms in different continents that had lasted for perhaps about 150 million years, ever since Pangea began to split. Wherever explorers went, newly arrived animals and food crops multiplied the opportunities for food production, revolutionized economies, facilitated the settlement of new environments, and ultimately made possible unprecedented population growth. Micro-organisms made the same journeys, shifting the global ecology of disease. The redistribution of biota constituted an unprecedented revolution in natural, as well as cultural, history, upending a long-standing process not just of social change, which had always been at human disposal, but of evolution itself.
The cultural changes explorers initiated were almost as dazzling. For most of the previous history of the world, cultures had diverged as they multiplied and as communities (p. 174) (p. 175) (p. 176) grew apart from one another. Exploration laid down, as it were, the infrastructure of a new phase of global history, in which formerly sundered or barely communicating cultures exchanged commerce, migrants, ideas, and ways of life. Convergence replaced divergence as the dominant trend in the global history of cultures.

Explorers returned to Europe with specimens or descriptions of unfamiliar worlds, stimulating science and demanding radical revisions of previous notions about the world. Long-range seaborne empires, of previously unknown scale and scope, destroyed or deeply modified existing polities and created new ones, of new kinds, along with vast new arenas of cultural exchange that spread European thought, religion, science, and art across the world, while informing and to some extent transforming Europe in turn with ideas, images, technologies, and models of life from the extremities of Asia and from the New World. Because of Europeans’ monopoly of routes to and from the Americas, a vast new hemisphere and its resources fell into the hands of European imperialists and colonists, shunting the global balance of wealth and power from East to West—from China, Islam, and India to Europe. In a further phase, which extended over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the impact of science, new technologies, and professional training transformed European explorers from adventurers to professionals, who gathered data towards the mapping of the world and the classification of its species, soils, and climates.

Yet despite the vastness of the consequences, the explorers’ work remains hard to understand or explain. The problems of why it happened, why it happened when it did happen, and why it was dominated by a few kingdoms and communities in Europe—a region previously poor, technologically backward, and literally marginal by the standards of much of the Islamic world, say, or the civilizations of maritime Asia—remain unsolved. We can approach these problems by outlining first the main features of the period from the mid-fourteenth century to the end of the 1490s, when explorers from Atlantic-side Europe, after slow, tentative beginnings, made a breakthrough into long-range, open-sea navigation across the Atlantic and into the Indian Ocean. We shall look next at their equipment—material and mental. We can then resume the narrative down to the early seventeenth century, when successors, still animated by chivalric self-perceptions and what may properly be called a spirit of adventure, decoded the wind-systems of the rest of the world and put oceans and continents in regular touch with one another. Finally we turn to trace the impact of science in the work of explorers over the rest of the seventeenth century and roughly the first half of the eighteenth.

**Preparation and Breakthrough, c. 1350–c. 1500**

In some ways, the circumstances of late medieval and early modern Europe seemed unpropitious for the growth of interest in long-range exploration or the investigation and acquisition of distant resources. From the mid-fourteenth century until the (p. 177) eighteenth, the region, in common with much of the rest of the world, endured an age of plague and cold, in which population first fell catastrophically, then stagnated or recovered only slowly or fitfully, without obvious reasons for or need of long-range expansion. The Black Death and the ‘Little Ice Age’ did inhibit exploration—but only briefly. Voyages into the African Atlantic, which had mounted from the late thirteenth century to something like a peak in the 1340s when Petrarch declared rhetorically that the Fortunate Islands were as well known as neighbouring lands to his contemporaries, resumed, on a modest scale in the 1360s and encompassed the Azores, over 700 miles out into the open sea, by the 1380s. The intensification of efforts in the early and mid-fifteenth century, from ports in Iberia and France, to get further into the ocean and further around the African coast occurred in
conditions of, at best, only modest recovery, as did attempts in the same period to penetrate the Sahara from starting points mainly in Italy. Much the same can be said of Russian voyages in the White Sea in the same period, which are ill documented, but which seem to have displayed, as far as the sources go, some of the features of western European seaborne exploration at the same time: purportedly religious inspiration, mercantile finance and activity, monkish colonization of remote islands, painful adjustment to new environments, and the expulsion or extinction of indigenous inhabitants.

The Economic Background

It seems that despite the relative abundance of land in Europe, critical shortages drove explorers to look far afield. Slaves were needed to supply the deficiencies of diminished manpower in Europe: from the 1440s, Portuguese explorers along the coast of Africa developed new sources of slaves, acquired by purchase or predation. Demand soared as Renaissance models of life made Europeans hanker for the slave-staffed world of Greek and Roman antiquity, and as new kinds of agrarian enterprise began, echoing ancient latifundia and prefiguring modern plantations. For reasons that remain obscure, while population declined or stagnated in Europe, per capita consumption, especially of food calculated by value, seems to have increased. Condiments that Europeans craved accounted for a significant proportion of growing demand: for sugar, above all, which was replacing honey as the sweetener most favoured on European palates, and most of which had to come from afar, as Europeans could grow it only in limited and marginal areas in and around the Mediterranean. Pepper, too, was an enormously sought-after commodity, unavailable from anywhere nearer than India (though as a result of Portuguese trade from the 1440s onwards, West African malaguetta was available as a substitute). Less important by volume (but extremely valuable) were Ceylonese cinnamon and its inferior Arabian substitute, cassia, and the cloves, nutmeg, and mace that grew mainly on the distant islands of Ternate and Tidore in what is now Indonesia.

All these trades reached Christendom by laborious and costly routes, prompting the search for alternative sources or more direct access. Christendom had little to offer in return for exotic products. Cash with which to pay for them was probably one of Europe’s most (p. 178) urgent shortages. Historians have sometimes questioned the traditional picture of ‘specie starvation’ in the late medieval West, and it is likely that capital in various forms—not just in land—was relatively abundant in the depleted demographic circumstances that followed the Black Death. But European customers for exotica had complained since Roman times of the ‘drain’ of bullion their tastes caused. Silver was notoriously the only commodity European merchants could usefully offer in China. The key to the role of specie in stimulating exploration probably lies not in absolute shortages, but in price differentials. Silver commanded relatively high prices in China but was cheap in Japan, which, until Spaniards boosted production in Mexico and Peru in the 1550s, was the world’s biggest producer of the metal; gold was relatively over-valued in silver terms in India. The opportunities for making money out of the relative differences were enormous, especially for anyone who could acquire gold where it was cheapest—in the mining zones of West Africa south of the Sahara—or find new sources of silver and get them to markets in maritime Asia.

The lure of those markets, and of the gold and silver with which to penetrate them, was critical in inducing Europeans to explore. In antiquity and the Middle Ages European merchants could only reach the world’s richest economies by the hazardous overland routes we conventionally call the Silk Roads, or by approaching the Indian ocean by torturous journeys up the Nile and across the Nubian desert to the Red Sea, or via risky excursions across Ottoman or Persian lands. None of these routes was accessible to European shipping; so Europeans were confined to limited roles as peddlers in regional trades, or importers of small quantities of high-value goods such as they could carry on their persons. The search for a maritime route, pursued at intervals from the late thirteenth century, was frustrating: Africa was a vast obstacle, rimmed by lee shores and hostile currents. The Atlantic, according to prevailing geographical theories, was unnavigably broad and obstructed along European shores by adverse winds. According to most interpreters of Ptolemy, whose rediscovered Geography dominated European notions from the early fifteenth century, the Indian Ocean was literally unpenetrable—landlocked along its southern rim. This view still prevailed in maps of the 1480s, on the very eve of the breakthrough that took explorers around the Cape of Good Hope and made the East accessible.

The Intellectual Background
In other respects, however, in the fifteenth century in the course of western Europeans’ renewed self-modelling on classical Rome and Greece—the movement conventionally known as the Renaissance—Ptolemy’s text and others that scholars recovered and debated stimulated geographical and ethnographic enquiry. Humanists wanted to know whether the golden age of primitive innocence, of which antique poets sang, was instantiated in remote regions of the world. Philologists wondered whether the languages of apparently primitive peoples could cast light on the problem of identifying the language of Eden or the relationship between the tongues of the world after Babel. What we have come to call ‘early anthropology’ pondered whether phases of development (p. 179) characterized universal history and how humans were related to apes. The hunt was on for the monstrous beings with whom Pliny peopled the fringes of the earth. Contact with indigenous peoples of the Canary Islands and West Africa made these apparently academic questions practically urgent and linked them to debate over juridical problems: did such creatures qualify as human, or should they be relegated to the nether links of the chain of being, with monsters and *similitudines hominis*?

Did they possess sovereignty, and if not who could rightfully dispose of sovereignty over them? Could they lawfully be victims of war and enslavement? Curiosity about the same problems, both academic and practical, sometimes appears in explorers’ own writings. Alvise da Mosto, a Venetian gentleman who out of curiosity, as he claimed, joined Portuguese voyagers in the region of the Gambia and Senegal in the mid-1450s, compiled much ethnographic detail. Columbus agonized over how to fit the people he encountered in the Caribbean into the Biblical and classical panorama of humankind.

More directly influential for explorers’ trajectories, however, were the strictly geographical problems classical texts raised. Although debate invoked many texts, two were dominant. Ptolemy not only raised the question of the accessibility of the Indian Ocean, but also helped to re-ignite old enquiries about the size of the globe, while inspiring debate about the extent of the eastward prolongation of Asia, the size and navigability of the Ocean, and the importance of establishing coordinates of longitude and latitude for the accurate mapping of the world. Strabo’s Geography, which first became available in Italy in Greek texts in the 1420s, helped focus interest on the problem of the existence and, if they existed, the location of the Antipodes—a speculative continent or continents that invited discovery. The quest for the Antipodes, in which at one time Columbus proposed to take part, or for what came to be called Terra Australis Incognita, was one of the most consistent objectives of European explorers throughout the period covered by the present book. Geographical debate intensified and became in a sense fashionable among European savants at the Council of Florence in 1439, which brought Byzantine and Latin churchmen together and became a forum for humanists’ conversations about the relevant texts.  

**The African Atlantic and the Breakthrough of the 1490s**

Among participants in those conversations—and a collector of ancient geographical lore—was Prince Pedro of Portugal, whose brother, Henrique, known traditionally but misleadingly as ‘Henry the Navigator’ since he did not navigate and never made more than a couple of short trips by sea, was already active as a promoter of exploration in the African Atlantic. Henrique’s project combined the conquest of the Canary Islands (in which the prince made little progress), the colonization of the Madeira group and the Azores, the acquisition of West African slaves, and the search for the sources in West Africa of the Saharan gold trade. By the time of his death in 1460, Henrique’s ships had groped as far as the ice shores that obstructed their route beyond the latitude of the Cape Verde Islands. In 1469 a commercial sponsor, Fernão Gomes, took over the concessions Henrique had obtained from the Crown and the papacy, and, until the Crown (p. 180) revoked his rights in 1475, pursued the work of exploration as far as Cape St Catherine, two degrees north of the equator. Thereafter, under royal patronage, exploration, trade, and evangelization increased, especially after the inauguration of relations with the kingdom of Kongo in the 1480s and the arrival there in the following decade of permanent Portuguese missions. In 1488, Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope, albeit with difficulty that deterred followers. By about that time charts—coordinated by Duarte Pacheco and the Bohemian compiler known as Valentim Fernandes in a work of 1508—recognizably showed every feature of the West African coast, despite considerable errors in longitude and some small ones in latitude.

Coastwise exploration, however, against the current, was too slow and painful to yield a route to the Indian Ocean—even had Dias not found the Cape to be dangerous and hostile to navigation. Portuguese cabotage contributed little or nothing to
knowledge of the high Atlantic. Yet with extraordinary suddenness, after such a long period of gestation, preparation, and frustration, explorers went on to crack the code of the Atlantic wind-system within the space of a single decade. In 1490, Pedro Covilhão and Afonso de Paiva made overland journeys to the Indian Ocean to report on whether it was genuinely landlocked. In 1492–93 Columbus discovered viable, exploitable routes to and fro across the Atlantic, which, although they proved disappointingly useless as ways to maritime Asia, opened up alluring possibilities of other kinds. In 1496, apparently seeking to emulate Columbus by a shorter route in higher latitudes, John Cabot, starting from Bristol, made another round trip route across the Ocean, albeit in regions that proved commercially unrewarding: in effect, his route led, like that pioneered by Norse exiles in the tenth century, and abandoned in the late Middle Ages, to abundant cod fisheries—perhaps already known and exploited by Basques and Bristolians—but not to any exploitable lands or trades. Meanwhile voyages in Columbus’s wake revealed the south-Atlantic wind-system, which, in 1497, Vasco da Gama could use to break through into the Indian Ocean, and which led Cabral to Brazil in 1500.

The Adventurers’ Equipment

How did the transformation happen so suddenly? Explorers’ material and mental equipment—technology, motivation, cultural context, social and institutional conditions, and environmental constraints and opportunities—demand examination.

Technology

Traditionally, historians have alleged that technological progress was chiefly or solely responsible for European explorers’ breakthrough to other parts of the world. But the voyages of the 1490s, which registered such spectacular results compared with the efforts of their predecessors over the previous couple of centuries, employed nothing that could reasonably be classed as a breakthrough technology. Very slow, incremental improvements in the manoeuvrability of rigging helped navigators cope with variable winds, but the key to long-range navigation was the exploitation of following winds, for which traditional square sails were best: indeed, Columbus paused in the Canary Islands on his first transatlantic voyage to convert his triangular-rigged ship to square rigging. Truly tight water casks were essential for long trips on the open sea, but they had been available on the African Atlantic route via the Azores for a hundred years. Much has been made of supposedly new direction-finding technologies—the quadrant and astrolabe, which gradually attracted the interest of academics in the late Middle Ages, but which remained curiosities that professional pilots largely disdained. As far as we know, no voyage of the 1490s made practical use of them. Columbus and Vespucci had them on board, but manipulated them only to impress their crews; both explorers relied on traditional methods of celestial navigation, and on timing the passage of the guard stars around Polaris and reading the corresponding latitude off printed tables. In any case, most of the technologies that made European nautical achievements possible in the long run—including the astrolabe, the rudder, lateen rigging, separable bulkheads, mapping by coordinates, and, as far as it was relevant, firepower—were borrowed from China or the Islamic world or from antiquity via Arabic mediators, before Europeans developed them and expanded the range of their applications. In most cases not until well into the eighteenth century did technological innovations of European origin confer a significant advantage.

The Cultural Context

Nor does it seem helpful to recur to Weberian-style explanations of European explorers’ achievements as the outcome of deep-seated features of culture, such as religious inspiration, scientific curiosity, or capitalist or entrepreneurial or
adventurous ‘spirit’, or scientific curiosity. None of these—if any such things exist—seems peculiarly European; or if it is, there is nothing in it that is peculiar to the Atlantic-seaboard communities that nourished the explorers. In any case, culture forms gradually: the phenomenon of the 1490s demands an explanation that fits the sudden chronology.

It is true, as we have seen, that literary models inspired some explorers. Chivalric romances of the sea, Arthurian legends with maritime modifications, and sea-steeped hagiographies—in some respects an overlapping genre, such as the tale of St. Brendan’s seaborne search for paradise or the aquatic wanderings of St. Eustace—were among the late medieval and sixteenth-century equivalents of modern pulp fiction, which even people of modest educational accomplishments could read. Columbus and Vespucci can be shown to have read some of them and modelled themselves on them. So, with less certainty, can many Portuguese explorers of the fifteenth century and their great patron, Prince Henrique. His self-designated ‘knights’ and ‘squires’ included pirates and desperadoes who appropriated chivalric language to describe their exploits, representing the slave raids on the West African coast, for instance, as battles against ‘wild men of the woods’. Columbus’s father-in-law, Bartolomeo Perestrello, was one of Henrique’s men. His life followed the standard trajectory of a chivalric novel of the sea to the governorship of Porto Santo. Columbus’s life—his self-delusive affectations of noble ancestry, his seaborne quest, his struggles with adversity, his self-representation as ‘a captain of cavaliers and conquests’, and his rise to be the king’s admiral and a sire of dukes all fit the same pattern.

The influence of the same literary corpus was strong among Spanish explorers and conquistadores in the sixteenth century. It endured into the seventeenth. In 1605—the very year in which Cervantes satirized the genre by making Sancho Panza long to be ‘governor of some island, with a little bit of the sky above it’, Pedro Fernandes de Queiros set out from Peru in search of an ‘unknown southern continent’, bearing with him blue habits with which to invest his crew as ‘Knights of the Holy Spirit’ at the end of his quest. The importance of literary inspiration is intelligible in the context of the society explorers inhabited. The chivalric ethos was a powerful force in late medieval Europe, which, along with war, wealth, education, and the Church, provided a rare means of social ascent. Most explorers were anxious not only or primarily to make discoveries but to ‘arrive’ in a social sense. Columbus was a weaver’s son who made good. Vespucci, though of noble birth, had to claw his way back from disgrace and virtual exile from Florence and escape from the taint of the low-life associations of his youth. Nevertheless, although the power of chivalric and hagiographical models helps us understand explorers’ mentalities, it fits the chronology of the breakthrough of the 1490s only very inexacty.

As for scientific curiosity, styles of scientific thinking are many and various but confidence in observation and experience as means to truth is observable in evidence from just about every literate culture, and was at least as strong in what we think of as the Middle Ages in China and Islam as it was in Christendom. ‘The overall survey of the ocean’s shores’, the perfection of charts, hydrographic documentation, the practice of celestial navigation on the open sea, and the compilation of data and specimens of fauna and flora were among the objectives of the series of voyages around the Indian Ocean commissioned by Chinese emperors in the early fifteenth century. Columbus and Vespucci expressed pleasure at being able to demonstrate ancient errors from present or recent experience but their delight hardly constitutes evidence of special cultural proclivities. Prince Henrique, on good contemporary authority, confirmed by evidence from his library, turned to the exploration of the African Atlantic in pursuit of a destiny revealed in his horoscope. Astrology may be said to have prefigured astronomy, just as magic generally may be said to have prefigured science, but the facts do not support speculations among historians of a bygone period that Henrique presided over a ‘school’ of scientists.

A more promising line of enquiry lies through examination of the explorers’ sources of patronage and investment. According to conventional historiography, European explorers benefited from the abundance of mutually competing states, which made monarchs willing to authorize and finance voyages of exploration. But other parts of the world had state systems, too, without any such effect. The lack of interest Chinese elites showed in carrying maritime exploration much beyond the limits of the Indian Ocean is important, because it left unexploited fields of enquiry open to Europeans; but it is better explained by the lack of incentive, and by changes of grand strategy linked to the factional politics of the Ming court than by the absence of inter-state competition. In any case, state patronage was of little importance in getting European exploration underway. The Crown made only marginal contributions to the activities of Prince Henrique. Cabot got a small purse from
the king of England and a large subvention from merchants in Bristol. That the queen of Spain ‘pawned her jewels’ to pay Columbus is a silly myth; he was backed by a consortium of court officials and Italian bankers in Seville. As far as we know, Vasco da Gama’s voyage drew on resources supplied by Italian bankers in Lisbon.

Appreciation of the decisive role of private capital helps identify the real causes of the suddenness of the breakthrough. In the 1480s Atlantic exploration, after a long unremunerative period, began to yield dividends. The revenues of Madeira, by dint of a long, cumulative process, started to make a conspicuous contribution to the finances of the Portuguese Crown. In the North Atlantic, turnover increased in valuable commodities, such as narwhal and walrus ivory, whaling products, and perhaps (though the evidence is equivocal) salt cod. Sugar production began in the Canary Islands—where most of the future financiers of Columbus already had heavy commitments—in 1484. Two years earlier, the Portuguese trading post of São Jorge on the underside of West Africa’s bulge, began to yield significant amounts of gold. There is nothing like profit to stimulate investment. Backers were willing to take risks with explorers—even those, like Columbus, Cabot, and Vasco, whose projects were implausible—only when the ocean had proved itself as an investment opportunity.

Environmental Conditions

In any case, two facts should discipline speculation about Europeans’ prominence in the exploration of world-girdling routes in the period covered by the present book.

First, in the global ‘space race’, as in any contest between hares and tortoises, it is helpful to come from behind. Navigators in maritime Asia had no incentive to extend their traditional range, which already supplied all the commodities they wanted and absorbed all the shipping they could build: that is why, on the whole, they welcomed the access of shipping European intruders eventually brought with them, despite the irritating religious intolerance, imperial pretensions, piratical habits, and aggressive business methods Europeans also evinced. Europe’s was, in some ways, like ‘developing’ economies today, desperately seeking offshore resources.

Secondly, the achievements in question were not so much those of Europe in general as of a few communities dispersed along Europe’s Atlantic edge or, to a lesser extent, around the Baltic and western Mediterranean. Interest in overseas exploration from central Europe—especially, in the fifteenth century, in Nuremberg and Bohemia—took the form of the recording of geographical and commercially useful information, and occasionally, later, of investment. Russia was an important starting point for long-range exploration, as we shall see, but all of it was into lands and seas contiguous with Russian territory. So, for world-ranging explorers, maritime tradition and access to Atlantic winds were of more importance than any feature of European culture generally.

(p. 184) Indeed, the discoveries of the 1490s were not, strictly speaking, discoveries of unknown lands—which of course were already well known to their inhabitants—but of unexploited winds. The history of the world, as traditionally written, contains too much hot air and not enough wind, for throughout the age of sail—which is to say for almost the whole of recorded history—winds and currents decisively conditioned and limited everything people could do at sea. The Atlantic and Pacific were hard oceans to cross because their wind-systems were fixed; broadly speaking, in both oceans a regular, little-varying clockwise system dominates the space north of the equator, with an almost symmetrical counter-clockwise system to the south. In consequence, dwellers on the shores are either pinioned to leeward, or faced with the prospect of following the outward wind with scant prospect of returning. Most navigators preferred to sail into the wind in quest of unknown destinations—counter-intuitive as this may seem to modern enthusiasts who long for the sensation of a wind at their backs. A headwind made it unlikely that one would discover anything, but at least it promised to get one home. The Indian Ocean became, by some centuries, the world’s earliest arena of long-range navigation because it has a monsoonal system, and navigators could sail out in confidence that eventually the wind would turn. That luxury was unavailable in the world’s other oceans, where the decoding of the wind-systems was a long, tentative business.

The Adventurers’ Achievement, c. 1500–c. 1620
Columbus genuinely inaugurated a new era by daring to sail with the wind—perhaps in utter recklessness, or perhaps already having realized that if the north–east trades reached across the ocean, he would be able to find the westerlies of the north Atlantic to make the return voyage. By the time of his second voyage in 1493 he had mastered the fastest outward route; during his subsequent explorations native guides showed him how to find his way around and across the Caribbean, which was a longer and tougher crossing than that of the Atlantic. On his third voyage in 1498, he revealed the continental dimensions of the mainland. Though he had established a viable route back to Europe on his first voyage, he had not observed, or not recorded, the Gulf Stream, which was undocumented until 1513, with improving effects both on access from the Caribbean to Europe and on the approach to the Atlantic coast of North America as far north as Newfoundland.

The Pacific

Despite the precedent Columbus set, the Pacific was much harder to master than the Atlantic, for two reasons. First, it was hugely bigger. Typically, the first recorded crossing, with favourable winds, in 1521, took three months and reduced the crew to extremes (p. 185) of thirst, starvation, and scurvy. Most sixteenth-century maps show how explorers clung to an unrealistically imagined ocean of hopefully manageable dimensions. In part, this was a consequence of the enduring appeal of Columbus’s errant geographical thinking. The traditional estimate, first calculated by Eratosthenes in Alexandria in the third century B.C., was nearly accurate and most Western geographers endorsed it. In order, however, to lend appeal to his proposal to cross the Atlantic, Columbus proposed a globe 20 to 25 per cent smaller than in reality in order to shrink the apparent distance from Europe to Asia. Explorers and their public continued to hope he was right. In part, too, the longing for a narrow Pacific was a function of politics: in 1529, Spain and Portugal agreed on a line of demarcation between their zones of navigation in the eastern hemisphere; the narrower the Pacific proved to be, the more likely it was that valuable destinations lay in the Spanish allocation.

The triumph of wishful thinking inspired attempts to cross the ocean and condemned most of their protagonists to failure, suffering, and death. Without longitude-finding technology or realistic charts, navigators literally got lost. In 1595, for instance, Álvaro de Mendaña set out to colonize the Solomon Islands, which he had discovered over a quarter of a century before. He and most of his followers were dead by the time they abandoned the search as hopeless. Until the 1770s, Europeans in the Pacific had only one strategy to avoid getting lost: stick rigidly to the path of the wind. In consequence, most of the ocean off the wind remained uncharted.

The unremitting nature of the wind-system was the second main reason for the intractability of the Pacific. In 1521 a Portuguese malcontent, known in Anglophone tradition as Ferdinand Magellan, crossed the ocean in Spanish service in pursuit of Columbus’s dream of a westward route to Asia. But, exactly as with the follow-up voyage by García de Loaysa a few years later, he only succeeded in demonstrating that the ocean was unexploitable by means of an approach from the Atlantic: the invariability of the south–east trades made a return journey impossible. By sailing into the path of the same trades Polynesian navigators had traversed the ocean, colonizing Easter Island and perhaps touching the South American coast; furthermore, by experimenting little by little in setting a course off the wind, they had reached Hawaii, New Zealand, and the Chatham Islands. But even they, with their prodigious accomplishments in seamanship, had been unable to settle in South America or keep in touch with their outlying colonies. After Loaysa’s disillusioning attempt, the quest for starting points for viable routes to and fro across the ocean shifted to New Spain, Central America, and Peru; the commitment grew as Spaniards established more and more settlements on the Pacific coast of the American hemisphere. But all their efforts, though sustained with defiant perseverance from the 1520s, yielded no decisive success, until the 1560s, when, as a result of slowly accumulated knowledge of the winds, navigators opened a route home to New Spain from the Philippines via the north Pacific currents. The Pacific became ‘the Spanish Lake’—not only or perhaps chiefly because of Spanish superiority or daring but rather because rivals blenched at the daunting journey and the paucity of returns. Even in the eighteenth century, when piracy, whaling, logging, scientific research, and global strategic thinking brought increasing amounts of international shipping to the ocean, (p. 186) fantasy was still the best motive for Pacific exploration: the search for imagined benefits, such as the ‘Unknown Southern Continent’ with its delusive promise of un plundered riches, or the ‘Strait of Fuca’ of ‘Anian’ which would—if only it existed—open the way to a Northwest passage.
The Indian Ocean and Maritime Asia

Meanwhile, even in the Indian Ocean European navigation long remained dependent on established routes, indigenous patterns of trade, and native guides, pilots, and maps. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the ‘Vasco da Gama era’ is how little difference it made for the first hundred years or so after his breakthrough voyage. The reasons traditionally said to have made Vasco’s exploit memorable have vanished under scholarly scrutiny. Indigenous empires and trading states remained dominant and largely unaffected by Europeans scurrying and worrying at their edges. The European merchants who penetrated the ocean by way of the Cape of Good Hope in the sixteenth century are now seen as similar to their ancient and medieval predecessors, who usually came by way of the Nile and the Red Sea. They fitted into the existing framework of trade, served regional markets and suppliers, and caused, at worst, local and temporary disruptions.

Furthermore, the belief that the Cape route wrenched east–west trade out of its historic pattern by diverting commerce from the traditional Eurasian routes has long been exposed as mythical. The volume of trade along traditional routes continued to grow, together with that of the new route, almost throughout the sixteenth century, as world demand and supply expanded in the key products: pepper and exotic spices, aromatics, and drugs. Traditional trade continued to flow through time-honoured channels until well into the seventeenth century. It now seems incontrovertible that the first casualty of the new era—the inter-continental caravan routes of central Asia—suffered not so much from Portuguese competition as from political turmoil of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries deep in the interior of Asia.13

For a hundred years after Vasco’s achievement, no European rival bothered to emulate it.

Nevertheless, Vasco’s voyage deserves part, at least, of the reputation it acquired. It was a stage in the globalization of trade. It brought about unprecedented cultural encounters. It opened a new route for the exchange of influences between the ends of Eurasia. It made it possible at last for shipping from Europe to take part in the lucrative trades that prospered within the Indian Ocean. To a lesser extent, it stimulated direct trade between Europe and Asia. It facilitated the long process by which European economies, enriched by the pickings of the Orient, began to catch up with those of the Indian Ocean rim. Vasco and his successors may not have changed much for the peoples and powers of the Indian Ocean, who barely noticed the poor barbarians from Portugal, but it transformed Europe, bringing Europeans into closer touch with the gorgeous East than ever before, and putting the newly emerging Atlantic world in touch with older, wealthier civilizations.

(p. 187) The intruders would not have got far or stayed for long without indigenous help. Javanese maps and Malay pilots helped the Portuguese to extend their reach from India across south-east Asia and the Indonesian spice islands to China by 1512 and Japan by 1542. Vasco da Gama relied on a Gujarati pilot to get him from East Africa to India, and—after his initial unwillingness to believe in the Monsoon, Portuguese trade in the sixteenth century clung to seasonal constraints. The monsoonal system, however, had major disadvantages for shipping from outside it. It cost time waiting for the change of wind; and, to get into and out of it, ships from or bound for the Atlantic had to risk the deadly lee shores of Natal. In the 1590s, Portuguese pioneers opened a relatively short route across the ocean via the Mascarene Islands, but voyages along it had to contend with adverse trade winds and still relied on the monsoons as they approached their destinations or returned from them.

The problems were unsolved until the second decade of the new century, when Dutch intruders, anxious for a competitive edge in the spice trade, discovered a new route to outflank the monsoon: heading east with the westerlies of the far south, and turning north for the Sunda Strait with the Great Australia Current. The voyage was long and dangerous and proved costly in lives and ships lost, but the time saved made it profitable. By the mid-century it also opened what came to be known as the Southern Ocean to European enterprise, leading to Australia, New Zealand, and—eventually—Antarctica, and forming a corridor of rapid access around the world between the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. The decipherment of the world’s wind-systems was virtually complete.

America
Meanwhile, compared with Asia and the Indian Ocean world, which were so indifferent at first to European influence, America was a sort of tabula rasa, on which European explorers could inscribe their own outlines, to be filled in with colonies, empires, and new economic activities. Columbus’s shipmates, Vicente Yañez Pinzón and Alonso de Hojeda, were the most enterprising of the many explorers who extended his findings along America’s Atlantic and Caribbean coasts. Along the coast of central America, Columbus inaugurated a search for a passage towards Asia, and a series of successors continued the search northwards. By 1525, when Estevão Gomes, in the service of Spain, and the Florentine Giovanni da Verrazzano, on behalf of Lyonais merchants, had searched as far north as Cape Breton, expectations plummeted: English and Portuguese explorers had already demonstrated the continuity of the coasts of Labrador and Nova Scotia.

South, meanwhile, from Columbus’s discoveries, which had reached the mouth of the Orinoco in 1498, Pinzón, continuing his efforts, arrived at the mouth of the Amazon (which he mistook for the Ganges) the following year. Another henchman of Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, left descriptions that are so vague, sailing directions so amateurish, and calculations of distance traversed so wild that it is impossible to be sure by what (p. 188) routes he sailed or how far south he got. On a voyage probably of 1501–2, he reached at least as far as Rio de Janeiro, encouraging successors to continue the reconnaissance of South America. The southward limit of the continent remained uncertain until Magellan intervened. Like Vespucci, he shared Columbus’s picture of a small world, in which Asia lay only a short way beyond America, and therefore shifted allegiance to Spain when Portuguese interest in further westward exploration ebbed. When he finally found the longed-for strait that led to the Pacific in 1520, he had in effect already failed: the strait was too southerly to be a convenient gateway. The maze-like web of channels tortured explorers. Magellan followed the Humboldt currents for three weeks along the Chilean coast before dashing across towards the Philippines. Thereafter, exploration of South America’s Pacific coast proceeded from the north.

By then, the objectives of Spanish explorers of the mainland had changed. Encounters with natives conjured rumours of rich civilizations in the interior, and—without displacing obsessions with the search for a route to Asia—inspired Vasco Núñez de Balboa to seek the realm of Dabeiba along the San Juan valley in 1512. On a second voyage in 1513, Balboa crossed the Isthmus of Panama to ‘gaze on the Pacific’. Hernán Cortés followed on what was initially intended to be a reconnaissance expedition to the Caribbean coast of what is now Mexico in August 1519. Abjuring the authority of his superior in Cuba, he marched inland in search of Aztec riches. The route was consciously chosen to penetrate the most inaccessible parts of the Aztec world, where the Aztecs’ most reluctant tributaries and most defiant enemies would be found. As a conqueror, Cortés may be underrated; as an explorer, however, he is underrated: he extended the existing routes of contact between civilizations in world-changing fashion. The great belt of rich sedentary civilizations that stretched across Eurasia could now begin to exchange culture and biota with those of the Americas.

Conscious imitation of Cortés, plus the usual fantastic ambitions, animated the conquistadors of Peru. The illiterate Francisco Pizarro was to become governor, captain general, and adelantado, and his officers would be noblemen and high bishops. After climbing the Andes, Pizarro followed the Inca road that crossed from Cajatamba into Jauja before descending, in late October 1533, to Cuzco. The riches he garnered attracted more explorers to the Andes. Three expeditions from different directions met at Bogotá in 1539 and started rumours of the existence of El Dorado—not a place but a gold-rich chieftain, whom other explorers sought for the rest of the century in the Venezuelan lowlands and highlands of Guyana. The settlement of Chile was in part an unintended consequence of attempts to repeat Pizarro’s exploits. Meanwhile, the search for a fabled Land of Cinnamon led one of Pizarro’s brothers to the Amazon, the length of which Diego de Orellana sailed in 1540. Exploration along the River Plate and Paraguay and Paraná Rivers and into the Bolivian highlands responded to myths of other rich realms, various distortions of Inca realities or speculations about remote and surviving Inca strongholds, including ‘the city of Los Césares’, supposedly reported by Francisco César, who led a long but ill-documented expedition inland from the River Plate in 1538.

North America had equally persistent legends. In 1539, a missionary’s black servant, overtaken by disease and delirium, left a garbled note telling of great cities with emerald-studded temples. In April 1540, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado led an expedition of 200 horsemen and 1,000 slaves in search of them. After two gruelling months, they reached...
the Pueblo civilization—‘good people’, the Spaniards reported, more devoted to agriculture than war. Coronado pressed north to a supposedly rich, urban culture in what is now Kansas. The vaunted cities were no more than turf lodge settlements of the ‘raccoon-eyed’, tattoo-faced Kirikiri. An impatient and profligate explorer, Hernando de Soto, thought he could do better than Coronado by tramping overland from Tampa Bay. Immiserated, diseased, and defeated, the expedition fled after Soto’s apparently natural death in May 1542. The failure discouraged Spanish efforts in the North American south but by the 1590s a series of independent expeditions had reconnoitred New Mexico. Surviving accounts of Juan de Oñate’s expedition to found a colony there in 1598 describe the obstacles. Gaspar Pérez de Villagra recounted sun so fierce that his eyes ‘seemed to burst from their sockets’, the horses were blinded, and men ‘breathed fire’ from the desert heat. The colonists hoped to find an overland route to link up with the California coast, which Spanish navigators had begun to map in the 1540s. But the terrain and distance proved unconquerable.

On the colony’s eastern flank, neglect of the Mississippi made it impossible to create the kind of network of river routes that was emerging in South America. The usefulness of the St. Lawrence, however, as a causeway toward the interior emerged relatively early. Here, as in the cases of the South American river routes, legends of rich kingdoms became the explorers’ main inducement. In 1535 Jacques Cartier travelled down the St. Lawrence in search of the fabled riches of the Saguenay. At Hochelaga (site of present-day Montreal), some 2,000 people flocked into the geometrically perfect streets to greet the French explorer. Yet he found it difficult to sustain cordial relations with the natives, and his search for the Saguenay’s riches proved fruitless.

As in Spain’s dominions, French expectations of what the New World offered gradually changed. Furs replaced gold as the commercial objective. In 1600 the Crown granted a monopoly to a consortium from Honfleur and Dieppe; felicitously, the promoters chose Samuel de Champlain as governor, who opened access to the interior via the St. Lawrence as well as the Mississippi–Missouri system. English and Dutch explorers found America even more disappointing. They were torn between two objectives: founding colonies in imitation of or competition with Spain, and by-passing America, or finding some quick route across it, in pursuit of Columbus’s old chimera—a Western way to the wealth of Asia.

In three voyages between 1576 and 1578, Martin Frobisher searched in vain for a Northwest Passage north of Labrador. Collecting pyrite samples, he returned to England in the mistaken belief that he had discovered gold reserves. Backed by the Dutch East India Company, in 1610 Henry Hudson set off to the bay that would bear his name, only to become trapped in ice. After the spring thaw failed to free the ship, the crew mutinied and set Hudson adrift. Robert Bylot, one of the few survivors, returned to Hudson Bay in 1612 to prove that a ship could survive an arctic winter. Bylot, in turn, recruited William Baffin, a navigator and surveyor of unsurpassed genius. In 1615–16 Bylot and Baffin pressed as far as 77 degrees north, travelling through the Foxe Channel and Davis Strait, before being forced back by ice. Their efforts uncovered profitable whaling grounds and greatly enhanced English knowledge of arctic survival.

Frustrated in the search for a way around America, English colonists in seventeenth-century Virginia continued the search for a way across it, finding only a mountain barrier and an incalculably vast breadth of land. The foundation of a colony in Massachusetts in 1620 has undeserved renown as marking a new beginning in the history of the hemisphere, but it did mark a turning point in one respect: future English exploration of America would be more for the continent’s own sake than in pursuit of a route to Asia. The American dream succeeded dreams of the ‘gorgeous East’.

It is hard to narrate the exploration of the Americas in our period without foregrounding European protagonists. In some ways, the effect is misleading. Native peoples had already discovered the best way to most of the places Europeans touched. Columbus admitted that his main motive for seizing native captives was ‘to take them with me and obtain from them information about what could be expected in those lands’.

In Florida, Ponce de León found a native guide who already knew Spanish. Cortés in Mexico used native maps and guides to form a picture of Mesoamerica. Vasco Nuñez de Balboa came to gaze on the Pacific in 1513 thanks to a native chief who
showed him a map. A sketch a native scratched in the dirt informed Hernando de Alarcón of the course of the Colorado River in 1540. A Zuni map of villages in the vicinity of Hawkiuh reached Spain a little later. English intruders in the Chesapeake in 1585 got ‘a description of the region’ from native informers.

The map of New Spain that a native named Nigual sketched from memory for Francisco Valverde in 1562 still survives, as do many native cartographers’ contributions to the survey of the kingdom the Crown ordered in the 1570s. Iroquois used sticks to show Cartier the course of the St. Lawrence. John Smith’s map of Virginia was explicitly based on data supplied by native informants. Powhatan himself drew the dimensions of his realm for Smith in the dust. Natives gave coastal plans to Bartholomew Gosnold in Norumbega in 1602 and when Samuel Champlain met the Huron, and enquired about the land, ‘they told me of it in great detail, and showed me sketches of all the places they visited’.17

Nonetheless, it is fair and helpful to speak of European exploration as developing and linking indigenous people’s existing networks of routes. Within the Americas, most indigenous peoples seem to have remained confined to their ecological comfort zones and never to have built up much knowledge of each other’s territories, much less a picture of the whole hemisphere or of any substantial part of it. Even in the great civilizations of Mesoamerica, mapping was local or regional, and existing contacts—with the Caribbean region, the Mississippi valley, the North American southwest, and Central and Andean America—were sporadic and tenuous. When European explorers finally crossed the Atlantic, they relied absolutely on natives to guide them and provide them with the rudiments of maps, but the construction of an overall image of the Americas was impossible until the outsiders, with their broader perspective, arrived.

(p. 191) The Impact of Science, c. 1620–c. 1750

Myth and romance seem to have dominated European explorers’ mental worlds until well into the seventeenth century. Increasingly, however, over the period covered by the present book, and with accelerating impact from early in the seventeenth century, science became inextricably involved with the history of exploration. Thanks in part to the accumulation of data from around the world, Westerners became the coordinators of global knowledge, the conservators of museums, the mappers and ethnographers and cataloguers of the world. The range of sponsorship of exploration widened, from merchants, missionaries, and monarchs, to include the scientific societies that proliferated in Europe from the 1660s onwards. European explorers continued to use native maps and guides wherever they went, but became increasingly dominant, gathering control of the routes of global exchange into their hands, like the reins of the world. They often remained susceptible to mythic quests and the temptation to romanticize their own adventures, but tended to subscribe ever more wholeheartedly to the increasingly scientific culture of their home continent: they became servants of science and suppliers of facts.

Chart-making and Nautical Science

In the seventeenth century, pilotage and navigation gradually ceased to rely wholly or chiefly on craft, transmitted from father to son and enhanced by experience. They became professions, codified in textbooks, accessed by formal education, and in some countries licensed by examination. Columbus had likened navigation to ‘prophetic vision’.18 A sixteenth-century engraver depicted Vespucci consistently with the explorer’s self-description, like Christ in Gethsemane, communicating with the heavens while his crewmen slept. But with increasing precision, direction-finding technology gradually lost its mystique.

Charts, formerly despised by most practical navigators, displaced sailing directions and mnemonic devices as aids to navigation. To modern minds, it seems astonishing that navigators made little or no use of maps and charts, except as sources of inspiration or as devices to keep landlubbers satisfied, before the seventeenth century. Most long-range navigators do not even seem to have bothered to carry them on board. Hardly any explorers made charts: Columbus and Vespucci claimed to intend to do so, but there is no evidence that either of them ever got round to it. From 1508 the Spanish Crown obliged Atlantic pilots to report their findings to the keeper of a master-map, known as the padrón real, in Seville—Vespucci was the first appointed custodian. But it is not clear that such a padrón was ever kept up to date or used by
navigators. In 1574 the English engineer William Bourne, who wrote or translated numerous important works on navigation, called for the use of charts on shipboard, but acknowledged their imperfections: they were too vague and inaccurate to replace memory and written sailing directions as aids to navigation.

The technologies on which accurate chartmaking relied only appeared in the seventeenth century. The introduction of the telescope and the streamlining of instruments in the tradition of the quadrant—sexants and octants enhanced with telescopes and reflectors—made it possible to assess latitudes at sea with unprecedented accuracy. The use of triangulation helped refine the depiction of shorelines. Accurate soundings that could be represented visually were among the details pilots demanded most strenuously and found wanting in charts; so were accurate representations of offshore shoals, rocks, and islets: seventeenth-century charts began to supply these wants. Little by little it became mandatory for explorers to take specialist chartmakers on their journeys or to train in chartmaking themselves. In the first decade of the seventeenth century, transatlantic expeditions returned to Europe with excellent charts of parts of the coasts of New England, Hudson’s Bay, the James River, and much of the coastline of Greenland, while Luis de Torres and Pedro Fernandes de Queiros demonstrated their competence as chartmakers in the Pacific and Champlain did the same in Canada. In 1613 the English mathematician Thomas Blundeville opined that every explorer should record his course on a chart sufficiently reliable to guide a follower to the same destination; broadly speaking the practice became normal over the next few decades.

Longitude remained the most glaringly absent element, unreachable by the science of the era. It seemed to be one of early modern science’s Faustian fantasies, like the philosopher’s stone, the Fountain of Eternal Youth, the squaring of the circle, and the secrets of Hermetic tradition. No traditional method of obtaining a reliable value seemed entirely satisfactory with sixteenth-century technology. Apart from inferences from generally inaccurate guesses of distance traversed, most professional navigators, for most of our period, reckoned their longitude on the basis of an erroneous assumption that related it to magnetic variation. Another technique widely attempted was that of measuring the difference in time between two places at a single moment, represented by an eclipse. In theory, if one can get the timing right, the method will work because longitude is directly related to time, each degree of longitude corresponding to one three hundred and sixtyieth of the time it takes for the Earth to complete a single revolution. So a single celestial event, observed in places at an interval of one hour, will yield a difference in longitude of fifteen degrees between the places concerned. Without reliable timepieces, however, the practice was unworkable. Columbus and Vespucci had tried the method—or claimed to have done so—with wildly inaccurate results. In 1580, Philip II of Spain ordered an experiment in the simultaneous timing of an eclipse in different observatories around his realms: the results recorded by different observers in the same place varied by up to 25 per cent. He ordained a prize for anyone who could solve the problem of longitude: the prize remained unclaimed.

The most promising method, known in antiquity and purportedly tried by Vespucci, was to measure lunar distances, which separated the moon from select celestial bodies or the moons of Jupiter from each other and from their parent planet. If conducted accurately, such measurements made it possible to measure the difference in time between different places, without having to rely on the frustrating periodicity of eclipses. Appealing in theory, the method was effectively impossible with the naked eye. The invention of the telescope, which Galileo successfully deployed to identify the rings of Saturn and the moons of Jupiter in 1610, brought the method within practicable reach. Thanks to the incorporation of filaments in telescope lenses in the second decade of the seventeenth century, it was possible to measure lunar distances accurately, at least on land on a stable platform, and so provide a guide to longitude. For the first time, it was possible to construct maps in accordance with Ptolemy’s prescriptions: on the basis of accurate coordinates. But owing to the movement of a ship, and the effects of variations in temperature and humidity on the accuracy of instruments, the method proved unserviceable for finding longitude at sea. Ships continued to over-reach their marks and founder or crash. The foundation of the British Board of Longitude, and the promise of valuable rewards, conferred by parliament, to anyone who could solve the problem, failed to yield results until 1769, when a chronometer that was proof against warping, shrinkage, and clogging came into service on a British ship.

**The Persistence of Myth**
Though charts were increasingly realistic, the map of the world continued to exhibit illusions that lured explorers to further efforts. Myths rather than facts still drove the process for most of our period. The legend of ice-free routes to the North Pole or around the Arctic edge of America stimulated boreal adventures. In 1719 James Knight lost his life trying to exit Hudson’s Bay to the North. The failure of further expeditions of the same sort in the 1740s merely displaced to the Pacific the search for an opening through the ice. But the Pacific, because it included the world’s biggest uncharted spaces, spawned big, numerous siren-lands and seas of its own. Here, in the 1720s, Jonathan Swift could still locate *Gulliver’s Travels* in ironic homage to the persistence of myth. The islands of Rica de Oro and Rica de Plata gleamed distractingly in maps of the north Pacific. The notion that California was an island proved hard to eradicate. The biggest cuckoo or canard was the Terra Australis Incognita, which seemed ineradicable from maps. A Dutch expedition of 1615 had demonstrated the existence of open sea south of Tierra del Fuego, but few maps registered the fact. In 1642 Abel Tasman, having followed the southern coast of Australia, approaching from the west, mistook New Zealand for a promontory of the fabled continent. The failure of each attempt to locate the legend seemed only to spur others. In 1752, Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, whose credentials were equally good as both scientist and explorer, argued that it was probable that ‘some land’ must exist in the unexplored reaches of the Pacific and Southern Oceans. Only when Captain Cook, resolved to sail ‘as far as it is possible for man to go’, reached 71 degrees south on his voyage of 1773–74 did it become apparent that the unknown continent, if it existed, must lie beyond the reach of available technology.

False notions infected maps and misled explorers on land as well as by sea. Along with the rational commercial quest for furs—‘the treasure’, as Russians said, ‘of the land’—the quest for the ‘Golden Old Woman of the Ob’, who first appeared in sixteenth-century maps, encouraged the penetration of Siberia. Proceeding laboriously up and down the rivers, exploration reached as far as Lake Baikal by about 1620. When the Old Woman proved chimerical, new myths intervened. From 1639, rumours of the wealth of a realm supposedly called Dauria induced explorers to the Amur River. Dauria did not exist, but a commercial route between Russia and China was among the results. Further north, meanwhile, the imaginary, gold-rich realm of Pogycha beyond the River Kolyma stimulated renewed efforts from 1645, which took Semen Dezhnev beyond the Anadir three years later. But cold and the lack of native guides prevented further advances. Maps left vague the question of whether Asia and America were joined at their extremities. In 1724, however, Peter the Great, feverish and approaching death, ordered that the question be resolved. The following year Vitus Bering, a Dane who had served Peter since 1704, commenced an odyssey to do the tsar’s bidding by prospecting and surveying a land route across Siberia. It was a gruellingly slow business, bedevilled by unremitting problems of supply, and obstructed by turbulent rivers, deep marshes, permafrost, and deadly cold. After two attempts, over a period of fifteen years, Bering was unable to confirm his suspicion that water separated the continents, but he tried again by sea in 1740. He died in the attempt—perishing, according to the death certificate, from hunger, thirst, cold, parasitic infestations, and pain, on 8 December 1742. But thereafter, maps included the Bering Strait.

The interior of Africa was equally or perhaps even more occluded by uncertainties. Myths dotted the map—of the origins of gold, of the existence of lost cities and kingdoms, of the course and sources of the Nile and Niger. The discovery of the source of the Blue Nile, in 1618, by Pedro Paez, one of the Jesuits working hard to get Ethiopians to renounce heresy, hardly registered in European mapmakers’ minds. In 1623 the Jesuits of Goa launched an effort to find safe overland routes into Ethiopia, and began to publish maps that reflected the work. Missionaries in Congo, Angola, and Monomotapa—the region between the Zambezi and the Limpopo—gathered a few contributions about the locations of inland markets, settlements, and courts at intervals during the seventeenth century. In West Africa, though native slavers seem to have penetrated ever deeper into the interior, Europeans’ forays remained very tentative. Around 1680 the Huguenot slaver Jean Barbot attempted to collect data on the hinterland but found that ‘as far as I could verify, none of the Europeans who live on the coast had ventured inland’. On a rare excursion in 1701, on behalf of Dutch merchants, David van Nyen dael reached the court of Ashanti at Kumasi. Though progress in exploration was patchy, a scientific standpoint did begin to clear the depiction of the interior of the speculations that notoriously adorned maps: in 1727 d’Anville displayed scientific scepticism by leaving the greater part of his map of Africa honourably blank.

Equally delusive and equally inspiring was the hope that North America was a narrow continent that could be quickly
traversed and used as a launching bay for trade with China and Japan. In 1651 an employee of the Virginia Company speculated that the Pacific lay ten days’ march from the source of the James River. A group of English explorers, descending the Appalachians in 1671, thought they could see the ocean in the distance. Although the Spanish colonies in New Mexico and Arizona were relatively close to the Pacific, they would probably never have attracted colonists but for the vain hope that the ocean would be easily accessible to them. The Franciscan missionary Eusebio del Kino did find the way to the shore in 1687—but the terrain was unsuitable for a road and the prospects of commerce were negligible.

A realistic picture of the extent and topography of the North American interior emerged little by little, mainly thanks to missionaries and trappers and traders of fur and skins. The navigation of the Mississippi did not begin until 1673, under French auspices, in the hope of finding a route to the river from the Great Lakes and thence to the Pacific. The result of Louis Jolliet’s expedition was decisive: the Mississippi flowed in the wrong direction and the abundance of the Missouri suggested that a large drainage area lay to the west—an impression confirmed by the reports Fr Louis Hennepin brought back in 1680 from his two years’ captivity with the Sioux. René-Robert de la Salle completed the navigation in 1682. He called his house ‘China’—an ironic testament that the illusion of a quick route to Asia was at last being abandoned.

In the interior of South America, too, the quest for El Dorado and similar fantasies waned and the practical needs to open new frontiers of evangelization and to establish access between widely separated colonies took over as the route-finders’ main objectives. The exploration of Amazonia illustrates the first of these priorities—resumed by Franciscans in 1637 after more than half a century of neglect: the results appeared in the detailed map of the region that Fr Samuel Fritz published in 1707. Divided between Spanish and Portuguese possessions, the Amazon was of little use as a highway of trade, but in 1647 Miguel de Ochogavia, ‘the Columbus of the Apure’, reached the headwaters of the Orinoco, celebrating ‘the benefits to commerce’ that would ensue from a new link between the upper Andes and the Caribbean.

The World-Picture

Still, despite the persistence of myth, the triumph of science can be seen in the unfolding of the map of the world. In 1666 the French Académie Royale des Sciences launched a project for improving and correcting the charts and maps of France and the world. In 1669 Jean-Dominique Cassini arrived at the newly opened Royal Observatory in Paris to mastermind the work. As measurements of latitude and longitude came in from envoys and correspondents the number of places grew on the great map of the world that adorned the floor. Expeditions went to Cayenne, Egypt, Cape Verde, and Guadeloupe to gather coordinates. Edmund Halley sent data from the Cape of Good Hope, and the academicians incorporated messages Jean de Thévenot sent from places he visited in India prior to his death in 1667. Jesuits in Madagascar, Siam, and China contributed.

Meanwhile, the mapping of France proceeded apace, but yielded a puzzling anomaly. A degree of latitude on the surface of the Earth seemed to vary in size from place to place, subverting ancient cosmographical belief in the perfect sphericity of the planet. In 1718, Cassini’s son and successor concluded that the globe was elongated towards the poles, but data from around the world suggested that if anything the reverse was true: a degree occupied less space in relation to its proximity to the equator; so the world seemed squashed at the poles. Cassini’s case, moreover, contrasted with Sir Isaac Newton’s opinion, shared by the scientific establishment in England, that centrifugal force must make the world an oblate spheroid—distended at the equator. In 1735, after much inconclusive debate, the Academy decided to settle the question by sending an expedition to the equator to measure a degree as accurately as possible, while another team went to the Arctic to obtain the corresponding value as close as possible to the North Pole. The equatorial expedition, led by Charles-Marie de La Condamine, returned with an estimate of nearly 111 kilometres—about half a kilometre too little. Under Maupertuis, meanwhile, the Arctic explorers achieved a measurement only about a third of a kilometre out of true, but marginally longer than La Condamine’s. Though the combined effect of the efforts slightly under-represented the extent of distortion from perfect sphericity, the essential problem was satisfactorily solved: Newton was right about the shape of the planet. Maupertuis’s image appeared as the frontispiece of his collected works in a celebratory engraving over the legend, ‘His destiny was to determine the form of the world.’
Explorers had transformed Europeans’ perceptions of the world. They decoded the world’s winds. They confirmed—gradually and in the face of much incredulity or self-interested resistance—the immensity of the world. They devised viable routes to link the oceans and major landmasses. They revealed the existence of a New World in the Western hemisphere. They exposed new resources for Europeans to exploit, shifting the global balance of power away from the formerly preponderant civilizations, empires, and economies of Asia. They brought evidence of the diversity of creation to Cabinets of Curiosities, where they first evoked wonder, then stimulated research in what became museums. Cultural exchange now embraced almost all the coastal peoples of the world and many of those living deep inland. The increasingly scientific, professionalized exploration of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought formerly uncommunicating shores in boreal Asia, Australia, and New Zealand into the web of global commerce. The map of the globe as European savants pictured it in the mid-eighteenth century displaced traditional images not only in areas Westerners ruled, but also in China, Japan, India, and the Islamic world. It was recognizably like our own—so much so in the overall shape and in the detailed delineation of most of the world’s coasts, that it seems amazing that chartmakers crawling over the hide of the Earth with rudimentary technology should have anticipated the view of the planet that we can now get from outer space.

Envoi: Subversive Revelations and Romantic Effects

Most of these achievements were consistent with philosophical commonplaces of the period in Europe: with confidence in progress, with the high valuation of secular and practical knowledge, with the celebration of observation and experience as keys to truth, and with a growing sense of Western superiority over the rest of the world. Less predictable consequences, however, were also becoming visible. The most unsettling impact of the discoveries on enlightened assumptions would not be felt until the second half of the eighteenth century. The noble savage was not, of course, a newcomer to the discourse of philosophes; in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries Redemptorist, Jesuit, and secular ethnographic descriptions of the Huron and Micmac had introduced the concept; in 1703 Lahontan had made a wise but formally uninstructed Huron the mouthpiece of his critiques of church and state; and feral children already had admirers; but the ascent of the noble savage peaked only in the 1760s, when specimens of noble savagery from the South Seas alerted romantic sensibilities to the wisdom of unadorned nature and, by inference, of the common people. In 1768 Voltaire adopted the Huron as a hero, and the following year Diderot found liberty and sagacity embodied in the South Sea Islanders Bougainville’s expedition encountered.

In the same period, the discovery of an erotic paradise in Tahiti stimulated an alliance of liberty and libertinage, without which the thought of Rousseau or the Marquis de Sade would be unthinkable; though earlier practitioners had not been wanting, they had never had so much evidence to cite in favour of free love. Meanwhile, though Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa had prefurred romantic aesthetics in the drawings they made on La Condamine’s expedition, the representation of nature remained restrained by classicizing and rationalizing taste until, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, science and romance fused in the New World in the work of botanical illustrators and scientific draftsmen, with stimulating effects on the new concepts of the sublime and the picturesque.

Yet already by the mid-eighteenth century there were signs that scientific exploration could be self-critical and perhaps self-subverting. Maupertuis began his great Arctic expedition believing that every truth was quantifiable and every fact accessible to sense-perception. In northern Finland, however, amid Sami magic, in a land frequented ‘by fairies and bears’, doubts assailed him. By the time of his return home he had become a convert to a kind of mysticism: ‘We cannot chase God’, he wrote, ‘in the vastness of the heavens, nor the abysses of Earth. Perhaps it is not yet time for us to understand the world systematically, but we must be content to behold it in awe.’ In 1752, he published Lettre sur le progrès des sciences, in which he argued that in future scientists should conduct experiments on dreams and hallucinogenic drugs—‘certain potions of the Indies’—in order to explore the cosmos. Perhaps, he speculated, the sensible world is illusory. Perhaps God alone exists, and perceptions are merely the properties of ‘a mind alone in the Universe’.

Scientific exploration, it seems, led not only to the ends of the Earth, but beyond them.

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Abstract and Keywords

Spain and Portugal were, for various reasons, the pioneers of European overseas expansion. Between c. 1450 and c. 1550 they constructed vast empires, different in character but with common features. This chapter identifies similarities and differences in the structuring of Portugal’s essentially mercantile empire based on trading posts in Africa and Asia, and that of Spain’s territorial empire, based on conquest and settlement in the Caribbean and the American mainland. It discusses the imperial bureaucracies, the approach to evangelization, the impact of the discovery of silver deposits in Mexico and Peru, the introduction of African slavery to America, and the growing importance of Portugal’s territorial empire in Brazil as its Asian empire succumbed to foreign attack. The rising costs of administration and defence generated reform programmes that led to serious tensions between the imperial governments and the creole elites of their American territories at the end of the eighteenth century.

Keywords: Empire, conquest, slavery, silver, bureaucracy, defence, creoles

In creating and developing overseas empires, early modern Europe transformed both itself and the world. For Adam Smith, writing in 1776, the full consequences of the European discovery of America and of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope had yet to reveal themselves, but some were already apparent. On the one hand, by linking the continents in a process of mutual exchange, the ‘general tendency’ of European voyages of discovery ‘would seem to be beneficial’. On the other, ‘to the natives . . . both of the East and the West Indies, all the commercial benefits which can have resulted from those events have been sunk and lost in the dreadful misfortunes which they have occasioned’. In this dual process of inter-continental exchange and imperial expansion Spain and Portugal were the pioneers, marking out paths that their European rivals would sooner or later follow.

The overseas territories ruled by the monarchs of Spain and Portugal are known to history, and were increasingly known to contemporaries, as the Spanish and Portuguese ‘empires’. This is not, however, how they were officially styled at the time. In the sixteenth century the word imperium or ‘empire’, as inherited from imperial Rome, conveyed concepts that would come to be increasingly elaborated over the course of the century, both of sovereign legislative authority and of an extended territorial complex made up of more than one polity and owing allegiance to the same ruler.

Only one emperor, the Holy Roman Emperor, was universally acknowledged throughout Western Christendom, and his existence posed problems for any sixteenth-century ruler who fancied the idea of appropriating for himself an imperial title in order to express the new reality of overseas dominion. Manuel I, king of Portugal (1495–1521), seems for a moment to have played with the notion of calling himself ‘emperor’ of his extensive overseas possessions, but dropped the idea for unknown reasons. Philip II of Spain (1556–98) failed to succeed his father, the Emperor Charles V, as Holy Roman Emperor (1519–
58), but was always respectful of the imperial title, which passed to the junior branch of the Habsburgs based in Vienna. It was probably for this reason that he rejected suggestions made in the 1560s that, in order to give him precedence over mere kings, he should style himself Emperor of the Indies. His successors on the Spanish throne adhered to the position he had adopted, although Spain’s dominions in the New World were sometimes referred to as its imperio de las Indias, while Spaniards would occasionally address their monarch as Emperador de las Indias.

Spain’s empire, however, was much more than an American empire, an empire of the Indies. The Spanish Habsburgs were rulers not only of large parts of America but also of numerous other territories in Europe, North Africa, and even Asia, following the partial subjugation of the Philippines in the 1560s. The complex of very disparate territories over which they exercised dominion came to be known simply as the monarquía, the Spanish, or Catholic, Monarchy. Similarly, Portugal’s extensive empire was known as the Portuguese Monarchy. In 1580 Philip II succeeded to the throne of Portugal. Although the Portuguese Monarchy retained its distinctive institutions under the terms agreed for his succession, the sixty years’ union between the Spanish and Portuguese Crowns were years in which Philip II, his son, Philip III (1598–1621), and his grandson, Philip IV (1621–65) governed from Madrid a vast global empire, whose size and extension aroused widespread suspicions that they were plotting to achieve ‘universal monarchy’.

Since the 1970s historians have tended to use the term ‘composite monarchy’ to describe early modern polities consisting of distinctive territories grouped together under a single ruler. The structures and practices of the Spanish Monarchy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, created by the dynastic union of the Crowns of Castile and Aragon following the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile in 1469, reflected the general organizational pattern of composite monarchies. The institution of the viceroyalty, inherited from the medieval Crown of Aragon, was devised as a response to one of the most fundamental problems created by the agglomeration of different territories beneath a single ruler, that of royal absenteeism. The viceroy, standing in for an absentee monarch, was his alter ego in territories far distant from the royal person, and the monarchs both of Spain and Portugal would adopt the system of viceroyalties, or in some instances governorships, to mitigate the consequences of the intractable problem of distance.

Similarly, the concept of a Monarchy composed of distinctive realms and provinces, all with their own laws and institutions, not only prevailed in Spain itself and its European possessions, but was also carried across the Atlantic, even if in a modified form. Major geographical or historical complexes in the New World, like New Spain (Mexico), Peru, or Quito, were officially classed as kingdoms—reinos—and took their place as the reinos de las Indias among the other realms of the Spanish Monarchy. These realms might also be grouped under the general title of the estado or ‘state’ of the Indies, and the Portuguese used the same terminology when they spoke of the Estado da Índia or Estado do Brasil. The overseas territories were not called ‘colonies’, or at least not before the mid-eighteenth century when ministers in Madrid began to imitate the usage of rival European powers. By then ‘colonies’ had come to imply a degree of subordination. At least technically, however, Spain’s overseas possessions formed part, not of a colonial empire but of a worldwide Monarchy composed of individual kingdoms and provinces.

The history of this imperial complex, like that of other European empires, has all too often tended to be treated as if it lived within a largely national framework. Recent years, however, have seen a growing realization that the imperial policies of the different European powers were shaped by mutual interaction, that imperial boundaries, even when charted on maps, were all too likely to be porous, and that the development and character of an empire cannot be fully understood as long as it remains artificially compartmentalized. This realization has led to attempts to integrate the history of individual empires into a wider historical context, in the form of Atlantic history or of global history. The first of these was given an impetus by the creation of the Atlantic Alliance in the Cold War period, and the second by the trends towards globalization in recent decades. Both aim to trace interactions and connections between different empires, continents, and territories. They have been accompanied by an increased interest in the possibilities of comparative history, as a device for revealing and explaining the similarities and the differences between the different European empires.

Nowhere are connections and comparisons more needed, or more likely to prove fruitful, than in discussions of the two
Iberian empires, created as they were by peoples sharing much the same geographical space. Portugal and Spain, as pioneers of European overseas empire, both embarked on long-distance voyages and the acquisition of overseas territory in the course of the fifteenth century. Both were traditionally crusading powers, engaged over the course of the centuries in the long process of reconquista—the reconquest of Iberian soil from the Muslim invaders. In both, this crusade shaped forms of social organization and a militant and religious collective mentality which would heavily influence their subsequent approach to overseas empire. Both saw themselves as nations with a divinely appointed mission to halt and throw back the advance of the Ottoman Turks and carry the Christian gospel to the farthest corners of the earth. Even after a series of papal bulls and the signing of the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494 had nominally demarcated their respective spheres of influence, each continued to see the other as a rival in the race to move further into extra-European space; and each kept a close watch on the activities of the other, borrowing and imitating ideas and practices.

Yet, in spite of the connections between the two powers and the many similarities in their behaviour and attitudes, Spanish and Portuguese historians, strongly entrenched behind their respective national barriers, have been reluctant to move outside them. Only in the last few years have signs appeared of an expansion of historical horizons and of a collaborative approach to the study of institutions and practices common to both Monarchies, like the institution of viceroyalty and the character of viceregal courts. Inevitably there is still a long way to go, and the process of connecting and comparing is likely to engage the attention of more than one generation of historians. We are still far from the systematic comparison of the trajectories of the two empires that must one day be written. As a result, this chapter can do no more than look at the two empires in tandem, contrasting and connecting them at those points where the literature on both makes this feasible.

(p. 203) **The Acquisition of Empire**

Both Spain and Portugal forged their overseas empires following a period of conflict and domestic upheaval in which each of the three monarchs who emerged victorious—John I (1385–1433), the founder of the new Portuguese royal House of Avis, Ferdinand II of Aragon, and Isabella of Castile—seized the opportunity of victory to strengthen the royal authority and rally their subjects round the Crown. This revival of royal power, first in Portugal and then in the Spain created by the union of Castile and Aragon, was to be crucial for the development of empire. With their nobilities at least partially tamed, and with the support of increasingly bureaucratized organs of government staffed by letrados—university graduates trained in the law—the Iberian monarchs were well placed to give direction to the process of overseas expansion and stamp their own authority upon it where circumstances allowed.

Portugal, emerging first from its period of civil strife, took the lead in organizing the voyages and expeditions that would eventually endow it with a worldwide empire. These were planned to meet a variety of requirements, commercial, territorial, spiritual, and geographical, in varying degrees of combination. Crusading zeal, the territorial ambitions of the nobility, and the desire to tap directly into the gold trade of the Sahara, launched the Portuguese on a prolonged struggle to expand into North Africa, where they scored a brilliant victory with the capture of the Moroccan city of Ceuta in 1415. The conquest of North Africa was to be a continuing dream that encompassed the ambition to reconquer the Holy Land, but, for all the territorial ambitions of the nobility, hopes of easy conquest were dashed by the resistance of Moroccan warlords. Eventually Portugal’s North African empire came to consist of little more than a coastal zone defended by a string of fortress towns whose upkeep placed a heavy drain on the royal treasury, while providing ample opportunities for Portuguese soldiers and traders to engage in lucrative activities of their own. Spain’s hopes of a viable North African empire would be similarly dashed a century later, when attempts were made to follow up the reconquest of the Moorish kingdom of Granada in 1492 by carrying the crusade across the straits of Gibraltar. One of the dying wishes of Queen Isabella in 1504 was that Castilians should devote themselves to the conquest of Africa and the war against Islam. A Castilian army commanded by Cardinal Cisneros captured Oran in 1509, but, as happened with the Portuguese, there would be little left to show for all the effort expended, other than a costly string of presidios—frontier outposts—along a shoreline behind which loomed the hostile and solidly Islamic Maghrib. For Spain and Portugal alike North Africa was to be intractable territory, and it soon became...
apparent to both that there were richer pickings and far more alluring prospects of expansion and settlement to be found elsewhere.\(^4\)

Those prospects were initially to be found in the islands of the Atlantic discovered or rediscovered by Iberian and other seamen in the opening decades of the fifteenth century, and which would come to be seen as providing opportunities both for colonization (p. 204) and for agrarian development. The Portuguese began settling the uninhabited island of Madeira in 1424, the Azores in the 1450s, and the Cape Verde islands in the 1460s. Sovereignty over the Atlantic islands was bitterly disputed between the Crowns of Castile and Portugal, and the Canary Islands in particular became a focus of conflict in the war that broke out between the two countries in 1475 as a result of Portuguese intervention in the struggle over the succession in Castile. In the peace treaty of 1479 Portugal renounced its claim to the Canaries, but in the face of fierce resistance by the indigenous Guanche population it would take the Castilians until the final years of the fifteenth century to establish effective dominion over the Canary archipelago. The experience of their encounter with the Guanches and of the conquest and settlement of the Canaries would do much to condition subsequent Castilian responses to the encounter with the indigenous peoples of America and the challenges involved in the conquest and colonization of the Caribbean islands and the American mainland (see Map 8.1).

Castilian–Portuguese rivalry was an obvious spur to exploration and to territorial conquest and occupation, but the move of the Iberians into the Atlantic and down the coast of West Africa was driven by imperatives that extended well beyond considerations of power and prestige. The Canary archipelago offered access to the coastal regions of Saharan Africa and its elusive sources of gold. In Madeira and the Azores Genoese capital underwrote the cultivation of land that could be used to reduce Portugal’s dependence on foreign sources of wheat, and to develop sugar plantations for the production of a commodity for which there was an insatiable European demand.

Commercial considerations, together with the hope of finding, in the fabled African kingdom of Prester John, a Christian ally in their crusade against Islam, encouraged the Portuguese to reconnoitre and move down the West African coastline. These voyages marked the beginning of a process which, over the course of the following decades, would (p. 205) see the establishment of Portuguese feitorias, or trading stations, at strategic points along the coast, and with them the establishment of a permanent Portuguese presence in West Africa. Portuguese merchants and impoverished members of the lower nobility were the moving spirits in this process. Where trading prospects looked promising, however, the Crown was quick to move in and regulate, sometimes taking the initiative, as it did in 1482 when embarking on the construction of a fortress at the gold-trading station of Elmina.

The West African trade revolved in particular around the acquisition of Guinean gold in exchange for European commodities, but, in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, slaves from the African interior, initially acquired to supply the Atlantic islands and the domestic markets of Portugal and southern Spain, became an increasingly important component of this Portuguese–African commercial economy. Once the slave-trading machinery was in place it could readily be adapted to meet a rapidly growing demand for labour in the new European societies that would soon be in process of formation on the other side of the Atlantic. Enormous profits were there for the making, and it was the hunger for these profits that drove Portuguese soldiers, adventurers, and traders, as well as the Portuguese Crown, to engage more deeply with the kingdoms and societies of West and Central Africa. It had early become apparent that militarily these African societies were fully a match for the Portuguese and that conquest was therefore out of the question. The alternative was to enter into diplomatic relationships with African rulers and provide them with mercenaries in exchange for trading privileges. This strategy proved particularly successful with the powerful central African kingdom of Kongo, which became a major Portuguese ally as it was transformed into a nominally Christian kingdom thanks to the conversion of its ruler and the activities of a handful of Portuguese missionaries.\(^5\)
Following the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope in 1487 the Portuguese began moving up the east coast of Africa, where they found resistance weaker and plundering easier than on the west coast of the continent. But, as in West Africa, they also established formal relations with local rulers, including the king of Ethiopia (not quite the Prester John of their imagination), to whom they sent an embassy in 1520. Alongside the formal relationships, however, numerous Portuguese made their own local arrangements, taking up residence as settlers, acting as traders, or entering the service of African rulers as mercenaries. By the middle of the sixteenth century, therefore, Portugal's African ‘empire’ was a mixture of formal empire, consisting of coastal settlements and trading posts, and informal empire, made up of a complicated network of relationships based on official and private negotiations with local rulers and elites.

This would also be the pattern that developed after Vasco da Gama reached Calicut in 1498, and Portuguese merchants began prizing their way into the trading networks of the Indian Ocean in a bid to gain control of intra-Asian commerce and what promised to be an immensely profitable maritime trade in the Asian spices so eagerly sought by Europeans. Once again, private and royal initiative went hand in hand. The Crown followed up Vasco da Gama’s voyage early in 1500 by sending out a large fleet to India under the command of Pedro Alvares Cabral—a fleet which hit the coastline of Brazil on its outward voyage. As Cabral claimed the territory in the name of King Manuel, this unexpected encounter with land on the Portuguese side of the 1494 dividing line between the overseas possessions of Spain and Portugal gave the Portuguese a transatlantic foothold in the New World of America. The land was rich in dyewood, but in the opening years of the new century its resources seemed of small importance in comparison with the fabled riches of Asia. It was only in the 1530s, after Breton and Norman traders had begun exploiting the forest products of north-eastern Brazil, that the Portuguese Crown, fearful of losing its sovereignty, began paying serious attention to the American portion of its expanding global empire.

All eyes were on India and Asia, and it was in 1505, with the appointment of Dom Francisco de Almeida as viceroy, that Portugal embarked on the construction of what became its Estado da Índia, a ‘state’ that would eventually run all the way from the Persian Gulf to India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and the Moluccas, and then on to China and Japan (see Map 8.2). The first pieces of this Asian empire were put together by Almeida, who negotiated local alliances and built fortresses at Cochin and elsewhere. Almeida’s defeat of an Egyptian–Gujarati fleet off Diu in 1509 ensured Portugal’s maritime supremacy in the region and with it the smooth running of the carreira da Índia, the regular sailing of fleets on the six months’ run from Lisbon to India, and their return journey laden with pepper, cinnamon, and other Asian products. Almeida’s successor, Afonso de Albuquerque, who held the title of governor rather than viceroy, continued and systematized the process of constructing the foundations of a Portuguese Asian empire, which he did with great military daring and political skill. He negotiated a series of alliances with local rulers that would help guarantee the safety of Portuguese shipping lanes, but he also secured for the Portuguese three strategically placed bases, with the capture of the Persian Gulf port of Ormuz, together with Malacca, and Goa, which he transformed into the capital of Portuguese Asia—a position that it would hold for the next 450 years. Bringing settlers in from Portugal and encouraging their marriages into local elites he effectively turned Goa and its hinterland into a colony, a small piece of overseas Portugal, Christian but racially mixed, in what was less a territorial empire than an imperial framework within which trade, plunder, settlement, and local alliances jostled and interacted with each other.

Although the Portuguese secured footholds and made their presence felt through the Persian Gulf, India, and the Far East, there was little chance of large-scale territorial conquest, although after 1580, perhaps under the influence of union with the Spanish Monarchy, they seem to have developed an increasingly territorial conception of empire in Asia, and managed to seize control of a large portion of Ceylon in the last years of the sixteenth century. With a population of around a million at
the start of the century, the home country lacked the manpower to acquire and sustain, in a highly unfavourable disease environment and in the face of populous states and societies with formidable military capabilities, a massive territorial empire of the kind that their Castilian neighbours were beginning to build on the far shores of the Atlantic at much the same time.

Columbus’s Caribbean landfall of 1492 and his return with the dramatic news that he had reached the outskirts of Asia prompted a flurry of activity at the court of Ferdinand (p. 207) and Isabella, where the surrender of Granada had generated a powerful sense that Spain and its monarchs had been especially chosen by God to defeat Islam and plant the banners of Christ in Jerusalem itself. The report of Columbus, himself deeply imbued with a messianic vision of his own place in this divine reordering, confirmed the Christian providentialism of both Ferdinand and Isabella, and gave a fresh impetus to the crusading and evangelizing ideals of the reconquista—ideals which would inspire the generation of Spaniards that set out to conquer new worlds and bring new converts to the faith.

To reinforce their claims to the newly found islands, the monarchs sent envoys to Rome early in 1493. Alexander VI obliged by issuing a series of four papal bulls, the last of which granted Castile sovereignty over islands and any mainland discovered or to be discovered along the western or southern route, and divided the world along a line that, following Portuguese protests, would be renegotiated at Tordesillas in the following year. Following the precedent of the papal bull issued in 1455 to the Portuguese Crown, Alexander made papal recognition of Castilian sovereignty conditional on the conversion of the heathen and the spreading of the gospel. For both Spain and Portugal, therefore, overseas expansion was a joint church–state enterprise, and although claims to overseas dominion could also be based on conquest and effective occupation, papal recognition provided a firm juridical basis for claims to sovereignty. With it went the obligation, of which their rulers remained for ever mindful, to promote and extend the faith.

Just as the Portuguese Crown followed Vasco da Gama’s expedition to India by organizing a second one led by Cabral, so Ferdinand and Isabella, equally anxious to ensure their own rights, hastened to equip a new fleet under the command of Columbus, whom they named ‘our Admiral of the Ocean Sea, and viceroy and governor of the islands that have been discovered in the Indies’. From the start, as with Portugal’s overseas expansion, there was a tension in Castile’s ‘enterprise of the Indies’, between royal claims to authority and private initiative, without which large-scale conquest and colonization would have been impossible. In Spain, and particularly in the southern Spanish regions of Andalusia and Extremadura, there were, as in Portugal, many footloose young men, especially after the completion of the conquest of Granada in 1492. These men, with nothing much to lose and a great deal to gain if the newly found regions turned out to possess gold and offered the possibility of acquiring land and lordship, were to become the conquerors, settlers, and emigrants who, over the course of the next thirty years, would lay the foundations of Spain’s American empire. But always, one step behind, would be royal officials with a brief to make sure that the Crown’s authority was respected and that it received its due share of the spoils.

Columbus’s 1493 expedition made for the island of Hispaniola, which became the original base from which Castile’s eventual empire of the Indies would be constructed. Although trade with the indigenous inhabitants of the Antilles was regarded as an important part of the enterprise, this expedition, 1,200 strong, also aimed to establish a permanent settlement, following the pattern of the Portuguese style of settlement in Madeira and the other Atlantic islands. It also included a group of friars who would undertake the conversion of the natives. The discovery of gold on the island, however, and the presence of a population that could be mastered with relative ease, tended to (p. 209) shift the colonization of Hispaniola into the familiar lines of the reconquista of Spain from the Moors, in which the search for booty and the acquisition of land and lordship over vassals were the dominant driving force. It was a process that would devastate the island and wipe out most of the Taíno population.

Over the next three decades the process repeated itself as the Spaniards moved from one Caribbean island to another—Puerto Rico in 1508, Jamaica in 1509, Cuba in 1511—and on from Cuba to the mainland at the isthmus of Panama, from where Vasco Núñez de Balboa sighted the Pacific Ocean in 1513. Everywhere the Spaniards came, they left death and destruction in their wake. As the indigenous population succumbed to armed assaults and European diseases, fresh raiding parties, mounted by restless and hungry Spaniards who were incapable of settling down on islands whose resources they had
destroyed, moved further and further afield in forays to seize and enslave Amerindians to supplement a rapidly dwindling labour force. In 1519, when Hernán Cortés, in defiance of the orders of the governor of Cuba, set out with an expedition of eleven ships and some 600 men to conquer and settle what turned out to be the Mexican ‘empire’ of the emperor Moctezuma, the prospects of creating a viable Spanish ‘empire of the Indies’ appeared to be in tatters, and the benefits to the Crown of its newly acquired transatlantic possessions looked increasingly incommensurate with the costs.

Cortés’s expedition to the Central American mainland changed all this. Cortés himself was an astute and charismatic leader of men, with sharp political skills. He quickly appreciated after landing on the Mexican coast and making contact with local chiefs or caciques that this was a world very different from that of the Antilles. The country was densely settled, and there was every indication that he had stumbled on a sophisticated civilization which possessed impressive buildings, large urban complexes, and markets. It also transpired that it was held in thrall by a powerful ruler whose capital, Tenochtitlán, was far inland. Above all, this was a land in possession of gold. All this was an inducement to press on into the interior and come face to face with Moctezuma, whatever the risks.

It took two years from Cortés’s encounter with Moctezuma on the outskirts of his lakeland capital in November 1519 and his daring seizure of the emperor to make himself the master of a semi-conquered land. Following in the tradition of W. H. Prescott, whose rousing narrative, The Conquest of Mexico, was published in 1843, generations of historians explained the success of the ‘conquest’ primarily in terms of the bravery, skill, and technical superiority of a few hundred Spaniards, and the fatalism of a doomed Moctezuma. Since the middle of the twentieth century, however, while archaeologists have made an important contribution to the reconstruction of pre-conquest societies, historians and ethnohistorians, by studying pre-conquest and post-conquest sources in native languages, have helped to recover at least something of the ‘vision of the vanquished’ and to view the conquest through the eyes of the defeated.

There has also been a growing appreciation that the ‘conquest’ of such a vast territory would have been impossible if Cortés and his men had not benefited from indigenous traditions of hospitality to strangers, and from the active support and participation of regions and peoples who bitterly resented domination by the residents of the island (p. 210) capital, the Mexica (sometimes called Aztecs, a term not used by the indigenous people themselves), and were eager to throw off Moctezuma’s yoke. This dictated Cortés’s strategy, which was similar to that used by Spaniards in the reconquista and by the Portuguese in Africa and Asia—a strategy of divide and rule based on the making of alliances with local elites. But he also had other advantages which were not available to the Portuguese. Horses gave him at least the initial advantage of surprise, while European weapons and technology, including the nautical technology which would make possible the construction of the brigantines that would later enable him to control Lake Texcoco and besiege Tenochtitlán, helped tilt the balance against a civilization that possessed neither iron nor the wheel. He faced, too, peoples who, as in the Antilles, had lived in isolation from the European-Asian landmass, and had therefore not been exposed to such diseases as smallpox and measles. The consequent vulnerability of enemies and allies alike to the presence of Europeans created possibilities for domination by Spain, and subsequently by Spain’s rivals, over the land and peoples of the American hemisphere that did not exist in Africa and Asia.

The extent and wealth of Mexico and the rich spoils of conquest exceeded all expectations. In October 1520, having stage-managed what he depicted as a formal transfer of empire—translatio imperii—from Moctezuma to the Spanish monarch, Cortés wrote to inform the newly elected Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, that ‘one might call oneself the emperor of this kingdom’, which Cortés christened ‘New Spain’, ‘with no less glory than that of Germany, which, by the Grace of God, Your Sacred Majesty already possesses’. If Charles and his officials did not take up the offer, they were not slow to appreciate its implications. At last, the empire of the Indies looked like becoming a profitable empire, opening up visions of a limitless supply of precious metals to enrich the royal treasury.

The prospects became still more glittering ten years later when Cortés’s fellow Extremaduran, Francisco Pizarro, after negotiating with the Crown for the governorship of the lands he hoped to conquer, led an expedition down the Pacific coast into the Andean empire of the Incas. Taking advantage, like Cortés, of internal conflicts, and adopting Cortés’s technique of
making straight for the source of authority by seizing the Inca Atahualpa, he captured Cusco, the heart of the shattered Inca empire, in November 1533, little more than two years after he had set out with his 180 men on his expedition of conquest.

It would be easier to seize control of two relatively centralized imperial complexes than of other parts of the vast American landmass which had unfolded before the amazed eyes of the Spaniards. The Spaniards themselves were still few in number, in spite of the influx of immigrants and would-be conquistadores once news reached Spain of the riches of Mexico and Peru. Distances were enormous, terrain, ranging from high mountain country to swamps and jungle, was frequently difficult or impossible to negotiate, climate and disease took a heavy toll, and the eagerly anticipated gold or silver were all too often non-existent. Divided as they were into a mosaic of different polities, the Maya societies of Yucatán proved harder to conquer than those of the Valley of Mexico, and parts of Yucatán would not be fully subjugated until the late seventeenth century. (p. 211) In other regions where indigenous resistance was strong, like the southern Chile of the Araucanian Indians or the northern Mexico of the Chichimecas, uneasy frontierlands emerged. In regions, too, that had little to offer in terms of natural or human resources, the Spaniards established at the most only a minimal presence. Yet by the middle of the sixteenth century they had become the nominal masters of a vast territorial empire. The challenge would be to turn that empire into a reality.

The Organization of Empire

Having seen the devastation wrought by his compatriots in the Antilles, Cortés realized on becoming the master of central Mexico that the only way to prevent a recurrence of the same process on the mainland was to give his followers a stake in the land. Without this they would be no more than plunderers and marauders, forever moving on in search of fresh spoils. Earlier, in Hispaniola, Nicolás de Ovando, who had been appointed royal governor of the island in 1501, had instituted on behalf of the Crown a system, some aspects of which recalled that used in the reconquest of southern Spain. This involved the repartimiento, or distribution, of Indians to selected individuals, who in turn had the obligation to care for the people they had received in ‘deposit’, and instruct them in the faith. In medieval Spain the Crown had assigned Moorish villages, under the name of encomiendas, to members of the military orders, and the word encomienda would reappear in the new American environment, although carrying a rather different meaning. Here it would include no entitlement to land or rents, but was simply an assignment by the Crown of a compulsory labour force to a depository or encomendero, on the condition of his assuming specific responsibilities towards his Indian charges.

The rapid diminution of Hispaniola’s Taíno population and the prospect of richer spoils elsewhere meant that the introduction of the system failed to bring real stability to the island, but it provided a model that Cortés began to apply in Mexico even before securing royal authorization. The Crown, having struggled to impose itself at home on an overmighty nobility, was reluctant to give its assent, fearing the emergence in America of a new territorial aristocracy and the consequent challenge to its power. Like Cortés, however, it had to face the reality of bands of greedy and lawless adventurers who somehow had to be anchored to the land. As a result, encomiendas—some 600 in New Spain and 500 in Peru—came to be granted to a select group among the soldiers of the conquest, who, together with some of the later comers to the Indies, would constitute an elite among the Spanish settlers.

At this same moment in Brazil, the Cinderella of Portugal’s overseas empire, the Portuguese Crown was resorting to a rather similar strategy in order to encourage settlement and ensure permanent Portuguese possession of the land. Between 1534 and 1536 King John III (1521–57), following a practice adopted in the settlement of Portugal’s Atlantic islands, carved up the coastal regions and their hinterlands into sixteen captaincies running from north to south, and allocated them to twelve donatários, or grantees. (p. 212) These donatory-captains enjoyed far more substantial powers than Spanish encomenderos, and were permitted to make individual land grants, while also being assigned responsibility for tax-raising, the promotion of agriculture, and the administration of justice. In Portuguese as in Spanish America, therefore, the Crown, still in no position to impose effective royal control, was forced by circumstance to surrender significant power into private hands, even at the risk of creating a serious long-term challenge to its own authority.
The two crowns did, however, make strenuous efforts to mitigate the consequences of this devolution of power. Expeditions of exploration and conquest over such vast areas of territory had to be organized and financed through private initiative, and would not otherwise have been possible. But the Spanish Crown was always careful to retain the ultimate authority by insisting that those planning such expeditions should enter into a formal contract or capitulación, setting out the terms under which they would be allowed to recruit an expeditionary force, and the extent and nature of the rewards they could expect. All such documents were carefully notarized. The conquistadors were products of a society shaped by the thirteenth-century Castilian legal code of the Siete Partidas, and belonged to a highly legalistic world.

In order to curb the individualistic instincts of those who were carrying off the spoils it was important to settle them, where feasible, in cities and towns, and encourage a process of emigration from the Iberian peninsula that would make it possible to build stable transatlantic societies on the model of the hierarchical, corporate societies that existed at home. In the Aristotelian–Thomist philosophy that permeated the early modern Iberian mentality, the majority of human beings needed to live in communities in order to realize their full potential and promote the common good. As members of an essentially urban civilization Spaniards and Portuguese were anyhow instinctively inclined to congregate in towns and villages, and the process would be carried over to their overseas possessions.

The Portuguese Crown issued municipal charters to encourage the evolution of forts and trading settlements into fully fledged towns, some of which, like Goa, a ‘royal city’ from 1518, or Salvador, founded in north-eastern Brazil in 1549, were the result of crown initiative, while others, like Macao, were generated by individual or collective action. In the Spanish Caribbean, Santo Domingo in Hispaniola and the Cuban port of Havana developed into cities, and Cortés’s first action on reaching the Mexican mainland was to found a town, Vera Cruz, and endow it with the standard form of Castilian municipal government, consisting of town councillors (regidores), an alcalde to administer justice, and other town officers. In a Central American world which already possessed urban complexes it was natural for Spaniards to congregate in them, and, as soon as he had conquered it, Cortés set about the building of a new Spanish city, Mexico City, on the ruins of Tenochtitlan. The seat of Moctezuma’s power was thus to become the capital of New Spain. Pizarro, on the other hand, instead of taking over Cusco as the capital of Peru, turned away from the Andean highlands to build a new capital, Lima, on the Pacific coast, reflecting the dependence of Spain’s new dominion on supplies and reinforcements from the sea.

(p. 213) These new transatlantic cities and towns, dominating the surrounding countryside, were laid out, where feasible, on a grid-iron pattern with a plaza mayor at its centre—a layout that expressed in architectural form the kind of rationally planned and orderly communities that the conquering society aspired to establish in a subjugated New World. By 1580 there were 225 towns and cities in Hispanic America, and Spain had successfully created an urban civilization constructed on the model of its own. While anxious to promote emigration to the Indies, the Crown was no less anxious to ensure that only the right kind of settlers should make the Atlantic crossing. Seville was made the sole point of departure for America, and would remain so until the 1670s, when the silting of the river Guadalquivir forced a progressive shift of the Atlantic trade to Cadiz and its spacious bay. The House of Trade—the Casa de la Contratación—set up in Seville in 1503 in imitation of the Portuguese Casa da Índia in Lisbon, and eventually moved to Cadiz in 1717, was given the task of approving and registering all would-be emigrants. Foreigners, Jews, Moors, heretics, and gypsies were excluded, while, in a bid to create stable transatlantic communities, wives were expected to join husbands who had gone before them, and unmarried emigrants were encouraged to marry and settle down. In the first stages of colonization there were very few women among the emigrants, but by the 1570s they accounted for nearly 30 per cent of the total.

Emigrants from Castile, crossing the Atlantic over the course of the sixteenth century at a rate of 2,000 to 2,500 a year—about the same number as were emigrating from Portugal, with a much smaller population, to Asia and Brazil—would gravitate to the new cities in process of construction, where they could use their skills and crafts to help build the new societies, although artisans would soon find themselves in competition with Indians who were quick to learn the skills and techniques of the conquerors. As they grew, the towns in turn required increasing amounts of maize, wheat, and other food supplies from the surrounding countryside. The growth of urban markets stimulated an interest among the settlers in the acquisition of land, but large tracts of land remained in the hands of Indian communities. Encomenderos were expressly
forbidden to live on the lands of their tribute-paying Indians, and resided in the towns.

The Crown’s purpose in imposing this restriction was partly inspired by its determination to prevent the rise in the Indies of a hereditary landowning aristocracy. But it also reflected its preoccupation with the fate of the indigenous population and how it should be treated. The preoccupation was motivated both by its obligation under the terms of the papal donation to ensure the well-being and conversion of its new, non-Christian subjects, and by the painful awareness of how Spanish settlements on the islands of the Caribbean had brought about the near-extinction of their indigenous inhabitants. In 1498 Queen Isabella expressed her indignation on learning that Columbus had permitted enslavement on Hispaniola of her ‘vassals’, and thereafter Indian slavery was technically forbidden, although exceptions were made for man-eating Caribs and for Indians taken in the course of a ‘just war’. This led to the reading aloud by Spanish commanders to bemused Indians of a document known as the requerimiento before engaging them in conflict—a device so obviously open to abuse that a royal decree of 1542 stipulated that even those taken in a ‘just war’ should no longer be enslaved.

The arrival of friars in the Antilles brought the behaviour of the settlers under close scrutiny, and in 1511, in a sermon which reverberated across the Atlantic, a Dominican on Hispaniola, Fray Antonio de Montesinos, denounced his compatriots for their barbaric treatment of the Indians. The sermon changed the life of Bartolomé de las Casas, a priest on the island who had received his own repartimiento of Indians and who would later join the Dominican order and devote himself to campaigning ceaselessly on their behalf both in the Indies and at the Spanish court. Las Casas’s torrent of writings, published and unpublished, included a description of atrocities committed by the Spaniards, entitled A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies (1552), which would circulate through Europe and would do much to propagate an enduring image of Spanish cruelty.

The alarming reports sent back to Spain by the friars led in 1512 to the publication of the Laws of Burgos, the first comprehensive legal code for the Spanish Indies, and the starting point for a long succession of laws designed to improve the lot of the Indians and prevent their exploitation by the encomenderos and the settler community. The legislation culminated in the famous New Laws of 1542 by which the Crown, deeply disturbed by the continuing reports of the maltreatment of the Indians and by the rapid decline of the Indian population, sought to transform the heavy labour services of encomienda Indians into tribute payments, and to prevent the transmission of encomiendas by hereditary succession. The New Laws provoked a rebellion among the settler community of Peru, and their implementation was suspended in New Spain in the face of similarly strong opposition. Charles V was forced to retreat, but retained some control by stipulating that on the death of the current holder an encomienda should automatically revert to the Crown, which would then authorize its reallocation.

Eventually the problem of the encomiendas went a long way towards solving itself as the Indian population succumbed on the mainland, as it had in the Antilles, to disease and maltreatment. Old encomendero families died out, the value of encomiendas declined as the Indian population dwindled, and the future lay with those encomenderos and wealthy settlers who had bought up land vacated by the disappearance of Indian communities. The growth of urban markets made land a profitable long-term investment, and in due course an oligarchy would emerge, drawing its wealth from its possession of great estates, or haciendas. But this oligarchy never quite evolved into the hereditary territorial aristocracy which the encomenderos had aspired to become.

The Indian question, however, remained acute. Scholars in the great universities of Castile, and notably Francisco de Vitoria in the university of Salamanca, had long debated the moral issues raised by the presence and activities of their compatriots in America, and in 1550, on the orders of Charles V, a junta was convened at Valladolid to consider the matter. At stake was the question, which dated back to Columbus’s first settlement on Hispaniola, of how the indigenous peoples of the New World were to be viewed. Did they have the capacity to understand the rudiments of Christianity and acquire ‘civility’, as the word was understood by Europeans? Were they indeed fully rational beings, or were they in some sense essentially inferior, thus falling into the Aristotelian category of “natural slaves”? This question was at the heart of the great debate at Valladolid between Las Casas, a passionate advocate of Indian rationality and capacity, (p. 215) and his adversary, the distinguished humanist scholar, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda. The debate never reached a definitive conclusion, but Las Casas
and his friends had at least created a moral climate in which the Crown was forcefully reminded of its obligations towards the Indians. Over the years it made continuing efforts to redress wrongs, adopting legislative and other measures to provide its Indian subjects with a degree of protection against exploitation by the settler community.

These measures were only partially successful, but Indian communities themselves were quick to learn how to play the Spanish system by resorting to the law courts and by appealing to higher authority, and ultimately to Madrid. Exploitation of Indian labour remained intense in some regions, and especially in the silver-mining region of the Andes, where, under a rota system known as the *mita*, Indian communities were obliged to provide a regular supply of mineworkers who were paid a pittance for their labour. Informal enslavement, too, was common in the frontier regions, which tended to remain a law unto themselves. Yet while the lot of many Indians in the Hispanic world, and especially of rural Indians, was a hard one, that of the Amerindian population of Brazil was worse. No impassioned debate over the ethics of colonization was conducted in Portugal as it was in Spain, and there was no Portuguese equivalent of Las Casas, ‘the apostle of the Indians’. Even though in 1570 the Portuguese Crown belatedly followed the Spanish example in abolishing Indian slavery, it continued to permit enslavement in cases of cannibalism or of a ‘just war’, a term that allowed for a multitude of crimes as settlers pushed deep into the interior in the seventeenth century. Theoretically the Indians lived under royal protection, but this was not supported by the kind of legislative effort that had some impact on their treatment in the Spanish territories. As a result they were, and remained, very vulnerable.

There were several reasons for this difference in the colonizing practice of the two powers. Brazil contained nothing comparable to the sophisticated civilizations of Mexico and Peru, and Portuguese friars and settlers found the lifestyle of the Tupinamba Indians repugnant and their social organization incomprehensible. Nor was evangelization conducted with anything like the intensity that characterized the work of the Spanish religious orders in America, where the friars followed up mass baptisms with sustained attempts at religious instruction, and engaged in a massive church-building programme that transformed the landscapes of Central America and Peru. While Portuguese Asia drew off some friars at the expense of Brazil, the Asian mission was never especially well organized or effective, but the enterprise was also hampered by the shortage of qualified recruits for work overseas, both among the religious orders and the secular clergy. Portugal’s sixteenth-century population was only a fifth of that of Castile, and where Spain possessed thirty-three universities by the early seventeenth century and had founded six in its American territories by the same date, Portugal for many years had only two, Coimbra and Évora, and never established a university in its overseas possessions. In the end it was the Jesuit Order which came to the Crown’s rescue in Asia and in Brazil. The first Jesuits arrived in Brazil at the end of the 1540s, and gave a fresh sense of direction to a hitherto inconsistent missionary enterprise.

(p. 216) In Spanish America, by contrast, the Jesuits arrived late on the scene, and found that much of the work of conversion and instruction in the more densely settled regions of Central America and Peru had already been shared out among those who had preceded them. The mendicant orders in New Spain embarked on their mission in 1524 in the immediate aftermath of the conquest, when the first Franciscans, the ‘twelve apostles’, arrived in the country. By 1559 the viceroyalty could boast 802 Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians, with 160 houses between them. The Jesuits, instead, devoted themselves to evangelization among the Indians in outlying regions like Paraguay, where the first of their famous missionary villages were founded in 1611, and to the education and religious direction of a growing creole population of settlers and new immigrants clustered in the towns.

The presence of the religious orders in Spanish America had a profound influence both on royal policy and on local practice. Concerned that exposure to the settlers would corrupt the innocence of their Indian charges and weaken their still uncertain hold on the faith, friars who hoped to recreate in the New World the primitive church of the apostles lobbied for the creation of a distinctive *república de los indios*, separate from the new colonial society in process of construction. While the notion had some appeal to the Crown, it proved totally impractical. The lives of Indian communities were disrupted as their populations succumbed to wave after wave of European diseases and many of their inhabitants moved to the new Spanish towns. At the same time, massive cohabitation between colonists and Indian women led to the growth of a mixed-blood mestizo population which never quite belonged to either world. The *república de los indios* survived, but as part of the
corporate society that was being created in Spanish America, with its own corporate rights and its own indigenous nobility.

Much of the groundwork of Spain’s and Portugal’s overseas empires was laid by individuals or groups—adventurers, emigrants, traders, friars—acting to a greater or lesser degree independently, even if sponsored or monitored by the Crown. Yet the inevitable fluidity of the first stages of overseas settlement and evangelization would necessarily have to be followed by a process of institutionalization if the monarchs of the two countries were not to see their newly acquired empires slipping from their hands, as the result of local initiatives or of attacks by rival European states. Where ecclesiastical affairs were concerned, this meant the overseas establishment of the normal apparatus of church government. Elsewhere it meant the establishment of formal structures of bureaucratic control.

Under the terms of the papal concession, overseas empire carried with it a series of obligations and benefits as church and state worked together to promote the worldwide establishment of the Christian faith. The so-called patronato real or padroado real gave the Spanish and Portuguese Crowns extensive powers in the area of ecclesiastical appointments. In return, the papacy expected full royal support in establishing Christianity overseas. In practice, both crowns clung jealously to their privileges, and tended to treat Rome as a junior partner in the imperial enterprise.

Although a bishopric was created in Funchal on Madeira in 1514, the Portuguese monarchs were slow to establish an institutional church and ecclesiastical hierarchy in their overseas territories. The Spanish Crown, with a larger number of qualified recruits (p. 217) at its disposal, moved considerably faster, and had set up thirty-one dioceses in Spanish America by the end of the sixteenth century. This was very much a church under royal control, and no papal legate was ever allowed to set foot in the Indies. The Holy Office of the Inquisition, set up in Spain in 1478 and Portugal in 1536, was exported to their overseas possessions, although not always with the customary local tribunals. It was introduced in Goa in the 1560s, but was never established in Brazil, which instead was subjected to inquisitorial visitations from Lisbon. In Spanish America, on the other hand, local tribunals were set up in Lima and Mexico City in 1570–71, and in Cartagena in 1610. Indians were exempt from its proceedings, which focused on the faith and morals of the creole and mestizo population, and especially on the alleged judaizing activities of Portuguese merchants who seized the opportunity afforded them by the Union of the Crowns to move into the Spanish Indies.

Where secular matters were concerned, the institutions of royal government in the two empires were shaped by a combination of metropolitan practice and local needs. From the start, Lisbon was the capital city of the Portuguese Monarchy, whereas Spain’s worldwide empire only acquired an effective capital when Madrid became the permanent seat of the court in 1561. The itinerant nature of Spanish kingship before then did not, however, prevent the rapid growth of an elaborate bureaucracy staffed by university-trained letrados, and the creation of a permanent repository for state papers in the castle of Simancas, near the important administrative and legal centre of Valladolid. With the creation of the House of Trade in 1503, moreover, Seville, as the gateway to America and the receiving-point for American gold and silver, became in many respects the true capital of Spain’s Atlantic empire until its replacement by Cadiz at the end of the seventeenth century.

The composite Spanish Monarchy was governed by a number of councils attendant on the monarch, including from 1523 a Council of the Indies, with responsibility for government and the administration of justice in the expanding American empire. The Portuguese Crown, by contrast, was slow to create a council in Lisbon for the handling of overseas business. It was only in 1604, following the Union of the Crowns of Spain and Portugal in 1580, that a series of Spanish-inspired administrative reforms led to the establishment of a Conselho da Índia. Eventually, in 1642, after the restoration of Portuguese independence, a new overseas council, the Conselho Ultramarino, came into being. Until then, Portugal’s overseas possessions were administered by a variety of central tribunals, and the only coordinating body for overseas affairs was the Casa da Índia, which confined itself to financial and commercial matters.

Portugal’s administration of its overseas territories, although centrally directed, tended towards ad hoc solutions in response to local conditions, with a degree of flexibility when these proved to be unsatisfactory. By 1550 it was clear that government through donatorial captaincies in Brazil had proved a failure, and John III, following the precedent set in India, appointed a
governor-general in an attempt to secure greater centralization, although without abolishing the existing system. The Spanish Crown, on the other hand, appointed viceroyos for the government of New Spain as early as 1535, and of Peru in 1543. Elsewhere it appointed governors, and no further viceregalies (p. 218) were created until the eighteenth century, when New Granada and the Rio de la Plata acquired viceregal status.

Administrative structures were accompanied by legal structures. Portuguese law became the law of the empire, with high courts operating in Goa and Salvador de Bahia, and a supreme court, the Desembargo do Paço, sitting in Lisbon at the summit of the judicial system. Spanish America, as a Castilian conquest, was subject to the laws of Castile, but these had to be modified or supplemented in response to local conditions, and in 1680 the vast amount of new legislation generated by royal decrees was finally codified in a separate compilation, the Recopilación de las leyes de Indias. Justice was administered by a number of audiencias, or high courts. The first of these was set up in Santo Domingo in 1511, and by the end of the sixteenth century there were ten American Audiencias. Unlike the two similar tribunals in Castile itself, these Audiencias were also entrusted with certain administrative functions in response to the challenge of distance. This set the scene for what was to be a permanent feature of political life in Spain’s American empire—perennial conflict between viceroyos and Audiencias.

Jurisdictional conflict, indeed, was integral to the working of government in both empires, with negative and positive results. Disputes between viceroyos and the courts of justice, between representatives of the Crown and the Church, between municipal councils and royal officials, and between Indian communities and settlers, consumed an enormous amount of time and energy, and greatly increased the inevitable delays in the decision-making process caused by the vast distances involved. At the same time, however, these internal conflicts worked to the Crown’s advantage, enabling it to play off one branch of government against another, clipping the wings of officials who fell out of line, and ensuring its own position as the final arbiter of disputes.

In recent years there has been a growing realization of the degree to which early modern government, whether in Europe itself or overseas, was a system of negotiated government, both within the governmental system itself, and between the Crown and local elites. The emphasis on negotiation, however, has sometimes been allowed to obscure the extent of the effectiveness of royal authority. In the Spanish and Portuguese Monarchies alike, the Crown, with extensive forms of reward and coercion at its disposal, succeeded in establishing itself as the essential point of reference for every section of the community and as a source of supreme authority which it could be costly to defy.

Impelling the Iberian monarchs to assert their authority even at an enormous distance from home was their determination to extract the maximum benefit from overseas territories which turned out to possess a vast potential for generating trade and revenue. This could only be achieved by curbing, insofar as possible, the natural tendency of merchants, settlers, and royal officials to siphon off the profits of empire, and attempting to shape and control the exploitation and development of overseas resources in ways most likely to benefit themselves.

In the early years of Portugal’s Asian empire the Crown resorted to monopoly control, both of the carreira da Índia and of trade in a variety of spices, including pepper, which generated an enormous revenue. But the Crown’s advisers came to realize the inefficiency of (p. 219) the monopoly system and its potential for corruption, and in the middle and later years of the sixteenth century, instead of itself engaging directly in commercial activities, the Crown moved increasingly towards the contracting out of its monopolies and taxing private trade. The Brazil trade, as it developed, was largely left to the initiative of private merchants, in sharp contrast to the highly regulated system of Spain’s carrera de Indias. This became a vast monopolistic enterprise run by the officials of the House of Trade in Seville, operating in conjunction with the community of Sevillian merchants, who were incorporated into a Consulado, or merchant guild, in 1543. The growing value of the transatlantic trade and the danger of attacks by privateers made the high degree of regulation comprehensible.

In the middle years of the sixteenth century the Spanish Atlantic trading system acquired its definitive form, with the annual dispatch of two fleets in convoy under armed protection, one in the spring to New Spain and the other in August to the isthmus of Panama, with the combined fleets returning home from Havana the following autumn. But the Crown paid a
heavy price for its monopoly. While it collected significant dues from the trade, collusion between the Consulado of Seville and the two Consulados established in Mexico City and Lima created ample opportunities for fraud, and foreign merchants increasingly infiltrated the trade by shipping to the Indies commodities that Spanish manufacturers were unable to supply.

At the heart of this transatlantic trade was silver. A great silver mountain was discovered in the Peruvian Andes at Potosí in 1545, and in 1546 and subsequent years rich deposits were found in northern Mexico. The exploitation of these mines transformed the economic life of Spanish America, and with it the Spanish Crown’s finances and the European economy. The Crown received a ‘royal fifth’ of all the silver produced, some of which was retained in America for purposes of administration and defence, while in theory the remainder was shipped back to Seville along with the large quantities remitted home by merchants and private individuals in payment for the goods shipped out from Seville to supply the growing Indies market. Following the conquest of Manila in the Philippines by Miguel López de Legazpi in 1572, however, a transpacific route was opened, with one or two galleons sailing annually from the port of Acapulco in New Spain to Manila, where Chinese merchants would exchange oriental wares for silver. The effect of the opening of this route, essential for the supply of Spanish settlements in the Philippines, was therefore to siphon off to China and the Far East large quantities of American silver otherwise destined for Seville.

The regular annual remittance of American silver to Seville became the first American priority of the government in Madrid. This in turn had sharp consequences for the New World economies and for the lives of the Indian population. Economic life in New Spain and Peru came to revolve around the exploitation of the mines and the supply chains needed to maintain them, including a continuous and adequate supply of labour. The mines of northern Mexico were too far from the more densely settled central regions of the viceroyalty to make possible a forced labour system like the Peruvian mita, and Indian migrant workers had to be lured to the north by the offer of wages. With demographic catastrophe overwhelming the Indian population of Spanish America, which by the end of the century stood at little more than 10 per cent of its size (p. 220) at the time of the conquest, settlers, crown, and church found themselves engaged in acute competition, not only for the tributary resources of a shrinking Indian population but also for the labour needed for work in the fields and the mines. The effect was to place continuous pressure on the viceroyalty of New Spain and Peru to exercise control over the deployment of labour, while engaging in a juggling act to manage the labour supply without violating the Crown’s commitment to protect the indigenous population.

By the later sixteenth century alternative sources of labour had become essential, and these would be found in Africa. By 1595 at least 86,000 black slaves from West Africa had been imported into Spanish America, and a further 80,000 were shipped over between 1595 and 1601. The Portuguese presence along the West African coast gave Portuguese merchants an unassailable advantage in the management of the transatlantic slave trade, and supplies to Spanish America were organized in accordance with the terms of asientos or contracts negotiated with the Spanish Crown. Portuguese merchants also supplied growing numbers of slaves to north-eastern Brazil, where the successful development of sugar plantations had a dramatic impact on the country’s economic prospects. From around 1600, thanks to the rapid rise in Brazilian sugar exports to Europe, Portugal’s American empire held promise of rivalling its Asian empire. By 1620 emigration from Portugal to Brazil, running at 3,000 a year, equalled the rate of emigration to Asia. The balance of the empire was beginning to tilt from the East to the West, as it restructured itself around Portugal’s African–American Atlantic.

By the early seventeenth century in both the Spanish and Portuguese Monarchies the institutions of empire were firmly established, even if cumbersome bureaucratic procedures and a high level of corruption had become firmly entrenched. In Spain’s empire of the Indies, and to a growing extent in north-eastern Brazil, the settlers had struck roots, patterns of economic development and exploitation had been set, and a dwindling Indian labour force had been supplemented by a massive importation of slaves from Africa. Across both empires and especially in the towns, voluntary and involuntary cohabitation were creating populations of increasing racial complexity, whose existence raised difficult questions of social organization and presented fresh challenges to royal officials entrusted with the administration of territories thousands of miles from Lisbon and Madrid. At the same time, the overseas empires of the Iberian powers were increasingly attracting the covetous attention of rival European states. As a result, the seventeenth century would see both Lisbon and Madrid
confronting massive problems of government and defence.

The Survival of Empire

When the Portuguese became the subjects of Philip II of Spain in 1580, one of the strongest arguments in favour of a union of the crowns was that Portugal’s dispersed overseas empire would now enjoy the benefits of military and naval protection by (p. 221) Europe’s most powerful state from attacks by local rulers and European rivals. To some extent these hopes were initially realized. Three Spanish expeditions were dispatched from the Philippines to the Spice Islands (the Moluccas) in the 1580s and 1590s in support of the Portuguese and their local allies, although they failed to recapture the Portuguese fort on the island of Ternate. It was impossible, however, to defend every vulnerable point in an over-extended empire. One such vulnerable point was the great trading centre of Ormuz in the Persian Gulf, which the Portuguese had long regarded as the key to India. In 1622 it fell victim to a combined Anglo–Persian assault. The union with Spain, too, was disadvantageous as well as beneficial. The enemies of the Spanish Monarchy, and in particular the Dutch, now had no compunction about forcing their way into regions which the Portuguese had long regarded as their own exclusive domain.

During the first half of the seventeenth century, and especially after the resumption of open war between Spain and the Dutch Republic in 1621, the Dutch increasingly encroached on Portuguese territory and trade routes in Asia and America. By 1605 they had captured the principal Spice Islands, but their attempt to establish themselves in Pernambuco in Brazil was temporarily thwarted by a joint Spanish–Portuguese expeditionary force in 1625. They returned, however, in the 1630s, and by 1640 the sugar-planting coastal region of north-eastern Brazil was in Dutch hands. At the end of that same year Portugal broke loose from Spain and the Duke of Braganza was proclaimed as King John IV of a newly independent Portugal. By an extraordinary effort a Portuguese naval force recaptured Angola from the Dutch in 1648, and in 1654 the Dutch were ejected from Recife, their last remaining stronghold in Brazil.

In spite of these successes, however, constant pressure from Portugal’s European rivals, and from Asian rulers and societies alienated by the activities and behaviour of Portuguese traders and renegades, took its toll of an over-extended empire with a small metropolitan base. As a result of constant assaults by the Dutch and by local potentates in Portugal’s Asian outposts, Lisbon lost its monopoly of the pepper and spice trades. In 1639 the Tokugawa regime, increasingly fearful of foreigners and infuriated by the success of Portuguese Jesuits and friars in gaining Christian converts, expelled all the Portuguese from Japan. The consequent closure of the enormously valuable trade between Nagasaki and Macao, which allowed Portuguese merchants to supply China with Japanese goods, and above all with Japanese silver, delivered a devastating blow to the Portuguese Asian economy. Then, in 1641, forces of the Dutch East India Company captured Malacca, leaving the Portuguese with no substantial base in South East Asia; and Sri Lanka finally succumbed to Dutch assaults in the late 1650s. The Estado da Índia was now visibly crumbling. Portuguese traders and settlers still remained scattered through Asia, constituting a kind of informal empire, and Portugal retained a few outposts, including Goa itself and Macao. These, together with the African territories of Mozambique and Angola, would remain in Portuguese hands until the second half of the twentieth century, but the days of Portugal’s formal empire in Asia were over.

In America, however, the story was different, in spite of a difficult period following Portugal’s recovery of independence and the expulsion of the Dutch from north-eastern (p. 222) Brazil. It took time to repair the war damage to the sugar plantations and refineries, and in the later seventeenth century growing competition from the French, Dutch, and English Caribbean islands ended Brazil’s monopoly of the Atlantic sugar trade. Further south, however, settlers in the distant frontier town of São Paulo had been opening up the interior in their search for precious metals and Indian slaves. Success came in the 1690s when extensive gold deposits were discovered in the region to the north of Rio de Janeiro that would come to be known as Minas Gerais. With the advent of a gold boom comparable in its effects to the Spanish silver boom of the sixteenth century, Portugal’s future as an imperial power now lay with Brazil. Immigrants rushed to the gold-mining regions and pushed forward Brazil’s frontier deep into the interior; massive numbers of African slaves were imported to meet the insatiable demand for labour; and the plantation economy of the coastal regions benefited from the new wealth and the market
opportunities created by a rapidly growing population. If Portugal had effectively lost one valuable empire, it was rapidly gaining another.

Spain, with a less dispersed empire to defend, had a better chance than its Portuguese neighbour of keeping its overseas possessions relatively intact. The treasure fleets fell victim to foreign predators on three occasions in the seventeenth century—to the Dutch in 1628 and to the English fleet of Admiral Blake in 1656 and 1657—but in general the well-protected convoys got through. The danger to Spain’s Atlantic economy lay less in foreign attacks than in infiltration from within. The Seville trade was deeply penetrated by foreign merchants, and in the middle years of the seventeenth century the Dutch and the British, moving into the Caribbean, seized a number of Spanish islands, including Jamaica, which fell to the English in 1655. These islands became bases for a massive clandestine trade with a rapidly expanding Spanish–American market thirsting for European goods. Spain’s empire of the Indies was being eroded from within.

In Europe, the revolts of Catalonia, Portugal, Sicily, and Naples in the 1640s gravely weakened the Monarchy, and in the second half of the century the France of Louis XIV replaced Spain as the dominant continental power. Spain’s transatlantic territories inevitably felt the impact of its political and financial weakness. Louis’s imperial ambitions extended to America, where the French saw the possibilities to be derived from seizing control of the mouth of the Mississippi, and founded the colony of Louisiana in the 1680s. Spain, although hampered by a great revolt of the Pueblo Indians of northern New Mexico in the same decade, reacted as best it could to the French threat by making the first moves to secure the permanent occupation of Texas and building a fort at Pensacola, on the Gulf of Mexico, in 1698.

The Monarchy’s financial problems, however, and the escalating costs of American defence, compelled the Crown to auction off increasing numbers of administrative and financial offices in the Indies, and the years after 1687 saw a systematic sale of judicial posts in the Audiencias. The effect was to undermine royal authority as important offices passed into the hands of the creole elites. It would take the extinction of the male line of the Spanish Habsburgs in 1700 with the death of Charles II of Spain, and the secure establishment of the French dynasty of the Bourbons on the Spanish throne following the signing of the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, to open a new chapter in the history of the Monarchy. Under the terms of the peace settlement Spain lost its possessions in Italy and the Netherlands, and its empire was effectively reduced to the empire of the Indies. Vast as this empire still was, imperial defence became a more manageable proposition once European commitments had been reduced, and the dynasty moved to strengthen Spanish naval power and reinforce the American presidios or frontier posts against possible attack (see Map 8.3).

Defensive measures were made all the more necessary as eighteenth-century America became a battleground for the rival imperial ambitions of Great Britain, Spain, and France. Spain’s enemies found to their disappointment that the Spanish–American mainland and the coveted Mexican silver mines were beyond their reach, but the Seven Years’ War of 1756–63 dramatically exposed the vulnerability of the empire’s outlying regions when British forces, operating in the Atlantic and the Pacific, captured both Havana and Manila. Although both were recovered at the peace settlement, this double disaster forced a general reassessment of imperial policy in Madrid. During the reign of Charles III (1759–88) the king’s ministers embarked on a programme of radical reform, both at home and overseas. Reform was accompanied by a new phase of imperial expansion, designed to protect the northern frontier regions of New Spain and the Pacific coast from British incursions. Spaniards began to establish their presence in California, establishing presidios, among them San Francisco, founded in 1776, and a string of missions for the conversion of the Indians.
As part of its reform programme, Madrid began a policy of liberalization of Spain’s Atlantic trade, culminating in its famous proclamation of *comercio libre* in 1778, which finally broke the Seville–Cadiz monopoly by allowing thirteen Spanish ports to trade directly with the Indies. The economic consequences of this decree, which in reality sanctioned a more flexible form of mercantilism rather than genuine free trade, are still the subject of debate. During these years, too, administrative structures in the Indies were radically overhauled and fiscal pressures stepped up in an attempt by Madrid to follow the example of its European rivals and secure greater benefits for the mother country from its increasingly prosperous American possessions.

The inevitable effect of the changes introduced by royal ministers in the second half of the eighteenth century—changes which included Charles III’s expulsion of the Jesuits from all his dominions in 1767, following the example set by Portugal’s first minister, the Marquis of Pombal, in 1759 and by France in 1764—was to impose enormous new strains on the relationship between Spain and its overseas subjects. Under the Habsburgs that relationship was based on the tacit compact forged over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries between the monarch and the colonial elites. By the unwritten terms of this compact the monarch himself was never at fault, royal officials who acted in a tyrannical manner took the blame, and laws regarded as unacceptable would be ceremonially accepted but not obeyed, pending protest and consultation.

The Bourbons, more authoritarian than their Spanish Habsburg predecessors, were determined to recover from creole elites the areas of royal authority alienated in the previous century, and to replace creole officeholders in the Audiencias and other institutions in the Indies with reliable officials sent out from Spain. As a result of the general tightening of royal control, creoles who thought of themselves as equal in status to peninsular Spaniards now saw themselves being downgraded by Madrid into mere colonial subjects. Whatever the attitude of the home government, they for their part remained wedded to the unwritten compact—a compact that had worked well enough to prevent major revolts and ensure a degree of political and social stability in Spanish America for some 200 years. As royal ministers ignored the compact and stepped up the pressure, tensions rose, both among the creoles and in the Indian communities. Between 1780 and 1782 both Peru and New Granada were shaken by major uprisings, and for a moment royal authority appeared seriously endangered. Pombal’s reforms generated similar tensions in Brazil, and in 1789 a conspiracy in Minas Gerais was nipped in the bud.

In the American empires of both Spain and Portugal, therefore, colonial societies were in the process of discovering a sense of their own identity, not purely as Spaniards or Portuguese, but also as Americans, and increasingly as Mexican, Peruvian, or some other variety of Americans, depending on their place of origin. New forms of local and regional patriotism were developing, based on a sense of place and on a growing pride in a real or imagined past. By the end of the eighteenth century the future of the American empires of Spain and Portugal hung in the balance. Over 300 years the imperial governments had managed, by combining coercion, the exploitation of an instinctive deference to royal authority, and a continuous process of negotiation with emerging colonial elites, to maintain a form of control over vast and remote areas, in the face of innumerable internal challenges and external threats. In the dawning era of nationalism and liberalism initiated by the American and French revolutions, it remained to be seen whether ties of loyalty and interest or the growing belief of settler societies in their right to manage their own affairs would win the upper hand.

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Abstract and Keywords

North European commercial expansion in Asia took shape within the framework of a typical early modern commercial institution: the chartered company. In 1602, shortly after the foundation of its English rival, several Dutch trading companies merged to form the United East India Company (VOC), the first joint stock overseas trading company based on permanent share capital. Batavia (Jakarta) on Java came to serve as the fulcrum of a wide-ranging inter-Asian trade network, based upon a monopoly of spice imports from the Indonesian archipelago. During the eighteenth century the fortunes of the Company declined, as it encountered formidable competition from French and English rivals. Yet on Java and Ceylon the Company strengthened its territorial hold and became a colonial power. It was declared bankrupt and lost its charter in 1799.

Keywords: Chartered company, joint stock, inter-Asian trade, spice monopoly, Batavia, European rivalry in India

The early modern European seaborne empires played a particular role within global history because they linked the continents via the oceanic routes for the first time. The Spanish and Portuguese empires and a century later the Dutch and English displayed outstanding institutional features which set them apart from earlier times and also from each other. Although all aimed at acquiring monopolies in trade there existed a sharp contrast between the ways and means of the fidalgos in sixteenth-century Asia and the more market-oriented behaviour of the northern Europeans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The process of European expansion overseas was not a unilinear development but rather was accomplished through distinctive institutions and varying programmes of confrontation or of collaboration with the peoples of Asia.

When the Dutch and English confronted and challenged the Portuguese and Spanish presence in other continents at the end of the sixteenth century, they emulated in many ways their Iberian predecessors. They also challenged the position of the European incumbents in Asia with the help of native populations who often quite mistakenly saw them as their potential saviours. Since the papacy had conferred the padroado on the Portuguese and Spanish Crowns, the overseas activities of the Iberians were organized in close cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church and thus had strong religious and missionary elements. The trading companies of the Protestant northern European nations were mercantile enterprises without missionary aspirations.

This chapter does not address the appearance of the northern Europeans across the global scene in the early modern era, since colonization of the western hemisphere is discussed in other chapters. Instead it focuses on one specific institution that shaped north European expansion into Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in crucial ways: the chartered joint-stock company and more especially the Dutch East India Company.
A New Business Model: The Chartered Joint-Stock Company

North European commercial expansion and colonial presence in Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries took shape within the framework of a typical early modern commercial institution: the chartered East India company. By far the largest and most powerful East India companies were the Dutch *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC), or United East India Company (1602–1800), and the English East India Companies (EIC), which existed in various formations between 1600 and 1858.

Due to their sheer size and remarkable endurance, the East India companies encountered a diversity of opinions in their own time as well as today. Free trade advocates beginning with Adam Smith have targeted the companies as typical representatives of mercantilist policies and of the ‘extraordinary waste which the fraud and abuse inseparable from the management of the affairs of so great a company, must necessarily have occasioned’. Economic historians have portrayed them as precursors of today’s multinationals. Asian historians often see them as precursors of colonialism and imperialism. In stating their respective positions, these scholars have been able to draw on a wealth of archival data that has been preserved in the archives of these long distance trading companies that played an important role in the history of maritime Asia and beyond.

If in the age of ‘archaic’ globalization maritime commerce with Asia still might have needed monopolistic trading enterprises to organize and administer such long distance trade, by the start of proto-globalization around 1800, the integration of the overseas markets had reached a point where these trading corporations with their outdated structures were becoming irrelevant. Indeed, with their particular organization and monopolistic market behaviour, the East India companies may be seen as symbolically marking the beginning and the end of the pre-industrial early modern period.

In England as well in the Low Countries the East India companies were established as vehicles to promote and control overseas trade with Asia. They were typical representatives of early modern mercantilist ideas in which an unabashed striving for monopolies was fully accepted. In the case of the chartered East India companies, this meant establishing a monopoly on the purchase and sale of Asian goods in the mother country and, where possible, also monopolies on the production and purchase of certain commodities in Asia. The VOC ultimately secured a virtual European spice monopoly on cloves, nutmeg, and cinnamon. Owing to the charters they received from their sovereigns—in England, Queen Elizabeth I, and in the Dutch case, the States General of the Seven United Provinces of the Netherlands—the East India companies were in legal terms extensions of the state, since they were granted such extraordinary rights as waging wars, concluding treaties, and occupying territories in Asia.

A brief sketch of the VOC’s performance during the two hundred years of its existence demonstrates the significant role that the joint-stock companies played in trade and in the movement of people between Europe and Asia. Its rich archives reveal that (p. 229) between 1602 and 1794, 4,789 VOC ships exported roughly 575 million guilders in precious metals and currency and about 300 million guilders worth of European commodities to Asia, to be used both for trading purposes and for the upkeep of the Company and its personnel in the East. Of the almost one million sailors, soldiers, and other Company servants who sailed on VOC ships to the East Indies during the Company’s two hundred years of existence, less than half came from Holland. Most of the soldiers actually originated in the Holy Roman Empire, while many sailors were of Scandinavian stock. Of these one million individuals, only 370,000 returned home. From the middle of the seventeenth century through the eighteenth century about five million guilders a year were spent in Asia purchasing commodities for export to Europe, where these oriental wares were auctioned off in the Dutch Republic. In other words over a period of two hundred years the Company spent about one billion guilders purchasing export goods in Asia which were sold at much higher prices, often twice as much and higher, at the Company auctions in Holland.

A glance at these figures reveals an important feature of Europe’s trade with Asia: the combined export of bullion and European commodities was insufficient to purchase the goods desired in Asia. The main reason for this was that the bulk of what Europe had to offer was unattractive to Asian consumers, either because European goods were relatively expensive,
or because they were of lesser quality than comparable Asian products. The only export commodities carried by Europeans that were welcomed across Asia were precious metals which often originated not in Europe but rather in the mines of Spanish America. This was the most outstanding feature of the Euro–Asian trade: the Europeans had to pay for Asian goods overwhelmingly in precious metals.

The Dutch, who could only obtain silver and gold through their European commerce, realized that this problem could be partly solved by joining as soon as possible the inter-regional trade of Monsoon Asia, seeking to make money from it much as they did in their home waters in Europe. In order to gain a favourable position on the Asian markets they strove to secure trading monopolies in specific tropical commodities. The English continued to depend on the export of precious metals for the purchase of Asian commodities for far longer, and not surprisingly this ‘bullion for Asian goods’ traffic met with scathing criticism from pamphleteers who argued that the unlimited export of bullion was a drain on the English economy. In the eighteenth century, English private merchants operating ships in the Indian Ocean trade, the so-called country traders, remedied this situation when they became engaged in the intra-Asian trade in close concert with the English Company which concentrated on preserving its privileges on the transport of goods to and from Europe. The profits of the freely operating country traders provided the EIC in Asia with ready cash that it received in exchange for bills of exchange that were repaid in London. In that respect the EIC almost came to operate as an umbrella organization for private trade in Asia.

The northern Europeans and the Iberians organized their shipping and trade in different ways. The Portuguese Casa da India in Lisbon, that administered the Portuguese Crown monopoly in Asia through the Estado da India in Goa, derived its income from tolls and taxes and contracted out its trade. Likewise, the Portuguese Crown contracted out the distribution of its Asian commodities to wealthy merchant families such as the Webers and Fuggers of Augsburg. Thus the Portuguese Crown monopoly was, as Niels Steensgaard has argued, a redistributive enterprise that sold monopolies, including even the route to Asia. The Dutch East India Company however ran a closed shop and assumed responsibility for all aspects of the trade. Moreover, it functioned as a joint-stock company in which shareholders could freely transfer their shares without consequences to the day-to-day operations of the company. At the outset, the English still squared accounts after each separate voyage and used ‘terminable joint stocks’ because its shareholders were keen on obtaining quick profits. As a matter of fact, the English company’s capital did not become frozen until the 1680s and was finally fixed only in 1708.

The business model of the Dutch East India Company constituted an institutional breakthrough because it worked on the basis of joint stocks based on permanent capital. The Company also maintained close ties with the Amsterdam bourse. It was the first company to issue stocks tradable on the Amsterdam exchange and during its two hundred years’ existence it continued to conclude short-term, low-interest loans that enabled it to finance the long-distance trade around the Cape of Good Hope. In his Observations on the United Provinces (1673), Sir William Temple keenly observed that a favourable business environment was provided in Holland by the low rate of interest at the bourse, the well-run banks, the appropriate laws, and the remarkable freedom from interference from the government. He concluded that Holland’s prosperity ‘resulted from a great occurrence of circumstances, a long course of time, force of Orders and Method, which never before met in the World to such a degree, or with so prodigious a success and perhaps never will again’.

Combinations of merchants in neighbouring countries attempted more or less successfully to emulate the VOC’s organization, yet they often failed to recognize that its incredible success was itself closely tied to the trade oriented Dutch economy of the Golden Age. Many of these companies were established as potential milk cows by their own rulers, as in the cases of the Swedish, Danish, and Brandenburg East India Companies, which indeed were underwritten by considerable hidden Dutch capital.

If the golden age of Dutch primacy in world trade was in the seventeenth century, as Fernand Braudel and Jonathan Israel have suggested, then the eighteenth century was the age of Great Britain. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the reign of William and Mary heralded a new age for Britain as a military and commercial powerhouse. Emulating the Dutch example, the English thoroughly overhauled their own East India Company in 1708, and in the years that followed the EIC was better prepared than its by then rather static Dutch counterpart for the major transformation in the composition of Asian goods.
from spices to Indian textiles and Chinese tea that were shipped to Europe, the changes in European consumption patterns and, last but not least, the new trading opportunities for entrepreneurs in Asia itself. When by the middle of the eighteenth century Amsterdam had forfeited her position as the emporium of global trade to London, the Dutch East India Company had also already lost most of its former lustre. It was not until the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1781–84), when most richly loaded VOC ships returning from Asia were seized by the British navy, that decline became inevitable.

Establishment and Organization

The establishment of the Dutch East India Company in 1602 was in many ways an outcome of stormy events during the final decades of the sixteenth century that contributed to the meteoric rise of the Dutch Republic as a formidable commercial power in Europe. In the course of the sixteenth century, the port of Antwerp had become the emporium of Europe’s maritime trade. The city had a huge textile industry, served as a market for English wool, and with its overland connections to the Rhineland and easy access to the North Sea catered to shipping from across Europe. Because Lisbon lacked this kind of prosperous hinterland, the Portuguese Crown made Antwerp its outlet for the spices and other precious wares coming from Asia. Ships from the northern provinces of Holland and Zeeland carried myriad commodities, from the Baltic in the north and the Mediterranean in the south, to Antwerp’s quays. These activities were brought to a sudden halt when the town was taken and sacked by the Spanish army in 1585. The Dutch rebels of the northern provinces responded by blockading the river Scheldt, closing Antwerp’s access to the sea. In a chain reaction to these developments almost one half of the citizens of Antwerp, rich merchants as well as skilled labourers, moved to the northern provinces of Holland and Zeeland, taking with them their capital and knowledge. Philip II of Spain, since 1580 also king of Portugal, imposed an embargo on Dutch shipping by denying entry to all ports of the Iberian Peninsula.

The answer from the northern provinces was not long in coming: the Dutch decided to sail to the Orient on their own ships. Between 1595 and 1602, eight Dutch companies sent to Asia no fewer than sixty-five ships in fifteen fleets in search of spices and other precious Oriental wares such as Chinese silk and porcelain. That was a striking achievement considering that in the same period the Portuguese Crown sent only forty-six ships to Asia. Most ships sailed around the Cape of Good Hope, but attempts were also made to sail via the Arctic northern routes and via the Strait of Magellan at the southern tip of South America. In total these first Dutch navigations to Asia resulted in a great loss of life and ships and yielded very unequal results. Eleven ships were lost and more than half of the crews never returned home.

The first fleets that reached the Indies did not venture much farther than the port of Bantam on West Java where they purchased the much desired spices. A breakthrough occurred in 1598 when an Amsterdam fleet commanded by Jacob van Neck sailed directly to the Moluccas, the source of nutmeg and cloves, and reaped a profit of 400 per cent on its return. Ironically van Neck’s success stimulated not only his Dutch compatriots to intensify their efforts and seek cooperation but also directly led to the foundation of the English East India Company. The Dutch newcomers faced Portuguese hostility (p. 232) wherever they met in Asia, but there was also tension between rival fleets from Holland and Zeeland which often arrived simultaneously in Asia and found themselves seeking to outbid each other in purchasing spices on the local markets.

To the extent the early voyages succeeded it was because the newcomers skilfully borrowed from Portuguese experience and expertise. Yet in their passionate devotion to the art of navigation the Dutch soon surpassed their predecessors in navigational techniques. It is an incontestable fact that the Portuguese pioneered global mapmaking. They had constantly updated and improved sea charts ever since Portuguese seafarers began to push southward along the African coast. On completion of their voyage, navigators would deliver whatever extra information they had discovered to the Casa da India in Lisbon, which controlled the royal monopoly on African and Asian trade. Attempts by the Casa da India to keep new discoveries secret from foreigners and strictly control the distribution of cartographic materials proved to be rather ineffective, as evidenced by the many excellent sea charts that were published in Venice, Genoa, and other Italian port cities in the early stages of overseas discovery.
By the end of the sixteenth century, when Philip II of Spain ordered the dismissal of all personnel from the rebellious Low Countries in the service of the Estado da India, much of the jealously protected Portuguese knowledge had made its way north. Jan Huygen van Linschoten, former secretary to the Portuguese bishop of Goa, was most prominent in the acquisition of this information, bringing home everything he had been able to collect during his stay in the Indies. He published all of this information on the sea routes in Asia in the so-called Reysgeschrift (travel note), a collection of Portuguese roteiros of the Eastern Seas, and his famous Itinerario, a full description of the Estado da India published in Dutch in 1595. The Reysgeschrift provides no fewer than twenty-five sailing routes together with some tables about tides and currents in the South and East China Seas. These roteiros (‘rutters’) were ‘all very faithfully and with great diligence and correction collected, and from the Portuguese and Spanish language translated into Dutch’. In forty-three chapters based on hundreds of rutters written by famous Portuguese pilots he furthermore gave a survey of the routes from Lisbon to India and the various ports in the Indonesian archipelago, Indo-China, China, and Japan. Cornelis de Houtman, one of the leaders of the first Dutch expedition to the Orient in 1595, had a copy of the Itinerario on board in addition to sets of sea maps and rutters that he had stealthily collected during a spying mission to Lisbon.

Dutch printing houses published maps, navigational aids, and travel accounts. Abraham Ortelius (1528–98) and Gerard Mercator (1512–94) worked closely together and dramatically changed the traditional worldviews that prevailed until the middle of the sixteenth century. Ortelius was the business-oriented popularizer, while the scholarly Mercator more or less invented the still widely used map projection that bears his name. After the sack of Antwerp, many outstanding mapmakers and printers moved to the northern provinces. Johan Blaeu of Amsterdam, soon appointed cartographer to the VOC, systematically continued to incorporate new discoveries and further refinements in the mapping of the globe.

The practical scientific approach not only saved many ships from running into navigational hazards along the way to Asia and in tropical waters, but also led to the discovery of a completely new shipping route that bypassed the Portuguese strongholds of East Africa. In 1611 the Dutch navigator Hendrick Brouwer discovered after rounding the Cape of Good Hope that by descending to the fortieth parallel south he could profit from the ‘roaring forties’ and sail an easterly course without any obstructions along the way. The tricky bit of that sea route was to change course to the north-northeast—towards the Sunda Strait—and keep the Australian coast at a safe distance to leeward. The disastrous wrecking of the VOC ship Batavia in 1629 on the Abrolhos reefs (Portuguese for ‘spiked obstructions’) off the Australian coast bears witness to the difficulty of determining longitude prior to the development of reliable chronometers in the eighteenth century. Starting in 1616, ships regularly anchored in Table Bay, close to the Cape of Good Hope, to purchase fresh food for the scurvy-ridden crews. In 1652, the Company ordered Jan van Riebeeck to establish a fortified settlement to supply all passing fleets with victuals. With the founding of this ‘tavern of the seas’, Cape Town, the ‘cart track’ (karrenspoor) of the VOC shipping to and from the Indies was completed.

Once the earliest Dutch fleets had found their way to Asia, the proverbial genie had come out of the bottle. In 1602, partly on their own initiative and partly thanks to the intervention of the Dutch statesman Johan van Oldenbarneveld, the existing companies from different ports in the provinces of Holland and Zeeland merged to form the United East India Company. The federation of shipping companies comprised six cooperating kamers (chambers or offices): Amsterdam, Hoorn and Enkhuizen (North Holland), Rotterdam and Delft (South Holland), and Middelburg in Zeeland. All these port towns were free to organize locally the hardware that was needed to carry out the trade with the Orient but they did so under the aegis of the United Company.

Since Amsterdam and Middelburg were the principal centres of this commerce, everything was carried out by a pro rata system: Amsterdam represented half, Zeeland a quarter, and the other chambers one-sixteenth each. This was also how the directorate of the company was organized: Amsterdam had eight directors, Zeeland four, and the rest one each. To prevent tied votes, a seventeenth director was added who by rotation represented another important town such as Haarlem or Dordrecht. Thus the top management became known as the Heren XVII, the Gentlemen Seventeen, a board of directors who would meet two or three times a year in connection with the preparation of the fleets.
It took the ships on average 160 days to sail to Asia and so they would be away for at least two years before the accounts could be settled. By establishing a joint-stock company with fixed share capital, a new type of business enterprise was created, enabling the Dutch to manage their Asian trade as an ongoing concern. Necessity thus gave birth to the juridical concept of the incorporated or limited liability company. This is a typical form of business enterprise in modern times but, in the early seventeenth century, it was a striking innovation. The proportions of deposited investments more or less mirrored the divisions of power among the six chambers in the Company. The Amsterdam chamber contributed one half and the Zeeland chamber almost one quarter of the 6.5 million (p. 234) guilders of share capital that was issued. Of the original eighty-four Amsterdam shareholders, about half were immigrants from Antwerp.

The VOC has been called the first joint-stock company based on permanent share capital. Its founding fathers originally intended to wind up the capital after a certain period of time but because all the share capital was soon completely invested in the construction of overseas fortresses and trading factories, this turned out to be impractical. Nor was the capital of the VOC increased as the company grew into a veritable Behemoth. Its relatively small financial base was not a problem because low-interest, short-term loans at the Amsterdam bourse were always available. Everyone who loaned money knew that he would be repaid within a matter of months after the auctions of the cargoes of the next homecoming fleet. Only under extreme conditions when shipping was temporarily interrupted, as during the four Anglo–Dutch wars, were special financial measures taken with the States General providing financial assistance to the Company to bridge the payment gap.

Every chamber of the VOC possessed its own offices, warehouses, and shipyard, and manned and equipped its own ships. The East-Indiamen were built in three standard ‘charters’. The largest retourschepen measuring up to 1,000 tons mainly served on the run to Asia and back, but after four or five voyages they often served out their lives in the more placid waters of the Indonesian archipelago. Smaller ships with less draft such as the fluit (flute or flyboat) were built for the intra-Asian traffic. With prefabricated methods avant la lettre it took only three months to build the hull of a ship and another three to rig it. The Amsterdam shipyard built and fitted out at least three ships a year. Thus the VOC provided ample employment in the towns where its offices were situated. The Amsterdam yard employed about 1,200 workers, Middelburg 600, and the smaller towns 200 each. The island of Onrust in the Bay of Batavia also housed a large shipyard to repair and overhaul the ships after their arrival in the tropics. In the last decade of its existence, when most of its ships were lost during the Fourth Anglo–Dutch War, the VOC had to lease ships from private owners.

Most of the clauses of the charter, or Octroy, which the VOC initially received for a period of twenty-one years, concerned the institutional organization and mode of cooperation between the chambers in the Netherlands, but the most important clause concerned the sole rights to trade East of the Cape of Good Hope as far as the Strait of Magellan. Within that wide geographical area the Company was authorized to conclude, in the name of the States General, ‘treaties with Princes and Potentates’. Given the hostile behaviour of the Iberian adversaries (who are not mentioned in the charter), the Company was allowed to build fortresses to protect its own interests, wage war whenever necessary, mint its own money, and establish a legal system for its own personnel and Asian subjects.

In a letter to the Gentlemen Seventeen, the redoubtable Governor-General Jan Pieterszoon Coen explained why force was necessary: ‘Your honours should know by experience that trade in Asia must be conducted under the protection and favour of Your Honours’ own weapons, and that the weapons must be paid for by the profits from the trade; so that we cannot carry on trade without war nor war without trade’. The States General fully supported the VOC during the Eighty Years’ War, which came to an end with the conclusion of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. From its inception in 1602 until the conquest of the Sultanate of Bantam on Java in 1684, this ‘company of the ledger and the sword’ was almost incessantly at war with European rivals, intermittently with the English, and with a brief respite in the 1650s and early 1660s, almost continuously with the Portuguese. Although the VOC would subsequently be drawn into many local conflicts and rebellions on Java and Ceylon, the first eighty years constituted an age of warfare and diplomacy among ‘declared enemies and feigned friends’.
Strategies of Empire

Too often in the past the Dutch and Portuguese seaborne empires have been studied as two discrete areas, yet most of the basic strategies that the Dutch developed in Asia were derived from Portuguese examples. It quickly dawned upon the Dutch newcomers that simple competition with the Portuguese on their own turf in Asia was not going to succeed until a grand strategy was developed to wage an all-out confrontation exploiting clear signs of decay in theEstado da India. The almost continuous strife between the Dutch and Portuguese in many respects represents a struggle for succession, in which the Dutch wrestled away the hegemony over the sea routes.

Cornelis Matelieff of Rotterdam should be given his due for having formulated an overall campaign plan. Commander of one of the VOC’s first fleets, he pointed out that theEstado da India derived most of its strength from the strategic positions of its fortified trading settlements along the main trading routes that connected the seascapes of Monsoon Asia, that is to say the Arabian Seas, the Indian Ocean including the Bay of Bengal, the South China Sea, and the maritime sphere of the Indonesian archipelago. Although the Portuguese were vulnerable in the Moluccas, their position was in his eyes still very strong elsewhere in Monsoon Asia. Handing out passes (cartazes) to all shipping that wished to pass unharmed, the Portuguese dominated the trade in the Persian Gulf from their settlement atOrmuz. Similarly, their stronghold at Malacca controlled the main passage between the Indian Ocean and the China Sea. Having himself failed to seize Malacca in 1606, Matelieff understood that makeshift policies would not suffice: there was an urgent need for a master plan. A close look at the four memorials he filed upon returning home tells much about the rise, the nature, and extent of the making of the Dutch thalassocracy in Asia.

First of all Matelieff argued that a ‘High Government’ consisting of a Governor-General and a Council of the Indies should direct the Company’s activities in Asia. Until then, the supreme command had rotated among the commanders of the various fleets, making it extremely difficult to carry out a continuous policy. Second, he advocated the need for a headquarters in Asia. Matelieff felt that the Company needed a rendezvous of its own instead of remaining at Banten, the pepper-exporting sultanate on the western point of Java, which the Dutch and English were both using as a stepping (p.236) stone for yearly expeditions to the Moluccas. Here the High Government could reside and direct its commercial operations. There was a need for an emporium where cargoes could be transhipped and collected, and a protected roadstead where VOC fleets could be repaired and prepared before they sailed on. Obviously, the best option was Portuguese Malacca, on the Strait of Malacca between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. If it could not be conquered, Matelieff suggested descending on the small kingdom of Jayakarta on the island of Java only a hundred kilometres east of Banten on Java. Jayakarta, the famous port Sundal Kala pa of yore, was located on a large protected bay and could be reached in all seasons. Matelieff’s proposals found a ready reception. The installation of a governor-general was almost immediately carried out with the appointment of Pieter Both in 1609. In the following decade this Viceroy and his immediate successors devoted their energies to the acquisition of the Spice Trade in the Moluccas and consequently spent most of their time over there.

The VOC’s prime aim from the outset was to secure a monopoly on the import of spices from the Indonesian archipelago. Once the monopoly had been established in the Moluccas after years of pacification campaigns, annual expeditions were carried out eradicating rival sources of production, the so-called hongi drives, with the intention of upholding this monopoly. The governor of Ambon, accompanied by korakora (war prahus) of the sultans of Ternate and Tidore, would tour the clove tree growing zone with his hongi fleet and cut down all trees that had been planted outside the territories that the VOC had been assigned. The production areas of cloves and nutmeg in the Moluccas, and of cinnamon in Ceylon, ultimately ended up in the hands of the Dutch, but they never achieved a full monopoly in pepper because this product was cultivated in too many different places, from Malabar on the west coast of India to Sumatra and Java in the Indonesian archipelago. The VOC nonetheless continued to provide Europe with more than half of its pepper imports.

The jealously guarded monopoly of nutmeg, mace, and cloves remained the mainstay of the Company’s trade until the final decades of its existence, even after commerce in other products such as tea and calicoes had become much more profitable. Over the years, the demand for spices in Europe showed little increase, yet by careful manipulation of the stocks of cloves,
mace, and nutmeg in the Amsterdam warehouses, the Company was able to keep the sales price of its imported spices at a high level.

**Blueprint of Empire**

It was not until 1619 that Governor-General Jan Pieterszoon Coen succeeded in forcefully occupying Jakarta and in carrying out Matelieff’s proposal to establish a rendezvous there. Coen is generally seen as the Dutch counterpart to Portugal’s Afonso d’Albuquerque, and the founder of the Dutch overseas empire in the east. Born and raised in the North Holland town of Hoorn, as a 13-year-old boy he was sent to Rome to learn double-entry bookkeeping at the trading firm of Pescatore (behind which hid the Dutch family name Visscher). Between 1607 and 1610, he served the VOC as a junior merchant in the East before returning home. In 1612, he sailed to the Indies again where he soon became chief bookkeeper or director general of all the VOC trade factories in Asia. Not satisfied with the local conditions in that town he moved in 1618 to nearby Jakarta as Matelieff had suggested. This move provoked a combined attack by the sultan of Bantam, the local ruler of Jakarta, and the English, but fortunately for the Dutch, these allies of convenience began to quarrel with each other about the spoils, as it proved prematurely. The garrison of the besieged trade factory was able to hold out long enough for Coen to muster reinforcements in the Moluccas and come to its rescue. After he had reduced Jayakarta to ashes Coen built from scratch a new colonial city according to the design of the Dutch town planner Simon Stevin and baptized it Batavia. During his second tenure as governor-general Coen defended the new town successfully against massive assaults from the Javanese kingdom of Mataram in 1627 and 1629.

Coen envisaged the trade of Monsoon Asia as part of an interconnected system in which products from the ‘Great Arc of Asian trade’ were exchanged via a multitude of locally operated trading networks which were linked together. His blueprint for an encompassing network took shape from the moment he began directing the Company’s trade at Banten. First of all he realized that the spices could not be purchased without having access to other Asian commodities. The cultivators of the spice trees in the Moluccas had to be paid in kind with food products and clothing. As one of his correspondents in India put it: ‘Coromandel [India’s southeast coast] is the left arm of the Moluccas and the surrounding islands because without textiles that come from there, the trade in the Moluccas will be dead’.13

Second, Coen understood that precious metals from Europe, China, and Japan could only partly serve for paying the Indian weavers. Spices, sandalwood, birds’ nests, and other tropical products from the Indonesian archipelago should attract the Chinese merchants in their junks, who in turn would bring in silk and porcelain and were glad to truck (exchange) Chinese gold for Japanese silver. If the VOC could plug into this system and forge commercial links across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea regions it would then be able to finance its operations in Asia. Coen even toyed with the idea that the profits made from the intra-Asian trade, every circuit feeding the other, might finance the cargoes of the return fleets.14 In short, his ambitious, not to say megalomaniac aim was to transform the VOC into a magical component that could keep the great wheel of intra-Asian commerce turning. He believed that it was only by full participation in the Asian trading networks that the VOC could free itself from the ‘bullion for goods’ cycle whereby continuous deliveries of precious metals from Europe were essential for the purchase of Asian commodities.

Coen totally reorganized the bureaucratic and accounting system of the VOC in Asia. He ordered the directors of all the Company establishments, from Mocha on the Arabian Peninsula in the west to the port of Hirado in the Far East, to send to headquarters detailed trade information, account books, and diaries reporting on local conditions. At Batavia, all these letters were read and commented upon, and used for instructions and consignments of goods in reply. All information received from the various quarters was processed in the so-called Generale Missiven which, accompanied by copies of the most important intra-Asian correspondence, were sent to the Gentlemen Seventeen in the Dutch Republic. A special office, known as the Haags besoigne, stationed near the States General at The Hague, read all the voluminous dispatches from the East and prepared digests of the information they contained, that informed decisions taken by the Gentlemen Seventeen. Without this well-organized bureaucratic structure the Company would never have been able to continue functioning for the
In the 1690s, the Company’s _advokaat_, Pieter Van Dam, drew up a secret manual for inside use, the so-called _Beschrijvinge van de Oost-Indische Compagnie_, which described in detail the bureaucratic setup of the Company and all of its operations in the Dutch Republic and Asia. Together with the aforementioned archival documents carefully preserved in the National Archive at The Hague, Van Dam’s _magnum opus_ continues to serve as a primary source of information for historical research.\(^{15}\) The organizational structure of the EIC, which used various appointed committees for simultaneously carrying out specific tasks at its office in London, offered an interesting alternative to the Dutch counterpart. By contrast to the Dutch, the English did not create a single headquarters in Asia but rather two presidencies at Bombay and Madras on the west and east coasts of India, allowing private trade under certain conditions, while instead of building and owning its own ships the EIC preferred to lease vessels for the transport between Europe and Asia.\(^{16}\)

Another important issue that Coen resolved was the uncomfortable and entangled relationship between Company monopolies and private trade. He advocated the formation of a strong commercial class of free burghers who would be given a free hand in local enterprise and trade. It had not escaped him that the Portuguese settlements in the East derived most of their strength from the _casados_, the married settlers. Wishing to found a large Dutch colonial settlement at Batavia, Coen implored the directors of the Company to send colonists and young women from Holland because, as he observed, ‘Who does not know that the human race cannot exist without women? If there were women here, the staple of the Indian trade would be yours’.\(^{17}\) He also proposed to send a large number of respectable Dutch families accompanied by four to five hundred boys and girls who would be brought up under their care. The failure of these population plans led Coen to change direction and encourage Chinese immigration to Batavia. As a result of this, Batavia expanded to become a colonial city where half of the free citizenry consisted of Chinese townsmen, turning the rendezvous over the years into as much a Chinese as a Dutch colonial city.

When it turned out to be impossible to conclude exclusive contracts with the inhabitants of the Banda islands, the production area of nutmeg and mace, the Gentlemen Seventeen instructed Coen to impose the monopoly with force if necessary. This order was promptly carried out with a massive display of violence: in 1621 the Banda archipelago was in effect ‘ethnically cleansed’. The bulk of the Bandanese were killed or deported by a large invasion force. In their place a colony of Dutch gardeners ( _perkeniers_ ) was established who, with the help of slave labour imported from the surrounding islands, (p. 239) continued to cultivate nutmeg tree gardens. The imposition of the monopoly of the cultivation of cloves throughout the widely spread Spice Islands took another forty years to complete.

In the Far East Coen devised a two-pronged approach to replace the Portuguese in the ‘Chinese silk for Japanese silver’ trade between China and Japan, and to blockade the ‘Chinese silk for American silver’ trade with Spanish Manila. In 1622, he sent a large invasion force to wrest the city of Macao in the Pearl River estuary from Portuguese hands. Driven off by the Portuguese, the Dutch occupied the Pescadores archipelago in front of the Chinese coastal province of Fujian and tried to open up negotiations with the Chinese authorities. In 1624 they finally settled down in Taiwan (Formosa), where they built a large castle to handle the future trade between China and Japan. A decade-long imbroglio ensued, a period of quarrels with Chinese pirates and Japanese merchants, but owing to a miraculous turn of political events in Japan and in China, the Dutch ended up in 1640 as the only European trading nation in Japan. Until in 1685 limitations were imposed on the size of the overseas trade by the Tokugawa shogunate, the VOC was henceforth able to finance with the Japanese silver, gold, and copper a large part of its purchases of calicoes in India. Although between 1622 and 1633 tremendous losses were suffered, the Far Eastern adventure ultimately paid off: the exclusive access to the Japan trade combined with the spice monopoly became the cornerstone of the Company’s success in the intra-Asian trade. In its relations with China the Company was less successful. In 1662 the Formosan colony had to surrender to the Chinese warlord Zheng Chenggong.\(^{18}\)

Recalled to Holland for consultation about his rather grandiose policies, Coen was able to justify past actions and explain future plans to the satisfaction of his superiors and was appointed for a second term. While in Holland he dropped another bombshell by insisting that the VOC should give free rein to the individual enterprise of Dutch settlers or freeburghers. Coen
meant to reduce overheads sharply and tackle corrupt behaviour by allowing private merchants to trade freely, provided that they did not deal in specific merchandise such as the spices over which the Company claimed a monopoly. He pointed out that the resilience of the Estado da India owed everything to the individual actions of the Portuguese colonists. His proposal was grudgingly accepted but no sooner had he returned to the East than the directors changed their collective mind and, jealous of the Company’s trade privileges, stifled this initiative to create room for individual enterprise.

A hundred years later these ideas were picked up again by Governors-General Van Imhoff and Mossel, who also advocated that the company should divest itself of its burdensome infrastructure. Yet such initiatives remained a lost cause until the Company’s final collapse in 1795. These leading ‘men on the spot’ keenly understood that monopolies breed corruption at all levels of the hierarchy. Those serving the monopoly tended to use their privileged position to enrich themselves at the expense of the organization, and those operating outside of it inevitably attempted to encroach on its exclusive privileges. From the beginning to the end, the top management of the VOC prioritized the suppression of private initiative and the preservation of undiluted monopoly. The (p. 240) Gentlemen Seventeen refused to understand that in doing so they sealed the Company’s fate. The type of corrupt behaviour in which everyone obtained his share of the cake became normal among its servants both high and low.

The Creation of Thalassocracy

Antonio van Diemen, governor-general between 1636 and 1645, is generally considered to have been the empire builder of the VOC. His verdict that the directors in Holland ‘may decide matters as it seems best to them, but we do here what seems best and most advisable to us’, is justly famous. With van Diemen, decision making in Asia shifted from the Gentlemen Seventeen in Holland to the High Government in Batavia. He personally commanded two large expeditions to the Moluccas to suppress popular unrest and secure the steady supply of spices. He introduced a new law code, the so-called Bataviase Statuten, in all of the Company’s establishments in Asia which remained in force until the end of the VOC’s existence. Van Diemen dispatched expeditions to discover the fabled gold and silver islands east of Japan, and sent Abel Tasman and François Jacobszoon Visscher in 1642 and 1644 on two voyages of discovery to trace the south and east coast of Terra Australis, the north and west coasts of which had already been discovered. These expeditions also aimed to seek out whether in the southern hemisphere westerly winds blew straight to the Spanish possessions on the west coast of South America. After Tasman and Visscher departed from the island of Mauritius, they indeed had the wind astern and were driven along the south coast of the Australian continent until they ran into Tasmania (then baptized Van Diemen’s Land). Sailing even further eastwards, they reached another archipelago that they named New Zealand. Having ascertained the existence of a wind system characterized by prevailing western winds, the ‘Roaring Forties’, they returned to Batavia.

These discoveries too did not yield immediate benefit, but when in 1655 the burghers of Amsterdam opened their new town hall on the Dam square, today’s Royal Palace, with a gable full of emblematic decorations boasting of the town’s primacy in world trade, they could not resist including Australia in their worldview. Inside this gigantic building, two enormous maps of the eastern and western hemispheres still adorn the marble floors of the citizens’ hall, proudly showing the new discoveries made in van Diemen’s time. Amsterdammers liked to see the world at their feet.

Van Diemen believed that the Company’s hegemony in Asian trade could not be assured unless it first eliminated Portuguese competition. He was convinced that the capital-intensive Company could not beat the free Portuguese merchants at their own game and therefore advocated an all-out offensive to do away with the Portuguese presence. He was able to mount such an offensive because of the favourable turn in the fortunes of the Company in the Far East. In 1636 the Tokugawa government issued maritime prohibitions forbidding its own subjects from sailing abroad and banishing the Portuguese due to their missionary activities. This meant that in Japan the doors were (p. 241) now thrown wide open to the Dutch to join the trade in ‘Chinese silk for Japanese silver’. Thanks to its trading station of Deshima in Nagasaki Bay, the company was able to finance for the next forty years a large part of its intra-Asian trade with exports of Japanese silver, gold, and copper to India.
With a free hand in the Far East, van Diemen could launch the offensive against the Portuguese presence in the Indonesian archipelago, India, and Ceylon. The most spectacular victory he obtained was without doubt the conquest of Malacca, which was taken from the Portuguese after a long siege in 1641. As of that year control over both passages between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca and the Sunda Strait between Sumatra and Java, was in Dutch hands.

For several years on end, the VOC blockaded Goa to destabilize and weaken the intra-Asian network of the Estado da India. This prompted the Ceylonese king Raja Singa to send an invitation to the Dutch to expel the Portuguese from their fortified settlements on Ceylon. A treaty was concluded on the king’s promise that he would grant monopsony rights (a monopoly to purchase a particular item) on cinnamon. As early as 1644, the strategic cities of Negombo and Galle fell into Dutch hands, but it would take a second offensive ten years later to capture Colombo. The seizure of the city of Jaffna in the north of the island, and shortly afterwards the conquest of Portuguese Cochin and other strongholds on the Malabar Coast, concluded van Diemen’s project and added (next to the Moluccas and Java) another pillar to the territorial possessions of the Company. When peace was ratified with Portugal in December 1662, the VOC had broken the Portuguese grip on the pepper-producing Malabar Coast of southwest India and had added cinnamon to its other spice monopolies.

The year 1662 was in many respects memorable for the Dutch: while gaining control of the coastal areas of Ceylon in the Indian Ocean, in the China Sea region they had lost Formosa to the Ming loyalist Zheng Chenggong, alias Coxinga. Ironically, what they took from the Portuguese in Asia they lost to them in Brazil, when the Treaty of The Hague forced the Dutch West India Company to give up its sovereign rights to Pernambuco.

**War and Diplomacy**

Having dealt with the epic struggle for the mastery of trade in Asia between the VOC and the Estado da India, it is time to turn to the diplomatic relations with the surrounding kingdoms in Asia. Quite exasperated by Van Diemen’s costly campaigns against the Portuguese the directors in Holland admonished their multi-tasking Governor-General telling him: ‘The Indian world is too large for us to possess everything, and our land is too small to provide the necessary power that the colonies demand’. The Gentlemen Seventeen thereby referred to earlier letters to his predecessor Hendrick Brouwer who they had instructed to seek to submit wherever possible to the laws of the Asian countries, because it was better ‘to be subjected to the laws and customs of those lands than to resort to arms, as long as it is tolerable and one can still trade profitably’.

The Gentlemen Seventeen’s general instruction to the High Government of the Indies in 1650 provided a blueprint for foreign relations. It distinguished between three categories of relationships: colonial possessions acquired by conquest such as Banda and Formosa; allied kingdoms whose rulers signed treaties that accorded the VOC a privileged position in certain products, vide the sultans of Ternate and Tidore with whom spice contracts had been secured in exchange for annual payments; and finally kingdoms or empires where the VOC was allowed to trade thanks to a special pass or a firman, such as Mughal India or Tokugawa Japan. How seriously the Company took its diplomatic relations becomes clear if one looks at the number of treaties that were concluded with the surrounding Asian polities: six a year in the third quarter of the seventeenth century and up to eleven a year in the final quarter.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, there remained three neighbouring kingdoms with which the Company continuously tried to come to terms by way of diplomacy and treaties, but without success: the sultanate of Makassar on the southern tip of Celebes; the sultanate of Bantam, the cosmopolitan port city only a hundred kilometres west of Batavia; and, finally, the mighty kingdom of Mataram in central Java. The sultan of Makassar provided port facilities to the Danish, English, and Portuguese rivals of the VOC to purchase spices from the Moluccas and thus infringed on the Company’s spice monopoly. After almost twenty years of concluding treaties that were broken repeatedly by the sultan, who was not willing to cave in to Dutch demands, the High Government in Batavia decided on war. Cornelis Speelman, with the help of his local
ally the prince of Bone, Arung Palacca, was finally able to conquer Makassar in 1667 and thus closed the last remaining gap in the spice monopoly.

The sultanate of Bantam where the Dutch had started trading on their first visit to the Indies remained a formidable rival in trade to Batavia by catering to Danish and English ships, Chinese junks, and Muslim traders from India. In 1682, Speelman, who by then had risen to governor-general, seized the opportunity to intervene in an ongoing feud between the sultan and the crown prince. By a considerable show of force, he also succeeded in bringing this neighbouring port principality into the Company’s fold. From now on, all Western commercial rivals were effectively excluded from the waters of the Indonesian archipelago, which was turned into a ‘Dutch Lake’. Eighty years of intermittent warfare and diplomacy had come to an end with the stabilization of the VOC’s position as the major trade power in the Indonesian archipelago in 1682.

Yet in its relations with the kingdom of Mataram in central Java the High Government of the VOC at Batavia sank deeper and deeper into the quagmire of court politics. As supporters of ‘rightful pretenders to the throne’ the Dutch became involved in no less than three protracted wars of succession (1677–1707, 1719–22, 1749–55) that gradually brought Java’s northeast coast under direct Company control and ended in the three-way partition of the Mataram kingdom. War reparations by the Mataram court for the military assistance resulted in the acquisition of all tolls and taxes in Java’s port towns and massive ‘contingents and forced deliveries’ of such crops as sugar, indigo, and coffee for export purposes. Thus in the second half of the eighteenth century the erstwhile maritime trading company turned Java into a territorial power not unlike the EIC on the Indian subcontinent. Yet while the English territorial expansion was accomplished at great cost with a standing army of almost 100,000 sepoys, Dutch control was achieved by means of divide et impera.

A Javanese court official succinctly described the contrasting national approaches: ‘The British are like the strong rapid current of water, they are persevering, energetic, and irresistible in their courage. If they really want to obtain something they will use violence to get it. The Dutch are very able, clever, patient and calm. If possible they try to reach their goal rather by persuasion than by force of arms’. 23

Batavia and its Trade Network in Asia

By the end of the seventeenth century, the VOC had reached the apex of its power and operated an empire of trade in the East (see Map 9.1). Batavia was served by a large number of trading establishments spread throughout Monsoon Asia from Mocha in the west to Deshima in Japan to the east. Situated on the shore of a well-sheltered bay, the town was bisected by the Ciliwong river, criss-crossed by rectangular canals and streets, and surrounded by a wide, deep moat and sturdy walls constructed of coral stone. A large parade ground connected the town with Batavia Castle. Across the river, opposite the castle, were located the Company’s ship wharves and godowns, which were connected by a canal to the sea. 24

Initially Batavia had a surprisingly pleasant climate for a town so close to the equator. Contemporary visitors described it as ‘as temperate and healthy as any place in the Indies’. A special feature of this colonial city was that it included the ethnic groups on whose military assistance and industry its very survival depended: the industrious Chinese and the so-called ‘Mardijkers’ (orang merdeka, or free people), free Christian burghers of Asian and mestizo extraction. In contrast to Manila, where Spaniards and Chinese sojourners were strictly segregated, the Dutch and Chinese townspeople of Batavia lived within the walls of the same town, served by large numbers of domestic slaves from all around the Indonesian archipelago and even the Indian subcontinent. In the so-called ‘Ommelanden’ surrounding the city, the Company gave out
tracts of land to the Company elite who lived on private estates, and to the indigenous ‘martial nations’ of the Indonesian archipelago who settled down in kampong of their own. The Balinese, Bugis, Madurese, and Ambonese who lived here provided—when called upon—manpower and troops for military campaigns elsewhere in the archipelago. Around 1700, about 20,000 people resided within the walls (half of them household slaves) and another 50,000 outside the city. About 5,000 Europeans and Christian mestizos and 3,500 Chinese lived in the town and, of course, large numbers of sailors lodged in the inns or on the ships in the roadstead.

In Batavia, all the municipal institutions of the burgher society of the home country were replicated and were seemingly as Dutch as Dutch could be. A town hall, two hospitals, an orphanage, a court of justice, and several churches, as well as corrective (p. 244) (p. 245) institutions and an almshouse all contributed to the familiar Dutch Calvinistic atmosphere. Yet there was a Potemkin village aspect to all this: Batavia was very different from its sister cities in the Dutch Republic: it was ruled by one large business corporation which jealously guarded its own trade monopolies in Monsoon Asia. Nearly all public functions remained strictly in the hands of the Company’s personnel. Lacking a steady supply of women from the home country, the local elite developed all the traits of a mestizo society.

So much for the main characteristics of Batavia as a colonial city, but what about its function as a rendezvous? Here it is necessary to take a closer look at the traffic on the city’s roadstead. There was an enormous difference in the number of voyages between the Dutch Republic and the Indies and the number of voyages within the intra-Asian network in the period between 1595 and 1660. While some 1,368 voyages were made around the Cape of Good Hope, no less than 11,507 voyages were undertaken for the intra-Asian trade in the Eastern Seas. As pointed out by K. N. Chaudhuri, the Dutch as well as the English discovered upon their arrival in Asian waters ‘that the whole of the Indian Ocean had a structural unity created by the periodic rhythm of the monsoon winds and by economic interdependence between one region and another’.

The position of Batavia as the spider in a web of trading routes connecting the Indian Ocean with the Indonesian archipelago and the China Seas says it all. At Batavia all the most important intra-Asian shipping routes met in such a way that they dovetailed with each other. This in fact constituted a structural modification: already existing traditional patterns of trade were now for the first time integrated within the network of the overarching trading corporation.

In its heyday the VOC annually sent on average some twenty-five ships in three fleets to and from Asia and had about another forty ships sailing along the Asian monsoon trading routes at any one time. The shipping movements of this mighty fleet stabilized at about 280 visits to the Batavian roadstead annually. The following schematic survey gives an idea of the year round operations of the VOC fleet.

In May, June, or early July, the Japan ships sailed for Nagasaki carrying Dutch and Indian textiles, ray skins from Siam, spices from the Moluccas, and so on. On their return trip in autumn, they delivered Japanese gold koban (coins), copper, lacquerware, porcelain, and silk. Part of this cargo went to Batavia; another part went via Malacca to Bengal or Persia. From those western quarters the ships would return to Batavia loaded with textiles just in time to provide the next batch of Japan ships with their cargoes.

Ships destined for the Coromandel Coast were dispatched between April and August, heading for Negapatnam and Pulicat, where they would load stone slabs—often used for tombstones in Batavia—and all sorts of textiles, indigo, saltpetre, and diamonds. This round-trip took about two and a half months. The Gulf of Bengal trading station at Arakan was served from Negapatnam in August or September.

At the beginning of September, ships left for Galle in Ceylon with a cargo of spices and locally ordered wares. From there, they continued their journey in October to the Malabar ports of Cochin and Wingurla. At these ports, areca (palm nuts), pepper, cowries (mollusc shells), and coconut husks (for making rope) were loaded for transport to Surat and onwards to Persia. Some ships sailed directly from Ceylon to Persia and Surat with cargoes of spices, cardamom, and pepper, copper, and tin. In February and March, these returned (p. 246) with cargoes of textiles, jewels, Persian silks, Shiraz wines, fruits, armosins (a kind of taffeta), brocades, and Persian horses. Two more would follow in May with cinnamon.
In April and May ships were sent to West and East Sumatra to purchase gold and pepper. They would return in October, just in time to transfer their cargoes to the homeward bound \textit{return} fleet on the Batavia roadstead. Also in May, Batavia supplied Malacca with necessities in exchange for tin and pepper from the ‘Malay Tin Kingdoms’. In October, other ships were sent to the Malacca Straits to await and transfer goods from the ships that sailed directly from Japan to Bengal without calling at Batavia.

In July and August, the Bengal-bound fleet left bearing Japanese copper to purchase silk for Japan and cotton textiles and opium for Java.

Between June and August, ships were sent to the Ayutthaya factory in Siam, mostly bringing special goods ordered by the Siamese king, such as arms and clothing. The return cargo consisted of tropical timber, hides, ray skins, wax, elephant tusks, and other forest products. On the way home the ships would call at Ligor to collect tin.

All vessels bound for the Spice Islands in the eastern part of the Indonesian archipelago departed between December and February loaded with such ample provisions as rice, wheat, bacon, oil, beer, wines, and vinegar for the various garrisons that guarded the VOC’s spice monopoly there. They returned filled with spices, nutmeg, mace, sandalwood, caret, bird’s nests, and birds of paradise, just in time to liaise with the homeward bound fleet waiting at anchor in the Batavian roadstead. In addition to the shipping movements of the Company, Chinese junks annually came in great numbers to Batavia in early February and returned home again between May and July.

The question presents itself, what was the impact of the European companies on Asian indigenous trade? While agreeing that the Dutch spice monopolies will certainly have stifled indigenous trade in the Indonesian archipelago, the Indian historian Ashin das Gupta saw no indications that Indian trade was affected adversely ‘or that the Indian merchant was driven from the Indian Ocean in commercial competition. At the turn of the 18th century Indian shipping fully held its own against the English and Dutch vessels’.

All this was to change with the British advance towards political and military primacy in India during the century that followed.

### Changing Fortunes

It has often been remarked that the first signs of decline of the VOC became evident around 1700. That is only partly true. It cannot be denied that the intra-Asian trade of the Company began to shrink because, in the Indian Ocean especially, the VOC faced increasing competition from English country traders who with their lower operating costs and their ability to anticipate and respond to changes in the market encroached on the Company’s trade and thus gradually undermined its position. After the era of establishing monopolies, a competitive phase with other European trading companies set in at the turn of the century. This reflected fundamental changes that occurred in the composition of European trade with Asia. Products that the Company had mainly traded in Asia itself quite suddenly also found ready markets in Europe. Soon the Dutch were facing heavy competition from other European companies who entered the trade between Asia and Europe.

When real decline set in—or perhaps we should say relative decline—is hard to say. Some historians feel that this can be dated to the final decade of the seventeenth century; others point to the 1720s. There is no one primary cause that can be advanced; rather it was a mix of factors linked to developments in both Europe and Asia that began to destabilize the foundations of the enterprise. On the European side, the Company’s declining performance reflected a management that was based increasingly on nepotism and patronage of the urban elite, and the Dutch Republic’s political and economic decline within Europe itself. On the Asian side, changing local conditions, changes in regime, and wars in the various regions where the Company ran its trading settlements determined to a large extent the fortunes of the Company’s business \textit{in situ}.

The establishments at Malabar on India’s southeast coast serve as an example of how the Company’s influence declined. In the early 1660s, the Dutch had wrested Malabar from the Portuguese at a high cost. It soon turned out that expenses for the upkeep of the various fortresses and their garrisons outweighed the profits that could be made on the pepper trade. When
the local rulers with whom the Dutch had concluded exclusive monopsony contracts began selling to the English and the French, there was little the Dutch could do. Use of force was expensive and ineffective. As a contemporary observer put it: ‘Although the Company in India likes to represent itself as a local prince, this princedom must still live through its merchants’.

Without help from Batavia, local VOC officials had to adjust their policies to the realities of the local situation, which is how the VOC gradually lost much of its influence on the Indian subcontinent. While the Dutch Company had entrenched itself in the Indonesian archipelago and was closing down factories on the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, the English Company with its presidencies in Bombay and Madras was continually extending its influence all over the Indian subcontinent.

Contraction of Dutch trade within Asia did not mean contraction of trade between Europe and Asia. On the contrary: the total volume of VOC trade continued to grow in the eighteenth century. More people were employed on larger (though fewer) ships. Yet it cannot be denied that within Asia the Company began to withdraw from trading settlements that were no longer profitable. It would be wrong, however, to argue that by the end of the eighteenth century the Dutch seaborne empire had become a shambles. Fortunes were being made in Bengal throughout the last years of the Company’s existence, and the economies of its biggest territories in Ceylon and Java, the two pillars that supported the company’s administration in Asia, were not at all depressed.

What pushed the Company towards bankruptcy was a combination of heavy competition by Asian and English interlopers, financial ruin owing to the losses suffered during the Fourth Anglo–Dutch War, and the sudden end of the Dutch Republic’s ancien régime due to the French invasion in 1795. All this resulted in the loss of the Company’s (p. 248) Asian possessions, which one after another fell into British hands. Somewhat miraculously, the Dutch flag continued to flutter during the Napoleonic wars at the small trading post of Deshima in Japan, if only because the Japanese barred the British from entering.

When speaking of the VOC’s decline in the eighteenth century, one should realize that this was a relative decline vis-à-vis its greatest rivals in that era, namely the English and, for a long time, the French. Here it is important to note the fundamental changes that occurred at the beginning of the eighteenth century in the structure of the Asian–European trade. If in terms of commerce the seventeenth century was primarily the age of the monopolistic spice trade, the eighteenth century was an age of intense competition for Indian calicoes and Chinese tea. For the VOC, the spice monopoly remained an important element in the commerce with Europe and in the intra-Asian trade, but the relative importance of spices in the total trading basket declined. In plain words: the VOC stuck to its old formula and although it also dealt in Indian calicoes and tea, it did so mainly in low-cost bulk goods while the English and French companies focused on higher-quality goods and constantly revised their orders according to the ever changing fashions of the European public.

How the VOC dealt in tea is particularly telling. Initially it was the largest importer of tea into Europe, thanks to the Chinese junk trade to Batavia, but it lost that primacy when other countries in Europe set up companies of their own and sailed directly to Canton. In this particular case, Batavia turned out to be an Achilles heel. Due to the city’s predominant position within the VOC’s intra-Asian network, the Dutch company was a latecomer at Canton, where the tea trade was concentrated. As the spider in the web that had contributed so much to the Company’s growth, central Batavia now blocked any initiative to adapt to the changing balance of trade.

Ever since the loss of Taiwan in 1662 to the Ming loyalist Zheng Chenggong, the trading corridor between China’s southern port cities and Batavia had remained firmly in the hands of Chinese shipping, forcing the VOC to give up all aspirations to gain entry to the China market. Chinese junks from Amoy, Canton, and Ningpo arrived every year with the northern monsoon in February and departed again in May, June, or July with the southern monsoon. The opening of overseas trade by the Kangxi emperor after the Qing conquest of Taiwan in 1683 unleashed a veritable tsunami of Chinese merchants into Batavia, and thus the Amoy–Batavia corridor became the sole supplier of tea, porcelain, and other China wares. Carrying back and forth thousands of Chinese migrants, it also became the umbilical cord of Batavia’s Chinese population, which comprised by far the largest ethnic group in Batavia.
When the Gentlemen Seventeen sought to establish a direct link between the Netherlands and Canton, as with the EIC, they met with vehement opposition from the High Government of Batavia, which wished to protect the Chinese junk trade. When opposition was finally overcome in 1727 and a shipping link was opened between Holland and Canton, Batavia could not resist intervening and forced China-bound ships to anchor at its roadstead. As late as 1757, a special China Committee was established by the Gentlemen Seventeen in Amsterdam which henceforth operated its own (p. 249) nonstop shipping link between the Netherlands and Canton and deftly kept its distance from the VOC’s intra-Asian networks. Only at this time did the direct shipping link with China become the most profitable one in the entire Company network.30

The transformation of Batavia from an asset into a liability was not simply caused by conservative management that refused to adapt to the changing situation. There was also an environmental side to the story. Seventeenth-century Batavia was a busy emporium with a roadstead full of ships, known throughout Asia as ‘The Queen of the Orient’. By the 1720s, this had changed completely. In 1699, the eruption of Salak volcano, about sixty kilometres to the south, wrought havoc on the rivers that pass through and by the city. This natural disaster coupled with man-made destruction, notably the reckless chopping down of the tropical forest in the hinterland for use as fuel in the sugar refineries, brought about environmental decay, ground erosion, and frequent inundations during the rainy season. In the early 1730s, the digging of canals, and the construction of salt evaporation flats and fishponds around the city created breeding grounds for the anopheles mosquito and turned Batavia into a malaria-infested city which now became known as the ‘Cemetery of the East’. It has been calculated that in Batavia alone about 85,000 Company servants died of malaria between 1733 and 1795, an average of 1,400 Dutch residents annually, plus still larger numbers of Chinese and Indonesian inhabitants.31

In 1740, the seemingly harmonious relations between the Dutch and Chinese inhabitants came to a sudden halt when Chinese labourers who had lost their work owing to a crisis in sugar cultivation launched an attack on the city in early October. Fearing that the Chinese living inside the city walls might join the ranks of the rebels, the citizens of Batavia turned against their Chinese neighbours and slaughtered them all; within a few days, this massacre had claimed more than 8,000 victims.

Deteriorating environmental conditions, ethnic strife, and a refusal to adapt to the changes in the market thus turned Batavia into a liability. Its High Government continued to require that all traffic be directed to the general rendezvous at the expense of the Company’s other settlements. Batavia denied other well-situated ports under VOC control such as Malacca and Makassar the opportunity to play the roles that their strategic locations would have warranted. Even the rich colony of Ceylon, thousands of miles away, was forced to dance to the tune of the general rendezvous, and had to direct most of its shipping to Batavia first, instead of keeping a direct shipping link with the home country or independently directing its traffic with ports of the nearby Indian subcontinent.

Throughout the eighteenth century, various individuals both in the Dutch Republic and in Asia attempted to remedy the Company’s disappointing performance by active intervention. The career of the dynamic Governor-General Gustaaf Willem van Imhoff (1741–49) says it all. He started his career with the epithet Hersteller—the restorer—but was remembered by the nickname the Versteller—the patcher. His successor, Jacob Mossel, a more down-to-earth but equally driven man, was similarly unable to arrest the Company’s relative decline in the intra-Asian trade. He also undertook a private crusade against corrupt behaviour and conspicuous consumption by issuing decrees against ‘pomp and circumstance’, but with little effect.

Corruption increasingly became a vexing problem for the VOC management, which failed to gain a grip on the private trade and the underhand practices of those involved in it. These problems were inherent to the nature of a business that sought to impose, defend, and maintain monopolies at all costs. Enemies of the monopoly could be found both within the Company and outside of it. Internal corruption occurred on all levels in Asia. Crews pilfered from ship cargoes, engaged in private trade in precious commodities, or undercut the Company by secretly buying and selling spices, to name just a few practices. It was hardly a secret that the value of goods smuggled into Europe sometimes even exceeded that of the Company’s own shipments.
It was not just the interloping of English country traders that hurt the financial situation of the Company. The damage was also done by its own servants who remitted their private fortunes to Europe by letters of exchange thanks to the services of an EIC that was glad to accept Dutch cash in Asia for its own local use and repay the funds in London. Jealous of its own monopoly, the VOC was unwilling to condone private enterprise by its servants or free burgers in Asia, and when it finally made tentative attempts in that direction because it was no longer able to send large sums of money to Asia in the 1790s, it was too late to make the difference.32

The fourth Anglo–Dutch war of 1781–84 dealt the final death blow. The French and English companies had been at war with each other in South Asia off and on since the 1740s, and called in the assistance of their respective state navies in Indian waters whenever it was necessary. The VOC traditionally refused to seek such military assistance from the States General in Holland. The Dutch Company which in the days of Van Diemen and his immediate successors had been such a bellicose actor on the Asian scene had changed face and was steering a neutralist course amidst the warring French and English parties in India. Jealously protecting its almost sovereign powers east of Cape Town, it stumbled on using its own local resources, and could not properly defend itself against the superior forces of its English rival. When in 1780 Britain declared war on the Dutch Republic, which had recognized the revolutionary American Republic, the VOC had to foot the bill. The imposing fortress of Negapatnam on the Coromandel Coast was lost during the fourth Anglo–Dutch war because the garrison was inadequate to defend it. The only reason why the Cape Colony and Ceylon did not fall into English hands was that the indefatigable French Admiral Suffren beat off all attacks by his British antagonist Admiral Hughes. It was only after the war that a Dutch naval squadron under Commander Van Braam was sent to the Indonesian archipelago to restore order there.

The greatest losses of the war were financial. In the first year of the war, the proceeds of the VOC wares auctioned in the Netherlands amounted as usual to around 20 million guilders and new loans were negotiated on the Amsterdam bourse for the next outgoing fleet; but almost all shipping ended up in enemy hands and for three years running no income arrived from Asia. The Company’s operations became paralysed. With the help of loans from the States General and the city of Amsterdam amounting to 12.5 million guilders, survival was temporarily secured, but when the Company asked for another 14 million, its lenders balked.

Immediately after the war, a special office, the so-called fifth department, was added to the Company management with the task of bringing about a turnaround. A duumvirate of commissars-general was to offer advice about revamping the company’s organization and was sent to the Indies in 1791 to take active measures. But in 1795, before these officials could carry out any reforms, the Dutch Republic was invaded by French troops. A new regime was installed under the name of the Batavian Republic, and in March 1796 this revolutionary government dismissed the Gentlemen Seventeen and replaced them with twenty-one members of the Committee for the affairs of the East Indian trade and possessions. This move in effect constituted the nationalization of the Company and all its effects. The charter of the VOC was formally abolished on 31 December 1799.

During the Napoleonic wars that followed, the possessions of the former Dutch East India Company ended up in English hands only to be restored in 1814 as a result of the negotiations at the Vienna congress. After the French invasion of 1795 the Dutch Stadtholder Prince William V of Orange fled with his family to England where he was provided with a temporary domicile at Kew Palace. In his capacity of Hoofd bewindhebber (‘chief executive’) of the VOC and Captain-General of the Dutch Republic he forwarded, on the request of his British hosts, the so-called Kew letters to all administrators of the VOC in Asia urging them to transfer ‘temporarily’ their territories to the English East India Company so that these would not end up in French hands. The British government, he wrote, had solemnly promised to restore the Dutch overseas possessions to their lawful owner as soon as the ‘former political conditions’ had been restored. Most officials surrendered their territories, with the exception of the Governor-General and Council of the Indies on Java who held out until 1811 when the ‘Jewel in the Crown’ of the no longer existing VOC was invaded by British forces. Only on the little island of Deshima in the Bay of Nagasaki in Japan did the Dutch flag remain on top. At the Vienna Congress, twenty years after the Kew letters were sent, the British government decided to partly live up to its promises: with the exception of the strategic colonies
of Ceylon and the Cape of Good Hope and a few minor settlements in India, the former overseas possessions of the VOC in Southeast Asia were returned to Dutch control. Out of these building blocks would arise the Netherlands East Indies, the formidable Dutch colonial empire of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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**Notes:**


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Jesuit Missions

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Abstract and Keywords

The early modern Society of Jesus was the first global religious order. This chapter analyses the theory and practice of the Jesuits’ missions to non-Christians as these were understood by Ignatius of Loyola (the founder of the Society) and developed by his successors. It focuses on the work of prominent Jesuit missionaries whose pastoral strategies were considered models within the Society. The chapter underscores the Jesuits’ commitment to the accommodation of non-Christian traditions; Jesuit contributions to science, comparative religion, and other fields; conflicts between Jesuits and European officials and settlers, especially in the Iberian world; and divisions within the Society concerning mission work. The chapter concludes with reflections on the relationship between evangelization and theology and on directions for future research on Jesuit missions in their global context.

Keywords: Jesuits, early modern Catholicism, mission, evangelization, accommodation, inculturation, religious conversion

During the last twenty years a growing international community of Jesuit and non-Jesuit scholars has researched the history of the ‘Old Society’, that is, the Society of Jesus before the general suppression of 1773. The early modern Jesuit missions have received particular attention.1 Historians have often viewed the Society as the first worldwide religious order, and several scholars have adopted a global approach in response to the traditional emphasis on national boundaries in missions.2 At the same time, the connections between extra-European missions and internal missions—the Jesuits called the latter ‘our Indies’—have drawn wide interest.3 Scholars have explored Jesuit missions from diverse perspectives, including music, literature, theology, science, visual arts, and economics.4 Missions served as conduits for information that circulated throughout the Jesuit network and beyond in letters, books, and other forms of communication.

Studies of missions have helped to explain the institutional development of the Society of Jesus. Viewed for a long time as a compact and homogeneous institution, the Society experienced internal tensions and fractures that decisively influenced the missions.5 Recent studies of missionary sources have provided a better understanding of Jesuit spirituality, of the legacy of Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises in the missions, and of the theological premises of the Society’s pastoral ideals and practices. Finally, documents preserved in the Society’s archives have allowed historians to gain new insights into the lives and careers of individual missionaries.

This proliferation of studies has lent support to the widely held assumption that the Jesuits were the most creative and effective missionary order, and has at the same time obscured the activities of other religious orders. Several factors, however, explain the recent emphasis on Jesuit history. First, the collections of documents that are preserved in the Society’s archives and libraries throughout the world are much larger than those of other orders. Second, controversies, myths, and various forms of anti-Jesuitism have contributed, intentionally or unintentionally, to the historical and cultural relevance of the
Society of Jesus. No similar set of controversies and myths developed in connection with the other orders. Third, the Society’s rapid growth and effective centralized government make it an excellent vehicle for the investigation of relationships between centres and peripheries in the early modern world, a theme that is a less prominent feature of the history of other religious orders.

Recent scholarship has revealed a distinctive Jesuit approach to missions (what the Jesuits called ‘our way of proceeding’). At the same time, the study of the Society offers lessons about shared characteristics of Catholic missions (and Christian missions in general) during the early modern period. Mission as a form of self-fulfilment has been a part of the Christian tradition since the time of the early Church. Jesuits were not the only ones willing to die to ‘help souls’, a central element of the Society’s self-definition. The Society shared with other religious orders the desire to serve everywhere and to accommodate different peoples. In many places, Jesuits were not the first to establish Catholic missions but instead continued work that had been begun by others. This chapter is a journey around the world in the company of prominent Jesuits whose work influenced generations of missionaries, and whose pastoral strategies were considered models within the Society. Some of these individuals have been the subjects of recent studies, while others await detailed investigation.

The Jesuit missionary vocation was rooted in the desire to ‘help souls’ (cura animarum) that Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) pursued from the moment of his conversion in 1521. Twenty years later, in the founding document of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius introduced a fourth vow for professed priests of the Society that affirmed the Jesuits’ willingness to go anywhere in the world at the request of the Pope. Jerónimo Nadal, one of Ignatius’s closest collaborators, reiterated this idea: ‘We are not monks! . . . The world is our house.’

Inspired by letters from distant lands that Jesuits read aloud at dinnertime, young novices wrote to the Father General petitionering to be sent overseas. In these litterae indipetae (letters from men who petebant Indias, that is, ‘desired to be sent to the Indies”) applicants explained their individual vocations; more than 14,000 letters from all over Europe are preserved in the Society’s archive. A commitment to enduring the hardships of mission life was more important to a successful candidacy than intellectual gifts.

The indipetae, which are ‘both spiritual and administrative’, have been the subject of several recent studies. The letters demonstrate the close connection between Jesuit spirituality and the development of the Society’s missionary ideals and practices. Borrowing the language of Ignatius’s Spiritual Exercises, the petitioners repeatedly affirmed the Ignatian ideals of discernment, desire, and indifference. The letter-writing process was itself part of the petitioner’s attempt to discern his vocation for overseas missions. The desire to leave for overseas missions was the first sign that God was calling, but it had always to be paired with indifference, that is, unconditional obedience to the decision of the petitioner’s superiors. The indipetae allow scholars to understand the circulation of information about overseas missions, the process of recruitment of missionaries, and the complex network of relationships between petitioners, local superiors, and the Father General.

Muslims, Jews, and New Christians

The Jesuits sent their first missions to Muslims in North Africa. Ignatius had demonstrated his commitment to ministering to Muslims well before he founded the Society. In his autobiography he told the story of his encounter with a Moor on the road to Montserrat. They began to discuss theology, and when the conversation turned to Mary, ‘the Moor said it seemed to him that the Virgin had indeed conceived without a man, but he could not believe in her giving birth remaining a virgin’. When the two men parted, Ignatius ‘aroused his indignation against the Moor, for it seemed that he had done wrong in allowing the Moor to say such things about Our Lady’. Later, ‘being tired of examining what would be best to do and not arriving at a definite conclusion’, Ignatius resolved to let his mule decide. If the mule went in the same direction as the Moor, Ignatius would follow and kill him; otherwise he would let the Moor continue his journey. Thanks to the mule’s choice, the Moor was saved.
This episode became famous within the Society and appeared in many biographies of Ignatius, in sacred dramas about the Society of Jesus, and in letters of missionaries to Muslims. The encounter was an important step in Ignatius’s transformation from worldly knight to spiritual seeker and itinerant preacher. Its ambiguity reflects Ignatius’s complex relationship with Muslims. On the one hand, he always adopted a warlike approach to Islam, urging in 1552 an alliance of European rulers led by Charles V to fight the Muslims in the Mediterranean. This proposal, which was rejected for political and financial reasons, anticipated the creation of the Holy League that would be victorious at Lepanto in 1571.11 On the other hand, Ignatius was committed to missionary work among Muslims, travelling to the Holy Land in 1523–24 intending to devote the rest of his life to this task. After founding the Society, he considered missions in North Africa to be a priority, no matter what the cost to the Society’s other ministries. Ignatius planned to create two Arabic-speaking colleges in Sicily and to accept moriscos (converts from Islam) into the Society of Jesus, both because of the Society’s inclusive ethos and because they would strengthen the Society’s missions among Muslims. He was unable to bring most of these missions to fruition during his lifetime, and several missions to North Africa failed within a few months. His commitment to the conversion of the Islamic world, however, figured prominently in his letters and in the early documents of the Society, and it helped to shape the pastoral ideals and practices of succeeding generations of Jesuits.12

Among the most prominent men who took up Ignatius’s engagement with the Islamic world was the Italian Jesuit Antonio Possevino (1533–1611). Possevino served as a missionary in Piedmont, in France, in eastern Europe, and in Russia.13 Later, as the Society’s secretary (1573–77), he helped to direct missions throughout the world, including those to Muslims in eastern Europe. Possevino was also a prolific writer. His most influential book was Bibliotheca selecta, which was published in 1593 with a prefatory letter from Pope Clement VIII.14 This monumental work contained suggested readings on a wide range of topics. It gained popularity within the Society and beyond, and it helped to shape the course of study that was codified in the Society’s Ratio studiorum (1599). Like Ignatius, Possevino had conflicting impulses concerning Muslims. When he wrote Il soldato cristiano [The Christian Soldier] (1569), the first early modern Catholic catechism for military forces, Possevino was undoubtedly inspired by his experiences in Piedmont and France, but he always mentioned fighting Islam as well, and the book was distributed to the fleet that confronted the Ottomans at Lepanto.15 In a section of Bibliotheca selecta devoted to heresies and to the enemies of the Church, Possevino offered a particularly harsh image of Mohammed and Islam, underscoring the connection between Islam, Lutheranism, and Calvinism (a classic theme in Catholic polemical literature) and the need for a war to liberate Europe from the Muslim threat.16

Possevino’s aggressive stance towards Islam was ultimately less prominent than his writings in support of peaceful conversion. In Book IX of the Bibliotheca, dedicated to world evangelization, he underscored the shared beliefs of Catholics and Muslims, the importance of learning Arabic, and the cultural—in contrast to religious—value of many Islamic thinkers. He proposed that Christian dialogue with Muslims, based on reason, could be enhanced in the Islamic world by promoting the reading of Christian and pagan philosophers (including Plato) in Arabic translation and by underscoring texts that were compatible with Christian teachings.17 Muslims, he wrote, were led by the natural light of reason (naturali lumine ducti) to be open to conversion, and they often demonstrated a sincere esteem for the beauty of Christianity. In general, they were drawn to the Christian way of life rather than to the Christian religion.18 Possevino argued that because many Muslims were attracted to Christian society and culture, it was especially important that the clergy and laymen who were sent to Muslim lands be selected for their irreproachable way of life.

Ignatius’s conflicting impulses concerning Islam shaped the Society’s approach to Muslims until the late seventeenth century. The rhetoric of the crusade re-emerged among Jesuits in moments of confrontation with the Muslim world, when the imperative of fighting against enemies of the faith carried an apocalyptic and millenarian charge. At other times, however, the Society advocated accommodation and undertook peaceful missions to Muslims throughout Europe, North Africa, and Asia.19

These missions helped to lay the foundation for the Society’s ministries to other non-Christians, beginning with its missions to the Jews. As a youth Ignatius had no contact with Jews or New Christians and the Basque country in which he grew up was fiercely proud of its Old Christian heritage.20 Prior to 1492 Jews in Guipúzcoa, the province in which Ignatius was born,
were obliged to wear clothing that distinguished them from Old Christians. During the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the province passed ordinances prohibiting people who could not prove that they were of noble families—this group included not only descendants of Jews but also foreigners and other minorities—from settling in the region. Ignatius affirmed the Old Christian heritage of his family and his province when he was questioned by the Inquisition about his lineage and about his ties to the Spanish mystics known as *alumbrados*.

Well before founding the Society, Ignatius appears to have renounced any antipathy that he may have felt towards Jews, especially those who showed an interest in conversion. When he began his ministry in Rome in 1537, he lived near the Jewish quarter. He provided food and shelter for needy Jewish catechumens (those who were being instructed in Christian teaching, prior to baptism) and arranged for dowries for female converts. At Ignatius’s request Pope Paul III published the bull *Cupientes iudaeos* (1542), which gave Jewish converts the right to retain their property after conversion as well as rights of citizenship and inheritance. The Pope also was responding to a need expressed by Ignatius when in 1543 he designated the church of San Giovanni del Mercato as a house for the catechumens with whom Ignatius and his companions were working.

Ignatius’s twenty-eight years in Rome coincided with a decisive shift in papal policy. Pope Paul IV, in the bull *Cum nimis absurdum* (1555), withdrew the protection that the Papal States had extended to Jews for centuries and introduced a policy of systematic discrimination, including the establishment of ghettos in which the Jews of Rome and other cities were to be obliged to live. Ignatius ‘sent copies of [the bull] far and wide with instructions to pass them around after they had been read. In this way, he not only helped promulgate the bull, but seems to have agreed with it.’

Yet, despite this, Ignatius possessed a deep affinity for the Jewish people, albeit not for the Jewish faith. During the final years of his life, Ignatius appears to have moved away from his tolerant attitude towards professing Jews. At the same time, however, he reinforced his already strong ties with Christian converts from Judaism. The most striking example was his insistence that all qualified men be admitted to the Society, regardless of lineage. The Society, at the insistence of Ignatius and with the support of his closest companions, was among the most vocal and effective opponents of the statutes of ‘purity of blood’ (*limpieza de sangre*), which required that candidates for a wide range of civil and ecclesiastical positions throughout the Iberian world prove that they had no Jewish or Moorish ancestors.

The secular clergy and most religious orders barred, by law or custom, the admission of New Christians. In contrast, the Jesuits under the first three Fathers General—Ignatius, Laínez, and Francisco de Borja—became known throughout Europe as a haven for New Christians, including some of the Society’s most prominent members. Such inclusiveness drew criticism from a vocal minority of Spanish and Portuguese Jesuits, who urged the exclusion of New Christians from the Society (since few men of Muslim descent sought to enter, discrimination against New Christians focused on men of Jewish descent). Ignatius firmly rejected their requests and enshrined the principle of non-discrimination in the Constitutions, which demonstrate his deep commitment to equality within the Society and confirm his own repeated affirmations of the Jewish heritage of all Christians.

After Ignatius’s death, critics of his admissions’ policies renewed their campaign to exclude New Christians, and in 1593, following a divisive debate, the Society’s fifth General Congregation decreed that ‘in no case is anyone . . . of Hebrew or Saracen stock, henceforth to be admitted to the Society. And if by error any such [person] will have been admitted, he should be dismissed as soon as this impediment has been shown’ (p. 259) exist. The decree was revised in 1608 at the sixth General Congregation, which limited investigations of individual lineages to five generations and made them less intrusive. The debate leading up to the decree and the decree itself, however, played a decisive role in Jesuit debates concerning a series of other lineage-based exclusions in the missions that remained a source of division within the Society until the Suppression. If Jesuits were to question the suitability of fellow Europeans for admission, many in the Society reasoned, how would they respond to requests to join from non-European converts and their descendants? Only a policy of inclusion could advance the missionary enterprise.
Brazil

Like the Jesuits’ relations with Muslims, Jews, and New Christians, their relations with indigenous peoples and Africans in Latin America were characterized by persistent tension between theory and practice. The Jesuits established their first mission in the Americas in 1549 when Manuel da Nóbrega (1517–70) and five companions travelled with Brazil’s first governor to establish the capital in Salvador da Bahia. This established the pattern of close collaboration with the Portuguese Crown that gave the Jesuits a virtual monopoly on the Brazilian missions.

The history of the Jesuits in Brazil may be divided into three periods. The first, from 1549 to 1580, covers the period preceding extensive Portuguese settlement. The second, from 1580 to c. 1680, marks the period when the establishment of sugar plantations in the areas surrounding the Society’s first missions fuelled Brazil’s economic growth. The third, from c. 1680 to 1759, begins with the sustained decline of Jesuit influence and ends with the expulsion of the Society from Portugal and its empire.

During most of the colonial period the Portuguese Crown entrusted the Society with the administration of Indian labour. This authority, which was intended to protect the Indians from enslavement and other abuses, proved to be a source of sustained conflict with settlers who viewed the Society as an obstacle to the exploitation of Brazil’s riches. The second governor, Mem de Sá (1557–72), was a devoted collaborator and benefactor of the Society, but before and during his administration the Crown sent contradictory signals by issuing slaving licences to settlers and by permitting the violent subjugation and enslavement of hostile Indians. As a result, the Jesuits found themselves serving both as agents of the Crown and as critics of imperial policies, a position that was tenuous.

Nóbrega and his fellow Jesuits—most notably José de Anchieta (1534–97)—established a network of missions along the coast that stretched from Pernambuco in the north to São Vicente in the south. During the early years of the mission Nóbrega ministered among both Indians and settlers. Thousands of previously nomadic Indians moved to the villages (aldeias) that the Jesuits established, and Nóbrega and Anchieta were initially encouraged by their receptivity to Christianity as well as by the support of the Crown in general and of Mem de Sá in particular.

Nóbrega and his fellow Jesuits had the opportunity to establish themselves as intermediaries or ‘go-betweens’ in colonial society. Adopting many practices of the earliest European intermediaries in Africa, the Society mediated between settlers, crown officials, Indians, mamelucos (people of mixed European and Indian descent), Africans, and mulattos. Among the central principles that guided the Brazilian Jesuits were the accommodation of Indian religious and cultural traditions and the requirement that missionaries and lay brothers master Indian languages. The Jesuits made extensive use of music and theatre, and focused their attention on Indian leaders, women, and children. Their role as intermediaries and their knowledge of native languages contributed to the success of the missions and sometimes even saved their own lives.

The aldeias, however, provided opportunities for slave-raiding by settlers, and the Jesuits began to doubt whether a mixed-race society in Brazil that allowed for the freedom of the Indians could be created. Nóbrega reluctantly concluded he could best serve the Indians by separating them completely from Portuguese society. A century later, the great missionary, preacher, and writer Antônio Vieira (1608–97) came to a similar conclusion. From 1653 to 1662, Vieira served as Superior of the Jesuit missions in the Amazon. When he arrived in Brazil, however, Vieira affirmed that he would not exercise the powers he had been granted by the Portuguese Crown to distribute native labour to settlers, ‘in order to avoid conflicts in this matter with the Portuguese, whose souls, before those of the Indians, we have come to Maranhão to seek’.

Within a few months, however, Vieira’s hopes for the collaboration with the colonists which he believed essential had diminished. He continued to defend the freedom of the Indians—in Brazil and at the royal court in Lisbon—for the rest of his life. He viewed the labour of Africans as the only viable alternative to the enslavement of the Indians, and he called for more humane treatment of African slaves. Vieira never demanded that African slavery be abolished in Brazil.
In 1680 the Jesuits were deprived of their crown-supported pre-eminence in the Brazilian missions. The Society’s influence steadily declined during the eighteenth century, and in 1759 the Marquês de Pombal, a long-time critic of the Society, expelled the Jesuits from Portugal and its empire.

**Peru and Mexico**

The Jesuits were comparative latecomers to Spanish America, where they made an unsuccessful foray into Florida in 1566. They arrived in Peru in 1568, when other religious orders were well established there. The Jesuits quickly developed close ties to the Inca nobility and were present—as protesting witnesses—at the execution of Túpac Amaru, the last Inca, by Viceroy Francisco de Toledo in Cuzco in 1572.

(p. 261) The two dominant figures in the early stages of the Society’s missions in Peru were José de Acosta (1540–1600) and the mestizo historian Blas Valera (1545–97). Valera had been born in the isolated northern Andes, far from Cuzco. Like his contemporary Garciláso de la Vega (1539–1616), the great historian of the Incas, Valera’s father was a conquistador and his mother was a member of the Inca nobility. Also like Garciláso, Valera as a young boy heard stories from relatives about the fall of the Inca empire. In 1568 he became the first mestizo admitted to the Society in the Andes. Valera was fluent in Quechua, which he taught to his fellow Jesuits in Lima. After ordination in 1573 Valera taught at the Society’s college in Cuzco. By 1577 he was at Juli, where he learned Aymara. Valera and Acosta insisted that Jesuits who intended to work in Peru master at least one Indian language before even leaving Spain. By contrast, other Jesuits sought to de-emphasize language study (and the Society’s work among the Indians in general) in favour of urban ministries.

Valera believed that his Inca ancestors venerated a ‘true God’ who was an approximation of the Christian God and whose worship the devil directed towards less worthy objects. Yet these false objects of worship kept the Andeans from idol worship, and were at least in this sense praiseworthy. His admiration for the Incas was matched by his scorn for the Spanish settlers and for non-Jesuit clergy in the region. He denounced the violent conversion of the Indians. Valera wrote that the soldiers and settlers had failed to protect the Incas and to provide religious instruction to the natives who provided tribute and labour to the Spanish as mandated by the encomienda (land grant) system. These men ‘did not try so much to make the Indians Christian to save their souls as to make them work for the Spaniards’ own interests and comforts [. . .] the Spanish soldiers and citizens were much more corrupt for their part in their customs and moral and civil life than were the gentile Indians.

José de Acosta was equally critical of the conduct of Spanish soldiers, settlers, and clergy. He served in Peru from 1572 to 1586 and was the second Jesuit provincial (1576–81). Acosta was one of the greatest missionaries of the early modern world and one of its most perceptive writers on the Americas. Soon after taking office he convened the first provincial congregation in Peru, at which he and eleven fellow Jesuits undertook a wide-ranging assessment of the Society’s pastoral ideals and practices. The congregation determined that the Society would begin to accept doctrinas (Indian parishes) and would focus its ministries on the Indians. Acosta understood that language study was essential to the success of these ministries, and by the end of his term as provincial at least fifty of the 113 Jesuits in Peru were fluent in native languages. After leaving office, Acosta served as the theologian of the Third Lima Council (1582–83) and wrote the catechism and confessional manual that Andean parishes would use throughout the colonial period (the council appointed Blas Valera to the team that translated the catechism into Quechua and Aymara).

Acosta’s best known work is his *Natural and Moral History of the Indies* (1590), in which he correctly intuited the origins of the American Indians and proposed a tripartite hierarchy of non-European civilizations in which the Incas and Aztecs occupied a middle ground between the nomadic Indians of the Americas and the advanced civilizations of Asia. His most enduring contribution to the Jesuit missionary enterprise, however, was his manual for missionaries, *De procuranda Indorum salute* (1589).
Acosta wrote De procuranda during what he viewed as a hopeful period for the Church in Peru. Acosta was ambivalent, however, about many aspects of colonial society in general and the missionary enterprise in particular. He was especially concerned about Spanish crimes against the Indians, the viability of the encomienda, misconduct by missionaries, and the spiritual capacities of the Indians. De procuranda, then, was the product of a profoundly divided theological and pastoral sensibility.

Acosta was more critical of the Andeans than Valera, affirming that they practised human sacrifice, and at several points in De procuranda he justified the use of religious coercion. While accepting in theory the Jesuit commitment to accommodation, Acosta underscored its limits in the Andean context. The Incas, he argued, were ‘irrational’ and similar to animals in many ways, but when instructed they showed great talent.

Acosta noted that it was necessary for the Spanish to extirpate indigenous religious traditions and that in some cases this would involve coercion, which was to be practised ‘for love of the Lord’. Acosta was ultimately more concerned, however, with the sins of the Spaniards than with those of the Indians, declaring that ‘the Spaniards are absolutely responsible for the failure of the Christian faith that has been sown among the Indians to produce thus far the desired results, because we have not proclaimed Christ with sincerity and good faith, and above all we have negated with deeds what we have professed with words’. He declared that Spanish soldiers and crown officials came to the New World solely to get rich and return to Spain, and argued that these men must be obliged ‘to carry out in some form the obligations of apostles’. Every missionary, he believed, must meet three basic requirements: ‘integrity of conduct, sufficiency of knowledge and mastery of the language [. . .] he can expect nothing great if learning the language is not his first and inexhaustible goal’.

Before returning to Spain in 1587 Acosta spent a year in Mexico, where his brother Bernardino—one of four Acosta brothers who joined the Society—was rector of the college in Oaxaca. Like the Jesuits in Peru, the Jesuits in Mexico were latecomers to the colony, arriving in 1572. Since the other religious orders were already well established in their ministries to the Indians—the first Franciscans had arrived in 1521—the Society during its first decades in Mexico concentrated on educating young men of European and creole descent, founding separate schools for Indians that focused on basic instruction and evangelization. The Society nonetheless adapted its pastoral strategy in Sinaloa when confronted by Indian revolts and attacks by non-Christian Indians on native converts. In 1594 Tapia was murdered by Indians aided by Spanish settlers who accused the Jesuits of monopolizing Indian labour. By the early seventeenth century the Society had reluctantly concluded that it could only advance the mission with the assistance of Spanish troops.

Although a comparatively small number of Jesuits undertook missions to the Indians in Mexico, these men played a decisive role in the development of the colony, especially on the northern frontier. The Jesuits established their first mission in northern Mexico in 1591 in Sinaloa. The linguistic diversity of the 100,000 Indians of Sinaloa posed an immediate challenge to Father Gonzalo de Tapia, a gifted linguist, and his companion Father Martín Pérez. They sought to gather the semi-nomadic Indians into villages and above all to repair the damage to relations between natives and Spaniards caused by Spanish mining expeditions. Tapia and Pérez admired the traditions and way of life of the Indians. The Society nonetheless adapted its pastoral strategy in Sinaloa when confronted by Indian revolts and attacks by non-Christian Indians on native converts. In 1594 Tapia was murdered by Indians aided by Spanish settlers who accused the Jesuits of monopolizing Indian labour. By the early seventeenth century the Society had reluctantly concluded that it could only advance the mission with the assistance of Spanish troops.

The most successful Jesuit missionary in northern Mexico was Father Eusebio Kino (1645–1711), an Italian who was part of the first Spanish expedition to cross Baja California (1683–85). The expedition determined that Baja California was a peninsula rather than an island, as had previously been believed. Like Tapia, Kino was determined to pursue his pastoral work without assistance from the Crown, especially after he witnessed the abuses committed by the Spanish soldiers whom he accompanied in Baja California. From 1687 until his death, Kino established a network of missions and ranches throughout the Pimería Alta (modern Sonora and Arizona). His home mission, Nuestra Señora de los Dolores, served not
only as a place of instruction but as a farm, ranch, and factory. In constructing his mission network Kino encountered opposition similar to that which his predecessors in Sinaloa had encountered, especially from Indians of the Pimería Alta who resisted conversion. After the murder of Kino’s companion Francisco Javier Saeta in 1695, the Jesuit provincial in Mexico City considered abandoning the northern missions. Although Kino reluctantly accepted the aid of Spanish soldiers in punishing the murderers, he remained wary of such collaboration and convinced Father General Tirso González—a fellow missionary whom he had befriended in Spain when he was en route to Mexico—not to abandon the Pimería Alta.

The Paraguayan Reductions

The Paraguayan reductions were the Society’s best known and most successful missions during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Between 1588 and 1767, the Society established a network of thirty missions stretching across present-day Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil (see Map 10.1). At their height, almost 150,000 Guaraní lived on these missions. The Paraguayan reductions have been mythologized in history, literature, and film, from Voltaire’s *Candide* to Robert Bolt’s *The Mission*. Critics have called attention to the Jesuits’ authoritarian government, alleged avarice, and lack of respect for Guaraní religious and cultural traditions. Recent scholarship, however, has applied ethno-historical methods to the study of the reductions and highlighted ‘the existence of a certain “indigenous agency” whose nature and historical meaning must be understood’. Relati

Relatively few Europeans settled in Paraguay due to the absence of precious metals, and this made it easier for the Guaraní to preserve their own way of life while adapting to European society. Like the Society’s missionaries throughout the early modern world, the Jesuits in the reductions served as intermediaries between natives and Europeans. The reductions, which were economically self-sufficient (*yerba maté* was the principal export crop), were plagued by sustained conflict with European settlers in search of Guaraní slaves. Father Antonio Ruiz de Montoya’s famous history of the first decades of the reductions includes a harrowing account of his successful descent of the Paraná River in 1631 with 12,000 Guaraní in order to escape a band of Spanish slave raiders. At this time the Guaraní had only native weapons with which to fight the Spaniards. In 1638, however, Ruiz de Montoya received permission from the Crown to provide them with European weaponry. Crown officials recognized that the use of arms by the natives—or the threat of their use—was essential to the survival of the reductions and to the Spanish Crown’s defence of Paraguay against Portuguese incursions. Despite assertions to the contrary by contemporaries and by modern historians, however, there is no evidence that the Jesuits themselves ever took up arms to defend the reductions.

In the Treaty of Madrid (1750), Spain and Portugal modified the boundaries that the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) had established and called for the removal of Jesuits and Guaraní from seven reductions in which 29,000 Indians lived. Recent scholarship has provided a new understanding of Guaraní responses to the expulsion order. Barbara Ganson, drawing on Guarani-language letters that indigenous leaders wrote to the king and to crown officials, underscores the anger and disbelief that the evacuation order provoked. From 1754 to 1756, after peaceful appeals failed, the Guaraní waged an armed rebellion against both the Spanish and the Portuguese in an effort to save the reductions. The Jesuits’ enemies in the royal courts accused the Society of aiding the rebels. As a result of these and other conflicts with the Iberian Crowns, the Jesuits were expelled from Portugal and its empire in 1759, and from Spain and its empire in 1767. Approximately 5,000 Jesuits from Spain and Spanish America and 1,000 from Portugal and Brazil went into exile, mostly in Italy.
China

At the same time that the Jesuits were establishing frontier missions in Paraguay and northern Mexico, they made their first entry into China. The Italian Jesuit Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607), the founder of the China mission, was a pioneer in Chinese studies and the author of the first Christian book in Chinese. It was Ruggieri’s brilliant fellow Italian Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), however, who was responsible for the Society’s successful entry into the imperial court in Beijing and for its most important conversions among the Chinese literati class. Born in Macerata, Ricci studied at the Society’s Roman College, where he received an excellent humanistic education. He travelled to Goa (1578), was ordained in Cochin (1580), and sent to Macao (1582), where he plunged into the study of Chinese. Three years earlier Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606), the Jesuit Visitor in Asia, had sent an Instruction to Jesuit missionaries succinctly outlining the accommodation of indigenous traditions that guided the Society’s pastoral ideals and practices in the early modern world in general and in Asia in particular.

Do not attempt in any way to persuade these people to change their customs, their habits and their behavior, as long as they are not evidently contrary to religion and morality. What could be more absurd, indeed, than to transport France, Italy, or [any] other European country to the Chinese? Do not bring them our countries but [bring them instead] the faith, which does not reject or harm the customs and habits (p. 266) of any people, so long as they are not perverse, but, on the contrary, wishes to see them preserved in their entirety.

Ricci’s attempts at accommodation were not all successful. At first, on Ruggieri’s recommendation, the two men dressed in Buddhist clothing and introduced themselves as ‘monks from India’. Ricci was never persuaded by this aspect of the accommodation of Christianity and Buddhism, and by the early 1590s he had abandoned Buddhist dress. Adopting a new strategy, Ricci donned the black silk robe and high square hat of Confucian scholars, and studied Confucian texts. At the request of Valignano, he translated the Confucian canon into Latin. According to Ricci, Confucianism, properly understood, was compatible with Christianity, since it was a civil rather than religious tradition. The new policy of accommodation of Christianity and Confucianism remained unchanged in the Jesuit China mission throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In 1595 Ricci completed his first Chinese book, the Treatise on Friendship, a translation of 100 maxims by Greek and Roman authors. The book, which demonstrated the affinities between Western and Confucian views of friendship, gained a wide readership among Chinese literati.

Ricci’s knowledge of astronomy, geography, music, and mathematics won the admiration of the Chinese. In 1584 he completed the first version of a world map that placed the countries of the world inside an oval to indicate the spherical shape of the earth and the current state of European geographical knowledge concerning Asia. Ricci strategically placed China in the middle of the map. In 1602, drawing on his accumulated experience in China and with the help of the scholar Li Zizhao, Ricci completed a new, more detailed version of the map. His study of Confucianism led him to argue that the truths of ancient Confucianism had been distorted by earlier interpretations and Buddhist influences, and that the excellence of the ancient Chinese in astronomy and mathematics had been obscured by later generations. At the same time, Ricci translated basic Christian prayers into Chinese and worked to make Christian doctrine intelligible to China’s elite. Ricci’s most famous book, The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (1603), is a dialogue between a European and a Chinese based on Ricci’s conversations with the scholar Zhang Huang. The book seeks to demonstrate through natural reason the existence of an omnipotent God who had been known and worshipped by the ancient Chinese before the introduction of Buddhism.

The most notable Christian converts in late Ming China were four government officials: Yang Tingyun (1562–1627), Li Zizhao (1565–1630), Xu Guagqi (1562–1633), and Wang Zheng (1571–1644). Their conversions, mentioned in both Western and Chinese sources, became symbols of the success of Ricci’s method of converting the Chinese elite.

After achieving renown among Ming scholars and founding Christian communities in Zhaoqing, Shaozhou, Nanchang, and
Nanjing, Ricci in 1601 was finally admitted to the imperial city of Beijing, where he established a Jesuit residence. His success in China reached its apex at the imperial court. Ricci employed the mnemonic system that he had mastered in Rome to help prepare hundreds of young Chinese for the general examinations for imperial service. When he died in 1610, the China mission was staffed by eight European priests and eight Chinese brothers in four residences who had converted approximately 2,000 Chinese, a small number in comparison with the 300,000 Japanese converts at this time. But Ricci had opened a door. Among the talented young Jesuits who continued his work were Giulio Aleni (1582–1649), Nicolas Trigault (1577–1628), and Niccolò Longobardo (1565–1655), who became the superior and questioned some of Ricci’s assumptions. Longobardo was sceptical, for example, about Ricci’s focus on the accommodation of Chinese traditions, and argued that the Chinese literati were atheists. Longobardo also rejected the Chinese terms that Ricci adopted to indicate Heaven (Tian) and God (Shangde), and proposed to use transliterated Latin terms instead. In the short term Ricci’s supporters emerged victorious in the debate about the accommodation of Confucianism. Longobardo’s writings contributed, however, to the development of the Chinese Rites Controversy.

In 1613 Longobardo sent Trigault to Rome to seek support for the China mission. Trigault secured the establishment of a new China province in order to remove the China mission from the jurisdiction of Portuguese Jesuits who opposed the Italians’ efforts to train native clergy and were reluctant to divert resources from the more successful missions in Japan. He also received permission to ordain Chinese priests (including men who were not proficient in Latin) and to introduce a Chinese liturgy. These dispensations were key elements of the Jesuits’ efforts to expand their ministries and to ordain talented literati. Finally, Trigault brought Ricci’s work to the attention of Europeans by publishing his account of the China mission. These promising concessions did not produce the anticipated results. Acquaviva died in 1615 before the new province had been formally established, and the Chinese liturgy was never introduced, although a decree approving it was promulgated in China. By the time Trigault returned to China, Christians were being persecuted and the very survival of the mission was in doubt. As a result of these challenges, and following the arrival of other mendicant orders, the Jesuits of the China mission began in the 1630s to experiment with new pastoral strategies, placing more importance on the apostolate in the Chinese countryside while continuing their mission to the imperial court in Beijing.

In 1644 the Qing dynasty took power following a civil war. The Jesuits remained in the imperial service, especially as astronomers and mathematicians. During the long reign of Emperor Kangxi (1661–1722) the Jesuits were highly regarded at court. The accurate forecast by Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–88) of an eclipse in 1669 won wide praise and enhanced the prestige of the China mission. At the same time that Jesuits working in the Directorate of Astronomy helped to ensure support from Chinese elites, the Society strengthened its pastoral work in areas that were far removed from the imperial court. The abundance of sources on the Society’s work among the literati has led scholars to fail to notice that ‘the strongest and most durable incorporation of the Jesuit missions [occurred] among the popular levels of [Chinese] society where it took the form of communities of effective rituals’. Recent scholarship provides a detailed description of Jesuit pastoral strategies, which included the study of Chinese languages, the establishment of lay confraternities and sodalities of Mary, cooperation with local lay catechists, and the printing and circulation of Christian books in Chinese translation (the well-developed printing industry in China proved important to the success of Jesuit ministries in the countryside as well as at court). For Jesuits working with commoners, the accommodation with Confucianism was less important than it was at the imperial court. China’s Christian communities gradually became self-sufficient, and itinerant Jesuits visited them twice a year.

By the early years of the eighteenth century, ninety Jesuits (both European and Chinese) ministered to between 200,000 and 500,000 Christians. The China mission, however, was fragile. Internal divisions (especially between French and Portuguese Jesuits) divided the Society. In addition, Jesuits were at odds with Spanish Franciscans and Dominicans who first entered China from the Philippines in 1633 and who generally opposed the Jesuits’ accommodation of Chinese religion and culture. The debate about accommodation came to be known as the Chinese Rites Controversy and sharply divided
Catholic missions in China between the mid-seventeenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries. The Rites Controversy hinged on three principal issues: the ceremonial honours paid to Confucius by members of the mandarin class; the traditional veneration of ancestors through prostrations, the burning of incense, and the offering of food before commemorative plaques; and the use of the term **Tian** to denote Heaven and God.\(^1\)

The decrees that the Pope and the Holy Office issued were rooted in conflicting translations of Chinese terms and in conflicting understandings of the meaning of Chinese rites. Jesuits argued that these rites were rooted in filial piety and respect; Dominicans argued that they were pagan. Chinese Christians were initially permitted to honour Confucius and to maintain shrines to their ancestors in their homes provided that they understood that the rites were civil—not religious—in nature. The Holy See, however, annulled these concessions in directives that sharply diminished the Society’s popularity in China, particularly among the **literati**.

In 1724 the emperor Yongzheng exiled many Jesuits to Canton, and in 1732 he expelled them to Macao. A handful of Jesuits continued to work legally at the imperial court until the Suppression, while others worked secretly in the provinces, protected by prominent Chinese converts. The Society’s missions in early modern China never fully recovered, however, from the Rites Controversy.

**Roberto Nobili in India**

Inspired by Matteo Ricci and following the principles set down by Valignano, the Italian Jesuit Roberto Nobili (1577–1656) was one of the pioneers of the Society’s theory and practice of accommodation.\(^2\) Born into an aristocratic family from Montepulciano, Nobili joined the Society at the age of 19 and travelled to Goa via Lisbon in 1606. He spent the rest of his life in south India. Nobili considered Indian Brahmanism to be a *social* system rather than a form of pagan idolatry. He was accordingly more concerned with accommodating India’s caste hierarchies than with accommodating indigenous religious traditions, as his fellow Jesuits in China were doing. Like Ricci and the other Jesuits in Beijing, however, Nobili focused his attention on India’s Brahman elite and himself became a Brahman in order to strengthen his ministry.\(^3\)

Madurai was a failing mission when he arrived. Nobili attributed this failure to the Jesuits’ requirement that converts adopt the Portuguese way of life and to the Society’s fruitless attempts to convert members of the lowest castes of Indian society, whom the Brahmins scorned. Nobili rejected the pastoral practices of his predecessors in India, including their humble self-presentation, and underscored his own noble origins in an attempt to attract Hindu Brahmans to Christianity. Nobili’s approach produced notable results. By 1609 he had converted sixty Brahmans. He allowed Brahman neophytes to maintain signs of social distinction and also to continue to take ritual baths, since he thought that the rituals were performed for hygienic and not spiritual purposes.

Nobili’s pastoral ideals and practices were controversial inside and outside the Society. In 1610 his most vocal Jesuit critic, Father Gonçalo Fernandes (1541–1619), accused him of adopting pagan practices, a charge that was supported by the Jesuit Visitor Nicolau Pimenta (1546–1614). But Nobili received support from Rome: in 1617 the brief *Cum sicut fraternitas* by Paul V requested explanations from Nobili concerning his conduct of the Madurai mission, although the papacy generally supported his approach. Subsequently, Nobili introduced an alternative approach to social distinctions and suggested that Jesuits should present themselves as *pantāracāmi*, ascetics of the Sudra class who were allowed to minister to the lower castes. In this way Jesuits were able to bypass the caste system.

When Nobili died in 1656, the Jesuits in south India had baptized almost 40,000 people, most of whom were from the lower castes. A talented linguist, he wrote theological treatises in Latin, Tamil, Sanskrit, and Telugu.\(^4\) At the beginning of the eighteenth century a new debate on missionary methods developed in south India in the form of the Malabar Rites Controversy. This began with the bull *Inter graviores* (1704), issued by the papal legate Charles-Thomas Maillard de Tournon, who had stopped in Pondicherry on his way to China, and decided to investigate Capuchin criticisms of Jesuit
pastoral practices. The bull, which annulled earlier concessions, was confirmed by the Holy Office (1712), by two Popes (Benedict XIII and Clement XII), and by the bull Omnium sollicitudinum (1744), promulgated by Benedict XIV. Despite repeated official condemnation, the Malabar Rites continued to be secretly accepted by Jesuits until the suppression of the Society.

New France

French Jesuits served throughout the early modern Iberian empire under the authority of Spanish and Portuguese superiors. In New France they were in conflict with settlers (p. 270) and crown officials and faced other problems that their brothers in the Iberian world had faced from the time of the founding of the missions.

Fathers Jean de Brébeuf (1593–1649) and Jerôme Lallemant (1593–1673) established the Society’s most important Quebec mission in 1634 in Wendake (or Wendat), the land of the Huron. Unlike other native peoples of New France, who were primarily nomadic hunter-gatherers, the Huron were a semi-sedentary society of skilled farmers. Their confederation consisted of four nations spread among approximately twenty villages near Lake Simcoe and Georgian Bay. The Huron had been trading partners of the French since Quebec’s establishment and a missionary target since the Franciscans arrived in 1615. The Jesuits viewed the sedentary nature of Huron society as an encouraging sign for evangelization.

Among the mission’s principal difficulties were smallpox, influenza, and dysentery epidemics that periodically afflicted the Huron after the arrival of the Jesuits, whom the Indians suspected were responsible for their suffering. Between 1636 and 1640 the Huron population declined from about 30,000 to 15,000. In 1648–49 the Huron settlements faced repeated attacks by the Iroquois, their traditional enemies, who enslaved 1,000 Huron Christians and killed Brébeuf and seven other Jesuits. In addition to working among the Huron, the Jesuits in 1654 began their ministry to the Iroquois in a territory that was disputed by France and England. In a village on the eastern edge of Iroquois country the Jesuits met Catherine Tekakwitha, a Mohawk girl who was baptized in 1675, moved to an Iroquois Christian village near Montreal, and ‘joined a group of Christian Iroquois women who renounced sex and marriage, while disciplining their bodies with fasting, flagellation, and deliberate exposure to the pain of fire and the discomfort of cold’.

Catherine quickly gained a reputation for sanctity. After her death in 1680 at the age of 24, her tomb became a destination for pilgrims.

Jesuits in New France were skilled in native languages, and wrote grammars, dictionaries, hymns, prayers, and other liturgical texts. In 1635 Father Paul Le Jeune (1591–1664) founded the College of Notre-Dame-des-Anges, the first Jesuit college in North America. Within a few years the Society built several other schools in which young native students studied the catechism, Latin, classical poetry, rhetoric, science, geography, and mathematics. The Jesuits focused their education ministry on children in the hope that the young would teach Christianity to their parents. The Society occasionally sent Indian boys to France to continue their education.

Le Jeune’s College of Notre-Dame-des-Anges ‘followed strictly the Ratio studiorum of the Jesuit colleges in Europe, which focused on integrating intellectual, physical, and spiritual formation’. While the College was not successful in attracting native students, and primarily educated the sons of French settlers, Le Jeune’s efforts led to the establishment of schools for girls that were more successful among the Indians.

In order to convert natives who lived far from French settlements, the Society established native Christian villages along the Saint Lawrence River. These villages, like similar settlements in South America, were known as réductions. The reductions of New France, however, were a failure in comparison with those of Paraguay, as the Jesuits never convinced the Indians to abandon their partially nomadic way of life.

Although the Jesuits were fascinated by indigenous societies, including their languages, clothes, and medicine, the Society was only intermittently committed to the accommodation of native traditions in New France. Some missionaries even underscored the need for natives to embrace French civilization as a precondition for conversion. Others (including Brébeuf)
underscored elements of indigenous society that were compatible with Christianity. Throughout their ministry in New France, Jesuits drew on basic Christian beliefs and practices to understand their equivalents—for example, the immortality of the soul—in Amerindian spirituality.

Beginning in 1632 the Jesuits sent detailed accounts of their missions to their brothers in France. These were published under the title *Relations de la Nouvelle France* (1632–73). The *Relations* were instrumental in helping the Society to recruit young missionaries and to obtain financial support for its mission work from royal and aristocratic patrons throughout Europe. Like missions in the Iberian world, missions in New France were closely linked to the political and economic interests of the French Crown. Jesuits served as the king’s emissaries, and converts to Catholicism became subjects of the Crown. The promotion of trade—particularly the fur trade—was an integral element of official French support for the missions.

Following the suppression of the Society in France (1764), Jesuits maintained a tenuous presence in New France, which since 1760 had been under British control. By 1800, however, the last Jesuits in the colony had died or returned to Europe. The Society of Jesus was not to be re-established in Canada until 1842.

**Conclusion**

Jesuit missions provide a privileged vantage point for the study of early modern history. These ministries were an expression of the spirituality of the Society of Jesus and represented the broader transformation of religious life. For this reason, historians have long considered the Society to be a ‘laboratory of modernity’. Jesuits made important contributions to literature, science, music, and the visual arts, and they made extensive use of the printing press to share their knowledge. Their overseas missions not only spread the Gospel but also contributed to the diffusion of European culture in America and Asia and to the introduction of new cultures to Europe.

Two themes on which scholars have focused during the last twenty-five years suggest promising new directions for research on Jesuit missions and, more broadly, on the religious and cultural history of the early modern world. First, the study of Jesuit missions requires a more complete understanding of accommodation, which scholars have traditionally considered to be the principal feature of the Society’s pastoral theory and practice. Historians have sometimes interpreted accommodation anachronistically, as a form of toleration, syncretism, or religious relativism. Such an approach does not account for the theological origins of accommodation and its deep roots in Jesuit spirituality, in the *Spiritual Exercises* and in the *Constitutions*. To explain their distinctive (p. 272) view of accommodation, Jesuits referred to the early Church, and in particular to the words of Paul that Ignatius often repeated: ‘I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some’ (1 Cor 9:22). Moreover, the Jesuits demonstrated the many ways in which pagan authors provided a prefiguration of Christianity. The Jesuits’ humanist education gave them the resources to close the gap with the past, and to bridge the anthropological, cultural, and political differences between Europeans and non-Christian peoples living in distant lands. Ricci and Nobili, for example, considered Confucians and Brahmins to be the Chinese and Indian counterparts of the Jews and Gentiles to whom the first Apostles preached. Jesuits adapted the Christian message to their interlocutors because they found foreshadowed in non-Christian traditions some of the fundamental truths of Christianity.

An analysis of the theory and practice of accommodation that underscores its historical and theological roots will contribute not only to our understanding of the overseas missions but also to our understanding of the mission fields of Europe itself. Recent studies show that in the internal missions the Society’s practice of accommodation inspired Jesuits to live among the poor and the illiterate, to share with them the misery and uncertainty of everyday life, and to become similar to them in habits and way of life.81

Accommodation was not an exclusively Jesuit strategy. It was essential for any European involved in foreign missions.82 The principal questions that require further research are the ways in which the practice of accommodation varied in different times and places, and the ways in which missionaries’ perceptions of the needs of indigenous societies led to different degrees of accommodation. Early modern religious orders and secular clergy conducted a sustained debate about the extent
to which accommodation was to be permitted in specific contexts. Differences on these questions frequently led to accusations of heterodoxy, especially in the cases of China and India. Finally, accommodation was not an exclusively Catholic approach. Systematic comparison of Catholic and Protestant missions reveals the confessional similarities and differences in approaches to evangelization.

The study of religious missions from a global perspective is a second aspect of the early modern missionary church that requires further study. Describing the scope of the Society’s ministries, Jerónimo Nadal, an eminent interpreter of Ignatian spirituality, repeatedly affirmed that ‘the world is our house’. Scholars have echoed Nadal’s credo, identifying the Society as the first global religious order. Here again, however, broad definitions of the Society’s ministries should not invite anachronism. Although the study of global history validates an approach that focuses on the circulation of ideas, books, goods, and people, it runs the risk of overlooking or underestimating the diversity of responses encountered in different parts of the world. Jesuit missionaries had to interpret Rome’s directions while remaining respectful of indigenous traditions. The study of the circulation of theology, which is frequently ignored by historians, provides many vivid examples of the ways in which missionaries in the Americas and Asia reinterpreted the theological directives that they received. This reinterpretation led to sustained conflict in China and India and to more limited confrontations in Brazil and elsewhere in the Americas. The history of the overseas missions is marked by a constant and productive tension between centre and periphery that cannot be neatly absorbed by the concept of global Catholicism. By freeing themselves from anachronistic elements in the literature on missions, historians and scholars in related disciplines will be able to provide a new understanding of accommodation and of the ministries of the Society of Jesus in their global context.

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O’Malley, John W., Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Steven J. Harris, and T. Frank Kennedy, eds. The Jesuits. Cultures, Sciences and Arts, 1540–1773 (Toronto, 1999).

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O’Malley, John W., Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Steven J. Harris, and T. Frank Kennedy, eds. The Jesuits II. Cultures, Sciences, and The Arts, 1540–1773 (Toronto, 2006).

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Notes:


4. For Jesuits and the arts see John W. O’Malley, Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Steven J. Harris, and T. Frank Kennedy, eds., The Jesuits II. Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540–1773 (Toronto, 2006), which contains many case studies on missions; John W. O’Malley and Gauvin Alexander Bailey, The Jesuits and the Arts, 1540–1773 (Philadelphia, 2005); for

(5.) On divisions within the Society, see Michela Catto, *La compagnia divisa. Il dissenso nell’ordine gesuitico tra ’500 e ’600* (Brescia, 2009); and Jean-Pascal Gay, *Jesuit Civil Wars. Theology, Politics, and Government under Tirso González* (1687–1705) (Farnham-Burlington, 2012). These studies provide the European context for an understanding of the same divisions within the missions.


(18.) ‘Honesty and sobriety, two key virtues in our Religion, are the most important and most effective ways [. . .] to
persuade them.’ Possevino, Bibliotheca, 444.


(20.) Spaniards and Portuguese drew a distinction between New Christians and Old Christians, who were presumed to have no Jewish or Muslim ancestry. New Christians were prominent among the alambrados, whose orthodoxy was suspect.


(23.) See Reites, St. Ignatius and the People of the Book, 163–168.

(24.) See John W. Padberg S.J., Martin D. O’Keefe S.J., and John L. McCarthy S.J., tr., eds., For Matters of Greater Moment: The First Thirty Jesuit General Congregations (St. Louis, 1994), Congregation 5, d.52, 204. The fifth General Congregation was the first to be convened when the Society did not need to elect a new General.


(26.) Alida Metcalf, Go-betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500–1600 (Austin, TX, 2005).

(27.) Metcalf, Go-betweens, 93ff; McGinness, Atlantic Reformation, 104–141.

(28.) Metcalf, Go-betweens, 117.


(31.) Sabine Hyland has recently published a manuscript by Valera that was unknown until the nineteenth century. She provides an excellent introduction to Valera’s life and work. See Hyland, Gods of the Andes: An Early Jesuit Account of Inca Religion and Andean Christianity (University Park, PA, 2011); and Sabine Hyland, The Jesuit and the Incas: The Extraordinary Life of Padre Blas Valera, S.J. (Ann Arbor, 2003).


40. Acosta, *De procuranda indorum salute*, II.XVI, 361.

41. Acosta, *De procuranda indorum salute*, IV.VI.2, 49; IV.VII, 53.


46. Herbert Eugene Bolton’s biography remains the standard one. See *Rim of Christendom: A Biography of Eusebio Francisco Kino, Pacific Coast Pioneer* (Tucson, 1984 [1936]).


1924). Cunningham Graham celebrates the reductions as a proto-socialist utopia.


(52.) Ganson, *The Guaraní Under Spanish Rule*, 104f.

(53.) Klaiber, *The Jesuits in Latin America*, 140.


(58.) ‘In *Doctrine of the Mean*, one of the texts in the *Four Books* of the Confucian Canon, friendship is defined as one of the five basic human relationships, together with those binding the ruler and his official, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife.’ Po-Chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City*, 156f.


(61.) See Spence’s superb analysis of Ricci’s mnemonic techniques, in *Memory Palace*.


(64.) Matteo Ricci, *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas* (Augsburg: s.e., 1615).

(65.) Dunne, *Generation of Giants*, 165.

(66.) Trigault, who was a supporter of Ricci’s pastoral practices, appears to have become depressed as a result of the divisions within the Society. He committed suicide in 1644. See Brockey, *Journey to the East*, 87–89.


(73.) Ines G. Županov, *Disputed Mission: Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century India* (New Delhi, 1999), 36.


(78.) Pope Benedict XVI canonized Catherine Tekakwitha in 2012.


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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter traces the development of European colonial societies in the extra-European world c. 1500–1800, chiefly in the Americas. It examines the factors affecting the growth and stabilization of those societies, including: the impact of disease; the establishment of coercive labour regimes; European interactions with indigenous peoples; the genesis of complex economies based on precious metals and agricultural commodities for export to Europe; and the formation of a creolized cultural life and identity. The chapter’s overarching theme is the transformation of European overseas settlements from mere dependent appendages of Europe into distinctive colonial societies with strong identities of their own, increasingly in conflict with the European states that governed them. Special attention is paid to the hybridity of colonial societies, which emerged from the sustained interactions between those of European, Amerindian, and African descent, as well as to the legal and cultural regimes discouraging such cross-cultural and inter-racial encounters.

Keywords: Colonial societies, slavery and indentured labour, European–Amerindian relations, colonial cultural life, creole identity, age of revolutions, Atlantic history

The colonial settlements established and developed by European states and their subjects in the early modern period were characterized by remarkable heterogeneity, both in their individual composition and when viewed comparatively against one another. In large measure, this heterogeneity emerged from the mixing and melding pell-mell of diverse peoples of varied geographical and cultural provenance. From this chaotic milieu emerged new cultural forms and norms, phenotypes, and identities, which resembled and drew upon the original, pre-contact models while metamorphosing in unprecedented ways. The forging of colonial societies did not involve the mere replication of European societies in the tropics, even if in self-consciously ameliorated form. Hybridity went beyond exchanges of genetic material, diet, and customs, but extended to the domain of religion, where syncretic practices often resulted from the collision of belief systems, chiefly through conversion efforts. Also contributing to the divergence of colonial societies from their original models, and from each other, were differences of terrain, climate, disease, and a host of other ecological and epidemiological factors, many of which were unknown in Europe and to which European colonists were compelled to adapt. Law and governmental institutions, which often departed radically from European models and norms, also shaped the development of colonial societies.

Any treatment of early modern European colonial societies must begin by drawing strict boundaries. Nominally European enclaves, coastal trading fortresses, territorial toeholds beyond continental Europe and its adjacent islands, proliferated in the late fourteenth century and their numbers exploded in the fifteenth century and thereafter.1 By the early sixteenth century, in part due to navigational advances and auxiliary innovations, such as shipboard cannon, they dotted the littorals of Africa and parts of Asia. But rarely did they amount to much more than trading posts with a garrison and a fluid constituency of merchants, artisans, seamen, and administrators. In Asia, for example, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) had 11,000
employees at its zenith (c. 1690), with the lion’s share based on the island of Java. But these employees were dispersed across the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The total number of soldiers, seamen, artisans, and administrators based at the largest fortress, Batavia, was 2,700. Of course, these outposts were far from transient beachheads. Indeed, they proved pivotal to the processes encapsulated by the evocative term ‘proto-globalization’. Sometimes they exerted tremendous influence in the African and Asian societies with which they came into contact, whether through the slave trade or ‘legitimate commerce’.

Yet in spite of their longevity and influence, they were marked by impermanence of a different sort: the absence of government beyond executive fiat; scant cultural or institutional complexity; the presence of few women, children, or kinship structures; scarce territorial settlement; and paltry urbanization. Such flux rarely favoured the creation, let alone efflorescence, of colonial societies. These forays and beachheads, even those of long duration, are therefore excluded from this brief survey of early modern European colonial societies. Occasionally, such coastal trading fortresses became the base for future incursions into the interior and the foundation of colonies with more diversified social structures, greater European population, multifaceted economic activity, elaborated customs, and other markers of society. The case of the Dutch in South Africa offers a prime example of such an initially unplanned trajectory. The VOC wished to create a refreshment station to victual passing ships with fruits and vegetables, and not until 1707 were Dutch settlers (freeburghers) designated the sole supplier to Cape Town and the ships which anchored there en route to/from the East.

Much more frequently, however, Europeans, even where their governments lustily, if naively, laid claim to dominion, remained on the peripheries of larger African and Asian polities. The scope of their activities was limited by the parameters those political entities permitted them, whether traders, mercenaries, or missionaries. European ascendancy, ephemeral in the most optimal of circumstances, remained largely contingent on the acquiescence or collaboration of non-Europeans. Even the Portuguese Estado da Índia, in one historian’s phrase, was ‘no more than a collection of territorial niches and mercantile networks, the latter peopled by traders who were often anxious to keep the state at arm’s length’ at the end of the seventeenth century. It would have been impossible, of course, for contemporaries to conjecture which of these European nodes were harbingers of fully fledged imperial ventures and would result in the establishment of colonies of settlement instead of remaining stunted trading posts. Nevertheless, this survey confines itself to those places, chiefly in the Americas, where European states, or their agents, came to claim and exercise sovereignty, however shaky, on a grand scale and, furthermore, where complex colonial societies emerged.

The territories claimed by European states in what are now the Americas greatly exceeded their effective dominion, from the beginning until the end of the colonial period. Just after Columbus’s landfall in the Caribbean yet prior to European contact with mainland northern South America, the Iberian Monarchies, Spain and Portugal, divided the territories they believed they would find (but had not yet found) along a meridian 370 leagues (approximately 2,061 kilometres) west of the Cape Verde islands. According to the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), Spain would exercise sovereignty to the west of that line of demarcation, with Portugal exercising sovereignty over territory to the east of it. After Portugal landed on the eastern coastal fringe of what is now Brazil in 1500, South America became divided between Portugal and Spain. Spain’s claims extended to North America, too, but its capacity to exert control over territories north of modern Mexico remained slight.

Other European nations rejected these claims and contested Iberian hegemony. France sponsored settlements in modern-day Canada (particularly Quebec) and also claimed several Caribbean islands, most notably Saint-Domingue. Following the Reformation, the ascendant Protestant powers, England and the Dutch Republic, launched their own imperial ventures in the New World. The more permanent fruits of a century of conflict were, for Britain, a chain of colonies along the eastern seaboard of North America, with population and economic centres in Virginia and Massachusetts, a string of islands in the Caribbean, of which the most important were Jamaica and Barbados, and a foothold on the northern coast of South America (Guyana) after 1796. As for the Dutch Republic, transient conquests of the northeast of Brazil and settlements in what is now New York State had evaporated by the middle of the seventeenth century, leaving it with several Caribbean islands, notably Curaçao, and a South American toehold, Suriname.
By 1700, the outlines of settlement were clearly defined. There was an Ibero­sphere in South America, Meso­America, and parts of what is now the North American West. There was an Anglosphere in the eastern fringes of North America, with a further zone of dominance to the north, in modern Canada, shared with France. The circum­Caribbean was a territorial hodgepodge, with France, Spain, Britain, and the Dutch Republic holding a shifting portfolio of islands and mainland footholds. But the grand claims to sovereignty could be misleading: before 1750, European territorial settlement in North and South America was largely confined to the littorals and isolated population centres in the interior, usually developed around mines yielding precious metals. Whether due to Amerindian dominance, population scarcity, disease, or the absence of economic incentives, effective dominion eluded Europeans in many of the territories they ruled according to international law.

This chapter begins with an overview of the founding of colonial societies and their subsequent development, focusing on how they emerged from the interaction, often through economic activities, of indigenous peoples, Europeans, and Africans. It then turns to mature colonial societies, with an emphasis on urban planning, civic life, evolving tastes (aesthetic and dietary), and defence. Those communities, often quite significant in scale and scope, which existed outside of the boundaries of the colony, such as refugee slave and pirate societies, are also discussed. The attention of the chapter then shifts to the forced labour regimes which existed in colonial societies. While in important ways colonies resembled (and often replicated) metropolitan Europe’s economic activities and labour practices, imperialism gave rise to forms which diverged abruptly from those of Europe, whether judged by their severity, scale, or scope. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the rise of ‘creole consciousness’ which, combined with intensified interference from metropolitan authorities, generated conflicts that contributed to the dissolution of the European empires in the New World at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth.

The Growth of Colonial Societies

The emergence of colonial societies occurred in the crucible of the Atlantic World, first in the Eastern Atlantic archipelagos of the Canary Islands, Madeira, the Azores, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Cape Verde. Subsequently, colonial societies were established in the Caribbean and the Americas. The island chains of Cape Verde and São Tomé were uninhabited before the arrival of the Portuguese, who brought Africans as slaves from the mainland while also using the islands as a dumping ground for convicts and other ‘undesirables’ in Portugal. The emergent societies were marked by processes of transculturation and the emergence of hybrid cultural forms.

In their enclaves dotting the littorals of both Africa and America, however, acculturation proved crucial to the creation and sustenance of colonial societies. Given the minuscule number of Europeans who faced vast, populous, and powerful African kingdoms, European accommodation was inevitable. Both in America and Africa, the Portuguese relied heavily on what have been termed ‘go­betweens’ (in Brazil) and ‘trans­frontiersmen’ (in Africa). These terms refer to Europeans who crossed frontiers and acculturated to the local dominant culture. In Brazil, European men who ‘went native’ thereafter served as conduits between European and indigenous societies, often facilitating transactions for valuable commodities. In Brazil, such go-betweenes were largely responsible for the flourishing of the early brazilwood trade.5 In Senegambia and the Upper Guinea Coast, such lançados were equally vital. Portuguese males—often fugitives from the law, religious persecution, or creditors—settled, married African women, and raised children, who would come to identify themselves as Portuguese. In Angola, go-betweenes, called Quimbaires, were equally influential, forming a floating population of Luso­Africans, who occupied the liminal space between European and African societies.

In East Africa, there were efforts to turn conquistas into colonias in the sixteenth century, but the activities of the Portuguese men who left the confines of the coastal fortresses were both ad hoc and largely unmonitored. Some of these individuals came to acquire land from various chiefs in the Zambesi, whether by outright purchase or in exchange for military service. These Portuguese men then sought to bolster their proprietary claims by seeking the Portuguese Crown’s recognition of their land title. The Crown complied, but it limited inheritance of the title to three generations and required a
small quit-rent in addition to the right to press the owner’s slaves into military service. The name of these estates were prazos da coroa. The prazo holders, however, became fully enmeshed in African society, through intermarriage, dependence on African auxiliaries for defence, and reliance on tribute from Africans residing in their territories in order to subsist. Over subsequent generations, though clinging tenaciously to the title of prazo holder, they became integrated steadily into African society. Their link to Portugal attenuated precipitously. All of these cases gesture at acculturation’s role in the formation of colonial societies, including the obstacle it presented to the coalescence of such societies. Europeans often remained at the margins, unable to press their claims to sovereignty over large territorial tracts without intermediaries.

Unlike in Africa, the arrival of Europeans in the Americas provoked demographic disaster for indigenous societies. Depopulation, and the trauma and dislocation such annihilation brought in its wake, altered the dynamics of the formation of colonial societies. It made ‘conquest’ possible. Long before European colonies were definitively established, the epidemiological impact of cross-cultural contact reverberated throughout the New World. On the eve of Columbus’s voyages of 1492, conservative estimates suggest that there were between 46.8 and 53.8 million inhabitants in the Americas, with the lion’s share in Mexico (34 per cent of the total) and Andean South America (28 per cent). The decimation of Amerindian population was wrought by the introduction of new diseases which were not necessarily lethal in Europe or Africa, but ravaged New World peoples without previous exposure, to say nothing of immunity, to them. At least five of these diseases—smallpox, measles, influenza, scarlet fever, and yellow fever—were unknown in the Americas and some medical historians believe that mumps, rubella, pneumonia, anthrax, bubonic plague, malaria, and typhus, too, were introduced by Europeans and Africans. The results of this contact with Old World diseases proved catastrophic. By the mid-seventeenth century, the Amerindian population in Spanish America had sunk to between 5 and 10 per cent of levels in 1500 whereas the indigenous population of Brazil stood at no higher than one quarter of its pre-1500 size. In the Caribbean, a miniscule percentage of the original Amerindian population survived. In North America, historians estimate that 90 per cent of Algonquian speakers in Southern New England perished from epidemic disease by 1639. Beyond violent dispossession (often accompanied by coercive labour practices, discussed subsequently in this chapter) and microbial menace, forces unleashed by European colonization wrought more subtle transformations within Amerindian societies. In Spanish America, the monetization of the economy and privatization of property (marketization) provoked seismic shifts, most notably by triggering large-scale Amerindian migration to cities, where waged work could be found and onerous tribute avoided. In Franco-British North America, the rise of the fur trade ultimately had a deleterious effect on the Iroquois. The lure of the fur hunt disrupted well-entrenched patterns of shifting seasonal activities, particularly agricultural ones, and the division of labour within Iroquois society.

The social composition of the Europeans who populated the peripheries of the New World differed by colony, depending in large measure on the manner in which they were colonized. Almost all European powers sought to lure sturdy labourers, skilled tradesmen, and earnest, God-fearing folk. But lack of interest from prospective colonists who met these exalted criteria compelled the chartered companies and other intermediaries European states sub-contracted for the purposes of colonization to resort to a less appealing demographic cohort. The Virginia Company, for example, recruited ex-convicts, the poor, decommissioned military veterans, and other perceived undesirables. Contracts of indenture were required, both to persuade prospective colonists who could not support themselves financially to cross the Atlantic as well as to secure a semi-stable labour force. These contracts gave the holder full right to labour for a fixed period of time in exchange for subsistence, and sometimes stipulated a land grant at the end of the term of service as well. Perhaps 60 per cent of the emigrants to British colonies travelled under some form of labour contract while in some places, like the Chesapeake in the seventeenth century, 75 to 85 per cent of settlers were indentured servants, 40 per cent of whom died before completing their term of service.

In addition to contracts of indenture, European states (normally via their intermediaries and agents) resorted to forced migration to populate their colonies. In the Portuguese empire, for example, degredados (convicts condemned to exile or jail) were dispatched to various colonies. In the late fifteenth century, 2,000 Jewish children were baptized and transported to São Tomé and the Portuguese government routinely dispatched orphaned girls to Brazil, to offset the imbalance between
men and women and to encourage procreation and hence population growth. At first, Britain resisted shipping convicts to the colonies, but soon came to resemble its rivals. Fifty thousand convicts were transported to its American colonies over the course of the eighteenth century. Many more were bound for the Antipodes before the dawn of the nineteenth century, when Botany Bay, Australia, received its first fleet filled with convicts in 1788.

Viewing the formation of colonial societies through the dual prism of mercantilism and latter concepts of nationalism contributes to distortions regarding the provenance, customs, and identities of the inhabitants. Certainly, there were ‘English’, ‘French’, or ‘Portuguese’ colonies in the sense that more or less well-defined territorial units were claimed by individual European states, which claimed to exercise sovereignty over them against rival contestants. But within those territories, heterogeneity prevailed. Early ‘British’ North America, for example, was inhabited by a ‘mixed multitude’ drawn from many European territories and linguistic-cultural groups. Even those from England fitted no distinct socio-economic or cultural pattern, reflecting seventeenth-century England’s own diversity. New Netherland, too, was marked by a hybrid population due to ethnic and linguistic diversity. In 1658, there were so many French speakers that official documents were printed in French as well as in English and Dutch. By 1665, a full quarter of all marriages in the Dutch Church were exogenous ones. The polyglot, intercultural nature also resulted from the number of territories changing hands as a result of imperial rivalry. St. Croix and St. Lucia, for example, were swapped multiple times as chips in peace negotiations, while Jamaica was seized from Spain by England as part of Cromwell’s mid-seventeenth-century ‘Western Design’. The Dutch conquered and held the northeast of Brazil, as well as Luanda (Angola), for almost three decades in the seventeenth century before being dislodged by the Portuguese. In the eighteenth century, great swaths of New France passed from French to British sovereignty as a result of warfare while other morsels, such as Louisiana, came under Spain’s sway as compensation for its ill-fated alliance with France in the Seven Years’ War. In all of these cases, the conflicts arising from differences in language, customs, and law were legion and the transitions were often protracted and contentious.

Patterns of settlement, and the characteristics of the society which developed after settlement, also depended in large measure on the terms and circumstances under which the colony was founded. In Maryland, for example, the charter given by the English Crown to Lord Baltimore in 1632 not only presented him with an enormous territory, but (p. 286) endowed him with massive, nearly absolute administrative latitude. He was empowered to recruit subjects of his own choosing, which prompted the influx into Maryland of Catholics, then under duress in Britain. Lord Baltimore’s charter was not dissimilar to the instrument of proprietorships, or donatory captaincies, employed in Brazil a century earlier. Nobles were granted huge tracts of land with unencumbered authority to develop and settle them, though with poor results in most parts of Brazil. In addition to colonies entrusted to a single lord, various European states resorted to chartered companies either to foster or maintain colonies of settlement. In exchange for agreeing to settle 4,000 French Catholics in Canada within fifteen years, Richelieu made the Compagnie de la Nouvelle-France the seigneur of all lands claimed by France in North America, granting it a monopoly over all trade except fishing. Its first expedition (1628), however, was a failure, leading to other approaches to the peopling of New France. The chartered company model would be tried by other powers, including the Dutch, Spanish, and British, to populate overseas territory and generate economic growth, with mixed results. The English East India Company, for example, struggled to attract and retain settlers. It was forced to introduce creatively coercive measures in the late seventeenth century. After 1671, for example, any man seeking a marriage licence in Bombay had to sign an indenture, committing to remain in India for seven years. These later developments notwithstanding, it is crucial to remember that at their inception these companies received sizable concessions, however temporally or contractually limited and offset by huge financial risks these ventures involved, which amounted to the exercise of sovereignty over enormous territories and across vast distances.

The nature of the economy was perhaps the single greatest factor influencing the development of a colonial society. The colonies experiencing significant population growth were normally organized around extractive industries, whether export-oriented monoculture or mines. New World bullion provided the Spanish Monarchy with at least a fifth of its overall revenue and made up most of the value of exports from Spanish America to the Iberian Peninsula in the early seventeenth century. Mineral strikes in Zacatecas (1546) and Guanajuato (1550) in Mexico and in Potosi (1545) in Peru encouraged the emergence of new population centres, regional markets, and a host of subsidiary activities, even though less than 15 per cent
of the population was directly involved in mining. Gold and diamond strikes in the interior of Brazil after 1695 prompted a massive, swift migration to the region that was soon renamed ‘Minas Gerais’, or the General Mines. Some of this wealth would remain in the densely populated mining towns, such as Vila Rica de Ouro Preto and Mariana, soon bejewelled with lavishly adorned churches in New World Baroque style.

Not all colonies were established for chiefly economic motives, though. The Massachusetts Bay Colony offers a prime example of how religious impulse shaped the settlement and cultural patterns. The Puritans founded this New England colony in the third decade of the seventeenth century as a society to live apart from what they considered the irredeemable corruption of the Old World. Though Puritan efforts to realize their goal of creating an authoritarian theocracy failed, religion remained at the heart of social life, with the congregation forming the centre of the community and the local Church imposing doctrine on its members. Puritanical precepts further shaped the colony’s social composition, as the stewards of this emergent New England society showed themselves hostile to titles of nobility and the hierarchy of social ranks inherited from Europe.

Regardless of the reasons underpinning their foundation, there were several common constraints on the growth of New World colonies. Slow increase in the size of colonial societies sometimes was attributable to scarce resources. In New Netherland (present-day New York), for example, the colony did not produce enough victuals to feed its inhabitants until 1635, more than a decade after its founding. Population was stunted by the skewed sex ratio which prevailed in most newly founded colonies and which persisted in those organized around extractive economies. In the seventeenth century, male immigrants to the Chesapeake colonies outnumbered women three to one. Population growth was hampered also by horrifically high mortality rates. Of the 8,000 men, women, and children brought to Virginia under the Company, a mere 1,218 survived after a few years. In 1622 alone, more than 1,000 perished of disease, starvation, or as a result of Native American attacks. In neighbouring Maryland, infant mortality reached 30 per cent while 47 per cent of the population died before reaching the age of twenty.

Eventually, less precarious food supplies, immunity, and the emergence of tobacco—a principal cash crop destined for export—permitted the conditions necessary for demographic stability and growth. Between 1640 and 1670, the total European population in the Chesapeake leaped from 8,000 to 38,500, an annual growth rate of 7.5 per cent. There were 74,000 French in the Americas in 1730, six times the number of sixty years earlier. Even in the French Caribbean, settlements became permanent and nuclear families proliferated: between 1665 and 1680, the percentage of free men who supported families rose from 57 per cent to 73 per cent. There was great variation in migration patterns across empires, with Britain transporting many more colonists from its shores than Spain. In the first century of British Atlantic colonization, 530,000 emigrants left, amounting to at least twice and perhaps four times as many as forsook peninsular Spain for its New World colonies.

The experience of women varied enormously across colonial societies, but everywhere it was characterized by subordination to men and patriarchal legal and social norms. Whether married or single, women in British America were excluded from the system of private property, the underlying basis of most other forms of political and economic participation. Ironically, and tragically, widowhood provided women with an economic identity, as the law entitled her to one-third of her late husband’s estate. In New France, at least in its early decades, there was a dearth of European women, to the extent that the French Crown actively intervened, sending 1,000 women to Canada in the 1660s. The absence of many other social institutions, from guilds to associations, combined with the physical isolation of settlers, due to the availability of land, and a self-sufficiency imposed by the absence of markets, contributed to make the role of the familial unit and family life central. Though these circumstances enhanced women’s roles in society in certain respects, it perpetuated other forms of exclusion. Educational opportunities were available for some women, as the Ursulines provided children of wealthy families with education, though beyond the reach of most women in New France. In Spanish America, the experience of women differed, though there were numerous analogous exclusions from public life. Marriage was far from universal. Many women did not marry and residency in a convent proved a better option for many. Ten per cent of Lima’s population lived in convents in the early eighteenth century (3,865 women). Not all were nuns, for convents served as temporary residences for
women of all ages deemed in need of protection, shelter, and support.

Concubinage also was widespread in Ibero–America, partly because of the ubiquity of relations across lines of class and race, transgressions which the Church refused to countenance legally. Furthermore, the costs, including fees and dowry, associated with formal, legally sanctioned marriage were prohibitive for many, prodding the poor to prefer consensual unions out of wedlock, with couples sharing bed and board. It should be noted that women (as well as men) with social pretensions of any sort did not accept concubinage: it stripped them of honour, status, and respectability. Still, for many women (and men), there were few viable options. As a result, the rate of illegitimacy was astronomical, even if children were brought up within a de facto nuclear family: in Lima in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it hovered between 20 and 40 per cent; in Buenos Aires, it reached 37 per cent; in the Mexican mining town of San Luis de Potosí, it reached 51 per cent.

Portuguese America was marked by similar rates of illegitimacy, reaching almost 40 per cent in São Paulo in the mid-eighteenth century. Though sometimes a father was present (if not officially acknowledged), just as often they were not. About one-quarter of households in both Mexico City and São Paulo were female-headed. Unsurprisingly, many illegitimate children were abandoned and were transferred to foundling hospitals, where mortality rates were horrendously high.

As the preceding discussion of concubinage and legitimacy suggests, colonial authorities often sought to keep individuals of different geographical provenance, ‘race’, or ‘ethnicity’ separated from one another. This effort took several forms. The most sustained segregation initiative was that undertaken by the Spanish to divide their subjects into two ‘republics’: a Republic of the Spaniards, which also included free and enslaved Africans and ethnically mixed castas, and a Republic of Indians. Initially, from the 1530s, Spanish colonizers sought to physically separate the two republics from each other. This policy entailed the forced relocation of Amerindians as part of a policy of reducción or congregación, intended to concentrate sometimes dispersed populations into clearly demarcated (and highly regulated) settlements. In all cases, these communities were situated a fair distance from the towns inhabited by Spaniards. They later became the pool of labour deployed for the extraction of commodities, chiefly silver. Eventually, the notion of the ‘two republics’ was embraced by those who sought to protect Amerindians from the depredations of the conquistadors and their descendants, and to hasten their conversion to Christianity by eliminating purportedly corrupting outside influences.

But such efforts to cordon off Amerindians permanently from Spaniards, whether fuelled by exploitative or paternalist ambition, were doomed to fail. Spanish reliance (p. 289) on Amerindian artisans, construction workers, domestic servants, and vendors of staple goods necessitated frequent contact and some quarters of certain cities, such as Lima, quickly became multi-ethnic. Nevertheless, Spaniards clung to the legal fiction of the two republics and it permeated many aspects of everyday life. A royal order as late as 1573, for example, declared that no Indian should enter a Spanish city until it was completely built ‘so that when the Indians do see it they are amazed . . . and they will fear [the Spanish] and will not dare offend them, and they will respect them and wish to have their friendship’. Later, the laws separating the two republics were honoured in the breach, particularly in the seventeenth century. In New Spain (Mexico), where schools were established by crown decree for the education of Indian youth, the curriculum specified instruction in reading and writing in Spanish, thus recognizing de jure the mixing which existed de facto.

Notwithstanding the strenuous efforts of colonial authorities, romantic relations, many involving various degrees of coercion, quite frequently occurred across ‘ethnic’ or ‘racial’ lines (both remarkably slippery, unstable, and perpetually shifting concepts and descriptions in this period). Spanish America offers a clear illustration of these tendencies. Initially, it appears, exogamy was as much official policy as it was de facto practice, at least in part due to the preponderance of vagabond European men and the scarcity of European women. To justify and legitimate this practice, the Spanish Crown formally sanctioned inter-ethnic marriage in the Caribbean in 1514. In some cases, marriage to women who formed part of the indigenous nobility could bring with it significant advantages, including power over land and tribute. Elsewhere, such as in South Africa, the shortage of European women led Dutch authorities to remain silent on the consummation of relations and marriages between European men and free black women. Similar patterns can be found across the fringes of Portuguese empire, including in São Tomé where Portuguese traders and soldiers married African women. The Luso–African progeny described themselves as ‘children of the land’ (filhos da terra). In the early Chesapeake, there was black–white
intermarriage in spite of prohibitions against it. Fragmentary evidence suggests that a significant proportion of the children without acknowledged fathers born to white women in seventeenth-century Virginia were inter-racial. In short, across European colonial societies, especially in early stages and on the geographical periphery, inter-racial and inter-ethnic unions were the norm and often met with acquiescence, if not grudging approval, from authorities.

In most places, however, such early policies of permissiveness favouring the creation of an organic society, in some form, gave way to prescriptive measures to achieve separation and exclusion. This shift often entailed attempts to curtail inter-ethnic and inter-racial unions. Authorities increasingly sought to ban and punish such unions, often with great ferocity. Soon ancestry became one of the major cleavages in colonial society. Intermediate legal categories were created to classify children born from inter-ethnic and inter-racial unions. For example, the child of a Spaniard and an Amerindian was defined as a *mestizo*; a child whose parents were creole and black was a *mulatto*; the child of a union between someone of African ancestry and an Amerindian was a *zambo*. The permutations multiplied, but they were lumped together under the collective noun *casta*, which referred to those of mixed parentage but smacked of illegitimacy, or suspicion of it, due to African ancestry. The overall framework is known to historians as the *sistema de castas*.

Official efforts at categorization of this sort were fraught with ambiguity. There was some ambivalence, too, whether *mestizo* or *mulatto* referred exclusively to perceived physical characteristics or features, or if it also incorporated additional behavioural factors, such as judgements concerning the depth of commitment to Christian spirituality and piety. Nevertheless, classification increasingly was based on phenotype, colour specifically, where relative ‘whiteness’ defined one’s place in the social hierarchy, determining access both to education and vocation. Similar racialized taxonomy existed in the Portuguese colonial world, where children of inter-racial unions commonly were marginalized socially and occupationally. Such relationships continued to preoccupy authorities. In 1726, Portuguese King Dom João complained that the inhabitants of the mineral boom region of Minas Gerais ‘are not in the habit of marrying . . . it is not easy to force them to renounce their black and mulatto concubines and for this reason every family is becoming tainted by the mixture of bloods’. Hierarchies of race and class, while bearing important resemblance to and generally reinforcing each other, did not overlap completely. As an historian of colonial Brazil has noted, colonial authorities struggled ‘to reconcile the discrepancy between a society of class and stratification by race’.

## Urbanization and Defence

Though rural societies existed, as in New France, cities were the framework in which colonial societies developed, even those colonies premised on plantation-based economies. The urban spaces of colonial societies were predictably heterogeneous. French colonial cities were notably small and unsophisticated. As late as 1726, Saint-Pierre, Martinique was the largest French city in the Americas with a mere 8,000 inhabitants (of whom only 2,356 were classified as white). In spite of its diminutive size, Saint-Pierre was two and a half times as populous as Quebec and Cap Français. Urban planning reflected seventeenth-century French tastes and styles and many cities—Fort Royal, Louisbourg, and later New Orleans among them—were laid out on rectilinear grids by military engineers. Most French colonial cities and towns boasted buildings indicative of the Catholic Church’s omnipresent function in social life, including convents, monasteries, schools, hospitals, and poor houses.

Spanish colonial cities could not have been more different than those of New France or the Antilles. In 1600, Mexico City, which had been built atop the ruins of the Aztec capital, had over 100,000 inhabitants, with imposing urban planning characterized by plazas and wide avenues. Spaniards tended to build their residences in the compact urban core, with a central plaza as the city’s indisputable civic centre, ringed by municipal and other public buildings. Interestingly, the use of a plaza in Spanish America (p. 291) predated the use of such public squares in both Italy or Spain, another indication that New World city planners were not nostalgic imitators of the Old World, but important innovators. In the Americas, most cities adhered to this model of urbanization, whether a new settlement or a city built upon the ruins of indigenous capitals, like Mexico City or Cuzco, formerly the Incan capital. Other cities experienced enormous growth triggered by economic stimuli.
There were, for example, 120,000 people resident near the cerro rico silver mine of Potosí in 1580. Not all Spanish colonial cities, however, were as populous as these cities. In the Philippines, Manila, itself built on the site of a captured palisades and situated near a flourishing population cluster predating Spanish arrival, possessed a European population of a mere 3,000 in the 1620s.

Portuguese colonial cities originated, by and large, as a fortified port which then expanded into an agricultural hinterland. Given their commercial and military origins, it is hardly surprising that unlike Spanish America, but like Portugal itself, Brazilian cities lacked central squares (praças). Salvador da Bahia, in Brazil’s northeast, and the most important city in Brazil before its gradual eclipse by Rio de Janeiro in the mid-eighteenth century, is a prime example of this tendency. There was frequent interaction between the far from self-sustaining sugar and tobacco plantations, situated in semi-tropical and remarkably fertile Rencôncavo, and the city of Salvador, where tools, supplies, and food were obtained and where the scions of the landed elite occupied the most important civic posts.

Britain’s continental colonies grew at a tremendous pace, with population increasing at 2.6 per cent per year after 1660 and Gross National Production galloping along at 3.2 per cent per year. Cities expanded as a result, particularly in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. On the eve of the revolution, in 1775, Philadelphia boasted a population of 40,000 and New York 25,000, while burgeoning regional trading centres like Charleston and Newport each had between 9,000 and 12,000 inhabitants.

Colonial cities teemed with associational life and culture, both high and low. Ibero–Atlantic cities were enriched by thriving associations, initially centred on guilds and a spectrum of religious sodalities and brotherhoods, which provided venues for social interaction, medical assistance, and arranged for such end-of-life necessities as funeral services and the execution of wills. In Brazil, they often served as major social welfare providers, of which a notable example was Salvador da Bahia’s elite and omnipresent Santa Casa da Misericórdia. But other brotherhoods catered to needs of their members, including those focused on ameliorating the predicament of blacks (enslaved and free) and persons of mixed-race backgrounds, including raising funds to purchase the freedom of kin who remained enslaved. Many brotherhoods did not discriminate on the basis of birth, wealth, or social class. In British North America, no single pattern for social life took hold. In seventeenth-century Virginia, for example, perhaps due to the relative isolation fostered by plantation life and combined with rather primitive towns, associational life was sluggish and churches failed to pick up the slack. Historians have pointed to the ‘highly materialistic’, ‘competitive’, and ‘exploitative’ ethos that developed in the Chesapeake, perhaps offering a further explanation for the thinness of communal life. New England, by contrast, was characterized by its dense civic life, entwined (p. 292) closely with religious establishments, aided undoubtedly by an egalitarian wealth structure reinforced by a cereal agriculture based-economy.

Cities also were home to universities and print culture. Higher education became a hallmark of Spanish America and later of British America. The first university was founded at Santo Domingo in 1538 and several other universities, notably those of Lima and Mexico City, soon followed. There were nineteen universities in Spanish America by 1700. Mexico boasted a printing press by 1539 whereas Lima had one by 1583. Portuguese America, it should be noted, had neither a university nor a printing press until 1808. Those aspiring to a career requiring advanced training were forced to cross the Atlantic to study at the University of Coimbra, or pursue a degree at a university outside of the Lusophone world altogether. In British North America, the first printing press was installed in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1638, while the first universities, Harvard College and William & Mary, were founded in 1636 and 1693 respectively. By the 1720s, at least one newspaper was published in all of the major northern ports and by 1750 some cities had three or even four newspapers. By the 1760s, each colony north of Delaware possessed a university. The British Caribbean, by contrast, never had a university. In New France, a Jesuit college was founded in the seventeenth century, but there was neither a newspaper nor a printing press while it remained a French colony.

Apart from universities and the printing press, natural sciences and political economy were diffused through institutions resembling the academies and learned societies then coming into existence in Europe. In cities of Spanish America from the
mid-eighteenth century, for example, ‘economic and patriotic societies’ and merchant guilds (consulados) provided venues for literate exchange and inculcated forms of sociability which we now associate with the Enlightenment. More informal access to new ideas in British America was gained through the establishment of public libraries as well as subscription libraries. Benjamin Franklin established the Library Company of Philadelphia in 1731 and it soon had 100 subscribing members, leading Franklin to boast that ‘these libraries have improved the general conversation of Americans, made the common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries’. This model spread and there were at least sixty-four subscription libraries on the eve of the American Revolution.

Whether situated in cities, hinterlands, or distant peripheries, all colonial societies confronted similar challenges. Faced with enormous differences in climate, flora, and fauna, most early colonists sought to reproduce closely European habits in the New World. Dietary and consumption preferences illustrate this tendency clearly. Spanish settlers, for example, sought to import or grow Old World foods in the Americas, particularly olive oil, wine, and wheat (for bread). Together with breeding European livestock to which they were accustomed (above all, pork and lamb), Spaniards believed that the consumption of such familiar foods would protect them against the hostile climate to which they were not yet inured. Spanish colonists also imported vast quantities of wine across the Atlantic before vineyards were established in Chile, Peru, and Argentina. During the early sixteenth century, all ships leaving Spain for the Americas were mandated to carry on board animals, plant cuttings, and seeds in an effort to recreate Old World agriculture. Not all efforts of this type yielded results, but livestock flourished in this new environment, thus permitting colonists to purchase meat at lower prices than Spaniards could in Madrid. By the end of the sixteenth century, then, colonists were able to supply for themselves the staples which they had previously acquired from Spain. They even engaged in import substitution avant la lettre by replacing olive oil with lard for cooking.

Preference for the comforts of Old World staples and luxuries, however, did not preclude the adoption of New World foods. The embrace of cacao, the chief ingredient of chocolate, suggests the adaptability and expansion of the European palate fairly early in the history of American colonization. Tobacco, which, like chocolate, quickly became the rage both in Europe and its colonial societies, provides a second pertinent example. These examples, though, should not disguise the conflicts which arose as a result of efforts by metropolitan authorities to monitor and modify colonial habits of consumption. Towards the middle of the eighteenth century, as metropolitan–periphery tensions escalated across the New World, there were attempts by authorities to regulate the consumption practices of colonists, including restrictions placed on luxuries, which had no counterpart in the Old World. In Brazil, for example, sumptuary laws were enforced which prohibited colonists from using velvet, gold, silk, or silver in their dress. Throughout Ibero–America, such restrictions fell more heavily on free blacks and those of multiracial backgrounds. In British North America, including the Caribbean, colonists often emulated everything from metropolitan sartorial style to interior design to alcohol preferences, perhaps in an effort to ‘Anglicize’ their societies. Toward the end of the colonial period (c. 1770s), and only at the end, this tendency gave way to more of a ‘creole’ sensibility: colonists displayed displeasure with the Navigation Acts and other restrictive mercantilist trade measures by rejecting imported tastes and striving to nurture a self-consciously distinct American style.

Colonial societies faced numerous security threats, whether from hostile European navies in wartime, unvanquished Amerindians, pirates, or rebellious indentured servants and slaves. Defence and safety therefore were major preoccupations of colonial societies and significant facts in the organization of both economic and social life. Spanish America furnishes perhaps the most complete example of how colonial societies responded to threats, both internal or external. Spanish coastal cities were under constant duress from corsairs, with at least 100 raids recorded by 1585, and subsequently full-scale assaults, which sometimes resulted in the temporary capture and sacking of port cities, such as the 1668 capture of Portobello, or Havana and Manila in 1762–63. These defeats, however, were the exception, and an extensive network of fortifications, patrols, armed convoys, and intelligence collection, which could consume upwards of 60 per cent of the colonial treasury’s total expenditure, as in New Spain (Mexico), in the late sixteenth century were devised to protect against such an occurrence.

Notwithstanding the ubiquity of the threats, there were very few full-time soldiers in Spain’s New World colonies, with most
of these on the frontiers, whether northern New Spain, southern Chile, or the interior of modern Argentina (then the Río de la Plata). The Spanish Crown relied heavily, therefore, on militias to pick up the slack from as early (p. 294) as 1640. At first militia service was limited to whites only, but quickly their ranks were filled with mestizos and free blacks. Though Amerindians were largely excluded from military and militia service, they were incorporated into the auxiliary companies that emerged in the latter phases of the colonial era, especially on the frontier. Spain’s reliance on militias would lessen somewhat in the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War, as peninsular officers increasingly were brought in. Nevertheless, the number of militiamen far outstripped regulars until the end of the colonial period. Militia service was a defining feature of colonial life for men, affording creoles as well as those of mixed ancestry opportunities for social prestige, reward, and advancement. Status could be enhanced, for example, through the purchase of an officer’s commission. For those in the regular army, only open to white creoles, the benefits were greater still, with the enjoyment of the military fuero (the judicial right for officers, soldiers, and their dependents to be heard by a military rather than civil court) a coveted distinction.

Societies Beyond the Bounds of Empire

In part, defence was an ongoing preoccupation not only due to international warfare, but because colonial authorities believed they faced threats from an ‘enemy within’, those communities bordering the colony that they could not control. Many Amerindians, however devastated by microbes and violence, remained beyond the grasp of the Spanish state altogether, constituting a society apart never to be absorbed. Even in the late 1700s, independent Native Americans still held effective dominion over at least half of the actual landmass of what is today continental Latin America (from southern Chile to Mexico’s northern border with the United States). Furthermore, 2.7 million independent Indians, amounting to more than 20 per cent of the total population of Spanish America, resided within the territory nominally claimed by Spain but independent of Spanish authority. On the peripheries of empire, the situation was even more dramatic: in Chile, for example, two-thirds of all Amerindians did not recognize Spanish sovereignty as late as 1780. In Comanche country (Comanchería), in what is now the southwestern quadrant of the United States, the Comanches carved out an empire that was larger than Central America and exceeded the amount of European-controlled territory north of the Río Grande River. Their presence effectively precluded Spanish expansion beyond San Antonio and demonstrated, in the words of a recent historian, that ‘the fate of indigenous culture was not necessarily an irreversible slide toward dispossession, depopulation, and cultural declension’. In British and French North America, Amerindians remained outside of the bounds of colonial societies while still exercising significant influence over them. The fur trade, for example, locked Europeans and Native Americans into habits of mutual dependency. Europeans often had to accept Amerindian trade protocols, keep prices in check so as not to alienate their trade partners, and cultivate alliances in order to trade at all. Furthermore, the Five Nations Iroquois retained both autonomy and sovereignty by maintaining a balance of power (p. 295) between the French and British in eastern North America, sometimes through neutrality but sometimes through alliance with one of the two powers. As a New Englander remarked, Iroquois delegations were ‘courted and caressed like the potentates of the earth’. This situation would change only after the eclipse of New France in 1763.

Since the tentacles of the feeble European colonial state could not reach far before the first decades of the eighteenth century, many colonial societies were able to spring up and evolve far from the interference of colonial authorities. On uninhabited islets and marshy estuaries, pirates flourished, especially during the ‘golden age’ of piracy (c. 1650 until 1730), when up to 2,000 roamed and wreaked havoc in the Caribbean. Pirates constructed a multinational, multiracial social order which brazenly defied and deliberately subverted the concepts of justice, financial reward, and authority prevailing within colonial societies. Elsewhere, the cattle ranchers of the rugged interior of the Brazilian northeast (sertão) threw. Their self-sufficiency and geographical isolation put them beyond the colonial state’s reach. In the interior of São Paulo, to the south, settlement quickly moved beyond the official bounds of the colony. It was multinational (with Portuguese intermingling with Spaniards, Italians, and northern Europeans) and multilingual, where língua geral, a mixture of Portuguese and Tupi Guarani, was more commonly spoken than European Portuguese.
Not all slaves remained within the legal bounds of the New World colonies into which they or their African ancestors had been forcibly brought and sold as chattel. A small minority, though still a substantial number, of slaves managed to escape captivity and form fugitive communities beyond the grasp of the colonial state. Such self-emancipating slaves were referred to by various names, but the Spanish term *cimarrón* or French *marron* and English maroon, the latter two derived from the Spanish, were the most common terms. The communities they forged went by multiple names. In Spanish, such communities were referred to as *palenques, manieles, cumbes,* or *mocambos.* In Portuguese, there were four terms to designate such communities: *mocambos, ladeiras, magotes,* and *quilombos.* Of these, *mocambo* was the most commonly used, taken from a Mbundu word for ‘hideout’.

In Brazil, fugitive slave communities varied widely in population size, from the 11,000 to 20,000 *quilombo* of Palmares, located in the remote interior in northeastern Brazil, to a few hundred individuals, as in the *mocambos* of southern Bahia. Most *mocambos* were situated close to farms and towns, but others, like Palmares, were in remote, inaccessible locations. Those closer to colonial settlements were, as a leading historian of Brazilian slavery has noted, ‘often parasitic, based on highway theft, cattle rustling, raiding and extortion’. Though sometimes evolving into agricultural communities, ‘rarely did *mocambos* become wholly self-sufficient’. Palmares, by far the largest and longest-surviving fugitive slave community, existed for almost the entirety of the seventeenth century and its political organization relied heavily on traditional African forms. Like many *quilombos*, Palmares was under constant attack before it was overrun and razed. Colonial authorities were rarely content to permit these communities to exist undisturbed, often mounting extermination campaigns against them, relying on special units, headed up by bush-captains (*capitães-do-mato*) to extirpate fledgling communities before they could lay down deep roots. Punishments were often ghastly, involving a range of horrific forms of torture, including castration. These punitive campaigns notwithstanding, there were a surprising number of instances across the Americas, notably in Jamaica, in which European colonists were forced to sue for peace with maroon communities and to acknowledge the freedom they had won and the territory they controlled.

**Forced Labour Regimes**

Over the course of the early modern period, several labour regimes existed simultaneously and overlapped in colonial societies. While free labour—whether self-supporting artisan, iron master, plantation owner, or yeoman farmer—was most common in some societies, coerced labour predominated in others, particularly those organized around extractive and export-oriented industries, like mining and plantation agriculture. This section focuses on the coerced labour regimes which existed in most colonial societies, often at variance with European practice.

While indentured servitude was an institution that existed in the Old World, its New World guise was significantly harsher, resembling, in some places, chattel slavery. In Barbados, for example, planters ‘quite freely bought, sold, gambled away, mortgaged, taxed as property, and inherited in their wills indentured servants’ before the implementation of a master–servant code in 1661. Though not quite so numerous, French indentured servants constituted a majority of French migrants to the Caribbean, with perhaps as many as 30,000 to 40,000 arriving over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Most of these servants, primarily young men between 15 and 30 years of age, did not intend to settle in the Caribbean permanently, and some contracts of indenture even stipulated that payment for services would take place in France itself, not the Antilles, suggesting the anticipated transient quality of their sojourn. These differences aside, indentured servants enjoyed few rights and little recourse from abuse.

In addition to European indentured servants, Europeans’ voracious demand for labour portended the invention of new labour regimes or else the survival, expansion, and perversion of forms of pre-Columbian Amerindian servitude and coerced labour practices. These took several forms. The *encomienda* system, though derived from Iberian precedent, was recast in Spanish America. It allotted groups of Amerindians to an *encomendero,* typically a conquistador, who gained control over their labour and purportedly responsibility for their spiritual welfare and protection. In spite of efforts by the Spanish Crown to rein them in, notably through the 1542 New Laws, the largest encomenderos formed what amounted to a colonial
aristocracy for the first decades after the conquest of Peru and Mexico: Hernan Cortés, for example, received an encomienda for 115,000 natives, though the average size of an encomienda in the Valley of Mexico averaged 6,000 in 1530.

In the Andes of South America, the coerced labour regime known as the *mita* was taken from a Quechua word to describe the annual labour service demanded by the Inca and organized by local lords loyal to him. The Spanish continued this practice, though with more exacting brutality, forcing Indians to provide labour on a rotational basis in mines, agriculture, and textile factories. In the mines of Potosí, one-seventh of the adult population was made to work one year out of every seven, which led to devastating population dislocations. The vast majority, around 80 per cent, of labourers in the mines of Potosí and Zacatecas at the zenith of their productivity (1550–1650) were indigenous. Some of these indigenous people who toiled in the mines were not *mitayos*, but rather worked for a wage, and these were known as *mingas*. Europeans devised other methods of extracting indigenous labour besides the *encomienda*, *mita*, and tribute. The Jesuits offer one example. In 1610, the Jesuits moved their operations to Paraguay, where they attracted Amerindians fleeing from inward-moving settlers seeking their labour. They sought and received refuge in the Jesuit missions. The Guarani Indian mission population swelled to 30,000 by 1649 and reached between 80,000 and 120,000 by 1700. In exchange for accepting baptism and observing Catholic rites, the Guarani received protection to work family plots as well as communal fields.

Ready access to Amerindian labour, whether through the *encomienda*, *mita*, or other coercive and semi-coercive mechanisms, meant that there was little incentive for the owners of silver mines in Spanish America to purchase African slaves, at least initially. Even in less lucrative and less extractive industries, exploitation of Indian labour was the norm. In Brazil, particularly in the rugged interior and the frontier of European settlement, far from the Atlantic-oriented, sugar-producing plantation zones, colonists relied on Indian labour for the cultivation and harvest of basic foodstuffs. Amerindian servants were treated as property, but not evaluated as slaves, as Indian enslavement was nominally illegal, even if their condition differed little from bondage.38

The growth of population, and the emergence of colonial societies, was also linked to export-oriented agriculture. Mounting demand for tobacco, and the success of the crop, helps to explain the influx of settlers into the Chesapeake colonies while European taste for sugar helped to spawn massive plantations in the Caribbean, Brazil, and beyond. In Brazil, the number of sugar mills leaped from sixty in 1570 to 200 by 1610.39 The establishment of large-scale plantations was linked to increasing reliance on African slave labour, though there were other factors which led to the preference for African labour. These factors included special skills which some Africans possessed, such as equestrian prowess or diving ability (for the pearl-fishing industry); emergent European ideologies of race which equated darker phenotypes with debasement; and the colonial state’s ability to control, tax, or generate revenue from the slave trade.40

Regardless of the underlying rationale, the transition from either Amerindian coerced labour or European indentured servants (depending on the empire in question) to African slave labour occurred at different times, even if most of these systems overlapped and cannot be neatly separated sequentially. The importation of enslaved Africans into Spanish America averaged 1,250 per year in the sixteenth century, almost (p. 298) 3,000 in the seventeenth, and nearly 6,000 in the eighteenth century. In Brazil, an average of 1,000 enslaved Africans disembarked in Portuguese territory per year in the sixteenth century. This number swelled to 5,600 in the seventeenth century, and nearly 19,000 in the eighteenth. In Ibero–America, the Society of Jesus was the single largest owner of slaves. In the case of the British Caribbean, the transition to slave labour commenced in the middle of the seventeenth century. In Barbados, the number of white indentured servants declined from 13,000 to 3,000 between 1650 and 1680 while the enslaved black population grew to three times the size of the total white population by 1700.41 In the French Caribbean, the massive, disproportionate influx of African slaves occurred slightly later. While in 1700 the number of black slaves was just slightly higher than white inhabitants, slaves were four-fifths of the population of the French West Indies by 1730. By 1790, the number of black slaves was ten times the number of white inhabitants.42 On the mainland, the disparity was not as great, but nevertheless slaves comprised one-fifth of Virginia’s population in the first decade of the eighteenth century. Not all slave-dependent agriculture, however, was plantation-based. In South Africa, for example, almost one-half of the free male population owned at least one slave in a chiefly agrarian society, meaning that slave-ownership trickled down the social ladder to small-holders.
Even within the plantation system, the slave experience was quite varied, often shaped significantly by the crop cultivated. Even in Jamaica, an important sugar-producing colony, monoculture never prevailed and as late as the 1770s, four out of every ten slaves were employed in some facet of production other than sugar, and half of plantation space was devoted to raising livestock and cultivating foodstuffs for local consumption. Neighbouring regions of mainland British North America offer a glimpse into the differences in slave experience resulting from the crop around which their labour was organized. In the South Carolina Low Country, large landholdings devoted to the cultivation of rice, a primary staple, which did not exhaust the nutrients of the soil, meant that slaves and their descendants had a greater likelihood of remaining on the plantation than they did elsewhere, in spite of the labour-intensive, back-breaking nature of the work. In the Chesapeake, by contrast, the cultivation of tobacco, which quickly exhausted the soil, often resulted in the break-up of slave families and communities as planters either relocated in search of untapped lands to exploit or sold off their slaves after their land no longer yielded tobacco. In the northern continental colonies, by contrast, though most slaves lived in the countryside, many worked in highly capitalized rural industries—tanneries, salt works, and iron-furnaces—and iron masters were commonly the largest slaveholders in some areas. Where slaves did work the land, it was on farms that produced provisions for export to the Caribbean sugar islands. As the provisioning trade did not support the plantation regime found in either the Chesapeake or Carolina Low Country, most of these northern, farm-based slaves never laboured in large gangs and performed a variety of tasks, as hyper-specialization was less prevalent than it was farther south.

Though unrelenting brutality and dehumanizing ‘social death’ was common to all slave societies, the nature of slavery and slave society varied widely across the Atlantic (p. 299). World. Not all slavery was rural or plantation-based. In the Spanish empire, especially, urban slavery was ubiquitous and between 10 and 25 per cent of the populations of Lima, Mexico City, Quito, Cartagena, and Santa Fe de Bogotá were enslaved. Urban slavery was also common to the middle colonies of British North America, where slaveholding became almost universal among the elite, and even within the reach of the middle classes, particularly in port cities like Boston, New York, Newport, and Charleston. In all of these seaboard metropolises, slaves went from being on the periphery of urban activity, as servants in wealthy households, to the centre, labouring as workmen in the shops of artisans. By the 1760s, for example, Philadelphia’s white artisans and tradesmen had become major slaveholders. On the eve of the American Revolution, three-quarters of Boston’s wealthiest quartile of families were slaveholders.

The everyday experience of enslaved Africans in New World societies was marked by physical violence, rape, and dehumanizing terror. Various slave, or black, codes were introduced in the Americas. The 1685 French Code Noir was meant to require masters to provide for the basic sustenance of slaves and to extricate them from forced labour on Sundays and religious feast days. Most of the beneficent provisions were blatantly ignored whereas stipulations for corporal punishment were assiduously enforced. While permitting slaves to be baptized and to marry, the Code Noir denied them civil status, thereby depriving them of rights enjoyed by whites to own property, practise a trade, or give evidence in a trial. In Spanish America, the situation of slaves was marginally better, largely because slaves could seek, and sometimes found, assistance in the courts. As a result of the legacy of medieval Iberian law codes, especially the Siete Partidas, slaves had legal means to gain their freedom, including self-purchase. One response to the harsh brutality of slavery was escape. Very few slaves, however, managed to join the sort of fugitive communities described earlier. Large-scale slave rebellions, too, were rare, though occurred with greater frequency in the Caribbean during the Age of Revolutions, including in the middle and latter phases of the Haitian Revolution. But everyday acts of resistance, including sabotage, work slow-downs, temporary absenteeism without permission—in short, a range of subtly subversive behaviours which are sometimes lumped together by historians as petit marronnage—were common. Their ubiquity is indicative of the complexity of slavery in colonial societies in the early modern period.

Not all people of African descent, of course, were enslaved. The population of free blacks as well as inter-racial persons expanded through both manumission and natural increase. Even for those nominally free blacks, however, social and economic options remained severely limited. Even in the northern colonies of British America, there were all sorts of proscriptive statutes passed which impinged on the liberties of free blacks, barring them from voting, militia membership, and jury service. There were even laws which threatened re-enslavement for free blacks who lacked regular employments and
were accused of loitering. In Portuguese America, the mechanical trades were dominated by whites and licences were exceedingly difficult for free blacks to obtain. Such restrictions meant that blacks in Brazil, both free and enslaved, were reduced to menial and low-prestige livelihoods, including that of ‘barber’ (barbeiro), sanctioned to bleed, (p. 300) scarify, and apply leeches, presumably with the intention to heal. Some such barbers also obtained a further licence as a tooth-puller (tiradentes). In Spanish America, militia service offered free blacks the possibility for limited social mobility. Earlier restrictions, such as a 1551 law forbidding blacks from bearing arms, soon gave way in the face of the urgent need to defend coastal cities. In some regions particularly vulnerable to attack by either corsairs or foreign navies, there existed entire militia companies composed of free blacks, including at the officer level.47

Colonial Identities and Imperial Revolutions

The concept of creole had emerged very early in the colonial period, though creole identity took shape somewhat later. Originally, it was derived from a Portuguese word, crioulo (in turn derived from the verb criar, to grow), which referred to descendants of Africans born in the Americas, distinguishing them from bozales, African-born slaves. From Portuguese, it was adopted in Spanish, as criollo, where its meaning mutated. The first appearance in print of ‘creole’ in a form resembling its core common modern usage was in Spanish royal chronicler Juan López de Velasco’s Geografía y Descripción Universal de las Indias (1570), where the author claimed that Spaniards born in the Americas ‘who are called creoles [criollos] turn out like the natives even though they are not mixed with them [by] declining to the disposition of the land’.48 Creole, though referring initially to children of Spaniards (and their progeny) born in America, thus carried unmistakably pejorative connotations. At first, however, in Spanish usage, it was less of a racial epithet than a geographical or cultural designation which referred to place of birth or habitation. Increasingly, however, as cross-cultural sexual relations produced children with darker phenotypes, creole came to connote someone of mixed ancestry as much as a Spaniard born in America. Iberian purity of blood (limpieza de sangre) statutes originally used to discriminate against descendants of Jews and Muslims were expanded to encompass those with some degree of African descent, thus barring many creoles from many bureaucratic and ecclesiastical posts.

Some American-born Spaniards nevertheless embraced the term and fashioned a multifaceted identity around it, often incorporating some element of local patriotism. What historians have termed ‘creole consciousness’ further coalesced in response to what these American-born Spaniards perceived as unfair metropolitan bias, which equated difference with inferiority, and often resulted in exclusion from offices and other patterns of resentment-generating differential treatment. Particularly after the Seven Years’ War, which was a debacle for Spain, creole participation in the colonial bureaucracy and judicial system was curtailed drastically. Simultaneously, peninsular-born officials flooded Spanish America and infringed upon the relative autonomy previously enjoyed by creoles. At this point, the older notion of the Spanish Monarchy as a collection of kingdoms, and not colonies, began to break down.

These changes also heightened pre-existing creole–peninsular rivalry and gave a nudge to incipient creole patriotism. Previously confined to expressions of local pride, an identification with place, and a loose sense of being different from Europeans, creole patriotism morphed and pushed some Spanish Americans to envisage a future outside of the Spanish Atlantic Monarchy. Other factors prodded colonists towards a similar conclusion. The first was the economic boom fuelled not only by transatlantic trade but by the emergence of a robust internal market. Increased prosperity led elites to recognize the de facto semi-independence of their local economies and to resent the ‘mercantilist’ restrictions on colonial commerce, precisely at the moment when metropolitan Spain was attempting to bind Spanish America closer to itself. The second factor fueling the agitation was the presence of new ideologies swirling through the Atlantic World with hurricane-like force. Republicanism and political–economic critiques of the ‘Old Colonial System’ encouraged Spanish American creoles to imagine a different, new political arrangement. Sporadic conspiracies were uncovered, but, with the notable exception of the Comunero rebellion in New Granada (modern Colombia) in the early 1780s, these resulted in very little change.

Yet creoles were not the only group disgruntled with the forms of heightened state interference that historians call the
'Bourbon Reforms'. There were hundreds of Amerindian revolts in the eighteenth century, of which the wide-scale Andean insurrection of the early 1780s, known as the Túpac Amaru rebellion, was most unnerving to colonial authorities. While many expressions of discontent never amounted to more than local tax revolts, the Túpac Amaru rebellion was unprecedented. While refraining from overt criticism of the overarching structure of the Spanish Monarchy or Catholicism, the rebellion was galvanized by a novel combination of Incan symbolism, anti-European prejudice, and a political imagination that foresaw the removal of meddling Spanish bureaucrats and the recovery of Amerindian political autonomy in the Andes.

None of this subversive activity, however, threatened at first to crescendo into a separatist rebellion. It was only when French armies occupied the Iberian Peninsula, from 1808, and deposed the Bourbon monarchy that a crisis of legitimacy and sovereignty unfolded which resulted in the independence of Spanish America from Spain by the early 1820s. There were many divergent responses to this tumult, but one attracting a significant number of adherents was the idea that sovereignty had reverted to the people, now conceived as belonging to and being territorially rooted in the various local regions in America, without connection to Spain. Peninsular attempts to reintegrate these recalcitrant subjects by force back into the transatlantic monarchy failed, though only after a decade of unrelenting, disruptive warfare. Out of the wreckage of empire—indeed forged in the crucible of separatist warfare and civil war—emerged new entities, the nation states of independent Spanish America.

Portuguese America faced several small-scale dissident conspiracies in the last decades of the eighteenth century, with the most important one occurring in Minas Gerais. But the separatist fires such manifestations of dissent enkindled were snuffed out by the relocation of the royal family from Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro during the Napoleonic Wars in 1807–08. The Braganzas, Portugal’s ruling dynasty, transformed Rio de Janeiro into a ‘Tropical Versailles’ between 1808 and 1820, replete with European political and cultural institutions, refashioning it into the centre of a global monarchy. Brazil eventually gained its independence from Portugal in 1822, largely as a result of oafish (if justified) Portuguese efforts to restore Lisbon to its former status as capital, which the Brazilians rejected as ‘recolonization’. But Brazilians did not reject everything from Europe and remained a monarchy (headed by the same dynasty, the Braganzas), a system that was preferred as it was thought to favour the preservation of Brazil’s territorial integrity and the slave system. Despite several secessionist revolts, Brazil did not fragment, as Spanish America had. The Monarchy survived until 1889, outliving the institution of slavery, abolished in 1888, by a year.

The genesis of new identities occurred perhaps more slowly in the Anglophone colonies, where the word ‘creole’ only ever carried pejorative connotations. But geopolitical crises and the government reform programmes they spawned generated tensions between American-born subjects and metropolitan Britain, as it had in the Iberian world. The Seven Years’ War fuelled the resentment of American colonists who felt restricted and hampered by mercantilist trade laws that precluded intercourse with their traditional markets. Colonial frustration was heightened still further by a spate of new taxes foisted upon them in the aftermath of the conflict. Some of the grievance stemmed from the fact that colonists believed they had already contributed heavily to the war effort through soldiers and funds. Now they would be taxed for the maintenance of a greatly increased number of soldiers garrisoned in the colonies. To onerous taxes was added political strife. Colonial elective assemblies were increasingly ignored by crown-appointed governors and, in the 1770s, as the conflict escalated, Britain substituted a nominated assembly for an elected one, including in the colony of Massachusetts. The ensuing military conflict ended in 1781 and in 1783 the peace treaty was signed. In many regards, this was the beginning of a new process, as loyalists to the British crown left the nascent United States and joined other British colonial societies, in Canada, the Bahamas, Sierra Leone, and India, presaging the subsequent nineteenth-century reorientation of British colonial ambitions toward the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and Pacific Worlds. In the nascent United States, a federal system took root, enshrined in the 1787 Constitution, though under constant duress from ‘Anti-Federalists’ who preferred more authority vested in the individual states. Furthermore, though the revolutionary war had spawned a new identity, Americans struggled to wean themselves from British customs, tastes, and habits, and to forge a distinctive culture. Indeed, the process of ‘becoming un-British’ took decades.

In all of these cases, separatist sentiments and movements arose from a combustible mixture of several elements: mature,
increasingly self-sufficient colonies; metropolitan reform initiatives perceived to be heavy-handed, exploitative, exclusionary, and anachronistic; an emerging consciousness concerning a vast cultural gulf separating Europe from America, with a valorization of America; the spread of political ideologies (p.303) imbued with new notions of sovereignty, emphasizing self-government and increasingly out-of-step with the policies of imperial government; and, particularly in the case of Saint-Domingue (Haiti), pent-up disgust with and rejection of the system of chattel slavery.

The first great wave of decolonization of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, of course, was incomplete: Spain retained Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines; Portugal clung to Angola and Mozambique; and Britain remained ascendant in Canada and much of the Caribbean. Nor did it herald the demise of the colonial idea, as contemporaneous British expansion in South Asia and French incursions in North Africa attest amply. But in most of the Americas, the first settlements, so dependent on Europe in all senses, had become laboratories, often violent and coercive ones to be sure, of new identities through processes of ethnogenesis, religious syncretism, and cultural hybridity. As their populations grew and their economies expanded, the colonies became increasingly self-sufficient. The gulf between metropolitan fiscal–military requirements (as well as the models of political authority prevailing in Europe) and colonial aspirations became an unbridgeable chasm. After protracted conflict, colonial societies transitioned from the subordinate status of ultramarine appendages to independent polities, fully fledged participants in the international community of states.

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**Notes:**


(5.) Alida Metcalf, *Go-between and the Colonization of Brazil 1500–1600* (Austin, 2005), 59.


(15.) Bailyn, *The Barbarous Years*, 111, 170.


(34.) As Richard Price elucidated, in a New World context, *cimarrón* originally referred to domestic cattle that had taken to the hills of Hispaniola and soon to Indian slaves who had escaped from the Spaniards. But by 1530, it was applied to African slaves who had absconded and carried strong negative connotations. See Richard Price, ‘Introduction: The Maroons and their Communities’, in Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, 2nd edn. (Baltimore, 1979), 1–2, fn 1.


(36.) Hilary McD. Beckles, ‘Plantation Production and White “Proto-Slavery”: White Indentured Servants and the
Colonisation of the English West Indies, 1624–1645”, in Lorimer, *Settlement Patterns*, 166.


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Abstract and Keywords

Though long-distance trade routes had always connected Europe to the broader communities of Africa and Asia, these only become more robust in the late medieval era. The scientific and technological breakthroughs in maritime transport in the fifteenth century not only increased the volume of trade with the outside world but also linked new regions in the Atlantic and Pacific rims to a global commercial network. By the eighteenth century a series of changes had rapidly transformed the economy of Europe and the world in new and unexpected ways. This chapter considers the emergence of the new, ‘global’ economy by focusing on three central topics: the merchants who sought opportunities, the growth in state regulation over commerce, and finally the material substance of early modern trade through the exchange of commodities, both new and old, that exposed Europe to a broader variety of goods than ever before.

Keywords: Commodities, economy, globalization, merchants, protectionism, trade

Trade, according to Englishman John Wheeler, was an innate interest of mankind. ‘There is nothing in the world so ordinaire’, he wrote, ‘and natural unto men, as to contract, truck, merchandise, and trafficke one with another, so that it is almost unpossible for three persons to converse together two houres, but they will fall into talk of one bargaine or another, chopping, changing, or some other kinde of contract.’ Wheeler wrote this in 1601, while he was the secretary of England’s Society of Merchant Adventurers, a monopolistic export company, so his defence of trade was understandable. Other Europeans, however, would have agreed. The rapid expansion of long-distance trade to the Americas and Asia, enabled by new maritime technology, brought established and new commodities on a scale heretofore unimaginable.

Throughout the ancient and medieval eras, goods and crops, people and diseases, and customs and religious practices circulated across the Afro–Eurasian landmass. However, it was not until the innovative new maritime technologies of the fifteenth century that the entire globe began to develop into a unified marketplace. Entrepreneurial pursuits were not new, but the opportunities created between the sixteenth and eighteenth century were. Improved transportation enabled the quest for new trade routes and goods, ultimately increasing the volume of trade, making ‘exotic’ commodities more accessible than ever before. This transformation ultimately inspired the organization of a ‘global’ economy where Spanish silver mined in Peru was shipped through the Philippines on its way to China, while coffee grown in Africa was transported on Arab ships through the Red Sea to reach Mediterranean markets. The Portuguese and Spanish commercial empires moved raw materials and new products from Africa, Asia, and the Americas to serve the novel demands of European consumers, creating new markets at home and abroad. Other European countries strove to compete, with the English, French, and Dutch carving out new enclaves with their own merchant navies. In some regions, European merchants and shipping displaced traditional economic exchanges, but in most places European traders merely attempted to insert themselves within
developed regional economies.

Historians and economists have spent decades unpacking the details of the global economy. From these studies, there is a consensus view of its basic features. Long-distance trade to Europe, initially flowing along the Silk Roads from China, enlarged with the improved maritime technologies of the Portuguese, establishing new overseas trade networks, first to sub-Saharan Africa, followed by the Indian Ocean. The Spanish ‘discovery’ of the Americas led to the formation of a booming ‘triangle’ trade across the Atlantic, creating an integrated economic sphere for multiple European and African kingdoms with new colonies across the ocean. At the same time, Europeans made steady inroads into the vast Asian trading spheres, establishing direct, maritime access to the diverse goods, economies, and peoples from the Middle East to Japan, bypassing, to a degree, the traditional Silk Roads that spanned Eurasia. Furthermore, the addition of the new maritime routes also increased the volume of exchanges, as caravels simply carried greater volumes than traditional overland caravans could. While it has tempted many to establish economic ‘success’ or ‘superiority’ in the competitive early modern markets, the essential fact is that most national economies grew with the addition of new goods and merchants entering the marketplace, though some may have done so faster than others.

No country failed to regulate its new economy. National economic interest meant state regulation for its own ‘profit’, an economic system later described as mercantilism. It centred on one primary goal—to accumulate specie through a favourable balance of trade achieved through an export economy or at least domestic autarchy. Historical discussions over the nuances of the mercantilist economy are exhaustive; there is general agreement that early modern countries strove to achieve a protectionist economy, using some variation of tariffs on imports, regulation through trade monopolies, taxes on sales, and expansion into new markets, either through subsidies, trade penetration, or outright colonization.

The great danger of any analysis of the early modern economy is the expectation of a natural progress to a modern, capitalist, industrial economy. While industrialization may have created a booming economy in the nineteenth century, viewing the early modern period as a stage on the road to industrialization threatens to distort an understanding of earlier development and growth as specific, early modern, features. Throughout the early modern era, Europe’s economy grew and expanded its global reach, but the world’s leading economies in terms of scale, markets, and production were all in South and East Asia. Europe’s early modern success was in gaining a share of the Asian market, not in advancing along the road to capitalism.

With a plurality of topics and actors, it is impossible for any single essay to unpack the early modern global economy. To shed some light on this complex development, this contribution will examine the broad outlines of economic change as well as considering a few illustrative examples to provide a window into this evolution. It will begin with a discussion of the transition from the traditional overland trade routes to the higher-volume maritime routes around the globe following the fifteenth century as seen in three individual experiences, then discuss the growing regulation of economic structures as various European countries attempted to guide the expansive pathways into more regular channels to maximize government profits, and end with a brief consideration of a few of the new ‘global’ commodities to illustrate the divergent pathways that became part of the world economy. By the eighteenth century, both Europeans and their governments had been fundamentally changed by the expansion of the global economy in ways large and small, leaving no one unaffected.

Expanding Trade

There is no doubt that global trade expanded in the early modern era. Why it did so, however, is still very much of an open question. For most of the twentieth century, historians argued for the inevitability of European economic dominance in a positivistic framework that expected industrialization (or modernization) as the inevitable outcome of history. Europe’s domestic fortunes improved from agricultural innovations and proto-industrial (or putting-out) production, leading to a search for new resources globally. European empires expanded, so the theory goes, with a combination of military force, capital, and religious zeal to dominate the global economy. Since the 1970s, both economic historians and those working in the
emerging field of world history have offered a revisionist economic model that encompassed a more diverse global economy, dominated by the superiority of Asian production, markets and, especially important, population. European economic dominance in the modern era had not been challenged, though its success was perhaps later than some historians have suggested. More recently, research from around the world addressed the issue of economic growth to better understand the ebbs and flows of the global economy, though a consensus has been reached on the superiority of the early modern Asian economy, especially China’s, compared to Europe. The early modern global economy rested in robust local markets around the world, in which both European and Asian merchants fostered new connections as transportation technology improved. One of the keys to this new economy may have been the breakthrough of the caravel for transport, but the European-led long-distance oceanic trade did not displace traditional sea or caravan routes, but rather grew the economy in new ways.

The diffusion of religions such as Buddhism or Zoroastrianism may be seen as cultural appropriations, but the transmission of new ideas was also accompanied by the spread of material goods. The Afro–Eurasian landmass had long been unified by an expansive trading network. Archaeologists have dated the first evidence of pre-modern ‘Silk Roads’ as early as 2000 B.C.E., with evidence of regular exchanges increasing in the first and second centuries B.C.E. With Europe and northern Africa on the western end of these routes, goods, plants and crops, diseases, and customs and practices, including religious beliefs, moved between east and west, travelling through the Middle East, Central Asia, and China. For example, when Greek medical knowledge arrived in seventh-century Tibet, it arrived in the form of imported medicines and texts, diversifying both Tibetan cultural frameworks and the local economy.

As populations grew and adapted to new environmental challenges, the original Silk Roads through the Middle East were supplemented by a new, ‘northern’ route, running from China through Siberia, and then across the Eurasian steppe in the seventh or eighth century C.E. After that period, the volume of trade, and the regions connected to these routes, only increased. The Samanids of Central Asia, for example, had a robust trade with Baltic Norsemen in the tenth and eleventh centuries, exchanging silver jewellery and other decorative items for fur, amber, wood, honey, and slaves. By the fourteenth century, Europeans from France to Russia could be the proud owners of Syrian glass or Chinese pottery, and Asian silk, arriving from China, Central Asia, and the Middle East, became available throughout the continent.

Despite the variety of commodities already available, Europeans hoped to find alternatives to the existing routes, heavily dependent on transit through Muslim countries, and to discover new markets abroad as well as new goods (see Map 12.1). The scientific and technological improvements in maritime technology in the fifteenth century created an opportunity to establish water-routes to Asia, which increased the volume of goods moving back and forth, and to discover new lands in the Americas and eventually throughout the Pacific Rim. These new routes would prosper alongside the existing overland Silk Roads, which continued to be utilized by merchants throughout Eurasia. It is also important to note that many states aggressively competed to control new or old routes and to monopolize jurisdiction in order to maximize their own profits. Early modern Europeans did not foresee oceans open to all, but rather envisioned the seas ‘as a space crossed in many directions by jurisdictional corridors’, in the words of one recent scholar. Each state saw the seas as a series of linked passages between their varied ports and colonies. When different states’ paths ‘crossed’, the result could be naval conflict. While the opportunities created by deep sea voyages opened the world to new commercial opportunities, it was not seen as an opportunity for all, but rather a claim for space that needed to be aggressively defended.

Oceanic exchanges expanded the global marketplace, as the new naval technology allowed all of the world’s regions to be economically integrated for the first time. With Spain’s establishment of its new colony at Manila in 1571, its first port in its future colony of the Philippines, Spanish merchants could now deliver South American silver directly to the markets in China. After 1571, then, Spanish merchants and sailors could circumnavigate the world and find European ports throughout their
voyage, creating a fully ‘global’ trade network. For the first time, the world’s regions were connected in a ‘unified’ economic system, which would then continue to grow and expand into new spaces throughout the early modern era. In other words, 1571 marked the start of an identifiably global era of economic exchange.\footnote{As Spain was the first European country to establish a trans-Pacific trade route, there is a good reason to accept 1571 as the year in which global trade began. Others, however, have argued that the world’s economy had been integrated already with the inclusion of the Americas into the Atlantic world following Columbus’s voyage in 1492. Certainly Asian goods had long been a part of Europe’s economy, travelling overland on the Silk Roads, and Portuguese oceanic travel to the Indian Ocean throughout the sixteenth century had reached Southeast Asian markets, if not Australia or New Zealand, decades before the establishment of Manila. Most of maritime Europe—Portugal and Spain, but also Britain, France, and the Netherlands—established maritime networks and regulated relations with Asian nations or new colonies between the mid-sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century. All of these theories emphasize the role of Europeans in developing global trade networks. This is not to imply that Europeans ‘invented’ global trade, but rather to highlight the ways in which Europeans exploited new opportunities, enabled by changing transport technology. The Afro–Eurasian Silk Roads were one set of linked regional markets, complemented by a series of multiple zones of maritime commerce in the Indian and Pacific Oceans (see Map 12.2). In the sixteenth century, European merchant navies joined these existing trade networks, in some cases becoming the primary shippers for Asian merchants, even though they failed to make a great impression on the overland traffic. The end result may have been something new, but it was facilitated by numerous pre-existing trade networks worldwide.}

Though most assessments of the global economy have placed an emphasis on the role of the Asian markets, other scholars working in the Atlantic world have argued that European economic growth emerged directly from their profits in the triangle trade, suggesting that while the Asian economy was important to Europe it was not the primary motive force for European economic growth.\footnote{Even with the varied critiques of the general emphasis on the importance of Asia to Europe’s economic growth, the majority of the scholarship agrees that a share of Asian trade was the goal for European states, if not necessarily the only means of encouraging growth. This means neither that all European endeavours succeeded, nor that all nations participated equally. The overall system was global in scope, but ultimately it was a story of individuals and small exchanges in local markets that could widely diverge in time and place. Merchants could be successful even if the route itself failed to produce steady trade. Even in a ‘failed’ attempt to establish a new trade entrepôt or economic foothold in a foreign market, a single merchant might prosper. To understand this dynamic, I will explore the new economy and its opportunities by considering the trade missions of several individual merchants, which will reveal the multiple opportunities in this geopolitical endeavour and the complex competition that drove state interests.}

As for example, Abel Jansz Tasman was a member of the Verenigde Oost­Indische Compagnie (VOC, or Dutch East India Company), who was tasked by the Company to lead an exploratory voyage to Australia as a potential new market in 1644. While his voyage failed to produce novel opportunities for the VOC, upon the completion of his expedition, Tasman was rewarded with a high office in Batavia, the Dutch colony in Indonesia, later leading a trade mission to Siam in 1647 and a skirmish against the Spanish in the Philippines the following year. Though the VOC never established successful commerce in Australia, his voyage reflects the pursuit of new opportunities that was a constant among all European merchants and companies. Tasman included his analysis of the possible opportunities for a new market, keeping records of ‘what facilities (as regards fresh water, refreshments, timber and the like) may be available’ on the coast. His opinion was mixed but generally positive: the vegetables were ‘not unlike a certain plant growing at the Cape of Good Hope, and fit to be used as pot­herbs, and another species with long leaves and a brackish taste, strongly resembling persil
Indeed, Tasman’s discussion of the extended, but arguably successful, process of establishing trade contacts with the indigenous community would have been familiar to any European explorer. On his first meeting with the local community, one Dutch sailor threw a length of white linen off the side of the ship to them; once the linen was worn by the locals, the Dutch crew accepted this as a positive sign to start a greater exchange.

Tasman wrote that ‘we threw out to them a piece of wood to which we had fastened two large nails; we then handed out to them a small Chinese looking-glass with a string of Chinese beads, which they drew up into their fish-hooks with a small fishing-line, which they handed up to us to show their gratitude. This fish-hook was made of mother-of-pearl, and shaped like a small anchovy.’ He went on to offer more of each, plus a knife, once he made landfall. It was a success, as the next morning the Dutch were offered ‘cocoa-nuts, yams, plantains, bananas, hogs and fowls’ which they received for only a small amount of cloth and a few ‘old nails’. While not a long-term marketplace for the VOC, the voyage made Tasman’s career in the company.

Tasman’s experience was an individual one rather than a company or state accomplishment, but this outcome reflected a reality in the early modern global economy. Individuals could frequently prosper from their entrepreneurial efforts, even in cases where the ‘greater’ benefit for the mother country was slim to none. Frenchman Jean Chardin, for example, travelled extensively through the Middle East, in particular Safavid Iran, making a name for himself and his craft. He was a jeweller by trade, but France’s inhospitable climate for Protestants in the middle of the seventeenth century inspired his journeys abroad. Chardin made three separate journeys to Iran in the 1660s and 1670s, which were reflected in his extensive narrative of society, politics, and commerce in that country. His long residence in Isfahan, and good relations with the local authorities, were a contrast to the lack of success of the Compagnie française pour le commerce des Indes orientales (French EIC, or East India Company). In addition to recording life in Iran, Chardin also kept records of the company’s ongoing efforts to become established. This included a letter from M. Caron in Iran to the Director of the French EIC, dated 29 May 1665, that detailed the struggle in Asia. Caron was particularly frustrated by the Dutch success in dominating the spice trade, as they controlled the production and transportation of nutmeg, mace, cloves, and cinnamon, which left the French with few profitable opportunities. The Dutch, he wrote, ‘carry on such a Trade in the Indies, and in Europe, as brings in such immense Gains, that if it were to have no other Trade but that alone, it would be sufficient to keep and maintain it, as on the Contrary, if it were deprived of the Possession of those Spices, it could not even Subsist’. While he acknowledged that the Portuguese and the English established their own trade in Asian silk, linen, saltpetre, and indigo, it did ‘not yield them any considerable Profit’. While the French East India Company may have failed to displace the Dutch from the spice trade, at least in the seventeenth century, merchants such as Chardin prospered in the Middle East. Chardin’s fame as a long-term resident of Isfahan facilitated his return to Europe, where he took up residence in London, as France, and perhaps its East India Company, remained inhospitable to him.

These cases are not to imply that European companies, or states, failed to prosper in Asia’s marketplace. The Dutch, as Caron complained, dominated the spice trade from their colony at Batavia. The Portuguese had a similarly profitable colony established in Macao, which provided them with access to the benefits of the China trade. Success, however, did not diminish the interest in even greater profitability, which was the inspiration for Tasman’s voyage. The Portuguese similarly invested time in attempting to establish a permanent trade delegation in the Kingdom of Siam, with mixed results. One of these expeditions was led by Pero Vaz de Siqueira, a Portuguese man born in Macao. His father held a high position in the colony, and trained Siqueira for a life in commerce. In the 1640s, he accompanied his father on a trade embassy to Japan, and would later lead one of the missions to Siam as the officially appointed envoy to the court. The 1684 expedition was not a success. Siqueira’s account of it provides numerous reasons for its shortcomings; he was not even capable of writing a full report while there. ‘The routes are so insecure’, he wrote, ‘that it could have fallen into the hand of those who could harm the vassals of His Highness serving in the Kingdom.’ Fortunately, he concluded, the Portuguese still held Macao, though he was fearful about the growing influence of the French Jesuits in Beijing. He reported with alarm the recent mission of Dom Francisco Palù, though he did ‘not yet have news of what this Servant of God has done there’, it was well known that the Jesuits ‘have achieved what they so strongly desired’. This desire, according to Siqueira, could only be seizing control over all trade from China.
Even in a successful situation, most merchants feared its immediate loss. While the Portuguese and Dutch would be displaced in the eighteenth century by the British and the French, the European presence in the market continued, just following new routes through new colonies. The experiences of Tasman, Chardin, and Siqueira demonstrate the diverse experiences and opportunities for Europeans in the global marketplace. Some routes were established and perennially profitable, but this never stopped the interest in greater explorations, the continuing hope for new profits, and the opportunity for an individual’s success.

Regulating Commerce

In 1663, an English embassy led by the Earl of Carlisle travelled to Muscovite Russia. Failing to make any significant breakthroughs in Anglo–Russian trade relations, a member of the Earl’s embassy observed that the Russians ‘will in time leave off that rustick and barbarous humor, which is so natural to them, and learn by degrees to live with more civility . . . And were they under a gentler Government, and had a free Trade with every body, no doubt but this Nation would in short time be taken with our civility and decent way of living’.21 Even in this short passage, the plan for English economic expansion was clear. The first step was the establishment of free trade between the countries, which would produce widespread cultural change as the Russians adopted the superior English customs. In the end, a transformed Muscovy would become a natural market for English goods, producing only increased profits. This plan remained essentially unchanged from the beginning of regularized trade between England and Muscovy in the sixteenth century to the eighteenth, despite the lack of success in changing Muscovite culture in the direction of an English-inspired model.

As both new goods and increased volumes of older luxuries arrived on European shores, potential profits created domestic concerns. Diaspora merchant communities jostled in European markets alongside domestic ones, and the competition for customers led to increasing demands from both local populations and their state governments for greater regulation. For the merchants, eliminating (or at least, restricting) foreign competition would increase profit margins. Foreign merchants, meanwhile, pressured governments for eased regulations to allow greater freedom to operate within European markets. For the governments, potential tax revenues were not only desirable, but increasingly necessary, for ongoing international competition throughout the early modern era. Constant military conflicts at home and abroad in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries led to the rise of new state regulations, in order to supply burgeoning armies.22

In other words, the expansion of the global economy was inextricably linked to the rise of new regulations on commerce. While Carlisle’s embassy feared Russia’s cultural rejection of new goods, it was Russian trade restrictions on the English operations that created the difficulty. This was not unusual in the early modern period when most European governments established protection over their domestic economy, with high tariffs on foreign merchants and companies, lower rates for their own groups, and, above all else, monopolies to regulate individual industries. Selling a monopoly licence for either the sales of a specific region or rights to trade with a specific reason was a method to minimize potential risk and to produce steady taxes for the state. The sales of goods may rise and fall, the transport of goods might be impeded by nature, warfare, or foreign rejection of European arrival, but requiring merchants to pay for those privileges yearly, regardless of the outcome, guaranteed the states’ interest.

As both domestic and foreign regulations were transformed, sometimes inspired by internal necessity but at others by foreign pressures, it is impossible to offer a single answer to why protectionism was appealing.23 As a partial solution to this multifaceted development, I consider the formation and evolution of the first successful long-term joint-stock company established in Europe, the Muscovy Company of London. While Britain sits well within the conceptual borders of ‘Europe’, west Europeans considered Russia to be outside of that ideological space in the sixteenth century. The interaction between the Muscovy Company and the Tsar’s government led to a transformation of commercial regulations in both countries, but, in many ways, the evolution of the economic system in Russia by the end of the seventeenth century resembled that already in place in Britain in the sixteenth. In other words, regulating commerce not only provided economic benefits for the ‘mother’
country in Europe but also inspired a parallel evolution that exported European business practices to other parts of the world. In Russia’s (p. 319) case, the changing trade policies produced economic regulations that more closely resembled a European model than when these exchanges began.

England had a long tradition of commercial enterprises licensed by the government. The Company of Merchant Adventurers of London received a royal licence at the beginning of the fifteenth century, and held an exclusive monopoly to export cloth. A similar group was organized in Bristol, which sponsored John Cabot’s expedition that discovered Newfoundland in 1497. In 1552, King Edward VI granted this Bristol Society of Merchant Venturers a monopoly over all of Bristol’s sea trade. Though both had origins in medieval guilds, these licensed companies established a precedent of monopolizing long-distance trade; the benefit to the state was in the upfront payment for a licence, rather than any anticipation of future tax revenue. In 1555, the Muscovy Company was chartered as a joint-stock company, with an exclusive privilege for trade with Russia. Its charter followed Richard Chancellor’s discovery of a direct sea route to Russia’s shore through the Arctic Sea, and reached a successful conclusion with his arrival in Moscow in 1553. The joint-stock company was innovative and ultimately beneficial to the British government. Investors gathered together to purchase a licence to trade with a specific region, in this case Muscovite Russia, paid an upfront licence fee to the English government, and then attempted as the best they could to profit from the potential trade transactions. The profits from the enterprise were sufficient to entice later companies to strike similar deals with the English government, including the Jamestown Company for Virginia, the Africa Company, and the well-known East India Company (British EIC), all shortly after 1600. Nor was Britain alone, as the sixteenth century would also witness the formation of similar institutions in most countries, including the Dutch VOC and the French EIC. Only Portugal left its Asian merchants under the direct control of a state institution, the Estado da India, rather than in the hands of the ‘private’ joint-stock groups.

The initial agreement between Tsar Ivan IV of Russia and the Muscovy Company provided tax-free status for English merchants in Russia. With an advantageous position for trade, the volume of goods exchanged steadily increased, leading to the establishment of a new port at Arkhangel’sk, on the Arctic Sea, in 1584. English success, however, attracted interest from other Europeans, particularly the Dutch, who became a permanent presence in the Russian market by the end of the sixteenth century. From that point on, the Russian government gained an advantage by negotiating between two fierce competitors for Russian goods, though the trade would benefit all parties.

By the 1620s, the English and Dutch entered a competition to control Russian exports through monopolies, particularly for tar, potash, and caviar. While the English Muscovy Company still had tax-free trading rights in Russia, the Dutch did not. If the English held an export monopoly, the only profit for the Tsar was the cost of the licence, whereas the Dutch paid both the licence and taxes. In other words, the entry of the Dutch into the market resulted in steadily increasing revenue for the Russians as the cost of the monopoly licences surged. In addition, the Dutch signed a treaty with the Iranian shah in 1619 that allowed them to export silk through Russia, inspiring new frustrations for the Muscovy Company. Therefore, it was not a surprise that by the 1630s, the Muscovy (p. 320) Company aimed not only to seize control of the Russian export monopolies but also to control access to the Volga River to prevent Dutch exports of Iranian silk.26

English hopes in Moscow continued to be frustrated. The outbreak of the English Civil War in the 1640s led to the termination of the Muscovy Company’s tax-free status in 1649. At the same time, the Russian government became more active in regulating its own economy, beginning a comprehensive overhaul of trade regulations with its new law code that same year, including new fees for transportation and customs posts, higher rates for seals necessary to certify transactions, and restrictions on unlicensed businesses. Though the west European merchants were exasperated at their changing economic position in Russia, the Russian government achieved a regulation greater than ever before, providing the Tsar with a better negotiating position than he had previously held.

Both English and Dutch merchants continued to prosper from the Russia trade, but their reaction to the increasing Russian restrictions largely bordered on panic. England, in particular, witnessed a flurry of strident defences of the loss of English merchants’ right of ‘free trade’, in other words, their right of unrestricted trade with foreign countries, with severe
restrictions on any competitors. Thus the perception of deteriorating status in Russia was not blamed on the Russian government for regulating its own economy, but rather was presumed to be the fault of the Dutch for entering the Russian marketplace in any capacity.

The mercantile English public was convinced that the Muscovy Company, one of several joint-stock companies operating in the seventeenth century, bore some responsibility for its own failures. During the second half of the seventeenth century, a part of the ongoing free trade debates speculated that joint-stock companies and monopolies, at home and abroad, were in fact the cause of economic losses. For example, an anonymous pamphlet published in London in 1691 offered no doubt that ‘All Joynt-Stocks in Trade are in themselves a Monopoly’, listing the numerous companies in operation. If these monopolies prevented trade, then the solution was clear: ‘All Trade out to be Free and under no Constraint, this being every Subjects Natural Right; Joynt-Stocks and other Limitations of Trade, tend chiefly to the enriching of a few, in prejudice to the general Good of a Nation, Subjecting it to a double Tax.’

While a debate over the best means of increasing trade revenue began in England, the Russian government continued to pursue further regulations and restrictions on foreign trade, a decision mirroring most European states in the seventeenth century. The New Commercial Code of 1667 expanded the restrictions for all merchants, not only charging foreign merchants punitive tariffs on all trade goods but also physically restricting all foreign merchants inside the kingdom. Foreign merchants could conduct business only at designated border trading posts: Arkhangel’sk on the Arctic Sea for the English and Dutch; Novgorod, Pskov, Smolensk, and Putivl’ for overland trade from Sweden, Poland, and central Europe; Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea for all trade with ‘Asia’, spanning from the Middle East to China. Russia’s New Commercial Code was a clear plan for creating a state-managed zone of trade within the interior of Moscow. Foreign goods, including valuable commodities such as Iranian silk and Chinese tea, could still be transported through the interior of Russia for foreign merchants, but the transit was now controlled by the Russian government. Alongside the commercial code, the government licensed a new ‘Armenian Company’ to assume responsibility for all transportation of goods from Iran and India to Moscow, and the older ‘Bukharan Company’ continued to transport goods from China. As state-sponsored transportation monopolies, both groups were required to pay upfront costs for their licences to the government, guaranteeing funds to the Russian coffers regardless of the success of the English or Dutch in managing their trade with Asia.

Over the course of a few decades, Russia’s economic position had been improved by its new regulations and restrictions on west European merchants’ right of ‘free trade’. Merchants arriving on Russia’s borders from Europe and Asia protested against the newly invasive inspections, with little result in altering the policies. The reason is obvious. While some merchants felt wronged by the new procedures, the state had far more to gain by collecting customs duties than it did in accommodating the interests of foreign merchants. Despite the changing conditions, the English envoy in Moscow during the early eighteenth century, Charles Whitworth, remained convinced that English merchants were just about to reap the financial windfall of Iranian trade along the Volga. ‘The English Trade would still increase considerably if any expedient could be found to reconcile the interests of the Muscovite and East India Companys about introducing raw Silk from a Province of Persia call’d Chilan, which lies on the Caspian Sea.’ In order to accomplish this sensible goal, the English hoped to displace the Armenian intermediaries in the trade, who were delivering Iranian silk to their Dutch employers. Sadly for Whitworth’s ambitions it would not be until 1734 that the Muscovy Company would receive the right to purchase and ship Iranian goods through Russia, and, perhaps worse, the results were poor. In a letter to the British Foreign Secretary, the chairman of the Company, Jacob Wolff, considered the benefits of the Iranian trade ‘insignificant’, as ‘our Merchants having lost considerable sums’ for their efforts. However, the losses were rather one-sided, as the Russians had long benefited from strictly regulating English efforts in their markets. It may not have been ‘free trade’, but it still could be beneficial for local authorities.

This should not imply that the economy was strictly regulated at all levels. While the English failed in their public attempts to establish a new trade with Russia, smuggling proved to be a viable option not only for the English merchants but also for the English ambassadors. Though the scale of the trade is difficult to document, English entrepreneurs smuggled Chinese goods from Russia to London throughout the eighteenth century, circumventing the East India Company’s privileges by labelling
commodities like tea as ‘gifts’ rather than as commercial goods. The Russian government, unsurprisingly, had no objection to the merchants flouting British restrictions, as the merchants had the legal right to buy Chinese goods in Russia. If the Silk Road continued to deliver desirable goods to Moscow and St. Petersburg, Western merchants would seek new ways to profit from it. As long as local authorities benefited from this ‘smuggling’, it would persist as a valuable exchange.

Following 1667, the Russian government had implemented sufficient policies that its foreign trade was as ‘protected’ as any other European state. It had a guaranteed revenue from the sale of export and transport monopolies, established new customs inspections and regulations to keep merchants on the border and paying regular tariffs and sales taxes, and had even begun developing its own merchant companies loosely based on the joint-stock companies that had become popular across the continent. The Russian government attempted to launch its own joint-stock companies in the eighteenth century, but its economy had long since been transformed to the standard established in early modern Europe. Despite the ongoing discussion of free trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the new global economy was controlled through restrictions on movement, trade, and production, not open opportunities.

Commodities

The development of a global, maritime economy transformed domestic markets worldwide. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, sugar from the Caribbean, tobacco from the Americas, and silver from Spanish America (where it had been discovered at almost the same time in Potosi [Alto Peru, in present-day Bolivia] and Zacatecas [present-day Mexico]) had become embedded in the European economy. The Indian Ocean littoral and Asia had been no less affected, as maritime transport only increased the volume of silk from Iran, madras from India, spices from Southeast Asia, and silk, porcelain, and tea from China. Nor was the impact of new commodities limited to Europe, as American tobacco, potatoes, corn, and cane sugar became global products, as did coffee from East Africa, among others.

The study of the production, diffusion, and reception of commodities has been one of the most fruitful areas of recent research. Scholars have offered varied methods for approaching the topic, depending on their own academic area. The 1980s witnessed the innovative idea of studying a ‘commodity chain’, explicitly linking the production process to the final consumption of the goods. As an integral feature of the early modern world where new commodities were discovered, and then imported to Europe, this link served as an important reminder to consider the condition of production as affecting consumption habits and the commodity’s value. In the 2000s, a different approach was offered, suggesting that we analyse a ‘commodity network’, in which the ‘connections between actors are seen as complex webs of interdependence’ rather than as a linear set of links. At the same time, while economists and geographers navigated between understanding chains or networks, ethnographers and anthropologists placed their focus on the process of ‘localization’, a term referring to the articulation of consumption habits as different ethno-linguistic groups refashioned the product within their own cultural contexts. Smoking tobacco in London, for example, was quite distinct from chewing tobacco in Indonesia. The product was the same, but the consumption habits reflected the interests and values of these unique societies.

Considering the variety of viable methods for studying the importance of commodities’ exchanges in the early modern world, I will focus on four commodities that reveal different aspects of the global marketplace: tobacco, silver, rhubarb, and yerba mate. This is far from a complete list of the varieties of goods transported around the world in this era, but will provide a glimpse into the different patterns of consumption to illustrate the value of restoring goods, and the people who produced and consumed them, into the narrative of economic history.

Christopher Columbus led the first European expedition to encounter tobacco in the Americas, and it quickly became a featured product on the sixteenth-century voyages of exploration in the Atlantic. The diffusion of tobacco as a mass product took most of the century, but between the 1570s and 1610s, consumption of tobacco became a global phenomenon. Tobacco’s reception upon its first arrival in a new country reflected a typical process for most new commodities in the early modern era. Initial scepticism from state authorities, if not an outright ban, was followed quickly with legalization, as the local
government discovered the revenue to be made regulating the import, production, or export of leaf or finished tobacco products. With most countries in Europe, Asia, and the Americas implementing frankly discriminatory tariff and subsidy policies designed to raise revenue from the global economy, tobacco found a role as another profitable commodity. Of course, in countries with an ideal climate for production, or at least with suitable colonies, the transformation of tobacco from suspicious foreign product to a domestic good was easiest. Spain and Portugal, for example, developed tobacco plantations in their American colonies as a potential cash crop that was easy to produce, which in turn led to large profits. Spain experimented first in its Latin American colonies with tremendous success. Portuguese success was similar, with the early emergence of Bahia in Brazil as one of the major centres of tobacco export from the New World.

Iberian success was in fact so considerable that England was encouraged to develop its own tobacco plantations in the Chesapeake Bay, in order to prevent the drain of specie to Spain for tobacco exports from the New World. Pamphleteers such as Edward Bennett, in his Treatise touching the Importation of Tobacco out of Spaine, argued that it would be in the kingdom’s best interest to develop tobacco plantations in Virginia to avoid a dependence upon imported tobacco.41 England’s own colonies afforded an excellent opportunity to defend the Crown’s exchequer, perfectly expressing the early modern economic orthodoxy. As the Virginian plantations became commercially viable by the 1620s, merchants in England and Scotland invested heavily to expand production and reap the financial benefits. The mercantile support for tobacco production emerged in spite of the strong condemnation of tobacco throughout England. King James I, with his famous Counterblaste to Tobacco, was the most notable, but he was powerless to defy the wishes of a mercantile parliament. English trading interests could argue that as long as the money was kept within the empire, no revenue was lost. Furthermore, potential exports would in fact create revenue, enriching England’s colonial and mercantile interests.

Even countries without the ability to support domestic production at home or in their colonies accepted tobacco as a consumer product. Both the Dutch and the French experimented with tobacco production at home and abroad, but with middling success. France’s American colonies eventually produced sufficient leaf to meet domestic demand, but France never became a volume exporter. For the Dutch, the problem was greater. Not a colonial power on a large scale, or at least with suitable tobacco-producing land, the Dutch followed their established economic model: that of the middlemen of Europe. Dutch merchants purchased tobacco from England, Spain, and smaller producers like the French, mixed the leaf with low-cost tobacco stalks that could be chopped to produce a pseudo-leaf, and then marketed the mixture as high-quality ‘Virginian’ leaf. The Baltic market in the seventeenth century, in fact, was dominated by Dutch-sold tobacco, much to the indignation of English traders, who saw it as another Dutch tactic to undermine English economic strength.

State entrepreneurship could produce sufficient tariffs to entice other reluctant tobacco countries. Sweden, for example, attempted domestic tobacco cultivation in order to limit its reliance on imported leaves. However, by purchasing Dutch tobacco and then reselling the product to interior countries, Russia in particular, Swedish merchants generated revenue for the state through customs duties without any exertion on the part of Swedish merchants or any reliance on its initially small domestic production. As a result of a Russian military defeat, the Treaty of Stolbovo (1617) stipulated that Russian merchants deal only with Swedish agents. This gave Swedish trade an exclusive position in the Russian–Baltic trade, inserting Swedish middlemen into all port cities where the Russians could purchase Baltic goods, such as in Riga, Reval, and Narva.42

The producer and middleman models may be applied nearly universally. Among the Muslim empires, the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals all produced and sold tobacco soon after its introduction in the early seventeenth century. In each case, Muslim religious authorities protested against tobacco’s arrival as a moral danger, which temporarily halted its consumption, much to the dismay of English and Dutch merchants.43 However, the export potential of domestically produced leaf rendered religious prohibitions against importation and consumption moot. In each country, tobacco had been prohibited upon its initial entry, but each government reversed its decision shortly thereafter.

In India, the British EIC began curing tobacco in its factories as early as 1612. In response to tobacco’s arrival, Emperor Jahangir forbade smoking by decree in 1617, but revenue from Mughal taxes on tobacco were too great to ignore. By the
In the 1620s, the Mughals allowed commercial tobacco production inside their borders, creating new opportunities for the EIC as an exporter of tobacco throughout Asia. The EIC charted a similar course in Iran, where Shah ‘Abbas prohibited tobacco early in the 1600s, followed by another ban in 1621, but conceded legalization while heavily taxing consumption. The taxes became a valuable source of state revenue, and tobacco remained legal; the EIC began selling tobacco by 1628–29. The Ottoman Sultan Murad IV (1623–40) attempted to ban tobacco a decade after its introduction into Turkey, but this failed to dissuade Ottoman subjects from adopting the habit. A fatwa issued shortly after Murad’s death declared tobacco smoking permissible. In each country, profits from the trade overrode prohibitions. The Muslim empires quickly became tobacco exporters, not only to each other but also to the Caucasus and Central Asia, including the trade entrepôt of Bukhara.

In late Ming China, as in Europe and Muslim Asia, officials found tobacco too valuable to ban. Tobacco was introduced to the country through multiple exchanges, from Portuguese merchants in the south and Spanish merchants in the Manila trade. By the early seventeenth century, tobacco was being domestically produced, even if the government did not officially recognize the product until the 1630s. The importance to the state emerged as a result of tobacco’s utility as a high-value commodity for trade with the Mongols and the indigenous communities in Siberia.

The only exception to the global diffusion of tobacco was Russia. Without question, tobacco had arrived in Moscow no later than 1609, when the pipe-smoking English envoy posted in Iaroslavl’ started ‘a great conflagration that caused much damage’, according to one eyewitness. However, Russian religious and government officials emphasized that it was a foreign product, whether Protestant, Muslim, or Chinese. Furthermore, Russia could not produce it, or adapt the Dutch or Swedish model easily, as it could neither be grown within the empire nor be easily resold to the ring of producers surrounding the state. The profits from the regulation of the tobacco trade that flowed to other state treasuries could not be tapped so easily when Russia could expect to be a consuming state, not a producer or middleman. Future tobacco merchants, as well as potential customers, faced the state’s almost categorical refusal to accept the drain of precious specie for a product with no investment value and no revenue potential.

By the 1620s, further tobacco incidents warned the Tsar of its ever increasing danger. In February 1627, the governor of the Siberian town of Tobol’sk petitioned Tsar Mikhail Fedorovich with a request for the Tsar to resolve the problem of the accumulating debts of military servitors in Siberia, incurred from their tobacco habits. The Tsar’s solution to this problem was a comprehensive blockade against tobacco’s presence. He decreed that no one would be allowed inside a Russian or Siberian city with tobacco, and that no merchant could be allowed to sell tobacco to a military servitor anywhere. Furthermore, any merchant caught with tobacco should be ‘exiled’ from Russian lands, physically removing the tobacco and any potential of it being purchased within Muscovy’s borders. The formal prohibition against tobacco was only the opening salvo in a long campaign to curtail tobacco sales and use. By 1633/34, the Tsar extended his ban on tobacco to all cities in Muscovy, ‘on pain of the death penalty’.

The ban was only reversed at the end of the seventeenth century, when Tsar Peter the Great arranged an import monopoly with a group of English merchants, who, in accordance with early modern trade regulations, were required to pay for the licence upfront. Sadly for the English, they spent the next decade protesting Russians’ disinterest in tobacco, as they failed to make a return on their investment. For the Russian government, however, once tobacco generated profits for the state’s coffers, it would remain a legal import.

Tobacco may have been one of the most successful exports from the Americas, but it was not the only commodity reaching a new audience in the early modern era. There was an expansive exchange of plants and animals across the Atlantic, and several others, including the potato, corn, and cane sugar, quickly established themselves as new global commodities with similar histories to tobacco. However, the consumables might not have had the greatest impact on the changing economy, as Andean silver ultimately became the causal force of European expansion into the Asian markets.

Not all of the global commodities of the early modern world were new. Silver, long known in Europe, became one of the driving forces of economic exchanges in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Following the discovery of a great silver lode in the Andean Mountains in 1545, the Spanish empire relied on its ability to extract silver to fund its global projects, both
wars in Europe and trade in China. American silver would comprise 70 per cent of the world’s silver production in the sixteenth century, and the labour necessary for mining turned the colonial outpost of Potosí in Alto Peru into one of the world’s largest cities in short order, with a population of 120,000 in 1573, larger than Madrid and Paris at that time.\(^{53}\)

Silver production came at a great cost to both the environment and the local population. While the new mines were first established along traditional lines, requiring charcoal for smelting the ore, the process failed to produce sufficient supply after the middle of the sixteenth century. By 1572, this supply problem led to the innovation of extracting silver from ore through an amalgamation process requiring mercury, with toxic results on the land and people. In addition, Spanish authorities in Alto Peru relied on a forced labour draft, the *mita*, to replenish the workforce, which faced a high mortality rate through overwork, lack of sufficient food and other supplies, and poisoned water.\(^{54}\)

Silver was, however, necessary for the new economy. While some of the American silver reached Europe, much of it travelled directly to Manila to facilitate Spanish purchases of Chinese goods, particularly tea, silk, and porcelain. The volume of trade rose steadily following the mercury innovation, peaking shortly after 1600. Though there was a decline in the trade in the middle of the seventeenth century, American silver returned as an important good for the China trade by the last quarter of the seventeenth century, and maintained that status until late in the eighteenth, when Europeans began to experiment with other goods desired by the Chinese market, including opium from South Asia and sandalwood from the Pacific.

Silver, like tobacco, demonstrates the complex geography of early modern commodities exchanges. While Potosí to Manila was a direct trade route, transforming Spanish colonial silver for new Chinese exports for Europe, Spain was not alone in the silver trade. Japan also had a silver boom in the sixteenth century, and Portuguese merchants acted as the middlemen for the Japan–China silver trade. It was the combination of American and Japanese silver that eventually brought sufficient hard specie to China in order to complete the monetization of its economy, which supported China’s economic growth in the early modern era.\(^{55}\) Though the Portuguese may have only been a small player in the silver trade, their success in Macao in the sixteenth century was linked to their middleman position between China and Japan, demonstrating that participating in the trade could have benefits beyond the production of the commodity.

In addition, while the trade in both tobacco and silver was facilitated by the transportation revolution enabled by new maritime technologies, this new trade co-existed (p. 327) easily alongside traditional overland Silk Roads. Chinese rhubarb, for example, was a highly desirable commodity in early modern Europe for its gastrointestinal health benefits. While the increasingly regular maritime trade with China could have supplied Europe’s needs, there was a belief that rhubarb was most efficacious if it was not exposed to the humidity of an ocean voyage. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier was another French Protestant jeweller, who, like Jean Chardin, travelled extensively in the Middle East but also to South and Southeast Asia in the 1630s and 1640s. He published a six-volume account of his travel observations, and appropriately included Chinese rhubarb as one of Asia’s most valuable commodities. Reflecting the common knowledge of the era, he confirms the fear of exposing rhubarb to water, which was minimized by transporting the product along the Silk Roads, but this was not a perfect solution: ‘if the Rains happen to fall, there is as much danger that way, so that there is no Commodity requires more care than that’.\(^{56}\) From the belief of men like Tavernier, an overland route was a necessity. Therefore, Chinese rhubarb was exported north to the Russian border city of Kiakhta, then across Siberia until it reached the Volga River, where it was transported north to Moscow, where various European merchants would purchase it.

While Europeans had generally relied on home-grown remedies in the medieval era, the global economy introduced new therapeutics that could cure a variety of ailments. In the late sixteenth century, England only imported approximately 15 per cent of its drugs from outside Europe, but that rose to 70 per cent by 1669. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, this included 10,000 pounds of rhubarb from China.\(^{57}\) The Russian government steadily increased its regulation of imported rhubarb. It assigned an official from the Pharmaceutical Chancery office to inspect and grade rhubarb at the border, and maintained its stock of imports in the high and dry climate of Kiakhta, rather than risking devaluing the drug by storing it in the colder and wetter conditions of Moscow and St. Petersburg.\(^{58}\) Rhubarb signals the continuing importance of overland
trade along the Silk Roads as well as the importance even a small-volume commodity could hold in the global marketplace, as any revenue-generating opportunity was actively pursued by multiple actors.

Despite the many ‘success’ stories of new commodities in the global marketplace, there were numerous commodities that failed to become export crops. A good example is the failure of *yerba maté* to expand beyond South America. *Yerba maté* is a tea produced from the leaves of a holly plant that was collected from wild crops, primarily in Paraguay, before European arrival. It is a caffeinated beverage, but it could not match the success of coffee, tea, and cacao in Europe. One possible reason for its failure was that the taste could simply have been unappealing to a European palate, though both coffee and cacao only became popular in Europe through the transformation of the product with a sweetener, an example of one way in which a commodity could be transformed as it was ‘localized’ for a new audience. Another possibility was that cultivation of domesticated *yerba maté* plants, to produce a sufficient volume for export, did not occur until the middle of the seventeenth century, when the other caffeinated beverages had already reached Europe. However, domestication did increase consumption of the product, at least locally. Between the 1650s and (p. 328) 1670s, Jesuits experimented successfully with the cultivation of the crop, increasing yields and successfully disseminating the *yerba maté* habit throughout parts of Spanish America. When the Society of Jesus was expelled from Spain’s American colonies in the 1760s, cultivation ended and the local community returned to harvesting wild plants. *Yerba maté*, however, long remained the most popular caffeinated beverage in Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, and parts of Brazil.

*Yerba maté* illustrates the complex process of the diffusion of a new commodity in the early modern world. Europeans encountered a new product, consumed in a small region, but then commercialized production and extended its reach, making it a daily custom among an extended population that would not have encountered it without European intervention. At the same time, though *yerba maté* undoubtedly spread, it also remained limited in a defined region, never extending beyond South America to Europe, Asia, or even Central America. As much as commodities have been upheld as the markers of globalization, it is necessary to accept that far more products remained local than became universal.

### The Global Economy

In 1743, André-François Boureau-Deslandes published *An Essay on the Navy and Commerce*, arguing that a good navy was not merely a necessity for national defence but also for the economic success of the country. After all, he opined, ‘trade will introduce abundance and wealth throughout the kingdom, which in turn will make it more powerful’.60 This is an argument that would have been familiar to John Wheeler, who predicted these sentiments in his defence of joint-stock companies, published in London in 1601 that began this chapter. If England’s joint-stock companies did not seize control over foreign trade, the country would be fundamentally weaker than its neighbours, not only in terms of the ongoing disputes with the Dutch but also with the Spanish and Portuguese.

The early modern economy was regulated through a series of protectionist policies that sit in opposition to a ‘modern’ belief in the merits of capitalism. Few, if any, believed in free trade in the modern sense of that term. Rather, the greatest benefit for the state was in extracting consistent revenue through monopolies, tariffs, and taxes, and preventing the drain of specie to foreign countries. This system was generally assembled through a set of mostly ad hoc policies that were adjusted, revised, and, on occasion, erratically enforced. It was not a stagnant system, but instead a dynamic one that ebbed and flowed, and responded to changing conditions and opportunities. The goal of these protections was to increase national strength, which most understood as military might.

Beyond the state concerns of accumulating specie to supply an army, merchants and the general population were utterly transformed by the emergence of the global economy. Heretofore unimagined goods became part of daily life. The few who directly prospered from the global marketplace could gain power and prestige from economic (p. 329) accomplishments, contributing to the ongoing transformation of European society. Even individuals such as Tavernier or Chardin, unwelcomed in their home country, could find solace from the fame brought to them from their international travels and knowledge of
At the same time, merchants were not the labour that drove the global economy. It is impossible to consider the history of mass production and consumption of new goods from the Americas without including the dependence on an exploitative and inhumane labour system. In the fifteenth century, the Portuguese brought slaves from Africa, first to Madeira and then throughout the Azores, as the new labour force for their sugar plantations. By the sixteenth century, both English and Dutch merchants were exporting African slaves to the Americas, first to supply the Spanish plantations, but soon after to supply the growing demand of their own colonies in the Caribbean and along the North American coast. In the first half of the twentieth century, scholars documented the degrading nature of slavery, in which people became commodities, whose value rested in their treatment as goods of exchange. Despite this important intervention, the field of world history has struggled to incorporate the human cost of globalization into its broader narratives, as the interest in the ‘global economy’ has focused on Europe’s interaction with Asia rather than the Atlantic world.

Nor was African slavery the only exploitative labour force utilized by European states to render their American colonies profitable. The Spanish imposed forced labour drafts on the indigenous communities in South America to supply the silver mines, and North American colonies were populated with indentured servants, most from poorer regions in Europe, alongside slaves to produce plantation crops such as sugar and cotton. In addition, these labour systems were not limited to utilizing men and women for their physical labour, as their reproductive labour was as valuable for its ability to produce a future labour force, leading slave owners to seek invasive control over slaves’ entire bodies. Furthermore, Europeans readily exported the new labour system, and its captive labour force, to their new Asian colonies, in which the Portuguese and Spanish once again proved early innovators. At the same time, this is not to imply that the slaves did not pursue multiple forms of resistance to the colonial economy as has been shown by studies of creole culture, new religious practices, and innumerable riots and rebellions, but it is necessary to understand the physical and moral costs of forging the global economy.

Though many earlier studies of the global economy have focused on relating stories of ‘success’ and ‘failure’, of determining whether or not Europe was ‘superior’ to Asia, the goal of this chapter has not been to evaluate the ultimate ‘winners’ from the new opportunities, but rather to suggest alternative ways of conceptualizing the process. The economy was not made by state-driven policies, but rather by individual merchants with personal goals and aspirations and by a workforce that was frequently dragooned into service in a cruel labour regime. At the same time, new commodities enriched and diversified the lives of ordinary Europeans who likely never saw beyond the boundaries of their local communities nor necessarily understood the process by which these goods were delivered. People were affected by the changing dynamics of global trade, and too often their experiences have been displaced by the attempt to resolve which state decision or technological innovation enabled new trade routes. The balance of trade was not seen in the accumulation of specie, but rather in the way a person who lived in 1750 was utterly different from one who lived in 1350.

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Notes:


(2.) This issue was raised in Jack A. Goldstone, ‘The Problem of the “Early Modern” World’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 41 (1998), 249–284.


(9.) For example, Stephen Frederic Dale documented the vibrant Indian mercantile community throughout the Middle East and Central Asia in his study, Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600–1750 (Cambridge, 1994).

(10.) Laura Benton, A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900 (Cambridge, 2010), 106.


(12.) Some scholars have argued for a plurality of years that marked the beginning of ‘global trade’. See, for example, Patrick Karl O’Brien and Leandro Prado de la Escosura, ‘The Costs and Benefits for Europeans from their Empires Overseas’, Revista de historia economica, 16 (1998), 29–89.


(16.) This is not to imply the indigenous community perceived the tossed out cloth as the start of trade. For a discussion of complexity of gift exchange in the Pacific, see Marshall Sahlins, ‘Cosmologies of Capitalism: The Trans-Pacific Sector of “The World System” ’, Proceedings of the British Academy, 74 (1988), 1–51.

(17.) Kenihan, Journal of Tasman, 47–49.


(20.) Seabra, The Embassy of Pero Vaz de Siqueira, 113.

(21.) Guy Miege, A Relation of Three Embassies from His Sacred Majestie Charles II to the Great Duke of Muscovie, the King of Sweden, and the King of Denmark (London, 1669), 62.


(25.) The English East India Company prioritized matching the Dutch treaty in Iran as its top priority. The National Archives, Kew (TNA), CO 77/4, East Indies Original Correspondence, 1570–1856, ff. 135r–136r., April 1629.

(26.) TNA, SP 91/2, Secretaries of State: State Papers Foreign, Russia, f. 244r., 1633.

(27.) In exile from England, the future King Charles II asked for the revocation of the tax-free status, to punish his rebellious subjects. TNA, PRO 22/60, #75, 16 September 1648.


(30.) Anon., *Companies in Joynt-Stock Unnecessary and Inconvenient: Free Trade to India in A Regulated Company, the Interest of England* (London, 1691), sig. A.


(32.) Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts, Moscow, f. 16, Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv, r. XVI, Vnutrennee upravljenie, op. 1, d. 709, ll. 100–101, 22 March 1677.

(33.) For the English response, see TNA, SP 91/3, Part 2, ff. 210r-212v, 16 September 1676.

(34.) TNA, SP 91/5, Part 1, ff. 34r.-37v., ‘Whitworth to Secretary Harley’, 31 January 1707.

(35.) TNA, SP 91/65, ff. 92r.-93v., ‘Wolff to Secretary Holderness’, 15 March 1757.

(36.) For example, TNA, SP 91/28, f. 116, ‘Edward Finch to Edward Weston’, 11/15 July 1741.


(41.) Edward Bennett, *A Treatise Touching the Importation of Tobacco from Spaine* (n.p., 1620).

(42.) Maria Bogucka, ‘The Role of Baltic Trade in European Development from the XVIth to the XVIIIth Centuries’, *The


(48.) Isaac Massa, *A Short History of the Beginnings and Origins of these Present Wars in Moscow under the Reign of Various Sovereigns down to the Year 1610*, trans. and ed. G. Edward Orchard (Toronto, 1982), 190.

(49.) *Russkaia istoricheskaia biblioteka*, vol. 8 (St. Petersburg, 1884), #27, no earlier than 27 April 1627, 451–452.


(52.) The classic study of this phenomenon is Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, 30th anniversary edn. (Westport, CT, 2003).


(54.) Moore, ‘*The Modern World-System*’, 336–337.


(56.) Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Collections of Travels through Turky into Persia, and the East-Indies*, vol. 1 (London, 1684), 182.


(60.) André-François Boureau-Deslandes, *Essai sur la marine et sur la commerce* (Lyon, 1743), 9.


(63.) For example, Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1944); or more recently, Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham, 2008).

(64.) This is not to imply that world historians have ignored the human costs. For example, Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley, 1982), 195–231.


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Asian Connections and Chinese Comparisons: The Unconquered East
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Abstract and Keywords

Many of early modern Europe’s connections to Asia were commercial in nature, in contrast to the colonial relations forged by Europeans in the Americas. This chapter considers the ways in which the connections that Europe had with Asia and the Americas provide a context for comparing the early modern political economies of China and Europe. Similarities and differences highlighted by this exercise help make clear both the dynamics of economic change common within both world regions as well as the character of their connections, illustrating important differences between them. The intellectual limitations of identifying historical parallels according to traits first observed in Europe is suggested by noting features of early modern Chinese political rule that are not observed in Europe until a later historical era. These topics illustrate various ways in which comparisons and connections to other world regions helps to place early modern Europe in a global history perspective.

Keywords: Connected histories, comparative history, economic divergence, international relations, maritime trade, political economy, Asia, China

A half century ago historians knew far more about Europe than they did about other parts of the world. Today we know even more about Europe. Our knowledge of the early modern era in particular has grown dramatically, as the chapters in these volumes make abundantly clear. At the same time knowledge of the early modern era in other parts of the world has also grown greatly and in the past few decades some of this scholarship is being translated into or directly produced in Western languages. We now recognize that many of the dynamic processes of historical change—commercialization, political centralization, urbanization, cultural consolidation—occurred both within Europe and beyond. With the publication of volume two of Victor Lieberman’s two-volume opus Strange Parallels in 2009, we probably have the greatest synthesis of scholarship on Eurasia dedicated to highlighting the common components of historical change particular to the early modern era, with coverage for some themes and places beginning in the ninth century. Reviewing briefly the successes and limitations of this project serves as an introduction to early modern European–Asian connections and the place of China in comparisons among Europe and other world regions.

As an historian of Burma, Lieberman was struck by discoveries he and other Southeast Asian specialists had made about political, economic, and social change in this world region that seemed similar to better known phenomena in European history. Lieberman’s massive work of synthesis continued a practice of Southeast Asian specialists engaging European historiography notably pursued by Anthony Reid who took inspiration from Fernand Braudel’s study of the Mediterranean to help frame his two-volume study of Southeast Asia between the mid-fifteenth and late seventeenth centuries. For Reid, the goal was to show the coherence of a world region within which there were shared patterns of material culture and social organization that distinguished the region from others at the same time as many of the commercial exchanges (p.335) and
The political processes affecting Southeast Asia were similar to those found elsewhere. Lieberman’s purpose has been somewhat different. He has attacked what he considers to be false dichotomies between European and non-European parts of the world. Initially, he argued that places in both Europe and beyond that were ‘rimlands’ of Old World civilizations and buffered against the destructive shocks emanating from Central Asia were in fact the sites of dynamic change in the early modern era. Certainly what Alfred J. Rieber has recently called the Eurasian borderlands for their links to Central Asia were indeed difficult places to mount the kinds of political, economic, and social changes found more readily in other world regions. Lieberman refined his 1997 account to accommodate evidence of economic and social change occurring in imperial China, an old civilization which did not fit his initial taxonomy. He also came to see Mughal India as a polity somewhere between a bureaucratically organized Chinese dynasty and the political fragmentation of Europe. By the end of volume two of *Strange Parallels*, Lieberman’s view of early modern Eurasia was both fleshed out and emptied of its original analytical arguments. By accommodating empirical information that did not fit his initial contrast of rimlands and old civilizations, Lieberman lost his taxonomy for imposing intellectual order upon early modern Eurasian history.

The similarities Lieberman initially stressed were subsequently qualified by unrelated differences, such as China’s early development of bureaucracy and its relationship to semi-nomadic peoples different from those encountered in other parts of Eurasia. How these contextual factors are meant to affect Lieberman’s strange parallels is unclear since the Chinese developed traits he attributed to geopolitical protection from Central Asia, while the formation of empire on the Chinese mainland has consistently involved relations between sedentary Han Chinese and peoples originating to their north in Inner and Central Asia. Thus *Strange Parallels* does little to prepare us for a new geometry capable of aligning knowledge about Europe and other world regions in a coherent and compelling manner. Not only does China not fit his schema, but we also lack many suggestions for explaining variations among his cases or much understanding of why other places in protected rimlands did not develop in the same ways as others. To understand what parallel social, economic, and political processes in different parts of the world might mean to our more general understanding of historical change we need to situate these within some sense of what are significant differences. Taking China as a salient example of the ‘unconquered East’ in early modern times, we might better see what are parallel and what are distinct patterns of historical change in the Chinese and European world regions—geographical spaces of roughly similar size with populations in China larger than Europe after the era of the Han (206 b.c.—220 a.d.) and Roman (27 b.c.—393 a.d.) empires when they had very similar populations at their respective peaks.

The ‘unconquered East’ is a term of geographical reference based on the vantage point of Europeans heading toward Asia. Concerning the connections among Asians and Europeans, historians of the early modern world have done much to reframe our understanding of the discovery of other world regions by Europeans. These engagements, which had previously been depicted solely from the points of view of the brave souls who set out from western European ports for destinations unknown or falsely imagined, are (p.336) now understood to have been shaped by the sensibilities and desires of multiple parties. They are in turn part of a broader spectrum of encounters among diverse people travelling long distances for reasons of faith, or in pursuit of some mix of profit and power, whose multilingual skills and shared bases of knowledge made possible conversations and communications about a world far larger than any of them could experience personally. Sanjay Subrahmanyan has conceived a set of ‘connected histories’ to make up a shared world of overlapping discourses and concerns, much of which was expressed in terms, such as millenarianism, quite particular to the early modern era.4

The two perspectives of connections and comparisons together provide a basic framing for evaluating early modern Europe in ways that were uncommon a generation ago. This chapter first considers some of the connections made between Asia and Europe. These connections in turn lead to comparisons of political and economic dynamics within China and Europe respectively that inform their relations with parties beyond their respective regions. These comparisons encourage us to recognize the dynamics of historical change at work in both world regions as well as those dynamics that create important contrasts to each other.

The economic content of Europe’s early modern relationships with Asia principally concerned trade. Europeans were eager to buy spices and teas, as well as a variety of cloths and pottery at different Asian ports. In contrast, European economic
connections to the Americas, as other chapters in this volume assess, went well beyond trade to include different efforts to promote production from which the people and governments back in Europe would benefit. Small groups of white settlers formed communities along the eastern seaboard of North America, while black slaves were transported from Africa to supply labour in the Americas more generally. In addition, Europeans coerced labour out of natives in South America and attempted to appropriate land from natives in North America. In brief, Europeans created new social and political relations to support their economic ambitions and cultural objectives.

Beyond their goals of creating wealth for the home countries, Europeans in the New World included Catholic missionaries dedicated to bringing Christian teachings to natives. There were also Catholic missionaries in Asia; Francis Xavier reached Goa on the west coast of India in 1542 and he subsequently made his way to Japan as one of a number of Portuguese missionaries who followed the routes their merchants took through Asia. The Spanish enjoyed the greatest religious success following the arrival of Spanish Jesuits in 1565, converting much of the population in the following century. But the Catholics were not tolerated everywhere. The Japanese expelled Christian missionaries and merchants in 1587 and welcomed the Dutch to replace the Portuguese because the Dutch Protestants did not seek religious conversions. Outside the Catholic presence in the Philippines, early modern Asian societies were not deeply affected by Christian religion in the ways that parts of the Americas were. The Japanese took the most explicit and strict measures to limit the introduction of Christian doctrine; in most other parts of Asia what Christian missionaries achieved were at best notably small-scale successes. European cultural knowledge circulated into Asia but Asian knowledge systems were not fundamentally undermined or transformed in the early modern era from these contacts. A similar story unfolded regarding economic practices and again forms a contrast between early modern European impacts on Asia and on the Americas.

In contrast to their economic practices in the Americas, Europeans did not settle the land in Asia; nor did they import slave labour or exploit natives directly. Instead, they went to Asia as merchants, but not just any merchants. They were merchants who came not merely with the backing of their home governments, but also with the coercive powers deemed reasonable and necessary for merchants going overseas to have. From the voyages of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century, the goal of Europeans entering Asian waters was to control major trade ports and key commodities for sale in Europe. A century later the Dutch were attempting to keep the English and other European traders out of the spice trade, in particular nutmeg and mace. European traders considered each other to be competitors; they entered into pre-existing Asian trading networks and brought with them the threats of coercion and violence first cultivated in Europe, where competition between the armed Italian city states in the Mediterranean blossomed into the subsequent competition of the larger northwestern European states for wealth and power according to a mercantilist logic.

Historians of Europe, quite reasonably, are interested in the commodities Europeans carried back from Asia far more than they are in the circuits of trade crossing Asian waters in the boats of Asian merchants. To the extent historians of early modern Europe hear of Chinese maritime trade, they most typically have heard that the Ming (1368–1644) state once sent ships as far as the east coast of Africa but lost their curiosity about the larger world and turned inwards, thus losing the kind of economic dynamism that propelled the material advances of Europeans. It becomes easy to assume, innocent of fact, that Chinese were not in fact major maritime traders and that the agrarian empire was not connected economically and culturally to places beyond its borders, both of which are false. At the same time, as will be discussed further later, European historians have become very aware of Chinese goods entering the material culture of early modern Europe, especially in the forms of porcelains, silks, and teas. These are viewed as European imports more than they are understood as Chinese exports; historians have done more to explain the impact of these imports on European societies than study their significance for the Chinese. To appreciate Chinese maritime trade’s significance to the Chinese we need to distinguish the economic and political purposes of exchange.

The sixteenth-century forays of European ships into Asian waters were modest compared to the maritime operations of the Chinese a century before them. The early fifteenth-century Chinese state mounted expeditions on a dramatic scale. They were diplomatic displays of power and wealth through which Chinese officials aimed to influence political conditions in maritime Southeast Asia and assure safe conditions for trade that took Chinese manufactures, including pottery and textiles,
abroad and brought into the agrarian empire new items, principally spices, herbs, and food products. The largest expedition had some 300 ships and 27,000 men; even the smallest had some forty to fifty ships. The first three expeditions went to the west coast of India; the fourth crossed the Persian Gulf, while the fifth and seventh reached the east coast of Africa. (p. 338) These operations remained the largest naval expeditions anywhere in the world until the early twentieth century and the First World War.

There were pressing political and financial reasons for the Ming government to end mounting these grand naval displays after the seventh expedition was finished in 1431. The Chinese empire’s border of military vulnerability had long been the steppe region to the north and northwest of the areas populated by Chinese peasant populations. Fears of a Mongol resurgence akin to the mobilizations that allowed the Mongols to conquer the Southern Song dynasty and establish their own Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) over the Chinese mainland meant that the government’s strategic attention was drawn to the north. The southern maritime frontier opened onto a world in which some Chinese officials had hoped to expand their government’s prestige, but none of the regimes beyond the empire posed threats to the empire’s political security. There were issues of how far the southern and southwestern frontiers would extend and the bases upon which populations of these areas would be incorporated into the empire, the fluid uncertainty of this area politically lacked the potentially volatile instability along the steppe border. Political priorities beyond the durable domestic concerns of ruling millions upon millions of peasants shifted to the empire’s northern frontier. The court continued to entertain tribute missions from Southeast Asia and be engaged diplomatically with the region. It simply chose not to invest the large sums of resources required to mount major maritime expeditions. The material benefits and symbolic capital built through such operations did not merit the high costs organizationally and financially.

The far smaller operations of European maritime expeditions were intended to be profit-making enterprises for merchants and revenue-generating exercises for their governments. This clear economic purpose harnessed to political needs led to the production of written records detailing merchant activities from which historians have gleaned large amounts of information. In contrast, the Chinese state did not harbour the same kind of interest nor develop any similar kind of relationship to its merchants. The Chinese state did want to create peaceful and stable conditions within which trade could be conducted, but the importance of peace and stability on this frontier mattered less than they did on the empire’s northern frontiers where political threats trumped the economic benefits to Chinese society derived from maritime trade. The state’s political calculus did not mean that private Chinese merchants stopped being active when the government’s expeditions were ended. To the contrary, Chinese merchants developed major networks of operations throughout Southeast Asia and into Northeast Asia as well. But their private operations were not systematically documented by the Chinese government because the government did not itself benefit greatly from maritime merchant activities. In fact their activities posed potential challenges to the central government, especially if local officials tapped maritime trade to raise their own revenues that could empower them to compete with the centre or if the merchants themselves became opposed to government authorities. The latter situation was a key feature of the Ming dynasty’s downfall and the Qing (1644–1911) dynasty’s initial policies of banning maritime trade. The commercial network led by Zheng Chenggong opposed the new Manchu-led Qing dynasty in the mid-seventeenth century; they went on to mobilize (p. 339) militarily in order to declare themselves separate and independent and resisted for several years the efforts of the Qing to subjugate them. Once these political concerns were resolved, private Chinese trading resumed.7

Structurally, the entry of armed Europeans into Asia extended the political economy of early modern European political and economic competition to Asia and made possible European positions to pursue exchange in Asia.8 But much of the trade that subsequently developed did not subordinate Asian traders or their governments to the conventions and expectations that Europeans applied to each other. Many merchant groups already engaged in trade within Asian waters generally continued their activities. Japanese traders halted their voyages to Southeast Asia under the constraints imposed by the Tokugawa regime, while Chinese merchants continued through the eighteenth century to be the most important economic agents in the exchanges throughout Asian trading circuits.9 Economic logics of market exchange among Asians continued to develop at the same time as Europeans wishing to buy up spices, teas, silks, and porcelains for transport and sale in Europe had to develop both the abilities to negotiate with Asian producers and merchants and the products to balance their trade for the
goods they came so much to desire.

The economic trade that connected Chinese and Europeans to each other was made possible in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by European mining of silver in the New World. The extractive relations Europeans established in one world region made possible their consumption of commodities produced in another world region. Without European extraction of resources in the New World it is difficult to see how people living in Europe would have managed to consume many Asian goods, especially Chinese silks, teas, and porcelains. These distinct political and economic relations that Europeans developed with people in other world regions constitute a broader context within which the narrative of traders competing to control Europe’s Asian trade unfolds, with the eighteenth-century triumph of the English over the Dutch who had succeeded the Portuguese in the seventeenth century. Silver in the early modern era trade between Asia and Europe was a commodity, not money, because it had a market-determined price that allowed it to be exchanged for the commodities shipped back to Europe. Behind this economic barter were the politically extractive relations that the Spanish established in the Americas to gain the silver from mines in Peru and Mexico that made the Asia–Europe trade possible.

Neither the extraction of silver nor its subsequent use in Europe’s trade with Asia as a commodity fits very neatly into standard early modern European accounts of their political economy, which principally consider the competition among European governments and their economies with each other. These stress the importance of expanding production domestically and increasing exports relative to imports, the balance being made up by silver which governments could use to pursue their war-making and state-making projects. This mercantilist logic created an alliance between European merchants and their rulers in competition with the rulers and merchants of other European countries. European moves into the Americas and Asia extended this competition and changed the bases upon which wealth and power were achieved. European material culture of the early modern era is difficult to imagine without the sugar and spices that entered from the Americas and Asia or without the Chinese silks and especially porcelains that entered into European homes and those of American colonists as well.

Several features of European trade with China need to be noted beyond the importance of Chinese commodities and other Asian goods to making early modern European culture different from the material culture of previous periods in European history. First, porcelain represented a Chinese product with a long history predating its export to western Europe and North America. By the sixteenth century, production and circulation of porcelains within China reached across an area as great as Europe from the islands that would become the United Kingdom in 1800 to the German and Polish-speaking lands east of the Elbe River, through a market economy serving roughly twice the number of people in Europe. Chinese porcelains had been circulating to Islamic territories through the Indian Ocean in the hands of both Muslim and Chinese traders from the eleventh century onwards. Chinese manufacturers produced to the tastes of their Islamic market much as they would produce distinctive designs for their later European market. The commercial successes of Chinese porcelains and pottery more generally inspired pottery production in Southeast Asian sites centuries before Josiah Wedgwood created true substitutes for Chinese porcelains on European markets in the late eighteenth century. Thus, the significance of Chinese pottery to early modern European material culture was new for Europe but hardly the first instance of Chinese goods circulating over long distances and forming a visible component of different material cultures. Second, just as Chinese porcelains were a commodity that Europeans imitated poorly for more than a century before Wedgwood achieved his commercial successes, Chinese craftsmen were able to imitate the production of European clocks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These clocks were objects intended to entertain in both China and Europe; Chinese fascination with the design and technology of these instruments did not mean the Chinese cared about the larger social and economic context that made the creation of these automatons possible, any more than Europeans were thinking they should become more broadly Chinese in their material sensibilities because they wanted to imitate Chinese porcelains.

Much more Chinese porcelain reached Europe than European clocks reached China. The demand for these products was not on the same scale. Those differences were part of a larger contrast already noted earlier in which the basic foundations of Europe’s trade with China was made possible by a triangular relationship between three world regions: American silver went to China, Chinese goods went to Europe, and European power to subjugate natives reached the Americas. What would
have been likely to happen to Chinese–European trade in the absence of silver mined in the Americas by Europeans? The Chinese would likely have had to develop their monetary system with some basis other than silver—they had a long prior history of monetary regimes, including ones relying on paper currency, copper coins, and in some areas cowry shells. It is of course difficult to predict what kind of system the Chinese would have developed in the absence of silver, but since they had experience with commercial exchange based on other media and silver in fact joined copper to form a bi-metallic system when large amounts of silver imports began to enter the Chinese empire, it would be reasonable to anticipate that some alternative basis for commercial exchange would have evolved.

The consequences for Europeans, however, would probably have been more serious, certainly undercutting early modern Europe’s material culture that was based on commercial consumption. The array of commodities made possible by European control of key parts of the Americas and the existence of Chinese manufactures and processed food products were major components of the early modern consumer culture that brought Europeans into market relationships and encouraged many of them to earn incomes, either through their labour or production of marketed goods, in order to purchase their consumption on markets. Jan de Vries has suggested that these changes in consumption were part of an ‘industrious revolution’ through which European demand for commodities grew despite real incomes remaining largely unchanged. He has further argued that this set of early modern changes set the stage for the subsequent supply-side changes in production ushered in by the Industrial Revolution—without prior European experience with commodity consumption, the unleashing of new scales of production may not have found such a ready market to consume.12

The importance of American and Asian trade to developing the tastes for commercial consumption in early modern Europe is easy to appreciate. The reliance of European traders on silver to exchange for Asian goods means that Asian consumers were not as dependent on European goods for the development of their market orientation as were Europeans on Asian goods. The Qianlong emperor’s refusal of British requests for a revision of the institutions through which trade was conducted was in fact based on this reality:

Hitherto, all European nations, including your own country’s barbarian merchants, have carried on their trade with our Celestial Empire at Canton. Such has been the procedure for many years, although our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders. There was therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce. But as the tea, silk and porcelain which the Celestial Empire produces, are absolute necessities to European nations and to yourselves, we have permitted, as a signal mark of favour, that foreign hongs [merchant firms] should be established at Canton, so that your wants might be supplied and your country thus participate in our beneficence.13

Often characterized as a statement of Chinese arrogance, the statement doesn’t suggest the emperor or Chinese elites more generally were not interested in European technologies or knowledge—clocks and astronomy confirm such interests. Rather, the emperor’s statement is consistent with British traders relying heavily on silver to exchange for the goods they purchased. Indeed, the growing late eighteenth-century British concern that too much silver was leaving for China was a key impetus for the development of opium sales to China as a commodity to balance British purchases of teas, silks, and porcelains. Indian opium was no more a British manufacture than had been American silver and thus the Qianlong emperor’s implicit invoking of elementary market principles, whereby exchange depends on division of labour and specialization, suggests that China and Europe were not in fact linked economically by the principles made famous by Adam Smith in his 1776 The Wealth of Nations. China’s domestic trade, part of which was on a spatial scale that would count as international in Europe because of the far smaller size of countries, did operate according to principles of specialization and spatial divisions of labour. The growth of the Chinese economy through the eighteenth century depended on this basic economic logic no less than commercial exchange across Europe embodied these principles.14

The economic parallels within Chinese and European world regions of expanding market exchange are framed by other differences regarding how each of them was connected to other regions economically. For China, foreign trade was sometimes more regulated and supervised than was domestic exchange. In particular the trade with Europeans was carried
out through licensed Chinese merchants, whose positions allowed them to capture considerable rents. But for Asian circuits of foreign trade there were fewer restrictions and subsequently fewer opportunities for any small set of merchants to establish a kind of monopoly position from which they could extract rents. In contrast, European traders aspired to establish monopoly positions for their trade and capturing rents from early modern maritime trade was the fundamental economic logic at work. Moreover, as just noted, Europeans in their trade with Asia less frequently relied on the exchange of goods they made and more upon the silver mined in the Americas, and later in the eighteenth century on opium grown in India, for their trade with China. These were very different political logics from the economic principles that came to drive international trade in the nineteenth century through the power of industrialization based on technological changes and abilities of industrializers to gain raw materials from Latin America and Asia and markets for their manufactured goods in these world regions as well. European colonization and the use of coercion and exploitation as elements of their political expansion continued in the nineteenth century. But nineteenth-century Europeans also had sources of wealth production they lacked in the early modern era and this new capacity transformed their international trade, even as their political pursuits remained closely tied to earlier efforts. How important was early modern political economy to the kind of economy that emerged in the modern era?

Scholars have put forward different views of both early modern and modern European political economy, but almost all assert or assume close connections between early modern and modern forms of political economy in Europe. The great social thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries envisioned their modern industrial societies to have emerged out of the formation of commercial capitalism. Marx depicted an ideal kind of feudal society from which a new set of social relations emerged in response to changes in the ‘forces of production’. Subsequent Marxists have placed varying emphases on the roles of international trade and social relations within northwestern, especially English, societies, but they, as well as European historians more generally, perceive nineteenth-century industrial capitalism to emerge only out of early modern European (p.343) conditions. More recent scholarship has followed up on some of these themes, including Kenneth Pomeranz’s The Great Divergence (2000), which stresses the location of coal as a domestic advantage for the British and draws on the international trade dimension for the windfall gains that the British could reap from using American resources, most notably cotton, for their cotton textile production. Pomeranz recognizes but does not analyse the conditions that created the large and swift increase in demand for raw cotton. That demand was predicated on major changes in technology that allowed the English to produce cotton textiles in a capital-intensive manner in factory settings.

While historians have well described the emergence of new technologies, the question of whether they were produced by a specific European political economy is less clear. Nobel laureate Douglass C. North has stressed the importance of institutions for creating the conditions promoting economic growth, including the conditions most likely to give people incentives to innovate. Accounts of the European conditions promoting technological change also include arguments about the cultural context for invention. These have recently been made by historians of science, and economists long committed to studies of economic history who have branched out into historical studies more generally. It is difficult to evaluate the causal significance of these economic institutions and cultural practices.

When we want to know what Europeans did that others did not, we face a challenge in knowing whether or not the differences were logically necessary or simply empirically contingent—which European conditions were not merely sufficient to explain what happened in Europe but more generally would be necessary for any place expecting to create economically useful technological change. The scientific and technological changes taking place in early modern Europe were a one-off, much in the way that an industrial revolution could only happen once and its occurrence reset the conditions from which other places began to work toward economic change thereafter. Scholars offer explanations of what happened in Europe and those aspiring to a more general explanation can make claims for the significance of their particular factors without being able to demonstrate that what mattered in their account of European changes is conceptually necessary for such changes to take place everywhere. We have a very difficult time confirming the level of generality for the explanations we proffer when the event to be explained is singular. The temporal overlap between certain scientific and technological discoveries and political changes in conceptions of liberty doesn’t guide us towards any causal mechanisms between them. Is there a meaningful correlation or is this a contingent occurrence?
The multiple outstanding challenges to address in order to understand more fully the supply side of producing science and technology make explanations based on the economic demand for technological change an appropriate focus for consideration. One such explanation suggests that in early modern times there were any number of important forms of craft manufacturing that, ceteris paribus, were more likely to locate in the countryside than in the city because labour costs were cheaper in the countryside and labour was the major factor of production in many processes. Labour was cheaper because food costs were lower in the countryside and public health risks in cities raised (p. 344) the costs of urban employment. Thus we need to be able to account for the greater likelihood of craft manufacturing locations in European cities than in the countryside. Jean-Laurent Rosenthal and I have suggested the threat of warfare to be one important reason. For the early modern era the threat of warfare was higher within Europe than it was within China. Additionally, when warfare fears were higher in China, as they were between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, crafts were more urban than they subsequently became. Conversely, in Europe when we see the efflorescence of rural crafts, these places faced fewer threats of war.

In the early modern era generally, this contrast of more rural sites of craft production in China compared to urban ones in Europe favoured China over Europe, but there were long-run consequences of a very different order. At the same time that labour was cheaper in the countryside, capital was cheaper in cities because monitoring costs were lower and information about borrowers was cheaper to obtain. Because capital was cheaper in cities than the countryside and labour was more expensive, relative factor prices created a European bias in favour of capital over labour and thus the development of new technologies that require capital. Robert C. Allen has more specifically explained the British development of the cluster of technological innovations creating factory-based machine production of cotton textiles in terms of need to make their high-wage labour better able to compete with cheap Indian cotton textile imports. The demand for technological change in early modern Europe was thus higher than in China irrespective of the particular supply functions for science and technology present in the two world regions.

China and Europe both expanded their commercial economies in the early modern era. Within each world region, the same principles of exchange according to divisions of labour and area specialization of production were at work. Between these two world regions trade also took place but it was not based on the same principles. Instead, Europe’s ability to trade with China specifically, and Asia more generally, depended upon its access to silver in the Americas. Without the American supply for silver and Chinese demand for silver to be a key component of the Chinese money supply, it is difficult to imagine how Europeans would have paid for the new kinds of consumption that trade with Asia made possible. At a general structural level we can see how early modern international trade was enabled by principles quite different from those at work within world regions like China and Europe. In a parallel manner, people engaged in this international trade located their common appreciation of the commodities making up their trade within cultural contexts very different from those in which the items were produced; European appreciation of Chinese porcelains and Chinese appreciation of European clocks were socially framed differently than appreciation of the same commodities where they were produced. Thus, the kinds of connections of comprehension and engagement that Subrahmanyam’s work in particular has encouraged us to appreciate can also be found in the early modern era trade between China and Europe.

At the same time, this trade can be used to create a larger encompassing framework within which to consider Lieberman’s parallels of commercial exchange increasing in his different Eurasian cases. In fact, his cases display considerable variation in amounts (p. 345) of commercial exchange, the density of market networks, and the organizations of commerce. Moreover, noting the presence of commercial exchange in diverse settings doesn’t lead us to recognize larger differences in the trade between them. Finally, these latter differences are tied to larger differences in political economy between China and Europe. These differences can help explain why modern economic growth began in Europe and not China, but not for the reasons conventionally invoked. The likelihood of industrialization beginning in Europe was at least in part the unintended consequence of the negative economic consequences of the threats of warfare in early modern Europe and British and Dutch maritime commerce with Asia. The impact of these maritime commercial empires on their domestic economies could therefore be different than the commercial benefits possible in a generally peaceful Chinese empire more conducive to the expansion of a market economy based on division of labour and specialization. In contrast, smaller competing states in Europe encouraged rent seeking whenever possible and efforts to defeat competing states both politically and economically.
The different types of political economy characterizing early modern Chinese and European governments can be located within a larger set of contrasting political relations. We can distinguish the kinds of political relations within China and Europe considered as two comparable world regions and the kinds of relations each had with peoples and polities beyond their respective world regions. Such an exercise shows both similar kinds of relations as well as very different kinds of relations in the early modern era.

The Ming and Qing state pursued three largely distinct kinds of relations: (1) relations with those subjected to civilian bureaucratic rule; (2) relations with others, mainly in Northeast and Southeast Asia; (3) relations with people of Inner Asia. We can also distinguish three distinct sets of relations that major European states sought to manage during the era of the Qing dynasty: (1) relations with their subjects; (2) relations between European regimes; and (3) relations to peoples and authorities they encountered overseas. We can further distinguish within Europe’s overseas relations important distinctions between European relations to peoples in the Americas and Africa on the one hand and those to peoples in Asia on the other.20

The taxonomies of political relations established by the Qing state and those formed by European states are distinct. They remind us of the different spatial scales of polities in the two world regions and relations the polities in each world region have with those beyond the regions. What are domestic and bureaucratically defined political relations in the Qing empire are a combination of domestic relations with subject populations and diplomatic relations with other rulers in Europe. The issues addressed in the Peace of Westphalia (1648) concern relations among rulers that would be faced between provinces under the Qing dynasty. To point out an important difference that upsets one conventional distinction between empires and modern states, the Ming and Qing dynasties ruled large populations under a single bureaucratic system, while early modern European regimes typically had no coherent bureaucratic system covering their varied and often non-contiguous domains brought together by marriage—from a Chinese imperial vantage point, they resemble far more the separate institutions of rule encountered in empires to Europe’s east.

(p. 346) When we turn to the second group of relations for the agrarian empire, namely relations with Northeast and Southeast Asian polities, we encounter what some scholars have considered to be a ‘tribute system’. The concept has fallen on hard times because it is very clear that there was no clear and consistent structural framework within which all of the relations of the empire were contained.21 But this subjects a history of diplomatic relations to a very high bar of conceptual consistency. Real relations between regimes under the Westphalian ideals of European-defined international relations hardly conformed consistently to principles. If we turn to the political practices pursued by Europeans when they initially entered Asian settings (a part of the third category for Europeans noted earlier), they were basically ad hoc reactions to opportunities they created or forced into existence and largely driven initially by desires to establish positions of commercial privilege for trade in goods taken back to Europe. The tributary principles may not have yielded a real system but they created more powerful conventions and norms than any European practices did with respect to the spaces into which both the Qing and the Europeans entered. Tributary norms have been criticized for their explicit hierarchy and they have been criticized for being inconsistently applied. Judged, however, according to the capacity of diplomatic principles and forms to accommodate political realities, we can alternatively argue that tributary norms recognized that some dimension of hierarchy exists in political relations however varied a particular vertical discrepancy might be and its openness to competing interpretations.

When we turn to the Qing state’s relations with inner Asia, the third set of relations important to this state, we encounter a set of relations with no obvious parallels in European terms and we find ourselves in an area of the world into which western Europeans would not enter in a major way until the late nineteenth century. For their part, the Qing state of Manchu rulers engaged Mongols, Tibetans, and Uighurs ideologically in ways that partially built upon shared beliefs in Tibetan Buddhism and created institutionally new forms of control, including a banner system of registration for some of them. The Qing elaboration of symbolic and institutional resources to govern Inner Asia created in East Asia a kind of empire different in important ways from any preceding it. And it is here that the European-inspired distinction between domestic and international, basic to the concepts of sovereign states engaging each other according to Westphalian principles, is least helpful.
In theory the Westphalian principles, as they became enshrined in international relations theory in the modern era, make a sharp and clear distinction between political relations within a polity and those between polities. The two types of relations exhaust the universe of possibility in the ideal modern world. Such ideals did not exist in the early modern era. The Peace of Westphalia itself was a treaty among polities in Europe. It was not invoked in the second half of the seventeenth or in the eighteenth century as a source of norms for relations between any European and non-European polities. The principles of adjustment and agreement built into the Peace of Westphalia were simply not imagined to be relevant to Europe’s early modern political relations overseas. A mix of coercion (or at least the threat of coercion) and appeals to the interests of others guided engagements that lacked any established canon of rituals and symbols to connote ideological meaning to some or all participants in a relationship between Europeans and others. In contrast, the symbolic framework of tributary relations could be contested or be at odds with the scales of coercive threats that the Chinese rulers and their counterparts in fact posed to each other, but such discrepancies between symbolic hierarchies and real relations at least meant political relations between China and several regimes in Northeast and Southeast Asia possessed a conceptual framework for engagement that Europeans did not have for their relations with peoples beyond their world region.

Within their world region, Westphalian principles facilitated a recognition that polities should recognize the interests of others and bargain according to those interests. In practice of course war making in Europe, including the Thirty Years’ War for which the Peace of Westphalia marked an end, meant that coercion played no small role in the competition between European regimes. Quite separately, the ways in which marriage alliances among royal houses led to territories being combined meant that the success of any given regime could depend not only on pursuing its interests or using coercion, but also on the strategies of marriage alliance that rulers pursued. As a consequence the domestic spheres of early modern European polities were hardly ruled in consistent and homogeneous manners across a regime’s territories. The king of Spain was king on distinct and separate terms over the kingdom of Castile and the kingdom of Aragon, while the French king’s relationship to his provinces varied as well. In fact, the laws and codes followed within eighteenth-century France varied—each region had its own taxes, customs and laws, weights and measures, and relationship to the Royal Crown. All early modern European rulers faced the task of negotiating with their elites to raise additional taxes. The particular institutional formats in which this took place varied; for instance, England’s parliament controlled the king’s access to new revenues after the Glorious Revolution in 1688, while the Spanish and French Crowns entered regionally based negotiations with many of their elites. Of course there was no Germany or Italy in the eighteenth century, only smaller polities of German-speaking and Italian-speaking people, so the spatial scale on which rulers engaged their subjects and competed with each other was even more modest than was the case for either England or France.

The consolidation of national states in Europe was a protracted process moving into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it did begin for some polities in the early modern era. But even in France the cultural integration of the country was, according to some scholars at least, an achievement of the second half of the nineteenth century with conscription of men for the army and the creation of a standard primary school educational curriculum. Elements of common belief, competing interests, and coercion threatened or applied by the state to its subjects were all components of domestic state making. In different ways shared beliefs, competing interests, and the threat of coercion also mattered to relations among European polities. Together the ways in which ideological, material, and coercive principles and practices were formulated in Europe formed a discrete and distinctive set of ideals and realities that diverge from the ideals and realities derived from different principles and practices fashioned in China.

Chinese rulers and their officials appealed to a set of Confucian-inspired beliefs, social practices, and local institutions to create an agrarian social order within which diverse local communities shared certain fundamental customs that distinguished them in at least some ways from people who did not live under the Chinese emperor’s rule. Under imperial rule, Chinese subjects also benefited, at least some of the time and in some places, from government projects to maintain or expand water control crucial to both irrigating agricultural land and making the transport of commercial goods cheap and reliable. Officials, especially in the eighteenth century, also pursued policies of encouraging new land to be opened and built an empire-wide network of granaries storing grain to relieve harvest shortfalls and subsistence crises for both urban residents and rural peasants alike. In addition to these ideological appeals and material benefits, Chinese officials registered
people in order to keep track of their activities; official fears of seditious behaviour meant that certain religious sects were deemed dangerous for their millenarian beliefs, while poorer labourers, like boatmen or peddlers carrying salt, were especially problematic because they were on the move and thus not typically found in the sedentary communities that officials liked to promote and the populations of which they registered.\(^{22}\)

If we look for European parallels to early modern Chinese practices of creating common cultural beliefs and practices, promoting certain elements of popular social welfare, and aspiring to monitoring potential deviant behaviour throughout society we are as much, if not more, likely to turn to a subsequent period of European history, for it is in the second half of the nineteenth century that we find European states creating national cultures, responding to popular expectations for social welfare, and seeking to expand their capacities for surveillance and social control. Thus, differences between early modern Chinese and early modern European political practices do not all lead to discrete and separate sets of differences subsequently. The political similarities that Lieberman and other historians assessing state-making changes beyond early modern Europe look for basically derive from norms set by European cases. Such an approach makes more difficult an evaluation of early modern practices that do not conform to early modern European experiences and offers no basis for considering the significance of the differences between early modern China and early modern Europe coupled with certain similarities between early modern China and modern Europe. The latter parallels are framed by other important political similarities and differences. The Chinese pursue strategies used in later times in Europe on far smaller spatial and demographic scales. Such contrasts tell us about differences in timing and scale that distinguish Chinese and European early modern characteristics at the same time as they suggest common components in modern times, and in particular how early modern traits of the Chinese empire could matter to its capacities to construct a modern social order.

Early modern China’s political capacities to pursue its agenda of normative, material, and coercive strategies depended upon the reasonable functioning of an administrative bureaucracy. By the eleventh century Chinese political leaders were already developing a rule-governed administration for which a considerable and growing proportion of officials were selected upon the basis of their performance in civil service examinations. (p. 349) By the sixteenth century this bureaucracy had a vertically integrated hierarchy of positions subject to a large and growing body of administrative law. The capacities of such a bureaucracy were essential to pursue the agenda of rule formulated by emperors and their officials. European states became better able to contemplate such practices when they too developed greater bureaucratic capacities at a later date.

This similarity of dependence on a certain level of bureaucratic capacities to contemplate particular kinds of interventions is in turn framed by another important difference between China and Europe.\(^{23}\) Early modern Chinese bureaucratic rule depended in no small way upon a basic overlap of interests and beliefs among officials and local elites who formed a generally well-educated stratum of society with economic pursuits ranging from land ownership to commercial endeavours. It was these elites who often funded local projects, who sometimes managed initiatives to build or replenish granaries or repair or extend water control works, and who would remain active in later periods, sometimes taking on more formal government roles. Through the eighteenth century however their activities were in political terms basically informal; they enjoyed no official status within the bureaucracy, drew no salary, and were not subject to the weight of administrative law. The shared agenda of officials and local elites did not preclude competition and conflict between them on some occasions but their relationship was institutionally very different from those in Europe where the frequent need for negotiation between the Crown’s officials and elites, who had their own bases of authority and prestige through noble birth, urban economic wealth, or a senior position in the Church (be it Catholic or Protestant), formed a principal domestic axis of early modern state making.

For all the political similarities that comparisons between European and non-European early modern states have yielded, many virtues of which can be gleaned in Lieberman’s important volumes, they have been unable to accommodate analytically and assess directly both similarities and differences among political practices in two or more world regions. At the same time we know that European political thinking and that of leaders in other world regions were connected as Subrahmanyam especially has made clear. In fact, if we recall the fascination for Chinese enlightened despotism that captured the imaginations of some eighteenth-century Europeans we can consider the possibilities of connected
appreciations of similar political aspirations. But at the same time we would do well to recall that the capacities of different aspirants to benevolent rule as well as their real commitments to constructing and implementing such rule could well be quite different. At the same time as affirmations of benevolent rule were made both by Chinese emperors and some European rulers, the political demands upon the latter occasioned by competition with neighbours put such benevolent principles at odds with the ruler’s needs for revenues. Political ideas can indeed circulate and be appreciated across world regions but without becoming consequential in parallel ways. By focusing on a combination of political ideas and political institutions we can better appreciate how early modern Chinese state practices were both similar to and different from those in Europe and how such similarities and differences could matter in later periods.

(p. 350) Comparing Chinese and European early modern histories and connecting them both to the parts of Asia that were sites of mutual engagement allows us to consider a series of ways European economic and political dynamics were neither unique nor universal. As we have come to know more about the world beyond Europe, both in terms of connections to Europeans and in terms of comparisons of how Europeans and others, like the Chinese, organized and pursued their economic and political activities, we can recognize the continuing challenge of connecting and comparing early modern Europe to other world regions, the better to appreciate early modern Europe’s particular traits and to understand the larger world of which it was a part, including those areas that Europeans had not conquered.

Further Reading

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Monarchy in Western and Central Europe
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The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History, 1350-1750: Volume II: Cultures and Power
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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter examines the slow and gradual assertion of monarchical authority evident throughout Western Europe between the later Middle Ages and the mid-eighteenth century. It demonstrates that this was a cumulative process, with periods of royal weakness as well as of stable, expanding authority, and suggests that physical force was less important in bringing this about than negotiation and compromise with the nobility and with rival bodies such as the Church and independent towns. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are shown to have seen an important re-establishment of monarchical régimes; after c. 1650 a further strengthening was evident, particularly in Louis XIV’s France, where increased taxation was the main foundation of military power. Dynastic continuity was everywhere crucial, as was the exercise of personal authority by an able and adult ruler.

Keywords: Absolutism, dynasty, government, law, monarchy, nobility, royal authority, sovereignty, taxation

The Late Middle Ages

Among other forms of political authority kingship had always enjoyed a special status in medieval Europe (see Maps 14.1, 14.2). The power of monarchs was seen as a mirror image of divine power and few men challenged the view that outside city states monarchical government was the normal and legitimate form of imposing order on this world. Even in the Church the Pope acted as a kind of spiritual monarch although he was elected of course, but then the emperor owed his office like a number of other rulers to an election as well, not to dynastic succession. Kings could be subject to a higher authority, in particular to that of the emperor or the Pope who might even act in certain cases as their liege lords, but their status was clearly superior to that of mere noblemen, even those of princely rank. However, this difference in status did not always translate into a proportionate difference of real power. The king might be the highest judge and everybody who held a fief in his realm was, in theory, directly or indirectly his liegeman owing him allegiance, but at the local or regional level royal commands often had little political purchasing power unless secular and spiritual lords chose to support royal policies because their own interests were best served by such policies. Even in a kingdom with a fairly strong institutional framework such as late medieval France, great noblemen could still
radically challenge royal authority.

The history of monarchy in the period under discussion here is, at least in western Europe, very much a history of the slow and gradual assertion of royal authority in a constant process of competition for power but also of renegotiating the political terms of trade with autonomous corporate bodies, the Church and, most importantly perhaps, the nobility. This is not to say that the nobility as such was in permanent decline but even the richest and most powerful magnates could, in the end, only maintain their status, wealth, and social credit by cooperating with the monarch and by trying to influence or control his decisions through the court or possibly, as in the English case, a parliamentary assembly. In the end local revolt no longer promised any real dividends and was no longer a serious option. This held true in England for example (not perhaps in Scotland where the authority of the monarch remained a distant one for many regions for the time being) after about 1570 and in France after the 1650s. Matters were different in central Europe, of course. Here royal or imperial authority provided at best some loose framework of legal order and basic political stability and at worst only a vague umbrella of feudal overlordship with ill-defined though not necessarily negligible powers of intervention in moments of crisis. The more powerful noble dynasties continued to assert their autonomy throughout the period under discussion here, and some of them aspired, from the later seventeenth century onwards at least, to achieve monarchical authority and status themselves, ideally legitimated by a royal title.

However, in the later Middle Ages the difference between royal, monarchical authority and the power great noblemen enjoyed was far less pronounced than in later centuries, even in countries such as England or France. Both in western and in central Europe visions of kingship which determined the character and face of monarchy and princely rule were to a great extent shaped by dynastic policy and the search for stability in a world where the political landscape was very much in flux. Whereas ancient kingdoms such as France were engulfed for long periods of time in dynastic disputes which seemed to put their very survival in danger (the Hundred Years’ War, 1337–1453) a number of new dynasties appeared on the stage and tried to gain a place among the great royal families of Europe. The house of Trastamara—illegitimate descendants of King Alfonso XI of Castile—thus claimed after 1369 the Crown of Castile with success and another branch of the same family was to rule Aragon in the fifteenth century. But the most famous example is perhaps the Burgundian branch of the Valois, the French royal house. The founder of the dynasty Philip the Bold (1342–1404) received the Duchy of Burgundy as an anapage (a part of the Crown demesne entrusted to a prince of the blood royal as a fief) from the French king, his brother in 1363. Having married the daughter of the last count of Flanders he inherited this rich province, one of the richest in Europe, in 1384. He and his successors used their newly won material resources but also the almost permanent conflicts between the royal houses of England and France to acquire a vast array of provinces in the borderlands between France and the Empire and to aspire—in the second half of the fifteenth century—to a position which would have transformed the Burgundian polity eventually into a kingdom of its own. This was not to be; the last Duke of Burgundy from the Valois line, Charles the Bold, fell in action in a battle against the Swiss in 1477, and did not leave a male heir, but for more than fifty years before this fateful battle the Dukes of Burgundy were among the most powerful rulers in Europe.¹

This success demonstrated that new dynastic ‘states’, in practice of course often no more than ‘loose conglomerates of self-governing territories’, could be created almost out of nothing by an astute combination of family policy—essentially marrying the right woman, preferably a potential heiress, at the right time—political ruthlessness, and the ability to construct legitimacy for the newly won status, relying on propaganda, the manipulation of historical memory, on court culture, but also on military success inspired by a well-publicized sense of a religious or political mission.² In such a way, princes tried to create great new multiple monarchies comprising different realms and principalities. The house of Luxemburg had done so in the fourteenth century, ruling at one stage over vast stretches of central and east central Europe from the Electorate of
Brandenburg to Transylvania and Croatia. Luxemburg power had reached its peak during the reign of Emperor Charles IV (1316–78) who made Prague his capital. In the fifteenth century, when Emperor Sigismund (lived 1368–1437) ruled Bohemia (where his authority was rejected by many of his subjects, however, for most of his reign), Hungary, and the Empire itself, the dynasty was already in decline. Ultimately the Habsburgs were to take the place of the Luxemburgs in east central Europe (Archduke Albert of Austria married Sigismund’s daughter and heiress Elizabeth in 1422) in the sixteenth century.

It was clearly one matter to acquire provinces, kingdoms, and principalities through conquest or inheritance and another to give some kind of stability to such newly formed dynastic power systems which often found their only common point of reference in the ruler and his court, lacking both a common culture and common administrative structures so that a simple lack of male heirs or a series of lost battles could easily dissolve these dynastic empires. The problem remained a perennial one throughout most of the period under discussion in this chapter. Ideally a more homogeneous elite having a stake in the composite monarchy as a whole not just in individual dominions and regions, on which the ruling dynasty could rely to support its policies, would emerge over time. A unified noble hierarchy based for example on newly granted titles or other marks of distinction such as membership in orders of knighthood could help to speed up this process. Equally the shared experience of warfare against common enemies, and the role a clearly defined cultural centre could play in diminishing the tensions between different regional and national traditions, or a more unified system of jurisdiction could all lend greater coherence to dynastic empires and multiple kingdoms. However in the late Middle Ages most composite monarchies of this kind remained rather fragile and this all the more so as the tradition to divide the various dominions a dynasty had acquired over time among different heirs had not yet disappeared. Only gradually was the principle of strict primogeniture to assert itself not only for individual kingdoms, where it had prevailed for a long time, but also for the great composite monarchies. This process was not really completed until the early eighteenth century when the Emperor Charles VI’s Pragmatic Sanction of 1713 laid down the principle of indivisibility for the Austrian Habsburg monarchy.

Moreover in the late Middle Ages, and often throughout the early modern period, at least in moments of crisis, local and regional communities were quite capable of defending their own constitutional traditions and political privileges as they did in Flanders as much as in Catalonia with its strong Estates, the ‘Corts’. When crowns and royal titles of different kingdoms were merged the Estates and the political elites of the individual kingdoms and principalities often insisted that their country retained its autonomy. Thus Henry V of England, who after the battle of Agincourt (1415) was able to persuade the French king Charles VI to bequeath his crown to him and his heirs and not to his own son, had to accept that law courts, councils, and administrative institutions remained quite separate in his new kingdom from similar bodies in England, and equally the English parliament insisted that England should never be subjected to French control. In some cases, as for example with regard to the Hussite rebellion in Bohemia (1419–36) or indeed the French resistance against English rule in France in the early fifteenth century, led in the late 1420s by Joan of Arc, one may discover even an incipient national consciousness or at least a deliberate appeal to national loyalties and allegiances in the resistance against the authority of a ruler perceived as foreign.

Given such problems only those dynasties were successful in the long run that could create an identity for themselves which was grafted onto traditions and beliefs which gave their quest for power a wider legitimacy; the values of chivalry for example, the idea of the crusade, the rule of law, or a specific variety of warlike heroic leadership could all serve such purposes. The foundation of the Order of the Golden Fleece by the Dukes of Burgundy in 1430 was one such attempt to harness cultural and political forces to the promotion of the dynasty’s power in a way which appealed to the nobility’s quest for prestige and status. Knights who became members of this exclusive brotherhood had to swear allegiance to the Duke as sovereign of the order and had to renounce any other, conflicting ties of loyalty. On the other hand they became to some extent the Duke’s companions, entitled to advise and even to admonish him. Nevertheless, the Dukes of Burgundy for all their efforts to transform their court into the foremost centre of chivalric culture in Europe always remained in some ways political upstarts and never quite escaped their slightly inferior position as vassals both of the emperor and the king of France. Legitimacy for new dynasties was in the end not easy to achieve in a lasting and convincing way. Dynasties such as the house of Lancaster which had acquired the English Crown by revolting against a legitimate though unpopular king
(Richard II of England, forced to abdicate in 1399) were in an even more precarious position. At the height of their power they ruled both England and large parts of France—Henry VI was crowned king of France in 1431—and the survival of the Valois dynasty in France seemed more than doubtful, but in the end a series of military defeats and Henry’s shortcomings as a king were sufficient to undermine the position of the house of Lancaster. Henry VI was deposed in 1461 (he died in the Tower a decade later having been briefly reinstated as king) and Edward Duke of York, who was of royal descent himself, successfully claimed the Crown, although the house of York was in its turn overthrown in 1483/85.⁶

Trastamara rule in Castile also proved remarkably unstable in the fifteenth century, which was to some extent a consequence of the enormous power great noblemen had acquired. Such over-mighty subjects who sometimes had a claim on the Crown themselves posed a problem not only in Castile but also in England and in France, although the Valois kings managed gradually to contain or even in some cases to destroy the power of the great lords step by step in the later fifteenth century. In this respect they were far more successful than their predecessors or other rulers had been in earlier decades. In fact the period under discussion here saw a high number of acts of open rebellion against rulers and princes leading in a number of cases to the overthrow of a monarch or his deposition. The cases of Richard II and Henry VI have already been mentioned. Wenceslaus of Bohemia was formally deposed by the Prince Electors as ruler of the Empire (he had been elected king in 1376) in 1400. In 1419 the revolt of the Hussites finally destroyed his already precarious authority in Bohemia as well, shortly before he died.

Similar phenomena can be observed in the ecclesiastical sphere where the conciliar movement deeply changed political ideas and practices. The claim of the General Council to be able to call the Pope himself to account, which both the Council of Constance (1414–18—the council had deposed or forced to resign three different popes with rival claims to rule the universal Church thus ending the Great Schism of 1378) and that of Basle (1431–49) subscribed to, could serve as an example secular diets and assemblies might imitate. The reform proposals promoted by the great councils had a particularly strong impact in the Empire where the princes and other Estates tried to create institutions which gave the Empire some degree of political stability while limiting the emperor’s personal authority. The Imperial Diet which replaced the much more informal meetings of princes at the emperor’s court (Hoftag) in the late fifteenth century and the Imperial chamber court (Reichskammergericht, created in 1495) both owed their existence to this quest for imperial reform.

Even before these constitutional reforms the authority of the emperor or king had been limited. He could at best exert direct control over his own hereditary principalities (and even there his authority was often weak outside the areas belonging to the Crown demesne and the towns which formed part of his personal estate, as was the case with the rule of the Luxemburg kings in Bohemia in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries) and those regions of the Empire where he could rely on an extensive network of reliable clients, often ecclesiastical dignitaries, lesser nobles, and urban elites. Elsewhere he could intervene from time to time in disputes or grant privileges but that was about it. In other realms and kingdoms, however, it was also a widespread practice to exercise tighter control over some political core region (or regions), a sort of ‘pale’ which also generated most of the available fiscal resources, and be content with some loose overlordship coupled with occasional interventions in the form of military campaigns or legal proceedings against unruly nobles or other troublesome subjects in the peripheral provinces. Thus south eastern England was much more tightly controlled by the king than the Far North or Wales, for example, not to mention Ireland,⁷ and in France, Paris and the North East were the traditional strongholds of royal power, to be replaced for a time by the Loire region and the areas immediately south of the Loire when large parts of northern France were occupied by the English after 1420 for about three decades.

In the Empire Franconia and Swabia, as well as—to a lesser extent—the areas bordering on the Rhine, had traditionally been areas open to imperial influence. Some rulers found it difficult, however, to exercise any great amount of authority even in these traditional strongholds of the emperor’s authority. Thus in the mid-fifteenth century Frederick III, the head of the Habsburg dynasty, retreated to his own hereditary dominions in Austria, a part of the Empire which was marginal not only in a geographic sense. Between 1444 and 1471 he hardly ever left his Austrian stronghold although he did go to Italy in 1452 to be crowned emperor by the Pope—the last coronation of an emperor in Rome though not the last by a Pope. However, with enormous tenacity Frederick III defended his legal rights and prerogatives as emperor as well as the claims of his family to
Kings whose legitimate authority was contested—like the rulers belonging to the house of York after 1460—might even find funerals of the dead king or at a lower level solemn entries into the great cities and similar events, as public ceremonies. The nature of royal authority: the regalia such as the Crown itself as symbols and the coronation but also the lavishly staged nature of the royal dynasty in the past. Perhaps even more important, however, was the notion that the king of France enjoyed a unique sacral status. Theologians and jurists emphasized that the French coronation and sacre (the anointing of the new king) gave the authority of the French monarch a quasi sacerdotal character. Not only was he able to heal—miraculously—the scrofula, he was entrusted by God with a providential almost messianic mission to defend his church.

A strong sense of a religious and historical mission going back to the time of the ancient Franks was also characteristic of the French monarchy. Present already in earlier centuries and gaining a sharper edge in the attempt to confute the theocratic pretensions of the papacy in the late thirteenth and very early fourteenth centuries, it was reinforced by the need of the new Valois dynasty to defend its possession of the Crown against the rival claims of the English Plantagenets. When the last male Capetian king of France, Charles IV, died in 1328 the Valois, distantly related to the former dynasty, had obtained the Crown. Their claim to the succession, however, was later disputed by Edward III of England and in 1337 the Hundred Years’ War between England and France broke out as a result of this dispute. The Valois claim was based on the principle that only males could inherit the Crown in France, and even more importantly that only sons—not daughters—could transmit a claim to the Crown to a potential successor. French jurists tried to prove that an ancient Germanic law code, the Salic Law (Lex Salica or loi salique), passed allegedly under the rule of the first Franconian king of France, Pharamond (the true Pactus Legis Salicae, a collection of customary law, was written down under King Chlodwig in the early sixth century), contained stipulations which denied women any share in the Crown as heiresses, let alone queens in their own right. In the fifteenth century the myth of the Salic Law which emphasized the necessity of unbroken dynastic continuity became a central part of the ideological baggage of kingship in France and remained so right up to the Revolution.

Perhaps even more important, however, was the notion that the king of France enjoyed a unique sacral status. Theologians and jurists emphasized that the French coronation and sacre (the anointing of the new king) gave the authority of the French monarch a quasi sacerdotal character. Not only was he able to heal—miraculously—the scrofula, he was entrusted by God with a providential almost messianic mission to defend his church. Such sacral authority was not easily compatible with any claims noblemen, bishops, or the king’s more powerful subjects in general might raise to have a say in the government of the kingdom, or even worse, to tamper with the succession to the Crown. Tracts such as the somnium viridarii (The Dream of the Orchard—Songe du Vergier), probably written in the 1370s by Évrart de Tréméaugon, emphasized that the authority of the French kings was consecrated by miracles and confirmed by the saint-like status of so many kings and other members of the royal dynasty in the past. Such a king was in the end accountable only to God alone, at least in theory. Although similar claims to possess miraculous power and to enjoy a unique sacral status (manifested inter alia in the act of anointing the king during his coronation and in the gift of healing the scrofulous) were made for the English kings—clearly in emulation of the French tradition—they did not preclude an approach to politics here which gave a greater role to the Estates (that is, to parliament) and to a more contractual interpretation of the origins of royal power and the way it should ideally be exercised. The fact that the succession to the Crown was contested for long periods of time in the fifteenth century undoubtedly had an impact on such theories but also the stronger tendency to distinguish between the king’s two bodies, his body politic (the Crown or kingship as an institution) and his body natural (the individual mortal king). Both in France and in England political rituals and material symbols were of great importance for giving expression to the sacral nature of royal authority: the regalia such as the Crown itself as symbols and the coronation but also the lavishly staged funerals of the dead king or at a lower level solemn entries into the great cities and similar events, as public ceremonies. Kings whose legitimate authority was contested—like the rulers belonging to the house of York after 1460—might even find
it useful to wear their crown on special occasions in public more frequently than would have been the custom in the past or were crowned for a second time after a period when they had intermittently lost their power due to a rebellion.13

In other monarchies such material symbols of kingship had however largely disappeared. In Castile the coronation had been abandoned as an inauguration ceremony as early as 1157, although Alfonso XI was crowned in 1332, but that was an exception. When a king died his successor was publicly proclaimed and the royal banners were unfolded. As the Estates had mostly already sworn an oath of loyalty to the crown prince (or princess—women were capable of inheriting the Crown in Castile) when the latter was still a child a coronation was seen as superfluous while the acclamation of the new king and the oath the crown princes swore when they were publicly acknowledged reinforced the notion that there was a bond of mutual obligation between ruler and subject.14

Did the lack of a coronation and of any act of anointing the new ruler make the kings of Castile merely secular rulers, without any claims to a sacral status? It has in fact been argued that the Castilian monarchs derived their legitimacy in the Middle Ages primarily from their function as military leaders in the crusade against Islam and that their authority lacked any sacral dimension.15 However other historians have insisted that such an interpretation fails to take account of the rich theological and political literature devoted to the role of the monarchy in late medieval Spain. The Castilian monarchy may have lacked the material symbols of sacral authority so prominently visible in France, England, and a number of other countries but there was nevertheless an entire system of images associated with the monarchy which assigned a providential not to say messianic role to the king (or queen); such images however were disseminated and promoted by written texts, sermons, and speeches and not so much by rituals and ceremonies as in France.16

The Age of Charles V

The man whose life and actions were to dominate European dynastic politics in the first half of the sixteenth century more than that of any other, Charles V (Charles I of Spain), inherited this particular Castilian tradition of kingship, but he was probably influenced even more profoundly by the cultural and political legacy of the Burgundian Dukes and of his grandfather Emperor Maximilian. In 1519 Charles, who had been born in Ghent (p. 364) in 1500, was elected as Holy Roman Emperor. Charles had already inherited the Crowns of Castile and Aragon in 1516 and also ruled the Burgundian lands which Maximilian had secured for the Habsburgs by marrying Mary the daughter of the last Valois Duke Charles the Bold in 1477. As southern Italy was also under Spanish rule and given the fact that Hernán Cortés was about to conquer Mexico for Charles in 1519, the resources the Habsburg emperor had at his disposal were truly enormous. Supplied with tons of gold and later silver too from America and with generous loans by his bankers in Antwerp, Augsburg, and northern Italy, he could recruit vast mercenary armies. Often he was able to outspend his enemies both in political contests (as he did at the imperial election in 1519 by pouring lavish gifts on the prince electors) and in warfare. Thus Pizarro’s recent conquest of Peru and the large shipments of gold to Seville which this victory produced enabled him to launch an offensive against Tunis in 1535 which allowed him to defeat the governor of this Ottoman outpost and to occupy the city itself.17

Charles ruled an empire which comprised almost half of western Europe and substantial parts of the New World. In many ways Charles’s dominions constituted the last universal monarchy in Europe before the Napoleonic age. Fighting against the enemies of the Christian faith—the Ottomans—in the Mediterranean and, in later years, against the Protestants in Germany as well, Charles appeared very much as a ruler in the tradition of the crusading princes of the Middle Ages, a true miles Christianus, a soldier of Christ. Not unlike his medieval predecessors he was nevertheless often at odds with the papacy. Succeeding popes saw themselves not only as the real leaders of Christianity—as opposed to the emperor—but also feared Charles’s power in Italy which posed a threat to the Papal States.

Charles governed his vast and far from homogeneous empire in part by installing members of his family as governors or regents in provinces which he could not govern in person, a device frequently adopted in large composite monarchies throughout most of the early modern period. Thus his brother Ferdinand who had received the Austrian duchies as his share
of the Habsburg inheritance in 1521 ruled the Empire in Charles’s place for long stretches of time and also became his successor designate in Germany in 1531, having previously inherited a claim to the Crowns of Bohemia and Hungary (in 1526), which could at least in the first case be fully realized, whereas Hungary came partly under Turkish rule for almost two centuries, or remained semi-independent (Transylvania). The Netherlands were governed between 1517 and 1530 by Charles’s aunt Margaret as regent, a position which the emperor’s widowed sister Mary of Hungary took over in 1531 for more than twenty years. An energetic and intelligent woman she made sure that the Netherlands remained, with few exceptions, loyal to the house of Habsburg during Charles’s lifetime. But relying on family members and viceroys to govern important provinces was not enough to ensure the coherence of the Empire. Charles also had to be continually on the move—again not unlike many of his medieval predecessors. Because there was no unified administrative structure the ruler had to appear in person from time to time to overawe opposition or to persuade reluctant Estates to support his costly policies. If we look at his itinerary (see Map 14.3), he spent a disproportionate amount of his time in northern Castile (in particular in Valladolid (p.365) and Burgos, but also, further south, in Toledo), in Aragon, and in Catalonia—although he did not set foot in Spain for almost thirteen years between 1543 and 1556—and in his native Low Countries in particular in Brussels but also in Southern Germany (Augsburg and Ratisbon were frequently visited by Charles, both imperial free cities). Other parts of his Empire such as central, northern, and eastern Germany or even Alsace and the Franche Comté on the borders of France he hardly visited at all.18

Charles V was not only an itinerant ruler, he was also waging war for nearly half his adult life. Charles took great pride in his military campaigns and had them depicted by the leading artists of the time (some of whom followed him on his campaigns) in paintings and other works of art. However, he also saw himself confronted by the problem that he was surrounded by a host of real or potential enemies. Francis I of France still considered many of the Burgundian lands as his rightful inheritance (Flanders and other principalities had been old French fiefs) and rejected the Habsburg hegemony in Italy as illegitimate. On the other hand Charles wanted to regain the Duchy of Burgundy, the ancient heartland of the Burgundian Dukes with the capital of Dijon and the nearby monastery of Champmol where the dukes had been buried since the early fifteenth century and where Charles V hoped to be laid to rest one day himself.

Alliances between Charles V and Henry VIII of England seemed to present a throwback to the early fifteenth century when England and the dukes of Burgundy had cooperated in dismembering France. In any case a lasting peace with France proved elusive despite a series of Habsburg victories after 1525 when the French king himself became Charles’s prisoner in the battle of Pavia. Charles even challenged Francis I to a duel more than once to settle his disputes with the Valois, a clear sign both of the influence ideals of chivalry had on him and of the extent to which he considered this conflict a personal one, a matter of honour and reputation.19

Ultimately the resources available to Charles V, enormous as they were, proved insufficient to defend an empire which was continually confronted with new challenges on all fronts. In the East and South the Ottoman Empire posed a formidable threat; in fact Vienna, the capital of the Austrian lands which Charles had left to his brother Ferdinand to govern, had been besieged by the Turks in 1526 and had narrowly escaped conquest, while in Germany the religious divisions which had first become apparent in the 1520s became an ever more pressing problem. As a ruler governing so many kingdoms and principalities all over Europe, as a successor to the crusading kings of Castile, and as emperor, Charles had a vested interest in maintaining the unity of Christianity; national churches or churches controlled by lords, princes, and cities at a regional and local level were hardly compatible with a vision of a Christian community led by one single ruler, the emperor. His attempt to subdue the German Protestants in 1546–47 was initially a stunning military success but ended in political failure in 1551/52.
Defeated by his enemies Charles V abdicated as Grand Master of the Order of the Golden Fleece and as ruler of the Netherlands in October 1555. In August 1556 he resigned as emperor, an unprecedented step. His brother became his successor in the Empire and his son Philip in Spain, the Netherlands, and his other dominions.

(p. 366) In many ways it may seem that with Charles the dream of a universal monarchy finally perished and that Charles’s life ended in complete failure. However, building on the legacy left to him by his grandfather Maximilian, he was successful in making his own House, the Casa d’Austria as it was called in Spain, the most powerful dynasty in Europe for a long time to come. Even after 1640 when the Spanish Habsburgs lost their dominant position in Europe, the Vienna branch of the Habsburgs rose to new splendour and one could well argue that the last vestiges of Charles’s vision of empire and its sacral mission only disappeared in 1918 when the Habsburg monarchy was finally dismembered at the end of the First World War. In fact Charles’s dynastic state building was in many ways remarkably successful. He strengthened the ties between Castile and Aragon which had been united in a loose dynastic union since 1469, due to the marriage between Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon, and he forged a much more coherent state out of the various provinces in the Low Countries. Although the Dutch Revolt undid much of his work in the late sixteenth century, the Southern Netherlands, transformed into the modern state of Belgium in the nineteenth century, survive, albeit somewhat precariously, as a political entity until today.

Whatever feelings of loyalty Charles V could appeal to among his subjects to defend his empire, a wider patriotism comprising all of his dominions was never among them; on the contrary, regional or national patriotism could all too easily become a divisive force. This was different in a much smaller realm like England where regional identities, apart perhaps from Wales and the Far North and possibly Cornwall, were not strongly developed. The framework for the exercise of royal authority was therefore quite a different one than in the sprawling Habsburg empire which lacked a real centre or capital. On the other hand resentment against outside interference, in particular against papal attempts to control the ecclesiastical structure and its profits, was traditionally strong. When Henry VIII decided to break with Rome in the 1530s because the Pope refused to dissolve his first marriage with Catherine of Aragon, Charles V’s aunt, which had not produced a male heir, he could therefore rely as much on such traditional hostility against any sort of foreign jurisdiction interfering with legal procedures in England—strong in particular among the common lawyers—as on a deeply ingrained anti-clericalism among many laymen.

Henry VIII dared to do what other rulers of the time may only have dreamed of: he claimed an authority for himself in ecclesiastical matters—within his kingdom—which was essentially similar to that which the Pope had enjoyed in the past. In many ways the king really saw himself as possessing a truly spiritual authority, appointing for example Thomas Cromwell his most important adviser during these crucial years as his Vicar General and Vice Regent in Spirituals in 1536, as an ecclesiastical prince might have done. The Act of Supremacy passed in 1534 by parliament which itself was to play a crucial part in giving legitimacy to the Reformation in England declared Henry to be the supreme head of the Church in England.20 The Act and subsequent legislation as well as Henry’s church policy ensured that the Reformation in England became much more openly Erastian in nature than in most other countries. German princes who adhered to the Reformation also exercised de facto episcopal powers after the break with Rome but their ecclesiastical supremacy was much more low key. They were rarely portrayed as the heroic savours of their countries—if not in fact of Christianity itself—who singlehandedly defended their subjects from the onslaught of the Roman beast and papal tyranny, at one and the same time successors to Constantine the Great and to the leaders of the ancient people of Israel who had slain the priests of Baal and had suppressed idolatry.

The image of monarchy which Henry VIII created and the grandiloquent rhetoric of the royal supremacy—allegedly inherent in the English Crown imperial since time immemorial—left an ambiguous legacy.21 On the one hand Protestantism and a strong monarchy seemed to go hand in hand in England. A national Protestant Church without a powerful godly prince to protect and control it became difficult to imagine; on the other hand, those of Henry’s successors who were perceived as being too soft on Popery or who actually turned back to Rome as Mary Tudor did between 1553 and 1558 (p. 368) or the Stuart, James II after 1685, could well be seen as having betrayed the idea both of a Protestant nation and of godly kingship. What is more because so many of the important legal measures suppressing papal authority and traditional ecclesiastical
institutions such as the monasteries were based on acts of parliament it could well seem that the royal supremacy was not a mere prerogative power but could only be exercised by the king-in-parliament with the consent of both houses, although Henry himself would certainly have rejected such an interpretation.

Henry VIII represented a new dynasty which had only come to power in 1485 with Henry Tudor after a prolonged period of dynastic power struggles, the Wars of the Roses. The king—like his father Henry VII—felt correspondingly insecure and was suspicious of all nobles with royal blood in their veins or who could otherwise call into question his own claim to the Crown or that of his children. His tendency to put on trial nobles, courtiers, and former friends who showed the smallest sign of being disloyal and have them sentenced to death—including two of his wives—often by a parliamentary Act of Attainder did not exactly create a relaxed atmosphere at the king’s court.

Relations between the French king, Francis I, and his nobles were much more amicable. When a nobleman fell from favour at Francis’s court he did not as a rule have to fear for his life, but was merely banished to his castle and his estates. There were undoubtedly tensions between competing noble factions but the conflicts between these factions were far less violent and lethal than in England. This was only to change after 1559, when France was governed by minors or weak monarchs. Francis I was in many ways the ideal leader of his nobility, fully immersed in chivalric culture, enjoying the company of his nobles, and acting the part of a warrior king with panache though not always with military success. He was also a great patron of the arts like many other Renaissance rulers but probably with a decidedly more sophisticated aesthetic taste. Francis I persuaded a number of Italian artists to come to his court and had himself represented in mythological images in the Italian fashion, thereby promoting a language of panegyric which allowed artists to confer an aura of sacral—but not necessarily strictly Christian—mystery on the monarch, which for the very reason that the message of the mythological allegories remained so difficult to decipher and ambivalent in their meanings proved to be particularly intriguing and fascinating.

Francis I was in many ways an authoritarian ruler but to control the provinces of his vast kingdom he had, like his predecessors, to rely to a considerable extent on great noblemen who acted as governors and military commanders, and to whom their offices gave a welcome opportunity to extend their own patronage networks. Although Francis I easily managed to drive the Duke of Bourbon, the kingdom’s Constable (supreme military commander) and most powerful vassal who tried to raise troops in a rebellion against the king, into exile in the 1520s, the second half of the sixteenth century was to prove that royal authority was much more fragile than Francis I’s flamboyant style of kingship had suggested. But then Francis was not yet confronted on any major scale by the religious tensions which tore the kingdom apart in later decades.

Monarchy in an Age of Confessional Strife c. 1560–1650

The confessional division of Europe did not necessarily become irreversible between 1551/52 and 1563 (the years between Charles V’s defeat in his last battle against the German Protestants and the conclusion of the Council of Trent which had rejected any sort of compromise with Protestantism) but for the foreseeable future the conflict between the Roman Church and its Protestant opponents did nevertheless shape the political landscape of Europe. With this division the framework both in terms of ideas and representations and in terms of practical politics for royal and princely—or for that matter imperial—government changed profoundly. Charles V was significantly the last ruler of the Holy Roman Empire to be crowned as emperor by the Pope and even he was crowned in Bologna not in Rome in 1530. German Protestant prince electors could reluctantly accept that the man they had elected as king and emperor was crowned in Frankfurt by German archbishops but a coronation in Italy by the Pope himself was out of the question after 1552 (the date of the treaty of Passau when Charles’s brother finally granted permanent legal recognition to Protestants)—apart from the fact that the Habsburgs themselves were no longer very keen on such a coronation either.

The Empire was a special case because here every secular prince could largely decide for himself which course he wanted to follow in religious matters (as long as adhered to the Confessio Augustana of 1530 or to Tridentine Catholicism) but the Habsburgs ruling the Empire after 1552/55 were by no means the only monarchs who had to come to terms with subjects who did not share their religious convictions. Elizabeth I of England found herself unable to persuade most of her Irish and a
much more limited but important minority of her English subjects, particularly among the peerage and gentry, of the merits of her own Protestantism; Philip II of Spain discovered to his frustration that a growing number among the nobles, burghers, and peasants of the Netherlands rejected the strict Catholicism he espoused; while the Emperor Maximilian II as king of Bohemia and Hungary and Archduke of Austria had to grant—for the time being—toleration to the Protestant nobility which often held the majority of seats in the local diets after 1560, and to a lesser extent to protestant boroughs and cities as well.

The confessional division of Europe posed new challenges to royal and princely authority almost everywhere even in countries which were not divided in religious terms. Monarchs could, like Philip II of Spain, derive a new sense of mission in the tradition of the crusades from the fight against heresy, but they could also find themselves in a treacherous no man's-land between the competing religious groups and movements: as the Valois did in France after about 1560 or in a more complicated and less obvious way the Stuarts in England and Scotland after 1603. A new theocracy promoted either in the name of a godly community, a new Jerusalem, on the lines of Calvin's Geneva or in the name of a renewed papal supremacy both in spiritual and in secular matters seemed to threaten the autonomy of royal authority itself and its claims to control the Church at a (p.370) national level which had been asserted so successfully in many European countries during the great schism and the fifteenth century, the age of Conciliarism, long before the Reformation.

The French monarchy was particularly strongly affected by this religious upheaval. Large sections of the French nobility, perhaps up to a third of all nobles and a smaller but sizeable section of the remaining population decided to follow the precepts of Calvinist Geneva and not of Rome in the second half of the sixteenth century. A ruler who—as the king of France did—defined his power so much as a sacral and indeed a sacerdotal one, found it difficult to come to terms with this religious opposition which was bound to reject the 'religion royale' (the royal religion) consisting of specific rituals and ceremonies including the coronation which sustained monarchy in France. The conflict between Protestants and Catholics, in conjunction with noble faction fights and the structural weakness of the Crown due partly to royal minorities, led to deep political instability in France and to the outbreak of a series of domestic feuds and wars (the Wars of Religion) in 1562 which were to engulf the entire kingdom and did not end until 1598.

Charles IX who had become king of France at the age of 10 in 1560 on the death of his brother Francis II and remained until his death in 1574 under the influence of his mother Catherine de Medici, an Italian, tried to crush Protestant resistance against his rule during the Saint Bartholomew’s Eve in 1572. What was in all likelihood only planned as a strike against the leaders of the Huguenot party ended in widespread massacres with thousands of victims first in Paris then in the provinces as well. The Saint Bartholomew’s massacre was to transform the political landscape both of France and western Europe. Not just Protestants but moderate French Catholics as well came to mistrust the monarchy and its murderous policies deeply. As a response to these events theories of resistance were articulated which saw royal power essentially as limited and the king more as an officeholder than as a ruler who had been entrusted by God himself with the plenitude of secular power. On the other hand the chaos of civil war which overcame France in the 1570s led many scholars and lawyers to the conclusion that only strong royal authority could restore peace. When Jean Bodin completed his Six Livres de la République in 1576 he strongly rejected the ancient ideal of a mixed constitution which had dominated political theory in the past. Only an undivided and ultimately unlimited truly sovereign authority—ideally that of a hereditary monarch—could survive the challenge of civil war or overcome it. Bodin’s arguments—as much as the resistance theories of Calvinists and militant Catholics alike—were to have a significant impact all over Europe.26

In France itself, Henry III, who ruled from 1574 to 1589, saw his authority undermined both by Protestants and by Catholics. When, lacking himself any male heirs in the late 1580s, he seemed to favour a Protestant succession to the Crown, thereby following the traditional rules of inheritance of the Salic Law which gave the best claim to Henri de Bourbon King of Navarre who was a Protestant, Catholic opposition became ever more violent and denigrated the king as a tyrant, sodomite, and heretic. Henry III was finally murdered by a Dominican friar, Jacques Clément, after the Pope had pronounced a sentence of excommunication against him in reaction to Henry’s decision (p.371) to have his most dangerous opponents the Duke of Guise and his brother, a cardinal, killed in 1588.
Henry III was one of the few anointed kings in this period actually to be killed by an assassin, but other kings and princes were equally under threat such as Elizabeth I of England, excommunicated by the Pope in 1570, and her successor James I of England who was almost blown up with his entire parliament in 1605 by Catholic conspirators. Assassination had already been used as a means of settling political scores by radical Catholics in 1584 when William the Silent, the leader of the Dutch Revolt—not a king, but as prince of Orange a sovereign ruler all the same—had been killed. Such acts of violence help to explain the often strident tone of the divine right rhetoric defending the unaccountability of kings and princes, at least in this world, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Princes sought safeguards against the threat of religious radicalism and found refuge in ideas of paternal rule and divine right kingship as James VI and I of Scotland and England did in his own political writings published during the 1590s and the first two decades of the seventeenth century.27

In France royal authority reached a nadir in the late 1580s and Henry of Navarre, the new king of France, did not find it easy to restore royal power. Henry owed his victory over the Holy League—the radical Catholics who were supported by Spain—as much to a new royalism which emphasized that kings could never be lawfully resisted as to his ability to come to terms with the political culture of the Counter-Reformation. After his final conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1593 he took great care to revive the sacral dimension of royal power, regularly healing the scrofulous and emphasizing the sacerdotal qualities of kingship, but also his own role as the saviour of his country who was prepared to sacrifice his life for his subjects’ well-being. And so he did in the end as he too was killed by a religious fanatic in 1610. Protestants were granted toleration in 1598 for the time being but ultimately their—peaceful—integration into the Gallican Church was envisaged. On the other hand, there was a genuine search in France at the end of the Wars of Religion to find a new basis for civic concord and peace, a desire for order and stability which was not just imposed from above but equally found its more or less spontaneous expression at the local level. In many cities the newfound unity among the citizens was celebrated in religious ceremonies which combined Catholic piety and devotion to the monarchy which thus gained a strong affective not so say emotional dimension. It was now no longer heresy which was executed as a source of dissension and chaos but rebelliousness and disobedience. At the same time this new civic and political religion was inspired by the idea—carefully nurtured by Henry IV and his advisers themselves—that the king’s victories demonstrated that God had chosen him to restore peace to France, that his triumph manifested the workings of providence.28 For many monks and friars whose predecessors had been in the forefront of resistance against Henry III and prior to 1594 to Henry IV as well, it became now almost heresy to resist an anointed king.29 But this new political theology gained a momentum of its own and imposed constraints on kingship which a more secular model of monarchy would not have entailed. The French monarchy could now hardly subsist without relying on the confessional culture of French Catholicism as the history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was to prove.30

In comparison to the last two Valois kings in France the position of Elizabeth I in late sixteenth-century England was much less contested despite the threat of radical Catholicism. The Tudors were—at least in England, much less so in Ireland—more successful in containing the religious divisions which were inevitably present in any discussion on domestic or foreign policy than Charles IX and Henry III of France. Elizabeth I even managed to integrate militant Protestantism into a framework of representations and doctrines which gave her a unique status as a godly ruler and heroic defender of the English reformation against Rome and Spain, without ever really subscribing in practical politics without major qualifications to the political vision which such ideas and images of authority were meant to sustain. Elizabeth was one among quite a number of female rulers and regents who held power in western Europe in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. But where others such as Mary Queen of Scots or the French regent Catherine de Medici (regent after the death of Francis II in 1560, and the real power behind the throne throughout the 1560s and 1570s) were rejected by many of their subjects for the very reason that they were women and therefore not, in the normal course of events, entitled to rule over men, Elizabeth managed to turn the seeming weakness of her gender into a strength. Emphasizing in moments when her councillors tried to persuade her to marry that she was married to her kingdom and would therefore have to remain a virgin, she became perhaps for the very reason that she was female a symbolic figure onto which her subjects could project their visions of England’s identity. And whereas some political writers argued that under the rule of a woman councillors and parliament had to play a more prominent role than during the reign of a king, others maintained that the ruler’s ‘body politic’
remained the same regardless of the gender of the actual monarch and could heal any deficiencies of the ‘body natural’ including its female gender. 

Nevertheless, in many ways the stability of the Tudor monarchy after 1558 was more precarious than it seemed. The succession crisis which was due to the fact that Elizabeth was childless could only be resolved by a highly controversial act of regicide, the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, Elizabeth’s main rival, in 1587. In the years preceding this dramatic event leading members of the Protestant elite governing the country had devised a scenario which would allow them to deny Mary’s claims to the Crown even if Elizabeth were to die before her. In redefining the kingdom as a sort of monarchical republic and in—at least implicitly—rejecting the claims of any pretender to the succession who was not a Protestant, Elizabeth’s councillors did not only anticipate to some extent the Exclusion Crisis of the late 1670s and early 1680s, they also developed a model of kingship (or queenship) as potentially elective and as subordinate to the value system of religious orthodoxy. This ‘monarchical republic’ presented a sort of Protestant counterpart to the vision of monarchy which theologians and lawyers writing for the Holy League in France constructed in the late 1580s and early 1590s.

The dominant power in late sixteenth-century Europe was undoubtedly Spain. The Spanish empire remained a classical composite monarchy where each kingdom and province—from Aragon to Naples and from Milan to the Franche Comté—cherished its own traditions and enjoyed its own privileges. Only in the colonies in the New World could the king impose his will without having to take account of local traditions, at least in theory. Philip II, who became king of Spain after the abdication of his father in 1555/56, has often been depicted as an authoritarian ruler if not a reckless tyrant. However, in Castile itself and his other dominions in the Iberian peninsula, including since 1580 Portugal, Philip’s style of self-representation was rather low key and modest. The king was in the later years of his reign not even addressed as ‘Your Majesty’ but as ‘Señor’ (Sir). To depict the king as a semi divine being would have been inconceivable in Spain where the secular ruler—who was neither crowned nor anointed as we have seen—was expected to show humility towards the Church and the clergy (which did not prevent him from strictly controlling the Church politically and financially). Spanish lawyers and legal scholars emphasized the limitations both the laws of nature and God’s commands imposed on princes, and in practice it was not unusual for officeholders to ignore royal instructions when they seemed incompatible with legal precepts, either tacitly or even not so tacitly. This did not prevent the king from punishing subjects he saw as rebels and traitors with great severity and indeed at times the utmost brutality. When a rebellion broke out in the Netherlands in the late 1560s, motivated by dissatisfaction with the rule of a king who, much more than his father, was seen as a foreigner, alien to the Burgundian traditions and the civic culture of the autonomous cities in the Netherlands, and when this rebellion was fuelled by the Calvinist ideals of a radical religious minority, Philip rejected all compromise and opted for a policy of harsh repression. The result was a war of secession which was to last for several decades and led eighty years later in 1648 to full Dutch independence while the Southern Netherlands remained under Spanish rule.

Philip II’s successors as kings of Spain increasingly found that the resources of their kingdoms, despite the constant but now no longer growing stream of silver from Peru, were too small to defend the vast empire they ruled. While art and architecture at court continued to propagate the glorious image of a Spanish global empire which ensured peace, religious orthodoxy, and stability at palaces like the Buen Retiro in Madrid, built in the 1630s, the peripheral provinces of this empire became more restless than ever. In 1640 both Catalonia and Portugal revolted. Such provincial rebellions were by no means unusual in this period. A number of composite monarchies such as the Stuart monarchy or the realm of the Austrian Habsburgs were confronted by the problem that any attempt to integrate provinces which in the past had enjoyed a special status (for example privileges which protected them against high taxation or granted religious dissenters toleration) into a more homogeneous empire risked provoking a rebellion (Bohemia rose against Habsburg rule in 1618, and Calvinist Scotland revolted against Charles I’s religious policies in 1638–40, while Catholic Ireland followed in 1641 for opposite religious reasons) while a laissez-faire policy was not only financially costly but also dangerous for the ultimate coherence of a multiple monarchy. In the Spanish case the Catalán rebellion could in the end be defeated but Portugal became an independent kingdom once more (peace treaty with Spain in 1668) and Spain lost its status as the dominant European power in the war it had to wage against so many enemies both external and domestic.
While Spain declined, France could reassert its place as the most powerful kingdom in western Europe in the 1640s. Despite the fact that a series of tax revolts and noble rebellions continued to threaten the stability of the country the reign of Louis XIII (1610–43) saw a clear movement towards political centralization which owed much to the relentless energy of Louis XIII’s prime minister Cardinal Richelieu. Against strong resistance much higher taxes than before were imposed on the population and the royal army became slowly a much more efficient instrument than in the past. The temporary breakdown of the Crown’s financial system nevertheless provoked one last great rebellion, the Fronde in 1648. It took Cardinal Mazarin who acted as prime minister on behalf of the regent, Anne of Austria almost five years to fully restore royal authority but the Fronde had never been a truly revolutionary movement. It lacked the religious fervour of such movements and moreover the idea of a republican constitution was rejected in France not just by those loyal to the regent but by most of the rebels (the urban rebellion in Bordeaux, the so-called Ormée was a partial exception) themselves.  

In fact most of them, as princes of the blood, high-ranking noblemen, or as officeholders in the great law courts and other institutions, had a personal stake in the survival of royal authority. Whenever the question arose as to whether clear limitations should be imposed on this authority most of the rebels shrank away from openly questioning the foundations of monarchy. They did not dare to draw away the veil which protected the mysteries of monarchy, as Cardinal de Retz famously put it in his memoirs. Ultimately they respected the sacred character of royal authority which had been reaffirmed so strongly after 1593/94.

No greater contrast could be imagined to what happened in England at the same time. In January 1649 Charles I was executed in London in front of his own palace for having waged war against parliament and his own people. Monarchs had been deposed, killed, and sent into exile before, but such a public execution of an anointed king after an official trial by his own subjects was unprecedented. Royal authority had initially broken down in England in late 1640 after Charles I had lost his war against the rebellious Scots who had risen against royal ecclesiastical policy in 1638. Parliament had forced him to abandon many of the instruments of prerogative rule on which he had relied in the 1630s when he had governed without parliament. But the civil war had only become inevitable because the king refused to accept defeat and because the appeal to the fear of Popery on which the leaders of the House of Commons had relied to whip up support for their fight against royal authority gained a momentum of its own which could no longer be contained. Unsettled by the religious and political radicalism of the Commons—or rather of their most active members who may not necessarily have been a majority—large sections of the gentry and peerage but also of the population at large, in particular in the north and west of the kingdom, had decided to support the king in his battle against parliament and for the established Church which the radicals in parliament seemed about to dismantle.

(p. 375) In the end the renewed intervention of the Presbyterian Scottish Covenanters and the greater military discipline of the king’s opponents had ensured parliamentary victory. Few parliamentarians had initially been republicans unless one takes every person who had read with some amount of approval Roman historians such as Livy and Tacitus to be a republican, but faced with a king who could never be a reliable partner in a peace treaty they took the ultimate step to have him executed. England became a republic for eleven years. The political experience of the 1640s and 1650s created a republican political culture, which perhaps only a minority subscribed to but which was nevertheless vibrant in intellectual terms and which did not entirely disappear after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Republicanism was inspired as much by a political Biblicism (visible already in the Scottish Reformation of the 1560s) which ultimately rejected the idea that there could be any other anointed king but Christ himself as by an ideal of civic liberty going back to classical antiquity.

In fact, it could be argued that monarchy had been de-sacralized forever by the act of regicide in 1649. This is doubtful; by staging his death as that of a martyr dying for the true Church and following Christ in his passion, Charles I had laid the foundation for a renewed and vigorous royalism for which divine right monarchy and the Church of England became inseparable. The problem was that the religious fervour of this royalism and its divisive nature made it unsuitable as a movement which could unite the entire nation behind the restored monarchy after 1660—it rather deepened the existing tensions instead of healing old wounds. In that sense the reign of the Stuarts in England after 1660 remained certainly more unstable than the great baroque monarchies elsewhere.
Baroque Monarchy, c. 1650–1750

The century between the end of the Thirty Years’ War and the end of the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48) is often seen as the classical age of absolutism. Over the past two or three decades, however, the notion of absolutism has become increasingly controversial, although there is no denying the fact that the unprecedented recruitment of vast standing armies in peacetime, a much higher income from permanent taxation, and a more efficient bureaucracy which could increasingly rely on the detailed information provided by official statistics did give monarchs in this period more power than their predecessors had enjoyed. A number of modern text books therefore still cling to the concept of absolutism, which is after all handy in summing up these structural changes which state and monarchy underwent in this period. However a closer look not so much at legislation and proclamations but at the way government worked on a daily basis, and at the extent to which policies could actually be implemented, render older notions of the inexorable growth of the state and of monarchical authority in this period at least doubtful if not obsolete. Kings and princes in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries found it as difficult as ever to govern without the cooperation of the social elite, even in kingdoms and dominions where the old diets and Estates had largely disappeared or politically gone to sleep for the time being. In a moment of crisis troops or other means of coercion could be used to crush a rebellion or to bring a city which insisted too much on its ancient privileges to heel. However, on a long-term basis, some albeit limited acceptance of and compliance with the policies a ruler wanted to pursue had to be sought. The political terms of trade between ruler and subjects and in particular with those subjects who enjoyed influence, social credit, and power at the local level were ultimately established and reshaped in a constant process of mutual negotiation, in the baroque age as much as in the past. Coercion could to some extent create or change the framework for this process but was no lasting substitute for it in the normal course of events.

Royal authority was constrained by a closely knit network of social ties and structures of mutual dependency—not least between officeholders and local and national elites—which made it difficult to confront let alone to undermine or destroy vested interests. This was to change to some extent in the second half of the eighteenth century—a period beyond the scope of this chapter—but in the baroque period absolutism was often more a discourse and a language than a reality. Admittedly the panegyric speeches, sermons, and works of art devoted to rulers or produced to propagate their fame in this period were often truly extravagant in their praise for royal or princely wisdom, virtue, and power, more so perhaps than in earlier ages when the explicitly or implicitly contractual foundations of princely authority and its moral and religious limitations were given a more prominent place in most countries. This change in the official political language should not be dismissed as mere rhetoric for it defined what could or could not be said in public and what had to be concealed behind a veil of silence, and here a marked change is of course discernible in particular in countries like France between the late sixteenth and the late seventeenth centuries.

Recent research has in fact rightly concentrated much more than in the past on the rituals and symbols of power, on court ceremony, or on public displays of authority on the assumption that political institutions can only survive and reproduce themselves by being sustained by a political culture which grants them persuasiveness and legitimacy. Such rituals of power had always been important, as we have seen, but perhaps never before had monarchy so much relied on exuberant quasi theatrical performances to silence all open opposition and direct criticism of princely authority. To some extent this visualization and enactment of power in image and ritual did not only represent a claim to authority but created this very authority in a symbolic performance or could do so if the circumstances were sufficiently propitious. Of course, symbolic acts, ceremonial celebrations, or visual images of power often conveyed ambiguous or even contradictory messages, but this was not necessarily a disadvantage. Different audiences could read such messages in their own way and the very ambiguity of visual and symbolic representations of power could thus evoke feelings of loyalty among men and women of quite different and possibly even incompatible persuasions.

One may observe, however, at the very moment when the baroque theatre of power was most impressive in its displays and performances a change of political culture. At the end of the seventeenth century there were signs of an incipient
crisis of representation leading ultimately to a disenchantment with monarchy. For example mythological and historical figures so prominent in the works of art which had celebrated princes and their power ever since the Renaissance now became potentially mere signs and lost their deeper symbolic quality whereby they not only invoked and conjured up the presence of what they represented but to some extent embodied the higher order and transcendent truth they mysteriously hinted at. Monarchs who were depicted as Hercules, for example, or as Alexander the Great were no longer transformed into higher beings in the eyes of the beholder; they were now just actors on a stage wearing one of many possible theatrical costumes. Thus a period when the cult of majesty at court reached its most unrestrained and extravagant forms can also be seen as a time when the old fabric of sacral monarchy slowly began to unravel. This was more due to the development of a rational theology suspicious of the mysticism which in the late sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries had, at least in Catholic countries, been a hallmark of religious revival, than to the influence of an enlightened philosophy critical of the Christian traditions underpinning the idea of sacral monarchy.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in France. Louis XIV’s reign marked in many ways the *apogée* of royal power in France during the early modern period. The provincial revolts and noble rebellions which had plagued the country for almost a century between the 1560s and 1650s came finally to an end. Higher ranking noblemen flocked to the court and sought active service in the vast and largely newly created standing army as commanders. The court was certainly no gilded cage for the nobility as older historians have assumed; it was far too important as a centre of patronage and more than ever the place where military careers were made or unmade. Moreover, Louis was by and large careful, more careful than his predecessors, not to upset the traditional social hierarchy by advancing newcomers, with the possible exception of his own bastard sons and daughters. Court culture was however centred on the person of the monarch to an unprecedented degree. The dynasty as such—represented by prominent ancestors—hardly figured in works of art at court in Versailles and the mystical body of the king, his political persona—always perhaps more closely linked to the king as a human being than in England—was almost entirely subsumed in the mortal body of the reigning monarch. This added to the king’s glory and personal charisma but it also rendered kingship during the reign of Louis XIV’s successors more vulnerable as an institution. Louis XV was too diffident and limited in his talents to keep the show on the road in the eighteenth century in a convincing way and the king’s personal deficiencies could now undermine monarchy and the authority of the Crown because the king as a human being was more than ever identified with kingship itself.

During Louis XIV’s lifetime Versailles became, however, a model for other European monarchies. The smaller German princes in particular looked to Versailles as an inspiration for their own courts and tried to compensate for their lack of real military and political power by building vast palaces which often resembled the Sun King’s residence to a greater or lesser extent. The emperors at Vienna, however, looked mostly with disdain at the Bourbon court in Versailles. As one of the oldest dynasties in Europe the Habsburgs felt that they did not need the pomp and circumstance and the—so it seemed—vainglorious self-promotion Louis XIV indulged in. The Hofburg in Vienna, the principal residence of the Austrian Habsburgs before c. 1750, was rather old-fashioned and unglamorous, and the emperor, surrounded by rich aristocratic courtiers who showed little reluctance to put their wealth and power on show in vast palaces even in the capital itself—something French noblemen would have been much more reluctant to do—put greater emphasis on displays of ostentatious piety than on secular ceremonies and festivals at court, although the latter were splendid enough. The Habsburgs did not claim, like the king of France, to enjoy an almost sacerdotal power—there were no miraculous healings in Vienna in contrast to Versailles where the king healed the scrofula like his medieval predecessors—but court ceremonial was closely linked to the culture of the Counter-Reformation with its pilgrimages, public processions, and ecclesiastical ceremonies and an array of saints whose cults projected allegiance to the house of Austria onto the realm of the sacred. The confessional element in Habsburg court culture, traditionally strong ever since the early seventeenth century, was reinforced even more emphatically when Charles VI (d. 1740), the last male Habsburg, ascended the throne in 1711. Charles VI had been proclaimed king of Spain in 1703 and never quite managed to accept his defeat in the War of the Spanish Succession (1701/2–1713/14). Baroque Counter-Reformation piety and imperial ambitions which harked back to older traditions rooted in Charles V’s vision of universal monarchy and even more ancient medieval ideas of empire, gave Charles VI’s rule a distinct flavour. His flamboyant and at times aggressive Catholicism alienated many Protestant princes and subjects in the
Holy Roman Empire, but on the other hand Charles VI could reap the benefits of a change in the balance of power in central Europe which had led to a revival of the emperor’s authority in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, partly due to the victory over the Ottoman Empire achieved in the 1680s, which had led to the conquest of Hungary and even, for a time, of northern Serbia.50

The Holy Roman Empire, which seemed to be on the verge of collapse during the Thirty Years’ War, proved in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that it was capable of a revival. It never became anything remotely resembling a modern state but the less powerful princes and Estates of the Empire, and they constituted the majority of course, came to realize that they needed imperial protection more than ever to survive in a world where great military powers such as France or, up to 1720, Sweden posed a constant threat. The Habsburgs were also helped in their attempt to revive imperial authority by the changing balance of confessional forces in the Empire. Important protestant dynasties either converted to Catholicism as the Wettins in Dresden did in the 1690s and were thus drawn more closely into the orbit of the imperial court, or were replaced by Catholic cadet branches as in Heidelberg in 1685 or Stuttgart in 1733, both ancient centres of Protestant power and culture: Calvinist in the first case, Lutheran in the second.51 The tendency to re-confessionalize both politics and the image of monarchy itself which we encounter in the Holy Roman Empire and at the imperial court in Vienna in the early eighteenth century was no isolated phenomenon. Louis XIV had adopted ever more the image of the crusader for the Roman Church from the 1680s onwards, when he decided to suppress the Huguenot Churches in France and his suppression of Jansenism during the last two decades of his reign formed the basis of a closer cooperation with the papacy than in the past.52

In England one can equally observe the renewed growth of confessional tensions from the late 1670s onwards. With Charles II of England (1660–85) it had been difficult to say what his preferred religious allegiance was, but the Catholic faith of his brother was a matter of concern to many and led to the Exclusion Crisis of the years 1678–81 when the Whigs tried to bar him from the succession. As Charles II managed to thwart these attempts James II could succeed him in 1685, and he tried to grant Catholics—in defiance of statute law—in his three kingdoms all the rights and liberties Protestants enjoyed if not more. The military intervention of his son-in-law William of Orange forced him to flee to France in 1688. James’s failure to find sufficient support for his policies in England was largely due to the fact that his idea of ruling a multiple monarchy united primarily by dynastic allegiance to a hereditary monarch and his family not by confessional uniformity and anti-Popery was rejected in favour of an ideal of national identity closely linked to Protestantism, albeit a multifaceted Protestantism, both in England and Scotland. The Stuarts ultimately lost their British Crowns because they were seen by their Protestant subjects not just as supporters of an alien faith but as unpatriotic, acting not just as Catholics but as allies of France, the embodiment of arbitrary government and religious intolerance for many people in England and Scotland ever since the 1680s if not earlier.53

After the failed experiment of James II’s rule (1685–88) William III returned to the image of the Protestant hero and saviour of both his adopted country and Europe from Popish tyranny, an image which had last dominated representations of monarchy in England during the reign of Elizabeth I before 1603—unless one were to include the Lord Protector Cromwell in the 1650s among the English monarchs of the seventeenth century.54 Admittedly the potential aggressiveness of this Protestant rhetoric was somewhat toned down when George I, the first Hanoverian, ascended the British throne in 1714. Neither George I nor George II were quite the material from which charismatic heroes could be fashioned, although George II did lead his army into battle against the French at Dettingen (1743) during the War of the Austrian Succession, which made him the last British monarch to command troops in the field. By and large, however, the monarchy and dynasty were now seen more as symbols and safeguards for Britain’s protestant faith and its liberty and less as institutions which played an indispensable role in mankind’s salvation and the battle against the Antichrist. The monarch became gradually more a ‘fellow Christian who had particular duties in showing his subjects how they should lead virtuous and pious lives’,55 and less a heroic leader in a confessional and political struggle of eschatological dimensions. This redefinition of the monarch’s role became even more visible in the later eighteenth century when not just George III of England but an increasing number of princes elsewhere posed as family men, trying to give an example of domestic virtue. The older model of the chivalrous roi connétable did not disappear entirely, however. Charles XII of Sweden (ruled 1697–1718) had provided an outstanding
example of a charismatic military leader who—for a time—fought successfully against heavy odds, confronting Poland, Denmark, and Russia, and a number of other enemies until he was overcome by the superior forces of the opposing coalition. With Charles’s death during the siege of Fredriksten in November 1718, Sweden ceased to be a country ruled by charismatic warlike kings, in fact it became to all intents and purposes a sort of aristocratic republic with a monarchical head.

Yet at the very same time Prussia—only raised to the dignity of a minor kingdom in 1701 when the Habsburgs needed the Hohenzollerns’ support against France—was about to transform itself into a military monarchy in an unprecedented fashion when Sweden abandoned this model. Frederick William I (1713–40) wholeheartedly rejected everything that was part of Baroque court culture, the French language as much as opera performances or the refined manners of the court aristocracy and the civilized ‘honnête homme’. Always dressed in a simple uniform, not in court dress, and well known for his outspokenness, his boorish behaviour, and, at times, his brutality, he defined himself first and foremost as the first officer of his army which he made the largest force in the Empire next to the imperial army. A Protestantism strongly influenced by Pietism and a military ethos that united the king and the noble elite of his country came to define Prussia as a state in the making during his reign.

The king himself, however, avoided military conflicts once the turmoil of the Nordic War had ended in 1721. In fact he strongly rejected wars which could not be justified on legal or moral grounds, but the instrument which he had created was employed by his son to devastating effect in 1740 when he attacked the Habsburg monarchy. Frederick the Great was probably the last hereditary monarch in Europe to play the role of roi connétable and military hero successfully. In his attack on Silesia in 1740 he was mostly guided by his quest for personal glory and fame, not all that much different from the warlike kings of an earlier age. However, the way his contemporaries projected their own specific notions of heroic monarchy onto the figure of the Hohenzollern king, mostly of course a process which took place after 1750 that is beyond the period under discussion here, demonstrated that charismatic rulers were now more likely to be understood and constructed as national heroes—the nations in question being here either Prussia or a Protestant Germany or both—and living symbols of the state they ruled than as mere protagonists of dynastic glory and of the traditional noble culture of honour, whatever the real motives for their actions were. In fact rulers and their dynasties now came under pressure to demonstrate that they were patriotic and prepared to serve the state they ruled, and even to subordinate merely dynastic concerns to the well-being of the state more clearly than in the past. During the course of the eighteenth century, particularly during its second half, it became increasingly important for monarchs nearly everywhere to employ the language of patriotism as their subjects came to see themselves as citizens of a political community which may have found its noblest symbol in the monarchy but was not defined by it. The fate of the great European dynasties after 1750 and indeed in the nineteenth century was to depend very much on their ability to find an accommodation with this new patriotism or even to become its protagonists. Where the Hanoverians and the Hohenzollern—perhaps somewhat narrowly—succeeded in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic era, the Bourbons in France (and to a lesser extent in Spain as well) failed, though these events lie beyond the scope of this chapter.

Further Reading


Bryant, Lawrence M. Ritual, Ceremony and the Changing Monarchy in France, 1350–1789 (Farnham, 2010).


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Kantorowicz, Ernst H. *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ, 1957).

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**Notes:**


(4.) Watts, Making of Polities, 413–414.


(8.) Peter Moraw, Von Offener Verfassung zu Gestalteter Verdichtung: Das Reich im späten Mittelalter, 1250–1490 (Frankfurt/M, 1989), 382–385.


(12.) Ernst H. Kantorowicz, The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology (Princeton, NJ, 1957).


(14.) Fanny Cosandey and Isabelle Poutrin, Monarchies espagnole et française, 1550–1714 (Neuilly, 2001), 303–305.


41. Andrew Lacey, *The Cult of King Charles the Martyr* (Woodbridge, 2003).


(49.) Stefan Samerski, ‘Hausheilige statt Staatspatrone. Der mißlungene Absolutismus in Österreichs Heiligenhimmel’, in Petr Mat’a and Thomas Winkelbauer, eds., *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1620 bis 1740. Leistungen und Grenzen des Absolutismusparadigmas* (Stuttgart, 2006), 251–278. Samerski does emphasize, however, that regional and national saints were rarely entirely replaced by dynastic saints.


For the notion of patriotism in France see David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, 2001).

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter analyses two different conceptions of monarchy in Northern and Eastern Europe. One, derived from medieval Catholic political philosophy, was based on the political consent of the citizen body and produced in Scandinavia and Poland–Lithuania, elective monarchy and political union. The second model, as embodied in Muscovy/Russia, emerged from the Byzantine and Orthodox tradition, and was consultative rather than consensual. The chapter considers the establishment and failure of political union in Scandinavia, the failure of elective monarchy in Denmark and Sweden in the seventeenth century in response to the demands of war, and the establishment and different fates of absolute monarchy in both states. It looks at the successful political union of Poland and Lithuania, and explains why the monarchy was unable to meet similar challenges, and considers the controversy over the nature of tsardom and autocracy in Muscovy/Russia and the achievements and difficulties of its rulers.

Keywords: Monarchy, Scandinavia, Poland–Lithuania, Muscovy/Russia, consensual, consultative, elective monarchy, absolute monarchy, tsardom, autocracy

Two Models of Monarchy

The memoirs of Samuel Maskiewicz, a captain in the Polish force that had occupied the Kremlin after its victory at Klushino in July 1610, describe Moscow in detail. Captivated by its dazzling Orthodox churches, Maskiewicz discussed the strange practices of the Muscovites, from their separation of men and women at banquets to their taste for jesters and jugglers. Relations with Muscovite boyars were cordial, and Maskiewicz related how the Poles recommended Polish freedom to them, quoting with amused detachment their reply:

Your freedom suits you, and our servitude suits us, since your freedom is licence, something we do not know. In [Poland] the powerful oppress the weak . . . Justice under your law comes slowly, taking a decade and more; for others it does not come at all. In [Muscovy] the greatest boyar can do nothing to the poorest, for at the first complaint the tsar investigates the case. And if the tsar himself perpetrates an injustice against me he is free to do so; he can act as freely as God himself, because he both punishes and rewards. I do not resent suffering at his hand, as I do at the hand of my brother; when the tsar accuses me, he does so as ruler of the world.¹

This amiable exchange reveals two different conceptions of monarchy. One drew upon the political thought of a Catholic Church that had retained the Roman empire’s claims to global authority, that presented itself as the one body capable of uniting the plethora of squabbling European princes, and that advanced papal claims to political authority over secular
monarchs, while spawning a powerful intellectual challenge to papal authority through conciliarism. The Muscovite model also drew on Roman tradition, but as it had developed in the Eastern, Byzantine empire. If Western thinkers, (p. 386) influenced by Cicero and Livy, praised the Roman republic and blamed Rome’s collapse on the decadence of its emperors, Byzantium venerated the emperor as supreme lawgiver in the tradition of Diocletian and Justinian. There was no Orthodox Gregory VII and no Orthodox Canossa: Byzantine emperors did not wait patiently in the snow until their patriarchs deigned to receive them.

As Byzantium shrivelled, the authority of Constantinople’s patriarchs withered. In 1448, outraged by the union between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches negotiated at the Council of Florence, the Muscovite Church elected bishop Iona of Riazan’ metropolitan of Moscow without patriarchal approval, five years before Constantine fell to the Ottomans. It was not until 1589 that the government of Fyodor (ruled 1584–98) bullied patriarch Jeremias II into recognizing the Moscow metropolitanate’s patriarchal status, but Russian Orthodox was effectively an autocephalous state church from 1448. Metropolitan and patriarchs, citing the advice of patriarch Agapetus to Justinian, stressed the duty of subjects to obey their rulers. Under Michael Romanov (ruled 1613–45), his father Filaret, patriarch from 1619 until 1633, was the power behind the throne, and patriarchal authority reached its zenith under the zealous reformer Nikon, in office from 1652 to 1666, who was accorded the title ‘sovereign’. Generally, however, the Orthodox Church, if it maintained that tsars should observe divine law, did not question royal authority. It could not resist incorporation into the machinery of state when the spectacularly unorthodox Peter I (ruled 1682–1725) showed his contempt for the patriarchate by appointing Stefan Iavorskii administrator on the death of patriarch Adrian in 1700, and then replacing the patriarchate with the Holy Synod in 1718. Thereafter no patriarch sat in Moscow until 1917.

The failure of Russian Orthodoxy to develop any effective critique of monarchical power partly explains the attitudes of Maskiewicz’s boyars. In contrast, Muscovy’s Western neighbours, drawing on Catholicism’s political heritage, developed distinctive political systems based on elective monarchy and political unions which produced composite states that were not arbitrary dynastic constructions, but rested on union treaties agreed between monarchs and their political elites. Monarchy was limited, consensual, and bound by law. While there were real constraints on royal authority in Muscovy/Russia, Russian political culture rested on different foundations. The clash between the two models of monarchy did much to shape the history of north-eastern Europe.

### Elective Monarchy

The crucial developments came in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In Scandinavia and Poland elective monarchy underpinned the constitutional principles that limited royal authority. The emergence of elective monarchy in both cases was the result of dynastic instability, which led to personal unions that enjoyed very different fates. Personal unions had been a feature of medieval Scandinavian history, but had often proved fragile and short-lived (see Map 15.1). If Norway remained a hereditary monarchy, the elective principle in Sweden and Denmark gave the ambitious Margaret, (p. 387) daughter of Valdemar IV (ruled Denmark 1340–75) the means of establishing a more lasting relationship. Elected queen regnant of Denmark (1387) and proclaimed queen of Norway (1388), she exploited the unpopularity of Albrecht of Mecklenburg, Valdemar IV’s grandson, who had ruled Sweden since 1364. In 1388 Albrecht’s attempt at a reduktion—the reclaiming without compensation of alienated royal estates—provoked rebellion. In
March 1388 Margaret was proclaimed Sweden’s ‘plenipotentiary lady and true husband’ (fullmäktiga fru och rätta husbonde) and made regent. Albrecht was defeated, captured, and deposed. Margaret adopted her great-nephew, Bogislaw of Pomerania—given the Scandinavian name of Erik—as her heir. In 1396, Erik, recognized as hereditary king of Norway in 1389, was elected king of Denmark and Sweden, establishing a political union that was given legal form at Kalmar in 1397.

Government structures across northern and eastern Europe were fundamentally influenced by differing customs with regard to the succession. Male primogeniture was alien (p. 388) to Slavic culture, and among the Baltic tribes out of which the Lithuanians emerged as a major power after 1300. Both cultures developed systems of collateral, cognatic succession, in which brothers took precedence over sons and appanage duchies circulated within the dynasty under the headship of a senior prince. On his death his brothers, sons, and nephews moved up the pecking order. Succession disputes in Kievan Rus’ were frequent and frequently murderous. They fostered fragmentation that left Rus’ helpless against the thirteenth-century Mongol onslaught. Political unity collapsed in Poland after the creation of appanage duchies by the will of Bolesław the Wrymouth in 1138; when Władysław the Short re-established the monarchy in 1320, he could only reunite the core provinces of Wielkopolska and Małopolska: Silesia was never recovered, while Mazovia was only fully reintegrated in 1529. In Muscovy, which established itself as a major claimant to the heritage of Kievan Rus’ when the metropolitan of Kiev moved to Moscow in 1325, collateral succession provoked civil war in the 1430s (see Map 15.2). Order was restored by Vasili II (ruled 1425–62), who institutionalized primogeniture in the ruling Rurikid dynasty, but only after he had been blinded and briefly exiled by his cousin Dmitrii Shemiaka.

In Lithuania the system worked better. Under the pagan Gediminid dynasty, the granting of appanage duchies to the numerous sons of Gediminas (ruled 1315/16–41) and his son Algirdas (ruled 1345–77) underpinned the astonishing expansion of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which swept up much of the lands of Kievan Rus’. Gediminids assigned Ruthenian duchies converted to Orthodoxy, adopted Ruthenian culture, and turned Lithuania into a major power. Algirdas ruled with his brother Kęstutis, demonstrating that sibling rivalries could be contained within a system that worked as long as it could expand to satisfy the rapidly expanding dynasty.

Collateral succession, in which princes were consulted over the division of the dynasty’s inheritance, established the notion that the transmission of political authority across the generations was a matter for negotiation. The extinction in the direct male line of the Árpáds in Hungary (1301), the Přemyslids in Bohemia (1306), and the Piasts in Poland (1370) opened the way not just to the affirmation of elective monarchy in these kingdoms, whose cultural and political links were strong, but to the development of a justification for it, rooted in the idea of the Corona Regni—the ‘crown of the kingdom’—which developed in Hungary and Bohemia, and spread to Poland. This notion conceptualized the kingdom as an abstract entity legally distinct from the monarch’s person, which kings held in trust for their people. Originally developed by monarchs to justify their authority, it also justified the political involvement of what was termed the community of the realm, most notably in determining the succession. When Casimir III of Poland died without an heir in 1370 he was succeeded by his nephew, Louis of Anjou, king of Hungary (ruled in Poland 1370–82) under an agreement made with Louis’s father in 1339, renewed in 1355. Louis also failed to produce a male heir; at Koszyce in 1374, to secure a promise from the Polish council that it would accept one of his daughters as queen on his death, he granted the szlachta (nobility) privileges which secured its political position by acknowledging that apart from an annual land tax of 2 groszy per hide, the szlachta could not be taxed without consent. This was not the capitulation to noble greed as which it is frequently portrayed. Two groszy was no symbolic sum in 1374, as is often claimed; it only became so later, thanks to inflation. It provided (p. 389) the Crown with a regular income sufficient to ensure that it only had to raise extraordinary taxation on two occasions before 1450. If these privileges were undoubtedly crucial for the construction of the consensual Polish political system, the restrictions they
placed on royal power were less onerous than the Land Law of Magnus Eriksson (c. 1350), the foundation document of Swedish constitutionalism, which decreed that the monarchy was elective, banned the king from imposing new taxes, stipulated that he should live off his own, and required him to govern ‘med råds råde’ (with council advice). It was dynastic failure, not the Koszyce privileges, that transformed Polish politics. In 1382 the szlachta honoured its promise to ignore the claims of numerous Piast princes in favour of one of Louis’s daughters, but rejected Mary, his nominated heir, choosing instead her sister, the nine-year-old Jadwiga, elected queen regnant in 1384. The community of the realm had asserted its authority.

### Union

Jadwiga’s accession did not secure the principle of elective monarchy in Polish law. This was achieved as a consequence of political union, instituted after the Polish community of the realm agreed at Krewo in August 1385 to elect as king Algirdas’s son Jogaila, Grand Duke of Lithuania since 1377, if he accepted Catholic baptism for himself and his pagan subjects; if he married Jadwiga; and if he joined his Lithuanian and Ruthenian lands to Poland. Baptized at Cracow in March 1386, Jogaila—or Władysław II Jagiełło as he became—married Jadwiga and was duly elected. His status was questioned in 1399, however, when Jadwiga died bearing him a daughter, who lived only hours. Without an heir born of a Piast mother, Jagiello’s position remained unclear. His daughter Jadwiga, born of his second marriage, to Casimir III’s granddaughter Anna of Celje, was declared his natural heir in 1413, but when the aged Jagiello unexpectedly fathered two sons in the 1420s with his fourth wife Sophia, the szlachta refused to recognize their natural rights to the throne, although it promised to elect one of them king following Jagiello’s death in return for enhanced privileges. With the election of Jagiello’s sons Władysław III (ruled 1434–44) and Casimir IV (ruled 1447–92) the Polish monarchy’s elective nature was established.

If in Poland–Lithuania the elective principle was crucial to the process of union, in Scandinavia it provided a mechanism by which the union was challenged and broken. In both cases, however, the monarchy’s elective nature meant that union was no simple dynastic phenomenon, but involved the communities of the realm in the establishment, definition, and development of consensual union states.

### Scandinavia

The Kalmar union failed, despite the shared linguistic, cultural, and political heritage of the Scandinavian monarchies. It was dominated by Denmark, where the monarchs resided; their policies were therefore often unpopular in Sweden and Norway. Erik of Pomerania’s (p. 391) pursuit of closer unification provoked discontent and rebellion. He was deposed in Sweden in 1439 after Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson’s popular rising, and in Denmark the same year. The Norwegians, abandoning their tradition of hereditary monarchy, deposed him in 1440, electing his nephew, Christopher of Bavaria, in 1442, two years after the Danes.

The appointment of regents in Sweden and Norway to overcome the problems of absentee monarchy encouraged challenges to royal power. Karl Knutsson, regent (riksföreståndare) of Sweden, was elected king of Norway once (1449), and of Sweden on three occasions (1448, 1455, 1464). Three members of the Sture family used the same position to challenge the brutal Hans II (ruled 1481–1513) and Christian II, who succeeded Hans in Denmark in 1513, but was only crowned in Sweden in 1520. Known as ‘the Tyrant’, he was deposed in 1521 following his slaughter of ninety Swedish nobles in the 1520 Stockholm Bloodbath. By the time he was deposed in Denmark in 1523, the Kalmar union was over, following the election of Gustav Vasa, leader of the rebellion, as king of Sweden at Strängnäs in June 1523.

The union nevertheless entrenched attachment to limited monarchy. It was established in July 1397 on the basis of two documents: the coronation letter [kroningsbrevet] and the longer union letter [unionsbrevet], which placed considerable limitations on royal power. If Margaret and Erik never accepted the unionsbrev, it was regarded by their subjects as binding. The union, by confirming the elective principle, reaffirmed the crucial mechanism for restraining royal power. This
was not due to the representative nature of elections. If these were occasionally effected by substantial assemblies, as with those of Erik of Pomerania (1389) and Gustav Vasa (1523), the electorate usually comprised the small group of aristocrats on the council (*riksraad* in Denmark; *riksråd* in Sweden). Elections, however, provided opportunities to impose charters limiting the king’s power. Although fear of Danish revanchism persuaded the Swedish *Riksdag* (parliament) to declare the monarchy hereditary in Gustav Vasa’s line in 1544, many assumptions underpinning elective monarchy survived. Accession charters limiting royal power were still drawn up, and kings were deemed to be bound by the law and accountable to the community of the realm. Two of Gustav Vasa’s three successors were deposed: Erik XIV (1568), by his brother John III (ruled 1568–92) and John’s son Sigismund (1599). Gustav Vasa and Charles IX (ruled 1604–11) used their demagogic talent to appeal to the *Riksdag* over the heads of the *riksråd*, but others were less adept: Sigismund, who based his rule on the council, did not long occupy the throne. In Denmark, where assemblies played a less prominent role, the *riksraad* asserted itself after Christian II’s deposition. His election charter’s stringent conditions did not prevent his excesses, but it justified his removal; that of his successor, Frederick I (ruled 1523–33), was even tougher. These charters created a growing body of constitutional limitations on royal power.

**Poland–Lithuania**

If the Kalmar union failed, the Polish–Lithuanian union proved remarkably durable, despite uniting two realms with very different linguistic, cultural, religious, institutional, and socio-economic heritages. Although traditionally described as a loose personal or (p. 392) dynastic arrangement, the Polish community of the realm was a party to the Krewo treaty, while its Lithuanian counterpart was party to subsequent agreements; thus to liken it to personal unions formed by hereditary succession is misleading. Jagiello’s failure to secure recognition of his sons’ hereditary rights to the Polish throne meant that the union depended upon the Poles continuing to elect Jagiellons, who claimed hereditary rights to Lithuania.

Hereditary succession was no simple matter in Lithuania. Jagiello, eldest son of Algirdas’s second wife Juliana of Tver, was nominated by Algirdas on his deathbed as his successor in 1377. Algirdas’s brother and co-ruler Kęstutis was still alive. In 1381 Kęstutis deposed Jagiello. Supported by his younger brothers, Jagiello then deposed Kęstutis, who died five days later in mysterious circumstances. Jagiello, restored as grand duke, was challenged by Kęstutis’s son, the politically astute Vytautas, who twice fled to Prussia to foment opposition with Lithuania’s enemy, the Teutonic Order. Jagiello, recognizing that he could not govern Lithuania effectively from Cracow and appreciating Vytautas’s political talent, compromised in agreements at Astrava (1392) and Vilkaviškis-Radom (1401). Vytautas was granted Jagiello’s regalian rights in Lithuania, which he governed on Jagiello’s behalf, for his lifetime, adopting the title ‘grand duke of Lithuania’, while Jagiello stressed his ultimate authority by styling himself ‘supreme duke’.

Vytautas transformed Lithuania before his death in 1430. He is traditionally presented as the champion of Lithuanian independence, but this reflects modern, not fifteenth-century, concerns. Vytautas, like Jagiello, recognized the union’s importance for Lithuania. By 1377 the days of easy expansion were over. A small pagan elite now ruled vast lands whose population was Orthodox and Ruthenian-speaking. The conversion of many Gediminids to Orthodoxy and the adoption of Ruthenian—a written language, unlike Lithuanian—as the language of law and government threatened the very existence of the Lithuanians as a separate people. Under pressure from the Teutonic Order, pagan Lithuania was unsustainable. Conversion to Catholicism and union with Poland offered a means of preserving a separate Lithuanian identity.

While Vytautas expanded his authority and defended Lithuanian autonomy, he was aware how much he depended on Poland. The newly established Lithuanian Catholic Church relied heavily on Polish clergy, and clergy educated in Poland; Lithuania had no university until 1579. Polish military support was essential for resistance to the Teutonic Order; its importance was demonstrated by the resounding victory at Tannenberg in 1410. It also underpinned Vytautas’s ambitious eastern policy, in which he challenged the Tatars—only to be repulsed on the Vorskla in 1399—and sought unsuccessfully to annex Novgorod, Pskov, and Tver. He married his only child, Sophia, to Dmitrii Donskoi, Grand Duke of Muscovy, who was succeeded in 1389 by Vytautas’s grandson, Vasili I (ruled 1389–1425).
Vytautas, tacitly and occasionally openly backed by Jagiello, stripped power from the appanage dukes, replacing many with Catholic Lithuanian governors. At Horodło in 1413 Jagiello and Vytautas renewed the union. Catholic Lithuanian nobles were granted the privileges and rights enjoyed by their Polish counterparts. Forty-seven Catholic Lithuanian families were adopted into Polish heraldic clans and provision was made for the election of a new grand duke after Vytautas’s death. Horodło proclaimed that (p. 393) Lithuania had been incorporated into Poland, but did not specify the nature of that incorporation. Vytautas opposed the Polish vision of incorporation with the notion of a union of equals: *aeque principaliter*. The adoption plan, in which he selected the Lithuanian families for inclusion, suggests that the cousins had a broader conception of union as a relationship not of states, but of peoples, through the creation of a joint Commonwealth: *a res publica*, a term used in the treaty.

Horodło was the union’s true foundation treaty. The extension of the principle of election to Lithuania and the granting of Polish privileges to Lithuanian Catholic nobles marked the foundation of a Lithuanian community of the realm along Polish lines. On Vytautas’s death Jagiello considered ruling Lithuania directly, but was thwarted by the election of his brother Švitrigaila as grand duke by Lithuanian and Ruthenian nobles. Švitrigaila’s election outraged the Poles; his refusal to obey Jagiello brought civil war. Vytautas’s brother Žygimantas was elected by Catholic Lithuanians dismayed at Švitrigaila’s favouring of Orthodox Ruthenians. Žygimantas defeated Švitrigaila with Polish support; to secure Ruthenian support he granted Orthodox nobles full legal equality with Catholic nobles in 1434. Personally cruel, he was assassinated by a group of Lithuanian nobles in 1440, but the opening up of the Lithuanian community of the realm to Orthodox nobles was an important milestone. The Horodło stipulation that state offices should only be filled by Catholics remained in force until 1563, but since Lithuania remained a composite, decentralized polity, the extension of legal equality reconciled most Orthodox nobles.

The politics of royal elections drove the process of union after Jagiello’s death in 1434. He had secured recognition for the natural rights of his sons to the Polish throne, but at the cost of privileges conceded at Czerwińśk (1422), and Jedlno/ Cracow (1429/1433). Succession would not be automatic: there would be a formal election to decide which of Jagiello’s sons would become king. In Lithuania, although the right of the eldest son to inherit the position of supreme duke was not challenged, Lithuanians exploited the Polish desire to continue the union and the principle that the grand ducal office was elective, to set the pace in every Polish election after 1434. After Žygimantas’s assassination, Władysław III sent his brother Casimir to Vilnius as governor. The Lithuanians insisted on electing him grand duke; when the Poles objected, they went ahead anyway. This put Casimir in a strong position after Władysław’s heroic death fighting the Ottomans at Varna in 1444. It took three years of hard bargaining before he agreed to be elected king of Poland in 1447. He refused to countenance a separate grand duke, but before his death in 1492 he suggested that his eldest son John Albert be elected king of Poland, and designated the next brother, Alexander, as grand duke. Both were elected to their respective thrones. After John Albert’s death in 1501, Alexander was elected king of Poland. On his death in 1506 the Lithuanians again jumped the gun, electing his brother Sigismund grand duke, which meant his election as king of Poland was a foregone conclusion. In 1529, Sigismund (ruled 1506–48) secured Lithuanian agreement for the election of his nine-year-old son, Sigismund August, as grand duke. The Poles reluctantly elected him *vivente rege* (in the king’s lifetime), but the practice was immediately banned by the Polish Sejm (parliament).

(p. 394) If the process of union drove the development of elective monarchy in Poland–Lithuania, royal election became the keystone of noble liberty as a consequence of Sigismund August’s failure to produce a male heir. After 1492 the Poles provided Lithuania with considerable financial and military support during a cycle of wars with Muscovy in which Lithuania lost a third of its territory by 1514. Not unreasonably, the Poles pressed for closer union, to ensure some say over Lithuania’s Muscovite policy. Until 1562 Sigismund August sided with those Lithuanian magnates who resisted closer union to preserve their domination of Lithuanian politics, established under his father, largely an absentee monarch from the 1450s. From the 1540s, however, ordinary Lithuanian nobles, paying high taxes to fund the Muscovite wars, looked enviously at the political rights of their Polish counterparts, who enjoyed substantial control over their own affairs through sejmiks (local parliamentary bodies) and the Sejm, to which the sejmiks sent delegates, and in the locally elected court system. Facing increasing pressure for closer union from the ordinary nobility, Sigismund August, fearing the collapse of the union after his death, dramatically changed course. In 1563 he renounced his hereditary rights to Lithuania, vesting them in the Polish community of the realm,
and advocated closer union. This was achieved after bitter debate at Lublin in 1569. Lithuania’s conception of union was victorious to the extent that the Poles accepted the continued existence of a Lithuanian state, with a separate government, separate offices, and a separate army. There was to be a common monarch, elected jointly, a common Sejm, and a common council.

This was the union of peoples nebulously formulated at Horodło in 1413, given closer definition at the abortive union of Michnik (1501), and finally realized in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (res publica, Rzeczpospolita) established at Lublin (see Map 15.3). Yet it came at a price for Lithuania. When the Lithuanian magnates walked out of negotiations in March 1569, Sigismund August appealed to the lesser nobility in Podlasie, which was strongly influenced by Polish culture, and the Ukrainian palatinates, where resentment at the exclusion of Orthodox nobles from government office was strong. The establishment of the Polish system of palatinates, sejmiks, and locally elected courts by the second Lithuanian statute (1566) provided ordinary nobles with institutions through which they could express their political demands. Sigismund August invited Podlasie and the Ukrainian palatinates to accept incorporation into Poland; in May and June the nobles of Podlasie and Ukraine swore loyalty to the Polish Crown. The Lithuanian magnates scurried back to Lublin to rescue what they could, but half the grand duchy was gone.

The constitutional revolution was completed on Sigismund August’s death in 1572. The new joint Sejm rejected the traditional form of election by the council in favour of election viritim, under which all noble citizens had the right to attend and vote in person. Tens of thousands turned up in 1573 to elect Henry Valois, Duke of Anjou. At his coronation Sejm in Cracow in January 1574, Henry accepted a coronation charter, the Henrician Articles, that formalized the limitations on royal power. These were accepted by all subsequent monarchs, who also agreed their own pacta conventa (accession (p. 395) (p.396) charter), extending restrictions on royal power. Henry fled Poland later that year to take up the French throne, but political union had opened the way to the most radical experiment in limited monarchy in early modern Europe.

**Autocracy**

It was this consensual republican model of participative citizenship that was politely rejected by Maskiewicz’s Muscovite interlocutors. The Muscovite system had developed differently from the Kievan roots it shared with Lithuania, partly through the adoption of much administrative practice from the Mongols. As Mongol overlordship crumbled after 1450 and other external threats waned, Moscow’s power waxed. Vytautas’s assertive eastern policy died with him, while Vasili II’s victory in the civil wars that plagued the first half of his reign opened the way to Moscow’s conquest of Novgorod (1478), Tver (1485), Pskov (1510), and Riazan (1521) under his son Ivan III (ruled 1462–1505) and grandson Vasili III (ruled 1505–33).

The image projected by Muscovy’s rulers from 1462 was explicitly imperial. The fall of Constantinople in 1453, and the ending of Mongol overlordship, enabled them to present themselves as the only independent Orthodox rulers, and lay claim to the Kievan Rus’ heritage. This brought conflict with Lithuania. Much had been learned from Vytautas, from whom the term gosudar (lord), embodying a claim to supreme authority, entered Muscovite political vocabulary. In 1447 Vasili II proclaimed himself lord of all Rus’ (gosudar vseia Rusi) and appointed his heir, Ivan III, co-ruler without seeking Mongol endorsement. After Ivan’s conquest of Novgorod and Tver he decreed that this title should appear on all official documents, although most of Rus’ was in Lithuania.  

The Jagiellons ridiculed these claims, but they were central to the imperial ideology that shaped the Russian monarchy. Ivan III began to allow himself to be referred to as tsar, a term that originally designated the Byzantine emperor, Tatar khans, and...
other foreign rulers, although it was not until 1547 that Ivan IV (ruled 1533–84) was the first to be crowned tsar; recognition from the patriarch of Constantinople followed in 1561. In 1492, as Ivan III, seeking to realize his claim to lordship over all Rus’, launched the first of numerous Muscovite invasions of Lithuania, he was for the first time designated ‘samoderzhets’, a literal translation of the Greek autocrator, twenty years after he had married Sophia Palaeologue, niece of the last Byzantine emperor, Constantine XI. Ivan’s imperial pretensions were manifested by his adoption of the double-headed eagle as his emblem, an assertion of his equal status with regard to Maximilian I, the German emperor.  

Humouring Ivan’s pretensions suited Maximilian, who happily incited Muscovite attacks on Lithuania while the Habsburgs challenged the Jagiellons for the crowns of Bohemia and Hungary, but few took them seriously. Before 1650 Muscovy posed no real threat to its European neighbours. If it seized a third of Lithuania between 1492 and 1514, including Smolensk, these territories were sparsely populated and had only been loosely under Lithuanian control. While many minor princes in these marchlands accepted the tsar’s overlordship, most Orthodox nobles remained loyal to the Jagiellons and the ideal of citizenship extended to them in 1434. Poland–Lithuania did not retake Smolensk until 1611, but when the First Northern War (1558–83) ended in (p. 397) humiliation for Ivan IV, and Muscovy collapsed into crisis after his death, it seemed there was little to fear.

Tsars did not direct their grandiose claims solely at foreign rulers. European observers from the imperial ambassador Sigismund von Herberstein (1486–1566) to the Bohemian Jesuit Georgius David (1647–1713) marvelled at the tsar’s despotic powers and the symbols of servitude invoked by his subjects, including the practice by which the highest noble in the land would prostrate himself before the tsar (bʹet chelom) and call himself a slave (kholop). The image was burnished by lurid accounts of the bloodsoaked oprichnina (1565–72) when Ivan IV earned his terrible reputation by dividing his realm in two, sacking Novgorod, humiliating its archbishop, and ordering the killing of thousands, including many leading boyars. Muscovy became a byword for arbitrary power; Polish nobles like Maskiewicz, who took pride in the legal limitations they had placed on royal authority, looked with bemused condescension upon Muscovite boyars who so readily accepted the whims of their rulers. These negative assessments have proven persistent. Historians argued about why such an authoritarian system emerged, attributing it, according to taste or ideological persuasion, to geography, climate, threats of invasion, the authoritarian personalities of Ivan III, Ivan IV, and Peter I, or to class struggle. Muscovy was depicted as a patrimonial state, in which all land belonged to the ruler, and the tsars triumphed ‘against nobles and . . . ecclesiastics’, to quote Pipes, a leading advocate of this view. The Russian government controlled, registered, and allocated all useful land and, after the 1649 Ulozhenie (law code), it controlled most of the labour force. All of this was administered and regulated through a highly centralized bureaucracy, the prikaz system.  

Others challenge this vision, claiming that Russia was more like western Europe than contemporary commentators allowed, and that the boyar Duma (council) and the Zemskii Sobor (Assembly of the Land) were consensual parliamentary institutions on the European model. De Madariaga argues that ‘autocrat’ and ‘samoderzhets’ meant ‘sovereign’, or ‘independent ruler’, and carried no claims concerning the tsar’s powers over his subjects. Thus the Russian monarchy was no despotism, and can be compared to absolute monarchies elsewhere: if its institutional structure was different, the practical limitations on royal power were similar. The most powerful statement of this position comes in the works of what Poe calls the Harvard School, since many of its advocates were students at Harvard of Edward Keenan, whose seminal article ‘Muscovite political folkways’ was ‘the most influential article on early Russian history in the last quarter of the 20th century’.

Keenan’s claims are simple. Muscovite political culture was unique. It diverged substantially from that of Kievan Rus’ and was not significantly influenced either by Byzantium or the Mongols, although certain Mongol administrative techniques were adopted. Since it was unique, Western observers did not understand it, and it should not be judged by the application of Western concepts. The political system was indeed highly centralized—largely because of the difficulties of ruling such a vast state, which from the 1640s stretched across Eurasia to Siberia. Muscovite political culture was authoritarian, but
autocracy was both a myth and a facade: Muscovy was ruled not by an all-powerful tsar, but by a boyar oligarchy content to project an image of its ‘self-imposed fictional subservience to an autocratic tsar’.\textsuperscript{16}

Keenan’s rough outline was filled in by his distinguished followers, who applied the insights of sociologists, anthropologists, and the Annales School to the Muscovite past. Nancy Shields Kollmann, in a brilliant prosopographical study of the boyar elite between 1345 and 1547, found not conflict but cooperation and consensus behind the autocratic facade. Tsar and boyars ruled together, within a system carefully calibrated to project harmony. The tsar publicly consulted his boyars before taking decisions; he was depicted surrounded by boyars to stress the unanimity behind the decision-making process. Kollmann showed how Vasili II’s destruction of the appanage system and adoption of primogeniture within the dynasty—but not by the boyar elite—underpinned political stability by preventing the fragmentation that had plagued Kievan Rus’. The system of collateral succession, in which sons were not eligible for offices their fathers had not held; in which brothers and cousins were ranked according to established rules; and in which only selected senior members of aristocratic clans were accorded boyar rank, ensured a stable oligarchic system which these clans had an interest in sustaining even if most members did not enjoy boyar rank. There might not be formal institutional or legal limits on the sovereign’s power within this conservative patrimonial system, but there were powerful moral and cultural constraints and a pervasive attachment to the rule of law, albeit in a form very different from Latin Europe.\textsuperscript{17}

The system was held together by an elaborate concept of honour which underpinned the public sphere in Muscovite political life, albeit in a very different form to that postulated for western Europe by Jürgen Habermas.\textsuperscript{18} These insights were extended to the provincial service class by Valerie Kivelson in a study of seventeenth-century Vladimir-Suzdal’ that challenges the ‘statist’ school of Russian history, which ‘posits the complete, controlling power of the absolutist tsar . . . state over a passive, anarchic, or broken society’.\textsuperscript{19} Kivelson uses ‘absolutism’ and ‘autocracy’ interchangeably; accepting that the Muscovite public sphere was different, and that Muscovite political thought did not diverge from theology until the late seventeenth century, she argues persuasively for the negotiated nature of power in Muscovy. In this participatory system, direct petitioning by provincial servitors, and the criticism of the tsar that emerged in times of crisis, demonstrates its consensual nature.\textsuperscript{20}

Such studies have transformed scholarship on pre-Petrine Russia by revealing much about how the system actually worked, and the mentalités that underpinned it. Yet those who study Muscovite state institutions, while recognizing the great contributions made by the Harvard School, have not been inclined to accept their premises; as Kivelson recognizes, this has left scholarship polarized between what she calls ‘the neodespotic school’ and those who argue for the consultative, participatory nature of Muscovite political culture.\textsuperscript{21}

Kivelson’s attempt to use the term ‘citizenship’ to reconcile the two extremes is unpersuasive, however, not least because of her contention that ‘citizen’ and ‘subject’ were close in meaning. This demonstrates one of the problems with the Harvard approach. On the one hand it argues that Muscovite political culture was unique, and (p. 399) that contemporary observers misrepresented it by applying inappropriate Western concepts; yet on the other hand it claims that Muscovite autocracy was similar to European absolutism. Up to a point, this is fair enough, and some of the recent critique of traditional assumptions concerning absolute monarchy can be applied to Muscovy. There were indeed serious practical limitations on monarchical authority. Yet the differences in political culture between Muscovy and western Europe really did matter, as Western observers maintained. Absolute monarchy was a theory concerning the nature of government developed according to the norms and principles of Western political culture. As conceptualized by its proponents, absolute monarchy was limited monarchy: kings were constrained by the need to obey natural as well as divine law, which extended to such areas as contract and succession law, and meant that there were theoretical as well as practical limits on royal power. Muscovite political culture recognized that the tsar was limited by divine law, but the concept of natural law had no purchase in Russia until the eighteenth century, and too much weight should not be placed upon the etymology of autocrat/samoderzhets. There is little indication that tsars recognized any theoretical limits on their power and few institutions that could constrain it: Muscovy was no Ständestaat, limited by corporate privilege and immunity.
The Harvard School struggles to explain the reigns of Ivan III, Ivan IV, and Peter within their model of a puppet tsar subordinated to a boyar oligarchy. Through Ivan III’s establishment of the *pomestʹe* system of service landholding the tsarist government not only asserted but established control of noble landholding, a control that was extended when Ivan IV decreed that service was owed from *votchina* (hereditary estates) as well as service land. Ivan’s *oprichnina*, and his abandonment of customary legal constraints on the conduct of trials are hard to explain if one assumes that tsars enjoyed only symbolic power, and that true authority lay with the boyars. It is no accident that Keenan devoted much of his career to a meticulously argued attempt to demonstrate that the correspondence of Andrei Kurbskii with Ivan, and his *History of Ivan IV*, the two major contemporary Russian sources attacking Ivan as a tyrannical despot, are seventeenth-century forgeries.22

Most scholars now accept Kurbskii’s works as genuine. Even if he did not write them, their content shows that ideas of the tsar’s unlimited power were alive and well in Muscovy, and that de Madariaga’s claims concerning the meaning of autocracy are implausible.23 Some fence-sit, suggesting that the seeds of a *Ständestaat* were developing in Muscovy until they were derailed by Ivan IV’s abandonment of custom and tradition after the crisis of 1553, when he fell dangerously ill and leading boyars refused to swear loyalty to his infant son.24 Nevertheless, the lack of any developed political philosophy advocating secular restraints on royal power, whether through institutions, notions of citizenship, or estate privileges, really mattered. When Ivan III deprived the Novgorod boyars of their lands, or Ivan IV reallocated lands around Moscow in 1550 to establish a service elite of a thousand men centred on the royal court, or when he removed the distinction between hereditary and service land in 1556, or when he launched the *oprichnina*, or when Peter bullied nobles into accepting his radical reforms after 1698, there were few ideological or political instruments available to opponents. It was not unreasonable for Western observers to describe their acts as despotic. Autocracy was indeed autocratic.

Yet the elites did matter, and the challenges to the simplistic view of patrimonial, personal monarchy have done much to illuminate Russian political culture and shed light on the strong sense of community and belonging that explains why despotic power was accepted. It is perhaps best to describe the system after 1462 as consultative rather than consensual. While consensus and unanimity were ideals, and Ivan IV’s 1550 *Sudebnik* (law code) stated that all new laws must be reported to the tsar and confirmed by the duma, this article differed fundamentally from the 1492 Lithuanian privilege issued by Grand Duke Alexander, which specified a range of decisions for which grand dukes had to secure formal council agreement, or the 1505 Polish statute of *Nihil Novi*, which decreed that no new statutes could be passed without Sejm consent. In Muscovy, the 1550 *Sudebnik* was part of a wider set of reforms that established a system predicated not upon consent, but upon service.

From the 1550s the tsars’ imperial ideology and the service system coalesced. Ivan IV’s restructuring of military service requirements, the creation of a system of political patronage centred on Moscow and the court, with the thousand-man reforms and the definitive establishment of the *prikaz* system underpinned the expansionist policy that began with the conquest of Kazan and Astrakhan (1552–56) and continued with the attempt to conquer Livonia, launched in 1558. The system served the interests of an expanding elite, with the boyar clans at its apex. The government controlled the distribution of service land through the *prikazy*, rewarding individuals and families according to the political and military needs of the moment. War and territorial expansion brought booty and land to distribute. The highly centralized system of reward bound the landed service elite to the tsar and his court. Collateral succession and partible inheritance strengthened these ties: individuals needed to acquire service lands to offset the partition of the family’s *votchina*. The administration granted lands scattered across Muscovy, ensuring that boyars did not establish consolidated holdings as the basis of the provincial powerbases so common in Poland–Lithuania, where the magnate elite was equally dependent upon grants of royal land, but where the monarchy’s chronic liquidity problems ensured that it was unable to redeem the mortgages, loans, and alienations that encumbered the royal domain. Much royal land was reclaimed in Poland after szlachta pressure forced a 1504 statute banning its alienation, but it did not cover Lithuania, and the Polish Execution Movement, which sought the execution of laws on the statute book, including that of 1504, was strongly resisted by Lithuanian magnates. In 1569 the Lublin treaty promised that the execution of the royal domain enacted in Poland in the 1560s would not be extended to Lithuania.

If in Poland–Lithuania after 1572 the senate council became the ‘guardians of the law and the king’ (*custodes legis ac
— a responsibility they took very seriously, utilizing the growing body of statute law by which they could hold the king to account—in Muscovy the boyar duma collaborated with the tsar to maintain the service system from which they benefited. If the tsar’s decisions were to be implemented, he needed the assistance of the boyars and servitors. Consultation was vital, and the image of a tsar (p. 401) who took decisions surrounded by his advisers was energetically propagated. This was the function of the duma and the Zemskii Sobor. It is no accident that the first of the assemblies to which nineteenth-century historians attached this name was summoned by Ivan IV in 1549 as he launched his dramatic expansion of the service state. There was no alternative but to communicate directly with the service class to consult, inform, and establish legitimacy. Attempts to compare the Zemskii Sobor to European parliamentary institutions are problematic. The duma’s small size—only some ten to twenty individuals in the sixteenth century, although it grew thereafter—meant that most boyars were excluded. Many aspired to join it; thus spectacular purges such as the oprichnina created opportunities for those excluded. Whatever else it was, the Muscovite system was no cosy, closed oligarchy; this description far better fits Lithuania.

**War and State Development**

These different models of monarchy were shaped by the pressure of war following the outbreak of the Northern Wars (1558–1721), which placed serious strains on the combatants. In Scandinavia war provoked radical political change between 1660 and 1680. Muscovy recovered from the war-induced crisis of 1598–1613 and was transformed under Michael’s son Alexis (ruled 1645–76) and his son Peter, who learned much—if selectively—from his rivals. Finally, if Poland–Lithuania’s consensual political system proved remarkably robust until 1648, thereafter its decentralized structure could not sustain its position in the condition of almost constant warfare, mostly fought on its own territory, between 1648 and 1721.

**Denmark**

The collapse of the Kalmar union opened ten years of political instability in Denmark, as the spread of Lutheranism and uncertainty over the succession to Frederick I (ruled 1523–33) culminated in the Counts War (1534–36). The victory of Frederick’s eldest son Christian III (ruled 1534/6–59) over his rival, Christopher of Oldenburg, ensured Lutheranism’s triumph and was followed by secularization of church land, to the Crown’s benefit. From 1536, however, royal authority was challenged as the council asserted its share of sovereignty and Norway was reduced to the level of a Danish province. Denmark’s powerful navy and control of both sides of the Sound—the gateway to the Baltic—ensured it remained the dominant Baltic power. Danish monarchs were enriched by lucrative tolls levied on merchant ships passing through the Sound, which flowed into the king’s coffers, not the Danish exchequer. This gave monarchs sufficient financial independence to ignore many restraints on their authority. Meetings of the Danish estates were infrequent; it was the council that elected the monarch and checked royal power, but the wealth of the royal domain and their prerogative income enabled Frederick II (ruled 1559–88) and Christian IV (ruled 1588–1648) to pursue independent foreign policies.

(p. 402) Until 1613, Denmark held the upper hand over Sweden, which was distracted by rivalry with Poland–Lithuania and Muscovy. Thereafter, the tide turned, as Gustav Adolf (ruled 1611–32) perfected the Swedish military state, and as a consequence of the markedly different fates of the two powers during the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48). Christian’s intervention in 1625 was vigorously opposed by the riksråd, but the King, thanks to his efficient exploitation of the royal domain and the Sound dues, was wealthy enough to ignore its advice. Over the next thirty-five years, the Danish monarchy showed that while it was rich enough to start a war, its resources were insufficient to sustain it. Christian was humiliated at the peace of Lübeck (1629) and Brömsebro (1645) and his son Frederick III (ruled 1648–70) had to accept the most stringent electoral charter issued to any Danish king, which vested considerable power in the council.

Frederick was not long constrained by it. In 1657, with council support, he sought to reverse Brömsebro by attacking Sweden while Charles X (ruled 1654–60) was bogged down in war in Poland. Charles marched his army across the frozen Sound in February 1658, turned up unexpectedly at the walls of Copenhagen, and forced Frederick to make the humiliating
peace of Roskilde (1658). Nine months later Charles again attacked Denmark, when he ran out of options in Poland and turned to a war he knew he could win. This time he was less successful, but the 1660 Copenhagen treaty confirmed the Roskilde gains.

The shock of defeat destroyed Denmark’s consensual elective monarchy. After 1625 the costs of war were largely met by taxation, as Denmark moved from being a domain state to a tax state. The council extended taxation to the noble masses, despite their privileged status, thus losing the support of a class whose economic condition had been undermined by partible inheritance. Infuriated by the abject performance of the noble-led army and the failure of nobles to perform the cavalry service (rostjæneste) that justified their privileges, Copenhagen’s burghers, who had defended their city, and the growing corps of professional army officers, many from the lesser nobility, seized the initiative, with Frederick and a group of royalist advisers discreetly channelling their anger to the monarchy’s advantage. At an assembly in September 1660 elective monarchy was dismantled and noble privileges abolished. Danish kings were proclaimed to be absolute hereditary monarchs (enevoldsarvekonger). Absolute monarchy was defined in the 1665 Royal Law (Kongeloven), which, apart from stipulating that monarchs must profess and uphold the Lutheran faith, stated that the king was the only sovereign power and was above all man-made law, which he alone had the power to declare, amend, increase, or diminish. 26

The absolute monarchy survived until 1848. In 1692 Sir Robert Molesworth was astonished ‘how a free and rich people . . . should be persuaded entirely to part with their liberties’ and claimed that now that Danish monarchs were absolute and arbitrary, their subjects ‘enjoyed not the least remnant of liberty’. Yet this was no autocracy, despite the symbolism of Christian V’s 1670 coronation, when the king placed the crown on his own head. The 1665 Royal Law, which devoted considerable space to the succession, represented a form of contract and a constitution that was binding only so long as the monarchy survived in Frederick’s direct line. If the king was the sole source of positive law, which he could alter at will, he was subject to both divine and natural law, whose scope was considerable. Frederick established a commission to review Danish law in 1661; in 1683 it issued the Danish Law, which was designed to harmonize the law with the 1660 revolution. It largely ignored Roman law, drew heavily on the past, and incorporated clauses from several electoral charters. Even Molesworth expressed grudging admiration.

The absolute monarchy survived because it did not turn into the tyranny Molesworth accused it of being. It rested on a solid basis of support. Although noble privileges were abolished and landownership opened up to commoners, nobles readily served the monarchy, in the army, navy, or civil service. Reforms that were launched in 1671 with the delineation of ranks in the administrative nobility, and concluded in 1693 with the publication of a table of ranks linked to military and civil service, provided a new structure for noble service. Since 1679, certain ranks within the administration conferred personal nobility on their holders; from 1693 promotion to the top three ranks was rewarded with hereditary peerages.

Absolute monarchy in Denmark was a solution to the problems posed by the shift from a domain state to a tax state, in which political domination by a narrow group of magnates was no longer sustainable. The stable system that emerged was based on opportunities for service provided to a reconfigured elite by the new tax state. For all the concentration of power in the king’s hands, this was no narrow despotism. If the disposition of power became the focus for manoeuvring by factions and favourites, the new collegiate system provided generally competent governance, while legal reforms removed the brutal penalties of medieval law and substantially reduced torture before its 1770 abolition. Absolute monarchy brought stability and prosperity. Legal and institutional structures ensured that monarchs worked within the framework provided by natural and divine law. Stability had much to recommend it.

Sweden

Sweden’s development echoed Denmark’s, but the route it took and the final outcome were different. The key factor before its 1630 intervention in the Thirty Years’ War was Sweden’s vulnerability. Denmark’s superior resources, control of the Sound, and suspicion that it wished to restore the union were perceived as threats to Swedish independence, while in 1592 the accession of the Catholic Sigismund, whose mother was a Jagiellon, and who had been elected king of Poland in 1587,
called into question the Reformation settlement. After his 1599 deposition, Sigismund’s desire to regain the Swedish throne and the threat posed by the larger, wealthier Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, whose throne he retained, were used to generate support for the monarchy.

Repudiation of the Reformation would threaten the embryonic Swedish military state. Engaged in constant warfare after 1560, monarchs used the windfall of church land to establish a new system for supporting the army. Unable to sell it off to an impoverished nobility, kings assigned crown estates to army officers in lieu of pay, not for life, but for the duration of service. The system gave those who benefited a strong incentive to resist a Catholic monarch and to support war. Army officers and petty nobles played a crucial role in the deposition of Sigismund, who enjoyed considerable support among council magnates, and in persuading his uncle, Charles IX, to accept the throne in 1604. The council, stung by Charles’s brutal authoritarianism, imposed a tough accession charter on his son, Gustav Adolf, in 1611, but the young king, plunged into war against Denmark, formed the close alliance with his chancellor, Axel Oxenstierna, that defined his reign. Together they crafted a military system capable of resisting Christian and Sigismund. Like Gustav Vasa, Gustav Adolf used his rhetorical powers to secure support from the four estates that constituted the Riksdag: the clergy, nobles, burghers, and free peasants.

When he intervened in the Thirty Years’ War, it was with the express support of råd and riksdag. If his considerable military talent brought victory on the battlefield, the system was robust enough to survive his heroic death at Lützen in November 1632. On the succession of his infant daughter Christina (ruled 1632–54), Oxenstierna and the council took over. Considerable authority was granted to it by the 1634 Form of Government; after a difficult period, renewed military success after the battle of Wittstock (October 1636) ensured that support for the war remained strong. From the 1620s until 1648, the Riksdag regularly approved the annual conscription levies that filled the army’s ranks, and provided resources to sustain the war.

It helped that war in Germany largely sustained itself and that the Swedish elites benefited from the booty and revenues they drew from it. Trouble came when it was over. Alienations of royal land accelerated after Christina reached her majority, threatening the military state’s foundations. Sweden could not afford to defend its newly acquired empire in peacetime. In 1654, as unemployed officers streamed home with few prospects, Christina, weary of the throne, abdicated in favour of her cousin, Charles X. He enacted a partial reduktion, recovering alienated royal estates, and raised an army to invade Poland–Lithuania, which was collapsing after the great Cossack revolt of 1648 and the 1654 Muscovite invasion of Lithuania.

War in Poland–Lithuania could not sustain itself, however; by 1657 Charles was fighting Poland–Lithuania, Denmark, Austria, Brandenburg, and Muscovy. The council extricated itself from these wars after Charles’s premature death in 1660, but Sweden’s structural problems remained. Louis XIV subsidized the regency government for Charles XI (ruled 1660–97), but when he demanded in return that Sweden should attack Brandenburg in 1674, the army was a shadow of its former self. Humbled at Fehrbellin in 1675, it fought a desperate rearguard action to repel a Danish invasion that was only defeated when Charles led his troops to victory at Lund in 1676.

As in Denmark in the 1650s, the council took the blame. Charles’s popularity was enhanced by his heroics at Lund; when the Riksdag assembled in 1680 his advisers plotted a coup. As in Denmark in 1660, the non-noble estates and petty nobles petitioned for relief from the burden of taxation, attacked council rule, and demanded a full reduktion. Charles forced the pace by asking if he was bound by the 1634 Form of Government and the stipulation in Magnus Eriksson’s Land Law that he govern with council advice, and whether the council formed a separate estate of the realm. The response was unequivocal: the Form of Government only covered regencies; the king was not required to take council advice; and the council was not an estate of the realm.

The 1680 declaration was the first of several measures agreed by the estates, culminating in the 1693 Declaration of Sovereignty, which defined the absolute monarchy. Charles was declared to be ‘an absolute and sovereign king . . . responsible for his actions to no one on earth’, who possessed ‘authority and power, according to his pleasure, and as a Christian ruler, to guide and direct his kingdom’. As in Denmark, restrictions on royal power were stripped away and a collegiate system of government was introduced. In contrast to Denmark, Charles regularly summoned the Riksdag,
although he treated it as a consultative body, allowing it no freedom to challenge royal decisions. With its backing, Charles pushed through the great reduktion, which recovered revenues worth some four million riksdalers, restoring the financial basis of the Crown and enabling Charles to introduce the allotment system (indelningsverk), which marked the full development of the system by which the army was supported directly by the royal domain. The council’s name was changed from council of state (riksråd) to king’s council (kungligt råd). The change in its status was clear.

As in Denmark, the introduction of absolute monarchy was supported by the non-noble estates and the petty nobility, which stood to benefit from the military state’s reconstitution. Following the Danish example, Charles promulgated a table of ranks covering the army, navy, and civil service. The reforms created a well-trained, well-equipped army, and an excellent navy, operating out of the new warm-water port of Karlskrona. During the Great Northern War (1700–21), under the charismatic military genius Charles XII (ruled 1697–1718), the army was again a match for its enemies, until the shattering defeat inflicted by Peter at Poltava in 1709.

There were limits to absolute monarchy in Sweden. The declarations of 1680 and 1682 stressed that it was no innovation, but constituted the true interpretation of Magnus Eriksson’s Land Law. That was stretching interpretation considerably, but as the reply of the estates concerning council advice demonstrated, they accepted the principle. Support continued under Charles XI, a highly legalistic monarch. He acknowledged that he was bound by divine and natural law, demonstrating frequently that while he had been declared to be above the law, he respected the 1680 declaration, which stated that the king ruled ‘according to law and lawful custom’ and did not manipulate it to the Crown’s advantage. This was demonstrated by Charles’s attitude to the reduktion. While he was keen for as much land to be returned to the Crown as possible, the implementation of the reduktion was assigned to a commission, and the king took care to ensure that noble families were not ruined by it. In practice, while some families—in particular the de la Gardie—did lose out substantially, there was much room for manoeuvre owing to the complexities of demonstrating the legal status of individual estates, and nobles received some compensation from the state’s enhanced ability to provide service.

The coming of the absolute monarchy strengthened the central government, whose centralized, collegiate form had been established under Gustav Adolf and Oxenstierna. The enhanced resources from the reduktion and the rationalization effected by the introduction of the table of ranks increased government efficiency and underpinned the spectacular achievements of the Swedish army after 1700. The dangers of removing the limits on royal power, however, emerged under Charles XII who, copying Christian V, made clear his conception of his own authority by crowning himself. As Swedish armies enjoyed victory after victory between 1700 and 1709, the system worked smoothly enough; after Poltava, with the king in exile in Moldavia, the strains began to show. As Peter picked off the Swedish Baltic empire and harried Swedish coastal provinces, Sweden’s enemies joined the fray. Charles refused council pleas to make peace. He no longer summoned the Riksdag. His insistence in 1713 on a property tax that took no account of status and overrode surviving estates privileges caused widespread discontent, but legal or institutional means of resistance had been stripped away. Discontent grew as Sweden’s enemies closed in. Charles fought a brilliant rearguard action after returning to Sweden in 1715, but few mourned when he fell to a stray bullet at the siege of Fredericksten in November 1718.

Charles never married; his failure to produce an heir exposed the shallow foundations of absolute monarchy. His refusal to make peace threatened the interests of the social groups that had acquiesced in its establishment; after his death the edifice came crashing down. Charles was succeeded by his sister Ulrika Eleanora (ruled 1718–20), who stood down in favour of her husband, Frederick of Hesse (ruled 1720–51). In the negotiations over their accession, power was transferred to the Riksdag, not the council. Sweden entered its Age of Liberty, although it was a liberty that chiefly operated to protect the privileges of the four estates, which had effectively usurped the Crown’s absolute authority.

The monarchy, however, retained room for manoeuvre under the 1720 constitution and the stringent accession charters of Frederick and his successor, Adolf Frederick of Holstein-Gottorp (ruled 1751–71). By the accession of his son Gustav III (ruled 1771–92), infighting between the parties of the Hats and Caps, and among the four estates, had paralysed government. Growing royalism among various interest groups, including army officers and civil servants, enabled Gustav to
mount a coup on 19 August 1772. Yet Gustav’s victory represented no simple return to absolute monarchy. Influenced by the ideas of Mercier de la Rivière, who distinguished between ‘personal and legal despotism’ and ‘personal and arbitrary despotism’, Gustav chose the former. His 1772 constitution, approved by the Riksdag, did not accord the monarchy the unlimited authority of 1693. Although royal powers were substantial, and the Riksdag met only at the pleasure of the king, who had the right to veto any legislation it proposed, it retained the right to veto royal legislation and new taxes could not be levied nor war declared without its consent. Even the 1789 Act of Union and Security, which removed some limitations on royal power, was more an act of populist royalism, supported by the non-noble estates, eager to remove the last vestiges of noble privilege, than a return to 1693. Gustav was assassinated in 1792 by a disgruntled nobleman, but his unstable son Gustav IV Adolf (ruled 1792–1809) presided over a system in which royal power was extensive, but was explicitly limited by the law, and by institutional constraints that embodied the notion of the separation of powers. After Gustav IV’s 1809 deposition, the new constitution quietly buried absolute monarchy.

If the Swedish and Danish words for absolute monarchy (envälde, enevælde) mean ‘the rule of one’, the Swedish experience in particular demonstrates that absolute monarchy in Scandinavia was subject to legal and institutional restraints which emerged from a political culture that respected the rule of law. Even after the 1544 introduction of hereditary monarchy, the idea that royal authority depended on a contractual agreement with the citizens never died, and electoral charters were replaced by accession charters: Charles XII was the only Swedish monarch who never had one imposed upon him. His rule ended Sweden’s brief infatuation with unlimited royal authority.

From Muscovy to Russia

The absence of any developed concept of natural law ensured that Russia followed a different path, for all the practical constraints on royal power. While respect for law, tradition, and justice (pravda), was strong, there was no real notion of sovereignty in the Western sense, no developed contractual theory of government, and little concern with the problems of the extent to which monarchs were bound by the law, and by what kind of law they were bound. Although Western debates reached Muscovy through Ukrainian Orthodox clerics, or visiting scholars such as the Jesuit-educated Croat Iurii Krizhanich, the absence of any secular printing industry meant that they remained isolated and their writings influenced few. If there are traces of contractual notions of government in the works of Krizhanich and Grigorii Kotoshikin, who wrote his treatise on Muscovite government in Swedish exile, and if both authors condemn Ivan IV as a tyrant, their works had no influence, and most writers, such as Ivan Peresvetov and Maksim the Greek, urged obedience to royal authority. Fyodor Karpov, who prefigured the arguments of Maskiewicz’s interlocutors by stressing that if rulers and subjects pursued justice the weak and powerless would not suffer oppression, was more typical.

The different nature of Muscovite political culture was revealed during the protracted crisis following Ivan IV’s death, when the service state collapsed. As generation succeeded generation, the growing middle-service class proved unsustainable. Defeat, famine, economic collapse, and peasant flight stripped the labour force from their estates. From the 1580s Muscovy’s heartlands emptied, as servitors abandoned their serfless estates, fleeing to the southern borderlands to join burgeoning Cossack bands that offered them an honourable lifestyle. The crisis reached critical dimensions following the death in 1598 of Ivan’s feeble-minded son Fyodor, the last of the Rurikids. His minister, Boris Godunov (ruled 1598–1605), seized the throne, but died as he advanced to meet a pretender claiming to be Dmitrii, a younger son of Ivan who had died in suspicious circumstances in 1591.
It was not to be. The Smuta was powered not by the rage of peasants resisting the imposition of serfdom, as was traditionally argued, but by discontent among the service elites, deprived of status and income. The Catholic Poles, with their arrogant air of cultural superiority, helped rally the support for a native candidate that brought Michael Romanov’s election in 1613. The Muscovite elites reunited round the image of a strong tsar, which Michael was not. The service state was rebuilt as the government addressed the problem of its economic basis, removing the right of serfs to leave their villages in 1592, and establishing the full legal basis of the system in the 1649 Ulozhenie.37 Recovery took time, but the gradual transformation of the army by Western officers began to pay dividends during the Thirteen Years’ War (1654–67), when Alexis secured Kiev and left-bank Ukraine—to the east of the Dnieper—from Poland–Lithuania at the 1667 truce of Andrusovo.

The acquisition of Kiev, the capital of medieval Rus’, was central to the process by which Muscovy became Russia. That transformation was underpinned by a reconstituted imperial ideology, which asserted tsarist claims to rule all Rus’ and maintained that the Ruthenians of what is now Belarus and Ukraine were integral—if junior—members of one Russian nation, despite the fact that they had lived under Lithuanian or Polish rule for generations and had developed a very different political culture. Many Ruthenians rejected this vision, as was shown by the tragedy of the Ukrainian Cossacks, who rebelled against the Commonwealth in 1648, accepted Alexis’s protection in 1654, but whose conception of the relationship with Moscow was very different to the tsar’s. After 1654, the Cossack officer corps split into supporters of Moscow and advocates of accommodation with Warsaw, as Ukraine entered the dismal period known as Ruina. During the Great Northern War, hetman Ivan Mazepa sought a solution through an alliance with Charles XII, but his supporters suffered dreadfully after Poltava. Although the Cossack hetmanate retained some autonomy, it was viewed with suspicion long before its liquidation by Catherine II (ruled 1762–96).

Russian military success after 1654 strengthened the imperial vision’s appeal. Peter used it to gather sufficient support to drive through his radical reforms. He faced opposition from traditionalists, but the Church, divided since the 1650s over Nikon’s reforms, was ill-equipped to resist. After Poltava provided the ultimate justification for Peter’s reforms, the pace quickened. When his heir, Alexis, defied him, Peter put him on trial in 1718 and approved the court’s death sentence, although Alexis died in mysterious circumstances before it could be carried out.38

Peter’s borrowings were selective, designed to enhance Russian military power, increase state authority, and improve government efficiency. Much was borrowed from Scandinavia, (p. 409) including the collegiate system and the 1722 table of ranks. If Peter and the Russian elite showed some interest in absolutist writers such as Hobbes and Pufendorf who drew on natural law to support hereditary monarchy, the indivisible nature of sovereignty, and the importance of state power, there was little interest in other currents of Western thought. Archbishop Feofan Prokopovich preached that disobedience to the monarch was a sin during Alexis’s trial, while Vasilii Tatishchev (1686–1750) defended the tsar’s undivided sovereignty. Mikhail Lomonosov (1711–65) trumpeted the imperial Russian vision, urging the tsar to repel foreign aggressors and calling for the expansion of Russia’s borders.39 Leviathan trumped Locke and empire provided the rallying cry that united the Russian elites.

Poland–Lithuania

Leviathan’s charms were less apparent in Poland–Lithuania, where the creation of a united commonwealth of citizens institutionalized a suspicion of state power that was strengthened by the extinction of the Jagiellonian dynasty and the introduction of fully elective monarchy. Some attachment to the hereditary principle remained. Henry of Valois fled to mount the French throne before a proposed marriage to Sigismund August’s sister Anna could be arranged, but his successor, the Transylvanian Stefan Bathory (ruled 1575–86) had to marry her as a condition of his election, although she was past childbearing age. In 1587, Sigismund Vasa, son of Anna’s sister Catherine and heir to the Swedish throne, won a disputed election, only securing the throne after his rival, Maximilian Habsburg, was defeated by Jan Zamoyski, Bathory’s chancellor. Two of Sigismund’s sons, Władysław IV (ruled 1632–48) and John Casimir (ruled 1648–68) were elected, but after the
childless John Casimir’s abdication, dynastic continuity was broken.

The abdication formed the climax of a long political crisis sparked off by the 1648 Cossack revolt. Until then, Poland–Lithuania had acquitted itself well against Sweden, Muscovy, and the Ottomans. The szlachta was proud of its consensual system, founded on the principles of Renaissance republicanism: self-government, and citizen sovereignty. These appealed across the union, to Polish, Lithuanian, Ruthenian, Prussian, and Livonian nobles, and to urban elites, whose exclusion from the Sejm has led many to condemn Poland–Lithuania as a state run by a selfish noble elite. Yet the ideal of self-government allowed great trading cities such as Danzig, Thorn, and Elbing to control much of their own affairs and to flourish alongside magnificent private cities such as Zamość or Slutsk. The decentralized political system, in which sejmiks sent delegates to the central Sejm and retained considerable powers over taxation and administration, while plagued by the sorts of political disputes, disagreements, and politicking that characterize all consensual systems, was by no means the chaotic anarchy as which it has often been caricatured, at least before 1668. The decentralized system was actually well-suited to defending a vast, relatively thinly populated polity. The szlachta were perfectly willing to pay taxes for defence, and to turn out to defend the Commonwealth according to the ideals of the citizen army. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that considerable sums were raised for defence locally by sejmiks, to supplement the efforts of the central government.\(^{40}\) Those who worshipped the szlachta’s golden freedoms, even in the darkest days of the eighteenth century, were by no means blind or stupid.

Yet there were problems. Many of them stemmed from the monarchy’s elective nature. Before 1572, as in Scandinavia, elections had largely affirmed rather than challenged dynastic succession. If considerable respect for Jagiellonian blood survived after 1572 there were already major problems. The elections of 1576 and 1587 were disputed, and the latter ended in a brief civil war. For the monarchy, elections were dangerous. The power to appoint to office and to distribute lucrative leases on royal land meant that kings, once elected, enjoyed considerable political influence, and the Vasa monarchs proved adept parliamentary politicians, despite some spectacular political crises which led to broken Sejms and the rokosz (legal rebellion) of 1606. During royal elections, however, the patronage machine was suspended, and interregna enabled the szlachta citizens to place further legal restrictions on royal power in the new monarch’s pacta conventa. The political crisis after 1648 brought bitter criticism of John Casimir’s government, led by disaffected magnates, and resulted in the first use of the notorious liberum veto in 1652, by which the objection of one envoy was sufficient to break the Sejm and block all its legislation, including taxes.

Despite the veto’s institutionalization and the dramatic collapse in the face of the Muscovite and Swedish invasions of 1654–55, John Casimir led a recovery, fighting the Swedes to a standstill with Austrian and Brandenburg assistance, and pushing the Muscovites out of much of Lithuania and Ukraine. When John Casimir, encouraged by his French wife, Marie Louise Gonzaga, sought political reform through a campaign to elect a successor vivente rege in the 1660s, which would have given the monarchy the chance of influencing the succession and avoiding an interregnum, the Commonwealth was plunged into a political crisis that ended in a second rokosz, led by Jerzy Sebastian Lubomirski. John Casimir’s abdication was meant to open the way to the election of the court party’s French candidate, but massed of nobles turned up to Warsaw in 1669 to transform ideas of monarchy by selecting a native ‘Piast’ candidate, Michael Korybut Wiśniowiecki.

The shattering of dynastic continuity transformed attitudes to the monarchy. Before 1668 the monarchy could still generate considerable support, from loyal ministers and supporters attracted by royal patronage, from their clients, and from many among the ordinary nobility who retained a considerable attachment to the Jagiellons and to the monarchy as an essential part of the constitution. After the 1606 rokosz, Sigismund developed some skill in handling the Sejm, as did both his sons, although they saw the senate council, which also formed the Sejm’s upper chamber, and whose members were royal appointees, as the key to political control.\(^{41}\)

The preference for working through the council and their open use of their patronage powers ensured that the Vasas were controversial monarchs, suspected by many of wishing to subvert the mixed monarchy (monarchia mixta) which the Commonwealth was felt to embody. Sigismund’s support for the Catholic Reformation was reflected in his appointments
policy; if over half of the Senate was Protestant or Orthodox in the 1560s, Sigismund had reduced their number to a handful by 1632. This earned him the enmity of the powerful Calvinist branch of the Lithuanian Radziwiłł family, whose most prominent members felt excluded from the positions and authority they felt was their right, a sentiment that led to the attempt of Janusz Radziwiłł to break the union with Poland by negotiating a union with Sweden at Kiejdany in 1655 after Charles X’s invasion. Few Lithuanians apart from his own clients endorsed it, but Radziwiłł was but one of many magnates whose life tenure of office released them from dependence on royal patronage, and who moved into opposition after initial support for royal policies as they made their careers. There were many Catholic malcontents, from Jan Zamoyski, who dominated the government under Bathory, but was increasingly marginalized by Sigismund, through Mikołaj Zebrzydowski, who led the 1606–08 rokosz, to Jerzy Sebastian Lubomirski, who led the rokosz of 1665–66, and whipped up opposition by claiming that the Vasas wished to subvert the constitution and introduce absolute monarchy. These sentiments were encouraged by growing disagreements over foreign policy. The desire of all the Vasas to regain the Swedish throne provoked fierce opposition during the cycle of wars against Sweden from 1598 to 1660. In 1611, following Sigismund’s unsanctioned intervention in the Smuta, the Sejm banned the king from declaring war without its consent. The corrosive idea that the interests of the monarchy and the interests of the Commonwealth were separate was strengthened.

The defeat of the campaign for an election vivente rege marked an important watershed. The court used the Crown’s patronage powers to rally support for the plan, based on the senate council, most of whose members signed a declaration of support. The king and queen campaigned tirelessly to convince ordinary nobles of the merits of the election, printing glowing accounts of Denmark’s 1660 revolution in the court-sponsored Merkuriusz Polski, Poland’s first newspaper, but the growing opposition, led by Lubomirski, secured the plan’s rejection by the 1661 Sejm. Lubomirski’s successful impeachment in 1664, and the court’s clandestine continuation of its campaign and attempts to secure army support convinced many that it planned to destroy the constitution and introduce absolute monarchy, and provoked Lubomirski’s rokosz.

Suspicion that the monarchy was the greatest danger to the constitution entrenched the idea that royal elections were the guarantee of the szlachta’s golden liberties, and tens of thousands of petty nobles, most of them from traditionally royalist Mazovia, turned up in 1669 to defy magnate supporters of a French election and acclaim Michael Wiśniowiecki, the native candidate. He proved to be a nonentity who died prematurely and unlamented in 1673. His successor, John III Sobieski (ruled 1674–96), was a talented soldier who won the throne on the strength of his 1673 victory at Chocim, which forced the Ottomans to make peace, though at the cost of ceding Podolia. Sobieski had been a protegé of Louise Marie, and a leader of the magnate malcontents who had rendered government under Wiśniowiecki all but impossible. During his reign, Sobieski faced exactly the same problem, as many of his fellow magnates demonstrated their jealousy at his success in winning the throne by opposing him. He did not help his cause when he abandoned his predecessors’ careful balancing of the Lithuanian factions by handing control of the grand duchy to the Sapieha family, who filled all the major offices of state and ran Lithuania as a virtual satrapy until their control was rudely ended by a szlachta rebellion in 1700.

By then Sobieski was dead, and the experience of Piast rule did not persuade the szlachta to repeat the experiment. The alternative, however, proved even worse. In 1697 the elector of Saxony, August Friedrich, dramatically declared his candidature by converting to Catholicism and was duly elected. The reigns of the Saxon kings Augustus II (ruled 1697–1732) and his son Augustus III (ruled 1733–63) were not as disastrous as they were traditionally painted, and revisionist historians have recently stressed many positive features of their rule. Yet they did nothing to bridge the gap between the monarchy and the citizen body. Augustus II never bothered to learn Polish, and neither took the close interest the Vasas had in Polish politics, depending on a small coterie of favourites. Even Staszewski, the leading revisionist, admits that politically Augustus III’s reign was an even greater fiasco than his father’s. August II’s solution to the absence of a permanent Polish–Lithuanian diplomatic corps was to conduct his foreign policy through the Saxon diplomatic service. In consequence, the Commonwealth was plunged into war in 1700, when Augustus allied with Russia and Denmark to attack Sweden. Charles XII, having knocked Denmark out of the war and destroyed the Russian army at Narva, invaded Poland–Lithuania, ignoring the Sejm’s pleas that the war had nothing to do with the Commonwealth.

Augustus’s blatant contempt for the Commonwealth’s heritage and institutions seemed to confirm that the monarchy was
the greatest danger to the constitution and to liberty. The war had disastrous consequences. For a decade and more, destruction was wrought by Swedish, Saxon, and Russian armies, as well as the Commonwealth’s own unpaid troops, which the Sejm could not raise the taxes to support. Charles, supported by many of Augustus’s opponents, including the disgraced Sapiehas, declared Augustus deposed in 1704. A Polish nobleman, Stanisław Leszczyński, was elected in his place. Charles then invaded Saxony to force Augustus to accept his deposition in the 1706 treaty of Altranstädt. Many Poles and most Lithuanians rejected Leszczyński, however, and the formation of the Sandomierz Confederation, which organized opposition to the Swedes, demonstrated that despite everything the citizens were still capable of defending themselves, though victory could only be contemplated with foreign support. Charles’s defeat at Poltava in 1709 opened the way to Augustus’s return, but he squandered the considerable political support he received from the 1710 Warsaw assembly in favour of intrigues which aroused justified suspicion that he was preparing a coup to introduce absolute monarchy. In 1715 the formation of confederations to oppose him at Tarnogród in Poland, and at Wilno in Lithuania enabled Peter I to mediate the 1717 agreement between Augustus and the Tarnogród confederates which was ratified at an assembly that—thanks to hindsight—has gone down in history as the Silent Sejm.

For the agreement has been widely blamed for the Russian domination of Polish–Lithuanian politics that followed. Yet the Silent Sejm was less the result of Peter’s manipulation than the consequence of Augustus’s policies, which convinced substantial numbers of the szlachta that their own monarch was a greater danger to the Commonwealth than the foreign monarchs, led by Peter, who fell over themselves (p. 413) issuing guarantees that its constitution should be preserved without change. Polish and Lithuanian politicians had long sought foreign political support against their own monarchs, and neighbouring rulers were very happy to support the liberum veto, which allowed them to block inconvenient decisions of the Sejm by paying envoys to break it.

The devastating wars between 1648 and 1717, fought on the Commonwealth’s own territory, destroyed urban and rural prosperity. 1717 marked the end of its days as a significant international player. For half a century and more the feeling that weakness was its strength, that its continued existence was necessary to its neighbours preserved Poland–Lithuania in the condition of cheerfully anarchic somnolence that characterized August III’s reign. Following the diplomatic revolution during and after the Seven Years’ War (1756–63), growing discontent spread among the szlachta, concerned at Russian domination of the Commonwealth’s politics, reflected in Russia’s defeat of an attempt to re-elect Stanisław Leszczyński as king in 1733, its insistence in 1764 on the election of another Piast candidate, Stanisław August Poniatowski (ruled 1764–95), former lover of Catherine II, and its involvement in the first partition that followed in 1772–73. Poniatowski was long tarnished in the eyes of reformers by his association with Catherine, but proved an enlightened, reform-minded monarch who finally managed at the Four-Year Sejm (1788–92) to assemble a coalition of squabbling reformers to agree the Constitution of 3 May 1791, which produced a new vision of limited monarchy and radically overhauled the political system to strengthen the state to enable it to defend the citizen Commonwealth. Significantly, the Constitution abandoned elective monarchy, declaring that the throne was hereditary and offering it to Frederick William of Saxony, the son of Augustus III.

Poland–Lithuania’s neighbours, and in particular Prussia, could not contemplate with equanimity the re-establishment of an effective Commonwealth. The Constitution represented the culmination of the political reaction to the 1772–73 partition; its result was the second partition of 1792, in which Prussia took the lead and Russia participated enthusiastically. A 1794 rebellion against the partition brought Austria to the table once more, and Poland–Lithuania’s neighbours removed it from the map in 1795. The growing gulf between the Commonwealth and its monarchs, bred by an obsessive fear of absolute monarchy, had fundamentally undermined the limited monarchy of which Poles and Lithuanians had been so proud.

Conclusion

The partitions of Poland–Lithuania cemented Russia’s position as a great power. The imperial vision launched by Ivan III was increasingly endorsed after 1613 by the boyars and middle-service class. Galvanized by Peter I, the elites preserved the system despite the problems caused by Peter’s radical reform of succession law after Alexis’s death, which saw him
succeeded by his empress, Catherine I (ruled 1725–27), the daughter of a Livonian peasant, the first of four female empresses in the next half century. Russia’s elites defended the empire with determination when the partition settlement was challenged by Napoleon in 1812. Yet for all the successes of the Russian empire after 1667, its rulers were well aware of the problems of the Russian model. The centralized Russian system was over-rulled and under-governed. Power, justice, and influence flowed outwards from the centre, and the lack of local institutions of self-government posed serious problems for successive regimes: it was no accident that Catherine II read her Blackstone and envied the effective justice enacted by English Justices-of-the-Peace. The Byzantine/Russian model of unrestricted royal authority depended crucially on the personality of its tsar. Authoritarian rulers like Peter I, Catherine II, or Nicholas I could achieve much, but their initiatives were often frustrated by the entrenched interests of the court and provincial elites on whom they depended for the implementation of their wishes. Consultation and the power of the imperial idea could only achieve so much.

Russian political culture differed fundamentally from that of the limited monarchies of Scandinavia and Poland–Lithuania, in which the limitations on royal power derived from institutions and estates privileges. Royal elections were an important means of limiting royal authority, but were abandoned in Sweden in 1544 in the interests of national unity against Sweden’s enemies, and in Denmark in 1660, where elections had acted primarily in the interests of a narrow group of council magnates. All three monarchies were consensual; if the principle of parliamentary limitation on royal power was most radically implemented in Poland–Lithuania—and in Sweden between 1720 and 1772—and was least firmly embedded in Denmark, consent of the citizens was crucial, and absolute monarchy in Scandinavia was enacted with explicit parliamentary consent.

Despite szlachta fears, which became obsessive after 1668, in Scandinavia absolute monarchy was limited monarchy. In Denmark it proved a stable system until 1848; in Sweden, it was overturned when it ceased to serve the interests of the estates that had combined to institute it. The traditions of natural law and the institutions of the estates systems ensured that Scandinavian monarchs remained much less dependent than the tsars on central authority, and Sweden and Denmark were not under-governed as Russia was. If in Poland–Lithuania the balance between the community of citizens and the state was never effectively achieved until 1791, when it was too late, that community of citizens was a powerful ideal that sustained the elites of the former Polish–Lithuanian states throughout the nineteenth century and left most unreconciled to the Russian empire which engulfed so many of them, as was shown in the risings of 1830 and 1863. Maskiewicz’s dialogue of the willfully deaf continued unresolved.

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Notes:


(3.) See Manfred Hellmann, ed., *Corona Regni* (Darmstadt, 1961).


(9.) For example, Georgious David, *Status modernus Magnae Russiae seu Moscoviae (1690)*, ed. A. V. Florovskyj (The Hague, 1965), 81.

(10.) Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime* (Harmondsworth, 1974), 58.

(11.) See Richard Helleie, *Enserfment and Military Change in Muscovy* (Chicago, 1972) and *Slavery in Russia, 1450–1725* (Chicago, 1984).


(24.) For a succinct account of the case, see Andrei Pavlov and Maureen Perrie, *Ivan the Terrible* (Harlow, 2003), 55–105.


(26.) For the text see http://bjoerna.dk/DanskeLov/Kongeloven.htm.


(30.) Quoted by Upton, *Charles XI*, 39.


(43.) For the case for the defence see Jacek Staszewski, *August II Mocny* (Wrocław, 1998) and *August III Sas* (Wrocław, 1989).

(44.) Staszewski, *August III Sas*, 282.

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Authority and Popular Resistance

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Abstract and Keywords

Divisions between Marxist and non-Marxist historians have fuelled debate of late medieval and early modern popular protest over the past fifty years. Yet, an underlying consensus has arisen with two broad forms of popular revolt, a ‘pre-modern’ (encompassing the Middle Ages to as late as the mid-nineteenth century) and a ‘modern’ one. Supposedly, high bread prices sparked the former, women filled their ranks, the leaders came from the elites and not the rank-and-file of peasants or artisans, their ideologies were primitive and backward looking, and these revolts ended in repression, not revolution. With modernity the characteristics changed. This chapter challenges this ‘pre-modern’/’modern’ divide, arguing that late medieval popular revolts differed profoundly from those of the early modern period across all of these characteristics. The changes depended on a growing gap in power between rulers and the ruled that had begun in places by the closing decades of the fourteenth century.

Keywords: Popular revolt, women, repression, weapons, sacks of cities, leadership

The Study of Popular Resistance

Over much of the twentieth century historical approaches to authority and popular resistance were divided between Marxists and non-Marxists. For the late Middle Ages and early modern period the divide has often been fierce but also at times blurred. Those on the left have included historians such as Henri Pirenne, a non-Marxist, but sympathetic to the rise of popular movements, viewing them as a significant and positive force in European history, vital to the rise of democracy. On the opposite side, there have been those who have seen popular revolt as a retardant force, detrimental to the advance of civilization or of no consequence at all. As such, R. B. Dobson dismissed the English Uprisings of 1381 as ‘negative where they were not negligible’. Several years earlier, J. H. Elliott came to similar conclusions about early modern European revolts from the early sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. For him, ‘movements of protest from above, and not popular uprisings’ were the ones ‘capable of leading to a mutation in the state’.¹ To be sure, many of the great debates of European history have focused on such controversies, as between Albert Soboul or Boris Porshnev, on one side, and Roland Mousnier or François Furet (who moved from the left of his early scholarship to the right), on the other.² They debated whether classes or social orders shaped conflict in early modern France and whether the causes of the French Revolution rested on class conflict. Over the past half century or more, however, a more pervasive understanding of the ‘pre-modern’ past has brought scholars on the left, centre, and right to an unstated consensus on the structures and patterns of popular protest over that long and amorphous period. That consensus or model of ‘pre-modern’ popular protest, I argue, now needs revision.
The modern history of ‘pre-modern’ popular resistance began with George Rudé’s classic works on crowds in history and especially those during the French Revolution. (p. 419) In reaction to scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially Gustave Le Bon and his psychological study of the crowd of the ‘popular mind’ (1895), Rudé disputed timeless generalizations on the psychology of crowds. As with so much else, the French Revolution demarcated also here the start of modernity. With armed protests such as the Champs de Mars in July 1791, Rudé found a watershed. Before, he argued, riots and revolts bore a close relationship with the price of bread, matters of the hearth, the economics of subsistence. Therefore (he argued), women were often the mainstay of these revolts as with the march on Versailles of 5 October 1789, that had been spawned by the scarcity of bread. In the later stages of the French Revolution and thereafter, riots became less sensitive to food prices and included fewer women. In their place, strikes arose as the characteristic form of popular protest, which he argued were mostly men’s business.  

Furthermore, ‘pre-modern’ or ‘pre-industrial’ revolts required little planning or organization but instead flared spontaneously. What leadership they may have had came from outside the crowd, from the upper classes. The rebels’ objectives were backward-looking: they sought to restore presumed lost rights and were ‘reactive’ to advances in state power—developments of bureaucracy, centralization, encroachments on pockets of corporative power and liberties. Assertive and strong kings such as Philip the Fair in early fourteenth-century France and Flanders were in effect the true revolutionaries, whose new policies prompted peasants and artisans as well as old nobilities to revolt in attempts to preserve the status quo. By contrast, modern rebels were creative in searching new means and issues to advance their political rights and economic advantage.

Other historians and sociologists soon added further dimensions to this model. To separate the modern from the pre-modern, the historical sociologist Charles Tilly, for instance, distinguished ‘communal’ from ‘associational forms of protest’. The former were ‘localized, uncoordinated, dependent on normal rhythms of congregation like those of marketing, church-going, or harvesting’, while the latter were ‘disciplined, large in scale, deliberately scheduled, and organized in advance’. For Tilly, the ‘pre-modern’–modern divide was pushed later still, as late as the 1850s, when popular collective action moved from ‘causal congregation’ and ‘uncoordinated protest’ toward ‘the deliberate collective action typified by the demonstration or strike’. His later works added new wrinkles to the model, seeing changes in the repertoires of popular revolt as with the predominance of tax rebellions in the sixteenth century with the growth of centralized monarchies. Yet to the publication of one of his last books, Tilly continued to stress the ‘pre-modern’/’modern’ divide: until 1800 popular protest was ‘parochial, particular, and bifurcated’; only with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did it become ‘cosmopolitan, autonomous, and modular’.  

Thus far modernists have criticized this model more readily than medievalists. William Reddy argued that the late eighteenth-century bread riot was a sort of strike. John Bohstedt, Roger Manning, and others have shown that women were not the sole, even the principal, rebels in early modern food riots, and feminist historians have demonstrated that women certainly had not retreated from organized collective action during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; instead, their activities then displayed (p. 420) a rich array of radical politics from street theatre to strike action.  

Medievalists and early modernists, on the other hand, have been more reluctant to address or challenge this model, even when their evidence (as in works by Rodney Hilton, Christopher Dyer, Marc Boone, Jan Dumoly, Jelle Haemers, and others) has shown leadership from within, strike activity, and creative ‘pro-active’ demands of peasants and artisans that reached back as far as the thirteenth century. At the same time, other medievalists have vehemently upheld the generalizations of the ‘pre-modern’ model. By Guy Fourquin’s reckoning, ‘rebellion’ was unknown before 1789, that is, large-scale actions that pushed for either systematic political or economic change; instead, earlier, popular revolt was without political or social consequence, leading ‘only to repression and not to revolution’. Early Modernists, who have been more sensitive to the importance of popular revolt before 1789, such as Yves-Marie Bercé and Winfried Schulze, have, nonetheless, also buttressed the essential points of this modern/pre-modern divide. As with Rudé, Bercé saw grain scarcity as the usual spark or precondition of pre-modern uprisings, ‘the traditional involvement’ of women, and leadership coming from outside: the clergy, mayors, or lords were their ‘traditional leaders’. Further, he emphasized ‘the fleeting character of popular enthusiasm, the apparent spontaneity of their gatherings and the ease with which they dispersed’. As with Tilly, Schulze understood the pre-modern revolt as essentially ‘reactive’: ‘cycles of revolt ran parallel to the great processes of state and economic modernisation’.  

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Even the Marxist historian of seventeenth-century peasant revolts in France, Boris Porshnev, would concur with many aspects of this model. For any success, the widespread revolts of the Croquants in the south of France and the Nu-Pieds in the north relied on leaders outside the ranks of peasants and artisans, on members of old aristocratic dynasties such as La Mothe de la Forêt, to instil discipline and military expertise. For Porshnev, these revolts were largely reactive; the motor that fanned their increased frequency during the first half of the seventeenth century was the growth of national monarchies and absolutism, even if the process was reciprocal: the need to suppress peasant revolts caused by increasing fiscal demands and infringements on ancient rights and customs, in turn fuelled the needs of absolutist monarchs to expand their military might and increase their fiscal demands. More recently, the political scientist James C. Scott, sympathetic to the plight and struggles of peasants and workers in places such as Indonesia, has gone further in shoring up the modern/pre-modern divide in collective political action. In effect, he has denied that subordinate classes had a political history in most places until very recently: ‘throughout most of history . . . subordinate classes have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized, political activity’. Such activity ‘was dangerous, if not suicidal’. In the pre-modern period (which for countries such as Indonesia lasted to the 1970s), the most these classes could achieve was by ‘working the system’—isolated individual actions (‘footdragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on’). He compared these actions to the unconscious ‘acts of millions of anthozoan polps’ that ‘willy-nilly’ create ‘a coral reef’. Finally, scholars have assumed that medieval and early modern revolts were infused with religious ideology, mysticism, and millennial ideas. With modernity, popular revolt as well as other aspects of thought and society became secularized.

**Late Medieval Popular Protest**

How well do these models describe collective political action and violence of subaltern classes from the mid-fourteenth century to the French Revolution? Were there significant changes over the long, amorphous period of ‘pre-modernity’/‘modern’, perhaps even as significant as the ‘modern’/pre-modern’ divide between 1789 and 1850? First, against this model, instead of being the typical form of ‘pre-modern’/modern revolt, food riots were extremely rare during the later Middle Ages. The few to surface came principally before the Black Death with famines of the early fourteenth century as in Siena, 1329, when a multitude of the poor from the countryside pressed into the city for relief. Crowds, ‘dying of hunger’, ripped through barrels of grain, threw rocks at governmental palaces, screamed ‘Misericordia’. The riot, however, was easily and quickly tamed by force and mercy with bread distributed to the starving poor. This riot was hardly characteristic of Siena’s numerous social and political revolts of the later Middle Ages, in which artisans and workers—not the starving poor—allied with other classes in attempts to overthrow its oligarchic government of bankers and merchants to change fundamentally the constitution of late medieval governments. On the other hand, the better known, longer, and more disastrous famine of northern Europe, from c. 1314 to 1317, was a period of social quiescence: not only did collective violence and protest fail to peak as the ‘pre-modern’ model of revolt would predict; it is difficult to find a single peasant or artisan revolt in these years. By contrast, major armed insurrections such as the Florentine wool-workers’ revolt, the Tumulto dei Ciompi of 1378, erupted in periods of economic recovery and good harvests. Had bread prices been the Ciompi’s determinant, it would have flared instead in 1374. Similarly, no bread crisis preceded or accompanied the other best-known of late medieval revolts—the French Jacquerie in 1358 and the English Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. For the later Middle Ages, Florence’s archbishop of 1390 had a better understanding than sociologists today of the connection between food shortages and late medieval revolt. He advised the Florence ruling council: ‘If you want to rule and maintain power, then keep the people starving’. From being the principal participants of late medieval popular protest, women were remarkable for their absence. The Brugse Metten of 1302 was possibly an exception. The Florentine chronicler Giovanni Villani described them slicing up the hated French soldiers ‘like tunny fish’. A Flemish chronicler placed them farther from the field of battle, but still saw them involved: from their roof tops, they dumped the contents of their chamber pots onto the French soldiers fighting in the streets below. On the other hand, no women appear as rebels in the numerous contemporary narrative accounts of the French
Jacquerie or in hundreds of royal letters of remission issued to these rebels, except when they solicited pardons for their husbands. Further, none appear in the chronicles of the Ciompi, and, in numerous judicial lists comprising over a thousand rebels during Florentine revolts from the earliest surviving criminal sentences in 1342 to the end of the century, only one woman appears, and she was hardly a popular rebel. Born into the powerful Medici family, she was condemned in 1379 with many men mostly from the elites for attempting to overthrow Florence’s government of artisans and workers.

Late medieval England may have been exceptional. With her husband, Joanna Ferour was active in village risings in Kent in the early phases of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. On 13 June she was involved in the burning of the Savoy Palace and the following day in the summary trials and executions of the archbishop, royal treasurer, and king’s physician at the Tower of London. She was not alone among women named as participants or leaders in late medieval English revolts. The wife of Thomas Brembole and her daughter were charged with the burning of the Savoy and the hospital at Clerkenwell in 1381; Katharine Gamen blocked the escape of the Chief Justice of King’s Bench, Sir John Cavendish, leading to his capture and ghoulish execution. At Petham hundred in Kent, seven were indicted for rebellion in 1381: three were women. Other examples can be added from other late medieval English revolts. Yet, despite these appearances, women rebels were certainly not typical even in England. From lists of thousands indicted, Andrew Prescott has found that they comprised no more than 1 per cent of rebels in 1381.

Did the ‘pre-modern’ revolt inevitably end in brutal repression without social or political change? Was open collective protest ‘suicidal’? The chronicles and administrative records of late medieval revolt present a panoply of striking exceptions to this supposed rule. The Tumulto dei Ciompi was, after all, a success, at least for three-and-a-half years. The rebels transformed fundamentally the constitution of Florence. Formerly disenfranchised wool-workers and others without guild recognition or citizenship, comprising the bulk of the city’s male population, now possessed their own guilds and obtained citizenship and an active voice in government. Even after the failure to push the revolution further in late August 1378, two of the three revolutionary guilds of wool-workers survived, and their defeat in late January 1382 did not bring brutal repression as models of ‘pre-modern’ revolt predict. Only three rebels were executed and within a month the new government reissued crossbows to the Ciompi. As the Sienese diplomat and spy, Giacomo Manni, reported: ‘very little harm has resulted from so much turmoil and revolution’.

Less studied but in many ways more remarkable and long-lasting was Siena’s revolt of 1355 that ousted the oligarchy of merchants and bankers—the Nine—which had ruled Siena since 1287. As with the Ciompi, artisans and workers previously barred from citizenship won rights of representation with a new constitution. But, unlike in Florence, where its ‘popolo minuto’ enjoyed citizenship for three-and-a-half years, in Siena they participated as citizens forming numerous governments over the city’s factionally ridden fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

Popular rebels in late medieval France and Flanders also produced success stories. Against the introduction of a new tax, ‘weavers, the poor, the fullers, and others’ at Tournai chose leaders from their own ranks and revolted against tax collectors and the city’s governors in 1307, ‘beating up the tax collectors, hanging several and throwing their bodies into the city’s moat’, and sending the city’s ‘lords, the bishop, prelates, and parish priests fleeing as fast as they could’. Nonetheless, despite the king of France’s intervention and his use of secret agents, the conflict ended in a negotiated settlement that favoured commoners: the old rectors were imprisoned, and for the first time an assembly of the entire town, ‘magnates, the middling sorts [mediocribus], and the little people [parvis]’ elected new governors, thus changing fundamentally that city’s constitution.

In another negotiated settlement, this time from south-western France, popular rebels again won favourable concessions, even though those who lost were even grander than at Tournai. In 1356, the Count of Armagnac, the king’s lieutenant in Languedoc, levied a new tax on Toulouse. The ‘people menu’ rose up, refused to pay, assailed royal officers, burnt the gates of the royal palace, and threw its furniture and plates from the windows. Ultimately, noblemen of Toulouse negotiated a peace between the rebels and the Crown. For assurances that the count would not be harmed, his army given safe passage, and the people would ‘quit their revolt’, the count rescinded the disputed new tax and promised not to impose further ones on
Further successes can easily be gleaned from chronicles and administrative records. A revolt of the ‘little people’ of Paris in 1252 against corrupt practices of the city’s provost forced the king to intervene and change the government of Paris. The people without underpants of Bologna, comprised of servants, apprentices, ‘and others of the lowest sort’ booted Bologna’s highest officer, the lord Podestà, out of office in 1289. In a two-year conflict between weavers and drapers in Huy beginning in 1298, the workers prevailed, sending the drapers into exile, even though they were allied with the town’s aldermen and other ‘rich men’ of the city. Butchers from Bologna chased the papal legate and city’s governor from the town in 1306. Still others staffed and led by lower orders succeeded in Bruges (in 1324 and 1360), Ypres (1360), Milan in 1253, 1256, and 1257, Modena in 1263, Florence (1323, 1343, 1378), Siena (three times in 1355, four in 1368, and 1371), Rome (1358), Viterbo (1281, 1387, 1390, and 1391), Arras (1355), Bologna (1398 and 1399), Paris (several times in 1380, 1381, and at least twice in 1413 and 1418), Tournai (1364, twice in 1423, and in 1424), Liège (1253, twice in 1302, 1312, 1327, 1345, 1346, 1395, and 1415), Huy (1285 and 1299), Louvain (1378), Enna (1354), Catania (1354 and 1357), Siracusa (1355), Messina (1284), L’Aquila’s peasants (1257 and 1267), and its popolo (1263, 1293, 1330, and 1370): the list goes on. From chronicle descriptions of popular insurrection in Italy, France, and Flanders, I have collected 1,012 insurrections from c. 1200 to 1425. Of these, either the chronicler failed to mention any repression following a revolt or the rebels won their demands in 726 revolts (over 70 per cent of cases).

To what extent did late medieval popular rebels rely on leaders outside their ranks, from the clergy, mayors, or lords? First, clergymen are almost wholly absent from the records of late medieval popular insurrection in Italy, France, and Flanders, whether as leaders or participants. One striking exception was the remarkable career of the Augustinian friar Iacopo Bussolari, who led the popolo of Pavia into throwing off ‘Milanese tyranny’ in 1356 and again in 1358. From his pulpit he preached against the sins of tyranny and organized the city’s neighbourhoods (contrade) into Roman military formations of Centuriones, Decuriones, and Quinquenarii. Through these, he organized the popolo to expel Pavia’s principal noble family: ‘like ants’, they dismantled brick-by-brick the family’s principal palace. But this was the exception to prove the rule. Bussolari roused the populace to collective action through examples, values, and rhetoric from Roman history, not the Bible. Leadership from mayors and lords was almost as rare. No feudal lords were prominent among the Jacquerie or the English Peasants’ Revolt as leaders or followers. An exception seen as the rule by historians was the Florentine Lord Andrea degli Strozzi, who organized a revolt of wool-workers in 1342. To gain personal power, he tempted workers with wild promises of wealth. Yet an anonymous chronicler of Pistoia, yet to be cited for this incident by historians, calls into question the rule derived from it. After Andrea’s failure and capture, another leader arose, this time from the ranks of the disenfranchised wool-workers, a dyer named Corazza. Unlike the hapless aristocrat, this one successfully stormed the Palace of the Priors with 1,300 foot soldiers from the wool-workers and won promises the Pistoiese chronicler did not bother to report.

Late medieval chronicles and judicial records list numerous leaders of popular revolt from the peasantry and especially artisans and workers, even if they may have clustered at the upper end of these groups. Some are well known to students of medieval history. During the Flemish revolt of peasants and artisans from 1297 to 1304, the butcher Jan Breydel and the half-blind weaver, Peter the King (Pieter de Coninck), whose eloquence chroniclers noted as far afield as Florence and Siena, were the movement’s principal leaders. With the second widespread Flemish revolt of 1323–28, leaders such as Clais Zannekin, Zeger Janszone, and Jacob Peyt came from the peasantry. In 1368 the weaver Hans Weiss led a revolt that brought craft guilds to power in Augsburg. But others have been less known such as the Genoese galleyman Piero Capurro, who in 1329 organized a mutiny against the aristocratic commander, Aiton Doria, because of his failure to pay back wages. Capurro then organized revolts that spread across coastal villages of Liguria, and led sailors, peasants, and fishermen against the Genoese government. The first ruling council of the Ciompi—the Balìa of Thirty-two—was comprised mainly of disenfranchised wool-workers: they made key appointments to the new government, cut deals with other classes, and drew up a new constitution that formed the three new revolutionary guilds that gave a voice, representation, and electoral power to virtually all adult males of Florence.
Again, England was an exception. At least twenty leaders of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 were clergymen. Moreover, prominent leaders of artisans and the poor, who rallied the populace against unfair taxation, judicial and fiscal corruption, and who fought for the extension of franchises to artisans in London from 1196 to the mid-fifteenth century included those who had held the city’s highest offices and were as wealthy, if not more so, than the oligarchs they opposed: William fitzOsbert, Thomas fitzThomas, Walter Hervey, John of Northampton, Ralph Holland, and William Cottesbrooke. In provincial cities it was the same: the town’s elected mayors and bailiffs were the leaders of a remarkable revolt at Bristol between 1312 and 1316 that stripped the town’s fourteen leading oligarchs of their privileges and then resisted taxes and reprisals from Edward II. (p. 425) At times, leaders of late medieval English uprisings came from higher levels still: the nobility led Londoners to destroy royal estates during de Montfort’s revolt in the early 1260s, and from his pulpit, Archbishop Scrope of York rallied commoners in 1405 against the ‘misgovernment’ of Henry IV, his broken promises, and high taxation.  

Finally, was the ideology of ‘pre-modern’ popular revolt backward-looking, reactive? Did popular rebels fail to present innovative demands and instead express awe and respect for kings, queens, or other titular heads of state? Demands such as those of the Ciompi or the 258 articles of the Ordonnance Cabochienne that followed the Parisian butchers’ revolt of 1411–13 do not fit the current image of the ‘pre-modern revolt’. Not only were these demands new and creative; they anticipated later social and political movements in European history. The Parisian ordinances limited the powers of the Crown, reducing it almost to a constitutional monarchy. 25 The Ciompi’s legislation ended imprisonment for indebtedness and ensured full employment by imposing production quotas on textile producers. 26

Secondly, late medieval popular revolts, instead of being ‘reactive’ to the previous initiatives of strong princes, more often corresponded with periods of weak or divided kingship or in Italian city states with factional strife within the oligarchy. The Jacquerie came on the heels of France’s defeat at Poitiers, the king’s capture and absence from France, and a civil war that then brewed between the Dauphin Charles and his cousin, Charles of Navarre. English revolts spread across the countryside in the southwest and within London in the last year of Edward III’s reign (1377), when that once strong king, suffering from illness, had lost much of his control to his mistress, Alice Perrers, and corrupt courtiers; the English Peasants’ Revolt erupted against the backdrop of an inexperienced 14-year-old king under the influence of his hated uncle, John of Gaunt, corruption at court, military defeat, and the Crown’s seeming inability to protect its coastline from French invasion. The revolt of the Ciompi depended on the widening crack within the Florentine oligarchy between the ancient families of the Guelf Party and wealthy emerging families such as the Medici, and was troubled further by war against its old ally, the papacy. No new taxes, repressive legislation, or economic crisis sparked disenfranchised workers to revolt in July. Contrary to the model, periods of strong kingship in England as with Edward I or Edward III saw few revolts, either against the Crown or the Church, despite their impositions of new purveyances for foodstuffs, munitions, and other supplies, heavier military obligations, higher taxation, and monetary manipulations that reduced the purchasing power of labourers and citizens. On the other hand, the three periods of most frequent and widespread revolt came with civil war in the 1260s that weakened Henry III’s rule, during the weak and troubled reign of Edward II, and at the beginning of Richard II’s reign and minority. 27

Finally, few, if any, examples of late medieval revolt on the continent fulfil the generalization that popular rebels showed awe and respect towards their royalty or other hereditary rulers. From 1345 to 1347 Neapolitans rallied their forces against their queen, Joanna, with cries ‘Death to the traitors and the queen, the whore’. After attacking royal officials and tax collectors at the beginning of Charles VI’s reign in 1380, Parisian rebels sacked the forty houses of Jews under his protection. According to the chronicler (p. 426) of Saint-Denis, these actions were simply to insult further the king. Although Italian city states north of Naples rarely owed allegiance to kings, some such as Viterbo had their hereditary lords. On numerous occasions, its popolo revolted against their Prefect, and their relish of communal liberties showed little room for respect or awe. On 17 March 1387 the popolo rebelled, sending the Prefect into hiding. Once found, he was dragged to the city’s square. Ceremoniously his mouth was pushed up the arsehole of his prized steed. They then sent him naked from the city in a casket. 28 Once again, England may have been the exception as seen in the respect English rebels showered on the boy-king Richard in June 1381.
A Transformation in Revolt: The Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries

Not only do stark contrasts arise between the models of ‘pre-modern’ revolt and the realities seen in descriptions of late medieval popular protest across much of western Europe; the patterns of revolt hardly remained static over the long stretch of the ‘pre-modern’. At different times and places, popular protest began to change fundamentally, perhaps as early as the last decades of the fourteenth century. First, the geography of popular revolt begins to shift. The frequency of popular uprisings in the two principal hotbeds of late medieval social protests—the city states of central Italy and the southern Low Countries—decline from the defeat of the government of the Minor guilds in Florence in 1382 and the victory of the king of France against Philippe van Artevelde at Rozebeke in the same year. Ypres—a major textile producer of the late Middle Ages with frequent and sophisticated popular insurrection from the 1280s to 1382—did not experience another until 1477. Jelle Haemers, Marc Boone, and others have shown that with the growth of princely power in the sixteenth century, urban and peasant protest in the Low Countries declined further: ‘the state had grown too powerful to admit to the demands of rebellious subjects.’ After the failure of the Sienese wool-workers’ revolt of the Bruco, or Club of the Caterpillar, in 1371, first against their employers, then the city government, factional conflict took over as Siena’s characteristic form of collective violence. After the fall of the Ciompi and the Government of the Minor Guilds (Arti Minori), Florentine artisans made several attempts to revive their revolutionary guilds, but the chroniclers mocked them as rag-tag bands no longer capable of posing a threat to Florence’s centralized oligarchy. Progressively, its governments narrowed the avenues to power, first to a more restrictive oligarchy with the Albizzi in 1393, then more narrowly focused on a single family, the Medici, in 1434, and then the rule of the Medici princes from the early sixteenth century to 1737.

With the Hussite revolt in the first decades of the fifteenth century, the ‘Great Revolt’ of Dosza in Hungary in 1514, the Bundschuh revolts across German-speaking regions during the first decades of the sixteenth century, and the German Peasants’ War of 1524–26, (p. 427) the spearhead of popular protest moved eastwards and swept across much larger regions than those of the Middle Ages, crossing from one principality to the next. More than during the late Middle Ages, these mobilized the peasantry, rather than townspeople. Further, they galvanized support with theological appeals to divine justice, anticlericalism, and assaults against tithes. Equally large, if not larger, revolts followed in seventeenth-century Russia, which combined the forces of townspeople, peasants, slaves, and lower clergy such as the Bolotnikov uprising of 1606 to 1607 and especially Stenka Razin’s in 1667 to 1671. As with the grand sweep of revolt across large parts of Europe in 1647 to 1649, climatic change, failed harvests, and their consequences—soaring bread prices and famine—were among the spark of these revolts. The infusion of religious belief with radical politics and social movements was as fundamental for Puritan groups in the seventeenth century with the Sea Beggars in the Low Countries and the Levellers and Diggers in mid-seventeenth-century England as it had been for the Hussites or German peasants during the sixteenth century. In Catholic Europe as well (in Catalonia and Naples during the first half of the seventeenth century) popular religiosity exploded into popular revolt: the clergy now became instrumental to the organization and leadership of popular insurgency. In addition, revolts such as Bolotnikov’s and Razin’s coupled an alleged devotion to the Czar with desires to restore ancient rights and new revolutionary goals for the dispossessed. As with other early modern revolts, the revolutionary propaganda distinguished the good prince from his corrupt and evil advisers and bureaucrats who keep the truth from him.

Perhaps the most indicative of the contrasts between late medieval and early modern patterns of popular protest was a sharp reversal in the relationship between the intensity and frequency of revolt on the one hand and the underlying economic conditions on the other. By the general crisis across much of Europe in the 1590s, the Florentine archbishop’s advice to the government in 1390 would no longer have held water: now scarcity and famine had become the essential sparks and predictors of social revolt across different economies, governmental regimes, systems of land tenure and dependence, and across Protestant and Catholic Europe—in England, France, Italy, Austria, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, and the Ukraine. From statistical studies of numerous uprisings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—Manning for England, Bercé and Pillorget for various regions of southern France, and Henry Kamen for Europe as a whole—historians have concurred: ‘the coincidence between bad harvests and popular revolt is so striking that it is almost a general rule that the price curve reflects
the incidence of popular agitation’. 37

The character of leadership marks another transformation. After the fifteenth century, leaders of popular revolt from the ranks of peasants and artisans had certainly not disappeared, as with ‘Captain Cobbler’ and ‘Captain Poverty’, who were leaders of the Pilgrimage of Grace revolt in England in 1536; George Brunner of ‘humble origins’, who led a peasant uprising in Austria in 1597; ‘Captain Pouch’ who led the Midland Rising of 1607; and perhaps most famously, the charismatic, crazed fishmonger, Masaniello, who led (at least in the streets) the Neapolitan revolt of 1647 against Spanish Hapsburg rule. 38 However, the social character of the leadership of many of the larger-scale revolts (p. 428) from as early as the Hussite movement and increasingly with those in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had changed. Bercé’s pronouncement that pre-modern popular insurrection relied on ‘traditional’ leaders from outside commoners’ ranks—the clergy, bourgeoisie, and especially the nobility—while well wide of the mark for the later Middle Ages, fits more closely the early modern experience across Europe. Czech noblemen with military experience such as the crafty, one-eyed military genius Jan Žižka disciplined and controlled peasants to do the nobility’s bidding in armed conflicts against the king of Bohemia, the Holy Roman Emperor, and three international crusades organized to break the Hussite movement from 1409 to the Basel Compactata of 1433. According to Kamen, ‘every major peasant revolt in Polish lands took place only with the armed support of the Cossack leaders’ during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. 39 The priest Jean Morel was a principal leader of the Nu-Pieds uprising through Normandy in 1639 against extensions of the salt tax; the great nobles and bishops of southern France led the anti-taxation revolts in Languedoc in 1632. The nobleman of the ancient dynasty of La Mothe de la Forêt disciplined and led peasant troops of the nouveaux Croquants in 1637 against royal taxes and encroachments on liberties in the region of Périgueux, and other minor country squires served as his military commanders. 40 The minor gentry often led enclosure rights in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England against the greater gentry or were even led by the greater gentry against rival lords. 41

Moreover, a new intellectual leadership developed for popular movements during the early modern period. Men from the professional classes—clerics, lawyers, physicians, and writers, ones Antonio Gramsci would later call ‘organic’ intellectuals —led popular insurrections or helped to shape and draft their demands and articulate their ideology. Their assistance ranged from legal advice to developing tactics, as with the 86-year-old radical priest and intellectual, Giulio Genoino, whom Rosario Villari has persuasively argued was the real power behind Masaniello’s Neapolitan revolt of 1647. 42 Such figures are hard to spot in the annals of late medieval revolts. No doubt, on occasion they must have been behind the scenes as with confederations of bondsmen in fourteenth-century England, who argued from Domesday Book to justify withholding their labour from ecclesiastical lords. Such may have been the case with the wealthy clerical pluralist, Mr. Richard Wynch, in supporting, if not igniting, the grievances of the tenants of Worcester Priory at Shipston-on-Stour during the early years of the fifteenth century. 43

But many more and much clearer cases of such roles played by radical intellectuals arise in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the ‘great uprising’ of Naples in 1585, sparked by the sharp rise in bread prices and which became a movement against Spanish rule with the ritual humiliation and lynching of ‘the people’s representative’ Giovan Vincenzo Starace, the university professor, Giovanni Leonardo Pisano, presented new political ideas and made numerous speeches against the Spanish viceroy to crowds of plebes and the city’s lesser bourgeoisie. Two generations later, in 1647, the price of bread and new taxes on foodstuffs fuelled revolts in southern Italy again against Spanish rule. Middle-class intellectuals, such as the famous writer Francesco Baronio and the young doctor Pantellaria Giovanni Colonna, stirred guildsmen not to trust the government, drafted the movement’s (p. 429) demands for a fairer system of fiscal distribution, and helped shape the populace’s slogans with written bills. These ranged from heavy satire in Sicilian verse to threats against local Captains at Arms. Other middle-class Sicilian intellectuals such as the young lawyer Pietro Milano drafted forty-nine articles to the Spanish government to reform legal procedure and return to the ancient laws of King Peter of Aragon. The revolts of 1647/48 in southern Italy were not solely urban ones; in fact, according to Villari, this wave of rebellion was ‘essentially a peasant war, the largest and most dramatic in western Europe in the seventeenth century’. 44 A Medici agent in Calabria claimed that no hamlet escaped from revolution. Organic intellectuals were instrumental to these revolts as well: Francesco d’Andrea, a leading lawyer and administrator, part of the intellectual and professional elite, was involved in this politicization
of peasants in rural Abruzzo. According to Geoffrey Parker, the example of Naples led to uprisings in over a hundred towns in southern Italy, where local lawyers and ‘other intellectuals’ had taken the lead.

Certainly, southern Italy held no monopoly on such popular leadership. Around 1522, Hans Murer, a university graduate and a doctor, was charged as ‘one of the true instigators’ of the trans-territorial peasant revolts in German-speaking regions known as the Bundschuh. With the Pilgrimage of Grace against Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries and incensed by rising taxation, the hand of these intellectual rebels can be seen in sworn oaths against the king’s advisers, circulated handbills, and battlements attached to church doors and market crosses. In addition, these scurrilous verses were ‘sung aloud in alehouses and on the march’, and their most prominent leader was the lawyer Robert Aske, who negotiated a settlement with the king. Tax farmers accused the learned cleric Ericus Holstenius, a teacher at the Cathedral gymnasium at Västerås, Sweden, of ‘rousing peasants to rebel against the injustices of tax farmers’ and helped frame from 1626 to the 1630s concrete proposals for a successful change of governmental policy. Aided by intellectuals such as Holstenius and the Bishop of Västerås, the Swedish peasantry persuaded the king that the system of tax-farming had not only depleted the resources of the peasantry, it had also damaged the nation.

Although women may never have been the predominant force in revolutionary crowds in any period of history, certainly the sexual composition of insurrectionary crowds had changed dramatically by the sixteenth century. Roger Manning finds that 11 per cent of the participants in enclosure riots of Tudor and Stuart England were women, and several were mostly or entirely feminine protests as with a revolt at Jowls in 1604 when 200 marched to destroy the Duke of Suffolk’s fences, ditches, and bridges to obtain rights of common pasture. Unruly women in early modernity were not confined to the countryside. At St. Giles’s, Edinburgh, in 1637, ‘rascally serving women’ resisted Charles I’s imposition of the Book of Common Prayer by drowning out the Dean’s reading, then hurling prayer stools at the Bishop of Edinburgh. When evicted, they stoned the doors and windows of the church. Women also emerged as the leaders of popular revolt at Maldon in 1629, when Ann Carter played a leading role not just in the rioting itself but in its planning, by first touring clothing townships to gain support and then sending letters in which she styled herself ‘captain’. Unable to write, she employed a local baker as her secretary.

Unlike in the later Middle Ages, England does not now appear exceptional for the early modern period. Revolts in seventeenth-century France produced equally colourful and significant cases of women’s participation and leadership in major revolts. According to William Beik, the most compelling desire of seventeenth-century crowds was to punish the authorities, and often women led these revolts. One characteristic that distinguished popular rebellion from factional warfare in seventeenth-century French cities was the appearance of women as the participants in the former. Women started the tax revolt at Montpellier in 1645, and it was led by a virago named la Branlaire. In a revolt at Dijon in 1668, women were enlisted to start the disorder. The 1675 revolt of Bordeaux began with ‘a fierce group of female peddlers wielding knives’, who attacked and chased government agents from town, throwing rocks and calling them gabeleurs. In the same year seditious women in Bergerac threw all the government’s officially stamped paper into a stream. For early modern Italy there has yet to appear a Natalie Zemon Davis or a William Beik to explore the role of women in popular revolt. However, from the shadows of the historiography, similar changes in women’s participation and their importance to popular rebellion appear by the sixteenth or seventeenth century. During the Neapolitan revolt of 1647, chronicles reported women marching under their own captains, armed with spits and shovels, and according to some, with arquebuses and halberds. But historians have mostly ignored this evidence or, as in the case of Peter Burke, have deemed it untrustworthy evidence. By his reasoning, women appear in the accounts of the revolt because of Neapolitan ‘machismo’. Women also became prevalent as rebels in seventeenth-century movements east of the Elbe as in Stenka Razin’s revolt against Moscow in 1670: not only did many women join the movement, but several, as with Razin’s mother, commanded rebel detachments.

Thus far historians have attempted to explain women’s role in early modern popular revolt as though it were a near-timeless element of the long ‘pre-modern’ past, arguing that women were put on the front line, often initiating riot, because they were not held accountable for what they did or that they received lesser sentences than their husbands for riotous acts. Natalie Zemon Davis has added that sexual inversion also gave a more positive licence to unruly women. But these explanations fail
to address why women’s remarkable participation and leadership of popular revolts in Europe was relatively so recent, to sometime around the sixteenth century and not as a deep structural aspect of some ambiguous ‘pre-modern’ past: new explanations need now to be framed in contexts specific to early modernity.

While elements of the pre-modern model of popular revolt begin to fit several aspects of early modern revolt, it does not succeed on all fronts or across the complex and multifaceted experiences of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. First, as the Bundschuh, Douza, German Peasants’ War, the sweep of revolts across Europe in 1647–48, and those across Poland, Russia, and the Ukraine at various moments during the seventeenth century well attest, popular insurrection in the ‘pre-modern’ sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can hardly be described as on a small scale, revolving round local ‘marketing, church-going, or harvesting’ as Charles Tilly and others have maintained was characteristic of revolts before 1800. Secondly, historians counting riots and revolts, Roger Manning and others for England, and especially in France—René Pillorget for Provence; Yves-Marie Bercé for south-western France; and William Beik across France—find that popular insurrection peaked in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century and began to decline significantly with the reign of Louis XIV in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and for England, a half century earlier. In these cases, the reactive model of popular protest before industrialization clearly fails; otherwise the strengthening of the English monarchy in foreign and domestic affairs and Louis XIV’s centralization, state building, and aggressive obliteration of former liberties for regions and social estates would have produced the opposite, an efflorescence of popular rebellion. Yet, on other counts such as the connection between famine and revolt, leadership, participation of women, and the infusion of religious ideology, these revolts begin to approach certain key aspects of the ‘pre-modern’ model.

Towards an Explanation

So how can these fundamental structural changes in the character of late medieval–early modern revolt be explained: from ones that correlated with favourable economic conditions to ones sparked by famine; ones in which leaders came overwhelmingly from the rank-and-file of peasants and artisans to ones that increasingly relied on leaders from outside; ones where women were almost completely absent to ones where they could comprise the bulk of resistance and appear as leaders? In short, I hypothesize that it rests primarily on the growing gap between rulers and those they ruled, an increasing imbalance in class power. The state became more adept at disciplining its subjects, bringing to bear more heavy-handed, brutal, and effective means of repressing those who dared to resist.

One avenue into these differences can be seen in William Beik’s distinction between factional and popular conflict in seventeenth-century France. Accordingly, factional conflict was

invariably carried out by men, often with swords, sometimes on horseback, and they relied heavily on military styles of mobilization. They did not throw rocks, enlist women and children, storm from place to place, cry out in desperation and indignation, or engage in vindictive mutilations, draggings, or pillaging . . .

What he does not say is that while these differences in the ‘style’ of conflict may have characterized seventeenth-century collective violence (even in the sixteenth century), they fail utterly to distinguish the two during the late Middle Ages, especially in regard to weaponry. In revolts across medieval Europe, insurgents were not confined to throwing rocks. Often they possessed weapons as advanced as their employers or the states they opposed. Nor did popular insurgents need to rely on the military experience and leadership of a fighting nobility. As the record of the revolt of the Ciompi (p. 432) shows, wool-workers were members of crossbow units and had had long experience in Florentine wars, against Pisa in the 1360s and against the papacy on the eve of the revolt. They had acquired leadership experience by rising to commanding positions as the ‘corporali’ of their neighbourhood militia. In revolts in Flanders when certain bells began ringing either backwards or in unusual combinations, guildsmen and workers knew immediately to return to their houses, where they kept their military arms, and then to assemble in their ranks under their guild flags to confront their social superiors.
Nor can popular insurgents in towns or the countryside in late medieval Europe be easily distinguished from those socially above them by any absence of horse power as Beik argues had became the rule with early modernity. Once the woolworker Michele di Lando had captured the Florentine flag of Justice, the Ciompi leader rode on horseback across the city proclaiming victory. Of the many chroniclers to record his ride, none expressed any amazement that he could handle a horse. In fact, chroniclers report artisan celebrations and festivals in 1333 when craftsmen, including disenfranchised workers in the wool industry, staged horse races through the streets of Florence. Given the speed by which the rebels of the English Peasants’ Revolt travelled from Canterbury to Blackfriars on the banks of the Thames, it is clear that they too travelled by horseback. In their final battle against the forces of Charles of Navarre, the Jacques lined up in two battalions of 2,000 men in each. They placed those with bows and crossbows in front and then in front of them they put their carts, and formed another battalion of their horsemen, fully 600 men, who were mostly armed. Certainly, Jean Froissart took literary liberties in describing the forces of the Parisian ‘hammer men’ who opposed Charles VI’s re-introduction of indirect taxes in 1382: ‘They were so well armed with all the pieces of armour as no knight could afford, and had their valets armed to the nines: they wore suits of iron mail and carried hammers, dangerous batons for breaking apart cauldrons’. But to be taken seriously, Froissart’s words would have had to ring with some verisimilitude to his contemporary aristocratic audiences.

The growing imbalance in power between rulers and the ruled can be seen more graphically from the perspective of the prince, changes in the repressive forces at his disposal, and changes in his attitudes and willingness to oppress, torture, and destroy his own subjects. As early as 1440 he addressed popular resistance on a new scale of brutality. Instead of capital punishment issued to a select number of popular ringleaders, such as the decapitation of eight of the leaders of the 1382 Parisian hammer men (which even the king’s chronicler of St. Denys found as disproportionate punishment and which destroyed an earlier agreement on what commodities could be taxed), monarchs by the mid-fifteenth century began to engage in massacres of the innocents—sacks of cities, with the rape, pillage, and murder of thousands of women and children. Such vengeance badly destroyed Arras in 1440, Dinant in 1468, Liège in 1468 and again in 1478, Mechelen in 1572, Antwerp in 1576, Volterra in 1472, Brescia in 1511, Prato in 1528, Pavia in 1528, Genoa in 1532, and parts of Naples in 1585.

The ‘exemplary punishment’ unleashed by the Duke of Alba against the Netherlands stretched across numerous towns during his six-year rule, and in eastern Europe, princely retaliation could prove even more brutal as with the Tsarist repression of the (p. 433) Cossack Stenka Razin’s peasant rebellion waged against the nobility and government officials in Southern Russia from 1667 to 1671. The Czar’s reprisals lasted several months and counted their victims in the tens of thousands, their bodies mutilated, disembowelled, impaled, nailed to boards, torn by fishhooks, decapitated in marketplaces, and displayed publicly as a warning to future rebels. Although punishment of popular rebels by heads of states during the seventeenth century may not have been as gruesome in western Europe as ones implemented by the Czar, still reprisals on a mass scale occurred even in places with small populations. In 1699, with an army of 10,000, Duke Victor Amadeus II of Savoy was able finally to suppress peasant revolts largely against his levies of the salt gabelle in the region of Mondovì, which for almost a quarter of a century had been raging off and on. The rebels’ defeat at Montaldo served as an example: forty-nine rebels were hanged; eight of its nine hamlets were destroyed; 2,578 villagers were deported to the marshlands of Vercelli, and the chestnut forests surrounding the region were cut down to deny any remaining rebels food or places to hide.

The most celebrated of massacres of popular rebels during the later Middle Ages was the French nobility’s crushing of the Jacquerie after Charles of Navarre’s betrayal of Guillaume Calle in May 1358: perhaps as many as 6,000 peasants were mowed down. Compare this probably exaggerated statistic of the medieval chroniclers to one battle during the German Peasant’s War—that of Francherhaus—when 50,000 peasants were slaughtered and with nearly twice that number of peasants facing death during the two-year rebellion. For late medieval western Europe, only one popular revolt was crushed by the massacre of a city—the sack of Cesena in 1377 executed by the celebrated English mercenary, John Hawkwood, under orders from the Cardinal legate, Robert of Geneva, soon to become the anti-pope, Clement VII. But this exception may have been too brutal and unjust even for the hardened Hawkwood; shortly afterwards, he turned his back on papal employment to side with their enemies.
This gap between rulers and the ruled also explains in part England’s divergence from the rest of western continental Europe during the late Middle Ages with its precocious centralization of kingship and relatively advanced control over its subjects: already by the reign of Henry I England was ahead of the game; and by 1400, as John Gillingham and others have argued, ‘England was a much-governed state’.

Concomitant and connected aspects to state development in early modern Europe further limited what John Walter has called ‘people’s power in protest’. Of these, was the polarization and re-alignment of those beneath the lesser gentry and merchant classes, with richer villagers and skilled craftsmen—the backbone and leadership of earlier rebellions—parting with their poorer neighbours to identify with the lesser gentry. Growing gaps in wealth, moral and cultural distinctions, even speech, further isolated the poor as less disciplined and desirable neighbours in early modernity. As John Najemy has recently shown for Renaissance and early modern Florence and can be seen in the proliferation of titles of distinction that entered the world of artisans and shopkeepers in places such as sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Siena and Venice, the widening of social divisions within the popolo was not peculiar to the English or to peasantry during early modernity.

(p. 434) Conclusion

This history of authority and resistance was certainly no story of progress: the increasing brutality of mass executions, sacks of cities, and more ghoulish forms of executing early modern rebels, whether in the Low Countries, Naples, or Russia, rails against the notion of an incontrovertible march of a state development that underpinned a ‘civilizing process’. Nor does the history of popular revolt in late medieval and early modern Europe illustrate a steady march towards democracy as Henri Pirenne once imagined. Instead, in many regions, the growing gap between rulers and the ruled forced labourers and citizens to turn inwards and to find modes of protest through more limited legal channels or isolated individual acts of everyday resistance—James C. Scott’s ‘the weapons of the weak’. For peasants, it was often a history that moved backwards. For cities such as Florence, Siena, Ypres, and Ghent, the high-water mark of effective collective resistance to the state was achieved during the late fourteenth century. In short, the vague and static notion of ‘pre-modern’ revolt fails to capture the rich and varied course of popular protest over the five centuries from 1300 to the French Revolution and prevents any understanding of the major structural transformations in leadership, participation, organization, aims, and ideology in popular protest that occurred at the end of the Middle Ages.

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soulèvements populaires au XVIIe siècle dans le sud­ouest de la France (Geneva, 1974), II, 543, have claimed that women’s role in instigating popular revolt was biologically determined and thus trans­historical. According to Delumeau, their emotional and instinctive need to protect their offspring and matters of the hearth extends to the present and explains also the revolutionary initiative and the inspiration that has guided contemporary women to join and lead movements such as Baader Meinhoff.


(7.) The Anatomy of Popular Rebellion in the Middle Ages, trans. A. Chesters (Amsterdam, 1978), 25; also, see Rhiman A. Rotz, “Social Struggles” or the Price of Power? German Urban Uprisings in the Late Middle Ages’, Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte, 76 (1985), 64–95, who holds that the structure of urban uprising was ‘broadly the same from the later thirteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth (at 88).


(10.) Boris Porshnev, Les Soulèvements populaires en France de 1623 à 1648 (Paris, 1963; Moscow, 1948 [but written before 1939]).


(12.) William Jordan, The Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century (Princeton, 1996), claims that ‘grain riots characterize urban life of the famine years’ (at 165), yet produces only one grain riot during the famine across Europe, at Magdeburg (Germany) in 1316.

(13.) Cited in Cohn, Lust for Liberty, 73.

(14.) For such examples, see Cohn, Popular Protest in Late Medieval English Towns (Cambridge, 2012).


(18.) Matteo Villani, Cronica con la continuazione di Filippo Villani, ed. Giuseppe Porta (Parma, 1995), II, 88; and


(21.) Cohn, *Lust for Liberty: The Politics of Social Revolt in Medieval Europe, 1200–1425* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 155–156, and 152. Further examples derive from letters of remission and judicial records but from these it is impossible to judge success or failure.


(26.) *Popular Protest in Late Medieval Europe*, annotated and trans. Cohn (Manchester, 2004), doc. no. 124.

(27.) Cohn, *Popular Revolt in Late Medieval English Towns*, 312–314.

(28.) Cohn, *Lust for Liberty*, 137, 82, 40.


(30.) *Popular Protest*, doc. 79.


(33.) On the importance of climate change for seventeenth-century crises, politics, and popular insurgence, see most recently, Parker, *Global Crisis*.

(34.) Rosario Villari, *The Revolt of Naples*, trans. James Newell (Cambridge, 1992), 173ff. To be sure, religious ideology in popular and peasant revolts was not everywhere central to early modern European revolts. According to Boris Porchev, *Les buts et les revendications des paysans lors de la révolte bretonne de 1675* [Moscow, 1940], trans. Nina Gourfinkel, in *Les Bonnets rouges: les historiens et l’histoire* (Paris, 1975), 299, ‘not the slightest trace of any religious ideology can be detected in the demands’ of the Breton peasant insurgents of 1675. Nor did they support their demands with references to Scripture or to Christian dogma. He then generalizes that the same holds ‘for all peasant and plebeian revolts of seventeenth-century France’. For the latter, however, he produces no note or proof.


(37.) Avrich, *Russian Rebels*, 373.

(38.) Similarly, with the revolt of Salerno that copied Masaniello’s at Naples, the crowd of peasants and citizens chose as its rebel leader or *capopopolo* a fisherman from the rank and file; see Parker, *Global Crisis*, 429–430.

(39.) Kamen, *The Iron Century*, 324. For a more complex analysis of these economic, demographic, and political conjunctures not only for early modern Europe but also for the Middle East and China, see Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley, 1991).


(41.) Manning, *Village Revolts*, 64ff.


(44.) Villari, *The Revolt of Naples*, 152. Also, see the popular revolts largely against the gabelles at Catania in 1647, which had among their ranks ‘intelletuali’, principally notaries and priests; see Giuseppe Giarrizzo, ‘La Sicilia dal Cinquecento all’Unità d’Italia’, in Vincenzo D’Alessandro and Giarrizzo, eds., *La Sicilia dal Vespro all’Unità d’Italia* (Turin, 1989), 99–783, at 316.


(49.) William Beik, _Urban Protest in Seventeenth-century France_ (Cambridge, 1997), 146; and Wood, _Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics_, 37, 48, 147, 158, and 158; Davis, ‘Women on Top’, 146 and 147; and Peter Burke, ‘The Virgin of the Carmine and the Revolt of Masaniello’, _Past & Present_, 99 (1983), 13. For a more recent and positive assessment of the role of women in this revolt, see Benigno, _Mirrors of Revolution_, 308–309.

(50.) Parker, _Global Crisis_, 181.

(51.) This is largely Parker’s argument in a section entitled ‘Chicks Up Front’ and based largely on the trans-historical claims of the French historian Jean Nicolas that their ‘ritualized behaviour . . . transcended time’ (_Global Crisis_, 515–516).

(52.) For the summary of these statistics, see Beik, _Urban Protest_, 146; and Wood, _Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics_, 46.

(53.) Beik, _Urban Protest_, 198.

(54.) _Popular Protest_, doc. nn. 126, 39, 149.

(55.) Peter Arnade, _Beggars, Iconoclasts, & Civic Patriots: The Political Culture of the Dutch Revolt_ (Ithaca, 2008), 166–211; Bercé, _Revolt and Revolution_, 163; and Avrich, _Russian Rebels_, 109. For other examples of ‘exemplary punishment’, see Parker, _Global Crisis_’ 530–532.


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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter outlines the main characteristics and connotations of the early modern court. A discussion of the historiography highlights major changes and influences, including Norbert Elias and anthropology. The chapter then integrates recent research into a presentation of court offices and staffs, numbers and costs, the role of women, the urban context of court life, ceremony and court culture, political power and favourites. The conclusions revise some widely held views. Rulers more often than not aimed to reduce their courts, viewing enlargement as a financial threat as well as an undermining of order. Most courts formed a combination of households rather than a single establishment, a situation reflecting the role of the dynasty around the individual ruler. Women played a marked role, particularly as mothers and dowagers. Finally the chapter shows that the court in the early modern age was in several respects different from preceding and later courts.

Keywords: Court, royal court, household, household staffs and offices, patronage, favourites, faction, ritual

The Court: Places, Groups, Occasions, Reputations

A court can best be understood as a house writ large: it was the place where a family lived but also the family itself. Noble families employed the term ‘house’ (Haus, maison, casa) to indicate their dwellings as well as their family in a wider sense: reaching backwards in time by including forebears and extended socially by embracing followers and servants. However, while nobles in all ranks took pride in their houses, the term court was reserved for dynasties holding or aspiring to sovereign status: courts are the houses of rulers worldly and spiritual. Therefore, the term combined with its location as in ‘the court of St. James’ was also commonly used to indicate the heart of monarchical power, as we now sometimes do by referring to the White House or to the Élysée for presidential power. The close connection with sovereign power and high justice persists in modern usage: judicial institutions are still often called courts or palaces. The court, then, can indicate the place where a ruler lives, the groups serving the ruler and his family, and the various functions this entourage performs. However, a closer look will reveal that courts changed places and attendance frequently. Therefore, an eighteenth-century German scholar, Johann Heinrich Zedler, opened his definition of the court with an appropriately elastic formula: ‘. . . what we call court, is where the prince resides’.

All over Europe, palaces and palace grounds make visible the legacy of the court. Numerous city palaces as well as hunting lodges suggest the splendour of a bygone world. Typically, these palaces include a sequence of courtyards, with open forecourts leading to more secluded inner courts. Such architectural forms reflect another meaning of the term court: enclosed space or garden. In the course of the early modern age, most rulers chose to settle in one place for the winter
months, moving between this fixed residence and a series of hunting lodges from early spring to late autumn. No European court as a rule stayed in one location throughout the year; hence no palace can be presented as the sole location of the court. Versailles in its heyday between 1682 and 1789, the epitome of the multifunctional permanent palace, accommodated the court for most of the year. Yet the king and his attendants moved to Fontainebleau annually for a longer stay in autumn and frequently sojourned briefly in other palaces. Hunting and recreation ranked high among the reasons for mobility, but most rulers in addition toured their realm upon their accession or for special political occasions such as meetings of the estates, whereas religious observances could likewise involve travel. At times, warfare or disease caused temporary and improvised migrations.

Which people can be seen as belonging to the court? Invariably, at the heart stood the ruler and his relatives. They were served by a household reflecting the day-to-day routines of any family: sleeping, eating, mobility. Three core staffs catering for the (bed-) chamber, the table, and the stables were present at all European courts. Devotion was of great importance at court, but the chapel did not universally figure as an independent staff. Guards and various services for hunting likewise were a necessary complement, sometimes integrated into the three core household staffs, sometimes organized as separate services (Table 17.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain/staff</th>
<th>Household tasks [connected government tasks]</th>
<th>Leading officers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hall</td>
<td>Table, hospitality, provisioning [economy, decision making]</td>
<td>Steward, Hofmeister, maître d’hôtel, mayordomo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamber</td>
<td>Bed, sleeping, audiences, and access [movable possessions, finances]</td>
<td>Chamberlain, Kämmerer, chambellan, camarero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stables</td>
<td>Horses, carriages, movement; quartering, justice [warfare]</td>
<td>Marshal/master of the horse, Marschall, écuyer, caballerizo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapel</td>
<td>Devotion, music, charity</td>
<td>Almoner, chaplain, Aumonier Kaplan, limosnero, capellán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guards</td>
<td>Protection [warfare]</td>
<td>Various</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunt</td>
<td>Recreation, training, food supply</td>
<td>Various</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(* ) High office in the chamber, the domain most closely connected to access and personal service, tended to be subdivided and multiplied, note the rise of the sumiller de corps at the Spanish court and the premiers gentilshommes at the French court, or the introduction of the bedchamber within the chamber under James VI-I in England.

(#) At most German and Scandinavian courts, a Marschall held high functions, preceding or immediately following the steward. At many other courts, marshals and provosts held responsibility for justice and quartering. Note the military connotations of these offices.

Each of these staffs formed a hierarchy of noblemen and lesser servants under the direction of a high nobleman. The courtiers leading the staffs for the table, the chamber, and the stables always pledged their oath with the ruler; usually the same held true for the dignitaries heading the chapel, the hunt, and the guards. This supreme layer of court officers willingly
accepted the authority of only the sovereign in person. The leaders of court staffs were assisted by proxies and heads of departments within their staffs—such as the services for silverware and the kitchen in the steward’s department or the wardrobe in the chamberlain’s department. The noble upper echelon oversaw a mixed bunch of non-noble servants, ranging from ushers to stableboys and turnbroaches. Usually, the staffs also included an intermediate level of nobles obtaining court rank and access on the basis of pedigree but attending court only intermittently.

The sovereign’s household inevitably also served as a centre for agencies of government. Officeholders in this domain, from chancellors and ministers to secretaries and clerks, were only partly integrated into the ruler’s domestic setup. Financial and legal specialists, never entirely fitting into the household, tended to gradually move out of the physical space of the court from the later Middle Ages onwards, loosening their connections with domestic service. This process of ‘going out of court’ can be seen all over Europe. Leaving behind the mobile households and resettling in permanent urban offices, specialized government services could more easily develop recordkeeping, fixed routines, and a stronger corporate identity. Their gradual differentiation and increasing reliance on paperwork, however, matched developments in the household where specialized services and archives likewise proliferated in the course of the early modern age. The leading councillors and ministers, moreover, still usually assembled at court, in the ruler’s apartment.

At times, regular staff on the payroll of the court formed only a minority of the aggregate of people converging around the ruler. Courts attracted numerous visitors, particularly during their ‘season’ in the winter residence. Sovereign princes held court, governed, and administered justice. Rulers with their advisers formed the highest judiciary, ideally safeguarding justice and the bonum publicum. The domestic, administrative, and legal functions of the court secured the presence of petitioners looking for redress of grievances as well as for employment and advancement. The grandees of the realm were expected to attend major dynastic and religious festivities; during such highpoints, the court served as a meeting place, fashion parade, and marriage market for the elites. This was the ideal occasion to flaunt wealth, conclude alliances, collect hearsay, indulge in gossip, or simply seek entertainment.

A meeting point for the prestigious, powerful, rich, and ambitious, the court acquired a Janus-faced reputation. The lifestyle of court elites provided a model of exemplary ‘polite’ behaviour, or courtesy. However, courtesy could also be perceived as a thin veil hiding hypocrisy, venality, intrigue, deceit, vanity, profligacy, and lechery. A long tradition of literary works culminating in The Book of the Courtier by the courtier-diplomat Baldassare Castiglione (1478–1529) describes the court as a school of good manners. An equally rich literary tradition views it critically, as a den of iniquity. The French writer Jean de la Bruyère (1645–96) noted in his Characters: ‘The most honourable thing we can say of a man is, that he does not understand the court; there is scarcely a virtue which we do not imply when saying this’. Common proverbs picture success at court as leading to corruption and downfall. Like a moth attracted by the flame of a candle, the ambitious petitioner risked perishing in the battle for royal preferment. Rewards were unlikely and transitory, failure and disgrace costly as well as injurious. Translated into contemporary terms, the mixed reputation of the court stands somewhere between bureaucratic centres such as a Brussels or Washington and the glamorous elite settings portrayed in glossy magazines: worlds of the ambitious, to be admired and detested at the same time.

Early modern courts were meeting points not only for their domestic elites: they attracted foreign visitors and served as the foci of an increasingly cohering as well as highly competitive société des princes. Major courts exchanged resident diplomats who in addition to pursuing their political agendas reported courtly practices from solemn ceremonies to lavish festivities. Their reports triggered emulation and helped to establish common expectations. Rome, the first focal point of European permanent diplomacy, was a key example in many respects. The hierarchy among Europe’s sovereigns established in 1504 by Pope Julius II’s (1503–13) master of ceremonies remained a point of reference for ceremony throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The intricate administrative machinery of the papal curia served as example for government by paper. More generally, Catholic devotion and liturgy were the single most important shared heritage of European courts until the advent of the Reformation. The splendour of the papal court also influenced the evolving transnational standards of courtly deportment and display, but shared this position with other notable centres, including the Burgundian court, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian princely courts, the English court under Elizabeth I,
the Spanish court from Charles I–V to Philip IV, and perhaps most spectacularly the French court under Louis XIV. However, intermarriage, succession, and permanent emulation created a hodge-podge of courtly traditions in which it is difficult and often futile to disentangle specific origins. The Habsburgs and the Valois-Bourbon, the dominant dynastic rivals of early modern Europe, cultivated diverging courtly idioms—yet the Spanish Habsburgs had adopted elements of the Burgundian court, introducing a successful model that itself had been based on the French court. Rather than detailing and describing a sequence of exemplary courts, this chapter examines the recurring practices of European court life.³

The History of the Court: From Neglect Towards a Dominant Model and Beyond

European courts have left a rich legacy of buildings, artefacts, and written sources. However, scholarship on the court shows an uneven development, with a long phase of neglect for most of the twentieth century followed by a sudden spurt of publications from the 1980s onwards. Only around the turn of the twenty-first century did a more balanced understanding of this remarkably fluid institution emerge. How did scholarly views on the court evolve?

In the eighteenth century, enlightenment critique reinforced and sharpened traditional antipathies vis-à-vis the court. Soon, the American and French Revolutions⁴ presented viable alternatives to monarchical rule. Nineteenth-century historians, many of them living in political environments where the dynastic court was becoming increasingly marginal, tended to view the domestic servants around monarchs in the past with a critical eye, as wasteful and largely irrelevant. Rather than studying the dynastic household, they focused on what they understood to be the key institutions of the emerging modern state: ministers, councils, and representative assemblies. The formative generation of historians around 1900 idolized the national state while relegating the dynastic court to the margins of political history. Under their twentieth-century successors, turning from political to social and economic history and from elites to common people, the disinclination to study the domestic core of royal government became ever more pronounced. Post-revolutionary censure, nineteenth-century concentration on modern state institutions, and twentieth-century emancipatory social history allowed the anachronistic view of the royal household as an apolitical environment to survive into the last decades of the twentieth century.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, popular biographical or anecdotal works on royalty produced on the fringes of academic history never failed to attract wider audiences. Moreover, and more importantly, historians of the visual arts and architecture necessarily acknowledged the court and its artistic setting as a theme for research. During the early modern age, numerous works of art were commissioned by the court and often created at court. In the course of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, princely collections and palaces throughout Europe formed the basis for museums. The artistic heritage of court life has been essential for historians of art and architecture; the same holds true for students of literary genres or performing arts created in courtly contexts. The artistic production of courts, carefully described in many studies, was understood mostly as princely propaganda or repraesentatio maiestatis: as a show of splendour and power intended to impress the population at large or more distant European fellow monarchs. Apart from some pioneering studies, more questioning or wider social perspectives on court art arose only in the 1980s, coinciding with a waxing interest in the court among historians.⁵

While art historians examined the relationship between court artists and the princely patrons commissioning their work, anthropologists had been using similar terminology to indicate a social pattern connecting patrons and clients prevalent in premodern societies.⁶ This hierarchical relationship, called patronage or clientage, depended on long-standing mutual loyalties and a clear expectation of reciprocal exchange of services. Patrons offered protection, recommendation, and advancement: the term patronage originally referred to ‘the right to present a member of the clergy to a particular ecclesiastical benefice or living’.⁷ Clients served the local interests of their patrons in various ways, depending on their status and potential. The patron could reward only a minority among his clients while the latter were expected to serve without demanding immediate returns. Clients demonstrated their loyalty by sending gifts, accompanied by polite letters openly or tacitly asking for favours.
—such letters abound in the private archives of high noblemen. In the early modern context, leading courtiers were the typical patrons, the ideal intermediaries or brokers between the local setup and the central court. Their connections extended beyond their own noble family networks, including lesser nobles as well as robe officeholders and local connections from all social layers. This ‘system’ of patronage was rarely formalized in the sense that clients were prevented from changing their allegiances, but it nevertheless showed remarkable continuity over time. Patronage networks were strengthened by artificial family ties such as godfathership or the incorporation of clients’ children into the household of the noble patron to be educated in the ways of the world. Patronage, whether viewed as the commissioning of works of art, as the rights of nomination enjoyed by the ruler and the higher echelons of officeholders, or as the anthropological term denoting long-lasting connections between patrons and clients, would retain a marked position in the history of the court from the 1980s onwards.  

Anthropological concepts and views gained influence on the study of court and rulership in at least two other fields: ritual and ritual kingship. Anthropologists examining the power of ritual in cultures outside Europe showed how specific rites helped in carrying through major transformations. Through the combination of dance, music, endless repetition, and sometimes drugs, these shared trance-like experiences could solve conflict, strengthen bonds, and both perform and engender political or social change. This anthropological view of highly significant ritual sharply contrasted with the traditional interpretation of European ceremony as a sterile demonstration of rank and protocol unworthy of serious scholarship. However, ceremonies at court did tend to occur during moments of transformation, reconfiguring political relationships, and bringing together participants from different groups. Could they have been more important than most earlier historians had imagined? 

Equally disturbing questions arose from the study of ritual kingship. Typically, when kings were elevated to near-divine positions, they were at the same time severely restricted in their personal freedom: the position was all-powerful, yet the person remained quite vulnerable. Both the upbringing of aspirant rulers and the show of power created around them burdened and pressured the incumbents. Incompetent or morally flawed behaviour on the king’s part was thought to have serious consequences, and rulers could be intimidated into passivity, a posture neatly fitting their role as aloof divinities. This paradoxical situation tended to empower the figures organizing the daily life of the ruler who more than all others witnessed the vulnerability of their supreme leader. The parallel with the ‘absolute’ kings of the early modern age, subject to increasing ritual demands and often described as silent as well as constrained, would soon be explored. Here, too, the tension between person and position seems obvious. Louis XIV himself, in the memoirs written for the education of his son, concluded that ‘those who are closest to the sovereign, are the first to profit from his weakness.’

In the 1960s these influences were gradually providing the groundwork for a fresh examination of the dynastic court. However, in a single stroke the German sociologist Norbert Elias changed the situation. His Die höfische Gesellschaft (The Court Society) (1969) raises the question why the court became so important in the early modern age: which social or political functions did it fulfill? Elias’s persuasive answer, based largely on his reading of Louis XIV’s Versailles, would serve as a general explanation for the early modern European court until the 1990s and therefore needs to be rendered here at some length.

Following a consensus among earlier historians, Elias argued that nobles in sixteenth-century Europe were in a difficult position, with an emerging mercenary infantry army undermining their prominent military role and long-term inflation reducing their income from fixed land rents while simultaneously pushing up their costs. Hoping to improve their situation through court employment and preferment, nobles moved from their estates in the provinces into the orbit of the royal court. At court, high standards of display and consumption made them ever more dependent on the royal bounty. The king, moreover, stimulated competition among noblemen by introducing many privileges and distinctions, coveted by the swarm of contending nobles. Any nobleman who was allowed to present to the king the nightshirt or candlestick during the public moments at the bedside, in the evening or the morning (coucher and lever respectively), could expect to see his ranking at court rise steeply. Elias aptly compared this to the stock exchange, where the value of a share rises whenever the buyers anticipate windfall profits. The king’s grace immediately raised a person’s status in the eyes of other courtiers. Manipulating prestige and rank through such subtle means, the king could rule by fixing noble claimants to power in mutual competition.
Fomenting rivalry between the two leading elites, the old ‘sword’ nobility and its younger ‘robe’ rival rising to power through service in government, the king used both as he saw fit. In the end, the expanding courts of the early modern age, Elias concluded, can be seen as ‘gilded cages’, transforming the nobility from a regionalized power elite into a caste of palace-bound honorary servants, losing power while priding themselves on their refined social mores. The robe servants, in the meantime, helped the king to construct a powerful bureaucracy. In the end, the ‘absolute’ state emerged triumphant. Elias gave a specific purpose to court life: bringing together and ‘domesticating’ the powerful nobles of the realm. The court, first and foremost, was an instrument to control and transform elites through manipulation rather than brute force. The political relevance of the court, then, Elias argued, was that it gradually rendered powerless noble grandees, compensating them with prestigious sinecures devoid of political bearing. Noble warriors had become suave courtiers, a change Elias viewed as a prime example of the ‘civilising process’ he elaborated in other works.¹²

Elias’s work, conceived in the early 1930s, first published in German (1969) but rapidly translated into French (1974) and a decade later into English (1984), towers over the first generation of new court history emerging between 1970 and 1990. His influence, however, was strongest on the European continent. In the very years Elias’s model dictated the research agenda of numerous continental historians, a revision of the study of monarchy and ‘absolutism’ took shape mostly among British and American historians.¹³ Their revised understanding of monarchy left more room for compromise and elite power than did Elias’s classic view. In the English setting, where the study of the court had never been entirely abandoned, the single most influential rival approach to Elias appeared.¹⁴ David Starkey, in a debate on the nature of the Tudor polity, underlined the relevance of access to and intimacy with the ruler in addition to formalized positions of political power in the expanding apparatus of the state. Domestic office allowed frequent access and hence provided opportunities to gain the ruler’s confidence.¹⁵ The (p. 447) notion of access as an important political advantage fits perfectly the patronage-based view of politics: serving in the king’s proximity made it easy to unobtrusively advocate the nomination of friends and followers. What had seemed largely irrelevant in political terms in an earlier generation now appeared as an essential part of the political process, supplementing and complicating formal decision making in the council. Moreover, this view sharply contradicted Elias’s anachronistic assumption that the supreme domestic servants, the closest companions of the ruler, were essentially powerless. The tension between these two conflicting approaches became visible only gradually, when the continental European and the British–American students of court and monarchy were brought together.¹⁶

Elias deserves pride of place as a founding father of court history. Many of his lucid observations are still entirely relevant; his key assumptions, moreover, have been effective in engendering critical research. Anthropological views of ritual called into question Elias’s almost entirely instrumental and secular view of court ceremony: did ceremony only serve the ruler’s worldly power, or did it reflect an ingrained hierarchical and religious mentality?¹⁷ A rich revisionist literature on kingship and elites, itself partly based on anthropological models of patronage and power, cast doubt on Elias’s wholly traditional view of ‘absolute’ monarchy. Starkey’s equation of access and power uncovered a fundamental flaw in Elias’s reasoning and raised important questions about the nature of early modern politics. The productive tensions between these views spawned a new generation of court historians, more sceptical about Elias’s key assumptions and sources. Losing standing among historians, Elias’s model retains more influence in neighbouring disciplines such as art history. Typically, discussions of the court in other ages, or in a global perspective, also tend to start with his persuasive though misleading set of cohering assumptions.¹⁸

Elias’s claims relied mostly on the rich literary legacy of the court. Courtiers, diplomats, and more distant observers of court life put into writing their impressions. Writers were commissioned to describe the splendour of festivals or the dignified procedure of ceremonies. Later authors systematically gathered and glossed such descriptions.¹⁹ These compilations convey a world of undisturbed order and grandeur that was only rarely matched in practice. Indeed, the printed literary legacy more often than not represents a stylized image rather than a description of the court. Two profoundly influential examples may elucidate this point. Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier, portraying a spirited dialogue at the court of Urbino, was loosely based on an actual coincidental meeting of elite figures from several courts—notably from the following of Pope Julius II. The book was accepted by contemporaries as setting new standards for court life, but it never approximated actual practice at court: a literary ideal became the classic vignette of Renaissance court life. Likewise, the multi-volume memoirs of the Duke of Saint-Simon, habitué of Versailles under Louis XIV, thanks to their crisp detail and literary quality, have dominated
the history of the French court. It has long since become clear that the duke’s memoirs are carefully redacted and often extremely biased, the very opposite of an impromptu diary. Saint-Simon, the son of one of Louis XIII’s court favourites, alienated his royal patron by leaving the army at an early stage. This undermined his hopes of a career at court. The duke took revenge in his memoirs, turning his personal experiences into a tragic depiction of the decline and fall of true nobility under Louis XIV, a view readily taken up by Elias.

Literary works provide easily accessible, attractive as well as outspoken interpretations of the court. However, they fail to convey information on many of the most basic aspects of court life. An increasing number of studies using archival series generated by the royal household have been attacking this deficiency, fundamentally changing our view of the early modern court in the process. This long overdue reconstruction of the court inevitably led to a re-assessment of its political, cultural, and economic functions. The role of women at court, previously confined largely to anecdotal dramatized stories about queens and mistresses, likewise has become far more visible. The following paragraphs present an outline of the results of research on the court in the last two decades.

The Reconstruction of an Institution

Numbers: Waxing and Waning of the Court

The variable nature of the court makes it very difficult to estimate numbers. During the seasonal outings of rulers to their hunting lodges, numbers were reduced. Servants and administrators were left behind in the urban winter residence, noble attendants retired to their country estates or engaged in warfare—itself a seasonal activity throughout the early modern age. On the other hand, the great occasions of court life were likely to attract numerous and mixed companies. Eyewitnesses describing court festivities report immense numbers of people, easily exceeding 10,000. The imperial court assembling for elections and coronations consisted of the travelling and hence reduced retinues of electors and other leading rulers of the empire, plus the incumbent emperor’s or the emperor-elect’s following. For Leopold I’s coronation in 1658 these retinues alone together numbered around 3,500 persons. However, the population of the city of Frankfurt, the venue for most elections and coronations in the early modern age, rose from around 25,000 inhabitants to c. 70,000 persons during the elections of 1790 and 1792. These 45,000 additional persons clearly cannot be seen as ‘courtiers’, yet they were attracted to the city by the presence of the court as spectators or in search of employment.

Reports by impressed visitors suggest inflated numbers. Conversely, administrative registers intended to control expenditure or organize accommodation (payrolls and quartering lists) represent a minimum only of court attendance: the core of people paid, fed, and lodged by the court at any particular moment in time. The contrasting perspectives of these different sources explain the extremely varied estimates circulating in the literature on the court. The point to keep in mind here is that numbers can be established properly only if they are connected to specific moments of court life as well as to specific sources.

Some trends can be established beyond doubt. The available court records unequivocally suggest a tendency of growth from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth century. Between the starting point of growth in the later Middle Ages and the peak in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, most courts doubled or even tripled in size. Following the phase of rebellion and restoration around the 1650s, a more diverse picture emerged: some courts, notably in the Holy Roman Empire, continued or accelerated their growth, whereas others stabilized or were reduced. The Russian court, a latecomer on the European scene, underwent a process of reconstruction and expansion in this period. After the mid-century wars in the eighteenth century, acute financial pressures and increasingly critical attitudes towards courtly outlay led to reforms throughout Europe. By the 1780s almost all European courts were involved in major reductions. The nineteenth century again offers a mixed panorama, with princely households varying from reduced rump establishments to full-blown ‘reinvented’ courts.
The early phase of this development can be documented only sporadically; from the seventeenth century onwards, sources allow a more reliable estimation. The records of the core staffs of the court—table, chamber, stables, chapel, guards, and hunt—support the following crude approximation. At the apogee of the ancien régime court, Scandinavian royal courts and the main princely electoral courts in the Holy Roman Empire could be expected to employ 500 or more staff.23 The major royal courts of Europe counted more than 1,000 persons in their core services, France leading the way with c. 2,000 persons around 1700. These numbers represent a minimum, to which numerous other categories can be added: households of dynastic siblings, personal retinues of high officeholders, temporary visitors, services for government, and military units connected to the court. Some of these will be discussed at greater length later in the chapter (Figure 17.2).

Competition among near-equals was a constant factor in dynastic Europe. The expansion of one court through the introduction of new dignified court offices or fashionable services could invite similar measures among rivalling courts. The emergence of permanent diplomacy accelerated the emulation and competition among courts. However, very specific political ambitions—securing a promotion in the hierarchy of European rulers, arranging a favourable marriage, outstripping a rival—would give rise to expanding court staffs, to active palace building, and to conspicuous court entertainments. Fifteenth-century Burgundian dukes aiming for a royal crown pioneered such costly initiatives, as did Italian princes seeking promotion from the fifteenth into the eighteenth century. Their example forced others to follow suit: could the royalty of Europe consent to be bested in splendour by these princelings? Likewise, the century of expansion of court numbers as well as expenditure in the Holy Roman Empire after the Peace of Westphalia (1648) can be seen as a consequence of the competition among the electors and greater princes of the empire, exacerbated by their aspiration to be accepted as equals by the crowned heads of Europe. In these same years, however, the courts of Spain, England, and France were stabilized or reduced.

In addition to this inter-dynastic ‘prestige race’ among European monarchs, we find domestic reasons for increasing numbers. The three layers of high officeholders, honorary officers, and lesser servants were all to some extent subject to inflation of numbers. (p. 450) High positions in the household staffs were much sought after, and there is a clear tendency of differentiation and proliferation from the sixteenth century onwards. Leading offices in various staffs, the chamber in particular, were subdivided, or alternatively new offices appeared next to existing positions. This development unhinged established hierarchies and exacerbated the endemic competition among the upper ranks. On the whole, however, the exclusive upper echelons remained limited in numbers. The lower tier of non-noble court service likewise expanded throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, usually at a leisurely pace reflecting the growing service requirements and fashions of the upper echelons at court.

The sharpest oscillations in numbers can be observed in the middle layer of noble honorary office. The service of these noble servants could be arranged through a system of job rotation, with shifts of three to six months, or a full year. Service par terme, already present at the later medieval French court, had been perfected at the Burgundian court. Alternatively, honorary court office could be organized haphazardly, based on the expectation that those admitted to formal court rank would attend the highpoints of court life every now and then, without the expectation of remuneration or accommodation. Most courts included specific positions liable to inflation: stewards and serving gentlemen for the table, chamberlains in the chamber, écuyers or equerries in the stables, young noble pages in the stables and sometimes in other staffs. Nobles from respected families could expect to be admitted to these ranks; only scions of prominent families could aspire to higher ranks and offices at court. Honorary court office, for these intermediate noble ranks, was a less prestigious variant of membership in orders of chivalry, such as the Golden Fleece, the Holy Spirit, and the Garter. These honorific connections of the court
confirmed status, provided access, and were intended to generate loyalty among the nobles. Also, they established hierarchies based on nomination, enabling rulers to influence elite rankings.

Expansion of the noble honorary officers forms a recurring pattern at the late medieval and early modern court. Rulers frequently stated in ordinances and decrees that they wanted to reduce numbers at court—an ambition as general and as ineffective as modern governments’ reiterated wish to do away with ‘bureaucracy’. In practice rulers more often than not, willingly or grudgingly, accepted the inflation of honours in the ranks of honorary noble servants. Outside of the typically noble domain of honorary office, the same pattern occurred. Chaplains in the chapel and clerks in all services could experience rapid growth. The key institution of collegial royal decision making, the council, showed a similar pattern of inflation, often followed by redefinition and reduction. At the lower levels of the household, the numbers of artisans, purveyors, and labourers holding nominal membership of the court also underwent phases of rapid growth.

This systemic tendency towards inflation of honours requires an explanation. Did it reflect a conscious policy initiated by the prince? Do we see Elias’s ‘domestication’ at work here? Clearly, many nobles thought it necessary to cultivate connections with the court: obtaining a court rank through honorary service became increasingly important and court service opened vistas of social ascent. Rulers, on their part, were happy to invite prestigious figures as servants accompanying them during their public appearances. Both sides hoped to profit, yet neither was eager to pay. Indeed sometimes financial needs triggered the sale of offices or titles, and hence the inflation of ranks. In France, this became a steady practice—although court offices were never fully included in the system of venality, as they could not be sold or bought without the king’s authorization. Rulers as well as servants were often disappointed. Louis XIII complained that swelling numbers of servants disturbed rather than improved the order during table service. Conversely, even after substantial investments in costly apparel, the hopes of courtiers were more often dashed than fulfilled—for these middling noble servants, chances of preferment were slight.

Figure 17.3 shows the fluctuations of the royal household in France and the imperial household in Vienna. Behind the fluctuations a steady rise in numbers can be seen at both courts throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The following decades show diverging developments, but only after the 1660s is there a consistent contrast between a reduced and stable French court and an expanding but oscillating court in Vienna. Early in Louis XIV’s personal reign, the court was seriously curtailed. This action not only saved money: the high officeholders and the reduced numbers of noble honorary officers were restored to exclusivity. The success of the reform was exceptional also because it proved to be lasting. This reduction of numbers unequivocally was the ruler’s initiative, which cannot be said with equal confidence about the earlier phases of expansion. Under Henry III, whose ordinances were formative for the seventeenth-century French court, numbers expanded rapidly. Apparently, the great courtiers took the liberty to draw into the court their own clients. The king complained repeatedly about noble grandees appointing their own followers and stipulated that only he himself could validate appointments at court. The same pattern can be observed at Rudolf II’s Prague court in its later years. In periods of increased contestation, courtiers usurped the rights of their sovereign, bolstering their positions by showering their clients with court employment. Both Ferdinand II and Louis XIII countered the inflation of honours; both were soon to be confronted by renewed upsurges. The years around the Fronde rebellion (1648–53) in France probably show the size of the court at its peak—yet this explosion can be understood neither as a sign of royal power nor necessarily as a consequence of royal intentions.

On the contrary, the peak of the 1650s necessitated the reduction under Louis XIV in the early 1660s—the expanding court was a symptom of crisis while reform reflected re-establishment of princely power. Furthermore, Louis’s successful initiative contradicts the common notion of his ever-growing court and thoroughly complicates the idea of ‘domestication’ of
‘the’ nobility. These reductions reduced the numbers of honorary servants from the middle ranks of the nobility and dismissed many lesser servants. Some of these—musicians, artisans, and labourers among them—were subsequently hired on the basis of commission, without the status and perks of court servants. However, for the greater nobles, the court in its reduced form had again become more attractive, and the Sun King made sure the services of his loyal supporters in high court office were prestigious as well as lucrative. From the 1660s until the revolution of 1789 most of the great families of France served in high domestic office at court, close to the heart of power with a comfortable grip on the distribution of honours. The reductions served the interests of the monarchy as well as those of its principal noble servants.

Successful reforms and reductions can be found at other courts—but the results were usually short-lived. Charles I’s court, employing more than 1,800 persons, probably represents the peak of the English court. Starting out with a somewhat reduced court of more than 1,300 persons in the early 1660s Charles II found out to his dismay that the hospitality of the court tables could not be maintained at its high pre-revolution standards. After reducing numbers to around 1,200 and downsizing court hospitality, however, the Merry Monarch did his best to restore the court to its previous grandeur. His brother and successor James II changed course radically (p. 453) (Figure 17.4). In 1685 James cut 380 of the 1,160 court positions and planned many reforms at court. This stunning operation would not outlast his reign: under William and Mary the court rapidly regained its former dimensions. Following another reduction at the start of Queen Anne’s reign, the Hanoverians maintained their court at a somewhat higher and roughly constant level until a further major reform in 1782. Interestingly, the French and English courts followed roughly parallel patterns, though at different absolute levels.

Increase and decrease in numbers did not universally have the same impact on finances and on the status of court offices. The honorary noble offices particularly prone to inflation often were not even remunerated on a regular basis: these offices formalized the connection of nobles to court hierarchies without necessarily stipulating actual services or wages. Hence, while inflation could undermine exclusivity, it was not always costly for the ruler. In addition, the nature of office-holding varied between different courts. Almost universally, we see the same families on lists of servants and courtiers from generation to generation. There appears to have been great continuity in court service at all levels. However, huge differences exist in the arrangements for succession. The French court gradually moved towards venality; from the 1660s onwards many court employments were hereditary in practice. New rulers ascended to the throne while their predecessor’s courtiers and servants retained their position. A tendency towards venality and heredity was present throughout Europe, yet only in France did it reach this outspoken form. Conversely, at the Habsburg court in Vienna, in theory all staff lost their positions upon the emperor’s death. In practice, many among them could expect to be confirmed in the household of the new emperor, but (p. 454) this never became a formal right—for the highest offices, moreover, it remained the exception. Less lucky servants could still hope to find a place in the dowager-empress’ household, absorbing numerous supernumeraries from the old court. Others would be sent away, sometimes supported with lifelong pensions themselves as well as for their widows. Discharging the previous ruler’s staff not only made it possible to construct a new configuration of permanent court servants; the conferring of honorary court office, too, started anew. The consequences of the inflation of numbers, therefore, remained limited to one reign, and the advent of a new ruler could coincide with substantial change and reduction.

The expenditure on the court on the whole followed a similar pattern, with an increase in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, attempts at reform in the later seventeenth century, and more systemic as well as more drastic reforms after 1780. We still lack the basis for a comprehensive overview of the finances of the early modern European court, but some tentative observations may be ventured. Even more than the numbers of courtiers and servants, court expenditure was likely to be influenced directly by the cadence of European competition. A particularly competitive political constellation, often connected to marriage and succession rights, would lead to lavish festivities. Following the Peace of the Pyrenees (1659),
the death of Philip IV (1665), and the succession of the child-king Charles II, the shadow of the Spanish Succession hung over Europe. Lavishly celebrated marriages between Spanish heiresses Maria Teresa to Louis XIV (1660) and Margarita Teresa to Leopold I (1666) made explicit rivalling ambitions: no expense was spared in the ensuing prestige battle. Great festivities could claim a substantial share of the annual court budget—and they were often covered by extraordinary income. The construction of palaces, usually undertaken in the intermissions between wars, forms another example of extraordinary outlay. Versailles was mainly built in the decade following the Peace of Nijmegen (1678–79). Even ambitious building projects, however, rarely approached military outlay. The total expenditure on Versailles from 1664–1715, c. 91.7 million livres tournois, was the equivalent of average annual military costs during the Nine Years’ War (1688–97). During wars, military expenditure—always the first item in the budgets of early modern polities—rose rapidly. Court expenditure would be reduced to a fraction of rising total expenditure, yet it often also plummeted in absolute terms. Acute financial crisis caused the suspension of payments at court: ceremonies were downscaled and wages were left unpaid, sometimes for many years. Any longer-term overview of court expenditure, in absolute terms and as share of total expenditure, therefore, will show an extremely jagged curve, with peaks jumping up to 40 per cent and dips falling below 5 per cent of total expenditure.

Calculating the average share of court expenditure in the total state expenditure is a hazardous matter: for most countries and periods, only crude approximations are feasible. However, it seems likely that in the second half of the seventeenth century, Europe’s major monarchies spent between 10 per cent and 20 per cent of their budget on the court. The Austrian Habsburg Court absorbed an estimated 13 per cent; the French court consumed an average 18 per cent of a substantially higher budget. The royal household in Sweden absorbed 12 per cent to 18 per cent of the budget in 1693, the exact figure depending on various choices in computation. In Denmark around the same time, 12.5 per cent of the budget appears to have been the maximum rather than the average court outlay. In England, the civil list accepted in 1698 amounted to 14 per cent of total net government revenue in these years, but from this share the household usually absorbed less than 50 per cent. Court outlay in England may have been closer to 5 per cent than to 10 per cent of total expenditure, substantially lower than in major continental monarchies. Conversely, at the smaller courts in the context of the Holy Roman Empire without great military ambitions, the princely household may have absorbed a larger share of the state budget. Overall, in the eighteenth century, with mounting military costs and increasing state income, the share of the court tended to decline, but only in the last half of the eighteenth century did it consistently fall below 10 per cent. These tentative figures include not only regular household expenditure but also costs for building, special occasions, travel, and pensions.

Court and Dynasty: A Constellation of Households

Usually we consider the court as a unipolar environment, organized around a single figure, the sovereign ruler. At the same time, it rarely becomes clear how exactly women fitted into the context of service at court. Both issues can be addressed together. Courts generally included more than one domestic core, with separate households for prominent women and men in the dynasty. Mothers and spouses were served by their own staffs, including a hierarchy of women. Queen-mothers’ or dowager-empresses’ establishments could approach the full complement of the ruler’s household. Such independent dowager households were sometimes located in the same palace but more often maintained their own residence—smaller replicas of the main court. Dowager-empresses, surviving their husbands for decades, were prominent in Vienna between 1637 and 1750; during this period their households expanded from c. 250 to more than 350 persons. In France, queen-mother Anne of Austria’s household numbered 525 persons shortly before her death in 1666.

While the queen or empress too had her own household, different patterns can be observed here. First of all, a queen regnant would maintain a court wholly compatible with the male royal court, though with a female staff serving the sovereign in her chamber. Female consorts were more common than reigning queens. Dynastic reproduction and succession dictated that their apartments adjoined those of the king; hence their households as a rule occupied the same palace. Moreover, consorts did not usually employ a full household: living in the same palace, they could be served by the staffs of the male ruler. Foreign brides were accompanied by large retinues during their voyage to the court of their future husbands—yet many of their followers would be replaced by local staff within a few years. French queens were served by relatively complete households including most regular staffs, much like the dowagers. Queen Maria Teresa was served by c. 643
persons in 1660 and her following still numbered 538 persons in 1676. At most other courts, however, queens or empresses employed an extended chamber staff with minor auxiliary services only, usually less impressive than the dowagers’ establishments. Henrietta Maria, upon her marriage to Charles I, had to make do with an establishment of around 200 persons. English queen-consorts in the later seventeenth century were served by only 100 to 150 persons.

Queens regnant, dowagers, and spouses of incumbent rulers employed women in various ranks in their chamber service. This female chamber staff matched the social make-up of the staffs in the male household, including a small number of high female officeholders, more numerous noble girls or ladies-in-waiting spending some years at court as honorary servants, and a sequence of women in lesser ranks. In addition, high nobles served as male officeholders. While the chamber staffs consisted largely of women, other staffs in these female households employed only males. They followed the profile of the main household, where as a rule we find only a few isolated washerwomen in a universally male staff—although Viennese payrolls sometimes refer to ‘musicalische Weibspersohnen’ in the chapel.

The number of women serving in the independent female households rarely surpassed a few dozen. In a smaller household such as that of the empress-consorts in Vienna who employed c. 60 to 80 persons, this could represent up to one third of the total; for the more comprehensive households of dowagers or French queens, numbering several hundreds of persons, 25 per cent can be seen as an exceptional maximum, 10 per cent as a more common proportion. The share of women in the households of English consorts as well as dowagers, numbering 100 to 200 persons, must have ranged between these percentages. Looking at the court as a whole, including all households, women holding higher office or employed in menial service at court represented a very small proportion of the courtly population.

Rulers’ sons and daughters needed to be catered for, until the age of seven largely by women. These women responsible for the education of dynastic offspring were of considerable importance—they held high rank, and often retained the loyalty of their pupils. At age seven, the sons’ upbringing would be taken over by men. The heir-apparent represents a special case. More than anybody else apart from the incumbent ruler, he needed a full-scale establishment preparing his rise to power. However, a conspicuous court around an eager successor could easily turn into a rival focus of power, particularly during long reigns. In France, following Louis XIV’s succession as a young child, the successor or dauphin no longer had a separate household, but only a few menins or companions: he was served by his father’s court. In the Holy Roman Empire, where the ideal was to have the successor elected vivente imperatore, or during the lifetime of the incumbent emperor, it was necessary to gradually build up the successor’s courtly apparatus: he needed to demonstrate his status to the electors. After safeguarding the election and succession, his retinue would further expand.

A detailed breakdown of the French court in 1699 lists c. 2,000 persons in the king’s maison, yet adds almost 1,600 persons serving in the households of the king’s close relatives. His brother Philippe d’Orléans or Monsieur (1640–1701), with an 830-person court ranked first among these secondary households while another 242 persons served Monsieur’s spouse Elisabeth Charlotte von der Pfalz or Madame (1652–1722). It is telling that 1,100 persons served the king’s brother and his spouse while the ‘six ministries’, the core institutions of central government, included only c. 700 personnel. The household of the new Dauphine, Marie-Adélaïde de Savoie (1685–1712), numbered 443 persons; her spouse, Louis XIV’s grandson Louis duc de Bourgogne (1682–1712) did not have a substantial household; the same can be said about his father, Louis de France (1661–1711) Monseigneur or the Grand Dauphin. At this point, there was neither a queen-mother nor a queen—Louis XIV’s morganatic second wife Madame de Maintenon never openly adopted this role. Otherwise, the secondary households together would have easily outnumbered the staff employed in the king’s household. Other courts were far more modest in apportioning staff to secondary households, but all European polities of any size retained the principle that prominent members of the dynasty needed to be provided for. These households served as separate nuclei of patronage and employment within the larger setup of the dynastic court.

Typically, early modern rulers opened their proclamations with an impressive number of titles, detailing their numerous possessions. This listing was to some extent fictitious, representing ambition and history rather than real control. However, many European polities had a ‘composite’ character, including different territories under the rule of a single monarch. These
regions, often cultivating their own dynastic traditions and insignia, could retain a visible presence at court, either nominally by regional guard regiments or offices, or indeed as fully separate establishments. In 1517 Charles V travelled by sea from the Dutch province of Zeeland to Spain with a Burgundian household of around 600 persons; in Spain this establishment was added to the existing structures, most notably the Castilian household (Figure 17.1). On his numerous voyages, Charles must have been accompanied by at least a significant proportion of this retinue. The co-existence of Burgundian and Castilian households was confirmed in 1548, when a ‘casa de Borgoña’ was introduced for Prince Philip. The Burgundian household developed into the heart of the court under Philip II’s rule as king. Yet it was unthinkable to abolish the traditional core of the court, the ‘casa de Castilla’. In addition a smaller ‘casa de Aragón’ remained in place at the central court, temporarily complemented by a sizeable ‘casa de Portugal’ (1580–1640). At the regional level of monarchies, viceroys or governors presided over their own miniature courts, with high-ranking nobles or ideally lesser members of the ruling house in the leading role. Courts could carry on in absence of their ruler. Stadholder-king William III resided mostly in England but had a rump court in the Dutch Republic; the Hanoverian kings of Britain were welcomed in their German electorate by a court that maintained form even without the ruler. In other cases, such separate households would come to life only upon the visit of the ruler, employing a set of officers whose service usually remained limited to paper status. The Bohemian and Hungarian royal courts under the Habsburgs were sleeping establishments, virtual courts activated only for special occasions. The same holds true even for the imperial court, usually defined as ‘the emperor amidst the princes of the Empire’, a situation limited to exceptional occasions. The Kaiserhof of the incumbent emperor, manned by his regular servants in Vienna, could not claim to be the ‘imperial’ court or Reichshof.

A dynasty recognized a single figure as its leader and as the ruler of the dynastic portfolio. Under the single dynastic ruler, however, more often than not a multipolar environment of households took shape, with a marked role for women as well as younger dynastic siblings. Particularly at the extremes of long reigns, during the youth and old age of rulers, these secondary households could exert conspicuous influence, but their presence and impact need to be taken into account at all times.

**Court and City: Nobles, Commoners, and Interaction**

Beginning with Castiglione’s dialogue and ending with revolutionary diatribe, courts have been described essentially as elite environments. Elias, contending that nobles were ‘domesticated’ at court and never entering into the details of court organization, likewise conveyed the impression of a largely noble society. His critics, re-examining the rulers’ relationship with the noble elites through the prism of the court, again concentrated on the noble upper ranks. High nobles held office in the upper ranks, more numerous other nobles attended court as honorary servants, but lower levels of non-noble household service far outnumbered these upper echelons. ‘Courtiers’ in Castiglione’s sense formed only a small minority of those present at court. Lesser non-noble personnel were numerous in all staffs—on the continent particularly in the stables and in the services for the table, in England in the extended chamber staff. Not only was the court a centre of consumption, it demanded multiple services and employed many people. These services could be obtained more easily in an urban environment, and city governments were happy to accommodate this voracious employer. Urban centres were deeply influenced by the presence of the court in their midst. Purveyors, artisans, and labourers on the court’s payroll were a notable presence in court cities. Construction and renovation of palaces demanded a constant effort; skilled artisans provided the court with luxuries of many kinds. It comes as no surprise that the late sixteenth-century writer Giovanni Botero pointed to the court in his examination of the rise of great cities, ‘... it is of immeasurable assistance in making a city great and magnificent if the prince resides there’. Conversely, when a dynasty changed places this could have dire consequences for the abandoned city. The city of Versailles, after the death of the Sun King and the departure of the court, almost overnight lost most of its éclat and activity. However, even after the arrival of the new king at Versailles in 1722 the palace with its modest urban envelope would never entirely recover the position it had held in the first two decades following 1682—Paris, the nearby metropolis, had regained its primacy.

Court personnel, the numerous lesser staff as well as the limited number of high-ranking officeholders, formed a dominant presence particularly in smaller court cities. Madrid, Turin, or the numerous small court cities in the Holy Roman Empire
basically developed around the core of the court. Neither London nor Paris was ever so thoroughly dependent on the court, but even for these metropolises the presence of the ruler and his retinue had great impact. Palaces and their auxiliary buildings usually accommodated only a small minority of the court’s staff. Versailles, allowing for the accommodation of an estimated 3,000 servants and courtiers in modest lodgings, was the exception. Even here, only the happy few found a place in the palace itself: most were accommodated in the annexes. Like armies on the move, courts had long used a system of quartering, requiring villagers or town dwellers to make room in their houses as well as stables for court staff and their horses. The practice of quartering, persisting into the eighteenth century at some courts, caused endless altercations: courtiers complained about the deficiencies of their lodgings, landlords grumbled about the bad habits of their tenants as well as about the insufficient and outstanding rents. From the later seventeenth century onwards, when courts had long since adopted the practice of a protracted season in the winter residence, courtiers and servants themselves took the initiative to purchase or rent lodgings in the court city or its immediate environment, and billeting was gradually replaced by a financial compensation.

Typically, the court did not fall under the jurisdiction of urban magistrates, nor did court personnel pay urban taxes: this was a self-governing body living in the city which adhered to its own rules and was adjudicated by its own officers. The court shared this special position with other, mostly ecclesiastical, corporations. The special legal and fiscal status of the court often was a source of frustration for local authorities. The city of London successfully defended its privileges against the jurisdiction of the court of the marshal and the steward, nominally valid for everybody within the ‘verge’ or the area within twelve miles of the king’s residence. In cities where the local authorities were less effective in their negotiations with the court, the special legal and fiscal status appear to have represented a permanent temptation to household staff. Viennese court personnel engaged in profiteering, using exemptions to undersell local shopkeepers. Their illicit ad hoc taverns were a thorn in the side of urban publicans and caused numerous complaints. The pranks and misdemeanours of court staff, most commonly committed by the guards or by the noble teenage pages educated in the stables, were another cause for resentment among townspeople, particularly if the court marshal proved overly lenient in his judgement. In short, the connection between court and city, while on the whole favourable for both parties, was rarely free from strains.

A change in style of court life and its connections to the urban environment can be detected. The court gradually lost its character as the moving boarding-house of the servants of the dynasty, adopting more business-like notions of service as employment. In the course of the seventeenth century, quartering gradually became redundant; the hospitality of the court’s tables was redefined to include only a smaller upper echelon of the court. The socially diverse group of courtiers and servants, through a long process of reductions and redefinitions, became more outspokenly exclusive in its outlook. Did the dense connections between the court and city decrease in the course of the early modern age? The establishment of Versailles reduced the importance of the royal palaces in Paris and increased the distance between capital and court. Hunting lodges were built across Europe throughout the early modern age, yet this did not necessarily entail the demise of the older urban residences. More often, refurbished urban palaces retained their role as winter residences and centres of court life. The venerable Vienna Hofburg, a remarkable agglutination of buildings from seven centuries, remained the key location of the court even after the construction and embellishment of Schönbrunn. The English court from the Tudors to the Hanoverians, too, cultivated its connection to the London metropolis, notwithstanding its alternative locations. The recurring presence of the court in the city or capital engendered frequent contact with the population. To answer the question whether court and city drifted apart, we need to consider another crucial theme: court ceremony.

**From Court Ceremony to Court Culture?**

At the heart of the court stood the ruler with his domestic and state servants, yet this constellation itself was understood by contemporaries as the peak of hierarchical society as a whole. A ruler was expected to effectively establish order in his own family, among his followers, and among grandees as well as state servants. Trumpets and kettledrums alerted the public to courtly processions demonstrating the hierarchy among the participants through positions and apparel, making tangible the order of the realm at large. The court included numerous artisans and performers specialized in staging these pageants. The great ephemeral outdoor festivals, drawing in large audiences, represent the acme of court life. These highpoints were often
paid for and organized by civic or religious corporations as well as by the court. The borders between spectators and participants were not always sharply drawn—although commonly rows of guards with halberds provided a sufficiently intimidating demarcation.

Following repertories and conventions established in the course of the Middle Ages, ceremonies were organized on various recurring moments. The liturgical calendar comprising the Christmas and Easter cycles gave rise to a series of annually repeated ceremonies and processions, notably dense during Holy Week. Among numerous ceremonies, the Maundy Thursday Pedilavium stands out, staging the ruler with a select group of poor as Christ washing the feet of his disciples: this ritual, displaying piety and humility before God and originally practised by clerics, had turned into one of the most striking demonstrations of princely sovereignty. After the Reformation, mitigated forms of such religious ceremonies persisted at Protestant courts, whereas Catholic courts continued the tradition. Baroque piety reached conspicuous heights notably at the Habsburg courts from Madrid, Brussels, and Vienna to the viceregal courts in Italy and Spanish America during the seventeenth century. Other forms of ceremony remained almost equally important for Protestants and Catholics alike. 

Dynastic demography gave rise to major ceremonies: births, baptisms, birthdays, marriages, and funerals formed notable occasions for public display and interactions. Birth and death were typically transformative events for dynasties because of their connections to succession. The actual moment of the ruler’s death, always a critical stage in monarchy, gave rise to a sequence of ritualized occasions marking the changeover to a new person while underlining the continuity of the position. More often than not, this entailed an elaborate coronation with solemn formulae affirming rights and duties, and religious rites. English and French kings, following their coronation or sacre practised the royal touch, with the newly invested king as the vehicle of celestial grace healing scrofula sufferers among his ordinary subjects. The coronation is but the most illustrious form of a larger category of ceremonies reconfiguring connections between the ruler and political bodies in the realm. The opening of estates assemblies, urban entries, acts of homage or enfeoffments established, confirmed or redefined relations between the ruler and the polity, urban or regional corporations, and vassals.

To these categories of ceremony, at least two can be added where medieval examples played a less dominant role. Diplomacy hardly was a new phenomenon, but the exchange of ambassadors underwent a remarkable intensification from the sixteenth century onwards. In the process, incidental missions gradually became permanent, turning ambassadors into regular figures at the major courts of Europe. Ambassadors, as representatives of the sovereign in person, needed to be received with full honours or honores regii. A set pattern developed including a public entry followed by public and private audiences, each characterized by its own specific routines. The increasing presence of diplomats demanded a European concordance of hierarchies in courtly settings, a gradually expanding common currency of rank that triggered more orderly and formalized procedures at court. Domestic practices, likewise following medieval precedents, tended to become more dignified in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Chamber ordinances defined and limited access into the royal apartment, while conventions around dining and sleeping tended to become more reserved and formal. Indeed, it has been argued that the courts of the early modern age diminished the ceremonial interaction with their urban environments while adopting a new more flexible pattern of ceremonies organized around the rulers’ daily activities: rising, devotion, council, public dining, recreations, sleeping. At the French court, always cited as the prime example of this tendency, the relatively public nature of the ruler’s daily practices reflected a long-standing pattern, surprising outsiders because of its openness rather than because of its exclusivity or rigour. French high noblemen had successfully defended their right to stay in the king’s vicinity against Henri III’s attempts to distance himself through increasingly detailed court ordinances. The lever and coucher, arising from a medieval tradition of accessible kingship, in the end did assume a more orderly form under the last Valois king and his Bourbon successors.

French bedside conventions, however, apparently were not seen as ceremonies by contemporaries: they cannot be found either in the first printed overviews of French ceremony, or in the protocols of seventeenth-century masters of ceremonies. Neither did these guardians of ceremonial order, responsible for staging the great religious, dynastic, or political celebrations, supervise the daily practices around the ruler, which remained in the hands of the steward, chamberlain, master of the horse, and their proxies. Daily life at court became full-blown ceremony only in the formal presence of outsiders, notably ambassadors. In the later seventeenth century the example of Ludovician lever and coucher
was mimicked all over Europe, yet this fashion never led to the wholesale abolition of traditional ceremonies, nor does this inflated example of French domestic ceremony indicate that court life became wholly ‘ceremonialized’.

Ceremonial practice changed continuously, often even when rulers aimed to restore the rules of their predecessors. Permanent diplomacy and the increasing availability of descriptions of ceremony in print put pressure on courts to aim for a more dignified and ceremonial ambiance. Changing religious beliefs redefined the nature of ceremony, particularly relevant for Calvinists with their contempt for the sacraments and rituals of Popery. However, rulers’ temperaments may have been the most conspicuous motor of change. The alternation of introverted and extraverted characters caused shifts between two equally important aspects of ceremony: protecting and projecting royalty. While the Tudors had not all been equally disposed to engage with the public, Henry VIII and Elizabeth I took their appearances very seriously. James I and Charles I were less keen and their performance struck some spectators as half-hearted at best. William III and George I showed considerably less taste for interaction with the public than Charles II and George II. Personal preferences seem at least as important an explanation for these shifts than any consistent development over time. Particularly long reigns, moreover, could suggest the discontinuation of age-old ceremonies largely because many ceremonies were once-in-a-lifetime occasions concentrated in the early years of a reign, a tendency strengthened by the fact that older rulers became less mobile and tended to withdraw.

However, some popular practices were indeed discontinued. After Charles II English kings reduced and finally ended public dining as well as the royal touch, a tradition practised by French and English kings alike, claiming to heal the scrofulous through the laying on of hands. Louis XV of France, during his extramarital liaisons, refrained from the royal touch because he thought himself unfit. Louis XVI, however, renewed the practice, touching more than 2,400 ‘attested sufferers from scrofula’ following his  in 1775. Interestingly, marked examples of withdrawal were often followed by attempts to reconfigure connections. In Vienna under Maria Theresa a gradual movement can be seen from the traditionally dense religious and civic interaction between court and city to a pattern of court receptions and recreations accessible to a socially more limited but gradually expanding public of nobles and urban elites. While some of the popular occasions for contact were gradually becoming less significant, courts tended to increasingly organize entertainments for expanding elite audiences, from salon-like meetings to court opera, theatre, and incidental greater festivities. Typically, the reforming emperor Joseph II, drastically reducing many age-old religious rituals bringing together court and city, at the same time opened dynastic parks and palaces to a wider public and engaged in direct interaction with common Viennese.

Rather than presenting these changes as a linear trend of withdrawal from the medieval to the Baroque court, suspended and reversed by enlightenment and revolution, this process can be understood as the ongoing redefinition of the court itself and its relationship with the outside world. Forms and locations of interaction changed, and different audiences were involved at various times, but for European courts, consistent withdrawal was never an option. Neither, moreover, did the court in practice ever approach the stately order it aspired to. Calendars of court life, published at many courts in the eighteenth century, indicate ceremonies and festivities throughout the year: however, they also show that at most courts, these were the highpoints only of a routine that usually was less decorous and solemn. In court ordinances, instructions, and decrees regulating daily life at court from the sixteenth until the eighteenth century, endless complaints about the lack of order and decorum strike the eye. Apparently many people either forgot or disregarded the strict discipline and order stipulated in court ordinances. Competition among leading officers in each staff, and among the main staffs, was endemic at court. The principle of hierarchy whether based on descent, title, or office was never challenged, but actual rankings were permanently contested. As in any large-scale human institution, rigid prescriptions on paper would not guarantee faultless implementation. The court, bringing together numerous socially diverse groups with different agendas, was never reduced to a tableau vivant of monarchical power.

The grand ephemeral spectacles of kingship call to mind the anthropological understanding of ritual: they redefined relationships among the main protagonists while they also brought together participants and spectators in a powerful shared experience. This experience could not be reproduced for distant audiences, but texts, images, and artefacts helped to broadcast courtly splendour. Emperor Maximilian (1493–1519) used the power of print and image to ‘fabricate’ his
reputation as a ruler, and many later monarchs followed suit. Festival booklets rendered processions and banquets as they should ideally have turned out. Paintings showed rulers in full splendour, surrounded by their predecessors and relatives or watched over by benevolent celestial protectors. The work of painters such as Peter Paul Rubens and Anthonie van Dyck conveys a powerful image of early seventeenth-century court culture. The Sun King’s imposing equestrian statues, gradually appearing in urban centres throughout France, present an emblem of unbending monarchical rule.

Rulers served as patrons for a mixed company of painters, sculptors, designers, architects, musicians, actors, writers, antiquaries, scholars, and scientists. Whether they figured on the court’s payroll or received only incidental commissions, these specialists contributed enormously to the reputation of the court. By attaching established artists or scholars to the court, rulers enhanced their own status. Their interest, however, was not necessarily limited to the instrumental aspects of patronage. Numerous princes wholeheartedly performed as dancers or musicians; others composed music or enjoyed reading. They avidly shared these interests with the specialists at court, some of whom became much appreciated companions. Princely patrons sometimes developed into prince-practitioners, working together with their learned servants while trying their hand at astrology, botany, alchemy. Numerous princes eagerly collected rare objects from around the world, artfully exhibited in Kunstkammern open for elite audiences and often even for passers-by. Most courts accommodated scholars and artists, assembling libraries and collections of rarities. Some paid for laboratories and observatories. The lives and works of Tycho Brahe, Johannes Kepler, and Galileo Galilei are inextricably bound up with courts and princes, and the same can be said for numerous other great talents.

The connections with artists and scientists, dictated by the ruler’s idiosyncrasies and pastimes as well as by the consideration of reputation, gradually acquired a more systemic form that became a key characteristic of modern monarchy. Much as artisans and shopkeepers could pride themselves on the status of purveyor, artists, scholars, and scientists could be drawn into the orbit of the court by receiving some payment or pension together with membership of a court academy. From the seventeenth century onwards academies and royal societies became instruments to redefine status and rank of notable persons, now in the domain of science, scholarship, literature, and various arts. The right of a ruler—or an institution more or less controlled by the ruler, such as a royal academy—to promote the cream of any field to superior status brings to mind the principle of the orders of chivalry established from the later Middle Ages onwards. The capability to bestow badges of honour, effective only when it relied on wider social acceptance, also conferred prestige upon the ruler and the court. Royal patronage established or confirmed a nationwide ranking, which allowed royal cultural institutions to serve as benchmarks for achievement in society at large. This recurring aspect of monarchical governance persists into the contemporary world in monarchies and republics alike. The state and its agencies reward individual outstanding service and certify other institutions. This function, however, relied on the role of the court as the heart of the political setup: the daily ambiance of sovereign power as well as the theatre of decision making and political trafficking.

Politics: Court and Government

According to the classic German sociologist Max Weber, power (Macht) is the capability to make people obey on whichever grounds even against their will, whereas authority (Herrschaft) necessarily includes an element of voluntary obedience. Why do people obey their rulers? All governments rely to some extent on their potential to use physical violence, yet this capability will rarely suffice to engender long-term support. Monarchical power in the early modern age without a doubt relied first and foremost on the widely held belief that at least in principle it served the common good—much as the contemporary world sees democracy. The religious–hierarchical view of society was made visible by a splendid show of power and grandeur, which rulers from Elizabeth I to Louis XIV perceived as a key aspect of their rulership. In addition to coercion and ingrained mentalities, the expectation of rewards figures as an equally necessary underpinning for early modern monarchy—as it does more generally in any political system. Innumerable persons and institutions were tied to the court by specific advantages and privileges, and many others were keen to obtain such benefits. They were stakeholders with an interest in the continuity of the courtly polity.

At court the distribution of honours (including income, offices, and privileges as well as titles) was unmistakably a key issue
for the ruler, for courtiers, and for incidental visitors. ‘Pyramids’ of clientage under high noblemen combined dynastic, institutional, and regional connections, uniting people from several social layers in their attachment to the patron. To sustain the loyalty of their clients, patrons needed access to offices, titles, and other forms of preferment. The expanding navies and armies of the early modern age were commanded by officers who would look to the court for promotion—indeed many among them combined a military career with a court position. In addition, the monarchs of Europe had obtained control over church nominations, whether through arrangements with the Pope, or simply because they themselves had become heads of their Lutheran or Anglican Churches. Offices in regional administration, in the central institutions of government, or at court, likewise, could be acquired in the proximity of the ruler. Countless other privileges, rights, and benefices were available at court. Numerous petitioners flocked to the court as the final instance of adjudication: the ruler and his advisers usually served as the highest court of appeal. The court, hence, was a powerful magnet for all in search of promotion, reward, or justice.

The ruler, with his circle of advisers, steered the ship of state. The decisions taken by the privy council were implemented by an expanding set of institutions no longer part of the domestic setting around the ruler. While the distance between domestic service and state service increased during the early modern age, this ongoing process rarely entailed a wholesale separation in terms of location, personnel, and mentality. Financial and legal specialists went ‘out of court’ at an early stage, from the later Middle Ages onwards. Likewise, representative institutions in the body politic claimed their own spaces and rituals. The practices of monarchical government, however, ensured the entanglement of high domestic and government agents around the ruler. Meetings of ministers and key advisers with the ruler as a rule took place in the latter’s apartment—the king’s cabinet. Versailles with its wings for ministers and councils could accommodate serious administrative work in the palace building itself. While meeting in the vicinity of the king for their consultations and councils, ministers did not necessarily ply their trade in the palace: they often worked in their own houses and we find state papers in their private archives. Ministries as separate buildings, distinct from the palace as well as from the domestic setting of ministers, are largely an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century innovation. The exclusive upper councils more often than not included high nobles, sometimes combining their role as advisers with domestic office. In Vienna the high steward chaired council meetings into the eighteenth century. Even in France, where high nobles lost access to the key secretarships in the Sun King’s personal reign, the council soon again included high nobles. In the later eighteenth century, moreover, nobles regained ministerial office.

The distribution of graces was of vital interest to most people at court, a maelstrom which only a handful of disinterested spirits might avoid. Courtiers in key positions were ideally placed as patrons and brokers. The Condé princes of royal blood, for example, combined their own dynastic network with supreme office as grand maître or steward at the French court and provincial government in Burgundy, enjoying rights of nomination and recommendation in each of these spheres. Yet even the Condé and their near-equals at court were not necessarily able to affect major policy decisions involving religious choices, economic policy, and matters of war and peace. For most courtiers access to the ‘micropolitics’ of the distribution of favours was far more important as well as feasible than access to the ‘macropolitics’ of great decisions of state debated in the king’s council.

Again rulers’ varying temperaments complicate the issue. Strong figures tried to control the entire executive process, an increasingly formidable challenge even for such notable figures as Philip II of Spain or Frederick the Great of Prussia. Few rulers could hope to effectively deal with all the paperwork throughout their entire lifecycle. While such bureaucrat-kings were often tempted to withdraw from the social pressure at court as well as from the ceremonial duties of royalty, they still tended to be overburdened. The combined pressures of socializing with courtiers, ritually performing royalty, and struggling through paperwork were simply too much for most rulers. Emperor Leopold I warned his friend and ambassador in Spain Count Pötting that unending paperwork barely allowed him to rapidly scribble a few lines; elsewhere he confided to Pötting that only hunting helped to distract him from the unrelenting pressures of government. There was a more radical way out of this predicament: to adopt a first minister, an intermediary who took charge of most work as well as most deliberations. While it was common and expedient for rulers to rely mostly on a few key advisers, they took a grave risk in restricting their trust to a single person, particularly if this adviser also held high domestic office. In their rare reflections on ruling, princes themselves almost universally stress the importance of personally controlling nominations. By

(p. 466)
carefully distributing their graces, they hoped to retain the loyalty of their highest servants, often leaving the latter substantial leeway to distribute lesser dignities and offices. Rulers understood as well as any parent that a blatantly unequal allotment of advantages threatened to undermine the peace even in a well-ordered and hierarchically arranged household. ‘Favourites’ who controlled both the council and the domestic setting around the ruler monopolized access and hence patronage. Their dominance over the ruler almost invariably upset the balance among family networks and alliances at court, particularly if the favourite used his position to benefit only his own followers while withholding royal rewards from his rivals. As soon as signs of the ruler’s discomfort with the favourite started becoming visible, the tables were turned and the game could be repeated with others in power. Succumbing to the attractions of a single confidant, the ruler threatened to become the vehicle of a series of subsequent rivalling supreme servants and their ‘factions’ or loose alliances. Louis XIV’s decision to personally rule his kingdom, usually seen as a statement of ‘absolute’ power, was first and foremost a determined choice to henceforth avoid the oscillations between the regimes of minister-favourites such as Richelieu and Mazarin. This turned out to be an advantage for high nobles at court, whose hold on prestigious and lucrative offices was now consolidated.

Powerful favourites emerged throughout the history of the royal court, although there is a notable concentration in the century dominated by religious turmoil in Europe following 1550. Conspicuous favourites surfaced regularly but lesser favourites were a constant of court life: in all services daily approaching the rulers, proximity could give rise to attachment. Chamber servants form the most evident example only of a less obtrusive but often very rewarding kind of favouritism. Long reigns exacerbated the problem of favour. Children coming to power as minors were likely to be influenced strongly by their mothers as well as by their male mentors, a dominance which could end abruptly when rulers matured. Mothers, wet-nurses, governors, and youth companions, key (p. 467) presences for any young prince, often retained a close relationship with rulers who ascended to the throne as adults. In old age, no longer able to handle the daily challenges of governing, rulers tended to rely strongly on a limited circle of confidants. To these categories of favourites we must add mistresses. Often serving as maids of honour in the queen’s household, these attractive women were sometimes deliberately presented to the king by a faction hoping to strengthen its grip on the king’s bounty. If indeed the woman in question was successful in gaining the king’s undivided attention, she could easily transcend this position and become the single most powerful figure at court—a female counterpart to the minister-favourite.

Sovereign power in the early modern age was more commonly identified with men than with women. The formal apparatus of state administration was wholly male; rulers were mostly male. It is unsatisfactory, however, to portray power at court as a male domain disturbed now and then by the appearance of all-powerful mistresses. Power at court, based on access and patronage as much as on membership of formal institutions, was never solely male. Women held power at the highest level as ruling queens and empresses, temporarily boosting the roles of the ladies in their service and putting at a disadvantage male courtiers. The intervention of court ladies close to dynastic power was also solicited during the reigns of male sovereigns. Not infrequently courtiers depended on the position of their spouse for obtaining access to the court. Saint-Simon could live in one of Versailles’ coveted apartments only because his wife served as dame d’honneur to the duchesse de Berry, spouse of Louis XIV’s legitimate grandson Berry, and herself the granddaughter of the king and Madame de Montespan.

Women were an important part of the dynastic representation and acted as patrons in their own right. Surviving the perils of childbirth, women were likely to outlive their husbands. Dowagers, with their own courts and often their own financial basis, arguably were the most prevalent form of female power in dynastic contexts. The role of dowagers became conspicuously visible as well as contested during regencies, as in France under Catherine de Medici, Marie de Medici, and Anne of Austria. However, these eye-catching conflict-ridden regencies highlight roles that were structurally present in muted form throughout early modern Europe, whether or not adult male successors duly took their fathers’ places. Christine-Marie of France (1606–63) steered Savoy through a difficult decade after the death of her spouse Victor Amadeus I in 1637 and retained a marked position until her death. In the United Provinces between the death of William II (1650) and the rise to power of William III (1672), the Orange dynasty was mainly represented by Frederick-Henry’s formidable widow Amalia van Solms (1602–75). In Sweden, Hedwig Eleonora of Holsten-Gottorp (1636–1715), queen-consort of Charles X (1622–60) and queen-mother of Charles XI (1655–97), wielded power in a sequence of roles into the reign of her grandson Charles...
Examples of authoritative dowagers can be multiplied. Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* discussed at length the personal grace of the courtier but at the same time shows a keen awareness that this stylish charm could be instrumental in obtaining the ruler’s grace—he’s rewards. The redistributive potential, often stressful for the ruler, ranked among the key attractions of the court. Whether or not the ruler controlled the flow of patronage personally, all interested parties would converge around court, trying to best serve the interests of their friends and clients. No study of early modern monarchical power can leave aside the domestic setting of rulership, the relevance of access and patronage, or the notable presence of women. Conversely, no student of the court can comfortably ignore the relevance of state institutions and the machinery of decision making. Only by combining these two different but overlapping spheres can we understand the nature of political trafficking at court. The study of patronage does not necessarily downplay ideological or religious cleavages, yet it highlights the rewards of the political game. In addition, without denying the importance of formal procedure and institutions in government, it underscores the relevance of connections outside of this apparatus.

**Outlook: The Court, an Early Modern Phenomenon?**

Dynastic power dominates world history; the domestic setting of dynastic power likewise shows some remarkable continuities. Within Europe, it is possible to establish a genealogy of exemplary court life from antiquity, via Charlemagne and Byzantium to Burgundy and the Italian princely courts, finally reaching Louis XIV’s Versailles and the temporary nemesis of monarchy, the Revolution of 1789. The Carolingian legacy formed an essential part of the traditions of the Holy Roman Empire until its demise in 1806. Imposing palaces, grand ceremonies, notorious favourites and mistresses have been recorded in chronicles throughout history. Yet among the numerous conspicuous examples of court life from antiquity to the contemporary age, the courts of early modern Europe stand out for several reasons.

Between the Black Death and the French Revolution the dynastic households of Europe underwent major changes. Numbers and outlay doubled or tripled from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century. Courts still moved around from spring to autumn, but invariably cultivated a long ‘season’ in the winter residence—in or close to a city that traditionally served as capital, or would acquire this status as a consequence of the ruler’s lasting presence. Administrative institutions initially operating in the context of domestic service moved outward, developing more specialized routines and attitudes in the process. Numerous clashes cannot obscure the steady alliance that emerged in most countries between princely rule and the most successful groups among the nobles. In fact, courts played a marked role in restructuring, stabilizing, and renewing noble hierarchies. A mixture of old nobles and *hominis novi* surfaced as the court-related ruling elite. Hierarchies and connections were renewed and institutionalized through orders of chivalry, honorary court office, and the flexible system of rewards and punishments. By the later seventeenth century few nobles could pose as truly independent and sovereign local leaders. However, they recaptured at the centre what they had lost in the provinces: a large share in collegial central government, military command, provincial government, and diplomacy—all in the service of the sovereign. The shared environment of the central court now outranked by far the reduced households of noble grandees.

The ceremonial and cultural radiance of the court peaked in the early modern age: in many developments, from music and theatre to language and science, the court emerged as a key player. The court gradually became more exclusive but at no point were the connections with its social environment reduced to the upper layers only. After the peak of Baroque court life, enlightenment critique questioned aspects of court life, though without seriously undermining it. The mid-century military–fiscal crisis caused a reduction of the court and made unavoidable a wholesale re-examination of *ancien régime* structures of privilege and finance. The revolutions in America and Europe, unintended outcomes of these reforming efforts, created a new political order. The courts emerging from the fray had lost their innocence, whether they continued as before or in muted form. Napoleon, in a remarkable act of social engineering, reconfigured bits and pieces from several pre-revolutionary courts to achieve his ambitions. Nineteenth-century courts underwent new phases of palace-building and re-inventing grand ceremonies but no longer served as the single or dominant heart of the political setup. Many functions of the royal court in the meantime had been absorbed by the state. Rewards may still nominally have been awarded by royalty, but...
the redistribution of most key resources was in the hands of state institutions. In short, the early modern court, while following age-old precedents and examples, can be seen as a special case, characterized by the accelerated growth of the intertwining institutions of household and government, closely related to a redefinition of nobility. Ordinances from the Burgundians onwards show an eagerness to render the court more efficient and affordable; court practices deep into the enlightenment and arguably later display the ardent defence of acquired privileges. The clash between these two prevalent attitudes, both usually referring to the past as a Golden Age, gave rise to endless altercations that usually ended halfway in muddled compromise.

Individual rulers at times drastically changed routines at court, enforcing their own preferences. Others simply followed the guidelines proffered by their domesticas, keen to tread in the footsteps of their predecessors. Nevertheless, they were all absorbed into the structures of this remarkably flexible and long-lasting institution. The study of the court shows that, notwithstanding the force, weakness, and idiosyncrasies of rulers, some patterns will crop up time and time again. Persons in power are exposed to persisting social pressures and conventions. The understanding of such conventions and a keen eye for the agendas of the individuals in the proximity of the prince are necessary conditions to understanding the limitations inherent in the position of any dynastic ruler. The court is the key to a social history of rulership and decision making.

**Further Reading**

**Comparative Studies:**


Find this resource:


Find this resource:


Find this resource:


Find this resource:

Duindam, Jeroen, Metin Kunt, and Tulay Artan, *Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires. A Global Perspective* (Leiden; Boston, 2011), available through open access at:

http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/books/9789004206236

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Notes:


(3.) This thematic discussion of royal courts in Europe leaves out for practical reasons most of the smaller princely courts and also the important Polish–Lithuanian as well as Russian courts. The literature on these courts does not allow me to address them at the same level as the Spanish, English, French, or German courts. See generally on central and eastern Europe Thomas Dacosta Kaufmann, *Court, Cloister, City: The Art and Culture of Central Europe 1450–1800* (Chicago, 1995); on Russia (mostly in a later period) Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy* (Princeton, 1995–2000) 2 vols. and on Poland in the context of citizenship Karen Friedrich and Barbara M. Pendzich, eds., *Citizenship and Identity in a Multinational Commonwealth: Poland Lithuania in Context, 1550–1772* (Leiden, 2009).


(13.) See the reassessment of monarchy by Ronald Asch, Volume II, Chapter 14.


(17.) Geertz, *Negara*, at 132, suggests that ′Power served pomp, not pomp power′.


(19.) See the discussion of these sources in J. R. Mulyne, Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly, Margaret Shewring, eds., *Europa Triumphans. Court and Civic Festivals in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot, 2004), I–II; on the German scholars discussing ceremony in the later seventeenth century, see Miloš Vec, *Zeremonialwissenschaft im Fürstenstaat. Studien zur juristischen und politischen Theorie absolutistischer Herrschaftsrepräsentation* (Frankfurt am Main, 1998). Numerous descriptions of court festivals and the works of many compilers of ceremony can now be found online.

(20.) This becomes quite clear in the meticulous annotated edition of Saint-Simon’s *Mémoires* by A. de Boislisle and Léon Lecestre (Paris, 1879–1930), I–XLII.

(21.) On coronations and elections, as well as on the ′imperial′ versus the ′emperor′s′ court see Jeroen Duindam, ′The Habsburg Court in Vienna: Kaiserhof or Reichshof?′, in Robert Evans and Peter H. Wilson, eds., *The Holy Roman Empire 1495–1806: A European Perspective* (Boston; Leiden, 2012).

(22.) Paul Keenan, *St Petersburg and the Russian Court, 1703–1761* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2013), 65–66 on this late enlargement and its costs.

(23.) Courts in Denmark and Sweden employed around 500 persons, see Fabian Persson, *Servants of Fortune. The Swedish Court Between 1598 and 1721* (Lund, 1999), 92 and personal communications by Persson.

(24.) This table is based on materials taken from José Martínez Millán and Santiago Fernández Conti, eds., *La monarquía de Felipe II: la Casa del rey* (Madrid, 2005), 2 vols; Félix Labrador Arroyo, *La Casa Real en Portugal, 1580–1621* (Madrid, 2009); José Martínez Millán and Maria Antonietta Visceglia, eds., *La monarquía de Felipe III* (Madrid, 2006), 6 vols; José Martínez Millán and José Eloy Hortal Muñoz, eds., *La monarquía de Felipe IV* (Madrid; Polífemo, forthcoming 2013–14); José Eloy Hortal Muñoz, ′Organización de una Casa. El Libro de Veeduría de la reina Ana de Austria′, in José Martínez Millán and Maria Paula Marçal Lourenço, eds., *Las Relaciones Discretas entre las Monarquías Hispana y Portuguesa. Las Casas de las Reinas (siglos XV–XIX)* (Madrid, 2008), I, 275–309. I repeat my warmest thanks to José Eloy Hortal Muñoz for his support.


(26.) Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles*, 96.


(30.) Bucholz, ‘Introduction’, bxi; I thank Andrew Barclay for his invariably helpful answers to my repeated queries.


(33.) Duindam, Vienna and Versailles, 63–69, 85–89; Duindam, ‘Materials’ for tables and sources.

(34.) Bucholz, ‘Introduction’; Robert Bucholz and Joseph P. Ward, London. A Social and Cultural History 1550–1750 (Cambridge, 2012), 104, cite 14 per cent for the civil list in 1698; Beattie, English Court, 104–105 cites 5 per cent for court expenditure under George I; Robert Bucholz, The Augustan Court. Queen Anne and the Decline of Court Culture (Stanford, 1993), 57 cites 39 per cent as the share apportioned to the household from the civil list; 54, table 2.2 shows actual practice hovered between 29 per cent and 57 per cent in Queen Anne’s reign. Robert Bucholz kindly helped me to better understand English court finance. On Sweden see Persson, Servants of Fortune, 60; on Denmark Sebastian Olden Jørgensen, ‘State Ceremonial, Court Culture and Political Power in Early Modern Denmark, 1536–1746’, Scandinavian Journal of History, 27(2) (2002), 65–76, 72–73; Keenan, St. Petersburg and the Russian Court, 66 cites expenditure on court wages in Russia.

(35.) Duindam, ‘Materials’; Persson, Servants of Fortune, 69–70 cites 8 per cent for Sweden after 1719.


(37.) Caroline zum Kolk, ‘The Household of the Queen of France in the Sixteenth Century’, The Court Historian, 14(1) (2009), also available online at http://cour­de­france.fr/article2336.html. Zum Kolk is preparing a major study on the court of Catherine de Medici; see also Ruth Kleinman, ‘Social Dynamics at the French Court: the Household of Anne of Austria’, French Historical Studies, 16 (1990), 517–535.

(38.) See these and more details in Duindam, Vienna and Versailles, chapter 3.
(39.) Aylmer, *King’s Servants*, 27, 474; Keller, *Hofdamen*, 28–30; Caroline Hibbard kindly referred me to Aylmer’s work, Andrew Barclay provided details for the later seventeenth century, and José Eloy Hortal Muñoz for the Spanish court throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

(40.) Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles*, 78.


(54) Duindam, Vienna and Versailles, 139.

(55) Derek Beales, Joseph II. In the shadow of Maria Theresa 1741–1780 (Cambridge, 1987); Joseph II. Against the World, 1780–1790 (Cambridge, 2009); and more particularly his: ‘Joseph II, Petitions and the Public Sphere’, in Hamish Scott and Brendan Simms, eds., Cultures of Power in Europe during the Long Eighteenth Century (Cambridge, 2007), 249–268, stressing the interaction with ordinary Viennese; for a contemporary view see Anekdoten und Karakterzüge aus dem Leben Josephs des Zweiten, Römischen Kaisers (Vienna; Neuwied; Leipzig 1790), 143.


(57) In practice, however, the impact of these policies may have been less impressive, see, for example, Roger Mettam, ‘Power, Status and Precedence: Rivalries among the Provinicial Elites of Louis XIV’s France’, Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 38 (1988), 43–62; Jens Ivo Engels, Königsbilder. Sprechen, Singen und Schreiben über den französischen König in der ersten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts (Bonn, 2000); on the far more modest yet not unsuccessful Habsburg imperial image-making, see Jutta Schumann, Die andere Sonne. Kaiserbild und Medienstrategien im Zeitalter Kaiser Leopolds I (Berlin, 2003).


(63.) Horowski, *Belagerung*.


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The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History, 1350-1750: Volume II: Cultures and Power

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Abstract and Keywords

The chapter discusses recent theories on the European state-building process and explains the choice made here to present a few individual cases of state formation instead of dwelling on the general aspects of the theme. The examples selected are: 1. the Italian Renaissance State in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; 2. the Spanish composite monarchy under Philip II and Philip III, a confederation of different polities each maintaining their own legislation and separate identity under a conciliar form of government; 3. the French centralized monarchy under Richelieu and Louis XIV, entailing a discussion of the nature and limitations of absolutism; 4. the German states, with a special emphasis on Prussia, and the Austrian Monarchy from 1648 to 1790, demonstrating how the Holy Roman Empire was still a force to be reckoned with, and how absolutist tendencies interlocked with a reform movement influenced by natural law theories and enlightened ideas.

Keywords: State, governance, absolutism, composite monarchy, Italy, Spain, France, Holy Roman Empire

The Nature of Ruling Authority

The period of over 400 years considered in this chapter, from the fourteenth century to the French Revolution, is more or less coterminous with the rise of the modern European state as generally described by political historians. For a working definition of this form of political organization we need not go further than the short list of its main features provided by Charles Tilly about forty years ago, on the basis of a long scholarly tradition resting on the authority of Max Weber: '(1) it controlled a well-defined, continuous territory; (2) it was relatively centralized; (3) it was differentiated from other organizations; (4) it reinforced its claims through a tendency to acquire a monopoly over the concentrated means of physical coercion within its territory'.

This description accommodates individual Swiss cantons and Italian or German city states as well as composite monarchies and developing national states, though its applicability to federations of towns or to the Holy Roman Empire is doubtful. Tilly also reminds us that in the five centuries from about 1490 to 1990 European polities underwent a process of ‘natural selection’ which reduced them from several hundred to a bare twenty-five or thirty states, depending on the criteria adopted. His definition says nothing, however, about government or governance, that is about the concrete institutions, the channels, and the means through which state power was exerted. For example, in most European states the attributions of government were shared between ‘a lord claiming more or less consistently powers of imperium, that is the power to do justice, to collect taxes and to call men to arms’, and ‘a representative assembly known under various names—Landtagi, Parliaments, Cortes, States General etc.—and discharging a two-fold function: on one hand limiting the lord’s powers by upholding local or corporate privileges and customs; on the other hand collaborating with him in the governance of the territory, envisaged as a sort of “common good” ‘. This in turn implies the existence of a body of
customary regulations or statutes (more and more often handed down in written form), which tend to be interpreted as a bilateral contract between the ruler and other territorial forces. (p. 479) But of course representative assemblies were not the only social structures with which developing states were confronted; a haphazard list would include cities, rural communities, seigneuries, religious organizations, brotherhoods, guilds, professional colleges, universities, and kin and client networks. Most of these groups were subject to their own authorities and regulations, which functioned independently from, or were recognized by the prince. If we place ‘The Origins of the Modern State in Europe’ in the thirteenth century, as in the great project sponsored by the European Science Foundation during the 1980s and 1990s, then we must think of a phase of growth lasting around three centuries during which the state was neither fully sovereign (in Jean Bodin’s sense) nor fully monopolistic (in Max Weber’s sense).

The pluralism characteristic of the distribution of power in this initial phase can best be viewed in the field of justice, which was ‘the historical nucleus of all government’, at least as far as internal affairs were concerned. The task of the (pre-)modern state was for a long time regarded as the keeping of a just balance between its corporate components, according to the medieval notion of the precedence of right over power. The emphasis was laid on the arbitration and composition of conflicts between existing rights and privileges rather than on the making of new laws. Correlatively, the need for a unification and codification of law and of a strict conformity of judicial verdicts to legislation was only felt when the exclusive sovereignty of the state was firmly established; until then, judges were more or less free to apply general notions of equity and to refer either to a particular statute or to common law, which on the continent meant Roman and canon law, beyond the Channel ‘the law and custom of England’—though local customary usages and practices long survived the emergence of the common law. The European state up to the sixteenth century can be aptly described as a jurisdictional authority, insofar as the administrative function, covering the broad and varied ground which during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries will be included in the notion of police or Policey, was mostly left to local or particularist forms of social organization, below the level of central power.

The transition from justice to administration (or, more accurately, the addition of the administrative dimension to justice) was parallel to the transformation of the patrimonial state, or domain state, into the fiscal, or fiscal–military state, which was a consequence of the huge growth in the size of armies and in military expenditure beginning in the late Middle Ages. Tilly’s dictum that ‘war made the state, and the state made war’ may highlight only one dimension, but it is certainly a crucial element in any explanation. From the political point of view, the shift from justice to administration and the advent of the fiscal–military state can be regarded as interlocking aspects of the transition, over most of Europe, from the Ständestaat (or corporate state) to the absolutist state. Absolutism has recently attracted considerable criticism (see later in the chapter) and several scholars in the English-speaking world have expressed the opinion that we should abandon not only the concept, but the term as well; their revisionism has been paralleled in Italy and Spain by the widespread rejection (especially among micro-historians and legal historians) of the ‘modern state’ or, indeed, of the state tout court as a relevant theme in the study of the early modern period: ‘the myth of absolutism’ (p. 480) has been rejoined by ‘the ghost of the state’ in the parade of hoary clichés to be discarded by up-to-date historians. The really important question is not whether absolutism or absolute monarchy or modern state are the right terms to describe, say, Louis XIV’s France or Frederick II’s Prussia, but whether the form of state that prevailed, at least in central and western Europe, in the late seventeenth and/or eighteenth centuries was different in kind from what had come before, and not just more developed. In the following sections it will be argued that such phenomena as the virtual or effective disappearance of the estates-general or diets in France and Brandenburg–Prussia, the appointment of new state representatives of the commissar type for the control of provinces and cities, the conversion of the nobilities from opposition against the state to large-scale participation in the burdens and benefits of office in court, civil, or military careers, the increase in volume and importance of royal legislation and the tendency towards the unification and codification of law, the modernization of finance and bureaucracy—a field where the Dutch Republic and Britain led the way—the extension of government control, especially visible in the German states and in the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy, to a number of areas formerly covered by churches or local communities or private agencies, when taken altogether point to a qualitative change in the nature and scope of European political organization. Those who belittle these innovations and regard them as minor adjustments in a corporate and hierarchic society based on patronage,
clientelism, and personal relations are left with the burden of explaining how the modern state emerged fully armed in France and elsewhere from the revolutionary upheaval, and why on the other hand even the brave new world born in the nineteenth century contains such visible traces of the old habits of corruption, lawlessness, particularism, and so forth.

Anti-state revisionism is not however the only or even the dominating trend in present-day political historiography. A movement in favour of ‘bringing the state back in’ was started in 1985 by Theda Skocpol (a sociologist, significantly) whose article is one of many inspirations cited in the introduction to Thomas Ertman’s important Birth of the Leviathan: ‘The work of all these authors’, Ertman writes, ‘has drawn on the classic texts of Tocqueville, Weber, Norbert Elias, and especially those of Otto Hintze’. It is from Hintze’s article of 1930, ‘A Typology of the Representative Régimes of the West’, that Ertman draws inspiration for his ambitious attempt to explain the different outcomes of the state-building drive characteristic of late medieval and early modern Europe. Hintze divided the parliaments or ‘estates’ then existing over most of Europe into two basic forms: the ‘two-chamber’ and the ‘tricurial’ types. The former was found in the northern and eastern margins of the continent, in England, the Scandinavian countries, Poland, and Hungary; the latter in central and south-west Europe, that is in the German and Austrian states and in the Latin countries (France, the kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula, Naples, and Sicily). The difference lay not so much in the number of curiae or assemblies, since these could vary depending on historical circumstances, but in their composition: the two-chamber system, typified by the English Parliament, consisted of an upper house, comprising the higher nobility or peerage and clergy, and a lower house made up of representatives of the counties and towns; both reflected a participatory form of local government, and ‘the result was cooperative interaction across status groups at both the local and national level. . . . Where, on the other hand, local government was structured in a top-down, nonparticipatory way—as was true in Latin Europe and Germany—status-based representative assemblies remained internally divided and hence weak, and rulers were always able over the long run to push them aside and realize their absolutist designs’. A further differentiation between these countries emerged as regards administrative infrastructures, which in Poland and Hungary early acquired a patrimonial character, whereas the German states and Britain had successfully constructed proto-modern bureaucracies. The final result of all these divisions and crossing patterns, according to Ertman (whose detailed analysis of each individual case cannot be summarized here) was the classification of the polities under consideration into four interconnected categories: patrimonial absolutism (Latin Europe); bureaucratic absolutism (German states); patrimonial constitutionalism (Poland, Hungary); and bureaucratic constitutionalism (Britain, Sweden).

I have dwelt at some length on Thomas Ertman’s reconstruction of the European process of state formation since it appears to be one of the most original and ambitious attempts to formulate a comprehensive theory of the process and of its divergent outcomes in early modern Europe, though the neatness of his schemes and classifications is likely to induce some doubts in historically minded readers, perhaps inclined to consider each individual state a class unto itself. Also one wonders where, in Ertman’s plan, would be the place of the Republic of Venice or the United Provinces, or where the explanation lies for the different structure and strength of the Castilian and Aragonese cortes. This is why, in the following pages, I have given up the idea of a comprehensive or a chronological treatment of the European experience and have decided instead to concentrate on a limited number of states at different stages of their development, in the hope that the examples chosen will give at least an idea of the variety and vagaries of state formation, with special regard to the relationship between rulers and subjects and between central and local governments.

The Italian Renaissance State (Fourteenth–Fifteenth Century)

The process of state formation in late medieval Italy was beset by a number of difficulties, the most serious of which were its involvement in the clash between the two universal powers, the Church and the Empire, and the precocious and extraordinary development of communal life in the central and northern areas. It was the alliance between the papacy and the flourishing cities of Lombardy and Tuscany which, in the middle decades of the thirteenth century, defeated the most important attempt at political unification of the peninsula staged by the Hohenstaufens, who had inherited the strong feudal monarchy created by the Normans in Sicily. The thirteenth century saw the beginning of a new phase in the history of
central and northern Italy, known as the age of the signorie, (p. 482) which in most cities led to the domination of a single individual or family, often as the result of a triumph of one faction over another. The weakening of imperial power—the Holy Roman Empire exercised overlordship and claimed authority over (very broadly) the northern half of the peninsula, the area known as Reichsitalien—and the displacement of the papal court from Rome to Avignon in the fourteenth century made it easier for the new lords to establish their authority and extend their control to neighbouring towns. Whether the final outcome of the struggle for power was a principality, as in Milan or Mantua or Ferrara, or an oligarchic regime, as in Venice, Genoa, Florence, and Lucca, the general trend was towards the replacement of the dozens and dozens of city states, each consisting of an urban centre surrounded by a more or less extensive contado, with a few large or medium-sized political entities, ‘different from the former not only in size, but also for their greater stability and equilibrium, for the multiplicity of political structures they contained, for the more complex nature and disposition of social groups and “orders”’. 11

During the long period of internal strife and intercity warfare that extended from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, many signori persuaded or compelled their fellow citizens to confer on them life-titles or even hereditary ones and to acknowledge their ‘full authority’ (plenitudo potestatis), which included the power to reform local legislation. They also paid large amounts of money to be appointed imperial or papal vicars, so as to derive their authority from a higher source; even Venice, which was not subject to the empire and regarded itself as a new Rome, sought imperial recognition for its rule over the mainland in 1435. The treaty of Lodi (1454), signed by Venice on one side, Milan and Florence on the other, and the stipulation one year later of an Italian league also comprising the kingdom of Naples and the papal state, ushered in a long period of peace which lasted, with the exception of the short and inconclusive war of Ferrara between Venice and the Pope (1482–84), until the beginning of the ‘Italian wars’ in 1494–95. The political scene of the peninsula was by then dominated by five medium-sized to large states. The following remarks, however, will focus primarily upon Venice and Milan, chosen as specimens respectively of the republican and the princely state.

Federico Chabod referred precisely to this period and to this area when he gave an affirmative answer to the question posed in his famous paper of 1956, Y a-t-il un état de la Renaissance? 12 In the Italian version of this essay, he points to three ‘modern’ features of the Italian Renaissance state: permanent armies mainly consisting of mercenary infantry corps, paid out of taxation; a diplomacy which from the middle of the fifteenth century was also permanent and instrumental to the establishment of a ‘balance of power’ anticipating within narrower confines the later European equilibrium; and the growth in numbers and strength of ‘the prince’s officials: in modern terms, a state bureaucracy’. 13 The last concept is further elaborated in the French text of the 1956 paper, where we find an interesting distinction between the feudal, chivalric conception of personal allegiance to the prince and the dawning notion of public employment as a paid service to the state, a feeling already present in the Milanese bureaucracy.

The disappearance of the ‘modern state’ in most recent work on Renaissance Italy, in favour of less ideologically charged terms such as territorial or regional state, is the result (p. 483) of a new approach, which while stressing the emergence of a strong nucleus of central power—that of a prince or a dominant city—pays due attention to the role of mediation or arbitration between different forces and interests, be they those of cities and communities, of seigneurial lords, of powerful families, of factions and associations, played by the prince and his officials, and to the constant proclivity of the latter to acknowledge and legitimize existing privileges and powers, to rely on negotiation, patronage, and clientelism rather than command and repression. Even such balanced judgements, pronounced in particular by two most influential historians, Elena Fasano Guarini and Giorgio Chittolini, have seemed to younger scholars too prone to an old-fashioned image of the state and too redolent of the old Weberian prejudice, and some of them have gone so far as to call the state ‘the non-existent institution’. 14

Intentional or not, the state-building drive seems real enough when we cast a comparative look at developments in Milan and Venice. This was certainly in part the result of the need to control and integrate the new territories that each state had annexed by 1450, when both polities more or less reached the limits of their expansion. The formation of the state of Milan was a long-drawn-out affair, extending from the lordship of Azzone Visconti (1329–39) and his heirs Luchino and Giovanni (1339–64) to the reign of Gian Galeazzo Visconti, the first Duke of Milan (1385–1402). Gian Galeazzo forced Verona,
Vicenza, Padua, Feltre, and Belluno all to submit, then turned to central Italy, where he seized control of Perugia, Pisa, Siena, and other Tuscan towns; on the eve of his sudden death he looked ready for a final attack on Florence, his main rival, whose political propaganda described him as a tyrant and enemy of common liberty. The state broke up after his death, 'prey to factional in-fighting in the centre, separatist forces in the periphery, renewed activity by old aristocratic families, initiatives by powerful military men', but it was pieced together again by his son Filippo Maria (1412–47), though in a more compact form after the withdrawal from central Italy and the loss of the Veneto. Even Genoa recognized his lordship for a time (1421–35), as it was to do again in 1464–77 and 1487–99.

The main line of the Visconti dynasty died out with Filippo Maria’s death in 1447, which proved the signal, like that of his father in 1402, for a revival of particularist forces and for a new fragmentation of the state along the fault lines represented by the old borders of the city states. In Milan itself a republican government was set up by the aristocracy, but the experiment of the Repubblica Ambrosiana was short-lived as Francesco Sforza, a successful condottiero who had married a daughter of the late duke, laid siege to the city and entered it at the head of his army on 26 February 1450. Francesco quickly reconstituted his dominion through skilful negotiations with town councils and feudal lords, who recognized his authority in exchange for a confirmation of their privileges and autonomies. It is a tribute to his moderation and ability in securing the loyalty of his subjects with good words and cautious proceedings, in arbitrating between competing factions and feuding families, that when the new duke, the more despotically inclined Galeazzo Maria (1466–76), was murdered by Milanese noblemen, there was no crumbling of the state as in 1402 and 1447, although his son, Gian Galeazzo Maria, was only a child under the regency of his mother, Bona di Savoia. In 1480 his uncle Ludovico, nicknamed ‘il Moro’ (literally ‘the Black’), usurped political power by assuming the tutelage of his nephew, whose timely death in 1494, under suspicious circumstances, enabled the former to proclaim himself duke of Milan, with the agreement of the new emperor Maximilian I. Ludovico’s power was at its apex, and his court, attended by poets and artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, was one of the most splendid and luxurious in Italy. His lordship, however, rested on brittle foundations, as is shown by the numerous plots hatched by his own family and by noblemen to overthrow and kill him. In 1499, when the new king of France Louis XII laid claim to the Duchy of Milan, Ludovico was unable to put up a serious resistance and fled the state. The French domination, interrupted by a short return to power of the Sforza engineered by the Swiss in 1512–15, would last until 1521, when Charles V took hold of Milan and appointed Francesco II Sforza as a puppet duke. The title was later conferred by Charles on his son Philip of Spain.

The instability and fractiousness of the Visconti–Sforza state in the fifteenth century makes a sharp contrast to the smooth and steady course of political life inside the Republic of Venice after the critical years 1378–81, when it was attacked in its own lagoon by a Genoese fleet in alliance with Padua and Hungary. The lesson was not lost on the Venetians, whose only mainland possession so far was Treviso. After Gian Galeazzo Visconti’s death they occupied Padua, Vicenza, and Verona (1404–06), then Rovereto, Belluno, Feltre, and most of Friuli. The expansion westwards was resumed in 1423–24 after a memorable debate between the 80-year-old Doge Tommaso Mocenigo and Francesco Foscari, his successor (1423–57). During the ensuing long war with Filippo Maria Visconti the Venetian armies, led by the best condottieri of the time, seized Bergamo, Brescia, and Crema, pushing back the border between the two states to the river Adda, 30 kilometres from Milan. Though compelled to adopt a defensive strategy by the Turkish advance in the Mediterranean and in the Balkans, in subsequent decades Venice additionally annexed Ravenna and Rovigo. It had now become the strongest power in Italy, and it took the League of Cambrai, a coalition of the main European powers under the Pope’s leadership, to bring about its defeat at Agnadello (1509), followed by the temporary French and imperial occupation of most of the Terraferma.

After the peace of Lodi (1454) the mainland possessions of the Republic of Saint Mark (as Venice was known) extended over 30,000 square kilometres. The Duchy of Milan consisted of 27,000; both states were densely populated, each with some 1.3 million inhabitants. With a population of around 100,000 inhabitants each, the two capitals figured among the largest cities in Europe and were flourishing centres of manufacture and trade, while the countryside, especially in Lombardy, was in the vanguard of agricultural progress. Both the Republic and the Duchy (like the Florentine state) were the products of an aggregation of smaller towns and their contadi, but the end results of this process, their constitutions, could hardly have been more divergent.
In Milan the council assisting the signore was split by Gian Galeazzo Visconti into a Secret Council, the supreme executive and judicial body of the state, and a Council of Justice. A ‘captain of justice’ instituted in the fifteenth century was responsible for criminal proceedings throughout the territory. Another central office, called Magistrato delle entrate (revenue office), was also divided from 1389 into two separate organs, one (p. 485) for ordinary revenue and the other for extraordinary income, while a general treasurer was responsible for expenditure. Each state agency had its own chancery, dealing with correspondence and record-keeping, but a secret chancery was at the direct service of the prince. The distinction between judicial and financial business was reproduced in each of the cities conquered by the Visconti in the double presence of a podestà, a figure harking back to the communal past but now transformed into a state servant, and a referendario who watched over the collection of taxes, farmed-out duties, and gabelles, and authorized payments by the local treasurer. Commissari endowed with higher powers were sent out to places where territorial control was more difficult, while capitani del divieto were charged with repressing contraband and patrolling the countryside. Everywhere the conquests of the Visconti were followed by the construction of fortresses and military citadels, the dispatching of armed garrisons, and the reform of the statutes of newly acquired cities.

The Venetian constitution had already taken its definitive shape before this time. Its complex structure rested on a basis represented by the Maggior consiglio (Great Council), which included all the adult male members of patrician families. After the so-called serrata, or closure, of 1297–1323 (a misnomer, since the number of seats was almost doubled) the only important addition to the Great Council before the seventeenth century was the co-optation in 1381 of thirty new families in recognition of their financial help in time of war. The members of the Maggior Consiglio numbered about 2,500 at the end of the fifteenth century. Though all the appointments to public office were made or at least confirmed by this assembly, the tendency was for the centre of authority to be displaced upwards: to the Senate, composed of around 300 people including the quarantie (courts of justice); to the Signoria, consisting of the doge with his counsellors, the six savi grandi, and the three heads of the quarantie; to the Council of Ten, created in 1310 to deal with state security and progressively taking over new responsibilities; and to the avogadori del comun (state attorneys) whose presence was required for the validity of every political assembly. All the politically relevant posts were strictly reserved for the patricians and were of short duration, the only ones conferred for life being those of doge and procuratori di San Marco (a mainly honorary title). A peculiar feature of the Venetian constitution, and of the social order it reflected, was the existence of a second rank of privileged citizens, the cittadini originari, with exclusive access to public offices at non-political levels, such as those of secretaries or accountants. The annexation by the Venetian republic, in only two or three decades (1404–28), of a large part of northern Italy, reaching as far the rivers Adda and Po, in addition to its extensive sea empire, brought few changes in the constitution, apart from the growth in the power of the Council of Ten and the creation of specialized magistracies: for example the auditori nuovi, a court of appeal for suits started in the terraferma. By the end of the fifteenth century the Great Council was electing to 831 posts, 550 of them in the city itself.

Unlike Florence or Milan, the Venetian government generally respected local legislation and the control each city exercised over its district; but they appointed governors (rettori) to oversee judicial and financial administration and to report to the Senate and Council of Ten. In time the total exclusion of terraferma aristocracies from (p. 486) political responsibilities was to become a cause of weakness and fragility for the republic of Saint Mark; but until the disaster of Agnadello (1509) this weakness was concealed behind a facade of prosperity and power; the Venetian state revenue was three times that of its main Italian competitors, Milan and Florence. Venice may not have been ‘the best-governed place in the world’ down to the eighteenth century, as stated a little too enthusiastically by Samuel Finer, captivated like so many other students by the myth surrounding its constitution. But his praise was in part at least justified if one thinks of the loyalty and pride of its citizens of all classes, of the high standard of living they enjoyed, and of the splendour of public ritual. Life in the subject towns and especially in the countryside, however, was another matter. The persistent ‘separateness’ between the terraferma and the dominant city owed much to the incompatibility of the two respective law systems: one, that of Venice, a city outside the borders of the empire, based on custom, natural reason, and equity, the other on local statutes, jurisprudence, and Roman law. This disparity did not exist in the Duchy of Milan, where the colleges of licensed jurists existing in each town, including the capital, not only monopolized local consilia and appeals, but supplied a high proportion of state magistrates and
counsellors.

In Venice as in other republican states (Florence and Genoa), where power was wielded primarily by the city’s dominant aristocracy, rising expenses were at first met primarily by recourse to forced loans, and these came to be seen as sound investments since regular payment of interest was guaranteed by governments in which creditors themselves or their families had a stake; in the mid-fifteenth century ‘cycles of war spending and forced loans, in use there since the thirteenth century to fund extraordinary expenditure, had so inflated the republic’s consolidated debt as to destroy confidence and impose a pause in forced loans’. This led to the introduction of regular direct taxation, first in the terraferma, and then in Venice itself (1463). Direct taxes also existed in the state of Milan in various forms. The Visconti and the Sforza, on the other hand, failed to convince or coerce wealthy Milanese to lend their money to the state and were reduced, especially after the death of Francesco in 1466, to the desperate measure of selling offices and public revenues, which of course led to new or heavier taxes. These sales often included the grant of feudal jurisdictions and privileges to locally powerful families, and thus further undermined the state’s authority in the provinces, although a decree enacted in 1441 established the superiority of urban courts over seigneurial justices. It is worth mentioning that feudal jurisdictions were rare and far between in the Venetian mainland with the exception of Friuli, significantly also the only area in north-central Italy where a three-curia parliament of the German type existed. The lack of close ties with a feudal hinterland and the exclusive absorption in trade and seafaring of the ruling class in the early history of Venice largely explains the absence of conflicts and factional strife of the type so frequent in the rest of northern and central Italy, including some terraferma districts. Fiefs and rural seigneuries were very common, on the contrary, in the Duchy of Milan, where the dukes had made large use of feudal investitures to secure the loyalty of local potentates or to reward clients and followers.

The different attitudes of governments and bureaucracies in the two states under examination are related to different relationships between state and society. The Venetian ruling class tended to interpret their service to the state as a political and not a bureaucratic one; very few of them, for example, studied law or became experts in some other field of knowledge, whereas jurists were prominent in all branches of the Milanese state apparatus; one reason for this was the mixture of administrative and judicial function in a great number of offices, another was the lawyers’ ability to interpret legislation and dovetail it to the needs of the lord or oligarchy in power, in other words ‘to serve a variety of masters’. Commissari, vicarii, and podestà were almost invariably of Florentine or Venetian origin in the two republics, while in the state of Milan they often came from other provinces or from abroad, the main requisite being their personal loyalty to the reigning duke; the judges and notaries accompanying them, on the other hand, were often recruited locally and from lower social strata. In all three states most offices were temporary; most holders of such offices were subject to sindacato at the end of their mandate, a practice unknown outside Italy and Spain and consisting in a routine investigation of the officer’s conduct at the end of his tenure by central magistracies or special authorities. Salaries were low and irregularly paid; officials often earned more from their percentages on the fines they imposed and other perquisites to say nothing, of course, of bribes and extortion.

Officers appointed in the provinces were often confronted with accusations of malpractice or abuse brought to the central government, with acts of disrespect and disobedience or even with threats and physical attacks, especially where they had to deal with embattled local factions. Chittolini’s essay on ‘the officer’s honour’ rehearses a great number of such occurrences in the state of Milan. Factionalism was rife in Cremona, Parma, Piacenza, Pavia, Tortona, and Alessandria. These alignments might still bear the names of Guelphs and Ghibellines, although reference to the Empire on one side, to a French (rather than Church) party on the other was now vague and superficial. In some cases the parties or squadre were more than two; there were three in Cremona, four in Parma, five and later four in Piacenza. Although they were led by powerful seigneurial families, they consisted of vertical associations resting on kin or clientelism and extending to the base of urban and rural society. Like the Genoese alberghi, the squadre were often officially recognized and determined or influenced not only the composition of local councils, but also the attitudes of podestà and commissari representing the central government. The evidence collected by Marco Gentile in his study of the Parmesan factions suggests ‘that the dealings of the Sforza government with the squadre implied their legitimation’.

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The example of the *squadre* is significant of a more general limitation upon princely power in Renaissance Italy, which became evident when its holder had recourse to force, rather than to negotiation and compromise, in order to impose his will on recalcitrant subjects or on largely self-governing cities. Two lessons could be drawn from these events: first, that in the circumstances obtaining in north and central Italy state-building could not root out particularism, but had to come to terms with it, especially in the form of ‘a kind of division and complementarity of functions and powers’ between regional governments and cities, ‘along the lines of the ancient contract under which urban centres had submitted to the authority of a *dominus* in exchange for a safer and more stable (p. 488) political order’; second, the second lesson was that, given such premises, a republican or, rather, oligarchic constitution was better equipped to last and weather storms than a self-styled ‘absolute’ government—not only because it was not exposed to periodical succession crises, but because the dominant aristocracies were more in tune, in spite of all possible grudges and resentments, with the deep-seated feelings and interests of lesser nobilities. The outcome of the Italian wars was soon to bear proof of this seemingly paradoxical conclusion. While the state of Milan disappeared as an independent entity and became a satellite first of French power, then of the Spanish composite monarchy, the republic of Venice staged a quick recovery from the defeat of Agnadello and survived for three more centuries as a celebrated model of political stability and ‘mixed’ government.

**The Spanish Composite Monarchy (1556–1621)**

Ever since the marriage of Isabel of Castile to Ferdinand of Aragon in 1469, Spain had been a composite monarchy, in the sense made popular by Sir John Elliott and by H. G. Koenigsberger before him: a collection of kingdoms and other polities, each with their own legislation and institutions, mostly with their own language, which were united only in the person of their sovereign, who reigned over each with a different title. Spain itself consisted of the union of the two crowns of Castile and Aragon, the latter in turn composed of the three self-governing principalities of Aragon, Catalonia, and Valencia. The Mediterranean expansion of the Aragonese monarchy had led to the annexation, between the late thirteenth and the mid-fifteenth centuries, of Sicily, Sardinia, and Naples. The control of the Iberian peninsula by the Catholic monarchs was later rounded off with the conquest of Granada, the last Arab stronghold on Spanish soil (1492), and of the Pyrenean kingdom of Navarre (1512).

This expansion continued under Charles V (Charles I as King of Spain, 1517–56), who secured possession of the state of Milan in 1521 and acquired a huge American empire thanks to the efforts of the *conquistadores*. After the peace of Augsburg with the German Protestants (1555) Charles V abdicated all his dominions, which were divided between his brother Ferdinand and his son Philip II: Ferdinand was crowned emperor and ruled over the Austrian hereditary territories, Bohemia and Hungary; Philip inherited the Spanish Monarchy with all its European and American possessions. In 1554 Charles had arranged his son’s marriage with Mary Tudor, queen of England, but she died childless four years later, and any hopes of a permanent union between England and Spain were thus dashed. However, all the other Spanish possessions in Europe and the New World—consisting of the Netherlands and Franche-Comté, the Duchy of Milan and the kingdoms of Naples, Sicily, and Sardinia, plus a string of coastal towns and fortresses in southern Tuscany (*Stato dei Presidi*), and beyond the Atlantic the immense viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru—were guaranteed by the peace of Cateau Cambrésis, which in 1559 put an end to (p. 489) half a century of warfare between Spain and France. Thereafter, and till the end of the century, France was preoccupied with the religious wars that raged inside her territory and was therefore unable to challenge Spanish hegemony. The main threats to Philip II came from the north: the revolt of the Netherlands, begun in 1566, led to the permanent loss of the seven northern provinces, while the expedition of the Invincible Armada, designed in 1588 to punish England, among other things, for the support given to the Dutch rebels, ended in disaster. In the Mediterranean, however, the Spaniards were more successful: as leaders of a Holy League, they scored a resounding, though inconclusive, victory at Lepanto against the Turks (1571), and in 1580 the extinction of the Avis dynasty in Lisbon enabled Philip II to add Portugal (with all its colonies in Africa and America) to his other territories.

Unlike his cosmopolitan father, who had spent most of his life travelling from one part to another of his empire, Philip was by
birth, education, and temperament a true Castilian. Only rarely, and for short periods, did he leave Madrid after choosing it as his capital in 1561. From his palace of Alcázar, or later from his summer residence of Escorial, the rey papelero directed the affairs of his immense Monarchy, reading letters, reports, and consultus, receiving foreign ambassadors and counsellors, instructing his secretaries to put into words his decisions, which his subjects, because of distances and bureaucratic delays, would know weeks, months, or even years later. The system of councils presiding over the various territories and branches of the administration was a direct consequence of the confederative structure of the Monarchy. Although a few councils were already in place by the end of the fifteenth century, such as the Councils of Castile and Aragon and the Council of the Inquisition, a general reorganization of government was undertaken by Grand Chancellor Mercurino da Gattinara in 1522–24, after his return with his master from Germany to Spain. A Council of State was set up as a small group of trusted counsellors with whom the emperor would discuss the most important affairs, especially concerning foreign policy. Beside it (or below it) were erected a Council of War (1522), a Council of Hacienda or finance (1523), and a Council of the Indies (1524). New organs took shape under Philip II: the Councils of Italy (1556–59), of Portugal (1580), and of Flanders (1588).

With the Camara de Castilla, raised to council status in 1588 and entrusted with church matters and with judicial and administrative appointments, the number of councils rose to thirteen. The traditional distinction between departmental councils and territorial councils has been replaced by Feliciano Barrios with a three-fold subdivision: 1) departmental councils, competent for the whole Monarchy (State, War, Inquisition); 2) territorial councils (Castile, Camara de Castilla, Aragon, Indies, Italy, Portugal, and Flanders); and 3) departmental councils whose action was limited to Castile: military orders (the three great orders of Alcántara, Calatrava, and Santiago, placed under the authority of the Crown since 1495), Cruzada (a levy on the Castilian clergy authorized by the Pope), and Hacienda.

All the councils were resident at the court, all were composed of a president (except those of State and War, chaired by the king himself) and of a varying number of counsellors and regents. The latter title was usually borne by representatives of the country or countries for which the council was responsible; the Council of Italy, for example, as a rule included one or two jurists from each of the territories concerned (Sicily, Sardinia, Naples, and Milan). Aragon was privileged in this respect, since its council, apart from the treasurer, was entirely composed of natives from the kingdoms concerned. The same distinction was granted to the Council of Portugal in 1580. Territorial Councils thus ‘were much more than mere administrative organs in that they also fulfilled some of the essential functions of representative bodies’. The regents from Italian states, in particular, acted in accordance with the respective ruling classes, from which they were chosen, to maintain and increase traditional privileges and autonomies. ‘The long-standing presence at court of Sicilian, Neapolitan and Milanese letrados as counsellors of the monarch clearly reflected the intention of keeping the government of Italian provinces within the juridical bounds of each territory. It was a way of acknowledging and confirming the individuality of the various Italian dominions, by connecting local magistracies with the Court and ensuring their participation in the taking of decisions.’

Only late in the century did the system begin to work properly. The Council of War, for example, rarely met under Charles V, and sixty years after its foundation was still lacking an internal organization and a precise place in the structure of government. Of the Council of Italy its president, Gaspar de Kuiroga, wrote in 1567 that ‘the only signs of its existence have come from the person of its secretary, Don Diego de Vargas, while the other members were unaware of their own appointment and ignored the instructions given to the Council and its secretary’. The hispanization of the government under Philip II was reflected in the growing importance of the Council of Castile, described by Janine Fayard as ‘a sovereign court of justice, a high administrative tribunal, a bastion of the law’ all combined in one. A peculiarity of Spain was the strict control which the Monarchy exercised over the tribunal of the Inquisition, established in 1478 with the Pope’s consent and subjected in 1487 to the Consejo de la Suprema y General Inquisición. Aimed at first against the conversos, New Christians suspected of secret allegiance to their old faith, Jewish or Muslim, it later became the most efficient and ruthless tool for the suppression of Protestantism in all its varieties, both in Spain and in its European and American dominions, with the exclusion of Naples and Milan which successfully resisted its establishment. But it could also be used as a weapon against political opposition, given the close identification of political with religious loyalty in the Spanish Monarchy. There is no doubt that the Spanish Inquisition, with its score of tribunals and its 20,000 familares scattered all over the country, thrived on the national obsession with religious and ethnic purity (limpieza de sangre). The secrecy of its proceedings, the
terror it struck into its victims and the population at large, and the severity of the punishments it dealt out have sometimes been exaggerated; but recent attempts at rehabilitation sound unconvincing, and anyway this ‘peculiar institution’ is responsible for the enduring confusion of the religious with the political sphere so typical of Spain.

Each Council received a constant stream of petitions, complaints, letters, and reports from viceroys and governors. Its members expressed their views on the subject under consideration, and their opinions were all summarized in a consulta drafted by the secretary and then presented to the king. After taking advice if he deemed it necessary, the king made his decision known, mostly in the form of a written statement on the margin of the (p. 491) consulta; this was then returned to the competent Council, whose secretary drafted a letter, to be signed by the king and sent to the viceroy or governor concerned or to other interested parties. As Elliott notes, the system ‘solved the problem of maintaining central control over distant proconsuls, but only at the expense of stultifying prompt administrative action’; and this slowness was sometimes made worse by Philip II’s and his successors’ indecisiveness. There were nine viceroys at the end of the sixteenth century, usually appointed for three years in Aragon, Catalonia, Valencia, Navarre, Sicily, Sardinia, Naples, New Spain, and Peru), and only two governors (Milan, the Netherlands). These posts were usually reserved for members of the highest Castilian aristocracy (the Grandees, a new rank instituted by Charles V) or even (especially in the case of the Netherlands) of the royal family; the same was true of embassies and military commands. Both Charles V and Philip II, however, drew most of their closest collaborators from the lesser nobility or the middle classes. As the century wore on, their background became predominantly Iberian, fewer and fewer foreigners succeeding in winning the confidence of the monarch in the way Chèvres or Gattinara had done in the 1510s and 1520s.

The government’s relationship with the provincial representative institutions revealed the significant differences between the various territories which made up the Spanish Monarchy. The Castilian cortes were frequently summoned by Charles V to vote extraordinary contributions called servicios, whereas alcabala, an indirect tax on sales of all kinds, was levied after 1519 as a fixed sum and therefore required no further approval. Since the nobility and clergy were exempt from servicios, they no longer sent representatives to the cortes, whose only participants were the procuradores of the main towns. Though not abolished de facto as the Estates-General were in France, the Castilian cortes did not represent a serious obstacle to royal authority, and in 1598 for instance voted meekly in favour of a new indirect tax known as the millones. Of a very different nature were the cortes existing in all the three kingdoms of the Crown of Aragon, which not only consisted of three chambers (those of Aragon, indeed, had four since the nobility were divided into two assemblies), but also appointed permanent delegations, and always put up a stout resistance against any attempt to change their constitutions and to attack their privileges.

The first half of Philip II’s reign was marked by the struggle for supremacy between two court factions: the first was represented at the highest level by a great nobleman, Fernando Álvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alba, and by the Inquisitor-General Hernando de Valdés, and was more nationalist in outlook and more intransigent in religious matters; the second, often regarded as more cosmopolitan and open-minded, was led by the smooth Portuguese Ruy Gómez de Silva, prince of Eboli, and after his death (1573) by the powerful secretary Antonio Pérez, who in 1566 had succeeded his father Gonzalo. The two factions fought each other over ascendancy with the king and control of patronage, but they also stood for different policies with relation to the Dutch Revolt, Alba and his associates advocating ruthless repressive measures against the conciliatory attitude adopted by their adversaries. The successive failure of both policies in the Netherlands and the fall from favour of Pérez (1579) finally threw both factions into a state of disarray. A remedy of sorts to factional infighting and to the excessive slowness of conciliar government was found, in the last fifteen years of Philip’s reign, in the appointment of (p. 492) special commissions or juntas, composed of a small number of ministers and acting outside formal procedures, to deal with emergencies and special problems; these commissions were usually temporary in nature, but sometimes they were intended to last a long time: this was the case of the Junta de noche appointed by Philip II in 1583 to assist him in the task of government, to which he felt more and more unequal. The Junta, composed of only five men (the Portuguese Christobal de Moura, the general treasurer of the Council of Aragon, count Chinchón, the president of the Council of Castile, count of Barajas, and two trusted secretaries of the king, Mateo Vázquez and Juan de Idiáquez) saw Philip II’s government into the 1590s and was abolished only after his death by his son and successor Philip III. ‘The junta system represented the triumph
of personal relations over institutional procedures in the exercise of power’; in the second half of Philip’s reign, moreover, a
new distinction took shape between ‘technical’ and ‘political’ juntas: ‘the letrados were appointed, as “technicians”, to the
juntas dealing with specific problems (mainly financial or religious), while noblemen engaged in politics were chosen to form
juntas where the government of the monarchy was in question’.30

The rise of the letrados was one of the outstanding social phenomena in Habsburg Spain.31 The word, originally applied to
any educated person, already in the fifteenth century had come to mean a jurist trained at one of the Spanish universities,
whose number grew spectacularly during the sixteenth century (twenty-one new universities since 1526). These graduates,
who mastered canon law as well as civil law, found employment in private practice, in the Church, or increasingly in the
king’s service as corregidores (royal officials controlling urban administrations), as alcaldes mayores (judges) in the
corregimientos themselves or in the eight royal audiencias, as members of the royal councils, where they often constituted
the absolute majority of members: in 1588 all eighteen councillors of the Council of Castile were letrados. The best placed
for a career in the public administration were the licenciados of the colegios mayores, ‘élite establishments which had
virtually acquired the status of independent republics within the universities’,32 especially at Salamanca, which had four out
of a total of six; the colegios mayores granted scholarships and helped their students all along in their careers. Pelorson’s
estimate of the number of letrados in Castile at the time of Philip III is between 10,000 and 20,000, only 2,000 or 3,000 of
whom were graduates and doctors; there were perhaps 1,000 or 2,000 in public employment.33 All in all, the impression left
by Spanish, or at least Castilian, administration in the sixteenth century is one of reasonable efficiency and autonomy, once
allowance is made for the hierarchic structure of society and for the omnipresence of patronage and clientelism.

Things began to change with the accession of Philip III (1598–1621). As is well known, almost the first act of the new king
was to hand the reins of government to his favourite, don Francisco Gómez de Sandoval y Rojas, fifth marquis of Denia
and first duke of Lerma. ‘So complete was Lerma’s power that he became the prototype for many of the great favourite-
ministers of the European seventeenth century.’34 Besides the eruption onto the political scene of the favourite with his
camarilla, other traits of the new regime were the systematic recourse to ad hoc juntas as a means of depriving the
councils of their functions and the resumption of a leading role by the great nobility, with whom a self-seeking (p. 493)
person such as Lerma, an accomplished courtesan but no statesman, had every interest in sharing his privileges and responsibilities.
This is why he allowed the Council of State a much-expanded role in policy-making, though he seldom attended its meetings.
In fact the inner coterie which ruled in the name of Lerma included several people who had enjoyed Philip II’s confidence,
like Christobal de Moura and Juan de Idáquez.

Lerma’s policy of retrenchment, coming after the disasters of Philip II’s final decade (the defeat of the Armada, failure in
France and the Netherlands, the economic and financial crisis, the ravages of dearth and plague) was partly successful in
closing the long-drawn-out conflict with England (1604) and establishing a twelve-year truce with the Dutch (1609), but did
not exploit the breathing space thus obtained to carry out the financial and administrative reforms that the situation demanded
and the so-called arbitristas recommended. The bankruptcy of 1596 was followed by another after only ten years, and the
temporary displacement of the court to Valladolid (1601–06) did little to redress royal finances. One of the expedients
adopted to raise money was the systematic recourse to the sale of offices and jurisdictions. The former had never been
officially recognized in Castile, though it had spread widely in the New World. It had been outlawed by the Catholic Kings
already in 1480 and was condemned in absolute terms by Charles V as far as judicial posts were concerned. Under Philip II
certain municipal offices, such as those of regidores or prison wardens, began to be alienated under cover of royal
mercedes (graces) granted to deserving citizens. But there is no doubt that ‘the volume of sales and the amount of their yield
reached a maximum in the first half of the seventeenth century’,35 when the Spaniards became familiar with proceedings
already well known in France, such as the creation of new offices for the purpose of selling them, the transformation of
temporary offices into perpetual and hereditary ones in exchange for cash, the collective cession of a number of offices to a
contractor who then resold them in retail, and even the levy of a moderate entry tax (media annata) on the salary of newly
appointed officers.

Two important features, however, continued to distinguish the Spanish version of venality from the French. First, the old
exclusion of offices carrying jurisdiction remained in full force, and so the higher offices in the administrative and judicial sphere were never put on sale; consequently, office tenure in Spain did not become a path to the formation of a noblesse de robe: positions of clerks, treasurers, receivers, store-keepers, hall-ports, prison wardens, and the like attracted small investors, swelling the ranks of a petty bourgeoisie with a bureaucratic and rentier mentality. If anything, the titles of regidores or veinticuatros, which brought little profit but considerable local power, appealed to families of the hidalgo class who already belonged to the lower nobility.

The French Centralizing Monarchy (1624–1715)

Although the abstract noun absolutism was unknown in the seventeenth century, and would remain so until it was coined by Châteaubriand in 1797 and popularized by (p. 494) German nineteenth-century historians, a contemporary of Richelieu or Louis XIV would not have hesitated to describe France as an ‘absolute monarchy’ or to speak of the king’s ‘absolute power’. If asked to explain the adjective, he would have had recourse to some Latin formula like legibus solutus or superiorem non recognoscens: a monarch was absolute because his power came directly from God and was therefore independent from any other authority on earth, including that of pope and emperor; he was absolute, moreover, because his sovereignty was ‘no more divisible than the geometrical point’ (Cardin Le Bret, 1632) and because he was not subject to any law, being himself the source of legislation and the fountain of justice.

Political theorists, starting with Bodin, warned that ‘absolute’ did not mean ‘unlimited’. Not only was the most Christian king obliged in his conscience to respect divine and natural laws; he was also bound by the so-called ‘fundamental laws’ of the kingdom: he could not change the order of succession to the Crown, established by the ‘Salic Law’, nor alienate the royal demesne. He was expected, moreover, even if no legal obligation was involved, to ‘take advice’ before deciding anything important and to avoid encroaching on his subjects’ private property, unless public safety made it necessary. These qualifications were sufficient to distinguish absolutism from despotism but were in themselves no obstacle to the exercise of a very extensive royal prerogative, which according to the famous Discours de la flagellation, pronounced by Louis XV on 3 March 1766, made the sovereign ‘the sole legitimate representative of the kingdom’ and included ‘full legislative power, without any dependence or partition’. The limits to royal power were of a practical, not theoretical nature: they consisted, first, in the weakness of the state machinery and of the repressive apparatus at the king’s disposal; second (and as a corollary), in the strength and cohesion of the corporate power groups which made up French (and not only French, of course) ancien régime society, such as parliaments and provincial estates, noble assemblies and assemblies of the clergy, town councils and village communities, professional colleges and craft guilds, and kin and client networks. Most groups had a hierarchic structure, and to secure their compliance with royal orders it was imperative to compromise with their leaders and representatives.

In the decades following the Second World War, an impressive series of in-depth studies of French regions and towns, simply by substituting a perspective d’en bas for a vision d’en haut, brought out the complexity and vitality of local society and politics and thus led to a much better understanding of the limits of self-styled absolute power. Scholars belonging to that generation dwell at length on what Gerhard Oestreich called ‘the non absolutist elements of absolutism’ and emphasized the gulf between the concept and the reality, a gap neatly summed up in David Parker’s dictum that ‘absolutism was always in the making but never made’. The final exploding of ‘the myth of absolutism’ has essentially been the work of English and American historians. The discussion which follows focuses upon three crucial themes for any understanding of the nature of French ancien régime government and society—the high nobility, the holders of patrimonial offices, and the provincial intendants.

The nobles admitted to the court of Versailles, after 1682, amounted to roughly 10,000 individuals, representing about 5 per cent of the French aristocracy, which in (p. 495) turn constituted about 1 per cent of the entire population. They included the wealthiest and highest-ranking families of the kingdom, princes of the royal blood, ducs et pairs de France, fieldmarshals and generals, descendants of great feudal lineages. The Fronde of the Princes (1650–53) had been the last major episode of
the resistance of these grandes to the process of state building and to the assertion of the monopoly of legitimate violence by the royal administration. The devoir de révolte, as it has been called by Arlette Jouanna, had found expression before then in the religious wars of the late sixteenth century and during the regencies of Marie de Medici, following the assassination of her husband Henry IV (1589–1610), and Anne of Austria after the death of Louis XIII (1643). It was much easier to criticize and oppose a chief minister than a legitimate king, and during the reign of Louis XIII and the first years of Louis XIV royal power was almost continuously in the hands of upstart favourites, some of them of Italian origin: Concini, Luynes, Richelieu, Mazarin. More than a dozen révoltes nobiliaires took place between 1610 and 1661. While the first Bourbon king had invested large sums of money to buy the loyalty of old leaders of the Catholic League, Cardinal Richelieu showed himself merciless against grandes who rebelled against his authority or merely flouted the law against duelling. Nicholas Henshall, who wants no part of absolutism, accuses Richelieu of ‘despotic methods’ for his ruthless repression of Protestantism and his ‘interference with the due process of law’ in dealing with recalcitrant noblemen, in contrast with the behaviour of Louis XIV, ‘who managed comfortably’ without such violence; it does not seem to have occurred to him that one thing may have been a necessary precondition of the other.

It remains true, however, that the assumption of personal rule by the Sun King at the death of Mazarin fostered a new climate of confidence and collaboration between power elites and the royal administration. Roger Mettam elaborates the point that ‘Louis, far from imposing a new kind of power structure on the country, worked within the constraints of a hierarchical and aristocratically dominated society, using the traditional powers of the monarchy to enlist the aid of some influential families and to reduce the obstructiveness of others’ and that ‘there was scarcely anything which could meaningfully be called “modern” in the France of Louis XIV’. This seems rather difficult to accept if one thinks of the restructuring of royal councils, of the central role attributed to the controller of finance in the administration and economy of the kingdom, of the establishment of the General Farm and the introduction of new forms of taxation, of the cowing of the parlements, of the partial codification of laws, of the build-up of military organization, of the consolidation of provincial intendancies, of the new dimensions of royal cultural patronage and propaganda, etc. A well-known authority on French ancien régime institutions, Bernard Barbiche, even speaks of ‘la révolution de 1661’ to mark the crucial phase of a transition from a justice state to a finance state, from arbitration to administration: ‘in the seventeenth century, the monarchy became conscious of the fact that its task was not only to arbitrate and to judge, but also to foresee and to manage’.

As far as the aristocracy is concerned, the shift from opposition against the state to cooperation and integration—as symbolized by the submission of the Great Condé after the peace with Spain of 1659—can be partly explained with the charismatic personality (p. 496) of Louis XIV and the aura of majesty and authority surrounding him. But no less important factors are the European trend towards the re-establishment of hierarchy and authority after 1660 so well described by Theodore K. Rabb and, especially, the widespread perception of the dangers of disobedience and of the advantages to be gained by basking in the Sun King’s glory. This might mean spending at least part of the year at Versailles, a court whose function was not only the domestication of nobility, but that of a clearing house of patronage on a national scale. It also meant, however, secondering the action of royal administrators and agents in the provinces and meeting with promptness the king’s financial demands in the pays d’états, where the voting and allocation of taxes was the business of the local assemblies of the three orders.

This has been demonstrated with remarkable clarity by William Beik’s seminal study of Languedoc, the largest pays d’états, which had earlier risen in rebellion against Richelieu’s attempt to introduce state personnel (the so-called élus) to apportion and collect direct taxes. The local power elites who flanked the royal agents ranged from the provincial estates and their standing committee to the sovereign courts (parlement and cour des comptes) and to church hierarchies (twenty bishops and two archbishops), from the seigneurial class to the officers’ companies and the wealthiest merchants. Their different demands were all at least in some measure satisfied by the central government in exchange for their prompt and spontaneous compliance with its financial needs: the protesters were expelled or forcibly converted, monopolies and privileges were maintained or reasserted, the estates’ authority and autonomy duly respected, the jurisdiction of both seigneurial and royal courts confirmed, the construction of the canal du midi carried out; and a comparison of the sharing-out of resources between king and notables at thirty years’ distance shows it to be slightly modified in favour of the latter,
who secured 29.8 per cent in 1647, a figure which had risen to 36 per cent by 1677: ‘The leaders in the Estates continued to bestow grants and favors upon themselves and their friends; honorific commanders continued to receive enormous grants. Royal officers continued to prosper.’\textsuperscript{43} In Beik’s view ‘Louis XIV’s success in Languedoc stemmed from his almost instinctive ability to reinforce class rule . . . He administered a larger dose of reward and punishment, making it clear that “negotiations were no longer in season” and that “satisfying the king” was the only worthy goal.’\textsuperscript{44}

This confidence and harmony did not last beyond the mid-1680s, which ushered in the interminable cycle of wars which lasted until 1713. Spiralling military expenditure coupled with the darkening of economic prospects and with the ravages of famine and disease in 1693–94 and 1709–10 meant that the privileged classes could no longer be spared, as is shown by the nature of the new taxes introduced in 1695 and 1710, the capitation and the dixième. But robins and the world of trade were also hit in other ways, since the forced loans and sales of offices of the last decades of Louis XIV’s reign were a thinly disguised form of taxation.

The different segments of the social élites reacted to the adverse circumstances in various ways. The grandees nursed a growing resentment directed at once against social mobility and monarchic despotism; they pinned their hopes for a revanche of the old aristocracy first upon the Grand Dauphin, and after his death (1711) upon his son, the (p. 497) Duke of Burgundy, who also died in 1712. Denis Richet rightly pointed out that the political programme set out in the Tables de Chaulnes (1711) by Fénélon and by the dukes of Beauviller and Chevreuse, which proposed a Monarchy limited by a Grand Conseil representing the highest nobility and by an Estates-General to be held every third year, can be considered a blueprint of aristocratic liberalism, even if his contention that ‘these ducs et pairs were undoubtedly the first great revolutionaries’\textsuperscript{45} may sound rather exaggerated. Other opposition currents included Protestant denunciations of religious oppression, the anti-mercantilist ideologies and the Christian agrarianism described long ago by Lionel Rothkrug,\textsuperscript{16} but also a revival of Frondeur spirits in the parlements, in the name of Jansenism and in defence of a mythical constitutional order: a prelude to their running battle against royal absolutism under Louis XV.

In no European country did the venality (or better, patrimoniality) of offices become such a conspicuous feature of society as in France. Nowhere else, in particular, were even the highest legal posts officially the preserve and private property of officeholders. How the practice originated and developed since the thirteenth century, or earlier, has been told many times and need not be repeated here. It will be sufficient to recall two crucial dates: 1523, when Francis I created the bureau des parties casuelles as an agency formally in charge of the sale of state offices in the judicature and in finance; 1604, when the droit annuel (called paulette after the name of its first contractor) was introduced under Henry IV: this was a fee corresponding to one-sixtieth of the capital value of an office, a kind of insurance premium which its holder had to pay in order to secure the right to bequeath its property to an heir. In financial terms the purchase of an office could be equated to a loan made to the Crown, of which the salary (or gages) paid to the owner represented the yearly interest. But apart from the fact that the gages were not in most cases the only form of income yielded by the possession of an office (let us think of the épices paid to judges, or of the profitable use financial officers made of the sums that passed through their hands), account must be taken of the social prestige attached to a royal office, well expressed by the definition given in 1610 by Charles Loyseau, ‘dignité ordinaire avec fonction publique’. Office-holding involved exemptions and privileges of a fiscal or judicial nature, and above all, at least in its higher reaches, gave access to nobility if not immediately, at least after three generations. Ennobling offices were of course much more pricey; among the most expensive was the position of royal secretary, which guaranteed immediate anoblissement while being in fact a sinecure.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed a rapid growth in the sale of offices, the pace of their creation varying with the financial needs of the Monarchy. Their approximate number was 5,000 during the 1540s, and about 45,000 by 1661. Colbert tried to reduce the scale of venality, but in the final difficult decades of Louis XIV’s reign his successors had systematic recourse to this method of raising money, not only inventing new offices, but duplicating existing ones; chancellor Louis Phélypeaux de Pontchartrain once said to the king: ‘Every time it pleases Your Majesty to create an office, God creates some imbecile who will buy it.’\textsuperscript{47} In Paris alone between 1689 and 1715 the government sold 2,461 posts of sellers of pork or wine, controllers of fish or butter and cheese, inspectors of forage, controllers of periwigs, and the like. Most of (p.
these were later abolished, and the proliferation of offices seems to have ceased under the reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI, even though we lack reliable figures. On the eve of the Revolution Necker counted 50,000 hereditary offices, 4,000 of which were of the ennobling sort.

Officers were second only to the military as a component of public administration. According to James B. Collins, ‘Louis XIV’s wartime state, like its English contemporary, employed about 10 per cent of the adult male population of working age, at least part of the year’ (this estimate includes 120,000 village tax collectors and 20,000 general farm employees as well as 300,000 men in the armed forces), and ‘the officers constituted a third or more of the fully literate male population’. The ambivalent attitude of officeholders towards the French state has often been remarked upon: on one hand they had a powerful vested interest in its strength and solvency, not only for financial reasons but also as participants, however small, in its prestige; on the other, the security they felt in the possession of their offices, which they knew the Crown would never be able to redeem, gave them considerable autonomy and force in the defence of their status and in their struggle against the government’s tendency, especially in times of crisis, to delay payment of gages or to extract money from them on various pretexts (for example, the renewal of the paulette). Their wrath was an important force behind the so-called Fronde Parlementaire and, as has been said, behind the growing opposition to Louis XIV. The upper levels of financial and especially judicial officers formed the core of what is known as the robe nobility. Historians have dwelt at length both on the rivalry between sword and robe inside the Second Estate and on their long-term tendency to merge into a unified aristocratic élite. The final decades of Louis XIV’s long reign also saw the rise of what Collins calls a ‘state nobility’, composed by a few robe families who monopolized the key ministerial posts: the Colbert, the Le Tellier, and the Phélypeaux clans. The unification of noble elites was a later process, fostered by enlightened culture, by the passage of time which cancelled the stigma of recent ennoblement, and by the realization that it was now the rich financiers and négociants, and not the officer class, who represented the main threat to old social hierarchies.

The practice of appointing special commissars to oversee justice and finance and to watch over the application of laws in collaboration with provincial governors began with Henry II and was intensified during the religious wars of the sixteenth century. These missions continued under Henry IV and Louis XIII, who had more and more recourse to state counsellors and maîtres des requêtes (officers charged with receiving the petitions addressed to the king) to fill these positions. But it was only in the 1630s that the need to restore public order in the country and to ensure the collection of taxes and the provisioning of the armies in the Thirty Years’ War made the appointment of ‘intendants of justice, police and finance’ (royal commissioners sent out to impose the wishes of central government in the provinces) spread to the whole kingdom. The social unrest caused by the dramatic increase of the taille and of other fiscal levies and the officers’ protests against the usurpation of their powers by the intendants led to the widespread demand for their abolition in the first phase of the Fronde. Most of them were recalled in 1648, but the Crown’s victory at the end of the long crisis (1653) brought the (p. 499) intendants gradually back in all the thirty-two généralités: the difference was that in the pays d’élections, where their title was commissaires départis pour l’exécution des ordres du roi, they were responsible for the allocation and collection of the taille, which in the pays d’états was the task of the estates and their standing committees.

The final institutionalization of the intendancies was the work of Louis XIV and Colbert. Governors were not abolished, nor did they lose their local influence, even though, as princes of the blood and ducs et pairs de France, they spent most of their time at court; indeed, as the case of Languedoc demonstrates, their wealth, prestige, and personal relations with the king and other powerful people enabled them to act effectively as centres of the patronage and clientage networks. As a rule there was no conflict, but a distinction of roles between governors and intendants: ‘While the governor continues to represent the majesty of the king, the intendant, almost always a maître des requêtes, therefore a member of the king’s Council, is so to speak a projection of the latter in his jurisdiction, and embodies an abstract entity: the state.’ The extension of the intendants’ powers, specified in their lettres de commission, was not matched by the means at their disposal. Each of them had one secretary and two guards under him, and since he was never a native of the province assigned to him, he was confronted with a largely unknown social and political reality; nor were the six years of the average tenure under Louis XIV sufficient to make him thoroughly familiar with his surroundings. Hence the importance of their ties with persons of high rank, and of their double allegiance: ‘they are allies, clients, “creatures” of some powerful family of governors or of
ministerial standing, and at the same time they are part of the state apparatus: both systems ultimately depend on the king'.

The same criteria mark the intendant’s recruitment of voluntary assistants, called ‘sub-delegates’ (subdélégués), among the notables of his généralité: they were chosen for their expertise in judicial or financial matters, but also as mediators between the state power and local networks of influence.

A close analysis of the correspondence of the 150 men who held the positions of intendant under Louis XIV, such as has been carried out by Anette Smedley-Weill (1995), bears witness to the thoroughness and devotion with which these men accomplished their manifold tasks in justice, finance, and police; it also confirms the crucial role they played in the state-building process and as forerunners of a modern bureaucracy. It was of such people and institutions that Louis XIV was probably thinking when he said on his deathbed: ‘Je m’en vais, mais l’état demeurea toujours’ (‘I depart, but the state will live for ever’).

Absolutism and Reform in the Empire and the Austrian Monarchy (1648–1790)

The treaties of Osnabrück and Münster, collectively known as the Peace of Westphalia (1648), ushered in a new phase in German history, marked not only by a steady movement of demographic and economic recovery from the heavy losses caused by the Thirty Years’ War, but also by significant changes in political and institutional life. Before dealing briefly with the German states and with the Habsburg Monarchy a few words will be in order about the peculiar superstructure which contained most of their territories, the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation.

The tag to this resounding name, as so much else about this unique medieval legacy, does not quite fit the reality. In the eighteenth century the empire still included millions of Czechs, Netherlands, Lorrainers, Frenchmen, and Italians. No kingdom could exist within its borders except Bohemia, since 1526 a possession of the House of Habsburg; but in the decades around 1700 as many as four princes of the empire secured royal titles elsewhere: Electors Frederick Augustus of Saxony in Poland, Frederick III/I Hohenzollern in Prussia, Victor Amadeus II of Savoy first in Sicily and then Sardinia, and Georg Ludwig, Elector of Hanover, in Britain. This promotion of vassals of the emperor may be interpreted as a sign among others of the weakening of imperial power and prestige after the Peace of Westphalia.

Recent historiography, however, has tended to reject the picture of the Holy Roman Empire in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a mere relic from former centuries, deprived of any political role or significance. The defence of Vienna in 1683 and Habsburg successes in the subsequent two-front struggle against the Ottoman Turks and Louis XIV’s France did much to revitalize the imperial ideal, while the rise of the Austrian Monarchy to great power status fostered a revival of imperial rights and prerogatives, not only in Germany but in Italy too. In the half century after 1685 Leopold I and his sons and successors Joseph I and Charles VI extracted substantial war contributions from their Italian vassals, including the Grand-Duke of Tuscany and the Republic of Genoa, and the invasion of the papal territories of Comacchio and Ferrara ordered by Joseph I in 1709 aroused a wave of ‘Ghibelline’ feeling all over Germany and Italy, kindling the enthusiasm of leading intellectuals such as Leibniz and Muratori. In Germany itself, imperial suzerainty was seen by small and medium-size princes, free cities, and knights as a guarantee against the appetites of bigger powers, and by territorial diets as a bulwark against princely despotism. The estates of Mecklenburg-Schwerin appealed repeatedly to the Aulic Council against dukes Friedrich Wilhelm (1692–1713) and Karl Leopold (1713–28) for levying contributions without their consent; as a result, Karl Leopold was deposed and his brother Christian Ludwig (1728–56) was eventually compelled to come to terms with the estates.

The Holy Roman Empire never had the chance to develop as a state on the French model since it was not a hereditary monarchy. Each successive emperor was elected by a restricted body of seven (in the eighteenth century nine, then eight) Electors, who imposed on him a number of clauses limiting his powers in the so-called ‘Electoral Capitulations’ (Wahlkapitulationen). The imperial ‘constitution’ was mainly the result of the imperial estates’ attempt to prevent the
strengthening of the sovereign authority. Besides the two central courts of justice, Reichshofrat and Reichskammergericht, sitting respectively at Wetzlar and Vienna, it included a financial organ, the Reichshofkammer, and a small chancellery, the Reichshofkanzlei. Foreign Affairs were mostly handled by (p. 501) the Austrian Chancellery without distinction from those concerning the Habsburg Monarchy. An imperial army was sometimes fielded in wartime, but “it was only a motley collection of territorial units raised and paid for by the individual princes”. The so-called Reichstände (literally the ‘Estates of the Empire’), who recognized the emperor as their immediate superior, numbered almost 2,500. About 2,000 of these were Imperial Knights, holders of tiny manors scattered all over the country; they were not represented in the Imperial Diet (Reichstag), which since 1663 met at Regensburg, and which comprised about 136 ecclesiastical and 173 secular lords; a separate assembly was formed by the representatives of the Imperial Cities, which governed themselves under the nominal authority of the emperor, and whose number was almost halved between 1521 and 1755, dropping from eighty-seven to forty-nine.

This political fragmentation was not substantially modified until the age of Napoleon, though some territorial consolidation did take place in the early modern period. A general tendency affecting most large and middle-sized states (and some smaller ones as well) in the decades following Westphalia was the rise of absolutism, or what Hans Boldt has more precisely termed ‘Verfürstlichung’ der Regierung (concentration of government in the prince) and ‘Verstaatung’ der Gesellschaft (‘statualization’ of society). This trend expressed itself in various ways: in the determination, first of all, to create standing armies, in some cases out of all proportion with demographic size and available economic resources, and in the related effort to persuade or coerce their populations to pay for them. Only states with a large military establishment, such as Brandenburg–Prussia, Bavaria, or Savoy, could exchange their alliance for substantial subsidies from Britain, France, or the Dutch Republic. The smaller German states found another way of financing their military establishments; this was the hiring of regiments to foreign powers who could use them for their wars. Friedrich Carl, regent for the Duke of Württemberg Eberhard Ludwig, by 1691 had supplied a total of 10,000 mercenaries to Venice, Holland, the Holy Roman Emperor, and Spain. One principality which specialized in this traffic of human cannon fodder was Hesse-Cassel, which in January 1776 struck a deal with the Westminster government for as many as 12,000 Hessians to serve in the North American war. Partly for this reason, Hesse-Cassel was “the most militarized society in all Germany”, since its population of 342,000 in 1773, counted one soldier for every fifteen civilians (against 1:30 in Brandenburg–Prussia).

The full deployment of princely absolutism involved on one hand independence from all external authorities, and this was to a certain extent guaranteed by the clauses of the Westphalia settlement acknowledging their territorial superioritas and enabling them to form alliances inside or outside the empire, provided they were not directed against the emperor. The other main obstacle was posed by the territorial estates (Landstände), existing in nearly all principalities and consisting of a variable number of assemblies or curiae; the clergy was generally not represented in Protestant areas, where it was controlled by an organ responsible to the prince, the Consistory; the nobility, especially in eastern Germany and in the Habsburg territories, might be divided into a magnate class, or Herrenstand, and a lower noble estate, or Ritterstand; the representatives of towns not subject to feudal jurisdiction formed another separate curia. Since the late Middle Ages (p. 502) the estates had been regularly summoned by the prince in each territory to discuss with him or his delegates the amount of direct taxes (or ‘contributions’) to be paid into his coffers as a supplement to the revenue that he drew jure regio from his domain and from other sources, such as customs duties and monopolies. The sums voted by the diet were then apportioned and collected by a standing committee of the estates, which also filled other administrative tasks.

Few princes were sufficiently strong or determined to deal with their diets as summarily as Frederick William, the Hohenzollern Great Elector, did with the estates of East Prussia: after their bond with the king of Poland was severed by the peace of Oliva (1660), the elector put an end to a long-drawn-out negotiation by marching to Königsberg at the head of 2,000 soldiers and arresting one leader of the estates’ opposition to his financial requests (1663); a few years later another leader, who had appealed to the Polish king and sought refuge at his court, was kidnapped from Warsaw on the elector’s orders and swiftly executed. The price to pay for the submission of the Brandenburg and Prussian estates was the confirmation and extension of the economic and social privileges of the Junker landowning class, in particular of their full dominance over the peasant serfs. No longer encumbered with estate opposition (the diets of Brandenburg and Cleves-Mark had been cowed
beforehand) the Great Elector himself and his successors were free to enlarge the standing army, which reached a strength of 83,000 men by 1740, and to develop the Generalkriegskommissariat (‘General War Commissariat’), created in 1655, into a full-blown Generaldirektorium (‘General Directory’) for war, finance, and domains in 1723.

Under King Frederick William I (1713–40), local administration was also reorganized in a way which reflected the double face of Prussian absolutism: while the Steuerräte, commissars appointed in the towns to collect the excise and oversee provisioning, were clearly state servants of a bureaucratic stamp, Landräte in the countryside had to be chosen among candidates elected by the local landlords and were comparable in some respects to English Justices of the Peace (JPs). On the basis of the compromise struck between the Crown and the Junkers, ‘the king exerted an uncontested autocratic power at state level over internal and external policy, the military and fiscal system, legislation and administration. In the districts and localities power remained in the hands of the Junker class, who held a semi-public jurisdiction in their own “houses,” on villages and feudal domains.’

The example of Frederick II also illustrates other features of the rise of absolutism, such as the weakening of the collegial principle in government agencies, where it was replaced by departmentalization and by the clear definition of individual duties and responsibilities (as in the Instruction written for the General Directory by Frederick II on 20 May 1748) and the tendency of the ruler to distance himself from the Privy Council and to draft and issue his decrees from his cabinet with the assistance of his personal secretaries. ‘During the second half of his reign Frederick issued up to twelve cabinet orders each day, sometimes more; the total number of orders issued in the years 1728–95 amounts to between 300,000 and 400,000.’

Elsewhere the progress towards absolutism was slower and more desultory, driven not by a conscious and systematic programme of state building but rather by the need for money caused by extravagant spending on courtly magnificence and grand residences and palaces modelled on Versailles and the Hofburg, as much as by military costs. A typical example is Württemberg, where Duke Eberhard Ludwig (1693–1733), in spite of strong opposition from the estates and from the old bureaucracy, pressed ahead with his building plans, involving not only the construction of a new residence outside Stuttgart, the old capital, but of a whole town around it, Ludwigsburg. After meeting in 1698, the estates were never again summoned either by Ludwig or by his successor Alexander Carl (1733–37). The Dukes preferred to deal with the permanent committee of the Diet, who represented the upper and middle echelons of urban society, collectively known as Ehrbarkeit; in 1724 this committee was finally bullied into voting for an annual subsidy for the maintenance of the army.

While the Privy Council and the other government agencies remained in Stuttgart and continued, on both financial and religious (Lutheran) grounds, to oppose the Baroque extravagance and immorality of the new Frenchified court in Ludwigsburg, Eberhard Ludwig and Alexander Carl ‘sought to bypass the professional civil servants through the creation of new, court-centred administrative staffs into which they funneled the business of government’.

Worse was to come with the new Duke, Karl Eugen (1737–93), who not only exceeded his predecessors in lavish expenditure, grandiose living, and munificent patronage of ballet, opera, and theatre (under him the court swelled to 1,800 persons, against a population of 500,000–600,000) but converted to Catholicism and revived the practice of taxing his subjects illegally and hiring out mercenary troops to France. Personal rule became official policy in 1758, when Karl Eugen created a new Staats- und Kabinettsministerium to deal with government business. Yet ‘for all their sovereign independence, the secondary German states still functioned as separate but indivisible parts of a larger whole’. This larger whole was the Empire, to which the old bureaucracy, the town councils, and the estates, all drawn from the Ehrbarkeit, turned for help at the end of the Seven Years’ War. The Württemberg diet, summoned in 1763, did not dissolve until 1770, when the Reichshofrat finally pronounced in favour of the estates, obliging Karl Eugen to accept a compromise under which the Kabinettsministerium was abolished, an annual budget was fixed for an army of only 3,000, and every further taxation was made conditional to the approval of the estates committee.

Unlike Brandenburg–Prussia, many secondary German states could not consistently follow the path of absolutism or become
fully independent from imperial influence. Most of them, however, strove hard to become ‘police states’ (Polizeistaaten). With the passage of time, especially during the second half of the seventeenth and in the eighteenth century, the ordinances issued by governments were more and more inspired not only by the need to prevent or correct abuses, but by the wish to introduce useful innovations, to promote ‘the maintenance and improvement of the common good and welfare’, as defined by Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff in a famous book of 1656, Der Teutschen Fürsten-Staat: this was the real meaning of Polizey, a concept which ‘formed the link between the concern for public happiness and absolutism’ and ‘bound up the (p. 504) independence claimed by the sovereign with his commitment to justice and morality’.\^50 Two powerful currents of thought which joined in furthering these views were the theory of natural law, set forth in the influential treatises of Samuel von Pufendorf and Christian Wolff, and cameralism, ‘a distinct body of economic ideas which emphasized the State’s wealth and the prosperity of its subjects’.\^61 The steady stream of Landesordnungen und Polizeiordnungen that issued from the chancelleries of German states, large and small, affected almost all aspects of social life, from ‘the organization of the judicial system and state finance’ to ‘the need of building permits in a town, or market or shipping regulations’.\^62 Not all ordinances emanated from the sovereign’s council or cabinet. Many were drafted by subordinate authorities acting within their particular jurisdictions. In self-governing towns and cities it would be the mayor or the city council who issued ordinances. Insofar as the German states, or most of them, can be described as examples of enlightened absolutism, it is of this strain of Aufklärung, rooted in the German soil, that we must think rather than of the influence of French Encyclopedistes or Scottish radical thinkers. There are exceptions, of course, the most famous being Frederick II of Prussia, whose practical politics were in any case much less than his ideas about religion or the natural equality of men or the social contract. Among smaller states, one of the most enlightened was Baden-Durlach, which in 1771 also absorbed Baden-Baden. Margrave Karl Wilhelm (1709–38), besides embellishing his capital city of Karlsruhe, also proclaimed religious toleration in 1722 and even provided for the building of separate churches for Lutherans, Calvinists, Catholics, and Jews. His son Karl Friedrich (1738–1811) was a correspondent of Mirabeau and a staunch believer in the doctrines of the French physiocrats, which he tried to apply in his territory, even to the extent of abolishing serfdom in 1783. Carl August of Saxe-Weimar (1775–1828) made his name famous in German literature by entertaining at his court Goethe (who was his chief minister), Wieland, and Herder. Charles Ingrao suggested that ‘enlightened government functioned best within the smaller states of the Holy Roman Empire’\^63 where princely paternalism was not thwarted by the imperatives of militarism and foreign policy.

Another tendency of recent studies has been to highlight the role of enlightened bureaucracy in the planning and realization of reforms. As regards Brandenburg–Prussia, Hans Rosenberg’s interpretation of the rise of bureaucratic power as a defence of class interest and the result of a drive to transform ‘monarchical autocracy into a system of bureaucratic–aristocratic authoritarianism’\^64 has been corrected by various authors, who have stressed the breadth of many functionaries’ intellectual interests and their participation in public debates over enlightenment and reform. The same is true for other states, such as Baden, Hanover, and Hesse-Cassel.\^65 ‘By the late eighteenth century the German bureaucracies comprised a generally honest, hard-working group of university-trained professionals’,\^66 recruited more and more through exams (a practice introduced in Prussia as early as 1755–70), owing their positions to their merits and abilities and not only to patronage and birth, often ennobled and anyway enjoying privileged social status, and thus tending to form a distinct social group or Stand.

(p. 505) It is a commonplace among scholars that during the reigns of Maria Theresa (1740–80) and Joseph II (1780–90), the Austrian Monarchy ‘underwent the most radical programme of reform in later-eighteenth century Europe’.\^67 After the War of the Spanish Succession the territories of the House of Habsburg occupied over 730,000 square kilometres, nearly half of which, 350,000 square kilometres, was located outside the empire. The sixteen to eighteen million people who inhabited these territories belonged to a dozen different ethnic groups and spoke as many different languages. While the German and Italian components shrank somewhat in the subsequent decades, as a consequence of the loss of the Kingdom of Naples (1734) and the Duchy of Silesia (1740), the proportion of Slavs, Jews, and Hungarians expanded due to the annexation of Galicia (1772) and Bukovina (1775) and to the extraordinary demographic growth of the Kingdom of Hungary. At the end of our period, towards 1790, the total population exceeded twenty-two million, almost half of whom lived in Hungary.
It is no wonder that so heterogeneous and far-flung an aggregate of territories presented an almost insoluble problem to state builders. ‘Such unity as existed [in the Habsburg monarchy] had been provided by the dynasty itself, by the Court in Vienna, by the army, by the triumphant Counter-Reformation and by a distinctive culture, that of the Catholic baroque.’ This applied, moreover, only to the core Austrian duchies (Lower and Upper Austria, Styria, Carniola, Tyrol, and Vorarlberg), and to the Kingdom of Bohemia, including Bohemia proper, Moravia and, until 1740, Silesia. Here the estates of each territory, in German fashion, met every year in order to discuss the financial demands presented by the sovereign or by his commissars and vote a contribution, usually lower than the amount requested. The same powerful families who controlled the diets composed the central organs of government: the Privy Council, the Council of War, the Court Chamber (which handled finance), and the Austrian and Bohemian Chancelleries.

Hungary, only recently annexed in its entirety, had so far resisted all attempts made by Leopold I and his successors ‘to fit it with Bohemian trousers’, that is, to make it subject to direct government by Vienna and to curb the estates’ powers, in the way that had been done in Bohemia after 1620. The defence of traditional rights and privileges, including religious pluralism and the right of insurrection, was the preserve not only of the great landowning families, who elected the Palatine, a kind of viceroy, but of a very numerous and independent lower nobility who had their strongholds in the counties (comitats) into which the country was divided. The economy, based on serfdom north and east of Vienna, was everywhere underdeveloped, except in Belgium and Lombardy, in spite of Charles VI’s efforts to promote industry and trade by mercantilist measures. Though larger than France and not greatly inferior in population, the Habsburg territories yielded only one-fifth of the revenue enjoyed by Louis XV.

The reforms carried out under Maria Theresa and Joseph largely changed the face of the Habsburg lands. The impression of general failure and defeat that Joseph’s sad final years tend to leave does not do justice to his (and his mother’s) lasting achievements in conferring a new unity and coherence on the sprawling possessions of the Habsburg dynasty, in establishing religious toleration and (up to a point) freedom of the press, in subjecting the Church to the State, in reforming justice and promulgating the great penal code of 1787, in fighting against noble privilege and for the rights of serfs and peasants, in providing generously for the poor, the sick, and the handicapped, and in promoting universal instruction. It is of course impossible here to deal even summarily with all these aspects of Habsburg enlightened absolutism. I have chosen to say something about educational reforms, which struck both contemporary observers and later historians for their boldness and thoroughness.

It is no wonder that school reform, like church reform, began around the middle of the eighteenth century, as teaching in Catholic countries had always been considered a preserve of the Church, which monopolized secondary education and kept a close watch over universities. Elementary schooling had traditionally been more widespread in Protestant areas, thanks to the emphasis laid by reformers on Bible reading. The importance of education had been moreover a central motive in Pietism, a Lutheran revival movement which flourished in the late seventeenth century and led not only to the proliferation of popular schools throughout the Hohenzollern dominions, but to the establishment under Frederick William I of institutes for the training of teachers in Halle and elsewhere. Inspired by a strong sense of duty, Pietist pedagogy as practised by August Hermann Francke (1663–1727) and his follower Johann Julius Hecker (1707–68) combined study, discipline, and manual labour and introduced such important innovations as collective instruction and choral repetition, the grouping of children into classes corresponding to different stages of proficiency, and the use of the blackboard. Johann Ignaz Felbiger (1724–83), an Augustinian monk who had become Abbot of Sagan after Frederick II’s conquest of Silesia, learned the new pedagogy and began to apply it in his native province, before being called to Vienna.

Maria Theresa had already shown her interest in higher studies at mid-century when she founded the Theresianum for the training of civil servants and carried out the reforms suggested for the Vienna university by her trusted physician Gerhard van Swieten. She became more and more convinced of the importance of elementary education as she learned of the existence of a widespread crypto-Protestantism in Styria, Carinthia, and Upper Austria. This showed conservative opinion, hostile to the growth of literacy in the belief that it would foster Protestantism, to be wide of the mark and encouraged proponents of popular schooling such as Count Johann Anton Pergen (later head of the Josephinian police), who in 1770
submitted a grandiose plan for the establishment of universal compulsory schooling under state control. Maria Theresa approved of the idea but was put out by the total exclusion of the Catholic clergy from the project and by the proposal to entrust its realization to foreigners of Protestant origin.

“The cause of school reform was saved by the suppression of the Society of Jesus in the following year, which created an educational vacuum” and, even more important, placed the necessary resources at the disposal of the government. The Education Commission established in the same year speedily drew up a plan recommending that Jesuit property should be used to finance a scheme of universal compulsory schooling, and Frederick II, at Kaunitz’s request, agreed to send Felbiger to Vienna to supervise the reform. The Allgemeine Schulordnung (General School Ordinance) drafted by Felbiger (p.507) was signed by Maria Theresa on 6 December 1774. It made instruction compulsory for all children, male and female, from the age of 6 to 12, and instituted three types of schools: Trivialschulen in rural communities, where children were to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic; Hauptschulen in towns, where new subjects were added to the curriculum; and Normalschulen in all provincial capitals for the training of teachers.

While the Austrian Monarchy began to establish a state-controlled system of general schooling after Prussia, it soon overtook its rival thanks to more generous funding and to a greater rate of growth. Already in 1781 “Felbiger estimated that the Habsburg monarchy had a total of 6,197 schools below the level of the Gymnasium . . . These were attended by a total of 208,508 pupils, more than 20,000 of whom were poor pupils who paid no school fees.” The priority given to primary schooling over higher education was strengthened under Joseph II, who sustained the efforts of the new head of the education commission, Gottfried van Swieten, son of Maria Theresa’s physician, by channelling more and more resources into primary education: the school fund for the central lands of the Monarchy grew seven-fold from 1781 to 1789. Education for all was the central piece of a giant effort towards the formation of a disciplined workforce and the promotion of social and economic welfare, which was characteristic of central Europe and burdened the state with far more responsibilities than it had in prerevolutionary France or in Britain. It epitomized the ways in which the role of government as well as its size had expanded throughout the early modern centuries.

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Notes:

(1.) Charles Tilly, ed., The Formation of National States in Western Europe (Princeton, NJ, 1975), 27. Tilly’s requisites largely overlap those listed by Wolfgang Reinhard, Geschichte der Saatengewalt: eine vergleichende Verfassungsgeschichte Europas von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart (München, 2000), who also mentions, however, independence from any external authority. Tilly’s first claim, that the territory of a state should be not only well defined, but continuous, is however denied by the composition of several early modern European polities.


(6.) Tilly, The Formation, 42; and Tilly, Coercion, Capital.

(7.) Thomas Ertman, Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe (Cambridge, 1997), 3.


(9.) Ertman, Birth of the Leviathan, 317–318.


(11.) Giorgio Chittolini, ed., La crisi degli ordinamenti comunali e le origini del Rinascimento (Bologna, 1979), 31–32.

(12.) Federico Chabod, Scritti sul Rinascimento (Torino, 1967), where the two, rather different, versions of this essay, one in Italian and the other in French, are published at 591–625.

(13.) Chabod, Scritti sul Rinascimento, 605, 614.


1997), 1016.


(26.) Manuel Rivero Rodríguez, *El Consejo de Italia y el gobierno de los dominios italianos de la monarquía hispana durante el reinado de Felipe II (1556–1598)* (Madrid, 1992), 219.


(29.) Elliott, *Imperial Spain*, 177.


(32.) Elliott, *Imperial Spain*, 316.


(55.) Heinz Schilling, *Corti e alleanze. La Germania dal 1648 al 1763* (Bologna, 1999), 480.


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Abstract and Keywords

From at least 1300, European princes fought their wars with borrowed money, using revenues to pay lenders. Since consent to taxation was vested in representative assemblies made up of nobles and burghers, direct taxation of wealth and property was not common. When large loans were needed at once, one turned to consortia of bankers (fiscal intermediation), although the interest rates they demanded were not supportable for long. One alternative, especially in states that lacked a strong central government, was long-term, low-interest loans marketed to the public, and guaranteed by town governments or local parliaments (fiscal intermediation). In some states, notably Venice and the Dutch Republic, a system like this worked well for centuries, but it could not cope with nearly exponential increases in the cost of war. During the Napoleonic era, a centralized state that monopolized the power to raise and spend money, as in England, became the European norm.

Keywords: Direct taxation, indirect taxation, short-term loans, long-term loans, financial intermediation, fiscal intermediation, the fiscal state

Fiscal history emerged as a sub-field in the 1980s, as a framework for providing the phenomena of taxation and state debt with a social and political context. There is now a rich array of monographs, together with important collections of more general studies. This chapter is both a review of the literature and an argument for a particular point of view, namely that taxation and state debt were two sides of the same coin. European governments of the early modern era lived on credit, some earlier than others, but almost all of them eventually. Thus ongoing expenses like wages for soldiers and salaries for officials were met by borrowing; as revenue came in, slowly, it was mainly applied to the service of debt. Readers will find separate sections on taxation and debt, because there are important issues that pertain only to one or the other. But connections between the two will be emphasized.

For scholars working from a Marxist perspective, government is a vehicle for the ruling class, and taxation another form of appropriation. But the study of how money was raised has usually led to the conclusion that states had objectives of their own, most obviously in the case of war. Indeed, the style of thinking now called Realpolitik was a product of the early modern era, with its long and terrible wars that seemed to follow one another without interruption. The size of armies and the cost of maintaining them increased exponentially. Emperor Charles V forced the surrender of Florence in 1530 with an army of 15,000 men; when he failed at the siege of Metz in 1552 he had 52,000 men. France sent 30,000 troops across the Alps in 1494, but for the War of the League of Augsburg (1688–97) Louis XIV had an army of 340,000. Behind the incessant quest for funds that plagued every government, the primum mobile was war.

By tradition, rulers were to support themselves from domain revenues that included tolls and seigneurial dues. That there was a gradual transition from a ‘domain state’ to a ‘tax state’ is generally agreed, although the phases and timing of the
transition remain under discussion. Also, the continuing importance of domain income varied enormously. By 1523 the French king received only 3 per cent of his income from domains. But Denmark, which controlled both sides of the Øresund until 1660, had nearly half its revenue from the Sound Toll as late as 1630. In many German principalities taxation was unknown until the sixteenth century. Finally, princely domains were enriched by confiscation of church lands during the Reformation. In England, such properties provided the bulk of Henry VIII’s income after 1534, but were then sold. In Sweden, where aristocrats lacked cash to buy land, Gustavus Adolphus was able to use one-time church farms to endow the salaries of the officers who led his armies across Germany.

Early medieval Europe had little experience of the idea that rulers had a right to ‘take’ the property of their subjects on a regular basis. As of about 1200, the per capita burden of revenues collected in France and England was only 5 per cent or 10 per cent of what it was in the great Asian empires of the day. Cultural and political barriers to taxation weakened during the Crusades; taxes levied across Europe by the papacy in the twelfth century paved the way for secular princes to do the same in the following century. To gain approval for taxes, they convened leading members of the nobility and the clergy, and (often if not always) representatives of the main towns. The great men got used to regular assemblies. During the early modern centuries, the privileged estates enjoyed their greatest influence. Through parliamentary assemblies, they steered tax burdens away from locally dominant interests, like landowners or merchants. Still, the levies to which they consented grew impressively. In Castile, the Crown collected a million ducats in 1522, 10 million in 1598. The County of Holland, backbone of the Dutch Revolt against Spain, raised 4.6 million guilders in 1599, 13 million in 1643. In England, taxation increased ‘by an almost imperceptible rate’, 440 per cent over two centuries, but then grew another 440 per cent in the century between 1688 and 1788.

Such figures have to be controlled for inflation; a 2 per cent annual rate, not uncommon after about 1550, would mean inflation of 270 per cent over fifty years. In the Ottoman Empire, where treasury receipts grew by more than 300 per cent over two centuries (1523–1748), the rate of inflation was a bit higher, meaning that the sultan’s real income declined. But European governments achieved real growth in revenue, for long periods if not necessarily for the whole time span of this chapter. In the Burgundian–Habsburg Netherlands, a fourteen-fold increase in revenue from 1445 to 1555, sustained by population growth and economic expansion, far exceeded inflation. In the Papal States, where prices roughly doubled from 1520 to 1640, taxation quadrupled. In real terms, Castile’s income was static during the seventeenth century, after quadrupling during the sixteenth century. The fact that European princes extracted more from their subjects than the Ottoman sultan did illustrates an important principle in fiscal history: to the extent that public business was transacted with some degree of transparency, taxpayers were less likely to evade the rules. As Montesquieu observed in his Spirit of the Laws, ‘One can raise taxes higher in proportion to the liberty of the subjects.’ In the eighteenth century, the States of Holland imposed on the province a per capita tax burden that meant 4 per cent of a labourer’s income. In the Papal States, which had no parliamentary assembly, the equivalent burden was only 2 per cent.

Yet higher taxes were not enough. To bridge the gap between income and expenses governments manipulated the currency, as in England’s ‘great debasement’ of 1542–51. In France, a series of depreciations between 1513 and 1636 reduced by half the silver value of the money of account. But since armies on the march demanded ready money, (p. 514) borrowing was the only remedy; hence debts mounted even faster than the costs of war. At his death in 1598, Spain’s Philip II had 10 million ducats of income and 68 million in debts. The Duchy of Milan, a Spanish province, had 2 million scudi of debt in 1600, and 44 million in 1660. Debt carried by the States of Holland rose from 21 million guilders in 1621 to 454 million in 1795. England had only 2 million pounds of debt under James II, but 834 million under George III (d. 1820). All the while, princes had a deservedly bad credit rating. England’s Edward III ruined the biggest banks in Florence when he partially repudiated his debts in 1343, and Spain’s monarchs did the same for Genoese firms that had faithfully served the dynasty, in 1597 and again in 1627. Why would any sensible burgher freely lend money to a prince? The short answer is that few people did. Usually, lenders dealt with trusted intermediaries acting on the ruler’s behalf.

Taxation
Parliamentary assemblies distinguished between ordinary and extraordinary taxation. The former was due at regular intervals, on the basis of multi-year agreements. The latter was acceptable only on special occasions, after the prince or his spokesmen had made a formal presentation on the amount requested, and why it was needed. In fact, ‘extraordinary’ taxes invariably became ‘ordinary’ with the passage of time. This is perhaps one example of why some economists think that government ‘can be modelled as a revenue-maximizing Leviathan’. The link between direct and indirect taxation was not discussed in exactly those terms, but contemporaries did distinguish between levies on property and taxes on daily transactions. In theory, the former could only be imposed by the supreme authority, while the latter could be introduced by town governments, with permission from their overlord. In practice, kings and princes of the fourteenth century rarely secured approval for direct taxes on property, or for excises collectible throughout the realm. Castile was an exception: in 1338, the Cortes granted a kingdom-wide alcabala or sales tax which became permanent after 1400. (The Arabic name suggests an institutional background that other European states lacked.) In France, the necessity of raising an enormous sum for the ransom of King Jean II—captured in 1356 by the English—compelled the Estates-General to break new ground. First, they approved an annual hearth tax; it was then abolished in the 1380s, only to be replaced by another direct tax, the taille. They also imposed a 5 per cent tax on sales, the aide, to be collected by élus (literally ‘elected ones’) chosen by the estates. These episodes foreshadowed future developments elsewhere. More commonly, fourteenth-century parliaments granted ordinary and extraordinary subsidies according to a quota system.

Apart from the aides in France and the alcabala in Castile, excises on items of daily consumption were the prerogative of town councils; with permission from their overlords, they relied especially on beer and wine taxes for their own needs, and in some cases for their quotas in subsidies for the sovereign. Around 1540, several states introduced or attempted to introduce excises collected on a territorial basis. In Castile, Charles V’s proposal in 1539 to introduce a sisa (in addition to the alcabala) was so firmly rejected by the Cortes that he swore never to mention the idea again. In 1542, as part of an agreement by which they agreed to take over Duke William IV’s debts, the estates of Bavaria funded the debt by instituting beer and wine taxes to be collected and disbursed by their own officials. Also in 1542, the provincial states of Charles V’s Netherlands accepted ‘novel means’ for raising an extraordinary subsidy: each parliament imposed beer and wine excises, collected and disbursed by its own officials, to help support the issuance of a new series of provincial bonds. Finally, in 1556 the estates of the individual Austrian duchies accepted a new tax on beer that was part of an agreement for taking over some of Emperor Ferdinand I’s debts. These efforts resemble one another closely enough to suggest ‘a basis in common planning’. Meanwhile, the sixteenth century also witnessed ‘the emergence of regularized direct taxation almost everywhere’, that is, property or wealth taxes to which hitherto exempt clergy and nobles were now for the first time subjected. But the principle of universal taxation remained more a goal than an achievement; the still-privileged estates resisted or set limits on direct levies, and indirect taxes, bearing more heavily on commoners, were easier to collect. In northern and central Italy, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, towns threw off the rule of their noble or ecclesiastical lords to become self-governing communes. In the thirteenth century, the ‘magnates’ or leading families were in many towns displaced by or had to share power with a sworn association that called itself the Popolo, made up of wealthy and middling burgHERa. The Popolo sought to eQualize fiscal burdens by introducing a property tax based on an assessment, the estimo. By the end of the thirteenth century, however, the governments of what were now city states relied more and more on indirect taxes, known as gabelle. Florence, for example, continued to tax the property of its subject towns and villages, but 1315 was the last time that citizens of the capital had to pay a tax on their property. Instead, the estimo was used as a basis for imposing forced loans, according to ancient Roman precedent. As one loan followed another, the capital was pooled in a Monte Commune, on which interest was to be paid at a stated rate, but often was not paid at all; as a result, shares of Monte stock traded at a fraction of par value. When magistrates raised rates in hopes of diminishing resistance to the loans, they also raised the issue of equity with new force: ordinary Florentines understood that their gabelle paid money into the coffers of the wealthy. They may have known too that ownership of Monte credits was concentrated in a small number of households. In 1379, the government announced a tax to be collected according to the estimo; but protests were such that it was converted to a loan, and the effort to tax Florentines directly was abandoned. As for subject territories, the rate for their property taxes was tripled in 1384.
In Venice, the idea of *la Serenissima Repubblica*, untouched by the violent factionalism that plagued other Italian cities, was carefully cultivated by the magistrates, but it also had a basis in reality. In financial matters, Venice’s role as entrepôt for trade with the East allowed the imposition of substantial tolls on foreigners while Venetians paid nominal fees. Here too, the *estimo* was used as a basis for forced loans, starting in 1187. Because revenue from indirect taxes was abundant, Venice did not use the *estimo* for direct taxation until the fifteenth century. A first effort was rescinded because of resistance from intended lenders, but in 1463 the government introduced a *decima* which was intended to obviate further resort to forced loans. In fact, the *decima* was used over the next half century both as a tax and as a forced loan. In different ways, then, Venice and Florence illustrate a common trend: Italian city states mainly relied on indirect taxes, calling on the wealthy more for loans than for direct taxes.

The Low Countries—the Rhine–Maas delta—was the other great hub of economic activity in the late Middle Ages. Flanders and Brabant were the most important provinces, with maritime Holland a distant third. Even as the Dukes of Burgundy and their Habsburg successors gradually brought the region under a common sovereign, the provinces guarded their autonomy: subsidies for the central government were agreed to not by the States General, which was mainly a forum for discussion, but by the states of each individual province. The imperious Duke Charles the Bold imposed a hearth tax that extended even to the subjects of great nobles who ruled as virtual princes in their own lands, but it ended with his death in 1477. During the sixteenth century, the pressure of wars with France allowed the government to introduce the excises mentioned earlier. The new tax regime also included levies on land, if not on trade. While Mary of Hungary invoked her ‘absolute power’ to override Holland’s rejection of a tax on exports, the result did not warrant continuing the experiment: the Italian banker who underwrote the project by advancing funds had to accept a loss.

Under Philip II of Spain, Habsburg authorities in the Netherlands made themselves unpopular, first by insisting on the death penalty for religious dissenters, as the law required, and then by attempting to impose a ‘tenth-penny’ sales tax that looked suspiciously like the *alcabala*. William of Orange led the open resistance that began in 1568, in which Calvinists took a leading role. As of 1572 the rebellion had a defensible beachhead in two northern provinces, Holland and Zeeland. Almost at once, the States of Holland diverted the excise and land taxes to the needs of the war, leaving holders of pre-Revolt debt high and dry. Holland’s credit was of course seriously impaired by this decision. But the ‘common means’, as these taxes were now called, sustained the Dutch Republic through a war with Spain that lasted until 1648, and until its demise at the end of the eighteenth century. The revenue base was expanded by taxing multiple commodities and activities, although there was, in the eighteenth century, an effort to address the question of fairness by resorting more often to property taxes, and by focusing excises on luxuries. A 1797 tax on playing cards was the last of sixty-one excises to be included in the ‘common means’. It has been suggested that the tax burden contributed to the stagnation of a hitherto dynamic economy, observable after about 1670. Meanwhile, the Revolt had reinforced provincial autonomy. The States General claimed to exercise sovereign authority, but in financial matters it seldom did. As before, taxes were collected by locally approved tax farmers and remitted to the States General by provincial officials. Convoy and licence fees intended for the navy, the only taxes not collected by the provinces, were widely evaded.

France’s kings were, from the fifteenth century, rightly thought to be the only monarchs in Europe who could raise taxes without the consent of their estates. From the (p. 517) 1350s, *aides* were voted for intervals, usually three years. But in 1436, the Estates-General of *Langue d’oil* did not include a time limit when they voted an extension of the *aides*. Without asserting that any change had taken place, Charles VII’s government simply went on collecting the tax: ‘never again . . . were the people asked to vote *aides*.’ Yet there were now two kinds of provinces in France. In areas that had long been part of the royal domain, provincial estates either atrophied or were suppressed by royal authority. In these *pays d’élections*, royal officials known as *élus* assessed the tax burden of each locality, and arranged auctions for tax farmers. But in territories brought under the Crown after about 1450, the estates remained vigorous. These *pays d’états*, making up the periphery of eighteenth-century France, included large and populous provinces that might in other circumstances have become independent kingdoms, like Brittany, Burgundy, and Provence. Here, the estates apportioned and supervised collection of traditional taxes, and they also had to give their approval for any new taxes.
The limits of what estates could do were tested under Louis XIV (1661–1715). During the wars of his last decades, enemies were impressed by Louis’s ability to impose new and lucrative taxes arbitrarily: the capitation or head tax of 1695, and the dixième or tenth-penny on all income in 1710. The fact that the dixième was abolished in 1717, after protest by France’s high courts or parlements, points to a check on royal authority. But the dixième was then re-imposed during the next war, and was eventually transmuted into a permanent tax, the vingtième or twentieth penny. Although it is sometimes maintained that an absolute monarchy could not have sustained competition with a parliamentary monarchy like England’s, the fiscal history of the eighteenth century does not unequivocally support this conclusion. Had Louis XVI not renounced the practice of periodically repudiating royal debt, it is by no means clear that France’s indebtedness would have required, in 1788, the convening of an Estates-General.46

The Holy Roman Empire is still sometimes presented as a ramshackle conglomeration that was hardly a real state until about 1500, and was thereafter hobbled by religious conflict. But this picture has largely been dismantled by recent scholarship. It is true that the imperial institutions created in the 1490s functioned only sporadically during the early decades of the Reformation. But then Archduke Ferdinand disobeyed his brother Charles V by striking a bargain with their Lutheran rival, Duke Maurice of Saxony. Under the framework of legal equality established by the 1555 League of Augsburg, Lutheran and Catholic territories collaborated on common objectives, one of which was stopping the Ottoman advance through Hungary.47 ‘Turk taxes’ (Türkensteuer), apportioned by the Diet among 383 territories, were calculated in the ‘Rome month’: six Rome months was the sum needed to have an army of proper size accompany the emperor-elect to Rome for his coronation by the Pope.48 The Diet raised 4.3 million Rhine gulden in Turk taxes between 1521 and 1556, but 23.3 million for the period from 1557 to 1607. Had it not been for this infusion of cash from the empire, the Habsburg Monarchy in Austria and Bohemia would not have been able to solidify its 1,000-kilometre long Military Frontier in Hungary and Croatia.49 Meanwhile, some territories, like Bavaria and Saxony, already had a well-developed system of taxation, administered by the estates. Elsewhere, ‘Turk (p. 518) taxes’ at the imperial level helped pave the way for the introduction of princely taxation, as in Hesse, which as of the 1550s had still relied on domain revenue.50

Castile had no provinces. Instead, the kingdom was divided into municipalities, such that every speck of land was considered subject to one town or another—hence the Crown’s ability to make money by selling township rights to rich villages. The most important cities were the eighteen which had the right of representation in the Cortes.51 From about 1490 to about 1650, these cities were in effect the chief administrators of royal taxation. Through much of the fifteenth century, the alcabala had been collected by tax farmers. But Queen Isabella (r. 1476–1504) questioned whether this tax truly was part of the royal domain. Her doubts were resolved by an agreement with the Cortes in 1494: hereafter, the alcabala was collected by town governments for terms of up to fifteen years, at a fixed rate based upon a capitation or encabezamiento. The Crown now had the luxury of a reliable income, but the fact that receipts were not tied to inflation was soon recognized as a liability.52 Hence the Crown pressed the Cortes for larger and larger servicios. The average annual value of these direct grants during the second half of Charles V’s reign was 60 per cent greater than during the first half (adjusted for inflation: 37 per cent). But the servicios too were raised by town governments, using whatever means they chose.53 In 1590 Philip II persuaded the Cortes to approve a second and more burdensome direct tax, the servicios de millones, tied to creation of a new issue of debt. But the towns remained in control, and over the next several decades receipts lagged, because urban magistrates were unwilling to impose real burdens on their social peers.54 Philip IV (r. 1621–65) concluded that his revenue system could no longer support an ambitious foreign policy. He achieved ‘fiscal disarmament’ by 1650, reducing taxes and cancelling debts owed by the towns. The servicios de millones were still collected, but, after 1657, by the treasury.55

England had neither provinces nor towns that played a quasi-autonomous role in financial administration.56 That Anglo-Saxon England was already a ‘tax state’ is debatable, but the kingdom undoubtedly had national taxation, through grants by parliament, from an early date.57 The government relied on taxes on trade during the fourteenth century, owing to foreign demand for high-quality English wool, but less so after about 1450, as English broadcloth supplanted raw wool as the principal export. By comparison with other countries, ‘England was relatively little taxed.’ As measured in constant prices, total revenue in 1670 was only four times greater than it had been in 1490.58 The Commonwealth had experimented with
new indirect taxes, including excises on beer and other items of common consumption, but most of these were rescinded after the monarchy was restored in 1660. The turning point came with the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688. Taxes in that year were still low by comparison with France, but on a per capita basis they doubled over the next ten years. According to a constant-prices index, taxation stood at 400 in 1670, 1,200 in 1720, and 6,400 in 1820. The great bulk of the increase came from indirect taxes, not only because taxation was extended to more and more commodities, but also because the introduction during Charles II’s reign of a professional civil service, replacing tax farmers, improved the efficiency of collection. England multiplied its excise taxes roughly a century later than the Dutch Republic did, and, because of continuing population and economic growth, sustained its tax regime through the eighteenth century.

State Debt

It seems safe to assume that all governments presiding over market economies have been creditors in one way or another. In ancient Rome, syndicates of tax farmers were regularly called on to make advances on their contracts. In Ming China, merchants wishing to buy salt from the imperial monopoly also had to purchase ‘licences’ on which delivery might not be made for thirty years. In Mughal India, ‘portfolio capitalists’ protected their business interests by serving the government as tax farmers and lenders. The Ottoman state borrowed too, not from bankers, but from officials, and from the surplus funds of pious foundations. In a pinch, as during the Habsburg-Ottoman war of 1593–1606, the sultan could authorize huge loans from his private treasury to the state treasury.

In medieval Europe, forced loans in the Italian city states are recorded from the later 1100s, but loans to princes by consortia of money-changers and pawn-brokers—Jews and northern Italians—do not begin to be documented until the 1200s. The Ricciardi of Lucca had a contract to farm the English wool toll in 1275, and in the County of Flanders ‘the financiers of Arras held the Flemish authorities in their collective pockets by the end of the 13th Century’. Meanwhile, town governments in the Low Countries—and, possibly, those of northern France as well—stepped in to shore up the credit of their respective rulers. For example, Dordrecht and Haarlem guaranteed loans for Count Floris V of Holland (r. 1266–96). Both of these kinds of transaction involved intermediation. In the one case, money-changers pooled the resources of their associates to make loans—much as the Fugger or the Spinola would do in later centuries. Alternatively, town governments stood surety for credit that was in some cases provided by their own burghers. For the procedure involving bankers, the term ‘financial intermediation’ has an established place in the literature. For the procedure involving town governments and (somewhat later) provincial parliaments, ‘fiscal intermediation’ seems an appropriate label.

Financial Intermediation: Bankers and Short-term Debt

Bankers in Italy developed the techniques that others would follow. In Rome, ‘merchants following the Roman court’ were active from the thirteenth century in transferring funds to and from various parts of Europe, and also as tax farmers. Perhaps because they had to be a bit more scrupulous about usury laws than secular rulers, the popes did not start borrowing from their bankers until the late fourteenth century. The Depositary for the Apostolic Chamber was a banker who was expected to make up any shortfalls (p. 520) by advances from his own funds. From 1411, the office was held for seventy-five years by nominees of Florence’s Medici bank, and then from 1513 until late in the sixteenth century by the Strozzi and other Florentine firms. Meanwhile, Medici rulers in Florence relied on the Strozzi and others: the bankers borrowed from associates at 8 per cent or 9 per cent, then lent to the government at 12 per cent or 14 per cent. This was ‘a typical system of borrowing associated with personal rule’, that is, ‘a profitable business for a rather narrow circle’.

Venice was far more cautious in dealing with its financial firms, and the bankers in turn showed little interest in lending to the Signoria. In the fourteenth century, government agencies like the grain office and the procurators of St. Mark accepted large deposits from nobles and even from ruling princes in Lombardy, but for safekeeping only, without payment of interest. From about 1450, bankers assisted in the repayment of forced loans, not with cash, but rather by opening lines of credit to the benefit of citizen-lenders; in other words, bankers assumed the burden of awaiting payment from the government. They
also extended credit directly, in loans the documents describe as interest-free; the government probably did favours for lenders in some other way. In any case, the role of bankers in state finance declined after around 1525.\footnote{68}

Despite its unusually turbulent history of factional conflict, Genoa developed an original and highly successful way of raising money. From early in the thirteenth century, subscribers to each new loan formed a syndicate or \textit{compera} which was vested with the right to collect a tax instituted by the commune in order to service the loan. The first consolidation took place in 1259, when existing \textit{compera} were folded into a ‘salt syndicate’ with rights to receipts from the salt office. Early in the fifteenth century, all current debts, running at rates between 8 per cent and 10 per cent, were converted to 7 per cent loans administered by ‘the new syndicate of St. George’, which from 1408 also functioned as a bank. There were by now some 11,000 shareholders, virtually equivalent to the entire citizen body. Although the commune renounced all its rights, even the right to inspect the books, the \textit{Banco di San Giorgio} was ‘not just the largest but the best-run commercial enterprise of the Middle Ages’. By the early sixteenth century, when shares paid only 2.7 per cent, they were mainly held by charitable foundations. In 1586, the bank opened a gold registry: those who deposited specie received a credit that could be transferred to third parties. This arrangement helped Genoa become Europe’s leading financial centre for the next quarter-century.\footnote{69}

Even in the eighteenth century, long after the city’s money-men had turned to safer investments, the \textit{San Giorgio’s} reputation inspired would-be imitators in northern Europe.\footnote{70}

During the sixteenth century, France relied for loans on foreign firms active at the fairs of Lyons. The bankers were Italian, mainly Tuscan, because Genoese lenders disappeared once their city became closely tied to Emperor Charles V,\footnote{71} and the Venetians never showed much interest. None of them made lending to the Crown his main business, and loans had to be guaranteed by someone who was ‘very close to the centre of power’, or at least ‘organically linked to the king’s finances’. Existing loans were consolidated in the so-called \textit{Grand Parti} of 1555, in which lenders showed great interest, until the Crown stopped payment in 1559: the enormous debt that resulted was not liquidated (p. 521) for another forty years. Italian bankers were still willing to lend, at the right rate, but it seems that royal officials shifted their focus to domestic sources of credit, including long-term loans that are discussed later.\footnote{72}

Although there were dominant finance ministers from time to time, the management of France’s finances was collegial,\footnote{73} not just at the highest level, surrounding the king, but in each administrative district, where financial and judicial \textit{officiers} were grouped in \textit{corps}. The accelerated sale of offices that began in the late sixteenth century meant both an honourable future for bourgeois investors, and a flow of capital to the state’s immediate needs. Insofar as \textit{officiers} were vested with privileges whose curtailment could bring open rebellion,\footnote{74} the Crown created a nemesis. But the \textit{officiers} also became the main source of credit in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as each new war drove the demand for credit to a higher peak. Richelieu and his advisers borrowed 17 million \textit{lives tournois} in 1631, and 69 million in 1633, as France recruited allies to thwart the apparent successes of the Habsburgs in Germany. The \textit{Chambre des Comptes}, France’s audit board, sought the records of loan transactions, but the king’s council refused, lest the high rates accorded to favoured lenders become more widely known.\footnote{75} Under Louis XIV, the government regularly extracted short-term loans from \textit{corps} of officials, like the \textit{Parlements}.\footnote{76} \textit{Corps} were also required to issue \textit{rentes} (bonds), secured by the property value of their offices; augmenting \textit{officier} salaries to service of the debt cost less than what the Crown would have paid for \textit{rentes} sold directly by the treasury, for which investors demanded higher interest.\footnote{77} As venal officeholders became a fixture of French life, they were praised by some as a noble bulwark against royal tyranny, and denounced by others as leeches extracting the blood of taxpayers. They were also ‘squeezed’ to cough up money for the king. During the eighteenth century, some 6,000 were hauled before the courts for alleged offences, and 4,400 were found guilty.\footnote{78}

Spain was the magnet for Europe’s greatest banking houses from around 1520 to about 1630. Here, lenders could choose sureties for their \textit{asientos} (contracts) from an array of revenues not on offer at any other court. There were taxes on church wealth that Rome granted the Habsborgs, continuing a tradition tracing back to the wars between late medieval Castile and Moorish Grenada.\footnote{79} There was also the famous ‘royal fifth’ of treasure flowing from the New World, especially after silver mines opened in Potosí (modern Bolivia) around 1550.\footnote{80} But the real secret of Spain’s success in international financial markets was the conversion of its principal tax revenues to the service of debt.\footnote{81} The \textit{encabezamiento} agreements...
assured a regular flow of *alcabala* income over fifteen-year terms. Charles V’s ministers used this income stream to fund a vast expansion of the treasury bonds known as *juros*; the capital outstanding was 3.6 million ducats in 1514, 124.4 million in 1554. *Juros* paid interest indefinitely, until that unlikely day when the treasury redeemed the capital. But bankers were not interested, since their short-term loans commanded rates that might be three times higher. They did, however, demand back-up *juros* that would start paying interest if treasury officials missed payment on their loans. When Philip II suspended payments on his short-term debt, in 1557, and again in 1575 and 1597, his bankers were not left high and dry, as they were in France after the failure of the *Grand Parti*: they received *juros* promising a secure if much lower (p. 522) return. To recover their capital, bankers sold *juros* on the secondary market. Moreover, the Genoese consortia who were the Crown’s main lenders during Philip’s reign had other means of defending their interests. In Genoa, as in Augsburg, one could invest in the state loans of the great bankers, but with a difference. In Augsburg, the Fuggers were fully liable to co-parties if the Crown defaulted; in Genoa, subordinate lenders agreed to share in losses as well as gains. Also, by investing in one another’s loan contracts, the Genoese formed a common front, making it impossible for Crown financial officials to make individual bargains.83

As of about 1560, interest on the *juro* debt was virtually equal to the *encabeziamento* income. How was the funding base to be expanded? Philip II eventually found a solution in the *servicios de millones* of 1590, which supported new issues of *juros*. With a secure fall-back for the Crown’s credit re-established, Genoese bankers opened their purses wider than ever. The largest *asiento* ever signed, for nearly 12.5 million ducats, came in 1623, and led directly to an important if rare Spanish victory against the Dutch. But, as noted earlier, income from the *servicios de millones* fell short of what was expected, and the Crown resorted to new measures, including heavy taxes on *juro* income. The Genoese pulled out after the 1627 suspension of payments. Even though the Portuguese Jews who replaced them pulled off yet another ‘financial miracle’ in the 1630s, Spain’s capacity to borrow had declined,84 just as its enemies were raising more and more in both short-term and long-term loans.

### Long-term Debt

Medieval Europe had two kinds of long-term debt.85 In Italy, from the 1100s, communes imposed forced loans, as ancient Rome had done. Sooner or later, governments all across Europe resorted to such measures in times of pressing need.86 But as a repeatable method for raising large sums, compulsion became less productive over time. In Siena, lenders demanded receipts for double what they paid. In Florence the secondary market rate for *monte* shares fluctuated around 30 per cent. In Venice *monte* credits were redeemed not at face value but at market rates of 20 per cent or less. Arguably, the forced-loan *monti* did not constitute genuine public debts.87

In any case, the focus here will be on a kind of long-term debt which had greater staying power: subscription to loans was voluntary, and regular payment of interest was guaranteed by the dedication to this purpose of specific, reliable revenues.88 Greek city states of the first century B.C. raised voluntary subscription loans that paid 10 per cent over the life of the lender,89 but this achievement left little impression in the historical record. Voluntary long-term debt was thus re-invented by northern French towns in the thirteenth century.90 The example of Castile’s *juros* shows that there was no reason why a sovereign could not underwrite debt of this kind—provided he had a familiar and assured stream of income comparable to the *alcabala*. More commonly, however, princes relied on intermediate levels of government to broker voluntary loans: (p. 523)

A provincial or urban government provided loans to the state, the debt being administered by the mediators themselves . . . As their fiscal apparatus was under close scrutiny, thus guaranteeing the payments on the debt charges, interest rates could be significantly lower than those attached to direct loans of the central government.91

### Fiscal Intermediation: Town Governments

Urban power developed more readily in some areas than others. While England, France, Castile, and Naples had monarchs
to keep a jealous eye on town privileges, towns that were to one degree or another autonomous flourished in Lotharingian Europe, the one-time realm of Charlemagne’s middle grandson, stretching from the North Sea down through Germany into central Italy. In the Low Countries, towns that issued their own *rentes* or *renten* (bonds) from around 1300 gained valuable expertise in the management of debt. Burgundian and Habsburg rulers were often frustrated by the pretensions of ‘great cities’ with rights of representation in provincial parliaments. But town corporations known to enjoy a certain autonomy could also serve the government. Antwerp, for example, extended credit to Charles V and guaranteed some of his loans on the Antwerp exchange. In Flanders, the Franc of Bruges, a federation of small towns and rural castleries, served a similar function. In the famously decentralized Dutch Republic, faith in local governments—the cities as well as the provinces—supported massive public borrowing at low rates. In the early years of the Revolt, when the States of Holland had forfeited its once solid credit rating, the towns came to the rescue: they agreed to issue *renten* in the name of the province, backed by revenues entrusted to them by the States.

Germany had only a few large cities, but, along with dozens of the many smaller towns, they enjoyed from the thirteenth century the status of free imperial cities, subject to no prince save an emperor who demanded at most an annual tax. If cities here began issuing bonds a bit later than in the Low Countries, their credit networks were if anything even more extensive. In 1408, Rothenburg-ob-der-Tauber, with perhaps 5,000 inhabitants, had buyers for its bonds in 120 different towns. But cities not ruled by a prince also lacked a rescuer-of-last-resort. The fact that Mainz allowed interest expenses to reach 75 per cent of its income was a prelude to trouble: in 1460, the archbishop-elector forcibly asserted control over a city that his predecessors had not ruled for 200 years. Most towns kept their credit afloat and were thus invaluable to successive Habsburg emperors. As in the Low Countries, burghers subscribed to loans of various kinds, some of which were guaranteed by their town governments. For example, much of what was recorded as domain income for the Habsburg Austrian lands actually represented money from lenders in anticipation of domain receipts. In this sense, ‘the financial system of the Holy Roman Empire rested almost entirely on the cities.’

In Italy, states relied on their major towns in much the same way. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Republic of Venice regularly contracted loans from the cities of its Terraferma provinces. In Spanish Milan, both the capital city and a ‘Congregation of the Contado’, representing nine smaller cities and the countryside, had a role in financial administration. In 1660, when debts guaranteed by the province had swelled to 60 million scudi, payment was suspended, and the debt was taken over by the *Banco di San Ambrogio*, an imitator of the *Banco di San Giorgio*. In the Papal States, Bologna, the largest city outside of Rome itself, underwrote twenty-six voluntary subscription *monti* on behalf of the central government between 1560 and 1650.

In France, the monarchy diverted to its own purposes the capacity for long-term debt shown by northern French towns. But it was also convenient to treat cities as autonomous. In 1522, the Crown alienated certain taxes to the *Hôtel de Ville* of Paris, to support a small issue of *rentes* on the king’s behalf. In the 1550s, some *rentes* underwritten by Paris and Lyons were converted to shares in the *Grand Parti*. *Rentes* were used far more extensively in the 1570s; in many cases *rente* purchases were in effect forced loans, but there is also evidence that the wealthy and ambitious men who purchased offices also invested voluntarily in *rentes*. In 1576 Paris was ‘frog-marched’ into extending a huge credit to the Crown, subsequently converted to *rentes*. In time of war the Crown regularly extracted large loans from the cities, and many of these too were likely converted to long-term *rentes*. Over the next two centuries, debt originating in many different ways was converted to *rentes sur l’Hôtel de Ville*, at least for form’s sake. In the 1780s, the *Ferme Générale*, which collected most of the king’s revenues, transferred two-thirds of its receipts to the government of Paris, for payment of *rente* interest.

**Financial Intermediation: Provincial Parliaments**

The Crown of Aragon was comprised of five small kingdoms, including Catalonia, each with its own *corts* or estates. As they voted higher subsidies for the king’s Mediterranean wars, from 1320, towns borrowed to pay their portion. In 1344, the king gave the towns permission to issue *rentas* so as to repay their high-interest short-term loans; the *rentas* were either for
the life of a named beneficiary (violarios), or, at lower rates, transmissible to one’s heirs (censales). In the 1360s the estates approved new kingdom-wide taxes, the generalidades, to be collected by commissions of the estates. Against this revenue the estates themselves began issuing rentas, although it worked best if individual towns issued them in the name of the estates. Well into the fifteenth century, both towns and estates still allocated more than half their revenues to the service of these fourteenth-century debts. Under the Catholic kings and then the Habsburgs, Aragon, insisting on its distinct laws and traditions, never paid a fair share to the Spanish fisc. It may be that Aragon’s extraordinary financial exertions during the fourteenth century cast a long shadow into the future. In any case, Aragon finally had its privileges revoked by Philip V in 1707.

The principle of reprisals made it difficult for a province to pledge its full faith and credit, since burghers venturing beyond the border could be arrested for non-payment of interest on provincial debts. Hence the precocious entry into the credit markets by Aragon’s provincial estates was not replicated elsewhere for some time. In 1482 the States of Holland supported a war against Utrecht by issuing renten, backed by parcels of domain entrusted to the States for this purpose. For two decades (1515–36) Holland and some other provinces issued renten funded by their ordinary subsidies. But if subsidies were burdened beyond a certain point the government would lose its main source of income. In 1543 the States agreed to ‘novel expedients’: each province undertook new issues of renten, backed by excises and other taxes collected and disbursed by its own officials. If purchase quotas for renten were still assigned to wealthy individuals, this practice was abandoned in the 1550s, so that Holland and other provinces now had a free market for public securities. The picture darkened in the 1570s when Holland, heart and soul of the rebellion against Spain, diverted to other needs the taxes hitherto earmarked for the renten. But as rebel provinces prospered behind a well-defended cordon sanitaire, the market for state credits flourished as never before. Holland’s debt was now mainly in the form of obligaties; unlike renten, these were made out ‘to the bearer’, and did not have to be brought to a tax office to record a transfer. The sum on which Holland’s officials paid interest rose from 50 million guilders in 1632 to 150 million by 1678, 300 million by 1720, and 450 million by 1795. Meanwhile, interest rates had come back down to a pre-Revolt level of 6.25 per cent by 1611; thereafter, rates were reduced to 5 per cent, 4 per cent, and eventually 3 per cent. Against the background of a stagnant Dutch economy things were not quite so rosy in the eighteenth century; there were brief suspensions of payment in 1715 and again in 1753. But until about 1700, securities marketed by the province of Holland were the gold standard for European state debt.

In Germany, sixteenth-century princes accumulated huge debts that sooner or later had to be taken over by the territorial estates. In Saxony, the beer excise was transferred to the estates in 1552, as part of an agreement by which they assumed responsibility for the duke’s debts. Bavaria’s estates had administered the duchy’s finances for some time. Taxes they voted in 1511 to pay off the duke’s debts could not keep up with his borrowing. Hence new taxes had to be introduced and then augmented, each one collected and disbursed by officials answerable to a permanent committee of the estates: in 1526, 1542, 1545, 1556, 1562, 1572, 1575, 1587, and 1588. There were other taxes the dukes levied by decree, but when taxes collected by the estates were audited ducal officials could not be present. Then came Duke Maximilian I (r. 1597–1651). He curtailed spending, reformed tax collection, and summoned the estates only on rare occasions. Yet taxes that serviced old debts were still collected by estates officials, and not even Maximilian I could extract from them more than a verbal summary of their accounts. In the Austrian duchies and in the lands of the Bohemian Crown, both ruled by the Habsburgs, the estates gradually superseded the bankers of Augsburg as the dynasty’s main creditors, especially during the Long Turkish War of 1593–1606. When Ferdinand II became Holy Roman Emperor in 1619, his 3 million gulden in tax revenues were entirely managed by the estates; there (p. 526) were also 2.4 million in domain revenues, but these too were mostly pledged to the estates, for the service of debt.

Yet the capacity and the willingness of German estates to shoulder more debt reached a limit around 1600, even before much of Germany was devastated in the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48). During the war Ferdinand II relied on a series of ad hoc fiscal expedients. The army that defeated Bohemia’s rebels at White Mountain (1620) was led and paid for by Ferdinand’s cousin, Maximilian I of Bavaria, who expended in this way the treasure he had stored up. The huge army that fought for Ferdinand under Albrecht von Wallenstein (d. 1634) was supported by a complicated financial scheme, organized by Wallenstein’s Flemish Calvinist banker, Hans de Witte. The generalissimo imposed levies on occupied
territories, but these ‘contributions’ trickled in slowly, leaving the men in want of ready money. De Witte supplied funds from loans raised by agents in as many as sixty cities, often from investors who had no idea what purpose their capital served.\footnote{114} Emperor Leopold I (r. 1658–1705) turned to Jewish financiers, appointing Samuel Oppenheimer of Heidelberg as \textit{Oberfaktor} and \textit{Hofjude}. Oppenheimer was assisted by Samson Wertheimer, who was also chief rabbi of Hungary. Following the failed Ottoman siege of 1683, Vienna’s Jewish bankers raised funds for campaigns that eventually reclaimed Hungary for the Habsburgs. But upon Oppenheimer’s death in 1703 Leopold repudiated the huge debt owed to his firm—a step no doubt facilitated by a prevailing climate of anti-Semitism.\footnote{115} Meanwhile, estates committees continued to collect and disburse traditional revenues, beyond the reach of a monarchy bent on centralization. Under Empress Maria Theresa, the Austrian and Bohemian estates were finally stripped of their fiscal prerogatives.\footnote{116}

The French monarchy had a disproportionate share of its income from the \textit{pays d’élèctions}, which had no estates to haggle about the modalities of taxing and borrowing.\footnote{117} Conversely, in the \textit{pays d’états}, the Crown made use of the estates to mobilize regional credit. In Burgundy, the estates met every three years, and elected a commission to transact business in the interval. In 1689, Louis XIV’s emissaries confronted the commission with a demand for an extraordinary tax, almost equivalent to the \textit{taille}. When the commission insisted that this matter had to await a meeting of the full estates two years hence, the men from Paris had a new idea: the estates would be vested with familiar and lucrative Saône river toll, against which they could sell \textit{rentes} to meet the king’s demand. On this and subsequent occasions, the procedure worked so well that Burgundian investors wishing to buy \textit{rentes} complained they were being crowded out by the money-men of Paris. On into the second half of the eighteenth century, ‘the monarchy used the superior credit of the estates to borrow on a massive scale’.

\section*{Sovereign Long-term Debt}

As a model case of sovereign debt, historians usually point to eighteenth-century England, where parliament pledged the full faith and credit of an entire nation. The States General of the Dutch Republic had a national debt too, from around 1600, although it (p. 527) makes a poor cousin to the English case, because the States of Holland, theoretically subordinate to the States General, carried a debt that was five times larger.\footnote{119} But one should not restrict the term sovereign only to those debts that had the backing of a national parliament. A debt guaranteed by the sovereign, on which interest was paid faithfully over a prolonged period, deserves the same recognition. The \textit{juros} of sixteenth-century Castile would thus qualify as sovereign debt, and so would the voluntary debt of the Papal States, starting with the \textit{Monte della Fede} of 1526. Forty \textit{monti} were created by the end of the sixteenth century, and the total debt virtually doubled under Urban VIII (r. 1623–44). The specific tax attached to each \textit{monte} was administered by a college of investors who met annually to elect officials. The guarantee of regular payment—together with a seventeenth-century investment climate not rich in other opportunities—meant that shares of stock for favoured \textit{monti} sold at premiums as high as 139 per cent.\footnote{120}

It was also in 1526 that Venice began accepting deposits of specie at the Mint (\textit{Zecca}). Depositors were initially promised an annual ‘gift’ of 15 per cent. Subsequently, rates fluctuated between 5 per cent and 9 per cent, although they reached 14 per cent during the Ottoman war of 1570–73. Unlike \textit{monte} credits, based on forced loans, interest payments on deposits at the Mint were never interrupted, and never taxed. After the Republic had lost many of its Mediterranean possessions to the Ottomans, there was strong support among the ruling elite for retrenchment. In 1577 the Senate created a sinking fund, using among other resources the proceeds of certain direct taxes. By 1589, the \textit{Zecca} debt was retired altogether, and treasury officials worked on what was left of old \textit{monti} debts. There were, however, new wars in the seventeenth century, so the Mint was re-opened for deposits. As interest rates were reduced, religious and charitable foundations became conspicuous holders of credits at the Mint. Owing to contraction of the local economy in the eighteenth century, payments fell into arrears, and the value of credits on the secondary market sank. In 1767, the government liquidated its debt again, this time in terms that amounted to a bankruptcy: Mint credits were redeemed at their market value, about 30 per cent. Venice floated new loans in 1785, but without success; investors in Antwerp and Genoa had not forgotten 1767.\footnote{121}

Until the latter part of the seventeenth century, England borrowed and spent at comparatively modest levels.\footnote{122} The fact
that there was no large overhang of old debt might have made borrowing easier, but England had no basis for long-term debt, since taxes were voted by parliament only for short intervals. The post-Restoration Crown relied for loans on goldsmiths in the City of London. Then in 1665 a treasury official, George Downing, won approval for a new idea: the Exchequer issued certificates at 6 per cent interest, backed by a parliamentary grant. Payment was suspended when Charles II ‘stopped’ the Exchequer a few years later, but the annuities creditors later received were the first beginning of a national debt. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the House of Commons took firm and visible control of state funds; this meant that investors could trust parliament’s ability to earmark revenues for the service of debt. Hence debt expanded to meet the needs of wars against Louis XIV and his successors.

The conversion of short-term to long-term debt was not easy, since perpetual annuities proved unexpectedly unpopular, in part because transfers had to be registered at the Exchequer. Hence when the South Sea Company was founded in 1711, government annuities were made convertible to shares in what seemed a promising venture. Only after the Company’s collapse in 1720 was a solution found: the Bank of England began issuing annuities that were both perpetual and redeemable. After the War of Austrian Succession in the 1740s, the government again struggled to reduce the level of service charges. Chancellor Henry Pelham found a way forward in 1749 by reducing 4 per cent loans to 3.5 per cent and then 3 per cent. Market conditions were now such that only one in ten investors demanded to have his money back. In 1752, various issues of 3 per cent debt were consolidated into one large stock administered by the Bank of England. As a mark of public confidence in state debt, these ‘consols’ were soon trading above par. The whole development from the 1660s through the 1750s, not any particular part of it, deserves recognition as England’s ‘financial revolution’.

Conclusion

Given that historians will usually disagree about almost anything, there is among fiscal historians a remarkable degree of consensus on two propositions. The first is that one may speak of fiscal modernity only in connection with what may be called ‘fiscal states’, that is, ‘states in which the central government monopolizes taxation, privileges end, and individuals not corporate bodies become the basis for taxation’. Centralization was thus the ‘sine qua non’ for the formation of a fiscal state. A fiscal state was also one that had a steady and secure flow of tax revenue which formed the basis for large-scale borrowing at low rates, with no threat of default. Since this happy condition had to be supported by a dynamic economy, self-sustained growth is another characteristic that distinguishes the fiscal state from the ‘tax states’ or ‘finance states’ that were its historical predecessors. The second proposition is that England was by 1800 or so the first fiscal state. England’s only possible competitor in this regard was the Dutch Republic, but here there is agreement that the Netherlands faltered in the eighteenth century, in part because of the inadequacies of a federal system in which sovereignty was shared by the provinces. There was from the 1770s a party of reformers calling for greater centralization, but finances were not brought under a unified central control until the period of Napoleonic rule in the early nineteenth century. In any case England did not long remain the only fiscal state. The period from 1783 to 1815 was a crucible of modernity, and not just in Europe: it marked ‘a conjuncture in the history of state formation when geopolitical and internal pressures to reform intensified and persisted almost everywhere down to 1914’.

This picture of things has been built up by careful scholars working from a great variety of materials. Nonetheless, it has the potential weaknesses of any argument for historical modernity, of which two may be mentioned. First, the notion of modernity often if not necessarily implies that problems have been solved in such a way that they need not be solved again, unless the terms of the solution come unravelled. Since problems that impeded the emergence of fiscal states were solved by centralization, any subsequent move towards de-centralization could only mean a regression. Yet there are today European nations where debt is issued and managed by provincial as well as national governments, like Germany, Spain, and Switzerland. This is not to suggest that the Bundesrepublik will one day need bailing out by der Freistaat Bayern, nor that the United States’ federal treasury will have to be bailed out by the sovereign state of Texas; the era of what I have called fiscal intermediation is well and truly past. But it is worth remembering that both the Republic of Venice and the province of...
Holland managed enormous debts quite well for nearly two centuries. Now that the fiscal state shows a few cracks, after a bit more than two centuries, one cannot exclude the possibility that problems thrown up by centralization will have to be solved by a move towards de-centralization.132

The notion of modernity also implies, almost necessarily, a sharper break with the past than is warranted by close inspection of the circumstances. In this case, one should keep in mind that the financial arrangements of other countries figured prominently in English pamphlet literature on fiscal matters, starting in the 1620s. Officials thus had the benefit of Continental precedents for each stage in the gradual building-up of a framework for the fiscal state. George Downing, who successfully promoted the issue of Exchequer certificates in the 1660s, had previously served as England’s representative in The Hague. If William of Orange did not bring a horde of Dutch advisers with him in 1689, as was once thought, the Bank of England did in its early years borrow from the Bank of Amsterdam to stay afloat.133 In the 1740s, when Chancellor Pelham gave investors a choice between getting their money back and accepting a lower rate of interest, he was doing as Venice had done since the 1300s, and Holland since the 1500s. In sum, England’s achievement was in a broader sense Europe’s achievement. A recent collection of essays has the admirable goal of extending the range of fiscal history beyond Europe, to include the Ottoman Empire, China, Japan, and India. Yet these states had nothing comparable to the European system of borrowing, at least not until after 1800.134 Apart from an abortive beginning in Hellenistic Greece, long-term debt in a proper sense started with the issuance of rentes by thirteenth-century towns in France and the Low Countries. Reaching the sophistication represented by England’s ‘consols’ required four centuries. But at every stage along a twisting and uncertain historical path, this was a uniquely European development.135

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**Notes:**


(25.) For example, for sixteenth-century Castile, Gelabert, ‘The King’s Expenses’, 228.


(30.) Muto, ‘The Spanish System’, 254, a fruitful suggestion that is worth investigating.


(34.) Armstrong, *Usury and Public Debt*, 42, 46, 100: in 1427, 86 per cent of Monte credits were owned by a mere 10 per cent of households.


(37.) Starting with Philip the Bold, r. 1364–1396; the last of the line, Mary of Burgundy, who married Maximilian of Habsburg (the future Emperor Maximilian I), died in 1482. Emperor Charles V (1500–56) was Maximilian’s grandson.


(39.) Geoffrey Parker, *The Dutch Revolt* (Ithaca, 1977); James Tracy, *The Founding of the Dutch Republic: War,


(52.) Gelabert, ‘The King’s Expenses’, 204–206, 228.


(63.) Caroline Finkel, The Administration of Warfare: the Ottoman Military Campaigns in Hungary, 1593–1606 (Beihefte zur Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes, 14, Vienna, 1988), 239/240: the so-called ‘inner treasury’ was the only source of funds for the campaigns of 1604.


(69.) Hocquet, ‘City-state and Market Economy’, 89–91, 98; Macdonald, A Free People Deep in Debt, 95 (the quote).


(71.) Andrea Doria switched sides, from France to the emperor, in 1528.


(73.) Bonney, ‘France 1494–1815’, 126. For Jacques Coeur (d. 1456), Kathryn Reyerson, Jacques Coeur (New York, 2005); for Jacques de Beaune, baron de Semblançay (d. 1527), Hamon, L’argent du roi; and for Maximilien de Bethune, duc de Sully (d. 1641), David Buissere, Henry IV (London, 1984).


Drelichman and Voth, *Lending to the Borrower from Hell*, 96–97, 134.


For these two paragraphs, save as noted, Tracy, ‘On the Dual Origins of Long-Term Urban Debt’.

For example, for the Dutch Republic, ‘t Hart et al., *A Financial History of the Netherlands*, 21, 22, 79.


For example, in areas where beer was the preferred beverage, interest on city bonds was often paid directly by the tax farmer or official who collected the beer excise.


On the importance in this connection of the acquisition of corporate status or legal personhood by the towns, Bavel, *Manors and Markets*, 185–186.


(100.) Carbone, Il Debito della Citta, 79–80.


(106.) Tracy, A Financial Revolution, 57.

(107.) Tracy, A Financial Revolution, chs. 2, 3, and 4. From 1543, Amsterdam was forced to pool its credit with the other cities of Holland. Whether these developments deserve to be called a ‘financial revolution’ is best left to other venues: Wantje Fritschy, ‘A “Financial Revolution” Reconsidered: Public Finance in Holland during the Dutch Revolt, 1568–1648’, Economic History Review, 56 (2003), 57–89; Tracy, ‘The Age of Fiscal Intermediation in Europe’.


(113.) Wilson, The Thirty Years’ War, 294–310; the quid pro quo was that Ferdinand promised an eighth electoral vote to the Duchy of Bavaria.

(114.) Anton Ernstberger, Hans de Witte, Finanzmann Wallensteins (Wiesbaden, 1954).


(120.) Partner, ‘The Papacy and the Papal States’, 369, 374–375; Carboni, La Debita della Citta, 78–84; Fausto Piola Caselli, ‘Public Debt, State Revenue and Town Consumption in Rome (16th–18th Centuries)’, in Boone, Urban Public Debts, 93–105, at 100.


(124.) Macdonald, A Free People Deep in Debt, 171.


(127.) Bartolomé Yun-Casalilla, ‘Introduction’, in Yun-Casalilla, Rise of Fiscal States, 1–38, at 12, 14; to avoid confusion (at least for American English) I change ‘corporations’ to ‘corporate bodies’.


(132.) For the idea that financial de-centralization may have worked better in certain historical circumstances: O’Brien, ‘Afterword’, 443–444; Pieper, ‘Financing an Empire’, 168.


(135.) Macdonald, A Free People Deep in Debt, 120: ‘It was precisely in long-term finance that Europe was in a league of its own.’

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter surveys major ‘republics’ and approaches to ‘republicanism’. Early modern analysis on the dangers of monarchs and people alike led to complex arguments under what circumstances and with which means faith, liberty, and privileges could be secured against king, neighbours, and foreign foes. Though these arguments remained embedded in different traditions of classical thought and in constellations of people, elites, international power politics, and constitutional forms increasingly idiosyncratic to each emerging individual polity, they remained connected to each other by observing power politics and revolutions as well as arguments developed in other polities. Uncompromising praise of a kingless republic or demands for unconditional subjection to a king remained fringe phenomena. But within the major emphases on preserving faith, life, liberty and privilege in a war ridden Europe, the plurality of modern approaches to research is more than matched by the plurality of themes and arguments ventured in the past.3

Keywords: Republic, republicanism, elites, privileges, war, civil war, participation, political analysis

Introduction

The idea of a ‘republic’ was familiar in early modern Europe. By the later fifteenth century, res publica/république either referred to any public authority in some institutionalized sense or to a polity without a hereditary monarch. The origin of the former notion rests with the translation of Aristotle’s Politics (1420s–1436/8) by Leonardo Bruni, the Florentine chancellor and author of the Laudatio Florentinae Urbis, a celebration of the city of Florence. According to Bruni’s rendering of Aristotle, social life needed the introduction of government, that is, of a hierarchy of order and subjection. Consequently, citizens, as an unorganized group of individuals devoid of such order, were denoted as societas; the polity properly established by introducing order and subjection as respublica or civitas, no matter whether the right to rule lay with one, few, or many. Indeed, the duty of good citizens primarily to obey rather than to participate in actual rule is now recognized to be at the core of what ‘civic humanism’ meant in that period in Florence, at least for those outside the inner circle of the actual elite.1

By the later fifteenth century, republics were also understood to be polities devoid of a hereditary king, run by the few (aristocracy), by the many, or by a combination thereof (polyarchy).2 The nobility of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth understood themselves and their polity as free in comparison with their monarchical neighbours, but did not wish to abandon (elected) kingship.3 Other polyarchies conventionally known as republics4 also had a monarchical component. The Swiss Confederation included a prince-bishopric and a principality, the Dutch Republic had for significant parts of its early modern
The term ‘republicanism’ was unknown to contemporaries before the mid-eighteenth century, at least in the sense of a consistent argument for the principled superiority of kingless government over kingdoms under all circumstances. It seems to have emerged precisely in order to address constitutional structures to be erected—or already existing—in monarchies that combined the advantages of monarchy with those of polyarchy, in particular for polities considerably larger than a city or small province. A handful of writers in their major works ‘were republican in the strict sense in believing that the common good of a community can never be satisfactorily assured under a monarchical government’ and therefore took a principled stand against monarchy. For that purpose they therefore envisaged a specific ‘republican architecture’, authors such as the brothers de La Court in their 1662 *Interest van Holland* and James Harrington in his 1656 *Commonwealth of Oceana*, both of whom wrote with conscious reference to their own polity.

The extent to which constitutional argument depended upon the specific circumstances in one polity, and in particular on economies of scale, was rooted in medieval commentaries on Aristotle, such as the *De regimine principum* (1280) of Aegidius Romanus (1243–1316). What seemed manageable and practical for a village or a small town, the rule of most or many heads of households assembling on the marketplace, was less practical for a larger merchant city or even a province, where an aristocracy of some kind seemed necessary, and quite impossible for an even larger polity where a single ruler was preferable, though that person might be assisted by other groups. Such considerations still informed Montesquieu, Rousseau, and even the arrangements of Napoleon’s emperorship. The early modern dynamics of warfare and the necessary economy of scale to survive, demonstrated by the downfall of most (independent) city republics by the end of the sixteenth century, served to link constitutional argument with considerations on the conditions of sheer political survival. These were combined with mostly derogative associations of the larger multitude, in cities but in particular in the countryside, and the widespread assumption that participation in government rested on virtues and expertise that only a (small) elite possessed. Even the sharpest critiques of a given prince, or even of the institution of kingship in any one particular context, often remained prepared to agree that in a different context another prince might be perfectly adequate. Thus, Machiavelli considered favourably the role of the Medici in Florence in his *History of Florence*, and Zuerius Boxhorn the role of the monarchical element of a stadhouder and captain general in the Dutch Republic. Cicero’s writings, though authored by a clear-cut and principled opponent of monarchy with respect to the Roman res publica, were drenched by their medieval and early modern readers with the king’s responsibility for the (Christian) common good and the administration of justice. Princes and nobility, as in Germany or Poland–Lithuania, addressed themselves as patriotic citizens while ruthlessly suppressing their own peasant-subjects and town-burghers. While the attack on a given individual king could develop into a (p. 540) systematic critique of monarchy once no alternative candidate could be recruited (as in the Netherlands in 1581–90s and in England in 1648–49), it could also lose momentum again once an appropriate ruler seemed to have been found.

This entrenched attachment to monarchy needs to be understood against the background of how the major pillars of European political thought, such as Greek and Roman history and philosophy, Roman Law, and the authority of the Old Testament, were moulded by medieval commentators. These authorities tied the king intricately to serving God, upholding the common good, and maintaining the laws of the polity, while condemning failure to do so as the token of the tyrant. Aristotle’s *Politics*, book III, 1287a–1287b, celebrated the rule of law. Cicero, Livy, and Tacitus did distinguish tyranny from kingship, which in principle remained compatible with res publica. The reception of Roman Law led to an understanding of the king as guardian of guardians with an entrenched responsibility for those put in his trust. Canon law developed the *Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debeat*—what concerns all needs to be debated by all. All monarchies in Latin Christianity had to operate under divine law, the law of nature and, increasingly during the early modern period, positive fundamental law, such as Salic law and the unalienable nature of the ‘bien and demesne’ of the French Crown. Most were de facto bound to consult elites over politics in one way or another. Ptolemaeus of Lucca juxtaposed 1. Samuel 8 on the rights of kings as
spelt out by the prophet Samuel, and 1. Samuel 12, his invitation to the people to judge over his performance in office. He concluded that there was a strict dichotomy between principatus politicus, which lived under laws and allowed the participation of subjects, and principatus despoticus, kingship depriving subjects of their cattle and children in favour of the household of the king.21 Roman law, besides encapsulating the notion that imperium was originally possessed by the people, was further developed by glossators and post-glossators to cover the case of independent city communes, but then again did so by describing their rule by addressing them as prince, as civitas sibi princeps.22 The legal figure of the universitas, the fictitious legal person, could be used to argue that the chief magistrate of a polity was superior to every single member, but inferior to the polity as a whole (maior singulis universis minor), allowing for the possibility that authorized representatives of the polity might regulate or even depose such a magistrate. The greater wisdom of the many was emphasized, compared to that of only one.23 Arguably the only arguments supporting monarchy without tying its legitimacy to its submission to laws and its duties towards the polity were based on the fifth commandment (Filmer) and the allegation of the direct divine institution of kings, on an unqualified affirmation of 1. Samuel 8, on collapsing any distinction between household and political rule (Wilhelm von Schroeder), or on the later radicalization of Bruni’s emphasis on the need for submission as functional requisite for any polity to the detriment of any other function (Thomas Hobbes, Gabriel Naude). But most of these arguments had become intellectual outcasts by the later seventeenth century.

Thus, between the 1490s and the 1790s, predatory ‘monarchies’ overwhelmed or incorporated weaker (city) republics, from Florence to Venice and the Dutch Republic. Contemporaries duly noted that monarchies that had lost their kings under the pressure (p. 541) of external and internal strife proved there was no alternative to monarchical rule by establishing new ones within less than a decade—for example, Cromwell and Napoleon. Yet simultaneously, Britain, the archenemy of Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, was considered not to be a true monarchy itself, given the limitations inherent in the constitutional settlement which followed the Revolution of 1688–89. Servants of the king of Prussia described their creation of a common legal code for all Prussian lands as ‘republikanisch’ in the sense of subordinating the monarch to positive law and distinguishing the public state under that law from the ruler’s private possessions. Both Frederick William II and significant sections of the nobility failed to recognize this as window-dressing and accordingly resented these tendencies.24 Thus, monarchy triumphed both by eventually consuming all republics and by incorporating arguments about serving the polity under law and, in one way or another, taking heed of the interests of their subjects beyond the nobility. This was so even when establishing absolute monarchy by formal law and by popular consent, as in Denmark, or by arguing primarily from the point of view of international power politics, from the dangers of debt and from the need for security of property.25 Consequently, depending on whether ‘republicanism’ is understood to be strictly tied to ‘constitutional republicanism’ or allowed to include arguments restraining monarchical rule by expecting it to obey the law and serve the polity, the scope of our subject shrinks or expands accordingly. Since anti-monarchical arguments developed not least by moving from the latter to the former sphere in situations of imminent crisis, but without entirely changing their substance, forms of argument which sought to restrain a monarch and those aiming at the creation of a kingless republic are less clearly distinguished than the term ‘republicanism’ may suggest. To identify some or all arguments branded by the absolutist reaction in the wake of the gunpowder plot (1605) and the assassination or execution of William of Orange (1584), Henry III (1589) and IV (1610) of France, and Charles I of England (1649) as king-killing,26 and therefore as ‘republican’, is as misleading as ignoring that staunch supporters of monarchy consciously tried to cleanse the contamination of monarchy from constraints they believed to be incompatible with the ‘true laws of free monarchy’.27

The discussion which follows first reviews some major ‘republics’, in the sense of polities without a hereditary monarch, and then addresses some features of political arguments that have been characterized as ‘republicanism’.

Republics

The Swiss Federation
The Swiss federation (confederatio) of thirteen sovereign polities and their partly dependant allies consisted of a network of treaties among these polities establishing different degrees of sovereignty or dependency. The thirteen sovereign polities consisted (p. 542) of eight ‘older’ polities (Zürich, Bern, Luzern, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Zug, Glarus) and five ‘new’ polities (Basel, Freiburg, Solothurn, Schaffhausen, Appenzell). They had partly dependant allies, viz the prince-abbey of St. Gallen, the city of St. Gallen, Biel, Mülhausen (Mulhouse), Geneva, the republic of Wallis (Valais), the free-state of the three leagues, the Grisons (Graubünden), the principality of Neuenburg (Neuchâtel), and the prince-bishopric of Basel. Among these polities, virtually every form of government existed. The republic of the Three Leagues was a peasant–householder democracy, the prince-bishops elective monarchies, Zürich and Bern patrician aristocracies. These ruled, like Bern, as any lord over its peasant subjects and suppressed them by force of arms, if that proved necessary.

Primarily those polities with a strong urban component (Zürich, Bern, Basel, Schaffhausen, Appenzell äussere Roden, St. Gallen, Biel, Mülhausen, Geneva, and the principality of Neuenburg) became adherents of the Reformation. Most of the more rural communities, such as Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Zug, Freiburg, Solothurn, Appenzell innere Roden, and the republic of Wallis, remained loyal to the Church of Rome. Glarus, the prince-abbey St. Gallen, and the republic of the Three Leagues received regulations for a co-existence of different confessions. Among these polities and their allies were three monarchies (the prince-abbey of St. Gallen, the prince-bishop of Basel, the principality of Neuenburg), five urban patrician aristocracies (Bern, Lucerne, Freiburg, Solothurn, Geneva), six city-polities with established guilds (Zürich, Basel, Schaffhausen, the town of St. Gallen, Biel, Mühlhausen), and eight primarily rural polities with democratically instituted assemblies of all enfranchised heads of households (Landsgemeindeverfassung), primarily among the more rural and overwhelmingly Catholic polities (Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Zug, Glarus, Appenzell, republic Wallis, republic of the Three Leagues). In various combinations, the thirteen cantons and their allies ruled over subject areas. In some of them, the representatives of the Swiss Federation had to deal with representatives of the respective area.

This tripartite division of main cantons, allies, and subject areas was in reality a much more complex system of bilateral treaties. The full citizens of the cities with guild representation and the citizens of those cantons with a Landsgemeindeverfassung possessed significant civic rights of participation. Heads of households collectively could elect officials, debate and vote new laws, decide over issues of war and peace, and grant privileges to new residents. In the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the families of officials evolved into an almost hereditary oligarchy and curtailed the exercise of these rights at assemblies. In practice, most heads of households lacked the legal qualifications or the experience to make law or decide on public issues in an age of rapidly professionalizing bureaucracy. In cities with guild representation, wealthy merchants, entrepreneurs, rentiers, and citizens possessing seigneurial rights in the countryside grew into an oligarchy of wealth and influence. In contrast, the Bern urban aristocracy was based on landholding in the surrounding countryside. Peasant uprisings against urban landlords and varying degrees of social differentiation, depending on the occurrence of rural industry and kinds of agriculture, characterized the countryside.

The most important threat to the emerging Swiss confederation remained the Reformation, together with the need subsequently to organize the co-existence of polities with different confessional outlooks. The attempt to enforce the Reformation throughout by Zürich had failed during the defeat at the hands of Catholic communities (Luzern, Uri, Schwyz, Obwalden, Nidwalden, Zug) in 1531. In the centuries to come, competing European dynasties attempted to influence the politics of the federation and to foster the emergence of factions orientated toward Madrid, Vienna, or Paris. This background explains why the secretary for the States of Holland and the Republic’s leading minister, Johan De Witt, suggested a division of the Spanish Netherlands, after the retreat of the Spanish Army, into ‘cantons’ with the intention of submitting them to French and Dutch influence.

**The Dutch Republic**

The leading early modern example of a successful republic was that of the Dutch, particularly during its seventeenth-century Golden Age. In the course of the 1560s several issues led to increasing tensions in the Burgundian lands that Philip II of Spain had inherited from his father, Charles I of Spain, as part of the division of the Habsburg family lands between Charles...
I (the Emperor Charles V) and his younger brother, Ferdinand I. Continuing attempts to centralize government and impose taxes and the persecution of (Protestant) heretics produced grievances that the regency under Margaret (1559–67), duchess of Parma (an illegitimate daughter of Charles) was unable to appease. Her adviser, Cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle antagonized the nobility and eventually also alienated magnates such as William of Orange, who became a coordinator of the mounting resistance. Philip decided to send the Duke of Alba to restore order. His repressive measures, including exemplary punishment of captured places like Malines, Zutphen, and Naarden in 1572, together with the ever increasing confessional polarization between reformed Protestants and adherents of the Church of Rome removed any room for compromise. Though Philip’s troops made significant inroads, they were unable to recapture Holland and Zeeland. The Southern provinces, eventually including Brussels and Antwerp, ultimately remained under Spanish rule. Even so, in 1576, the former Burgundian provinces sought in the Ghent pacification a compromise on the issue of religion and to accomplish jointly the withdrawal of troops. But such an agreement could not be reached. In January 1579, primarily Northern provinces outside the area of Spanish occupation established the Union of Utrecht with the prime aim of expelling the soldiers and safeguarding the regulation of religious matters by each province. The adherents of this later alliance deposed Philip as their overlord in 1581. After the assassination of William of Orange in 1584 and the eventual failure to establish a viable constitutional link to England, they could not find an alternative monarchical head whose principal role was to fund and organize the ongoing struggle against Spain. Left without such a leader, the provinces of the Union and the territory later occupied as ‘Generaliteitslanden’ (territories under the direct governance of the States General) effectively worked together and became consolidated as a federation of republics.

The issue of where precisely sovereignty was located—within individual cities that had only delegated it to provincial delegates (Amsterdam’s point of view), within each individual republic, or with the States General, the representatives of all the provinces in The Hague—remained as problematical as relations between the richest and most populous province, Holland, and the rest. The maritime interests shared by Zeeland and Holland were far less important to the other provinces. Up until the 1660s, the most outspoken ‘republican’ reflections focused on the republic of Holland alone, and in turn understood that province to be a federation of commercial cities. In political practice, the representatives of the individual provinces met for the States General at The Hague. While Holland’s representatives were mainly regents from the commercial towns, other provinces such as Gelderland or Overijssel sent mostly landed noblemen, who also served in town governments. Professional secretaries, in particular from Holland such as Johan van Oldenbarnevelt and Johan De Witt, became leading politicians. Simultaneously, the office of the stadhouder, the representative of the former lord, had survived in most provinces and was filled by a member of the Nassau and Orange dynasty, if one was available.

Three structural fault lines ran through the republic’s politics and were the source of open conflict in 1617–18, 1650, 1672, and 1702. The first was that Holland carried the major burden of expenses for the Union and attempted to have a proportionate share in directing its politics, at the very least scope to impose its own demands. Secondly, after the armistice with Spain in 1609, disputes within the established Dutch Reformed Church about the precise meaning of Calvinist orthodoxy led to open clashes between the adherents of Jacobus Arminius and his critics under Gomarus, who attacked Arminius for an alleged lack of proper allegiance to the doctrine of predestination. To protect Arminius’s adherents and maintain order, the influential Secretary of the States of Holland and advocate, Oldenbarnevelt, attempted to raise troops in Holland as a sovereign republic in 1617. To counteract this attempt, the stadhouder Maurice intervened with his army and arrested Oldenbarnevelt (and his adviser Hugo Grotius), and had them tried for treason against the Union. Though Grotius escaped, Oldenbarnevelt was executed. Henceforth, the established Reformed Church consolidated by the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618–19, and the House of Orange tended to support each other, while the claim for toleration (in particular for adherents of Arminius) became associated with a view locating sovereignty at the level of each individual province and thereby conferring more freedom of action upon each single province.

Thirdly, both the House of Orange and the Reformed Church supported war with Spain and subsequently France together with the burdens it imposed. From 1648, disputes ensued about the future course of action, and eventually William II used the army to force Amsterdam to accept a compromise in 1650. He died of smallpox later the same year. His attempt to consolidate the influence of his dynasty into something more similar to a monarchical authority abruptly ended. His son
William was born a week after his death. Johan De Witt as ‘Grand Pensionary’ of Holland led the Union during the war (p. 545) with Cromwellian England. A secret clause in the peace settlement formally excluded the House of Orange from high office. Adherents to the House of Orange later accused De Witt and his ‘faction’ of having manipulated negotiations with London to include this clause. Once the Stuarts were restored in England in 1660, the adherents of the House of Orange demanded the abandonment of the general exclusion from high office of the Orange dynasty in order to strengthen relations with England. To fight this claim, the de la Courts published their *Interest van Holland*—with sections actually written by De Witt—denouncing Orange rule as a system artificially maintaining troops that then could be used to deprive Holland of its freedom as in 1618–20 and 1650. ‘True freedom’, it argued, resided in a government from which the House of Orange had been excluded so that mercantile interests could be properly pursued. De Witt tried to compromise with Louis XIV, but in 1672 fell victim to the combined onslaught of Stuart England (Third Anglo-Dutch War), allied German princes, and France, leading to the occupation of eastern parts of the Republic including Utrecht. Holland and Zeeland fought on, but De Witt’s government collapsed among wide-scale popular protests indicting him for treason. He was killed by an angry mob. William III was swept into the *stadhouderschap* and was able to purge the councils of cities of supporters of De Witt, but his campaign to become hereditary count of Holland failed.

During the first three-quarters of the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic had become a leading European commercial and political power, based on very productive agriculture, rural industry, and a significant share of European coastal and overseas trade, in particular with the Baltic region and the East Indies. That had been achieved both with and without a *stadhouder*, during a period while Spain, England, and France remained preoccupied with each other and with their own internal turmoil. Not least with respect to a large Catholic minority, pragmatic toleration was practised to a degree rarely known elsewhere in Europe. Censorship remained active but limited in its efficiency, and besides pamphlets on Dutch politics, arguments and topics quite beyond or outside the European mainstream could be printed in the Netherlands more freely than almost anywhere else.

Stadhouderless periods, such as that between 1650 and 1672, did follow in the eighteenth century (1702–47), but after the War of the Spanish Succession the importance of the republic’s trade and Dutch rural industry continued their relative decline in the face of English and French competition. The cost of great power politics proved unbearable. While the republic still nominally supported the English effort to prevent a Franco–Prussian division of the lands of the Austrian Habsburgs during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48), the American War of Independence (1775–83/4) marked the beginning of the end. After entering the war to defend its trade (Fourth Anglo-Dutch War 1780–84), defeats at the hand of Britain and the economic malaise of trade and rural industry mobilized significant parts of the population to identify as ‘patriots’ and attack rule by the stadhouder. Already during the disturbances of 1672, traditional forms of local civic participation and protest in individual Dutch towns, in particular by members of local militias and by means of submitting grievances to local magistrates, had been combined with supra-local (p. 546) pamphleteering. A supra-local and aggressively pro-Orange citizens’ movement had developed whose members had addressed themselves as ‘patriots’. Members of that movement had also killed the De Witt brothers as traitors to the fatherland. During the 1780s, this phenomenon further developed into a considerable supra-local and supra-regional movement, again addressing itself as ‘patriot’ but now demanding constitutional reform to the detriment of the House of Orange. Clashes between these ‘patriots’ and supporters of the stadhouder increased, until in 1787, allegedly to protect the wife of the stadhouder (who was the sister of Prussia’s king), the Prussian army intervened on her behalf. Many fled to France, only to return in the ‘Batavian Legion’ with French revolutionary forces to establish the Batavian Republic (1795–1806). Though both the Dutch republican government and its successor, the kingdom of Holland under Napoleon’s brother Louis, did their best to pursue Dutch interests under adverse circumstances, the French exploitation of its client state mortally wounded anti-Orange ‘republicanism’ for good. Most citizens welcomed the return of the son of the last stadhouder, William V, in December 1813 and the establishment of the hereditary and also—thanks to French republican reforms—much more centralized monarchy that ensued.

**Venice**

Successfully manoeuvring between Byzantium and Latin kingdoms, the city had gained its independence during the high
Middle Ages. Protected by its extraordinary geographical location, it developed a leading position in trade in the Eastern Mediterranean. Apart from several Mediterranean islands, notably Crete and Cyprus, it consolidated territorial control on the adjacent mainland of North Eastern Italy (Terraferma). Despite growing pressure from the Ottoman Empire since the fifteenth century and increasing competition with England, France, and the Netherlands in trade, Venice was able to defend its independence until defeat at the hands of the French republic. Complex electoral arrangements, a sophisticated police system, ongoing tensions with the papacy—and consequently good publishing possibilities for heterodox treatises—and successful manoeuvring between the French Crown and the Habsburgs allowed them to retain a regional power until the end of the ancien régime. For example, when during the early sixteenth century, the system of Italian city states collapsed under the pressure of the Valois invasion in 1494/5 and Spanish inroads (defeat at Agnadello in 1509 against Louis XII of France) Venice was able to secure independence by balancing between the Pope and French and Habsburg interests. Venice became famous for the establishment of balance in a mixed polyarchical regime. The doge remained answerable to the Great Council (the privileged aristocratic families) and a council of advisers, all consolidated during the higher Middle Ages into the Signoria, a collective governmental body. Contemporaries identified the doge with the monarchical, the minor council with an aristocratic, and the great council with a democratic element of the mixed constitution of the republic. But internal stability did not shield the republic against the onslaught of the French republic in 1796. The peace of Campo Formio in 1797 turned Venice over to Austria as part of the French–Austrian agreement.

The Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth

The Austrian monarchy also participated, together with the Russian and Prussian states, in the partition of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth between 1772 and 1795. The Polish and Lithuanian nobility instituted in 1569 the Union of Lublin to deal with the anticipated extinction of the Jagellonian dynasty. The diverse parts of the personal union of the kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, including Royal Prussia (those parts of the former lands of the Teutonic order ceded to the King of Poland after the peace of Thorn in 1466) received an institutional bond beyond the person of the king. It is important to remember that that nation, that is, the noblemen appearing at the Sejm and being members of the szlachta, gained clearer contours only during the demise of the ensuing Commonwealth and in reaction to the continuing dismemberment of the Commonwealth by successive partitions. For the early modern period itself, the Polish and Lithuanian noble nation(s) remained open to non-noble groups and linked to other groups also known as ‘nation’ within the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth was run henceforth by the elected king, a senate, and a parliament (the Sejm) representing large segments of the nobility (Polish, Lithuanian, Prussian, Ruthenian), but excluding peasants and town burghers. In attempting to create a republic not run only or primarily by a king and his court, the Sejm had to become a place not merely for decision making, but to settle conflict and find compromise. Along that line, during the 1570s, the nobility established their freedom of religion (pax dissidentium and Warsaw confederation). Also, the principle that nothing could be imposed from above, but potentially everything had to be agreed to as long as it concerned all—‘Nihil constitui debet sine communi consiliariorum et nuntiorum terruestri consensu’—severely curtailed the legitimacy of majority decisions. From the middle of the seventeenth century, that fact led to a gradual extension of the vetoing power or liberum veto. In political reality, it seemed more prudent not to make a decision than to force one through against a dissenting minority. Even critical evaluations in eighteenth-century Poland–Lithuania were not prepared to accept majority decisions in general, for the right of minorities (of noblemen) to remain unimpaired in their interest and privileges was seen a major pillar of liberty.

To the Commonwealth’s nobility, developments in Bohemia, Hungary, Denmark, and later also Sweden were odious examples of noblemen deprived of their liberties. After the death of Augustus III in 1763, Russia was able to impose its own candidate, Stanisław Poniatowski, a former lover of the empress, as the new king in 1764. His supporters in Poland–Lithuania, however, the Czartoryski family, a branch of the Gediminids that had run the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and was related to the later Jagellions, sought together with Poniatowski to improve the efficiency of government by curtailing the liberum veto. Their opponents in the Sejm alarmed St Petersburg, claiming that its client king had begun to pursue his own politics. Russia intervened and had the Sejm confirm the full power of the veto in 1766. Furthermore, Russia also
sought to enhance the rights of the Protestant minority in the hope of further crippling executive government to suit its own interests. That attempt in turn led to the founding of the anti-Russian Confederation of Bar (1768–72) and into civil war, in turn leading to the first partition of Poland by the Romanovs, the Hohenzollern, and the Habsburgs in 1772.

Whether the republic would have crumbled in any case under the overwhelming strength of hostile neighbours on all of its borders (Sweden, Russia, Brandenburg–Prussia, and the Ottoman Empire), or whether the very antithesis of noble liberty, a government ruling by majority decision, imposing taxes and running a standing army, almost icons of despotism in Poland–Lithuania, would have rescued the Commonwealth, is a moot point. Enlightened contemporaries such as the king’s adviser and main author of the General Law Code (Allgemeines Landrecht) of the Prussian States (1794) clearly believed during the 1790s that the Polish example proved the superiority of monarchy both for defending a country and for establishing basic legal security not only for the nobility, but also for peasants and town dwellers.

**The English Commonwealth, 1649–60**

Attempting to bring more uniformity to the utterly diverging church establishments in the kingdoms of Ireland, England, and Scotland, Charles I met increasing resistance in Scotland and England. Concessions to his opponents ultimately triggered revolt in Ireland. In turn, after Charles’s attempt to purge parliament had failed and he had left a tumultuous London, the alleged threat of a Catholic invasion from Ireland left the remainder of a gradually disintegrating parliament raising the militias unilaterally. As opponents to these policies left London and gathered with Charles at Oxford, unity in favour of religious reform in 1640 gave way to two minorities dominating events, both committed to conflict rather than compromise. They were distinguished primarily by the intensity of their religious anxieties. By 1643, much of the initial local support for defending king, kingdom, and faith against outside invasions had been replaced by forced cooperation or resistance against the war effort of the remainder of parliament and of the king. Based on the financial means of the city of London that supported parliament, not least due to its financial interests in Ireland, parliament could build up a more effective military establishment that won the first (1642–46) and second (1648) civil wars. Since no alternative candidate for the throne was in sight, since Charles remained a potential icon of further royalist resistance and was difficult to negotiate with, and because Cromwell and those around him perceived a divine order to punish the man with ‘blood on his hands’, Charles was executed after a formal legal trial in January 1649. Though scholarly opinion is divided as to whether republican theories only came into being after the new regime appeared to be in need of them or not, many of those principally supportive toward the experiment of a kingless state adopted a critical attitude towards the actual Commonwealth. Despite successive purges of the shrinking remnants of parliament (following Pride’s Purge in 1649) by the army under Oliver Cromwell and his colonels, none of the successive Protectorate parliaments, nor the rule of the Major Generals (1655–57), achieved sustained stability. Commentators outside England, such as Marcus Zuerius Boxhorn and Salmasius stressed the phenomenon of a military dictatorship (statocracy) by the Lord Protector Cromwell on the shoulders of an army that had only been created during the war. The impact of the experience of civil war and army rule on England’s and Scotland’s elites was so devastating that in turn Charles II could extend his royal authority, such as challenging the privileges of the city of London, in a way that none of his predecessors had ever dared.

**Republicanism**

The sources and arguments that could be marshalled to limit or even deny a monarch any legitimate room for manoeuvre have been extensively described over the last twenty years. For the purpose of this chapter, six different strands of argument may be distinguished.

One strand consisted of claims to being part of an elite of virtuous citizens with sufficient standing and expertise not to be sidelined. The overwhelming consensus of early modern historiography is that, since there was no modern bureaucratic state, princes needed to take heed of what the elite—aristocracy of their lands, and sometimes even social groups below that, wanted, no matter what the explanatory or organizational framework of such attention. Beside aristocratic pride in lineage
and reputation, ‘civic humanism’, ‘promoting the pursuit of virtue in public life’ could be one vocabulary to support such claims. In Florence itself, it had meant different things for the actual ruling elite on the one hand and those lesser citizens serving in lower offices and being promised protection by law, but who were simultaneously obliged to obey, on the other. A handful of radical theorists, such as George Buchanan in Scotland or Ramsla von Neumair in Saxony, claimed that almost all male heads of households could be assumed to have sufficient virtue and reason to take matters of government in their hands, at least in the face of tyrants. In general, the early modern pursuit of virtue in public life nicely complemented the thoroughly elitist preferences of Cicero, but did not need be antimonarchical.

A second strand of argument has insisted on the importance of the repudiation of core assumptions of Aristotle and Cicero by Machiavelli, and in his wake by Hobbes. Their subsequent reflection on politics did, according to this strand, envision politics without recourse to classic virtue or indeed to the natural hierarchies among men and the consensus produced by and based on them that some species of classic thought had taken for granted. In his history of Florence, Machiavelli analysed the rise to power by Cosimo and Lorenzo Medici as similar to that of Nero, but also stressed the ‘popular collective disposition’ of Florentine citizens ‘to hate and to believe’ and the way in which Cosimo was thus able to play to the crowd as fundamental grounds of his rise to power. However, a consequence of this complete disrespect for hierarchy and consensus was one of the most radical arguments in favour of unrestrained absolute monarchy, above all as portrayed and justified by Hobbes’s _Leviathan_. A mainstream ‘republican’ alternative remained James Harrington, but he attempted, according to this strand of opinion, to suffocate communication between citizens by procedures in order to take account of the utter lack of natural virtue among them. Alternatively, the de la Courts argued that the major group to be reckoned with in Holland’s cities were wealthy merchants, that they, by pursuing their own interest, also pursued that of the republic of Holland, and thus should rule. Jonathan Israel pointed out that Spinoza’s arguments and their reception also fundamentally undermined the pillars of throne and altar, and insofar paved a way to modern republicanism.

A third approach has emphasized contemporary debates about limitations upon monarchical authority established by the rule of law in relation to mixed forms of government. The distance between a hereditary monarchy which accepted certain fundamental laws but regarded itself otherwise as absolute, hereditary monarchies constrained by positive law, (elective) monarchies with more or less pronounced ‘republican’ features, and ‘republics’ with or without considerable monarchical components is simultaneously fraught with contemporary polemic and with assumptions about the unquestioned submission of monarchy to law without any provision to enforce compliance on the king. Arguably, to speculate about how to force a king to comply remained an extremely problematic exercise, but it did by no means involve the construction of a republican counter model.

A fourth strand has focused on the actual practice of participation, in particular in towns, on the marketplace, in taverns, during assemblies, and by means ranging from public songs to pamphlets and to ‘rituals’ or ‘ceremonies’ to make visible and strengthen the legitimacy of a given political procedure and hierarchy. Similarly, ‘civic ritual’ in order to visualize the ability of a group of individuals to act as a single person was by no means confined to republics, however broadly understood, but a potential feature of corporate decision making within monarchies, and could possibly also be claimed for ‘rituals’ around the election of the king of Romans by the electoral princes. Indeed, since virtually no early modern regime could do without the active participation of its elites, it depends entirely on our understanding of ‘republicanism’ whether early modern rituals and popular participation serve as an indication of ‘republicanism’ or not. Since the early seventeenth century, the peasant-tenants of Salem monastery were actively trained to shoot muskets to defend Salem and its tiny territory. Petty noblemen to the north in the landgraviate of Hesse were horrified at similar suggestions by their landgrave, but it remains in the eye of the beholder whether Salem’s practice therefore provides us with a republican participatory practice. What is more, the killing of the truly anti-monarchical De Witt brothers by an angry mob in 1672 had ritualistic components and grew from wider pamphlet politics that characterized active political participation in Dutch towns. But was this killing therefore proof of a ‘ritual’ of ‘republican’ urban participation, and if so, in the sense of Cicero’s emphasis on virtue or Machiavelli’s on the gullible nature of the crowd?

Given the importance of classical critical analysis on the relation of empire, war, luxury, virtue, factions, the dangers
from the multitude, and tyranny, a fifth strand of research has brought to light how early modern thought addressed these issues for their own time.\textsuperscript{65} Aristotle explicitly discussed in his \textit{Politics} the dangers of uneven property distribution for the tranquility of the polity. Factions created by too stark a contrast between rich and poor could sow the seeds of civil war. Florence itself became an example of the potential impact of international rivalries on the social balance, constitution, and eventual fall of an erstwhile great city republic.\textsuperscript{66} Arguments addressing the proper distribution of property among citizens in order to secure the viability of a republic were considered, by James Harrington for example.\textsuperscript{67} A good deal of the Dutch debate during the stadholder-less period and in the wake of the 1672 disaster discussed the strengths and weaknesses of a monarchical component with respect to the consequent advantages—or disadvantages—in foreign politics.\textsuperscript{68} Robespierre’s plans to safeguard the republic against its enemies by saving its currency, even by extraordinary measures limiting liberty, is a final echo of the debate about how to combine internal freedom—under whatever constitution—with the demands of war. The fact that Sieyès suggested recourse to a ‘permanent representative of the state (a hereditary king or life president)’\textsuperscript{69} in order to save the republic is an example that this strand or argument survived the rapid change of political vocabulary between the 1770s and the 1790s.

Finally, and to the mind of this author most importantly, a sixth strand involved the assault on household government under whatever guise, and consequently the claim not to be treated as child, servant, or slave under patriarchal authority, but instead to secure one’s own household and the items belonging to it. Lucca’s juxtaposition of \textit{principatus despoticus} and \textit{principatus politicus} with reference to 1. Samuel 8 and 12 once again became available in print in 1630.\textsuperscript{70} The term ‘despotic’ entered juridical argument in Germany and the attack on Mazarin in France in Fronde pamphlets from 1648, the former arguing for the need for a prince to consult vassals on issues that could infringe on their livelihood, for example decisions on war, the latter arguing a conspiracy of favourites and financiers to enrich themselves by the profits of war and to enslave French noblemen and subjects along the way.\textsuperscript{71} Neither implied in the slightest the abolition of monarchy. Quentin Skinner has argued that the claim to be truly free included the right not to be a slave which became a core issue in the attack on Charles I.\textsuperscript{72}

The argument that any kind of government must under all circumstances protect our state, distinct from the constraints under which children, servants, or slaves live, and also protect our own household and property, figures among the items listed in Hobbes’s \textit{Elements of Law} as ‘Causes of Rebellion . . . that subjects have a propriety distinct from the dominion of the sovereign, confuted’.\textsuperscript{73} Indeed, servants, children, and slaves were not meant to have propriety distinct from that of their parents or masters. Women did have such a claim, and insofar as the kings of France were meant, from the mid-sixteenth century, to have ‘married’ the Crown of France, they remained under the obligation not to abuse the property of the Crown.\textsuperscript{74} The very same chapter of Hobbes’s \textit{Elements of Laws} was referred to by Quentin Skinner about the making of Hobbes’s concept of ‘state’ as a fictitious person, in particular with respect to continental arguments (p. 552) on the representation of the legal person. In section 7 of that same chapter, Hobbes had refuted the claim for ‘mixed government’ as ‘error . . . from want of understanding of what is meant by this word body politic, and how it signifieth not the concord, but the union of many men.’\textsuperscript{75}

This argument was first formulated by Hugo Grotius, as Hasso Hofmann has shown. In his \textit{De Iure Belli ac Pacis} I, chapters III and VII, Grotius, then living in the Paris of Louis XIII, transformed the original argument about the representation of corporations in a radical absolutist way. Until then, it had meant to submit the supreme magistrate, the king, as holder of a mandate for the corporation, similar to a lawyer supervising the property of minors (\textit{representatio potestatis}), to the corporation as a whole. For that aim, the king had been understood as holding personal sovereignty, whereas the corporation held real sovereignty. The latter could be exercised by an assembly being identical with the corporation in question (\textit{representatio identitatis}). Grotius made no distinction between the body politic and the legal person of the state, the \textit{civitas}, that subsequently was to be represented by the monarch alone. The German jurist Christoph Besold protested that the head of the body politic must not be confused with the body politic itself.\textsuperscript{76} The Grotian and Hobbesian project of introducing their specific notion of the \textit{civitas} as legal person in order to drop the older notion of an assembly identical with the body politic as a whole was intended effectively to annihilate valid representation of the body politic by anyone but the monarch and to collapse his rule over subjects with the very existence of the body politic. Besold characterized monarchies
which failed to respect the difference between monarchical rule and the body politic as ‘dominatus’. The career of the term ‘despotic’ remained connected to an emphasis on proper protection for subjects as citizens with their own household, with whatever procedures and under whatever form of government and that ultimately depended upon enduring republican ideas, if we wish to address the claim for such protection as ‘republican’. Besold, for one, rather participated in a debate about illegitimate tyrants and despots on the one and legitimate kings on the other.

One reason for this trajectory, surely, must be found in the motives of Europe’s elites, no matter how heterogeneous they were. As Nicholas Canny curtly put it, ‘those at the upper reaches of society who were opposed to being ruled by regents or favourites, always appreciated that any significant weakening of the authority of monarchy could leave themselves exposed to attack by people lower in the social scale. For this reason they, no less than monarchs and their advisors, sought to resolve whatever difficulties arose between them through negotiation and compromise rather than through persisting with confrontation’. That compromise needed to include the acceptance of monarchy as protector, not only against the people at large, but also against robbery by foreign invaders as experienced in conquered polities such as Ireland and Bohemia, but it also needed to include restrictions upon royal power that, from approximately the middle of the seventeenth century, appeared as vilifying despotic government, in whatever guise, in order to establish legitimate, protective monarchy. Consequently, Robespierre’s famous defence of the Terror on 5 February 1794 that ‘the government of the revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny’ and the reality of successive French revolutionary regimes served as a powerful deterrent against overthrowing monarchy elsewhere in Europe. It did not, however, as the seventeenth-century British Wars of Religion had done, undermine the argument for ‘republican’ features of monarchy in order to harvest the protection of monarchy and simultaneously prevent the danger of despotism.

It was under radically changed circumstances that this emphasis on proper protection for the citizen, which was to be further developed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, came under attack on such an unprecedented scale and in such unprecedented ways in Germany and by Germans, that all constitutional constraints were swept away by the citizens themselves, and that the German émigré, Hans Baron, in searching for a civic attitude protecting against this deluge, transformed the term ‘republicanism’ into a search for alternatives to monarchy. The fact that in early modern Europe, the relation of values and principles associated with ‘republicanism’ to different forms of government was not clear cut, came back in the fact that many of the nations meeting this challenge were either monarchies with ‘republican’ features or republics with ‘monarchical’ ones.

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**Further Reading**


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Wootton, David. Republicanism, Liberty and Commercial Society (Stanford, CA, 1994).

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Notes:


(3.) Anna Grzeskowiak-Krawawicz, ‘Anti-monarchism in Polish Republicanism in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’, in Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, eds., Republicanism. A Shared European Heritage, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2002), 43–59, stresses (at 47) that the attitude of the nobility was emphatically not initially anti-monarchical
(despite the title of her contribution).


(10.) Though Harrington’s *Oceana* did not explicitly address England, it was meant to apply to the English Commonwealth, and its legislator Olphaus Megaletor was meant to be Cromwell.

(11.) Jonathan Scott, *Classical Republicanism*, 64, thus suggests that ‘republicanism’ should not be linked to the establishment of or favour for a kingless constitution.


(19.) I thank Paul Rahe for reminding me of this important strand.


(29.) Andreas Suter, *Der Schweizerische Bauernkrieg von 1653* (Tübingen, 1997).


(34.) Gelre (Gelderland), Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Groningse Ommeelanden, Frisia, Overijssel. Some cities wanted to sign separately due to pretensions regarding their independence; some other cities signed but eventually did not escape Spanish occupation, such as Brugge and Antwerp.


(37.) Luc Panhuysen, *De Ware Vrijheid, De levens van Johan en Cornelis de Witt* (Amsterdam, 2005).


(40.) Not all provinces did suppress the stadhouderschap simultaneously and different branches of the Nassau dynasty filled the office, for example, from the Nassau branch in Friesland.

(41.) Israel, ‘Part IV: The Age of Decline’, in *Dutch Republic*.


(46.) Lukowski, ‘Machines’, 72.


(52.) Gelderen and Skinner, *Republicanism; Rahe, Against Throne and Altar; and* David Wootton, *Republicanism, Liberty and Commercial Society* (Stanford, CA, 1994) remain indispensable.


dutiful passivity'.


(59.) Sando Landi, ‘“Fama”, Humors, and Conflicts. A re-reading of Machiavelli’s “Florentine Histories”’, in Massimo Rospocher, ed., *Beyond the Public Sphere* (Bologna, 2012), 137–166, 150.


(77.) Christoph Besold, *Dissertatio Politica Juridica* (Tübingen, 1625), section I, ch. I.


(79.) Hans Baron, ‘Calvinist Republicanism and its Historical Roots’, *Church History*, 8 (1939), 30–42.

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Warfare on Land
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Abstract and Keywords
This chapter first discusses the three technological and tactical changes commonly associated with the onset of major change in early modern European land warfare. It considers the historiography of ‘military revolution’ and argues that military change was not driven primarily by technology. Rather, a set of dynastic, religious, and imperial conflicts helped create a ‘Europe’ of shared military aspirations, styles, and techniques out of formerly quite discrete spheres of military and political influence. However, by the late seventeenth century, the dissemination of information and experience across these spheres had not eliminated the differences created by regional military conditions; further variation was introduced by the various ways in which states funded and administered military change. During the eighteenth century, regional and other distinctions in European military styles diminished considerably, before the French Revolutionary wars introduced new expectations.

Keywords: Military revolution, absolutism, infantry, military enterpriser, gunpowder, land warfare, sovereignty, fortifications

In the late sixteenth century, the English military writer, Robert Barret, famously observed to those who bemoaned the loss of former military standards: ‘that was then, and now is now; the wars are much altered since the fierie weapons came up’.*1 His observation embodies many of the problems in examining early modern military history and the ways in which it has been interpreted.

The numerous technological and tactical changes associated with the introduction of gunpowder weaponry are only among the most easily identifiable elements of military change in the early modern period. There were many others. Land armies dominated by domestic nobility and others whose military activities required extensive training were gradually replaced by forces overwhelmingly made up of commoners whose training was brief if intense. This change to armies overwhelmingly composed of rapidly trained commoners made possible an astounding escalation of army size, which in turn had much greater impact on the societies in which they acted. By the end of the eighteenth century, ancien régime states aspired to a style of army and of warfare barely recognizable from the early days of gunpowder weapons. The ideal army of that era was large, composed of specialized, manoeuvrable infantry, cavalry, and artillery units. Such troops made up a standing army of trained and disciplined commoners, recruited (or conscripted) and provided for in peacetime and at war with food, salaries, uniforms, arms, transport, and living arrangements, supplied as far as possible by their sovereign. Lastly, this military force reflected the social hierarchies of its era, commanded by educated and dedicated career officers, largely noblemen, who were responsible for the men’s loyal behaviour and the army’s responsiveness to the sovereign power of the state it represented.

Even this brief description makes it clear that early modern changes to land warfare can hardly, except as a matter
of narrative convenience, be described primarily by the technological changes associated with the arrival of gunpowder weaponry. Military events in early modern Europe were driven by a series of dynastic, religious, and imperial conflicts that gradually created a ‘Europe’ of shared military aspirations, styles, and techniques from formerly quite discrete spheres of military and political influence. The rise of commercial economies fed the technological improvement and the distribution of gunpowder weapons across the continent. And the character of European governments altered, even as they tried to meet the (costly) challenges of supporting military change.

Developments in land warfare and the creation of that military ‘Europe’ will be discussed in the following four sections. The first examines the basic tactical and technological changes often considered fundamental starting points for the transformation in land warfare. The second examines a period controversially but frequently labelled ‘the early modern military revolution’. As European armies met one another across broader geographic expanses, their military practices and their styles of warfare came increasingly to resemble one another. Nevertheless, regional theatres of war retained some distinctive practices. Further, as discussed in the third section, administrative and fiscal responses to the political, financial, dynastic, and social implications of change contributed to diverse military arrangements and capabilities across Europe. The final section examines the armies of eighteenth-century absolutist Europe, which struggled to regularize and standardize their military forces and practices, under the more direct control of sovereign states, until the French Revolution and Napoleon overthrew expectations once more. As elsewhere in this section, the creation of Europe’s overseas empires will be considered only in passing.

The Transformation of Land Warfare

Important markers of change in land warfare during the early modern period usually include the introduction of massed disciplined infantry, the concomitant development of artillery and handguns, and the introduction of new fortification styles. In each case, some elements of these changes appeared before or about 1500, although none became standard or dominant practice until much later.

In the Middle Ages, many armies in Europe took for granted the military necessity, indeed superiority, of cavalry (most often with reference to knights whose training to occupy their military and social position was prolonged). The recognition that massed infantry armed with pikes could be used as a defence against heavy cavalry represents a transitional moment for many military historians. A frequently cited example is the Battle of Courtrai (1302), in which tightly massed Flemish infantry, armed only with pikes and maces, defeated a French force with significant heavy cavalry—the kind of force then considered invincible. The Flemish infantry, and others like it through the 1300s, were predominantly defensive and usually associated with cities and principalities (many of them in Northern Italy and Flanders) that could not easily muster knightly cavalry. Such defeats were particularly shocking because infantry were not only commoners, and the knights’ social inferiors, but they were also usually militias, who trained intermittently while pursuing other livelihoods. Their successes are often attributed among other things to internal cohesion and morale deriving from a shared cause.

One region particularly renowned for the success of its infantry was the Old Swiss Confederacy, first as it defended its privileges and then as it expanded against its Habsburg overlords from the 1350s. The Swiss cantons became famous for the defensive, and eventually for the carefully developed offensive, capabilities of their locally recruited and cohesive infantry companies who, armed with pikes and other non-gunpowder weaponry, moved in tight columns on the battlefield. From the 1440s, demand for ‘Swiss infantry’, a term that referred as much to a style of fighting as to the fighters’ origins, as mercenary contingents attested to the growing importance of this type of infantry in many parts of Europe.

The financial and military success of the Swiss cantons and the continuing demand for their services soon generated competitors—other Swiss companies and the Landsknechte, volunteer contingents recruited in the Holy Roman Empire from the 1480s. These units probably began as straightforward copies of the Swiss cantonal contingents, but men serving in these troops lacked the shared motivation to which the Swiss cantons’ success was attributed. Leaders of the
Landsknechte and similar units instead inculcated loyalty to the units themselves, a process reinforced by the discipline of battle drill, military experience, and the presence of veteran soldiers. As the character and usefulness of handheld gunpowder weaponry developed in the latter part of the fifteenth century, the Landsknechte and their imitators supplemented the pikes and halberds characteristic of the Swiss with new gunpowder weapons, the bearers of which were dispersed among the rest of the troop. Armed or not, the training required to put such infantrymen into the field remained dramatically briefer than that demanded of knightly heavy cavalry.

The existence of cohesive infantry contingents was not limited to Switzerland and the Empire. Janissaries and other disciplined Ottoman infantry were fighting in the Balkans, often with and against light, as well as heavy, cavalry. At least some of the Janissaries carried firearms before the mid-fifteenth century, and infantry sometimes numerically dominated Ottoman forces on the battlefield. By the late fifteenth century the Ottoman Empire was deploying infantry that bore important resemblances to Swiss and German infantry, albeit in a different military theatre.

Widespread use of gunpowder weaponry is also seen as a key early modern military transformation. The presence of artillery is reported from the extreme ends of Europe, from Scotland to Muscovy, in the 1300s. Information about artillery also circulated in written form. Early cannon, which suffered from serious defects in manufacture and design, were initially employed in fortress defence. Their use in attacking fortresses followed only when their reliability and the ability to transport them had improved. After the 1450s, with the development of gun carriages, siege trains with artillery became more common. The Burgundians used bombards and canon; the Spanish army deployed cannon against Granada in 1482–92; the English employed artillery during the Hundred Years’ War. The French deployed guns against English-held fortresses in Normandy, Aquitaine, and Brittany (1440s, 1450s, 1487–88), before taking a siege train of forty guns into Northern Italy after 1495. The Poles and the Lithuanians used siege guns against the Teutonic Knights during the Thirteen Years’ War (1454–66); Ivan III of Moscow used cannon against Novgorod in 1478 and Tver in 1485. The Byzantines and then the Ottomans used heavy guns in their contest over Constantinople, and the Ottomans were quick to improve Ottoman siege capabilities by creating a permanent artillery corps within the sultan’s household. In short, by the latter part of the fifteenth century, artillery was found in a great many European armies and was used over an even wider geographic swathe than massed infantry.

The addition of cannon to armies raised the kinds of logistical issues that would only grow in scale and variety during the early modern era. These weapons had to be manufactured or purchased considerably in advance. Campaign planning had to consider which guns to include; it had to provide transportation not only for the guns, but also for all the accessories needed to keep them firing: ammunition, gunpowder, tools, shields, carts, and additional horses among others. And since artillerymen themselves could not supply these requirements, significant escalation of governmental or other organizational and financial capacity was required.

The significance of artillery for early modern land warfare was quite uneven. In some theatres, it had an enormous and rather sudden impact. Although cannon could be used in the same way as trebuchets, launching missiles into towns, or for their startling noise, soon enough siege cannon were trained on fortress walls. When they were, high- and hollow-walled fortresses, which had heretofore repelled invaders during protracted sieges, became vulnerable to capture within weeks, occasionally days, their unreinforced walls unable to withstand cannonball fire.

But in the mid-fifteenth century, artillery-resistant fortress designs appeared in Italy, then spread to the French and Dutch theatres of war. The so-called Trace Italienne, or star fortress, had low earthen-filled walls and low protruding bastions, which resisted artillery damage and permitted lethal crossfire as besiegers approached the walls. The new design was enormously costly to build, and methods for refurbishing existing fortresses soon followed. Laying siege to one of the new fortresses was usually a costly and prolonged process of attrition in which the advantage lay with the defender. Nonetheless, the perceived military necessity of capturing them tended to focus armies on sieges and helped to make field battles relatively rare for much of the early modern period. With such sieges came an expanded need for specialized troops—especially for sappers, miners, and engineers.
In other military theatres, the presence of artillery engendered quite different reactions. In eastern Europe, although cannon were certainly available, sparser urban concentrations and highly mobile warfare apparently discouraged their frequent use. Older fortress styles and materials remained in use alongside limited bastion defences, and battlefield confrontations and raids were somewhat more common. In Hungary and Muscovy, for example, infantry and smaller field artillery delivered massed firepower on the battlefield from behind wagenburg, tabor, or guliyashche goroda—that is, circled wagons or linked, mobile wooden walls that provided infantry some refuge from mobile cavalry attack. Even where siege artillery was effectively used, and despite the presence of Italian military engineers and architects, the construction of bastion defences was an uncommon response. In the Germanies and further east, the Iberian peninsula, Scandinavia, and in the British Isles, there were far fewer new or refurbished fortresses. The Ottomans did not themselves invest in Trace Italienne fortresses, even if their formidable siege, artillery, and logistical skills led those with eastern Mediterranean outposts quickly to build such fortifications. The Austrian Habsburgs invested in the traces italiennes somewhat later, primarily in response to Ottoman expansion past the middle of the sixteenth century. Muscovy also used wooden fortresses, even pre-fabricated ones such as that carried to Sviazshsk on boats and constructed upriver of Kazan’ in 1551.

Further developments in the use of gunpowder weaponry included the tactical re-organization of infantry to include handheld firearms. At first, sharpshooters or a sprinkling of gunmen among massed pikemen in an infantry formation were introduced as protection against sharpshooters in the opposing ranks. Later, as firearms improved, especially with the appearance of the more accurate musket, the number of men with firearms within massed infantry units increased and their purpose shifted. Rather than defending pikemen, armed infantry became valued for their ability to deliver firepower directly into enemy ranks in the midst of battle. Muscovy’s musketeers, in the late sixteenth century, demonstrated this capacity on the parade ground by firing into an ice wall until it was destroyed.

In much later tactical developments, fire-armed infantry were trained to produce wider and more concentrated bursts of fire. Instead of standing in close, deep formations, infantry toward the end of the sixteenth century were positioned in long lines, the depth of which diminished as the width of their field of fire spread. Even later, the appearance of firearms with permanent bayonets at the very end of the seventeenth century led to the discontinuation of pikemen and the dominance of armed infantry on the battlefield.

Generally speaking, elements of these technological and tactical innovations were visible in many European armies by about 1500. They remain commonly acknowledged markers in the development of early modern Europe’s land warfare because many, if not all of them, are quite basic to the style of army and warfare that dominated Europe by the late eighteenth century.

However, the diffusion and development of these technological and tactical innovations should not be understood as having followed a geographic path or particular sequence. It has been argued that these military innovations constituted an ensemble of interconnected developments, and that the ‘homeland’ of that package of change lay in the Spanish Habsburg lands from the mid-fifteenth century, whence they migrated northwest and finally eastwards. But the underlying assumption, that early modern military change constituted a series of stages building upon one another, blurs the historical record. Individual particulars, such as the availability of artillery, infantry tactical developments, or the adoption of Trace Italienne fortresses, did not spread in lock-step fashion. While cannon appeared almost simultaneously in many different locations, they were deployed quite differently. And if the new fortresses quickly appeared in the eastern Mediterranean as well as in Italy, the presence of artillery generated different responses elsewhere. This and other examples point to evolving foci of early modern European military developments after the mid-fifteenth century.

More importantly, as the following section will argue, much of the variegated pattern of military change in Europe was created not by technological diffusion, but rather by the complex interaction of the mechanisms that evolved to support the technology, tactics, and troop organization described earlier. There were layers of international questions having to do with sovereignty and power as well as domestic political issues, not the least of which was the need to negotiate the nobility’s cooperation in changing military configurations. Even as the need to meet one’s enemies with corresponding force
introduced a certain convergence in battlefield, tactical, and strategic arrangements, the need to pay for mercenaries and domestic troops, and to supply them with weapons, food, and replacements called forth quite a diverse set of administrative and financial adaptations, given the different political, economic, and administrative conditions of participating states. The variety of responses to implementing technological, tactical, and other changes in turn meant considerable variation in the armies themselves, as governments confronted the political, institutional, fiscal, dynastic, and social implications of military developments.

Interpretations of Military Change

After 1450–1500, the impact of these technological and other changes on European military forces gathered impetus. In 1955, Michael Roberts argued that the enormous change in European armies during the period from 1560 to 1660 warranted being called a ‘military revolution’. Using evidence from the Dutch and Swedish forces, which were both innovative and powerful in that century, he argued that European militaries underwent major shifts in tactics and technology, in particular as they developed effective tactics for the use of gunpowder weaponry.19

This idea has been much debated by historians since its appearance. Geoffrey Parker and others have since revised and extended the concept of ‘military revolution’, arguing that major changes began to take place much earlier, especially in the Spanish empire, thereby extending the beginning of the military revolution to 1450 or 1500 and prolonging it until 1800. Furthermore, Parker pointed out that the presence or absence of Trace Italienne fortresses was an important marker that helped to delineate the geography of the ‘revolution’. The relationship of this military transformation to the growth of European states and the European conquest of overseas empires was another important topic of discussion.20 Modifications to the central (p. 567) concept followed, creating a vigorous debate on the timing, nature, and very existence of the military revolution. Some have discussed the degree to which major early modern military change was rooted in the late Middle Ages.21 A different geography and understanding of military revolution, one that encompasses the rather different militaries of eastern Europe, has been proposed.22 Others have suggested that the concept itself is a simplification, obscuring important local distinctions. Jeremy Black located critical changes in the period from 1660 to 1815, and Clifford Rogers argued that the idea of evolutionary change, or punctuated equilibrium, is more appropriate.23 While many have commented on a focus on prolonged sieges and the rarity of battle, especially in the Trace Italienne zone, the early seventeenth century has also been seen as the rebirth of war marked by decisive battles, with armies led by great commanders such as Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden, Maurice of Nassau, and Henri de Turenne; others have unequivocally described the Thirty Years’ War as a futile and destructive struggle.24 It seems safe to say that no all-encompassing characterization of early modern military change has been agreed upon.

This section argues that more trans-European battlefield experience and the wider availability of military information resulted in greater similarities among European land forces, although some regional military distinctions clearly remained during the period 1450–1680. At the same time, the means used to support the ‘new’ military forces were diverse, a factor that introduced another layer of difference among Europe’s land forces not necessarily connected with military theatre.

More general exposure to and information about military practices, including those described in the preceding section, are one characteristic of the period from approximately 1500 to 1700. This is attributable in part to political coincidence. Prior to the mid-fifteenth century, warfare was regionally quite constrained.25 After 1450, however, two unconnected sets of events changed the situation. First, the marriage of Maximilian of Habsburg to Mary of Burgundy launched the consolidation of Habsburg rule over a broad swathe of lands including Spain, the Spanish Netherlands, Spanish Italy, and the Holy Roman Empire, a configuration that virtually encircled France. France’s attempts to fight its way out of the Habsburg ‘ring’ imposed a new shape on conflict in southern and west-central Europe. It became more common for wars to be fought among and across formerly regional military theatres.

At about the same time, the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople and the expansion of the powerful Ottoman Empire into the
Balkans and along the Black Sea coast also changed previous military configurations, this time among Mediterranean states. Here, too, battlefield experience quite suddenly encompassed a much broader territorial range. Thus, towards the end of the wars against the Moorish kingdoms to its south, the Spanish Crown imported contingents of Swiss to serve in and to instruct their armies. The following Italian wars provided a theatre for Spanish military reform and the subsequent launching of the famed Spanish tercios, large permanent infantry units made up of pikemen, swordsmen, and bearers of firearms. The Venetians and others with island bases in the eastern Mediterranean got a taste of the Ottoman military style, just as the Ottomans encountered *Trace Italienne* fortresses in this context.

(p. 568) This diffusion of information could hardly be called European in the conventional usage of the word. The Ottoman Empire’s status as a European power after its conquests in the Balkans is rarely acknowledged, but it was integral to Europe’s expanded military experience from the sixteenth century. The Ottomans, along with many of their east–central and east European opponents, incorporated new information into a military world that was in some places differently composed, in armies that might include a significant contingent of mobile light cavalry, sometimes self-supporting on the basis of service for land grants; German *Landsknechte* and Flemish troops both fought in Hungary, for example. But the arms and tactics of the Ottomans on the frontier reflected major innovation, and the Habsburgs were not slow to respond to those changes—launching the centralization of the military and expanding the proportions of armed infantry, for example.26

The interlocking dynastic wars of the early sixteenth century in Europe and the Ottoman Empire expanded both their reach and focus over the mid-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Religious conflicts in support of an emerging Protestantism or the established Christian Church led to civil wars that eddied outward—the mid-sixteenth century wars under Charles V Habsburg were at once about the governance of the Holy Roman Empire and about religious loyalties. The French wars of religion involved not only civil conflict in France, but eventually brought Spain to the support of French Catholics. The first phase of the Dutch wars of independence, 1568–1609, pitted the seventeen provinces against Spain, but as a conflict between Protestants and Catholics, it also drew in England, launching an undeclared Anglo–Spanish conflict. And in northeastern Europe, the Livonian War (1558–83) was the first of several northern conflicts involving Sweden, Russia, Denmark, and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth over the fate of the eastern Baltic.

In this precarious political climate, numerous conflicts continued into the early part of the seventeenth century, with the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48) focusing yet again on the religious affiliations and governance of the component parts of the Empire, while connecting to the Dutch wars on one side of Europe and the Muscovites on the other.27 There was civil conflict in England, a France fearful of isolation, and further Nordic–Northern Wars linking conflicts between Denmark and its former colony, Sweden, with confrontations between the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and Muscovy/Russia. These wars, which provided some cross-fertilization of west European and central–east European fields of military practice, continued to be affected by the oldest of religio-cultural conflicts with the Ottoman Empire, which launched another series of campaigns in eastern Europe against the Commonwealth (1672–76), Muscovy (1678–81), and the Holy League (1683–99). These wars, like their sixteenth-century predecessors, were notably lengthy, with long sieges and often extensive interruptions between campaigns; they did however also feature some important and conclusive battles.

The effects of larger and more diverse field experience were multiplied by the circulation of men and of written materials. The cosmopolitan, non-national nature of many armies further promoted the circulation of information. Men whose station in life, profession, and temperament predisposed them to military service travelled widely across the continent, observing or participating in the latest in military activities, reinforcing at the same time the status and profession of soldier and officer. And their activities were encouraged; the French, Dutch, and Russian armies assumed that certain posts would be occupied by foreigners. In the same vein, individual Swiss, Scots, and German mercenary officers fought for quite extended periods with three or more armies.28

Individual first-hand experience was broadly disseminated through the widespread publication of memoirs and manuals, which were designed to impart information about the newest weaponry and tactics. One could cite a plethora of sixteenth-century Spanish and Venetian military manuals, followed by more manuals, commentaries on the Dutch wars, military
memoirs, and technical treatises on the art of fortification and similar topics. Mercenary officers and others self-consciously kept their skills up-to-date using such materials. In 1616, the Dutch even founded a military school with a six-month long curriculum, designed ‘to educate young gentlemen in the art of war’.29

Another common development in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Euro–Ottoman armies was the accelerating importance of infantry. As armed infantry became more adept at delivering firepower, the proportions of guns to pikes in infantry units grew. As early as 1516–21, the Spanish infantry increased its ratio of arquebusier and musketeer pikemen to as much as one quarter.30 The same arrangement was quickly adopted by Charles V as Holy Roman Emperor. While Swiss mercenaries remained relatively loyal to the pike for much of the sixteenth century, the German Landsknechte adopted ‘Spanish’ standards, arming first an eighth and then nearly a quarter of their number. Others followed suit. Ottoman Janissaries began adopting firearms in the 1440s, and by the early–mid-sixteenth century, fire-armed infantry had grown to between a quarter and a third of the army.31

The proportions of infantry in the military also grew. In the seventeenth century in some west European armies, foot soldiers constituted as much as 60–80 per cent of the military. In eastern Europe, where distance and other factors encouraged greater mobility, the proportions of infantry grew beyond one-third to one-half of armies on the march during the seventeenth century. In garrison forces, the ratios were higher still.32 Such proportions reflected a permanent and final transition in the social composition of European armies, now significantly dominated by commoners largely serving in the infantry.

The growing value of infantry to early modern armies was connected to its increasing tactical manoeuvrability (as well as to its lower costs). The coherence and discipline of the Swiss infantry and the Landsknechte were further refined. The commanders of Spanish tercios (reduced by the 1530s to a nominal 3,000 men, but in practice often fewer) became colonels. Subsequently, the Spanish subdivided coloncies into companies, whose captains could then manoeuvre these companies within the larger unit or independently. This process continued with the Dutch Maurice of Nassau who, at the very end of the sixteenth century, recommended the further subdivision of units and increase in officer numbers to allow for maximum performance; Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden would take the process still further.33 Manoeuvrability in this context was (p. 570) dependent on training by numerous, hierarchically organized, experienced, and well-informed officers, reinforced by ongoing disciplined action alongside experienced men. The introduction of new organizational forms and more numerous unit officers proceeded apace across Europe from Cromwell’s New Model Army to Russia’s ‘new formation regiments’.

Into the seventeenth century, essential as they were to the military enterprise, officers in many European armies remained a diverse social mixture. Much recruitment and command of military forces was undertaken by men of social standing and power—such as noblemen. For many noblemen, military service for their monarch and the personal honour and glory to be won in military action remained important motivations, evolving from social codes long characteristic of European nobilities. Discourse on the character and education desirable in military officers to some extent reinforced such attitudes. In many places, the military also offered an honourable, and potentially lucrative, career for second sons. But as before, not all nobles were willing to serve, even as officers, in regiments dominated by commoners and a new kind of fighting that placed increasing emphasis on drill and discipline. A combination of social and economic circumstances, while it launched many noblemen into a new kind of military career, also allowed for officer corps that included foreigners, foreign advisers, mercenaries, and native-born commoners.

The growth of armies—sometimes by a factor of as much as ten, although exact numbers are unreliable—was a further common characteristic across the Euro–Ottoman zone. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, armies of 20,000 men were counted departing on campaign from France, as from Muscovy and Poland. By mid-century, France counted on some 60,000 or 70,000 men during wartime; Spain and the Empire boasted 40,000 to 50,000 men each during particular campaigns, although it is doubtful in each case that more than 10,000 remained under arms during peacetime. The seventeenth-century Ottoman forces appeared large to most Europeans, but actual numbers are difficult to determine.34 Elsewhere during the seventeenth century, the expansion of land armies continued, with countries such as Spain, Habsburg Austria, Muscovy,
Sweden, and France all apparently able to call upon some 100,000 men each. Smaller states also increased the number of forces under their command. As army numbers continued to grow until 1700 and beyond, France—the continent’s largest army—claimed more than 350,000 troops. Such numbers were only possible given the predominance of commoners in European armed forces.

Armies of this size reflected the adoption of more sophisticated military strategies. Although the size of armies on a particular battlefield or at a given siege did grow during the seventeenth century, the large numbers of men in campaign forces more typically represented several different armies, fighting on different fronts, or undertaking separate tasks. During the Thirty Years’ War, for example, France had the capacity to send troops against Spain and the Emperor even as it garrisoned its borders. Imperial and Swedish troops were likewise engaged on several fronts. Russia fielded troops on the Baltic and in Ukraine during the Thirteen Years’ War as well as garrisoning its southern frontier. It was not until 1700 and the wars against Louis XIV that the forces engaged on each side of a single battle regularly passed 50,000.

Changes to army size and strategic thinking are attributable as much to international political conditions as to particular military approaches. The great seventeenth-century military architect, Vauban, for example, believed that such huge armies primarily reflected inter-dynastic relations. France, feeling itself isolated, built numerous frontier fortresses and sent armies into the multiple theatres in which it found itself competing. And similar reasoning applies elsewhere.

Finally, the greater geographic breadth of dynastic warfare, after 1559 and lasting through the seventeenth and into the early eighteenth century, was contemporaneous with an internationalization of power politics. Perhaps given the example of the Ottoman Empire, many states found it appropriate to think about broader continental strategies and create military and other alliances to counter the Ottoman advance, or to protect interests threatened by a developing international situation. Dynastic warfare also contributed to a sense of acceptable causes for the declaration of war and claims to land. Confessional warfare changed not so much what justifications were offered for military activity as a different categorization of combatant and non-combatant.

These developments notwithstanding, it is a mistake to imagine that European land armies in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fought wars compounded of massive siege and battlefield confrontations between disciplined and cohesive infantry units (armed with pikes, halberds, and then gunpowder weapons) sharing the field with artillery and increasingly well-trained cavalry. First, before the mid-point of the Thirty Years’ War, when decisive engagements increased in frequency, battles involving more than 20,000 men on each side, and indeed pitched battles generally, continued to be relatively rare. Furthermore, most armies took and held the field somewhat intermittently—seasonal campaigns, often interrupted by stops-and-starts—for a variety of reasons, including the inability of most armies to sustain troops fighting more persistently. They co-existed with and were supported by ‘small wars’. Some cavalry raids and pillaging expeditions were formal, planned operations, with limited infantry or artillery support and often quite positive results. Very similar behaviour supported forces on the move, undermined enemy supply, or constituted unplanned action by military marauders.

Furthermore, the trends towards similarity in land warfare during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were accompanied by a great deal of diversity. There remained important regional distinctions within military practice. On the one hand, into the sixteenth century, English forces, partially isolated by the Channel, retained an allegiance to the longbow, just as the French persisted in believing in the superiority of their heavy cavalry in the face of clear evidence to the contrary. On a much larger scale, in much of the Germanies and northeastern Europe, Trace Italienne fortresses remained in limited use. Although armies in this theatre grew large in the seventeenth century, they were somewhat different in composition, typically with higher percentages of cavalry. After confrontations such as Kircholm (1605), where a Polish army with twice as many cavalry as infantry defeated the Swedes, both Swedish and Bavarian armies also contained higher proportions of cavalry. Meanwhile, the frontier zones of southeastern Europe were distinguished by settled garrisons defending fortified borders with cavalry support. Such forces remained an exceedingly important element of the Russian, Polish, and Austrian military forces well into the eighteenth century, and neglect of these border troops was militarily costly. Austria, by contrast with its neighbours, more explicitly and purposefully distinguished its garrison and light cavalry troops from the rest of its
army in this period.40

Small wars exhibited a similar regional emphasis. The Muscovite–Lithuanian border wars in the first third of the sixteenth century were decided by raiding campaigns. Similar actions were also deliberately planned elements of broader military strategies. Light cavalry raided, burned, and pillaged villages, took prisoners for ransom and in lieu of pay, scouted for informers, and destroyed local economies. The scorched earth and raiding harassment tactics used by Peter I against Sweden in 1709 are but one startlingly effective example.

The east was certainly not alone in indulging in various kinds of ‘small war’. Raids, foraging expeditions, and disruptions of supply were elsewhere described as wars of attrition or sorties. The French civil war, in particular, included ample demonstrations of ‘raiding warfare’. For example, de Montmorency’s army in 1628 burned crops, deliberately destroying the local economy. During the Thirty Years’ War, too, small-scale encounters between cavalry units were frequent and important elements in the fighting, and plundering expeditions a military constant despite the efforts of several armies to curtail them.41

Some of the warriors of both ‘small wars’ and larger ones were unofficial or irregular troops. The Cossacks, Tatars, and Nogais on the Pontic steppe and the uskoks and martolocs on the Habsburg–Ottoman frontier supported formal military forces in return for payments in cash and kind that were often withdrawn once a crisis was past. Irregulars also proved a staple of European colonial wars. Not all such violence was military or even nominally under military control. The activities of irregulars often additionally included illegal and unlicensed military-style violence; the persistence of important bandit groups through the seventeenth and into the eighteenth century is another element in the diverse spectrum of such activities in early modern Europe.

Regional differences were not necessarily markers of ‘backwardness’. Some military advantage, in siege artillery for example, lay with the Ottomans.42 Nor was there a necessary sequence in the adoption of technologies and tactics. Trace Italienne fortresses still offer the clearest of illustrations. The presence of such fortresses has frequently been causally linked to the need both for larger armies and a larger proportion of infantry. Nonetheless, armies that did not frequently confront the Trace Italienne also grew rapidly over the seventeenth century. Such armies often used their infantry to garrison fortresses that were not Trace Italienne, as well as to deliver massed firepower on the battlefield. This underlines the suggestion that army growth was driven in part by new international considerations as well as military experience.43

(p. 573) **Implementing Military Change**

Such changes as these in land warfare, regardless of the theatre, were the product of constant struggles to meet the co-evolving political, financial, and administrative needs of implementation. The ability to undertake change required the political will of social elites. Beyond this, military and political elites pushed the limited administrative and financial capacities that they controlled in order minimally to meet the resource demands that accompanied military change. Responses to these challenges generally had a regional character, but there was also considerable variation within regional models, governed by political and other considerations.

The nature of a particular state’s support for military change broadly reflected the character of interaction among its political and social elites, specifically the relationship of Crown and nobility. Cavalry-dominated armies in medieval Europe had been bound up with the power and privilege exercised by ranking noblemen of the period. They raised their own military forces, they wielded great political power at court, and their social assumptions supported their belief in the military superiority of cavalry. The sharp decline in the efficacy of such forces by the sixteenth century, accompanied by a shift away from chivalry to more practical ethics, challenged a key component of noble status and power.44 In France, the nobility as a whole declined to acknowledge the declining efficiency of mounted men-at-arms well into the sixteenth century.45 And indeed, the French wars of religion (1562–98), encouraged a separatist warrior nobility and undermined some of the powers that had
accrued to the Crown earlier in the sixteenth century. The creation of intendants in their aftermath marked a restructured relationship between Crown and aristocracy. Nonetheless, the process was a slow one; the call-up of feudal levies of noble cavalry continued intermittently through the seventeenth century even as the Crown made efforts to convert this acknowledgement of military and political power into a more useful cash payment. It is not unreasonable to see the French Crown’s concomitant concerns with more direct sovereignty over the military as a by-product of this lasting tension.

On the other side of Europe, Polish political cooperation declined after the demise of the Jagellonian dynasty in the latter part of the sixteenth century. Political power then shifted firmly to the numerous petty nobility (szlachta); the liberum veto, which required unanimous Diet agreement to proposed measures, reinforced its position. The internal cohesion of the nobility with respect to military affairs nonetheless proved effective until the mid-seventeenth century. The famed Polish hussars, raised by the nobility using their private means, continued to gain important victories until after 1650. In fact, Polish nobles raised money, troops, and defence forces at a variety of national, provincial, and local levels. The King had diminishing military and fiscal resources, and his military leadership increasingly depended on charisma and negotiation. Exhaustion, serious defeats, and the loss of territory, population, and internal cohesion quickly undercut Poland’s military standing after 1650, despite its key participation during the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683.

(p. 574) As Sweden broke from its union with Denmark–Norway in 1523, the political groundwork was laid for the elite cooperation that supported the successful Swedish military machine of the seventeenth century. A socially diverse Riksdag balanced Sweden’s aristocratic council. The carefully negotiated participation of many (relatively poor) noblemen in Sweden’s military and in its bureaucracy created a basis for the collaborative tension that supported Sweden’s military activities into the earlier eighteenth century.

Given that elite cooperation needed careful negotiation, the introduction and then dominance of military units composed of common foot soldiers represented a particularly important social and political moment. With some exceptions (the Ottoman Janissaries and the tercios, which included some impoverished Spanish noblemen serving in the name of their faith), any significant military role for these units challenged the nobility’s fundamental role as defenders of the realm. And it undermined noble status vis-à-vis the Crown, if the Crown could call upon its own infantry instead of relying on nobly raised troops.

Throughout Europe, the political will to use government powers to muster and support significant numbers of domestically recruited infantry troops was therefore not quickly established. Raising such regiments at home was a particularly complicated political issue. The French nobility’s disdain for infantry service kept France quite reliant on mercenaries until the mid-sixteenth century. Its first successful domestic soldiers were garrison and border units first established in the 1550s and 1560s. After the Frondes with its further (though final) exhibition of independent aristocratic violence, these units became the prized vieux regiments and petits-vieux of the seventeenth century.

In Muscovy, the need for a greater variety of troops besides noble light cavalry was recognized with the addition of muskeeters to the army in the 1550s, while the problems with raising an army based on land grants became clear during the 1580s. Noble attitudes nonetheless limited further experimentation to the occasional hiring of mercenary regiments, most particularly during the Smolensk War (1632–34). To replace the noble light cavalry by new forces, which included numerous and conscripted infantry as well as cavalry troops commanded by foreigners, was undertaken incrementally over the course of the entire seventeenth century and involved the enormous social cost of enserfing the Russian peasantry. The restructuring of the entire field army as new formation troops happened only with overwhelming consent of the aristocracy after 1682. Thereafter, Muscovy’s noble officers reasonably willingly commanded conscripted commoners serving in infantry and cavalry regiments.

Voluntary seasonal troops were one interim response to the practical and political difficulties of raising domestic troops. Some states used the long-standing obligation of particular groups and communities to raise troops for the defence of the realm as a device for mustering militias. The Low Countries, the German Diet, England, Venice, and others used such obligations to raise temporary troops. Elsewhere, there were commissioned troops, those raised by captains from a particular
region, often upon payment of bounties. A common resort in the sixteenth century, militias were turned into trained, seasoned, and conscripted troops in the seventeenth century by Sweden. By (p. 575) the end of the seventeenth century, France and Brandenburg–Prussia successfully converted militia obligations into an obligatory army recruitment system. More universal coercive conscription systems elsewhere were relatively uncommon until the eighteenth century, although Spain, the Ottomans, and Russia made limited, regional, or seasonal use of conscripts prior to 1700.

Mercenary troops offered important alternatives to domestic units, especially at the beginning of the period: they did not raise concerns about noble displacement as much as domestically recruited infantry, since their allegiance to the Crown was generally and correctly assumed to be finite. Further, controls over the royal purse exercised by political elites not infrequently tempered such fears. Instead mercenaries raised quite different questions with respect to sovereignty, in states newly trying to control the exercise of violence within their borders and beyond. The responsiveness of mercenary units to Crown commands was a persistent issue, since neither the military nor political behaviour of such troops was entirely within the grasp of their temporary ‘masters’. The most obvious examples were rare if dramatic mutinies and plundering expeditions launched when payment was late or short. The strong unit identity of mercenary troops supported their military activities. But the same sentiments led them, among other things, to insist on the selection of officers by popular acclaim, to make collective decisions about the role their units would play, and to their refusal to disband during peace negotiations if they had not been paid adequately (as at the battles of Marignano in 1515 and Morbegno in 1531). Thus, the interests of mercenary units were occasionally somewhat at odds with military decisions made by those governments that hired them. Nonetheless, although they did not rely on them to the same degree, nearly all European states used significant numbers of mercenaries.

The ability of states to undertake military change was not only shaped by the particular ways in which their elites cooperated in the process, but also by their administrative capacity to raise the resources required to support the new military’s requirements. A key issue was the political transition from ‘domain states’ to more expansive forms of royal government. That is, rather than having the Crown or royal household largely dependent on revenues from royal domains, states strove for political and administrative formats that allowed them access to other resources. Medieval arrangements, such as the right to call noble cavalry levies, were transferred to cash payments. And in particular, as demands for larger armies and their support became a force driving dynastic success and glory, states extended their administrative systems to include new and broader forms of taxation and other forms of extraction where possible.

Increasingly rationalized bureaucracies undertook to extend the ways in which they extracted resources beyond the royal domain. Thus, to a significant degree, the Ottomans, some north- and east-European states, and to a lesser degree the Spanish adopted state-run extractive systems to gain access to their economies’ wealth, often in kind, sometimes in cash. Such administrative systems rarely directly taxed the wealth of the nobility, however. In addition, states’ powers of revenue collection were often weak and ineffective. And there were other difficulties; during the seventeenth century, many national budgets were lists of annual expectations rather than robust and vigorous accounting processes. The revenues raised were further limited not only by resource availability and extractive shortcomings, but also by inefficient oversight of expenditure. For structural, administrative, and political reasons, states such as France, the United Provinces of the Netherlands, and England supplemented resource extraction with other forms of revenue generation, since their increasingly commercial economies during the seventeenth century offered different revenue opportunities.

The capacity of states to collect resources domestically in the early modern period is often seen as positively linked with highly centralized monarchies. Such monarchies, it is argued, were most successful at extending their financial capacities and at gradually creating budgetary and fiscal regularity throughout the period in a way that supported military growth. Nonetheless, throughout the seventeenth century, there were effective exceptions to centralized monarchical efficiency. Poland, the most obvious example, supported a successful military with a decentralized structure that effectively mobilized private resources at the local level, even if it left little power in the hands of the king in Warsaw. The army raised in this fashion, although numbering only some 30,000, defeated the Turks at Vienna as late as 1683. The United Provinces, run by a merchant oligarchy, and the Habsburg Monarchy’s version of rulership shared by Crown and Estates were other political
structures that raised and expended revenue on their military forces to good purpose. In short, even in the late seventeenth century, centralized monarchies were not the only extractive structures that could support military success.55

Recent studies help to extend our understanding of the ways in which resources were mobilized to support and drive military change in early modern Europe.56 These re-examinations of state power focus on the myriad ways in which private wealth, commercial networks, and international organizational capacities, which could not be directly accessed by governments, were nonetheless leveraged to support military change, and how such alternative ways of accessing resources were integrated into developing notions of state sovereignty.

By contracting for mercenary troops, early modern governments could minimize pressure on their own resources—by limiting the duration of hire and the cost of troop preparation—and make use of others’ capacities and resources. Starting with the Swiss and the Landsknechte, nobles, landowners, rulers of small principalities, and other prosperous individuals, who continued to be motivated by personal honour and the glory of military service, were also frequently those who raised mercenary troops. They used their own social and economic capital, which were often inaccessible to rulers, to collect and prepare mercenary troops, and then negotiate contracts for and profit from them. Mercenaries were sometimes hired by their own sovereign or a friendly government. If a troop was hired by a government hostile to their leader’s, issues of sovereignty were raised but often ignored.57 In a French variation on this theme, noble colonels negotiated the recruitment, supply, and support either of newly forming French regiments or of regiments whose command they had discretely purchased. The colonel might later ‘sell’ or ‘bequeath’ the regiment, but in the interval the colonel’s resources and ability to borrow money would better and more reliably provide for the regiment than could the government, while the colonel’s personal standing was reinforced by the regiment’s (p. 577) activities. While such circumstances provoked no direct issue of sovereignty, the government’s control over its officer corps was diminished by the officers’ direct involvement in supporting army regiments. Notwithstanding, the Crown did not phase out venality of military office; instead, the conditions of such office sale were carefully framed by the Crown so that the army continued to benefit from access to the resources of the French elite.58 Meanwhile, well-provided mercenary and venal infantry troops played their part in military change, with their emphasis on the development of tactics and weapons deployment and on the importance of maintaining troop identity.

In the realm of military logistics and supply, state-administered systems were also supplemented or even replaced by a variety of contracted and private arrangements. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as military forces became larger and more permanent, it was generally accepted that armies on the move could not be entirely supported by governments. Some governments nonetheless managed to offer substantial support. An impressive network of magazines along the Spanish Road in the late sixteenth century allowed troops to move quickly from Lombardy to Flanders without fear of hunger or any shortfall in resources. And there were others’ attempts to use magazines and riverine transport to extend the reach of army supply. The Ottoman armies early on developed not only an efficient magazine system, but also the organization to extend supply beyond their empire’s borders. Indeed, until about the mid-eighteenth century, the Ottoman military was generally better provided than its enemies. The Ottoman and the sixteenth-century Spanish approaches to logistics and supply exemplify direct reliance on state-administered systems. These and other governments also experimented with state-administered arms and gunpowder production.59

State-administered supply systems were, however, generally inadequate to the scope of the task of feeding and supplying growing numbers of soldiers. From the sixteenth century, private and individual efforts both supplemented and substituted for state-administered efforts. A significant ‘tail’ of camp followers, adding 50 per cent or more to the number of soldiers, joined troops on the move. Carters, blacksmiths, ostlers, sutlers, foragers, prostitutes, armourers, laundrywomen, seamstresses, and amateur nurses provided for military men, filling undeniable needs by undertaking small-scale trade within the theatre of war. Purchasing, plundering, pillaging, and theft by armies and their camp followers occurred on a significant scale and remained an inevitable element of salary and sustenance for early modern armies throughout the period.60 And troop movements on campaign had to be planned to maintain food supplies, in this or more formal ways. This was basic to retaining army numbers and troop morale in the field, and it highlighted the advantage of moving through enemy territory instead of one’s own.
In an effort to distribute the impact of such depredations against one’s own population, some states formally denominated local taxes, collected exclusively on behalf of nearby garrisons. By the seventeenth century, war taxes called contributions were collected first in enemy territories, then in neutral, and finally friendly ones. ‘Contributions’ were also levied by occupying troops under threat of force, and the right to collect them was claimed by mercenary troops as supply, or as an ‘earnest’ against moneys owed by their colonels. Such arrangements could easily become the basis for negotiating more permanent taxes after war was over.61

Private commercial and financial networks were willing and increasingly effective participants in military recruitment and supply. The ‘Long Turkish War’ of 1593–1606 was fought along a Hungarian border that was normally unable even to support local garrisons. Cash subsidies and contributions from across the far-flung Habsburg Monarchy were moved through international banking and financial networks to field commanders. Major contractors moved goods to the border; one individual handled the purchase and management of artillery for the Habsburg war effort. Meanwhile, leveraging their personal credit, colonels supplied their units with food and other necessaries contracted at a considerable distance, since the border economy was unable to support sizeable demand. Similarly, international trade moved guns and cannon manufactured in England and Sweden to the Netherlands and other entrepôts, whence contractors (or the owners of mercenary regiments) again moved them across national lines to a final destination. The activities of contractors were surprisingly unimpeded by political considerations, although there were embargos against individual states—such as the effort to limit Muscovite arms purchases through Baltic ports. Arrangements like these applied to other goods and at a variety of levels. By the 1620s, Genoese and Flemish contractors were supplying the Spanish army with bread. Elsewhere, governments negotiated peacetime contracts to feed remote garrisons, often through a local captain or governor.62

These kinds of arrangements gave European armies access not only to resources, but also to personal credit and to organizational capabilities not within the grasp—nor necessarily even within the borders—of individual states. Although such potential military consequences as death or bankruptcy among large-scale contractors were acknowledged, these arrangements were still seen as flexible and effective. The business of war only grew as military conflicts during the seventeenth century became more continuous than ever before. For the Thirty Years’ War, in particular, military enterprisers handled not only regiment(s) but much larger tasks. Massive numbers of troops were recruited by individuals whose personal resources, credit, and connections to local and international commercial networks supported their offers of trained, armed, and supplied contingents. Such offers, however, were made only to those states that appeared most likely eventually to offer a significant return on the investment. Most famously Albrecht von Wallenstein raised and funded entire armies for the Habsburgs in the late 1620s and early 1630s.63

The devolution of military responsibilities to military enterprisers, international commercial networks, and mercenary troops was widespread by the mid-seventeenth century; for many, it was simply the most effective way of waging war. In part because it raised questions about state sovereignty and a state’s control over its military forces, however, the manner in which such arrangements were employed varied considerably across states. France, for example, certainly hired mercenary regiments and used other market-based expedients, but the French political focus on responsibility to the sovereign and France’s disinclination to further dissipate military authority steered it away (p.579) from military enterprisers. Since the Danish Crown had considerable personal wealth, until the 1640s it hired mercenaries directly and itself supported supply contractors; it initially avoided involvement with enterprisers, a decision that proved not to its military advantage. By contrast, the much poorer Swedish Crown expanded its army rapidly by relying on the personal credit of Swedish officers and other enterprisers, quickly scoring significant military successes, although the Crown also built up oppressive debt.

Remarkably, the Spanish Council of State openly debated the advantages and problems of devolution; by the early seventeenth century, it had in practice withdrawn most of its state-administered military support systems. The Habsburgs’ heavy reliance on military enterprisers was based on the dual understandings that the Crown was unable to raise the resources to support the army without them—and that the enterprisers would find imperial armies to be a rewarding investment. Despite the unsustainability of enterprisers’ activities on behalf of the Habsburgs during the Thirty Years’ War, it was remarkably militarily effective. Wallenstein’s efforts, in particular, were so successful that his dismissal in 1630
undermined funding and supply for the entire army. Upon his reinstatement, however, his reluctance to move troops as the Court expected, together with his obvious and escalating ambitions, raised the spectre of treason. In fact, explicit disloyalty to the Crown that hired them was relatively rarely one of the issues of sovereignty raised by mercenary troops. The tension between royal interests and the protection of contractors’ and enterprisers’ investments was, however, persistent. In 1633, Wallenstein may arguably have been giving preference to his troops’ financial and supply needs over Vienna’s concerns. Finally, international market-related arrangements, especially those involving the extension of credit for vast sums, offered real military advantages, but the financial overcommitment of states and individual investors offered other kinds of threats to sovereignty.

Enterprise and similar arrangements could also promote development of states’ fiscal apparatus and help consolidate political power. In emerging Brandenburg–Prussia, the Great Elector launched a reorganization of state revenues and the creation of a ‘war chest’, with the explicit goal of borrowing against the government’s credit-worthiness, rather than mortgaging Crown and personal properties. During the seventeenth century, the United Kingdom did not initially experience demands for extraordinary resources to pay for land warfare. After 1688, however, routinized financial procedures and the foundation of the Bank of England, in conjunction with England’s more-or-less consensual political structure (the Crown governed in cooperation with parliament), provided both political and financial support for rapidly expanding military expenses. In France, Colbert’s support for commercial and mercantile growth helped support Louis XIV’s multitude of wars, alongside a more modest harnessing of private resources.

Such arrangements were neither available nor desirable to all. In seventeenth-century Russia, it was new taxes, debasement of the currency, and increasingly complex state-run systems that supported arms manufacture, military recruitment, and supply to Muscovite forces. Fiscal reorganization went only so far as the creation of a very basic listing of expected revenues in 1680. The Ottomans retained their successful existing state-administered military bureaucracy.

In the years following the Thirty Years’ War, however, as the next section will argue, the military aspirations of European states began to change, with more persistent wars on a larger scale. Military practices converged further, despite some regional differences. European states strove for a more comprehensive definition of state sovereignty. Military enterprises, in particular, gradually disappeared—at least as the seventeenth century knew them. Larger, permanent, standing domestic forces commanded by the nobility became the military goal of many states.

Eighteenth-century Consolidation

The final century of the ancien régime was characterized by wars that increasingly involved many of the great powers not only in Europe but also across their colonial empires. It opened with two very large conflicts—the War of Spanish Succession (1701–14) on one side of the continent and the Great Northern War (1700–21) on the other. A period of briefer conflicts on a trans-continental and imperial scale followed: the Habsburg–Bourbon–Romanov conflict during the War of Polish Succession (1733–38), the wars that linked Prussian attacks on the Habsburg Monarchy with Franco–British colonial competition (the War of Austrian Succession (1740–48), the related Silesian Wars (1740–42 and 1744–45), and the global engagements of the Seven Years’ War (1756–63)). The undeniable importance of naval power in these confrontations is dealt with elsewhere in this volume. Russian and Habsburg wars with the Ottomans resumed, continuing intermittently if often informally nearly throughout the century. The result was, broadly, the emergence of growing military power in the Habsburg, Prussian, and Russian empires and the United Kingdom, and the decline of Spanish, Ottoman, Dutch, Swedish, and Polish military power. This punctuated but frequent bellicosity was closely related to the ever-increasing costs of war.

Changes in land warfare during the eighteenth century prior to the French Revolution may appear less dramatic than during the previous 150 to 200 years. Nevertheless, more systematic state support of armies by ancien régime governments during frequent conflicts represented new military aspirations among European states. This involved most particularly the power to raise and sustain permanent domestically recruited forces; the professionalization of armies and especially of their
officer corps; and more effective state supervision of the administrative and fiscal systems used to sustain these efforts. The growth of forms of absolutism and monarchy through the century was accompanied by a growing sense that issues of sovereignty imposed limits on acceptable arrangements between public administration and private and commercial contractors.69

Regional military models became more similar than ever before, as war increasingly drew powers from distant parts of Europe into conflict. Even Sultan Selim III set up ‘new order’ regiments toward the end of the century.70 At the same time, the border skirmishers and garrison troops of eastern Europe proved to have more universal application: Habsburg troops from the military border were used with success against the Prussians in 1740–41, and the extent of partisan or small wars rose.71 The importance of sharpshooters reasserted itself in imperial wars. Storming fortresses, rather than besieging them, represented a change in approach, but one at which the Ottomans had long excelled.72 Appropriate ratios of cavalry and infantry were acknowledged to be dependent on the job at hand. For some, including the Swedes, cold steel remained reliable and effective weaponry.73

Weaponry underwent evolutionary change after 1680. The new flintlock musket was rapidly adopted by European armies in those years, while the socket bayonet quickly eliminated entirely the need for pikemen on the battlefield. Even the Ottomans, then in slow decline, armed themselves in this manner. After such weapons were introduced fairly uniformly across the European theatre, there were only minor improvements to handheld weapons.74 The same might be said of artillery. Although the gradual standardization of the firearms and weaponry in national artillery parks was accompanied by a growing awareness of the need for systematic technical and scientific training, these changes did not seriously restructure military encounters.75

Similarly, the long eighteenth century also saw the standardization of infantry tactics to make maximum use of the new weaponry. Deployed in close order formation, the long thin infantry lines of the seventeenth century grew thinner still, relying for effectiveness on intense firepower and then on attack with the bayonet. These tactics were understood to demand greater intensity of military discipline, training, and organization. Further changes to the organization of armies created greater flexibility. The battalion (often a half-regiment) was intermediary between the regiment and the company; brigades (often several regiments) were the only organizational form between regiment and the general staff. A higher ratio of officers to men followed.

Intensive training of enlisted men was the assumed gold standard. In the second half of the century, there was considerable focus on and enthusiasm for what was perceived as the highly successful infantry drill of the Prussian army. At the same time, from the mid-eighteenth century, there was more concern about the life of the ordinary soldier, whose status and pay had begun to decline as much as a century earlier. Reform to logistical systems and more barrack communities were designed to improve conditions for the infantry. More military medicine on the battlefield and regularized ‘rules of behaviour’ were judged to improve life for the recruit. These changes were equally part of a continued reluctance to trust the commoners who made up most armies. They were suspected of disloyalty and desertion if not rebellion, and severe penalties and policing accompanied those advantages that were to be drawn from military life.76

The new weaponry and greater concentration on drill had one straightforward and unfortunate result. Concentrated battlefield firepower could and often did decimate an army’s most treasured resource—its trained troops—on one and often both sides of a battlefield. Initially, perhaps, states responded by using the threat of military force as a diplomatic tool, rather than actual military encounters, but events around the Seven Years’ War marked an end to this approach.77 As a partial result of such developments, the turn to the domestication and professionalization of armies that had started in the late seventeenth century accelerated. The questions of sovereignty raised by the use of military enterprisers (p. 582) in the preceding century were also part of the causal equation; the Austrians for example explicitly decided to displace military enterprisers for ‘loyal professionals’ in 1744. The growing claim to control the exercise of violence within national borders was another element. By mid-century, if not earlier, these discussions led to broad and diverse reforms.78

Some of the most dramatic systemic changes of the eighteenth century were therefore in the realm of recruitment and
retention. Increasingly, the goal was to create permanent, standing armies. Thus, where possible, men were not demobilized on the declaration of peace, but soldiers were recruited domestically and retained by governments who were more directly than ever responsible for their maintenance. There were different ways of trying to reach this goal, although no European state was entirely successful in doing it. Some states mobilized troops fundamentally by paying for them. France, a densely populated country, relied first on volunteer soldiers who received bounties and salaries. Less permanent troops—militias selected by lottery and other means—were pulled into the regular army as needed. As a further resort, foreign troops were also subsidized and mercenaries hired. Britain succeeded in creating an army (and in its case more importantly a navy) largely paid for by good management, growing taxes, and long-term borrowing. Press-gangs came to the rescue in cases of shortfall. After the War of Spanish Succession, Bourbon Spain, although retrenching, was inclined to replicate the French situation, with heavier reliance on militia reinforced by conscription and impressment during wartime. The successful focusing of states’ bureaucratic and fiscal abilities primarily on the ability to pay for the growing expense of an increasingly sovereign military (and most specifically of its land forces) created what has been called the ‘fiscal–military state’. Such states were among the more likely to have access to favourable credit.

In other cases, states with weaker commercial economies or smaller populations proved unable or unwilling to raise the armies they needed with cash; they garnered men and support for their troops through a variety of often-coercive state-administered systems. Sweden and Denmark at various times reimbursed their officers and soldiers with alienated lands and the use of militia-style forces. Prussia was among the most successful in ‘militarizing’ its militia in the early 1730s, when the celebrated Cantonal System of recruitment took final shape, an arrangement that allowed Prussian soldiers to live on the land as farmers when not training or fighting. The Habsburg Monarchy, whose huge expanse sustained its army in the early eighteenth century, moved towards a conscription system similar to Prussia’s during the 1770s and 1780s. Russia, where regional short-term conscription existed prior to Peter I, began national-level conscription for a lifetime of service in 1705. State-administered systems were more common in states (often in eastern Europe) that lacked the financial range and commercial economies of the fiscal–military states. Instead they used their administrative apparatus to supplement their fiscal resources by (coercively) extracting recruits in particular, but also horses, and food-in-kind. Such states are collectively referred to as ‘military–fiscal states’. The social structure of the largest such states (Habsburgs, Prussia, Russia, and the Ottomans) made anything but coercive administrative methods improbable, especially for domestic recruitment, since all had large unfree populations. Particular forms of resource collection tended to dominate in a given state, but individual practices were not exclusive to either the fiscal–military or military–fiscal states.

In the context of a domestically recruited military, the creation of a domestic professional officer corps became an increasingly important factor. While the effort to convert the noble warrior into a royal officer was by no means new, and had been achieved with some success in Sweden and elsewhere in the seventeenth century, the hundred years beginning in the 1680s was characterized by a general effort to draw a reliable officer corps from the nobility. Renewed emphasis on the ‘honour of an officer’ helped to encourage nobles to offer more regular and continuing service. Increasing insistence that staff officers and generals, as well as field officers, be required to wear uniforms and comport themselves with appropriate military dignity not only enhanced the honour associated with service but offered states the appearance of greater control over their armed forces. Nevertheless, a colonel retained a great deal of autonomy within his regiment and still reaped considerable credit for its performance. Pay and rations were still often paid to regimental officers for distribution, and so on. Measures were also taken to limit the rapid turnover of nobles in military positions.

Professionalism was another focus. Military academies and cadet corps prepared some officers professionally to fulfil their roles; elsewhere the foundation of such institutions was discussed. Military education simultaneously raised the level of officers’ training and changed its social significance. Although attendance at such schools might have opened officer ranks to commoners, just as battlefield prowess had allowed the promotion of non-nobles into the officer ranks in the previous century, exclusivity provided a further enticement to a noble officer corps in the eighteenth century. The proportion of non-noble officers generally dropped in the eighteenth century, as did the number of foreigners. Such commoners as remained tended to be concentrated in artillery and engineering units, which were less attractive to the nobility. Some states—the Swedes, Danes, the Habsburg and Romanov Monarchies—also ennobled commoners who attained a certain rank. The
entire process helped to restore European nobles to a leading military role—no longer as individual defenders of the realm, but as professional officers commanding a much larger army of commoners.86

These efforts and others like them drove a new scale and cost of warfare, which led governments to find new ways to encourage growth, collect resources, and use them efficiently.57 Commercial growth in England, along with the consensual government and fiscal regulation already mentioned, made it comparatively easy to raise the money to pay for war.58 A Russian export bubble afforded it some additional opportunities, while its old rival, the Ottoman Empire, relatively lost its famous advantage in resource collection.89 Austrian fiscal reform at mid-century permitted a greater degree of central authority over its fiscal system.90 And the commercial success of the Dutch allowed them to continue borrowing substantially and easily until their fiscal system was near collapse.

However, the development of more sophisticated financial and administrative instruments did not immediately mean that affordability drove military practice. Peter I funded his army (and navy) by calculating the funding needed, dividing anticipated costs by the size of the male population and sending his army to collect the resulting ‘tax.’ It was only (p. 584) after the early eighteenth-century wars were over, that the Dutch recognized that their past scale of borrowing for military purposes would oblige them to pursue different (more defensive and neutral) policies thereafter. And they would not be alone. By the mid- to late eighteenth century financial exhaustion did much to explain the cessation of prolonged wars, and their replacement by conflicts of considerable intensity but shorter duration.91

Still more extractive sophistication and greater concerns about sovereignty did not eliminate state–commercial partnerships in military affairs. British and Dutch private trading companies in the Indies, albeit with significant input from members of the government, ran their own military forces that extended the reach of empire. And not infrequently, European powers used smaller powers’ military forces ‘on loan’ as part of their own. Largely, however, where European governments in the preceding century borrowed from private contractors who would then produce troops with their supplies and so forth, states now contracted separately for supplies, support, transportation, or food to be provided directly to their domestically recruited armies on the move, in garrisons, and in barracks. Spectacular bankruptcies among major contractors supplying the Austrian and French armies during wartime, political corruption in supply, and the gradual bankruptcy of the United Provinces as it attempted to pay for its army over the eighteenth century, again illustrated clearly some of the flaws in the system, but their use persisted in many places because contracting remained more efficient and flexible than state-run systems.92 Elsewhere, where state-administered systems already existed, they continued to play an important role; as before, social necessity and the absence of credit-worthiness93 went hand-in-hand with preferences about sovereignty.

At the regimental and company level, too, the leveraging of organizational and financial capacity on behalf of the military remained widespread. While mercenary regiments were still hired to bolster national armies, much more common was the assumption already mentioned that the domestic nobility would command regiments in their national army, and beyond that, assume proprietorship of those regiments. Officers’ investment in their companies’ regiments still included providing food, extra wages, uniforms, or other items at their own expense in anticipation of reimbursement from soldiers’ forthcoming wages and support payments, and from the sale of officers’ commissions under their command. These adjustments to armies in the eighteenth century, with their increasing emphasis on sovereign control over recruitment and command, were however abruptly interrupted by the events of the French revolutionary era.

1792–1815: An Era of Revolutionary Change

The French revolutionary and Napoleonic eras brought a close to the early modern era in military history, as in so much else. The abrupt military changes that characterized 1789–1815 were not, however, primarily in battlefield tactics or strategy. The (p. 585) French revolutionary armies began by relying quite simply on the standard techniques of the eighteenth century. Napoleon’s insights about artillery innovation and use similarly derived quite directly from his pre-revolutionary training as an artillery officer.94
It was instead two changes to the social structure of the French army during the revolutionary and Napoleonic era that implied dramatic transformation for many European military systems. The first of these, the more commonly mentioned, was the French revolutionary use of the levée en masse. Karl von Clausewitz, and many after him, understood the linking of citizenship with the defence of the nation to be transformative. Most immediately, it gave France an enormous and apparently endlessly replaceable, domestically raised army of a size not seen in Europe since the Roman era, but also one purportedly with a level of enthusiasm and commitment from the ordinary soldier that had never before been expected or even hoped for. Revolutionary rhetoric also offered new ways of justifying or supporting war, which was underpinned by effective revolutionary reforms to state administration.

The levée en masse also had its military costs. While the first French revolutionary troops had some solid ancien régime training—as well as veterans trained in the old ways in their midst—subsequent waves of conscripts required that some adjustments be made to any reliance on military training and drill. Napoleon, in particular, introduced changes to tactics and approach to compensate. He fought offensively, rather than trying to avoid battle. He relied on weaponry, especially artillery, and individual initiative in the shape of skirmishing to support his men. And he also fought with much less concern for casualties than his predecessors or opponents.

The Revolution also transformed the deliberate social hierarchy of ancien régime armies, with nobles commanding commoners. While some officers of the old world did serve with revolutionary armies, one-third of them resigned their commissions almost immediately. Of necessity, promotion from the ranks became first possible and then likely, as the rule was established that junior officers should be elected by the men. Military service then offered, however improbably, the rewards of promotion and social mobility to ordinary soldiers. Such advancement, launched in the 1790s, was not rescinded by Napoleonic France. New emphasis on merit-based promotions also helped to change ancien régime armies and point forward to a new military age.

Further Reading


Frost, Robert. The Northern Wars, 1558–1721 (Harlow, 2000).

Hochedlinger, Michael. Austria’s Wars of Emergence, 1683–1797 (Harlow, 2003).


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**Notes:**

(*) With some obvious exceptions, the footnotes to this chapter refer to broad, Europe-wide discussions of particular topics, rather than the instances when such topics were first discussed in the context of a national historiography.


(2.) Denis Showalter, ‘Caste, Skill, and Training: The Evolution of Cohesion in European Armies from the Middle Ages to the 16th Century’, *Journal of Military History*, 57(2) (1993), 424.

(3.) For a basic description and chronology of the Swiss infantry, see John Casparis, ‘The Swiss Mercenary System’, *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 5(4) (1982), 593–642.


(8.) Agostan, *Guns*, 20, 28.


(10.) Smith and DeVries, *Artillery*, 315–317, Appendix 2, for example.


(13.) Muscovite siege of Smolensk, 1514, for example.


(16.) Razin, Istoriia, 2/2, 334.

(17.) Parker, The Military Revolution, xvi–xvii. The fact that massed infantry was understood to deal ‘a mortal blow to the feudal military’ conforms to this geopolitical understanding of military change. Brian M. Downing, The Military Revolution and Political Change (Princeton, 1992), 63.

(18.) Mihander Kingra, ‘The Trace Italienne and the Military Revolution during the Eighty Years’ War’, Journal of Military History, 57(3) (July 1993), 446.


(27.) For example, B. F. Porshnev, Muscovy and Sweden in the Thirty Years’ War, trans. and ed. Paul Dukes and Brian Pearce (Cambridge, 2012).

English volunteers and the Habsburg forces (among other adventures) before joining the Virginia Company’s expedition. The True Travels, Adventures and Observations of Captain John Smith in Europe, Asia, Africa and America (London, 1630).


(34.) John Lynn, ‘Recalculating French Army Growth During the Grand Siècle, 1610–1715’, in Rogers, The Military Revolution Debate, 125; Frank Tallett, War and Society in Early Modern Europe, 1495–1715 (New York, 1992), 9; Helle, Enserfment and Military Change in Muscovy, 267–271. The Ottoman army besieging Vienna in 1683, alone, is variously estimated at 120,000, 250,000, and 300,000 troops! But see Murphey, Ottoman, 35–48.

(35.) John Lynn, ‘The Pattern of Army Growth, 1445–1945,’ in Lynn, ed., Tools of War (Urbana, IL, 1990), 3–4. During the eighteenth century, most armies were smaller until the 1780s when the armies of the Habsburg Monarchy and Russia approached the size of the French forces during the 1690s.


(38.) Adams, ‘Tactics or Politics?’, 264–268, for example.


(40.) Helle, Enserfment and Military Change in Muscovy, 153–154; Jeremy Black, European Warfare, 1660–1815 (New Haven, 1994), 106.


(44.) Gonzalez de Leon, ‘Doctors’, 63.


(50.) David Potter, Renaissance France at War (Martlesham, Suffolk, 2008), 95, 106; Kiernan, ‘Foreign Mercenaries and Absolute Monarchy’, 68–69.

(51.) Frost, The Northern Wars, 31–33, 139; Glete, War, 203–206; C. B. Stevens, Russia’s Wars of Emergence, 1460–1730 (Harlow, 2007), 135, 162–163.

(52.) Kiernan, ‘Foreign Mercenaries and Absolute Monarchy’, 76.

(53.) Downing, The Military Revolution and Political Change, 75; Michael Hochedlinger, Austria’s Wars of Emergence, 1683–1797 (Harlow, 2003), ch. 3.

(54.) Virginia Aksan, Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870 (Longman, 2007), 73.


(56.) In particular, the recent work of David Parrott, culminating in his The Business of War (Cambridge, 2012), to which this section is indebted, but also Geoff Mortimer, ‘War by Contract, Credit and Contribution: the Thirty Years' War’, in Mortimer, ed., Early Modern Military History, 101–117 and others.

(57.) Tallett, War and Society in Early Modern Europe, 80.


(60.) See, for example, John A. Lynn, Women, Armies, and Warfare in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge, 2008).


(67.) Hellie, Enserfment and Military Change in Muscovy, 228; C. B. Stevens, Soldiers on the Steppe (De Kaß, 1995), 58–60.


(70.) Aksan, Ottoman Wars, 196–206.


(73.) Clausewitz, On War, ch. 4.


(78.) Lynn, ‘States in Conflict’, 85–186; Wilson, ‘New Approaches under the Old Regime’, 137.


(80.) Wilson, ‘New Approaches under the Old Regime’, 144–151; Peter H. Wilson, German Armies: War and German Politics, 1648–1806 (London, 1998), 333; Stevens, Emergence, 231.


(82.) Austria alone would attempt to free its serfs before the end of the eighteenth century, but efforts during the 1780s were unsuccessful and emancipation did not come about until 1848.

(83.) Wilson, ‘New Approaches under the Old Regime’, 144. France only really controlled army at the regimental level after 1763.


(87.) Tallett, *War and Society in Early Modern Europe*, 198.

(88.) Wilson, ‘New Approaches under the Old Regime’, 145–146.

(89.) Agoston, ‘Empires and Warfare’, 130ff.


(95.) Forrest, ‘The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars’, 202. The connection of patriotism to military service, experienced earlier in Britain’s American wars, did not have as immediate an impact.

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Abstract and Keywords

The development of early modern European warfare can be understood by focusing on the successive technological and administrative transformations which shaped the navies of European states. The heavy gun at first instance gave galleys a major advantage over sailing vessels. When sailing ships overcame the challenges to use effectively heavy guns (thanks to gun ports and line-ahead tactics), they became dominant in European naval warfare, although galleys remained in use in both the Mediterranean and the Baltic. While distinctive features of early modern navies— arsenals, admiralties, and standing war fleets—came into being in the Middle Ages, it took a long time before these became fully developed and professionalized. At the same time states with large maritime communities, like Great Britain and the Dutch Republic, had a critical advantage, thanks to the availability of merchant vessels remaining important for warfare until c. 1650 and the presence of experienced sailors.

Keywords: Naval history, technology, galley, sailing ship, tactics, naval administration, armed merchantmen

Introduction

During the early modern period war at sea underwent a technological transformation, which was fundamentally important for both its conduct and its organization. The enhanced fiscal means at the disposal of the modern state ensured that permanent, professional, and complex naval organizations became a general phenomenon in Europe between approximately 1500 and 1650. John Guilmartin has argued that ‘changes in technology generally had their most significant impact upon the conduct of warfare at sea as a result of quantitative, not qualitative, factors’.1 In other words, it is not the introduction, but the extent of the application of new technology which is decisive for the effectiveness of these innovations. Adopting this perspective, the first part of this chapter will focus on the technological changes: the introduction of heavy guns at sea and the innovations in sailing ship technology. The second section then goes on to examine the organizational or administrative transformation after 1650 when state-controlled professional navies consisting of purpose-built warships became the norm.

These two transformations had enormous consequences for all European maritime powers, whether public or private, large or small. For reasons of space, three important limitations have been adopted: individual countries will only be mentioned as examples of wider developments; European expansion overseas will only be considered tangentially;2 and the focus will be on warfare at sea initiated and paid for by a public authority, hence ‘naval warfare’, which means that privateering and piracy will largely be excluded. This is not to suggest that private elements were not important for naval warfare. On the contrary, the introduction of gunpowder weapons at sea offered new possibilities for all kinds of private initiative in maritime
warfare. Private naval activity operated at several levels: next to individual piracy and privateering, all kinds of combinations of private and public naval warfare existed in the early modern period: ranging from associations of privately owned vessels turning to private warfare (for example, French Protestants during the Wars of Religion, the Sea Beggars at the start of the Dutch Revolt, Dunkirk privateers operating in association with royal squadrons from Flanders), via more (p. 592) formal associations of privately financed ships under formal or nominal leadership more (for example, Knights of St John) or less (for example, Barbary corsairs) tightly organized, to the leasing out of entire war fleets to states or others willing to pay for them (for example, Genoese galley squadrons to Spain).

Historical writing about war at sea is one of those branches of scholarship which have been most influenced by nationalism and patriotism. Since the nineteenth century, naval historiography has been shaped by the conviction that sea power and state naval power were synonymous. The command of the sea was placed at the centre of a historical process by which Europe came to dominate the world through control of the sea lanes and the creation of overseas empires. As British and, later, American naval power became the foundation of global dominance, it is not surprising that Anglo–Saxon historians were in the forefront of this approach to naval history. The American naval officer Alfred Th. Mahan (1840–1914) is the best known representative of this ‘Atlantic’ or ‘Mahanian’ approach, formulated at a time when navies were firmly integrated into the infrastructure of Western states. Even though his approach remains influential, since the Second World War new debates, topics, and approaches have reshaped the study of naval history. The two most important are the debate over the ‘Military Revolution’, and the importance now given to economic and social dimensions, including the history of seamen and their recruitment. Recent years have seen a rising interest in medieval navies, a recognition of the importance of private elements in naval warfare, including military entrepreneurship, and the comparative study of naval history.

The Technological Transformation, 1330s–1660s

The first explicit evidence of a gunpowder weapon employed at sea dates from 1337, although many scholars believe that such weapons were carried on board ships even earlier, very shortly after they began to be deployed on land. The use of gunpowder weapons at sea increased throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. By 1450 they were commonplace on ships both in the Mediterranean and in the Atlantic. By 1500, when the gun port was introduced, permitting heavy guns to be placed below deck, gunpowder had been used in maritime warfare for more than a century and a half.

The Continued Importance of Galleys

Galleys were the first ships to benefit from the adoption of guns. From the beginning of the sixteenth century all major galley fleets were armed with heavy artillery. Galleys mounted a single large gun at the very front, in the bow of the vessel. Shortly after 1500, sliding carriages were employed to absorb the shock of the recoil and thus avoid any (p. 593) damage to the ship’s hull. A heavy gun enabled the low galley to inflict serious damage on the high-sided hull of a larger sailing ship, which previously had held the advantage when attacked by galleys with infantry weapons. The galley was also vulnerable to gunfire, but with its low hull it was more difficult to hit than a high sailing ship.

The galley could thus fire forward and be deployed in the standard line-abreast formation, which in practice was the most frequently used tactic of warfare at sea, as it was on land. The fact that only one heavy gun could be mounted in the bow of each galley was not a serious disadvantage as long as heavy guns were scarce and sailing ships were unable to mount such artillery in their bow. The only firearms that could be deployed from sailing ships in the same formation were small arms. The fact that galleys, thanks to their oars, could be manoeuvred independent of the wind enabled them to fire with more precision than sailing ships. Unlike sixteenth-century sailing fleets, galleys could also manoeuvre in large formations where fleet and squadron commanders might exercise overall control and command. At Lepanto, the greatest naval battle of the age, more than 200 galleys fought on each side. Both as gun-carriers and as units of large fleets they were eminently suitable to the disciplined warfare of the age, with its formalized tactics.
There were certainly disadvantages to galleys mounting heavy artillery, above all the tendency to lower their bow into the slightest head sea. But shipwrights—those of the Venetian Arsenal were probably the first—compensated for the weight of the artillery by designing hulls that were fuller in the bow and sleeker in the stern, resulting in a fishlike shape below the water surface. They also became much heavier and thus needed more oarsmen.

In spite of these inconveniences, however, galleys enjoyed a major advantage relative to sailing ships from around 1500 until around 1580. For centuries, galleys had been vulnerable to the high sides and decks of ships, but thanks to the heavy gun they could now stand off and sink them with impunity. The galley consequently increased in importance for warfare in the Mediterranean and in the waters of north-western Europe and the Baltic. In the Mediterranean there had been few permanent galley forces before 1500, but now their numbers increased dramatically. Thanks to the introduction of the heavy gun, the cannon-armed galley became the basis of a Mediterranean system of warfare that reached its apogee between 1520 and 1580 and would dominate there until the 1630s.

Although the galleys of the Mediterranean naval powers differed according to variations in strategic goals, resource availability, organization, and social structure, their design and construction were essentially similar, and mainly involved fighting superstructures that could be rapidly added or removed. This was not only the case for the ordinary (war) galleys, which by 1290 had adopted the optimal rowing system, with three men per bench each having an oar, that was to remain dominant for two-and-a-half centuries. Next to this ordinary trireme the heavier merchant galley could be converted for war, thus becoming a great galley (gallée grosse). These were sometimes purpose-built military transports, and provided the tactical backbone of late medieval fleets. The merchant galley could with agility be turned into a warship in an emergency. In this way Genoa, Venice, and Aragon–Catalonia were able to use their merchant fleets for military purposes. Their flexible galley fleets had enabled the two Italian city states to build maritime empires stretching across the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and into the Sea of Azov, controlling the major sea lanes.

The introduction of the heavy gun, however, reduced the importance of the heavy merchant galley for war. For two centuries merchant galleys had been the perfect solution for the transport of high-value commodities and for their protection against piracy. By 1520 the small fleets of four or five great galleys, which had defended the overseas trading connections of Venice, no longer provided effective protection. The speedy war galley was now favoured for battle, and the fleets of the large states in the Mediterranean—the Ottoman Empire, Spain, and France—dwarfed the small fleets of Venetian merchant galleys. Both Venice and Genoa had established their maritime empires thanks to their flexible fleets of convertible galleys which could be used for both commerce and warfare. Now they had to spend additional money for purpose-built galleys which became more and more costly, for reasons which will be explained later. This separation of Mars and Mercury, of warfare and commerce, in the Mediterranean gave an advantage to leading states like the Ottoman Empire and Spain which could eventually concentrate more on purpose-built war galleys than Genoa or Venice, although Venice demonstrated a remarkable ability to strengthen its fighting navy. In response to the rising sea power of the Ottoman Empire in particular, Venice built up a reserve fleet which expanded from fifty war galleys in the late fifteenth century to more than 100 after 1540. For the campaign of Lepanto in 1571 the Venetian Arsenal commissioned 100 galleys within two months, which represented about half of the Christian galley fleet.

When the merchant galley disappeared as cargo carrier around the middle of the sixteenth century, it was redesigned to become a hybrid warship, the galleass, with auxiliary oars, which made it able to carry much heavier armament fore and aft than a regular war galley. Although these vessels greatly impressed contemporaries they would prove to be ineffective against the oarless ship-of-the-line.

The advantage galleys acquired over sailing ships resulted in what could be called the export of the Mediterranean system of armed conflict at sea or the return of the galleys to northern waters between approximately 1520 and 1580. France and England began to use galleys and galleasses in the Channel, while Sweden (1540) and Denmark–Norway (1565) introduced galleys into the Baltic. France seems to have been first to employ war galleys with heavy centre-line bow guns in northern waters. In 1513 off Brest, a French galley fleet which had been built by the Genoese and the Venetians, shot its way through...
an English battle fleet, sinking one ship. This was ‘an entirely new way of waging war at sea’. From 1517 the French king Francis I (1515–47) and his successor Henry II (1547–59) deployed galleys in the Channel from their newly built naval base, Le Havre. These ships represented the cream of French naval forces along the Atlantic. French expertise paved the way for Henry VIII of England to build new types of oared vessels. Unlike sailing ships in this period, galleys could operate safely close to land, enabling them to disembark troops and artillery or to serve as floating siege batteries close to the walls of seaside fortresses and towns. Heavy guns could smash their thin, vertical medieval walls. As a result the galley became important in warfare in the northern seas during most of the sixteenth century.

The tactical logic of galley warfare dictated a constant increase in the amount of forward-firing ordnance. Flanking pieces were placed alongside the main centre-line gun. By the 1530s a second, smaller pair of guns was located at the bow. The weight of artillery aboard Mediterranean galleys grew steadily and with it the displacement of the ships: up to 200 tons for an ordinary war galley around 1550 and 300 tons by 1650. In order to maintain speed under oars, the increased weight entailed disproportionate numbers of additional oarsmen. In a period of rising prices and salaries it became more and more difficult to fulfil the growing demand for skilled and motivated oarsmen. This resulted in a change of the rowing system of galleys. Alongside—and, soon, instead of—free, professional oarsmen, slaves and convicts began to be used. Individual oars gave way to a single large oar for each bench. A single oar was less efficient than individual oars pulled by skilled oarsmen. Four men—one skilled oarsman and three slaves and/or convicts to an oar—were needed to equal the speed of a trireme with three professional oarsmen per bench, each with their own oar. Unlike the former free oarsmen, slaves could not fight. Therefore additional men were needed both to fight and to guard the slaves. This system reduced efficiency, though its advantage was that only one skilled oarsman per bench was needed, which reduced the dependence on skilled oarsmen and enhanced the flexibility to add or remove oarsmen according to the tactical situation. The new rowing system was first introduced in Spain during the 1550s; Venice was the last to abandon the old system, at the end of the sixteenth century. As a result of the increase in manning density to which these changes led, the strategic radius of action diminished because galleys had to land more frequently to recharge water and food.

Individual galleys continued to become larger and more powerful in the seventeenth century, but the number as well as the size of galley fleets declined. Yet galleys retained their tactical utility and remained in use, primarily in the Mediterranean. Inspired by Colbert, Louis XIV built the greatest galley fleet in the Mediterranean, with no fewer than forty vessels at the end of the seventeenth century on which 12,000 oarsmen, 3,000 officers, and 4,000 soldiers served. Galleys played a significant role in the Venetian–Ottoman wars for Crete (1645–69) and the Morea (the Peloponnese) (1694–98), albeit in conjunction with—and usually in a supporting role to—sailing warships. Spain and France both operated small galley squadrons in the Channel, around 1600 and in the reign of Louis XIV respectively. The Dutch in turn built a few galleys to counter the Spanish ones. In the Baltic, both Sweden and Russia employed galleys in the Great Northern War of 1700–21. Inspired by the Turks, the Russians built more than 400 galleys during the eighteenth century. While Mediterranean galley fleets dwindled, oared warfare remained extremely viable in the Baltic until the end of the century. Here armies needed amphibious mobility in the shallow waters of the skerries and archipelagos that dotted the Baltic coastline and were more or less inaccessible to sailing fleets.

The Rise of the Sailing Ship

Vessels which did not need to be propelled by oars could have higher freeboards, an important advantage at a period when height conferred a crucial tactical advantage. As a result, oarless craft played a slowly increasing role. Medieval sailing ships were equipped with superstructures fore and aft, castles which contained infantry soldiers and which facilitated attacks on the enemy. These structures epitomized the extent to which warfare at sea was an extension of fighting on land. In time these castles became higher and higher, making the ships top heavy, resembling floating fortresses. As a result it was almost impossible for a galley crew to successfully board and capture a sailing ship. In 1453 during the Ottoman siege of Constantinople, 150 Turkish vessels encircled four sailing ships in the Bosporus, but were unable to capture them. This was why, in the fifteenth century, the Venetians and Genoese built large sailing warships for operations against corsair galleys.
From a medieval perspective the introduction of artillery at sea was simply another phase in the adoption of gunpowder weapons, albeit a crucial one. Originally used as anti-personnel weapons, guns on warships increased in size and numbers during the fifteenth century. Three technological innovations before 1500 encouraged their adoption and explain their continuing importance during the sixteenth century. The first was the addition of a swivel to the base of a small gun which could be used from the side of the hull or castle or from a galley’s bow or stern. Secondly, hand-held gunpowder weapons, permitting more mobile gunfire, began to be used on ships. Finally, large shipboard guns which could be loaded with both the ball and the powder from the rear (breech loading), accelerated the adoption of artillery.7

The gun port offered an alternative as it enabled cannons to be placed below deck. Ships were therefore able to carry more and heavier artillery without becoming unstable. Traditionally dated to 1501, when a French shipwright is supposed to have invented the gun port, these had actually appeared in the late fifteenth century. Mystery still surrounds, however, the adoption of the broadside location of guns in the hull of sailing vessels. The fact that gun ports needed ‘hatches that can be raised by ropes when necessary in order to fire the cannons’ indicates that they were located low down near the waterline.8

New technology is one thing; successful application quite another. This was to be dramatically illustrated by the loss of the Mary Rose. The vice-admiralship and pride of Henry VIII’s navy, overloaded with men and guns, keeled over in strong winds and was flooded by water entering through the lowest gun ports, which had been left open after firing. However, in spite of all the risks that gun ports close to the waterline entailed, they were considered very important to optimize attacks on the hulls of the enemy’s ships.

The challenge confronting sailing ships was that they could not direct their fire forward to the same extent as galleys. Sailing vessels could only fire small arms when attacked by a galley fleet in standard line-abreast formation. A solution to this major operational problem was only gradually discovered. Initially, there seems to have been a tendency to locate heavy artillery to the aft of sailing ships. It seems that the largest (p.597) guns were originally deployed in the stern, and the broadside guns below deck shortly thereafter.

As the size and number of gunpowder weapons increased it became necessary to strengthen the ship’s hull both to enable it to withstand the increased recoil of its own weapons and to protect it against enemy fire. The introduction of artillery thus stimulated the development of purpose-built sailing warships, with several kings leading the way: from James IV of Scotland’s Great Michael (1506–12) to João III of Portugal’s Sao João (1534), to mention only two examples. ‘Great ships’ like these were only a small minority of all vessels available for naval warfare; they were also built as much for prestige and reputation as for tactical value. These ships probably all carried heavy artillery behind gun ports. In order to carry as many guns as possible they were floating fortresses rather than manoeuvrable weapons of war. City states and cities, like Genoa and Lübeck, and private investors too started building ships with the capacity to mount heavy guns.

New ship designs were developed to deploy heavy guns as effectively as on galleys. One of these was the galleass, mentioned previously. It had the bow of a galley, able to mount a heavy gun, and carried broadside guns on a deck under which banks of oarsmen were placed. Another, more frequently used ship design that developed was the galleon which combined the bow of a galley with the stern of a sailing ship. It combined the galley’s military advantage with the seaworthiness imparted by sails. The importance of the galleon with its heavy gunnery in the bow is explained by the fact that the galley remained its most important enemy until the end of the sixteenth century. Although the word ‘galleon’ indicated a type of ship, its exact design varied from country to country. Whereas the Portuguese galeão was in effect a purpose-built warship, the Spanish galeón designated both warship and armed merchantman. The events of the Armada of 1588 had shown that English galleons had an advantage over their slower Spanish counterparts thanks to a distinctive design technique of ‘whole-moulding’ which produced fast and weatherly hulls. The superiority of English galleons was still acknowledged in early seventeenth-century Spain.

The introduction of cast-iron guns (which were much cheaper than bronze cannon) around the middle of the sixteenth century made it financially possible to arm ships on an unprecedented scale. At the same time important improvements were made in truck carriage design and foundry practice. Cast-iron guns were considerably heavier than bronze pieces and threw
the same weight of ball, but cost only about a third or even a quarter as much. By 1650, cast-iron ordnance had become the standard means of defence afloat, although bronze ordnance did not entirely disappear.

Thanks to broadside gun ports and cast-iron guns a ship could carry much more artillery. Depending on its size the armed sailing ship which developed in the seventeenth century had one or two, and exceptionally three, complete battery decks. In addition, guns continued to be mounted under the quarter-deck and in the forecastle. When guns became less expensive, gun ports were placed closer to each other so that even more artillery could be mounted on sailing ships. This reinforced the trend towards larger and heavier vessels.

(p. 598) At the same time initiatives were taken to build faster and more manoeuvrable ships. In Portugal, the caravel of between 150 and 180 tons with two covered decks, four masts, and a narrow hull (to be distinguished from its smaller namesake which had been employed on voyages of discovery in the fifteenth century), was mainly developed for naval purposes in the sixteenth century. In England during the 1570s, the so-called ‘race built’ ship was introduced. This new design involved a reduction in the size of castles, which meant that lower priority was given to optimizing the use of anti-personnel weapons, since traditionally these were mostly deployed from these castles. Sleeker lines led to a faster and more manoeuvrable ship, while a longer gun-deck permitted an increase in the weight of the broadside. Several English warships were built and rebuilt according to this race built design.

Developments in Flanders around 1600 led to a ship design that was to have a wider and more enduring influence on European warships: the frigate. Although its origins are still being debated, this design combined speed and manoeuvrability with hitting power, thanks to a fine shallow hull and a great spread of sail. Frigates had a low and almost even outline, since the former castles had more or less been integrated. Continuous decks allowed most of the artillery to be carried amidships. They were faster than any English ship and ‘could run rings round them’ as English captains reported in the 1620s.9 (It has been suggested that the Flemish frigate represented ‘the first generation of specialist fighting-ships in the West outside the Mediterranean’.)10 In the 1620s the Dutch also started to build and deploy frigates. England, and from the 1660s France too, employed these purpose-built warships, which were significantly more mobile.

The development of ship design, concentrating on strength of hull, speed, and manoeuvrability, created several broad categories of ships, which is a clear indication that early modern European states were keen on optimizing the effective use of heavy artillery at sea in order to withstand and then surpass the galley, which originally held the advantage. The design and specification of the purpose-built sailing warship differed ‘from country to country, from shipyard to shipyard and even from ship to ship’.11 Alongside the introduction of heavy guns with hull-smashing capacity, however, boarding remained an important tactic in maritime warfare well into the seventeenth century. As a result, ships with both a fore- and after-castle, and equipped with anti-personnel weapons and anti-boarding netting, continued to be much prized.

The most spectacular consequence of the adoption of broadside artillery was the return of the fighting ship into the galley-dominated Mediterranean. Venice epitomized this development. In 1499 its government-owned war fleet, maintained by the state during peacetime, had included a few very large sailing ships designed to fight by shipwrights in the Venetian Arsenal. But during the sixteenth century such vessels were no longer constructed. The Arsenal then built only galleys. In addition to its own galleys, the Republic also hired converted merchantmen, from 1618 onwards. It soon became routine for both Venice and the Ottoman Empire to lease Dutch and English ships for their wars—a clear indication that these vessels were now considered sufficiently effective for warfare in opposition to galleys in the Mediterranean. In 1667 the Venetian Arsenal built (p. 599) its first ship-of-the-line employing an English warship as a model. During the next half century, no fewer than sixty-eight ships-of-the-line were built by the Arsenal.

The Continuing Importance of Converted Merchantmen

In spite of the development of purpose-built warships, the practice of converting merchant vessels for war, an important feature of medieval naval warfare, remained important until the mid-seventeenth century. The introduction of artillery did not end the phenomenon of the dual-purpose fleet in the case of sailing vessels, as it had in the case of galleys. On the contrary,
the development of the sailing ship from the full-rigged vessel of the fifteenth century—the three-masted vessel which combined the Atlantic and northern square sail with the triangular lateen sail of the Mediterranean—to the ‘relatively homogeneous type of seventeenth-century sailing gun-armed ship’, gave new opportunities for combinations of cargo-carrying and fighting power. The maritime potential of the Spanish Peninsula and the Netherlands was the essential foundation for their fighting navies.

Spain had to support large galley fleets to counter Ottoman incursions into the western Mediterranean from 1479—when Castile and Aragon were joined in a personal union under Ferdinand and Isabella—until the truce with the Ottoman Empire in 1580. However, while these fleets absorbed the bulk of expenditure upon naval warfare, Spain continued to lease armed merchantmen to protect the New World trade and for naval operations in the Caribbean against French and English privateers. After the truce of 1580 the Spanish Monarchy could invest more money in building galleons, suitable for Atlantic naval warfare. The reforms of Philip II after the disaster of the Armada in 1588 were designed to standardize the construction of galleons to ensure that they were appropriate for war at sea. The result was a revitalized fleet consisting of huge galleons by shortly after 1600. Yet these ships still had to be suitable for trade as well. In 1601 King Philip III gave instructions to build vessels ‘suitable for both commerce and the armada [the battle fleet]’. Some speed and manoeuvrability continued to be sacrificed for carrying capacity to meet the need for multi-purpose craft.

Like Spain, the Netherlands also continued the medieval tradition of converting merchantmen to create a war fleet, as was done during the Habsburg–Valois Wars between 1521 and 1559. Repeated efforts were made to develop new ship types suitable for warfare in the shoal-filled home waters, which became essential during the Dutch Revolt, as well as for the open sea. This created a nucleus of specialized warships by around 1621, yet the majority of ships in Dutch war fleets continued to consist largely of converted merchant vessels until after the mid-seventeenth century.

The rapid sixteenth-century expansion of Holland’s fleet created the largest merchant navy in Europe and possibly in the world during the seventeenth century, even surpassing that of Spain. This huge naval potential, together with the establishment of an indigenous arms industry, enabled the Dutch not only to equip war fleets for the defence of their territory, maritime commerce, and European fisheries, but also to create an overseas empire despite having to compete with larger countries such as Spain, England, and France. In addition, the Dutch practice of converting merchant ships into warships was copied by rivals. Between the 1610s and the 1660s both the Dutch and the English hired out armed merchantmen complete with ordnance and crews not only to Venice and the Ottoman Empire, but also to France, Portugal, Denmark–Norway, and Sweden. This mostly took place during wartime when it was crucial to mobilize as large fleets as possible. From a Dutch perspective the first half of the seventeenth century seems to have been the apogee of the converted merchantman for naval warfare. The provincial admiralties sold many of their purpose built ‘frigate-styled’ warships during the 1640s when peace negotiations were underway with Spain. It was reckoned that in any emergency the Dutch Republic could always fall back on the old practice of hiring armed merchantmen.

Sixteenth-century England lacked any major long-distance trade and so could not rely on converted merchantmen to provide a fighting navy to the same extent as Spain and the Netherlands. This changed rapidly after 1600 when both the English and Dutch navies ‘were run by merchants, for merchants, and largely made up of armed merchant ships’. Though Denmark–Norway and Sweden also lacked a large merchant marine, both gave armed merchantmen customs privileges in order to create reserve fleets which might augment the permanent navy when hostilities broke out.

European governments generally tried to use the merchant fleets of their own subjects or, if possible, of others, to fight, and devoted considerable energy to bringing this about. Along with the introduction of the heavy gun at sea converted trading vessels remained crucial for naval warfare. Like their purpose-built counterparts, such vessels carried more and more heavy guns. As long as specialized or purpose-built warships were in a minority within a country’s naval forces, the size of its merchant fleet, or its ability to hire or capture such vessels from others remained the foundation of its sea power. Even when purpose-built warships came to dominate Europe’s fighting navies during the seventeenth century, merchant ships continued to be important, albeit in an auxiliary and reduced way. They remained crucial for power projection overseas, being the main
war machines of chartered companies such as the Dutch VOC and the English EIC.

**Line-ahead: A Tactical Revolution?**

Around 1650 it was realized that merchantmen were no longer fit to fight wars. The three Anglo–Dutch wars between the 1650s and 1670s led to naval reorganization in both countries. The outcome was the universal application of the most effective deployment of seaborne artillery: continuous broadsides fired from ships-of-the-line in line-ahead formation. This proved to be the best practical solution to the problem that the ship-of-the-line moved along one axis determined by the wind, but discharged its cannon along another. The line-ahead formation was neither sudden, nor systematically adopted by Europe’s navies. Boarding and close-quarter fighting remained the preferred tactics, and line-ahead was considered a defensive expedient until mid-way through the First Anglo–Dutch War (1652–54). Moreover, its adoption did not exclude converted merchantmen from war fleets, at least initially.

This became evident when the Dutch, who were probably the first to employ line-ahead tactics, used these against the Spanish at The Downs off the English coast in 1639. The Dutch admiral Maarten Harpertszoon Tromp led his squadron, comprising purpose-built warships and converted merchantmen, in amongst the Spaniards (despite the presence of the English fleet, trying to keep the combatants apart) and sank forty of their fifty-three ships, which were mostly galleons and converted merchantmen. Tromp had used the formation, however, in a defensive way in difficult circumstances. For the coup de grâce he employed fire ships and mêlée tactics, that is fighting ship against ship. In 1645 when a Dutch squadron closed in on the Portuguese off the coast of Brazil they chose a line of battle combining warships and converted merchantmen.

The English were the first to adopt the line-ahead tactics more systematically during the First Anglo–Dutch War. Thanks to these, an English fleet with 100 ships routed a Dutch fleet of similar size commanded by Tromp, who stuck to the traditional boarding tactics, in June 1653. The outcome was disastrous for the Dutch Republic, as within a week the barely damaged English fleet had blockaded the coasts of Holland and Zeeland. On 10 August at the battle of Ter Heide, in which Tromp was killed, the English sank another thirty Dutch warships. The English were victorious thanks to their successful adoption of the line-ahead formation, which had enhanced the fighting potential of their fleet.15

The Republic now recognized it could no longer fight wars at sea with converted merchantmen. Before peace had been signed, two building programmes were launched for sixty purpose-built warships in total. In January 1654 the States General took the unprecedented decision that none of these new warships could be sold without unanimous consent of the United Provinces. Merchant vessels were no longer rented from private shipowners. Mars and Mercury were separated. The merchant fleet now largely lost any military importance, as the possibility of using merchantmen as a flexible force in warfare at sea had vanished, in European waters at least.

It was not until after the first naval encounter of the Second Anglo–Dutch War (1665–67), off Lowestoft on 2 June 1665, that the Dutch embraced line-ahead and the three-squadron order, albeit in a modified form. At Lowestoft the Dutch lost thirty-two of 100 ships. On this occasion their tactics were partially linear; they still had not fully embraced the line-ahead formation. The new tactics were issued by Johan De Witt in August 1665. During the Third Anglo–Dutch War (1672–74), when both sides employed line-ahead tactics, the more numerous Anglo–French fleet proved unable to achieve major successes against the Dutch.

Although eventually line-ahead tactics would be most effectively executed by purpose-built ‘ships-of-the-line’, this was a gradual development. As line-ahead tactics remained a central element in the operations of European navies for the next 150 years, that is until the Industrial Revolution and the development of steam-driven ships with turreted guns, it can be considered as the last of a series of major changes. (p. 602) Tactics remained largely unchanged until the first half of the nineteenth century, though the leading naval powers of the eighteenth century did introduce important refinements: coppering ships’ bottoms, developing the heavy calibre carronade, and improving the health of crews by advances in nutrition. All were
significant innovations during the last quarter of the eighteenth century and enhanced naval capabilities beyond European waters.

The Administrative Transformation, 1650–1815

Many characteristic features of early modern naval organization, such as arsenals, admiralties, and permanent navies, had come into existence during the Middle Ages. The arsenals of both Venice and Aragon–Catalonia were founded as early as the beginning of the thirteenth century. Admiralties appeared as institutions around the office of admiral, which originated in Sicily in the twelfth century and became permanent there in 1239. In the fifteenth century Admiralty courts appeared in Brittany, Normandy, and Guyenne, among other places. Sicily possessed a permanent war fleet in the thirteenth century, while Venice established one in 1301. England may have had a permanent squadron as early as the very end of the twelfth century. Something like a royal navy in the modern sense was actually developed by Henry V (1413–22). The question of continuity and change in medieval and early modern naval institutions needs further study, the English navy probably being the best researched example. Here the focus will be on administrative developments after 1650.

State Navies and Warfare Overseas

Anglo–French antagonism became Europe’s pre-eminent rivalry after 1688–89, when the Dutch stadholder William III became Britain’s king. From the age of Louis XIV to that of Napoleon I, France was the leading continental power, posing a direct threat of invasion across the Straits of Dover. The period 1688–1815 has been called that of the ‘Second Hundred Years’ War’ as England and France fought no fewer than seven major conflicts. The spectacular growth of British naval power is evident in the fact that, whereas England needed the Dutch alliance in 1689 to take on the powerful French navy, in later wars Britain usually could fight the allied French and Spanish naval forces alone.

If the period 1650–80 represented the beginning of the great battle fleets during the Anglo–Dutch struggle over maritime trade and supremacy, the wars of the following period, 1680–1720, did not originate in the maritime sphere but concerned the acquisition of territory within Europe. The navies were much occupied with the securing of military transports either for power projection to harass the enemy at vulnerable points (p. 603) or to support allies. The wars of this period were long, exhausting, and bitterly contested, while their destructive character was unprecedented. Earlier, privateering had been the leading source of maritime insecurity. Now, professional navies supported by state bureaucracies mobilized the resources of their own countries until these were exhausted, as was true of the Dutch Republic, France, and Sweden. During the following period, 1721–92, wars were fought with more limited aims and only as a last resort, when diplomacy failed. The attitude of European states towards their war machines has been compared with that of the great powers towards nuclear weapons: they had to have them but were afraid of using them. Until the final decade of the eighteenth century, strong European navies had been able to contest Britain’s attempts to dominate world trade. In the 1790s Britain secured the upper hand by successfully blockading enemy commerce and protecting its own trade. Between 1792 and 1815 the share of the British battle fleet in global naval size rose from about 30 per cent to around 50 per cent, resulting in an overwhelming superiority at sea, which not even a coalition of states could counter.

The 1650–80 period saw both a rapid expansion of battle fleets and a radical transformation of organization. The creation of powerful navies by the British and the Dutch changed the nature of maritime conflict which had remained decentralized, fragmented, and partly private in nature until the mid-seventeenth century. In the 1660s, France joined the Anglo–Dutch naval race when Louis XIV and Colbert attempted to create a giant battle fleet mainly consisting of ships built in the royal dockyards. It became part of a ‘new power structure at sea based on state navies run by professional officers’ which resulted in a state monopoly on violence in north-western Europe, where there was either war or peace. The imposition of prize law by admiralties, albeit applied unsystematically and determined mainly by diplomatic considerations, did help to establish the boundaries between what was legal and what illegal in the maritime sphere. Only in the Baltic had a state monopoly been achieved earlier, when the Hanseatic town of Lübeck had been defeated in the 1530s and the navies of
Sweden and Denmark–Norway became dominant. These two states enforced a *dominium maris baltici* between the 1570s and 1640s.

The state monopoly of violence was extended to the rest of Europe, the Americas, and Asia after 1680. The English, French, and Dutch colonies overseas were no longer bases for combinations of trade and privateering or piracy against Spain in particular. In the Indian Ocean, where the Portuguese fleet was still the only European state navy present, after its success in confining Ottoman naval power to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, European chartered companies distinguished themselves from privateers and pirates. Only the Mediterranean remained a zone of ambiguity, where warfare on trade between Muslim and Christian states continued, though this was becoming of diminished importance by the eighteenth century.

There were nevertheless important exceptions to the growing state monopoly. The Scots were very successful at various times in legalized private warfare, the so-called *guerre de course*. After 1692, when the French battle fleet came to be outnumbered by its Anglo–Dutch opponent and its financial resources were declining, France also turned from a *guerre d'escadre* to a successful *guerre de course*. In Zeeland, the Dutch Republic’s (p. 604) second most important province, privateering remained a highly important business, based on the traditional idea of combining trade and plunder. These large-scale privateering activities were important during the early modern era, believed to benefit the states which legalized these actions.

In the eighteenth century, the European power struggle gradually became separated between a continental and a maritime sphere. In the latter, wars were fought over colonies and long-distance trade as previously, but now state navies fought alongside chartered companies and private forces in the Atlantic and Indian oceans. Thanks to their growing ability to operate over increasingly long distances, European battle fleets became key instruments in a struggle for world dominion fought mainly between European countries or their colonists. Great Britain, France, and Spain were the main contenders while the Dutch Republic and Portugal tried to protect what they already had. The British were most successful. Their superior naval strength enabled the triangular trade between the mother country, West Africa, and the Americas to flourish, while British blockades of French and Spanish naval bases secured the Levantine and East Indian trades. In eastern Europe, a power struggle between Russia, Prussia, Austria, and the Ottoman Empire acquired a maritime dimension with Russia’s emergence as a naval power in the Baltic, the Black Sea and, by extension, the Mediterranean. Whereas Denmark–Norway and Venice preferred to remain neutral, Sweden intervened in an attempt to avert the rise of a strong eastern neighbour. In the Great Northern War, Russia secured renewed access to the Baltic and created a fleet there with a base at Kronstadt, on an island near St. Petersburg. The Russian navy grew rapidly in the later eighteenth century when, alongside the Baltic fleet, a Black Sea battle squadron came into being which was linked to Catherine’s ambitions to partition the European territories of the Ottoman Empire with Austria.

The Professionalization of Administration

The crucial developments between 1650 and 1815 were financial and administrative, rather than naval. A state’s capacity to raise revenue became the indispensable foundation of sea power. Britain’s ability to do so was unequaled: here parliamentary control of the Treasury and fiscal departments made possible an enormous rise in tax receipts, which increased about fifteen-fold from 1688 to 1815, while its gross national product rose only three-fold. Simultaneously the development of a system of long-term borrowing, at low interest rates and backed by parliament, enabled the British government to raise loans during wartime. A superior system of public finance gave Britain a decisive advantage over France, its main enemy during the eighteenth century. France belonged to the category of autocratic and militarized states capable of building large and efficient navies, but incapable of sustaining them. The navy of Louis XIV rose to be the largest in the world within thirty years, but largely disappeared during the next three decades. The French state could only expend half the proportion of national income that British (p. 605) governments could spend, while Spain experienced several financial crises which handicapped its ability to maintain its naval forces.
The Dutch Republic, Sweden, and, to a lesser extent, Denmark were able to support powerful navies, in contrast to these large monarchies but like Britain. In relation to population size, the Swedish fleet was even larger than its English counterpart throughout most of the 1521–1721 period, based on the government’s ability to raise taxes from peasants and burghers. Only the Dutch Republic, with a comparable population size, had a considerably larger navy than Sweden. ‘Europe’s most concentrated area of modern military competence and armed forces’ represents, in fact, a highly efficient fiscal–military alternative to the absolutist and military bureaucratic monarchies, which (even) puts the British example in perspective. The Dutch admiralties, which were the only federal fiscal authorities actually extending over the whole Republic, deeply penetrated local societies for resource extraction through a fine-meshed network of receivers responsible for levying taxes (customs duties) on incoming and outgoing commodities and means of transport along the sea and land borders. The advanced management of public credit, and the flexible transfer of financial means between the admiralties, the provinces (mainly Holland), and the States General when this was necessary, further enhanced the Dutch ability to mobilize large fleets.¹⁷

The latter half of the seventeenth century saw a dramatic growth of navies—parallel to that of armies—and a stabilization of European states into more or less homogeneous fiscal–military polities. Several were now able to develop complex naval organizations with a decisive advantage over earlier private and temporary forms of sea power. By the late seventeenth century a distinct European model of how navies (and armies) should be administered, trained, and commanded had emerged. The number of ships-of-the-line were now an approximate guide to the strength of a state’s navy. States with permanent naval forces had gained a practical monopoly of violence in Europe. Great battle fleets developed, consisting of larger vessels than the armed merchantmen and warships which had fought before 1650. As a consequence, these were only deployed in wartime. In peacetime most ships were decommissioned, with only a small number of vessels kept in commission and so requiring a fraction of the manpower needed for a fully mobilized fleet.

Between 1650 and 1720, navies became larger, remained in existence during peacetime, and were supported by larger administrations and newly established naval bases and dockyards. The emergence of permanent corps of sea officers, whose appointment and promotion was increasingly regulated, was the most important dimension of this process. Britain’s sea officers were partly gentlemen who had learned the profession aboard ships at a young age, while many others came from the maritime communities along the Thames. Experience in navigation and seamanship remained a sine qua non of a naval career. In absolute monarchies such as Spain, France, and Sweden, professionalization of naval officers, administrators, and shipbuilders in the long run eroded the links between the navies and the civil and commercial sectors of society.

Britain’s central naval administration is usually presented as a sophisticated and well-functioning professional model with the Treasury, the Admiralty, the Navy Board, (p. 606) and subordinate boards, including a permanent Victualling Board. Moreover, the Lord High Admiral and the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty had direct influence at the very centre of government decision making. In France Colbert developed a central naval administration loyal to the Crown but was unable to make it entirely effective in the provinces. Bourbon Spain followed the French example, but here as in France it seems to have proved difficult to develop professional administrative personnel. Russia’s naval administration, partly inspired by the Swedish model, must be seen as part of Peter the Great’s efforts to create a modern state. However, his commitment to the navy was strongly personal and hardly shared by any other element in the state. In the Dutch Republic the organization of maritime warfare continued to be decentralized, while the admiralties, businessmen, and suppliers were and remained closely connected in networks which enabled a quick and efficient mobilization of war fleets.

Practically no money was spent on peacetime training of sailors. As a warship and a merchantman employed identical sailing techniques, the skills of a sailor remained much in demand. Experienced sailors from the merchant marine continued to be regarded as the best nucleus of warship crews. This made it much easier for states with large commercial fleets, like Britain and the Netherlands, to man their ships. Although a positive relation existed between a viable mercantile marine and an efficient navy, this was not automatic. It depended on the mechanisms through which sailors could be transferred between the two. Moreover there was an inherent contradiction between the use of professional sailors and rapid mobilization of a
battle fleet, especially if the latter took place during the shipping season.

Recruitment of sailors or rowers can be characterized by distinguishing in two different ways: between forced and voluntary recruitment and between local or national and international recruitment. The deployment of prisoners, serfs, or other unfree people on ships was difficult to realize except on galleys where rowers were chained to their benches increasingly from the sixteenth century as we have seen. Convicts and slaves, captured or bought, were used on the Ottoman, Venetian, French, and Spanish galley fleets in the Mediterranean. In the eighteenth century the Russians also sent convicts to their galleys next to drafting their recruits for the navy from among their serf population for life long service. On sailing ships forced labour was possible only for one voyage or campaign. Forced recruitment or compulsion was a form of national service for sailors, either enforced more or less arbitrarily or through a register of seamen who were called in turn to serve in the navy. The British press system was typical of arbitrary recruitment by means of the press gang, introduced during wartime emergencies, while France under Louis XIV, Denmark–Norway, and Bourbon Spain adopted systematic enforcement. In Sweden the coastal regions and towns were compelled to send quotas of men to act as sailors in the navy which allowed for rapid mobilization. The Dutch practised voluntary recruitment although sailors were sometimes pushed into naval service by a general lock-down on privateering, merchant shipping, whaling, or fishing.

Recruitment could furthermore be local/national or international which results in four main groups of possible recruitment policies. France, Spain, Portugal, Venice, and other Mediterranean countries represent mixed systems of national and international (p. 607) recruitment of free and unfree crew, at least until the abolition of galleys. National recruitment of free sailors was dominant in Britain, Sweden, and Denmark–Norway, and in France and Spain to a certain extent after the abolition of the galleys. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Russia represents national recruitment of unfree labour, whereas in the Dutch Republic international recruitment was as important or (in the eighteenth century) exceeded the importance of national recruitment. With a population ten times smaller than France and five times smaller than Great Britain the Dutch Republic was hardly able to recruit its sailors locally or nationally. Attracted by relatively favourable wages immigrants came to the Netherlands, many of whom served on ships involved in long-distance trade. A true international labour market for sailors developed of which the Dutch navy took advantage. In contrast with the Netherlands, Britain’s demand for sailors could normally be met domestically, but not in wartime. As foreign labour could not easily enter the British labour market, impressment was the only solution. In the later years of the Napoleonic Wars, 25 per cent of sailors in the navy had been recruited voluntarily, 75 per cent (60 per cent British, 15 per cent foreign) by compulsory methods. Thus both the Dutch Republic and Britain took advantage of their large maritime communities for manning their navies, albeit in entirely different ways.

Before 1650 naval bases were often extensions of castles or commercial ports. These were not sufficient any more when the large new navies consisting of bigger warships required large harbours at strategic places, which needed to be fortified. During the second half of the seventeenth century large naval bases and dockyards were built with facilities for shipbuilding and repair of warships, together with large buildings for equipment and stores. Chatham, Portsmouth, and Plymouth in England, Brest, Rochefort, and Toulon in France, and Karlskrona in Sweden represent the best examples during the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century Spain developed Cadiz, El Ferrol, and Cartagena as naval bases. Denmark, Portugal, Venice, and the Ottoman Empire further developed their capitals as naval bases. Only the Dutch navy kept a decentralized structure, with several naval bases closely linked with the merchant communities within the cities of the five admiralties. The new naval base at Den Helder was completed only under Napoleon.

The integration of state power, naval administration, and maritime interests was particularly successful when capitals, such as Lisbon, London, Constantinople, Copenhagen, and Stockholm, were also the main naval base and centre of maritime trade, which facilitated centralization. Russia followed this model by moving its political centre from inland Moscow to the new naval base of St. Petersburg (with Kronstadt). Sweden on the contrary lost this advantage when the whole navy and its administration were moved from Stockholm to Karlskrona (south of the point where the Baltic might become ice-bound in winter) which much reduced personal contacts between state bureaucrats and sea officers. In this respect too the two major naval opponents of the post-1650 period offer contrasting examples: whereas messages from London could reach Chatham
the same day and Portsmouth in two days, Colbert had to wait for two weeks before receiving confirmation that orders sent from Paris had been carried out in Toulon.

Shipbuilding was concentrated in dockyards supervised by naval administrators and officers. The naval yard of the Danish king Christian IV in Copenhagen represented one of the most complete and well equipped in the world. This state monopoly on production and technology was maintained until the advent of iron and steam. The exceptions are few but important. In Great Britain and the Netherlands private shipbuilders were given considerable orders in wartime when the state dockyards concentrated their efforts on the maintenance of the battle fleet, rather than building new ships. In the Dutch Republic the naval dockyards, the greatest manufacturing facilities of the country until the Industrial Revolution, were a state institution run by managers who were or had been businessmen with relevant expertise and experience. The widespread belief in Europe, nevertheless, was that centralization and state control guaranteed high quality and standardization of warship design. The permanent workforce of the great naval bases could be used in a flexible way, either to fit out warships for sea, to repair vessels after their return, or to build new ships.

States had different motives or different combinations of motives which determined naval actions. The English used the navy to carry out its mercantilistic power politics against the leading maritime power of the mid-seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic. As a reaction the Dutch were forced to build a similar strong battle fleet. The French joined the naval race in the 1660s motivated by a combination of European power politics aiming at hegemony and a mercantilist trade policy. ‘The large British investments in naval armaments paid off in better protected trade and an increased colonial empire which created the financial resources to sustain further and increased war efforts.’ In France, commercial interests and chartered companies were not considered as priorities within naval policy to the same extent.19

Venice and the Ottoman Empire, both of whose navies declined, were exceptions to the wider trend. The Venetian Republic demonstrated a remarkable continuity, keeping its medieval naval institutions while surviving as a regional power in the Adriatic until Napoleon’s destruction of the Republic in the later 1790s. The Ottoman Empire largely failed to adopt the European model of naval administration until it started rebuilding its navy after the great defeat at Chesmé in 1770 with the help of foreign, mainly French, expertise. Other Mediterranean navies, mainly located on the Italian peninsula, were too small to be significant for warfare beyond local coastal areas, with the single exception of Naples during the 1780s.

**Britain’s Global Naval Supremacy Achieved, 1792–1815**

The extended period of intensive warfare between 1792 and 1815 was exceptional in that it was a total war during which the struggle on the European continent and on the oceans merged into one. At its height, the French army dominated the continent, while the British navy was supreme in the seas around Europe. The British battle fleet, with its increased ability to operate in poor conditions, blockaded (most of) the European continent, conquered the colonies of France and its allies, destroyed enemy trade, and supported British and allied forces from the sea. Nelson’s victory at Cape Trafalgar on 21 October 1805 over a combined Franco–Spanish fleet, in poor shape and badly manned, is the most famous event which confirmed British tactical superiority at sea and reduced the threat of a French invasion. It did not, however, put an end to Napoleon’s significant efforts to build a navy which were a constant concern to the British, until their eventual failure. In 1815 Britain’s highly professional navy was unchallenged around the globe. Within fifteen years after Waterloo steamships accompanied sailing vessels in naval expeditions, anticipating the end of the era of the sailing warship.

Great Britain eventually rose to global maritime supremacy due to its success in optimizing the elements of the administrative transformation. These included, in addition to its remarkable ability to raise taxation, the organization of resources, and the professionalization of naval organization, which included the establishment of a permanent corps of sea officers, large specialized bases, and state controlled dockyards. Furthermore Britain’s naval interests were well integrated into the centre of government decision making, and, last but not least, Britain had the advantage of a large mercantile marine, making it easier to man war fleets whenever necessary. However, Britain’s naval success was far from inevitable. Louis XIV’s navy was at times not only bigger than its English counterpart, but it might actually have gained the upper hand in the late
seventeenth century. The Dutch Republic’s decentralized naval system based upon the provincial admiralties was in important respects more efficient and better organized than its English counterpart, and also provided an alternative model to the administrative centralization which prevailed on the other side of the Channel. Both navies shared the same advantage of being both embedded in maritime communities and of being uppermost in the minds of their governments, which guaranteed their sustained development.

Technological developments had determined the destinies of European navies before 1650. It should be kept in mind that it took a long time before expensive permanent navies consisting of purpose-built warships entirely replaced the cost-efficient flexible fleets. One implication is that the tendency of some early modern naval historians to measure naval power by counting purpose-built warships does not make much sense before the mid-seventeenth century, since such totals do not include merchant fleets in their calculations. Even after the so-called separation of Mars and Mercury after 1650, the navies which developed most impressively were also those which retained connections with the merchant marine and the maritime world. Though navies, admiralties, and arsenals may have been common features of naval warfare since the late Middle Ages and were subsequently expanded and professionalized, these links with seafaring communities represented a critical advantage throughout the entire early modern period.

Further Reading


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Notes:


(2.) This not to deny of course the tremendous impact of gunpowder for power projection overseas.


(5.) It should be noted that galleys also had sails to save human power whenever possible, but they were generally poor sailors unless in light breeze.


(8.) J. K. Oudendijk, Een Bourgondisch ridder over den oorlog ter zee. Philips van Kleef als leermeester van Karel V (Amsterdam, 1941), 122.


(11.) Stradling, Armada, 164.


Warfare at Sea’, *War in History*, 4 (1997), 123–149, 134–135, and 143 where the battle indicated as the battle of Scheveningen and is dated according to the English calendar on 31 July.

(16.) This section draws heavily upon the late Jan Glete’s impressive work on naval history in comparative perspective. See ‘Further Reading’ for references.


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Abstract and Keywords

The chapter studies early modern Ottoman history in its Eurasian context, as the Ottomans established relations with, fought wars against, influenced, and were influenced by their neighbours and rivals. Ottoman military capabilities played an important role in shaping the course of Ottoman history andConstantinople’s relations with her neighbours and rivals. Therefore, the chapter examines these capabilities and the continually evolving socio-economic systems and institutions that made Ottoman military might possible. Blending history and historiography, sub-sections discuss the emergence of the Ottoman dynasty, the question of religiously motivated conquest during the formation of the early Ottoman polity, the significance of the conquest of Byzantine Constantinople, the Ottoman prebendal system and households as sinews of Ottoman power, Ottoman pragmatism in administering the empire, evolving Ottoman boundary conceptions and policies, the role of diplomacy in European–Ottoman relations, the crises of the seventeenth century, and the resultant Ottoman military and fiscal transformations.

Keywords: Ottoman empire, Constantinople, diplomacy, borders and borderlands, wars, state finances

Introduction

The Ottoman Empire—also known in Europe as the Turkish empire—emerged in western Asia Minor (Anatolia) in the late thirteenth century and collapsed six centuries later during the First World War. This polity was ruled throughout its existence by the House of Osman, named for the founder of the dynasty, Osman I (d. 1324). The followers of Osman called themselves Osmanlı in Turkish, which in English came to be rendered as ‘Ottoman’. While early modern Europeans saw the Ottomans as a Turkish and Islamic empire, it is important to remember that Osman’s successors built the longest-lived multi-ethnic and multi-confessional dynastic empire in Eurasia. The ruling dynasty spoke Turkish but married across ethnic lines and included recent converts to Islam. The empire’s subjects, some 13 million in the 1520s, spoke dozens of languages and worshipped according to the teachings of Sunni and Shia Islam, various Christian Churches, and of Judaism, to name but the most important religious communities. To rule over such a diverse population required flexibility, pragmatism, and adaptation to local customs in governance. The Ottomans understood these skills from the time of their earliest conquests in the fourteenth century, and pragmatic adaptability remained the hallmark of Ottoman governance throughout the period covered in this chapter.

In its heyday in the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was among the militarily most formidable and bureaucratically best administered empires. It bears comparison to the better known Mediterranean empires of the Romans and Byzantines,
to the contemporaneous Muslim empires of the Safavids in Persia and the Mughals in India, or to Europe’s other multi-ethnic dynastic empires of the Habsburgs and Romanovs. While the inclusion of the Ottomans into the studies of comparative empires is a fairly new phenomenon, Ottomanists have now produced their surveys, syntheses, and handbooks in English.1

From the mid-fifteenth century until its demise, the Ottoman Empire was a crucial player in European power politics. From the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 through the early eighteenth century the Ottomans were a constant and serious military threat to their Venetian, Spanish, and Austrian Habsburg neighbours and rivals, besieging, albeit unsuccessfully, the latter’s capital city Vienna twice (1529 and 1683). Ottoman power rested on the wealth of the empire, a result of the effective management of human and economic resources across a territory of some 2.5 million square kilometres, stretching from Hungary in the north to Yemen in the south and from Egypt in the west to Iraq in the east (see Map 23.1).

Territorial expansion, security in the countryside, and fair taxation, along with favourable climatic conditions, resulted in a spectacular demographic explosion—a population of 20–25 million by the 1580s—and economic growth. This growth in population and economic resources was the basis for continued military might, which in turn guaranteed the Ottomans’ place among the great powers in seventeenth-century Eurasia. As the Ottomans’ military might declined vis-à-vis the HabsOrgs and Romanovs in the eighteenth century, the fate of the Ottoman Empire—its possible eventual partition by the great powers or among the emerging nation states—became one of the crucial issues in European politics, known in its day as the ‘Eastern Question’.

In the early modern era, the epic rivalry between the Ottomans and the Habsburgs in the Mediterranean and Hungary played an important role in shaping the course of European history. The European rivals of the Habsburgs—from the Catholic monarchs of France to the Protestant rulers and estates of western and central Europe—sought Ottoman help, concluded trade agreements and alliances, and in some cases even coordinated their military campaigns with the ‘infidel’ sultan. Ottoman–Habsburg rivalry also influenced the struggle for hegemony in Europe between the French and the Habsburgs, and the Franco–Ottoman cooperation earned, in the contemporaneous German propaganda literature, the disparaging title of ‘the common enemy of Christendom’ for Francis I, whereas Louis XIV’s attack on the Holy Roman Empire was likened to that of Sultan Süleyman I’s (r. 1520–66). Ottoman–Habsburg wars tied up Habsburg military manpower and resources in the Mediterranean and Hungary, and thus indirectly aided the Protestant estates’ fight against Madrid and Vienna from the Netherlands to the Holy Roman Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy.

The rapid and seemingly unstoppable Ottoman advance in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries gave birth to a burgeoning literature about the ‘Turks’, with more than 3,500 titles published in the sixteenth century alone. Known collectively as ‘Turcica’, this literature included a great variety of genres from religious treatises to political pamphlets and writings by pilgrims, diplomats, and war captives. Although Europe’s image of the Turk was complex, the idea that Christian Europe was culturally superior to the Islamic ‘Orient’ appeared early on in these works, forming the foundations of later Orientalist views of the colonial era. The idea of the Islamic ‘other’ contributed to the formation of an emerging ‘European’ self-image, wherein the concept of the ‘oriental despot’ was used and manipulated by European thinkers—from Venetian diplomats through Montesquieu and Voltaire—in their ongoing dialogue about the nature of the Ottoman sultan from ‘tyrant’ to ‘despot’ in the seventeenth century and that European literature about Ottoman ‘despotism’ gained currency in the eighteenth century, that is, in an era when the Ottoman sultans lost much of their former power vis-à-vis the empire’s elites.2

Conceptions formulated by early modern European political writers regarding Ottoman ‘tyranny’ and ‘despotism’ have proved persistent, as did similarly enduring stereotypes about the ‘Ottoman decline’ after the ‘magnificent’ and just reign of
Sultan Süleyman. This ‘decline’ literature was also influenced by the readings of Ottoman sources. Beginning in the sixteenth century, Ottoman authors of advice-to-kings literature (nâşihatname) complained about the ‘corruption’ of Ottoman institutions following Süleyman’s reign, which they presented as a ‘golden age’ of just and orderly rule.

From the late 1980s onward these notions have been challenged. Historians questioned the previously uncritical use of the Ottoman advice literature, and convincingly demonstrated that these works cannot be treated as impartial records of the transformation of Ottoman institutions. This advice literature not only presented every deviation from an idealized ‘old order’ (nizam-i kadım) as a sign of corruption and weakening, it also reflected the authors’ political and personal agendas in a time which witnessed intense factionalism and changes in the Ottoman political elite and literati. In reality, the Ottomans were responding to challenges similar to those facing their contemporaries in Europe and Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The adjustments that Constantinople instituted in cooperation with its metropolitan and provincial elites and pressure groups were more successful than was once acknowledged. The empire reached its largest territorial extent in the last quarter of the seventeenth century—and not under Süleyman ‘the Magnificent’ as is often stated. The very fact that the Ottomans were able to mount a major attack in central Europe in 1683, more than 100 years after the empire’s supposed decline had started, demonstrated the resilience and strength of the Ottoman military–fiscal system. After all, it was the Ottomans who almost captured the capital of the Habsburg Monarchy and the Holy Roman Empire and not the other way around. Despite military setbacks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially at the hands of Russia, the House of Osman retained most of its holdings until the late nineteenth century, and survived into the first quarter of the twentieth century, due to both changed geopolitics and the overhaul of the Ottoman ancien régime in the nineteenth century. This is especially remarkable in light of the fate of the other two Muslim empires of Asia, Safavid Persia and Mughal India, which both disintegrated in the eighteenth century.

The present chapter examines early modern Ottoman history in its Eurasian context, as the Ottomans established relations with, fought wars against, influenced, and were influenced by their neighbours and rivals. Evolving military capabilities played an important role in shaping the course of Ottoman history and Constantinople’s relations with her neighbours and rivals. These capabilities in turn were made possible by continually changing socio-economic systems and institutions, which thus should be discussed, however briefly, in this chapter.

(p. 616) The Emergence of the House of Osman

The Ottomans were one of the many Turkic principalities that emerged around the turn of the fourteenth century in northwestern Asia Minor, after the Mongol invasion of the 1240s brought to an end the rule of the Rum (Anatolian) Seljuk Turks, leaving a power vacuum. The eventual rise of the House of Osman to prominence was neither foreseeable in 1300, nor unchallenged in the decades and centuries to come. In the early years, Ottoman rule was contested by the neighbouring Turkish principalities and popular uprisings, as well as by regional powers, both Christian and Muslim. In fact, twice in the course of the fifteenth century, in 1402–13 and 1444, the very existence of the Ottoman polity was at stake.

By the middle of the fourteenth century Osman’s successors had established their first bridgehead on the European shores of the Dardanelles, and their third ruler, Murad I (1362–89), tripled their realms. Ottoman territories were by then evenly distributed in Anatolia and Europe, known to the Ottomans as Rumeli, that is, ‘the land of the Romans [Greeks]’. Murad also relocated his capital from Bursa in northwestern Anatolia to Edirne (Adrianople) in eastern Thrace, indicating that the Ottomans’ interest lay as much in Europe as in Asia. Bayezid I (1389–1402) continued the Ottoman expansion on both continents, extending his rule up to the banks of the Danube and the Euphrates. While the crusades of Nicopol (1396) and Varna (1444) failed to halt Ottoman advance in Europe, the victory of the Central Asian conqueror Timur (Tamerlane) over Bayezid (1402) temporarily checked Ottoman expansion, and resulted in a decade of civil war among Bayezid’s sons.

Fortunately for the dynasty, important institutions of Ottoman rule had already taken root. The Ottoman prebendal system,
based on the so-called timar revenue grants or military fiefs, developed under the first Ottoman rulers, following pre-existing Byzantine and Seljuk patterns of land tenure. These conditional revenue grants financed thousands of cavalrmen (sipahi), who collected taxes and dues from their respective villages in return for their military service to the ruler. Their commander was also the governor of his respective district, named sanjak (lit. banner) after the banner he received from the ruler as a symbol of his authority. Under Bayezid I, the districts were organized into the provinces of Rumeli and Anadolu (western Anatolia), whose governors were the commanders-in-chief of all the timar-holding cavalry forces. The timariot army strengthened the ruler’s position vis-à-vis the frontier lords and their mounted frontiersmen, as did his personal guard, which evolved into the famous janissary corps. The government recruited its future janissaries through a child levy or ‘collection’ (devshirme), by which Christian boys (primarily from the Balkans) were periodically ‘collected’, converted to Islam, Ottomanized, and trained for military and governmental service. In order to keep records of revenues and soldiers the Ottomans instituted a bureaucratic surveillance system via cadastral surveys, registers of prebends, and salary pay lists. The upshot of all this was that by the early fifteenth century a range of institutions and bureaucratic mechanisms had emerged to mobilize (p. 617) resources and to administer conquered lands. The beneficiaries of these institutions had vested interests in restoring the power of the House of Osman after the debacle against Timur.

Until the late 1970s, most scholars understood the Ottoman polity as a quintessential Islamic warrior state, whose raison d’être was the ‘holy war’ (gaza) against the ‘infidels’ and the continuous expansion of the Islamic state’s borders at the expense of its Christian neighbours. Formulated in the 1930s by the Austrian Ottomanist scholar Paul Wittek, the gazi thesis served as an all-embracing elucidation of the rise, evolution, and nature of the Ottoman Empire. Situated on the frontier of Byzantium—what remained of it—the Ottoman Turks were strategically positioned to wage such ‘holy wars’, and the opportunities for glory served as a magnet for the mighty warriors of the neighbouring Turco-Muslim principalities. The ostensibly inexhaustible supply of ‘holy warriors’ under the banner of the early Ottoman rulers seemed to explain their military successes.4

Scholarship from the late 1970s has questioned Wittek’s thesis, and demonstrated that gaza was a more inclusive enterprise than Wittek suggested. In addition to Muslim Turks, one finds among the early Ottoman fighters Orthodox Christian Greeks and recent Christian converts to Islam. Osman and his successors repeatedly made alliances with their Christian neighbours, and cleverly exploited the internal divisions in the adjacent polities. In fact, the Ottomans first crossed the Dardanelles Straits into Thrace in the mid-fourteenth century as allies of John VI Kantakouzenos (1347–54), who enlisted Osman’s help in his fight against emperor John V Palaiologos (1341–91) during the Byzantine civil wars. Kantakouzenos married his daughter to Osman’s son Orhan, and gave the town of Tzympe, on the European shores of the Dardanelles, to his Ottoman son-in-law. Until the mid-fifteenth century the Ottomans regularly used inter-dynastic marriages as a tool for subduing their Byzantine, Serbian, Bulgarian, and Anatolian Turkic neighbours and incorporating their lands into the nascent Ottoman polity.5

Historians have long noted the political fragmentation of Anatolia and southeastern Europe and the opportunities it created for the emergence of the Ottomans. However, geopolitics offers only opportunities, and it was the Ottoman political elite that cleverly exploited the internal power struggles in the neighbouring polities, leading to the subjugation and eventual conquest of Serbia, the Morea, the principality of Karaman in central Anatolia, Herzegovina, Wallachia, and the Crimea. For example, the Ottomans conquered Serbia in 1459 after a pro-Hungarian faction in that country deposed the pro-Ottoman co-regent, Michael Angelović. The conquering Ottoman army was commanded by grand vizier Mahmud Pasha Angelović (d. 1474), Michael’s brother, who was raised in the sultan’s palace after Ottoman frontier raiders had captured him as a boy in 1427.6

Emphasis on Ottoman pragmatism and political shrewdness and the inclusiveness of the early Ottoman enterprise should not overshadow the importance of religious fervour. The spirit of gaza, although understood differently by the various segments and generations of the society, remained important. Similarly, numerous sufi brotherhoods and religious fraternities of craftsmanship and chivalry (futuwwa, akhi) (p. 618) played a significant role in fourteenth-century Anatolia. What is emerging from the research of specialists is a need for a more holistic approach to early Ottoman history. In addition to geopolitics and Islamo-Turkic, Mongol-Ilkhanid, and Byzantine influences on Ottoman socio-economic developments and institutions, one should also take into account the influence of climate, environment, and epidemics of disease.7
Constantinople–Kostantiniyye– Istanbul

For the Ottomans, the conquest of Byzantine Constantinople in 1453 was significant for a number of reasons. It eliminated a hostile wedge that separated the Ottomans’ European and Asian provinces, frustrated the crossing of the sultan’s Asian troops to Europe, and had long inspired anti-Ottoman crusading projects. Constantinople was also one of three port cities in the Mediterranean, along with Venice and Barcelona, that was capable of serving a large galley fleet, thanks to its wealthy hinterland and natural harbour, the Golden Horn. Not surprisingly, after 1453 the Ottomans evolved into a naval power, eclipsing their Venetian rivals by the early sixteenth century and competing with Spain for dominance in the Mediterranean for most of the sixteenth century. Equally important for the Ottoman economy, the masters of Constantinople controlled and taxed the lucrative trade between the Black Sea littoral and the Mediterranean, through which Genoese and Venetian ships carried wheat and silk to Europe, and slaves to Mamluk Egypt.

The conquest gave the young Mehmed II (r. 1444–46, 1451–81) unparalleled prestige in the Muslim and Christian worlds. He was now the ‘Conqueror’ (Fatih), the first Muslim ruler to accomplish the old dream of the Muslims who first besieged the city under the Umayyad Caliph, Muawiyya (661–680). Mehmed’s claim that he was lord of ‘two lands’—Rumeli and Anatolia—and ‘two seas’—the Aegean and the Black Sea, suggested that the sultan regarded his empire firmly rooted in both Europe and Asia. More importantly, by adopting the Roman–Byzantine titles kayser/Caesar and basileus, along with the old Turkish and Islamic titles of kaghan and sultan, Mehmed signalled his claim to universal sovereignty.

Increased revenues from trade and territorial expansion and enhanced prestige enabled the sultan to gradually transform the Ottoman frontier polity into a patrimonial empire, where the ruler’s household troops and the timar-holder cavalry became the backbone of the military. This rendered the frontier raiders secondary, and gradually transformed their lords, the traditional Turkish aristocracy, into provincial governors, loyal to and dependent on the ruler, who also established state ownership over privately held lands. A similar change occurred at the centre of power, where the servants of the state came from the imperial household, in contrast to the pre-1453 era, when influential Turkish families such as the Chandarlis held the highest offices of the realm. Of the some eighty grand viziers in office between 1453 and the mid-seventeenth century, only eleven were born as Muslim Turks. The rest were scions of noble Serbian, Byzantine, Bosnian, and Albanian families or had more modest Christian background from the Balkans, Italy, and the Caucasus. These latter servants of the state arrived into the Ottoman palace as prisoners of war, hostages, or through the child levy. The new viziers were further tied to the dynasty through marriage, a practice which continued to the end of the empire.

Mehmed’s vision of empire is reflected in the ways he and his new elite recast the urban landscape of Constantinople, which the sultan made his empire’s new capital city. The centrepiece of the project was the Conqueror’s new palace, overlooking the entrance to the Bosporus Strait. Known as Topkapı, the palace’s deliberate use of Byzantine, Timurid, Mamluk, and Italian architectural references reflected the sultan’s universalist vision of empire and the imperial ideology of a centralized, patrimonial empire. The Topkapı Palace housed not only the private quarters of the sultan and his family—including the harem where the women and children of the imperial household lived and were educated—but also the palace school that trained the empire’s military and political elite and the chambers of the imperial council (divan), the empire’s highest governing body.8

Newly built mosques, schools, libraries, dervish lodges, bathhouses, hospitals, soup kitchens, caravanserais, and the famous covered market gradually transformed the urban landscape of the city. The covered market not only housed merchants’ shops and provided storage for valuable goods and money, it also made supervising, regulating, and taxing mercantile activity in the imperial capital easier, in accordance with the economic policy of an increasingly centralized state. The construction boom, initiated by the sultan and duly followed by the elite, invited capital investment and provided employment for thousands of skilled workers and day labourers both in the city and its hinterlands. The bulk of the workforce was provided by newcomers. They arrived in the city either via forced population transfers or voluntary immigration, encouraged by economic incentives. As a result, Constantinople’s population of c. 10,000 after the conquest reached 50,000 by the end of Mehmed’s reign, and perhaps as many as 250,000 by the latter part of the sixteenth century.
Mehmed II’s monumental urban project of rebuilding, repopulating, and re-presenting Constantinople demonstrates how the Ottomans appropriated (rather than suppressed) the city’s Byzantine legacy, and how the sultan’s projects were products of the city’s complex cultural environment. For example, the sultan’s citadel, known as the Yedikule (Seven Towers), incorporated (and thus rendered obsolete) Byzantium’s ceremonial entrance to the city, the Golden Gate. The Yedikule was also one of the first star-shaped fortresses in Renaissance Europe, and an example of the Ottomans’ use of contemporary Italian architectural designs. The city’s various names also reflected continuity, rather than break. In official documents and on coinage it was known as Kostantiniyye, an Arabic/Ottoman redaction of Constantinople, and among its inhabitants as Istanbul. This latter was a corruption from a Greek phrase meaning ‘to the city’, although Turkish speakers also referred to it as Islambol (literally, ‘lots of Islam’), a result of folk etymology that reflected the desire of the common people to make the city’s name meaningful.9

These examples remind us that while the conquest of Constantinople was an important step in the transformation of the early frontier polity into a patrimonial empire, Ottoman policies and institutions continued to be shaped by the same Byzantine/Slav milieu as before. In the larger imperial context, other developments were probably more important, including the emergence of the Shia Safavids in Azerbaijan and Iran in the early 1500s as an alternative imperial model and thus major challenge to the Ottomans; the resultant Ottoman–Safavid rivalry; the Ottoman conquest of Mamluk Syria and Egypt, along with Holy cities of Mecca and Medina in 1516–17; and the ensuing transformation of the Ottoman dynasty’s self-image as protector of Sunni Islam.

The Sinews of Ottoman Power

Ottoman economic stability and military success was due largely to the Ottoman prebendal system (timar), which managed revenue collection and maintained a large provincial cavalry army. The peasant family farms remained the basis of the rural economy in Anatolia and southeastern Europe. While peasants retained the hereditary usufruct of the land, they paid taxes to the treasury and to the timarier sipahi. Known as dirlik (‘living’), the sipahi’s basic annual income (3,000 silver akche or 60 gold in the 1550s) was meant to cover his ‘living’, horse, weapons, and armour. The sipahi resided in his village, and collected taxes and fines according to regulations stipulated in his district’s law code. He also kept peace among the villagers, and when called upon for military service, presented himself to his district commander. He could increase his income through good military service and patronage. The more revenue he had, the larger his military retinue grew. The sipahi’s district commander had substantially larger income, yielding annually between 150,000 and 500,000 akche in Ottoman Europe. In return, he was expected to maintain a military household of between 100 and 200 men. Governors-general of Ottoman provinces had revenue grants yielding annually 800,000 to 1,000,000 akche, and maintained household troops approaching 1,000 men. When revenues administered by religious endowments (60 million akche or one million gold ducats) are left out, revenues from prebends (200 million akche or 3.4 million ducats) accounted for 42 per cent of the empire’s total revenues in 1527. This prebendal system enabled the Ottomans to sustain a semi-professional provincial cavalry of about 70,000 strong.10

The most prosperous towns, with considerable revenues from customs and dues on artisanal production, were designated as imperial domains. Collected either through salaried tax officials or tax farmers, the annual revenue from the imperial domains amounted to 277 million akche or 4.7 million gold ducats in 1527, which represented 58 per cent of the empire’s total revenues, exclusive of religious endowments. This amount was to cover the salaries of the largest household of the empire, that of the sultan. In 1527, the royal household numbered 27,000 men, including 15,000 salaried soldiers, 3,500 janissary novices, 2,800 personnel of the royal stables, and almost 3,000 servants of the inner palace. In terms of revenues and the size of his household, no vizier or provincial governor could come close to the sultan.

The timar revenue grants and the child levy enabled the Ottomans to maintain the largest professional military in sixteenth-century Europe and western Asia, and an impressive navy as well. In the 1520s, the combined military potential of the fief-based cavalry, salaried standing army, and garrison forces is estimated at over 120,000 men. Of these, Suleyman was
frequently able to deploy some 50,000 troops for land campaigns. His mobilized navy often consisted of 150 to 200 ships, with 20,000 to 30,000 oarsmen and 10,000 to 15,000 combatants aboard. Ottoman armies routinely outnumbered their Venetian, Hungarian, Habsburg, Mamluk, and Safavid rivals, an advantage which they maintained until the end of the seventeenth century. An efficient supply system combined with budget surpluses (until the early 1590s) enabled the government to pay and provision its soldiers regularly. This in turn boosted discipline and morale among the soldiers.11

The Ottomans and their European enemies constantly watched and learned from each other, copied and adopted their opponents’ weapons, and participated in the early modern arms race. The sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire possessed all the characteristics to promote ‘brain gain’, and had no difficulty attracting foreign experts into its employ. The empire’s wealth and prosperity, the mobility of its multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and polyglot population, and the relative open-mindedness and pragmatism of its political elite made the empire, and especially its capital city Constantinople, just the sort of place where foreigners could sell their expertise, find new career opportunities, gain access to power, and advance the transmission, production, and dissemination of knowledge. Frequent wars with the Venetians, Spaniards, Austrians, and Hungarians accelerated the transfer of military technology between the Ottomans and their rivals. Similarities in military and naval hardware were also the result of illicit trade in weaponry and of common knowledge in weapons manufacturing and shipbuilding, shared by the Ottomans and their adversaries. This shared knowledge was transmitted to the Ottomans by hundreds of cannon founders, blacksmiths, and shipwrights from Italy, Spain, southeastern Europe, Hungary, and Germany. These people—Christians, Jews, and recent converts to Islam—either offered their skills to the sultan voluntarily or were captured and then forced against their will to work in the Ottoman cannon foundries, gunpowder works, and naval arsenals. Due to the advantages of the prebendal land-tenure-cum-fiscal system, efficient resource management, capable leadership, large and disciplined professional armies, self-sufficiency in weapons and ammunition production, and superior supply and logistics, the Ottomans enjoyed military superiority over their European and Asian rivals well into the seventeenth century.12

(p. 622) Ottoman–Safavid–Habsburg rivalry

Sultan Selim I’s (r. 1512–20) victories over the Shia Safavids (1514) and Sunni Mamluks (1516–17) transformed the Ottoman sultan into the most prominent Muslim ruler. Selim was now protector of Mecca and Medina and guarantor of the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. With the conquests of the Arab lands, however, the nature of the Ottoman Empire started to change. The roles assumed by the sultan and the influence of the Arab religious establishment required fuller adoption of Sunni Islamic practices in governance and policy. Under Süleyman, the empire’s highest religious authority, Ebussuud Efendi, successfully harmonized the sultanic laws (kanun) with the Islamic law (sharia), according to the Hanafi school of law.13

The conquest of the Arab lands had major economic and political consequences, too. The revenues of the Ottoman central treasury from the imperial domains rose from 73 million akche (1.3 million gold ducats) in 1509 to 117 million akche (2 million gold ducats) in 1523, due largely to revenues from Syria and Egypt. As the Ottomans consolidated their rule in these lands, the treasury’s revenues continued to rise, and reached their peak under Süleyman’s reign in 1527 with 277 million akche (4.7 million gold ducats), of which more than one-third came from the province of Egypt. As late as 1581–83, revenues from Egypt and Syria still accounted for 22 to 28 per cent of the central treasury’s annual income.14 Therefore, the protection of the maritime lanes of communications between Constantinople and Cairo became vital. This necessitated the strengthening of the Ottoman navy, but also led to more active Mediterranean policy, to confrontation with Venice and Spain, as well as to occasional alliances with France, Spain’s main rival. Meanwhile, the task of protecting Mecca and Medina from Portuguese encroachment in the Red Sea brought the Ottomans into conflict with the Portuguese. While some Ottoman statesmen and naval commanders, such as Selman Reis (d. 1528) and Piri Reis (d. 1554) might have entertained a more ambitious strategy in the Indian Ocean, Ottoman policy in that realm remained rather limited in scope and in its objectives—focusing mainly on the protection of the holy cities and Iraq—due largely to the restricted radius of action of the Ottoman oared-powered galley fleet. This did not allow long-range power projection, and was no match for the Portuguese
ocean-going navy. After repeated failures to dislodge the Portuguese from the region, and to deploy part of the Ottoman Mediterranean fleet in the Indian Ocean via a canal near Suez in 1569—an ingenious but technically and economically impossible project at the time—the Ottomans gave up whatever plans they might have entertained. With no military success and viable naval base in the region, Constantinople’s influence among Indian Ocean Muslims remained modest.\textsuperscript{15}

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Ottomans’ main rivals were the Habsburgs and the Safavids, and the theatres of rivalries among them were Hungary, the Mediterranean, and Iraq. After the conquest of central Hungary in 1541, the two rival empires partitioned the country and established a 1,000 km-long military frontier stretching from the Adriatic Sea in the west to the borders of the Principality of Transylvania, an Ottoman client state carved out of the eastern parts of medieval Hungary. The story of the next 150 years was one of Habsburg defence and slow Ottoman expansion, ‘little wars’ characterized by mutual cross-border raids, and two long wars (1593–1606 and 1683–99) with devastating consequences for the imperial centres and especially for the peoples of the theatres of conflict. But this was also an era of cross-border diplomacy and negotiation to maintain the truce, foster trade, and collect revenues, often with the cooperation and assistance of the authorities and populations on the other side of the border.\textsuperscript{16}

In the eastern Mediterranean, the Habsburgs and Ottomans also solidified their positions by the mid-sixteenth century. While the battle of Lepanto (1571) halted further Ottoman expansion in the western Mediterranean, it did not fundamentally alter the status quo. As the Ottomans rebuilt their navy by the next spring, and as Spanish resources were redirected to quell the Dutch Revolt, Venice accepted the Ottoman conquest of Cyprus. In 1574, the Ottoman recapture of Tunis, off the coast of Spanish Habsburg Sicily, demonstrated Ottoman naval resurgence and restored Ottoman military prestige. However, engaged in struggles against the Safavids and the Dutch respectively, the two imperial centres signed a truce in 1580, and disengaged.

Although militarily not as powerful as the Habsburgs, the Safavids and their followers—known as Qızılbash ('Red-head') after their twelve tasselled red hats symbolizing the Twelver Shia branch of Islam—presented a formidable threat to the Ottomans, for they undermined Ottoman sovereignty among the Turcoman and Kurdish tribes in eastern Anatolia, depriving the Ottoman government of valuable tax revenues, fighting men, and logistical support. In addition to economic and strategic considerations, the lands of Mesopotamia, stretching southeast from Anatolia into Iraq, were also of major religious and cultural significance for both the Ottomans and the Safavids. Alongside with the old Abbasid capital Baghdad, once the centre of Sunni Islam, Iraq was also the site of the sacred Shia shrines of Imam Ali in Najaf and Imam Hussain in Karbala. The Ottoman–Safavid treaty of Amasya (1555) acknowledged recent Ottoman gains and extended Constantinople’s rule into Iraq, including Baghdad. However, the Safavids remained a constant threat, and the two empires fought two more exhausting wars (1578–90, 1603–39). In the first, the Ottomans conquered Azerbaijan and parts of Armenia. In the war of 1603–39, under the able leadership of Shah Abbas (1587–1629) the Safavids scored some victories, including the temporary possession of Baghdad (1624–38). However, in the treaty of Zuhab (1639), the borders established in 1555 were restored with modifications: the Ottomans kept Baghdad and Iraq, while the Safavids retained Yerevan and their possessions in the Caucasus. The Ottoman–Safavid rivalry tied down Ottoman resources, and limited Constantinople’s freedom of action in the Mediterranean and central Europe against the Habsburgs.

**Administering the Empire**

Households constituted crucial building blocks of the patrimonial Ottoman Empire, for it was through them that the imperial centre collected taxes, mobilized its provincial cavalry, and maintained law and public order in the realms. The latter was important for the guiding principle of Ottoman–Islamic imperial governance, known as the circle of justice. This required that the government maintained peace and security and ensured fair taxation of the subjects, upon whose taxes the administration and the army depended. Protecting the subjects, dispensing justice, and upholding the ancient law (*kanun-i kadim*) of the realms, first promulgated under Mehmed II, was the sultan’s foremost responsibility. The Ottoman legal system that had emerged by the 1570s remained the basis of just governance. Imperial decrees on taxation and criminal law
accommodated local practices, and religious communities and corporate bodies such as guilds were accorded a great degree of autonomy in living according to their own laws and regulations. The imperial ideology, formulated by Süleyman’s grand vizier and chancellor, saw the Ottoman domains as the embodiment of Islamic civilization, with its law-abiding and law-giver sultan who was also the protector of Sunni Islam against both the Shia Safavids and the Catholic Habsburgs.17

Ottoman rule in the provinces was facilitated by a myriad of local communal institutions and power networks, which the Ottomans cleverly co-opted into their provincial administration and military. These played an especially important role in the empire’s European provinces, where more than 70 per cent of the taxpaying households were still Christian in the 1520s, and where the languages, customs, and economic, social and legal conditions were unfamiliar to the conquerors. Therefore, it was in the best interests of the Ottoman authorities to utilize local manpower and skills, and to adopt pre-Ottoman administrative structures and practices.

To ease the transition to Ottoman rule, the Ottomans also made use of pre-Ottoman tax policies, and as a consequence the conquered subjects often paid the same or less in taxes to the Ottomans as they had paid to their former rulers and landlords. The Ottomans followed this practice even in the heyday of the empire, an era usually associated with administrative uniformity and centralism. The Ottomans also enlisted thousands of local Christians into the ranks of their timar-holder cavalrymen, garrison soldiers, and auxiliary troops. In so doing they eased the manpower shortage of fighting men, but also integrated local elites and commoners into their military and administration and facilitated the acceptance of Ottoman rule among the conquered. Within a generation or two, many of the Christian sipahi disappeared from the registers of timar-holders, indicating their gradual conversion to Islam and fuller integration into the Ottoman privileged elite.

Ottoman rule in Europe, however, remained tenuous for generations after the initial conquest, and thus required less flexible methods, too. From the 1350s onwards, the Ottomans used forced population transfer to increase the number of Turkic-speaking Muslim subjects in a Slavic-speaking, Christian environment. The Ottomans resettled Turkoman and Tatar nomads from Asia Minor to Rumeli, and transferred whole Christian communities from their European realms to Anatolia. The government also encouraged voluntary Turkoman migration from Anatolia to the Balkans which, along with state-organized resettlement, resulted in massive Turkification of the population of Thrace and the eastern Balkans, and expanded Ottoman colonization far beyond military garrisons and urban centres.18

(p. 625) Beyond the seemingly uniform imperial administrative structures, one finds wide variation in administrative practice and adaptability to local conditions. Such policies grew out of the limited capabilities of pre-modern imperial governance and are also observable in other multi-ethnic and multi-confessional empires and monarchies. This was especially true along the empire’s frontier regions, in eastern Anatolia, the Arab lands, and in Hungary, where the Ottomans were forced to share taxation and jurisdiction with the local elites. Laying beyond these frontier provinces, the vassal or tributary states of the empire—Wallachia, Moldavia, Transylvania, Ragusa, the Crimean Tatar Khanate, the Barbary states in North Africa, and the tributary states in the Caucasus—enjoyed a great deal of autonomy in their domestic affairs, although the degree of autonomy and their obligations to Constantinople varied considerably according to shifts in geopolitics and to these regions’ economic and strategic importance for Constantinople.

While understanding socio-economic frameworks, institutions, and ruling techniques is important to assess any polity, it should not be forgotten that it was people who shaped the evolution of these institutions and techniques, and who were thus responsible for their success or failures. The inclusive and hybrid nature of the early Ottoman enterprise, the adaptability of its political elite, and the mobility, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and polyglot character of its population were a great source of Ottoman strength. So was the fact that many of the holders of the empire’s highest offices—viziers, provincial governors, military and naval commanders—were of Byzantine, Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Albanian, Hungarian, Genoese, Armenian, Circassian, Georgian, and Abkhazian origin, had family members among the empire’s non-Muslim subjects and/or in the neighbouring Christian states, spoke multiple languages, and understood the policies of the empire’s neighbours and rivals. Contemporary European diplomats and later historians often commented on the nepotism of Ottoman viziers. Indeed many furthered the career of their kin, such as Sokollu Mehmed Pasha (1506–79), whose Muslim relatives served as Ottoman...
governors, while his Christian relatives staffed the Serbian Patriarchate of Peć (western Kosovo), the centre of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which was re-established by Mehmed Pasha himself. What is missing from the literature, however, are prosopographical studies and the reconstruction of the networks, and economic and political interests of these vizierial households. While research has noted the ethnic–regional rivalries between the Balkan and Caucasian factions in the seventeenth century, little is known about how the economic and political interests of these households as well as intra- and inter-household relations shaped the empire’s economic strategies and policy decisions.19

Borders and Borderlands

Well into the eighteenth century, contemporary observers perceived the borders between the Ottomans and their European neighbours as a religious divide. Croats, Hungarians, and Poles thought of their country and themselves as antemurale (p. 626) Christianitatis, the bulwark of Christendom. The language of official Ottoman documents reciprocated this view. The Ottomans considered the lands of their Christian neighbours the ‘domain of war’ and the ‘land of the infidel’, where the ‘enemy of the faith’ lived. Ottoman chroniclers called the troops who defended the empire’s borders against enemy attacks ‘soldiers of Islam’. The sultan’s subjects close to enemy lands perceived themselves as being on the ‘frontier of Islam’. The fortresses of Buda and Belgrade that guarded Islam’s frontiers were known as the ‘strong bulwark of Islam’. Belgrade was also called the ‘domain of holy war’, as was Tripoli in Africa.

Prior to the Treaty of Karlowitz (1699), Ottoman border areas were still vaguely defined, and intentionally so, for their expansion and fluidity remained important features, as did cross-border raids and ransom slavery. Ottoman military raids proved an effective strategy to extend Ottoman taxation into enemy territory. In Hungary for instance, Ottoman raiders forced villages under Habsburg rule to pay at least a nominal lump sum. The fact that such villages were then recorded in the Ottoman revenue registers meant in the eyes of the Ottoman authorities that they had become part of the sultan’s domains. This conception, which privileged jurisdiction and sovereignty over subjects rather than over a demarcated territory delineated by physical border markers, was in line with early modern European notions of boundaries. The Habsburgs also accepted this conception and in the sixteenth century the two parties regarded the first Ottoman land survey of the newly conquered Hungarian lands, prepared in 1546, as a basic document regarding border disputes.

However, the widespread view that prior to the treaty of Karlowitz (1699) the Ottomans did not accept border delineations needs revision. In fact, linear borders were negotiated with Venice and Moldavia in the late fifteenth century. Following the conclusion of peace treaties, the common borders with the Austrian Habsburgs, Poland–Lithuania, and the Safavids were established by border commissions. Occasionally, there were attempts at demarcating sovereignty even at sea. In principle, most Europeans accepted the Roman law that no polity could control the open seas. Mehmed II’s famous chief jurisconsult, Molla Hüsrev, seconded this opinion by noting that the sea belonged neither to the ‘domain of war’ nor to the ‘domain of Islam’, for it was impossible to draw lines in the sea. However, these notions were not always followed in practice. Venice, for instance, considered the Adriatic its own Gulf, and the Ottomans also adopted the phrase of ‘the gulf of Venice’, although they used it more narrowly than the Venetians. The Ottoman authorities were also ready to cede territories to their Venetian, Hungarian, and Habsburg neighbours or exchange villages with them when circumstances dictated, despite the widespread belief that the Ottomans could not give up any land that the sultan conquered militarily, an idea indeed frequently voiced by Ottoman officials during peace negotiations. Therefore, Karlowitz should be considered only one stage, admittedly important, of a longer process, rather than a major turning point, in the evolving Ottoman boundary conceptions and policies. The importance of Karlowitz lay not in the delimitation of the border but in the fact that in 1699 the Ottomans were forced to accept European concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity of their neighbours.20

(p. 627) Defence and, when possible, extension of the sultan’s domains was the main function of Ottoman frontier governors. However, by the 1550s imperial overstretch made most of the borderland provinces heavily militarized zones and thus financially burdensome. Most frontier provinces in Hungary and Iraq ran a deficit, and became dependent on subsidies from the imperial treasury and/or aid from the neighbouring provinces in southeastern Europe and eastern Anatolia. Ottoman
borderlands were also zones of cross-border and inter-imperial communication, diplomacy, espionage, and commerce. Governors of frontier provinces played an important role in cross-border diplomacy, and many of the important peace treaties between Constantinople and its neighbours, such as the treaty of Zsitvatorok in 1606 with the Habsburgs, were the result of such negotiations. Merchants, emissaries, travellers, spies, adventurers, and pilgrims traversed the border areas regularly.

Cross-border negotiations also fostered inter-imperial communication, and many of the Ottoman governors in Hungary cultivated close relations with the Hungarian and Habsburg authorities, and even used the latter’s leverage to advance their own political careers. When one governor in Ottoman Hungary was re-assigned to the Safavid borderland, he pleaded to Emperor Matthias II (1612–19) and the Habsburg imperial interpreter in Constantinople to intervene on his behalf in the Ottoman court. When he was reinstated as governor of Buda in 1614 he thanked his Habsburg and Hungarian counterparts —the president of the Viennese War Council and the Captain-General of western Royal Hungary—for their successful lobbying.

The complexity of frontier politics is well illustrated by the rivalry between various Ottoman factions in the borderlands. When the Protestant Prince Gábor Bethlen (1613–29) of Transylvania, an Ottoman vassal state, led his armies against the Habsburgs, the pashas in Hungary were divided, even though Ottoman interests dictated that they supported Bethlen. For a short time, the anti-Bethlen faction managed to remove from his post the prince’s most ardent Ottoman supporter. This man returned shortly afterwards and led the Ottoman troops on the side of the Protestant prince against the Catholic Habsburgs, in accordance with Constantinople’s policies. These examples not only demonstrate the complexity of Ottoman borderlands, but serve as a reminder that, in addition to factionalism in the imperial capital, frontier realities and rivalries also influenced Constantinople’s policy.

**Diplomacy**

In its heyday in the sixteenth century, Ottoman Constantinople was the cosmopolitan hub of a world empire, and a major centre of early modern diplomacy and espionage, with resident ambassadors, interpreters, and spies from all the major European powers. The first resident ambassador was the bailo of Venice in 1454, followed by his counterparts from France (1536), the Habsburg Monarchy (1547), England (1583), and the Dutch Republic (1612). On the other hand, the Ottomans did not begin to station resident ambassadors in foreign courts until 1793.

(p. 628) Ottoman diplomatic relations with Europe reflected Islamic law and earlier Islamic practices as much as they did Constantinople’s pragmatism and the changing power relations among Europe’s main powers on the one hand and the Ottomans on the other. While in principle the Ottomans concluded only truces (implying merely the temporary suspension of war) with their Christian rivals, they considered these truces legally binding, in accordance with Islamic law. Contrary to what is generally believed, Constantinople was willing to sign genuine peace treaties, and it also granted trade privileges unilaterally to such friendly Christian powers as France, England, and the Dutch Republic.21

Until the late eighteenth century, Constantinople concluded only limited truces with the Habsburgs, the Ottomans’ arch-enemy. The first real peace treaty with the Habsburg Monarchy was concluded in 1606, following the Long War of 1593–1606. In it, the sultan accepted the Habsburg ruler as his equal, titled him emperor, and ended the annual tribute of 30,000 forints in return for the payment of a single ‘gift of honour’ of 200,000 forints. Although limited to twenty years, the treaty included the heirs of both monarchs, and the parties renewed it repeatedly during the Thirty Years’ War, which gave the Habsburgs a much needed respite on their eastern frontier. Later treaties signed with the Habsburgs at Karlowitz (1699), Passarowitz (1718), and Belgrade (1739) were called both peace and truce, and concluded for limited time periods. The first ‘perpetual and universal peace’ with the Habsburgs was signed in 1791 in Sistovi on the basis of status quo ante bellum, although Austria was granted some border adjustments, including the restitution of Old Orșova, which improved Austrian defence capabilities.
Although numerous Ottoman viziers were polyglots, both the Ottomans and the Europeans relied on interpreters. To find Christians with knowledge of Turkish and languages known to European diplomats such as Greek, Latin, or Italian was not a problem in the multi-ethnic Ottoman capital, whose population was roughly 60 per cent Muslim and 40 per cent Christian or Jewish in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. However, Europeans soon realized that employing the sultan’s Christian subjects as dragomans (from the Arabic/Turkish terjuman, meaning translator) was problematic, for the Ottomans could have pressed them for information and favours. Therefore, starting with the Venetians, most European resident ambassadors in Constantinople used translators from among their own nationals, trained both at home and in the Ottoman capital. Ottoman dragomans under Süleyman were Christian converts. Being polyglots and having Christian relatives living under Venetian and Habsburg rule, these dragomans played an important role in diplomacy and information gathering.22

In the sixteenth century the Ottomans operated a multi-layered intelligence network. The sultan’s Jewish physicians, confidants, and agents rendered especially useful services to the Ottoman court in gathering and assessing intelligence about the Porte’s European adversaries and neighbours. From the mid-seventeenth century onwards, wealthy Orthodox Greek merchants in Constantinople’s Phanar district, known as phanariots, had replaced the Sephardim as court physicians, confidants of and political advisers to sultans and grand viziers. Thereafter, the Porte’s chief dragomans came from a handful of phanarior families, who also dominated the governance of the Ecumenical (p. 629) Patriarchate and governed Wallachia and Moldavia in the name of the sultan. Some of them played crucial roles in Ottoman diplomacy such as Alexander Mavracordato who conducted negotiations with the representatives of the Holy League and with the Dutch and English mediators in the decade leading to the treaty of Karlowitz.

Knowledge of European politics under Süleyman enabled the Ottomans to devise a grand strategy and a universalist vision of empire, challenging Emperor Charles V’s universalist pretensions. The Ottomans conveyed their vision of a universalist empire to the European public by adopting and manipulating the language of European political propaganda and the symbolism of Habsburg imperial display. During the 1532 campaign against the Habsburgs, Süleyman’s imperial entries into Nish and Belgrade, which were skilfully choreographed by grand vizier Ibrahim Pasha, reminded Western observers of Emperor Charles V’s coronation cavalcade in Bologna in 1530. Süleyman’s four-tier helmet-crown, which the sultan wore during his triumphal processions and audiences, was commissioned by Ibrahim Pasha from Venice, with the help of Lodovico Gritti, the illegitimate son of the Venetian doge, and Ibrahim Pasha’s protégé. Mistakenly identified as the sultan’s crown by European diplomats present, the ceremonial helmet imitated both the papal tiara and Charles V’s crown, thus challenging the authority of both the Pope and the Emperor.23 The parades orchestrated by Ibrahim Pasha again demonstrated that Ottoman policy-makers were not only well informed about Charles V’s imperial ambitions, they were also familiar with the symbols used in contemporary Europe to display such ambitions, and were ready to deploy the same symbolic imagery to project an alternative display of imperial power.

Wars, Crises, and Ottoman Responses

By the late sixteenth century, the seasonal campaigns of the era of Süleyman gave way to long, exhausting wars. Of these, Constantinople’s ‘Sixty Years’ Wars’ against the Safavids (1578–90, 1603–39), Habsburgs (1593–1606), and Anatolian Jelali rebels (c. 1595–1610)—named so after a rebel leader, Sheikh Jelali, in the early sixteenth century—were especially destructive. While population growth was able to make up for the negative effects of frequent Ottoman campaigns under Süleyman even in such hotly contested frontier regions as Hungary, the destruction of the long war of 1593–1606 and the accompanying famine and epidemics caused irreparable damage, from which the societies and economies of the theatre of conflict were unable to recover. In other places, however, Ottoman population increased substantially in the second half of the sixteenth century, as suggested by the remarkable growth in the number of unmarried and landless married men, which in some parts of Anatolia reached 75 to 80 per cent of the recorded male population. However, by the end of the century, this rapid population growth led to ‘demographic pressure’, and in some localities to subsistence crises, as cereal production was unable to keep pace with the expansion of the population.24 Masses of landless peasants living at the limits of survival

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22. For instance, Alexander Mavracordato, who conducted negotiations with the representatives of the Holy League and with the Dutch and English mediators in the decade leading to the treaty of Karlowitz.

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24. The parades orchestrated by Ibrahim Pasha again demonstrated that Ottoman policy-makers were not only well informed about Charles V’s imperial ambitions, they were also familiar with the symbols used in contemporary Europe to display such ambitions, and were ready to deploy the same symbolic imagery to project an alternative display of imperial power.
roamed the countryside. Thousands of them were hired by Constantinople as militiamen to fight alongside the regular troops as infantry musketeers. Others sought employment in the private armies of provincial governors and local strongmen. Perhaps even larger numbers resorted to brigandage, supplying the manpower for the Jelali rebellions (1595–1610, 1654–59). Large scale rebellions and the resultant flight of the taxpaying population from the affected regions disrupted economic and commercial activity, and led to loss in tax revenues. The negative effects of wars and the Jelali rebellions were exacerbated by the ‘Little Ice Age’: extreme droughts, snowy winters, and periods of high rainfall, which resulted in crop failures and coincided with the Anatolian rebellions and the long wars against the Habsburgs and Safavids of the late sixteenth century. Loss of revenue due to socio-economic disorder, economic contraction, and inflation was especially serious in a time when the growth of the salaried army and war-related expenses increased the fiscal pressure on the imperial treasury.

Older literature explained Ottoman army growth with Constantinople’s need to counter Habsburg infantry firepower in the war of 1593–1606 in Hungary by increasing the number of musket-bearing janissary footmen. New evidence indicates that the growth of the janissary corps was part of a general military expansion that started under Sultan Süleyman I and accelerated during the Ottomans’ long wars against the Safavids and Habsburgs at the end of the sixteenth century. While in the 1520s the sultan’s salaried troops averaged less than 16,000 men, their number rose to 26,500 men by the end of Süleyman’s reign. This number more than doubled to 58,500 men by 1597.

The growth was due to both increased military needs and domestic political and social developments unrelated to foreign wars, such as the dynastic struggles among Süleyman’s sons, and the resultant militarization of the countryside. In the 1660s, during the wars against Venice and the Habsburgs in Crete and Hungary, the numbers of the standing army soared past 75,000, peaking in 1687 (100,600 men) and 1694 (114,000 men) during the wars against the Holy League. Impressive as these numbers might seem, only about one-third of these soldiers were actually mobilized for campaigns in the second half of the seventeenth century. The rest served in frontier garrisons or were pensioners, unfit for military service.

State Finances

The fighting men of the expeditionary forces therefore had to be recruited from the common people, and often with the help of provincial governors and grandees. In the Prut campaign against Peter the Great in 1711 and in the 1736–39 wars against Austria and Russia, some 70 to 80 per cent of the mobilized janissaries were fresh recruits, hired (p. 631) before each campaign. Provincial governors and grandees, too, profited from the exigencies of war. In return for their assistance in provisioning the expeditionary armies and providing troops, provincial governors and grandees gained access to ever larger shares of state revenues, partly by holding state offices and partly by administering tax farms.

The growth of the salaried army generated fiscal pressure. Soldiers’ pay almost tripled between 1582 and 1608 in nominal terms. Even if we account for the more than 50 per cent devaluation of the silver akche in 1585, salaries paid to the stipendiary troops rose from 81.5 metric tons of silver in 1582 to 108 tons in 1608, and their share within the total expenditure increased from 48 per cent to 64 per cent. In general, soldiers’ pay accounted for 60 to 85 per cent of the treasury’s annual expenditure from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century. In addition to war-related expenditures, the accession bonuses paid to the salaried troops and state employees became an especially heavy burden in the late seventeenth century, when three sultans—Süleyman II (1687–91), Ahmed II (1691–95), and Mustafa II (1695–1703)—succeeded each other in the same decade that saw the most exhausting war thus far. The total sum of accession bonuses often exceeded the annual
salaries of the janissaries, such as in 1687. Confiscation of the assets of dismissed viziers and high officials, minting copper coinage, and the debasement of the silver *akche* were among the devices used by the government to come up with the necessary funds. Starting in the 1670s, during the wars against Poland–Lithuania (1672–78), transfers to the central treasury from the sultan’s private treasury, which served as a reserve bank, became more frequent. Transfers reached their peak in 1685 with an amount (401 million *akche*) sufficient to cover the salaries of the standing troops for almost two years.27

Other policies with which the government experimented, albeit within the traditional fiscal system, included the regularization of the extraordinary wartime taxes (*avarız*), the reorganization of the collection of the poll tax payable by non-Muslims (*jizye*), the introduction of new taxes, and the widening of the tax base. The extraordinary taxes had become regular annual levies by the early seventeenth century, and were demanded in cash, as opposed to the earlier practice, when these were collected in kind. As a result of a more efficient collection of the poll tax, levied from 1691 onward according to the taxpayer’s capacity, the treasury’s poll tax revenues quadrupled between 1666 and 1698 in nominal terms. The share of the poll tax within the treasury’s annual revenues rose from 20 per cent in the mid-1660s, to 30 per cent in the mid-1690s, and to 48 per cent in 1702. This meant that the tax burden was increasingly shouldered by the empire’s non-Muslim population. Yet in 1686 the government also imposed a new ‘war contributions tax’ upon the religious establishment, previously exempt from such taxes. Although the tax was later imposed upon the townspeople of (p. 632) the empire, it demonstrated how fiscal pressure generated by wars affected ever wider segments of the subjects of the sultan.28

Fiscal pressure also led to further changes in revenue management. In 1695, the government extended the term of tax farms from three years to the lifetime of the tax farmer. The aim of the life-term tax farms (*malikane*) was to alleviate the treasury’s cash shortages through the large purchase prices which the successful bidders of the auctioned tax farms paid to the treasury at the time of the auction. The life-long tax farms also made tax collection more predictable for a longer period of time, for the treasury also received steady, albeit more modest, annual payments from the *malikane*-holders during the latter’s lifetime. In short, by using state tax revenues as collateral, the life-term tax farms functioned as financial devices of long-term domestic borrowing, comparable to the sale of life annuities known in contemporary western Europe.29

Changes in fiscal policy in the late seventeenth century stabilized Ottoman finances. In the first half of the eighteenth century the government was able to pay its troops and also the accession bonuses under Sultans Amhed III (1703–30), Mahmud I (1730–54), Osman III (1754–57), and Mustafa III (1757–74). The central treasury’s incomes and expenditures remained balanced until the Russo–Ottoman war of 1768–74. However, fiscal and economic exhaustion caused by that war, along with the war indemnity payable to Russia—amounting to about half of the central treasury’s annual income—upset the financial balance and led to further adjustments in fiscal policy. These included the use of the Imperial Mint as a reserve bank and the reorganization of the *malikane* system in 1775. In the new system (*esham*), shares of the tax farm’s annual revenues were sold to a large number of buyers. The aim was to further broaden domestic borrowing by reaching beyond the large financiers, who had dominated the *malikane* system, and to tap into the available financial resources of a larger number of lenders with more modest financial means.30

These fiscal polices, introduced from the late seventeenth century onwards, increased the Ottoman treasury’s revenues in real terms only modestly. Ottoman finances seemed inefficient especially when compared to the fiscal expansion of the Habsburg Monarchy and Russia. Whereas in the early 1760s St. Petersburg’s and Constantinople’s revenues were comparable in terms of tons of silver, by the end of the century Russian revenues were about ten times larger. Yet one should be cautious about explaining the Ottomans’ declining military performance vis-à-vis their Austrian and Romanov rivals solely with the growing fiscal gap.31 Dissimilar fiscal and military systems in the Habsburg, Romanov, and Ottoman Empires make comparisons of fiscal and military capabilities misleading. Despite having revenues comparable to that of Constantinople in the early 1760s, the Russian government was still able to maintain an army twice the size of the Ottoman army.

**Conclusions**
Whereas earlier historiography perceived fiscal-administrative decentralization and military devolution as signs of weakness and degeneration from an idealized ‘classical’ system of centralization, research has demonstrated that it was in fact the devolution of power to grandee households that allowed Constantinople to maintain or re-establish control over its frontier regions such as Mosul and Baghdad, and to counter the many domestic and foreign challenges it faced in the eighteenth century. Military expansion, devolution, and fiscal decentralization enabled the Ottomans to mobilize armies comparable both in size and composition to those of their rivals. It was with these troops that, following the loss of Hungary in 1699, Constantinople successfully halted Habsburg advances in southeastern Europe until the late nineteenth century. In the long run, however, the decentralized Ottoman military–fiscal system fell short in comparison to the more centralized armies of the Habsburgs and Russians. The Russo–Ottoman war of 1768–74 revealed the weaknesses of the Ottoman military–fiscal system vis-à-vis Russia, which by the late eighteenth century had emerged as the empire’s most powerful adversary, influencing the course of the Ottoman domains in the nineteenth century.33

Whereas the Habsburg Monarchy and Romanov Russia emerged by the latter part of the eighteenth century as military–fiscal states with large standing armies, over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Ottoman Empire evolved into a limited monarchy where the central government had to share authority, resources, and the means of violence with its emerging provincial elite. While these transformations were important, it is debatable whether they constitute such a break with the past as to mark the beginning of what at least one historian has characterized as a ‘Second Ottoman Empire’. Despite all the changes uncovered by historians in the past two decades, the empire remained an ancien régime. We have seen that the governing elite’s ‘economic mind’, including its fiscal policies, remained within the traditional framework. The distinctive Ottoman legal system that had emerged by the 1570s also remained in use until the nineteenth-century legal reforms. The same can be said of the frameworks within which the empire’s peoples lived and interacted with one another and with representatives of the government. Although new geopolitical realities at the end of the seventeenth century forced the Ottomans to accept international principles of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of foreign states, Ottoman diplomacy, too, followed traditional unilateralism. It was not until the late eighteenth century that the overhaul of the Ottoman ancien régime started in earnest during Selim III’s reign, often referred to as the ‘new order’. This process continued with the Tanzimat reforms (1839–76). If there was a ‘second’ Ottoman Empire, it was the post-Tanzimat empire, which increasingly looked and acted like the other nineteenth-century modern states.

Further Reading


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Find this resource:


Find this resource:


Find this resource:

Faroqhi, Suraiya, Kate Fleet, and Reşat Kasaba, eds. The Cambridge History of Turkey, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 2006–13).

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(1.) See, for example, Halil İnalcık and Donald Quataert, eds., *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, 1994); Caroline Finkel, *Osman’s Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1923* (New York, 2006); Kate Fleet, Suraiya Farooqi, and Reşat Kasaba, eds., *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 2006–13); Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Masters, eds., *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire* (New York, 2009); Christine Woodhead, ed., *The Ottoman World* (Abingdon, 2012). See also Suraiya Farooqi, *Approaching Ottoman History: An Introduction to the Sources* (Cambridge, 1999).


(18.) İnalcık and Quataert, eds., *An Economic and Social History*, 31–41.

(20.) For recent scholarship on the Ottoman borders and frontiers see Maria Pia Pedani Fabris, Dalla frontiera al confine (Rome, 2002), A. C. S. Peacock, ed., The Frontiers of the Ottoman World (Oxford, 2009), and the essays by Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, Gábor Ágoston, and Neida Fuccaro in Woodhead, ed., The Ottoman World.


(22.) On languages and interpreters see the chapters by Christine Woodhead and Tijana Krstić in Woodhead, ed., The Ottoman World.


(28.) Çakır, ‘Geleneksel Dönem (Tanzimat Öncesı Osmalı Bütçe Gelirleri’, 184–187; see also Linda T. Darling, Revenue-Raising and Legitimacy: Tax Collection and Finance Administration in the Ottoman Empire, 1560–1660 (Leiden, 1996), and Finkel, Osman’s Dreams, 325–326, 329–333, for some of the fiscal polices and the political turmoil that the fiscal crises caused.


(31.) Kwanç Karaman and Şevket Pamuk, ‘Ottoman State Finances in European Perspective, 1500–1914’, Journal of


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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter charts the evolution of a great power system between the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. It shows that while the contest absorbed ever greater parts of the continent, and soon spread overseas, its main focus lay in Central Europe. Conceptually, there was tension between powers with universal claims on ideological grounds and ‘great powers’ who were pursuing a narrower state interest. There was also a demand for a ‘balance of power’ to ensure that no single actor became a danger to the overall system. Another important distinction was between ‘revolutionary’ powers and ‘status quo’ powers. Despite being severely challenged by power shifts, however, the system remained capable of accommodating rising powers. It was also a world where intervention into the internal affairs of other states was considered legitimate, if the maintenance of stability in the system required it.

Keywords: Balance of power, Christendom, Holy Roman empire, norms, Peace of Westphalia, revolutionary powers, rising powers, status quo powers, state system, society of states

The struggle for supremacy and survival in early modern Europe raged almost continuously over the nearly 400 years between the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 and the Vienna Settlement of 1815. The ‘Turkish Wars’ pitted the expanding Muslim Ottoman Empire against the Venetians, the Austrian and Spanish Habsburgs, the Poles, and the Russians in various combinations throughout our period. Venice battled the Ottomans on her own from 1463–79 and with the support of Spain, Portugal, France, and the papacy from 1499–1503. The Austro–Spanish Habsburgs grappled with them between 1526 and 1568, with some Venetian support. Spain, Venice, and the papacy went to war with Turkey again in 1570–73. Austria embarked on another epic contest with the Turks from 1593–1606. Russians, Poles, and Austrians fought a long war with the Ottomans from 1683–99. Austria and Venice embarked on a fresh round of hostilities against the Turks in 1716–18. The Russians and Austrians launched a joint attack on them from 1736–39, the Russians fought Turkey on their own in 1768–74, and yet another Austro–Russian strike on the Ottomans followed in 1787–92.

These conflicts ran in parallel with the struggles between France and the Habsburgs. They began with the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century ‘Italian Wars’ between the Habsburgs and the French Valois dynasty in 1494–98, 1499–1504, 1521–26, 1536–38, 1542–46, and 1551–59. At stake was control of the whole peninsula, but especially the northern territory of Milan. The first half of the seventeenth century was dominated by the ‘Thirty Years’ War’ (1618–48), which pitted the Protestant German Princes, the Dutch Republic, France, Sweden, and Denmark at various times against the Habsburgs and their German allies. This was followed in the late seventeenth century by the ‘Wars of Grand Alliance’ between France on the one hand, and the English, Dutch, and the Austrian Habsburgs on the other. This began as a conflict between France and England against the Dutch Republic, Brandenburg–Prussia, Spain, and the Austrian Habsburgs in 1672–78. It developed into a full-scale confrontation in the Nine Years’ War of 1689–97, at the start of which England joined the anti-French
camp. This contest culminated in the ‘War of the Spanish Succession’ (1701–13), another war of coalition against France. It ran consecutively for many years with the ‘Great Northern War’ (1700–21) pitting Russia, Poland (now dynastically linked to Saxony), and Prussia against Sweden.

In the early eighteenth century, European politics were dominated by Franco–British alliances to contain Spain in 1716, and an Austro–Russian compact to limit France during the War of the Polish Succession (1733–38). The mid-eighteenth century was dominated by the ‘War of the Austrian Succession’ (1740–48), which ranged Prussia and France against Britain and the Austrian Habsburgs, and the subsequent Seven Years’ War (1756–63), between Austria, France, and Russia on one side and Britain and Prussia on the other. Eastern Europe remained very unstable, with the partition of Poland by Austria, Russia, and Prussia between 1772 and 1795, accompanied by the various attacks on the Ottoman Empire already mentioned. By contrast, there was a relative lull in western, central, and southern Europe after 1763, which was spectacularly broken by the outbreak of the ‘Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars’ (1792–1815) in which virtually the entire continent lined up against France.

This period was marked by many shifts in the European balance of power. Structurally, the initial clash between Christendom and Islam was soon overlain by the confrontation between Catholicism and the varieties of Protestantism. Even if secularization eventually blunted the force of confessional difference, religion remained an important international factor well into the late eighteenth century. In time, the clash between representative systems and (aspirationally) absolute monarchies was overtaken by the confrontation between Revolutionary France and ancien régime Europe. The dividing lines, however, were always fluid: alliances across these boundaries between ideological enemies against a third party were not infrequent.

Behavourally, Europe was divided between revolutionary and status quo powers. A power was revolutionary if its ideological or territorial aspirations were incompatible with the European balance. The status quo powers, by contrast, sought to contain these ambitions. Again, the dividing line between the two was fluid. Usually, an ideologically revolutionary power, such as the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg monarchy under Charles V, and France after 1792, was also expansionist in territorial terms. This stemmed partly from a missionary zeal and partly from the conviction that their own particular political system would only be safe in a world of similar systems. Moreover, a status quo power in one theatre could be revolutionary in another. Great Britain, for example, was a staunch defender of the continental equilibrium, while maintaining a claim to commercial and maritime supremacy, not least in the name of upholding that selfsame European balance of power.

There was also a marked geographic shift in the balance. From the 1490s, it increasingly included the overseas territories of the European powers: in Africa, Asia, and especially the Americas. Two vast empires, the Habsburg monarchy and the Ottoman Empire, dominated at the start of our story. Then the rise of the western powers, England, France, and (for the earlier period) the United Provinces, turned the Low Countries, (p. 640) western Germany, and northern Italy into a permanent battleground. Thereafter, the rise of the eastern powers, Prussia and Russia, and for a while of Sweden, shifted attention to Poland, the Baltic, and the Balkans. The principal focus of the European balance, however, was the Holy Roman Empire, certainly from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. It was there that the interests and ambitions of nearly all the protagonists intersected. The ultimate failure of the empire to turn itself into a state capable of self-defence, leaving a vacuum at the heart of Europe for hundreds of years, was both a precondition and the result of these factors.

War and foreign policy were once the staple of historiography, but their study became unfashionable for many decades. Today, the European state system is once again the focus of a lively debate which draws not only on military and diplomatic history, but on the study of cultures, mentalities, and the law as well. In this context, a simple narrative cannot do justice to the complexity and interconnection of the events just sketched. Instead, they are best approached under the following headings: norms, structures, beliefs, interests, theatres, challenges, responses, and settlements.

**Norms**
The mid-fifteenth-century European state system was characterized by furious divisions, but it was not a free for all. Its protagonists shared common norms as well as being divided by diverging interests and ambitions. At the beginning of our period stood the concept of Christendom, effectively a synonym for Europe, which stood for a sense of shared identity against the infidel Muslim enemy. Nearly all Europeans were practising Roman Catholics, who acknowledged the spiritual authority of the Pope, and they were at least dimly aware of the claims of the Holy Roman Emperor to represent Europe in its relations with the outside world. They were also, however, sensitive to the dangers of despotism. This produced a tension between the universalism of the imperial idea and the diversity of the European reality. It was once thought that our period saw the development of a modern sense of territorial sovereignty, but recent research suggests that it was incomplete. The notion of absolute sovereignty was utterly foreign to all concerned: both rulers and ruled accepted that there were limits on authority, which had to be exercised responsibly. ‘Tyrannical’ rulers could be and were deposed. James II of England, for example, was removed by a Dutch invasion carried out with strong local support in the late seventeenth century. Likewise, in the early eighteenth century Duke Karl Leopold of Mecklenburg was eventually pushed out by an Austro–Prussian intervention designed to prevent him from oppressing his nobility and thus turning the whole area into a source of instability.

European great power politics was, as we shall see, in some ways a ‘system’, in which states often responded more or less mechanically or predictably to events. Europe was also, however, in many respects a ‘society of states’ with a sense of community based on shared norms, diplomatic culture, and practice. Without it, the exchange of ambassadors or the convening of congresses would not have been possible. There was no formal system of international law as we know it today, but states were expected to at least acknowledge the requirements of ‘just war’. Rulers were not expected to embark on armed conflict unless they had ‘just cause’, though this could be generously interpreted to include not only self-defence, but defence of the faith, of ideological soul-mates, preventing rivals from acquiring territory, and even asserting an entitlement to ‘compensatory’ territorial gain. Rulers were also expected to behave with restraint, avoiding unnecessary bloodshed. Pre-emptive wars to forestall an enemy attack, though not preventive wars to head off the emergence of a threat further down the line, were not proscribed, but treated on their merits. Like today, there was no compelling international enforcement mechanism, but an increasingly vibrant public sphere watched over the maintenance of norms. Rulers who violated them too flagrantly, for example, by allying with the infidel Turks or through the perpetration of massacres, suffered a corresponding decline in prestige. The net result of all this was that wars tended to be waged for limited ends in a limited manner, at least in Europe, even at the height of the seventeenth-century religious divide. Tendencies towards more ‘total’ forms of warfare during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period, with its unprecedented mobilization of men and material resources, were widely condemned, and contributed to the subsequent celebration of restraint in the early nineteenth century.

Structures

The central European political structure, both geographically and conceptually, was the Holy Roman Empire which included all of present-day Germany, Switzerland, eastern France, Bohemia and Moravia, and northern Italy. It was headed by the emperor, who was chosen by four secular electors from Bohemia, Brandenburg, Saxony, and the Palatinate, and the archbishops of Trier, Cologne, and Mainz. In the seventeenth century, Bavaria and Hanover also became electorates and were joined very briefly in the early nineteenth century by Württemberg and Hesse-Cassel. In the mid-fifteenth century, the German imperial Crown was on the way to becoming hereditary in the house of Habsburg, in whose hands it remained, with a brief interlude in the 1740s, until the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire in the early nineteenth century. Germany was also home to a bewildering medley of smaller worldly and ecclesiastical principalities, as well as self-governing imperial free cities. They were nearly all represented in the Reichstag or Diet, a kind of imperial parliament which was supposed to help the emperor to keep the peace at home and defend the empire abroad. The smaller principalities were to some extent protected from the predatory attention of larger powers through the common adherence to the notion of the empire as a peaceful legal order; at the same time imperial subjects were shielded from some of the worst excesses of European absolutism. Though traditionally dismissed as weak, some current research claims that the empire was increasingly acquiring
the characteristics of a state during the early modern period. Its collapse was certainly a shocking event for contemporaries, especially the Germans themselves.

Beneath the emperor in theory, but often more powerful in practice, were ranked the kings of England, France, Spain, Poland, and the Scandinavian countries. Republican or oligarchical governments were still to be found on the Italian peninsula, where Venice still vicariously enjoyed the status of a major power, in Switzerland, and the Dutch Republic. That said, all mid-fifteenth-century monarchs ruled in conjunction with representative assemblies of one sort or another: the English, Irish, and Scottish parliaments, the French Estates-General, the Dutch States General, the Cortes of Castile, the Hungarian, Polish, and Swedish Diets. In most cases, with the exception of relatively homogeneous England and France, these polities were not national states but ‘composite monarchies’ which had coalesced through calculation or dynastic happenstance. The huge Habsburg conglomerate, for example, was the product of Maximilian’s canny marriage policies. Britain–Hanover came about partly because Queen Anne left no direct heir, but mainly because of parliament’s determination to ensure the Protestant Succession. Poland–Saxony was joined together because the Saxon Elector was voted in by the Poles, and there were many smaller and more temporary combinations.

Beliefs

At the start of our period, the principal clash of beliefs in Europe was between Islam, which had established a strong bridgehead in the Balkans and on the Black Sea, and still hung on to substantial parts of southern Spain, and the two branches of Christianity—Catholicism and Orthodoxy—which dominated most of the continent. Memories of the crusades were still fresh, and many of the protagonists still considered taking arms against the infidel an obligation, at least in theory. The feeling was mutual: Islam divided the world between Dar ul Islam, the House of Peace, and Dar ul Harb, the House of War, in which Christians and other unbelievers lived. From the early sixteenth century onwards, the Reformation split western Europe between various forms of Protestantism, especially Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Anglicanism, and the Roman Catholic rump. This had profound internal and external implications for the European state system. The unity of Western Christendom in the face of the Ottoman challenge was utterly destroyed. Henceforth, confessional solidarity and state security were often closely linked. Many Catholic rulers regarded it as their duty to restore the ‘true faith’ within and without. Conversely, Protestant powers came to believe that the defence of their church and freedoms at home depended on their vindication abroad. These currents culminated in the Thirty Years’ War which tore Europe apart in the first half of the seventeenth century. Religion played a generally reduced role in the eighteenth century, but recent research has shown that the Seven Years’ War was still widely understood in Britain and North America as a confessional struggle between the forces of Protestantism and international Catholicism.

The other major ideological fault line in Europe with serious implications for the state system was the clash between monarchical power and representative assemblies. This was often overlaid with religious tension, but it was essentially secular in origin. In the later sixteenth century, the Dutch estates—many Catholics as well as Protestants—revolted against Philip II, eventually leading to English intervention. In the early seventeenth century most of Europe was riled by the contest between imperial and princely power in Germany, king and parliament in England and Scotland, king and the nobility in France, and king and representative assemblies in Spanish Habsburg, Naples, and Catalonia; in all of these cases, outside powers were closely involved. In the early eighteenth century, the Baltic magnate Johann Patkul revolted against King Charles XII of Sweden, and encouraged the formation of an alliance between Poland, Russia, and Denmark against Stockholm. Parliamentary systems prevailed in England, the Low Countries, and later in the independent American colonies. In general, though, by the end of our period representative government drew the shorter straw in Spain, France, Tsarist Russia, Prussia, Poland, Sweden, Venice, and the Holy Roman Empire. The religious overtones of this struggle—which in Protestant readings pitted parliaments against Catholic despotism—were very strong in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and remained audible until the eighteenth century.

In the late eighteenth century, the revolt of the American colonists against the London government divided not only
Englishmen on both sides of the Atlantic, but also Europeans. Shortly after, the French Revolution and Napoleon added a renewed ideological charge to international relations. Within a few years, Europe was divided into two blocs for whom strategic security and ideological complexion were two sides of the same coin. The Revolutionaries, especially the firebrand Brissot, acted as if the future of their cause depended on its export throughout the continent, or at least into neighbouring states, in order to pre-empt counter-revolution. They were cheered on by sympathizers such as Tom Paine. Ancien régime governments, on the other hand, often argued that the future of the old order as a whole required its restoration in France. In the public sphere, their case was first made by the British parliamentarian and political philosopher Edmund Burke and later taken up by Friedrich von Gentz, a Conservative writer who earned himself the sobriquet ‘Secretary of Europe’. The resulting split ran not merely between states but within them, as German and Italian Jacobins, the London Corresponding Societies, and Irish rebels called upon the French to liberate them, while the conservative Catholic Tyrolians, the Sanfedisti of Naples, various French groups, and the Spaniards rose in revolt against the Revolution, especially its anti-clericalism, recruitment policies, and punitive taxation. Generally speaking, the story was one of Protestant resistance to Catholic centralization, but there were exceptions, such as Ireland, where the roles were reversed. In each case, the external implications of internal unrest were profound.

All European powers suffered from these divisions, and all were profoundly influenced by them in their foreign policy. In England, many were convinced that the defence of their Protestant beliefs and political freedoms required their defence everywhere, or at least in the nearby Low Countries and Germany. The Kings of Spain held that the future of Catholicism in their monarchy required its survival across Europe. For this reason, Philip intervened repeatedly in France and England in the late sixteenth century, with varying success. No polity suffered more, however, from division than the Holy Roman Empire, which was finely balanced between Catholic and Protestant, as well as between emperor and princes, and where there were major confessional conflicts throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, beginning with the Schmalkaldic League (1531) of the Protestant princes against Charles V and culminating in the terrible Thirty Years’ War. These tensions persisted throughout the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and were never entirely resolved.17

**Interests**

The principal driver of the European state system was ‘interest’, that is security and expansion. Security meant the defence of the realm against attack, be it imminent or more remote. Expansion involved the territorial aggrandizement of the state or at least an increase in its influence abroad. Both concepts were often strongly charged with ideology, as outlined earlier in the section on beliefs, but not necessarily so. Security and expansion were closely linked, because many of the protagonists genuinely believed that their own security could only be guaranteed through expansion, to balance or pre-empt that of rivals, or to prevent a badly governed space from exporting instability. Very often, however, the attempted absolute security of one actor meant the absolute insecurity of all the others. The greatest single determinant of interest was geography, not so much the objective physical facts themselves as the way in which they were interpreted through military and ideological lenses.

For example, England–Britain was unique among the major powers in that the metropolis was constituted of an archipelago of islands. This placed a particular premium on the Royal Navy, considered by many contemporaries to be the ‘wooden walls’ on which the defence of the realm ultimately rested. Its main task, despite Britain’s increasingly far-flung colonial possessions and commercial connections, was always home defence, control of the vital ‘narrow seas’ which separated her from the continent. That said, London never considered Britain to be an island in the strategic sense. She was dependent on the Baltic for the import of vital naval goods, such as timber. Until the eighteenth century, the existing technology and the prevailing winds meant that the Navy could not guarantee timely interception of an invasion force, if launched from the opposing channel ports. This meant that denying the enemy control of the Low Countries and as much of northern France as possible was a high priority throughout our period. It also required an active policy in the Holy Roman Empire in order to prevent it from being used as a base from which to outflank the Low Countries. In the confessionally charged atmosphere of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this preoccupation found expression in the intense English concern for the fate of
Protestantism in the Low Countries and the empire. Elizabeth sent an army to help the Dutch against (p. 645) Spain; James to support the Protestant claim to Cleves; and William and Mary to Flanders to battle Louis XIV.

Dynastic and diplomatic happenstance also tended to subvert Britain’s insular position. For much of the sixteenth and seventeen centuries, London feared that Scotland and Ireland would be exploited as a bridgehead for invasion. There was a lingering assumption that the spirit of the ‘Auld Alliance’ between Edinburgh and the French Crown, which lapsed in the mid-sixteenth century, presaged the encirclement of England. After 1688, England and the Dutch Republic were briefly linked by a Personal Union through William III who was also the Stadholder of the United Provinces. After Queen Anne died without an heir, the accession of George Ludwig of Hanover in 1714 joined Britain and his north German Electorate together for more than 120 years. It was a dynastic union only, but for diplomatic and military purposes the connection was extremely close. In effect, Britain’s European border now ran not along the Channel and North Sea, but the Elbe and Weser in the empire. She was, whether she liked it or not, a continental European power.18

On the far side of Europe, the Ottoman Turks faced in four directions. To the east, they sought to keep their backs free against Persia. To the north, they backed their Crimean Tartar associates against the Poles and the increasingly assertive Russians. As recent work has shown, however, the principal Ottoman preoccupation was with Europe, where the largest and most economically important provinces lay. Belgrade was closer to Constantinople than Baghdad, for example.19 From the mid-fifteenth century to the late seventeenth century, the Turks advanced along two main axes: across the Mediterranean towards Italy and Spain, and—especially—into central Europe. It was there that the Ottomans sought the final showdown with Western Christendom in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and to vindicate their claim to the Roman imperial tradition. Likewise, once the empire was in decline from the early eighteenth century, it was from central Europe and Russia that the principal threats to its integrity came.

The Habsburgs sought to keep their far-flung and somewhat ramshackle territories together. Their front line stretched from the Americas in the Far West and the Philippines in the Far East, to Morocco and North Africa in the Mediterranean.20 In the North, the Habsburgs abutted the English Channel and the North Sea. In central Europe, they held extensive territories in the Holy Roman Empire, especially the hereditary lands in Austria, Bohemia, and Silesia. After the destruction of the Hungarian Monarchy by the Turks at the battle of Mohacs (1526), the Habsburgs also picked up large tracts of Hungary and Croatia in south-east Europe. Their main aims were to box in the French, to roll back the Ottoman Turks, to dominate Italy, and—the precondition for all this—to maintain a strong position in Germany, including retention of the imperial Crown, which was effectively hereditary in the House of Habsburg from the fifteenth century.21 After the separation of the Spanish and Austrian Habsburg lines in the 1550s, there remained many areas of cooperation, especially with regard to France, the Ottomans, and the empire. In other respects, however, the two halves differentiated themselves strategically, with the Austrians becoming increasingly worried about (p. 646) Prussian and Russian ambitions, while Spain took on England overseas and in the Low Countries.

For France, the main concern at the start of our period was her encirclement by the Habsburgs, who were present not only in Spain to the south and the Low Countries in the north, but also in the Franche Comté to the east and Milan to the southeast; behind this lay their huge lands in Germany and their lock on the imperial Crown. As if all this were not bad enough, Charles V controlled much of the Mediterranean through Naples, Sicily, and even some North African ports. To cap it all, the Habsburgs were a major naval and colonial power, whose overseas empire threatened France from the west, at least psychologically. The first French priority, therefore, was to break the enemy stranglehold by pushing back the vulnerable northern border, by creating a buffer in the east, and cutting the Habsburg line of communication between Spain, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Low Countries by penetrating the Italian peninsula. To this end, the French pursued alliances with German princes, especially Protestant ones alienated from the emperor, attempted to unbolthe Habsburgs from the imperial Crown, and generally tried to keep the empire divided.22 In the late seventeenth century England re-emerged as a threat on France’s northern flank, but the French never quite shook off the sense that Vienna was main enemy.

In the east, the Russians enjoyed a comfortable buffer in the Siberian wastes and central Asian steppes, though by the end
of our period tensions were rising with China, the British in India, and the Ottomans in the Caucasus. To the north-west, they faced the Swedes, and to the south the Turks. The main Russian concern, however, was with the western border which ran uncomfortably close to the capital Moscow. It was from the west that a Polish army occupied the city in the early seventeenth century. Even, or perhaps especially after Tsar Peter the Great built a new capital at St. Petersburg (1703), the main military rivals of the empire lay in Europe, primarily because the progressive decline of Poland–Lithuania turned that Commonwealth into an area of furious contestation.

Brandenburg–Prussia was the newest, smallest, and most vulnerable of the great powers. Its quest for recognition culminated in the creation of a ‘King in Prussia’, as the Elector of Brandenburg was known from 1701. This honour did not, however, help with the extreme territorial fragmentation of the state, which was centred on the Mark Brandenburg, but stretched from East Prussia on the Polish border to Jülich-Berg in the west, with several enclaves in between. Consolidation was thus the absolute priority of Prussia’s rulers, who were hemmed in on all sides by more established powers, especially the Habsburgs to the south, and the Swedes to the north-west. The resulting cycle of expansion and wars created a security dilemma in which each gain only exposed Prussia to greater hostility on the part of her rivals.

The middling and smaller European states sought to survive and where possible to expand. Sometimes, one or the other middling power would shoot to prominence, only to decline. The Dutch Republic, for example, was conceived in revolt in the late sixteenth century, counted as a major force throughout most of the seventeenth century, and then gradually faded away over the course of the eighteenth century, before (p. 647) being overrun by Revolutionary France. Sweden burst upon the European scene under Gustavus Adolphus during the Thirty Years’ War, and remained formidable for many years before meeting its nemesis when Charles XII attacked the Russia of Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century. Thereafter, Sweden declined, shedding territory along the way, though it never suffered the indignity of occupation. Most of the time, however, the smaller states sought to manoeuvre between the great powers. Their greatest fear was partition, such as that suffered by Poland in the late eighteenth century.

Thus all powers—whatever their size—had an interest in the European balance. No state, however, was more closely concerned with the European balance of power—or the ‘Liberties of Europe’ in the contemporary parlance—than Great Britain. Some strategically important but territorially small bases such as Gibraltar, Minorca, or Malta aside, London was not interested in territorial expansion on the continent. She was, however, determined to prevent any other power from making such gains either, or at least to limit them. This was because the strategic consensus in London held that a dominant European power would soon look across the channel, and—being safe from attack on the continent—would be able to devote all its energies to naval construction, and out-build Britain. This in turn would enable an absolutist monarch to crush Protestantism and parliamentary government there. In short, in British eyes at least, British liberties and the ‘Liberties of Europe’ were inextricably linked.

That said, the force of interests often drove the formation of alliances across ideological lines. In the early sixteenth century, King Francis I of France cooperated with the Ottomans against his fellow Catholic rival Charles V; some German princes, fearful of the power of the emperor, cheered him on. Louis XIV did the same in the late seventeenth century, when he cooperated with the Turks against the emperor, and backed the German princes while ruthlessly stamping on any challenge to his own authority at home. Britain may have defended its own parliamentary government against France, but it allied with the Catholic Austrian Habsburgs and the princely Stadholder in Holland in order to do so, abandoning Hungarian Protestants and Dutch Patriots in the process. Later, during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, Britain supported Catholic rural rebels in the Vendee, Tyrol, and Spain against Paris, but crushed them in Ireland. The French did the opposite, or tried to.

Theatres

The Low Countries were so hotly contested that they became known as the ‘cockpit of Europe’. The interests of London, Paris–Versailles, Vienna, and Madrid intersected there. Spain and France clashed there during the epic struggles against
Charles V, again during the Thirty Years’ War, repeatedly during the reign of Louis XIV. After the Spanish Netherlands fell to Vienna in 1714, the Austrians battled it out there with Louis XV and once again during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. So did the English and later the British, from the continental expeditions of Henry VIII (1511–13, 1544), through Elizabeth (1584–85) and Cromwell’s interventions (1655–58), the armies sent to fight Louis XIV and Louis XV, to the later coalitions against France. The area was also of considerable economic importance, with a talented population and huge commercial potential, adding to its strategic value in the balance of power.

Northern Italy was similarly the site of furious contention. Since the Middle Ages, the area had been a hub of economic activity and the object of intense interest by expansionist princes, though declining in importance from the late seventeenth century. Its main significance, however, was strategic. To the Habsburgs, northern Italy was a key staging post along the ‘Spanish Road’ which kept their troops in the Low Countries supplied, and the path through the Valtelline which enabled them to intervene in Germany at will. To the French, the area was a key rivet in the ring of encirclement around her borders, which Francis I, Richelieu, and Louis XIV desperately tried to prise open. For some 200 years, Habsburg and Bourbon clashed there. After the Franco–Austrian rapprochement, the peninsula was something of a backwater in the late eighteenth century, before it was plunged back into turmoil after the French Revolution.

The Italian balance was closely connected to that of the Mediterranean as a whole. Here the interests of the Spanish Habsburgs, the French, and the Ottoman Turks intersected in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Mediterranean was one of the main axes of the Turkish advance, beginning with the capture of Egypt and fanning out across North Africa. The French and Turks collaborated, for example, in the siege of Nice (1543). There were major sieges, such as Malta, or naval engagements, such as the battle of Lepanto (1571). In the early eighteenth century, the Austrians inherited Naples and Sicily, and the British captured Gibraltar and Minorca, making both Mediterranean powers. Very soon, the Austrians were expelled from southern Italy, but the British—although they lost Minorca later in the century—seized and retained Malta during the Napoleonic Wars.

Further east, the Mediterranean theatre overlapped with that of the Balkans, where the Habsburgs and Turks faced off from the late fifteenth century. Here the intervening Croatian and Hungarian kingdoms were eventually crushed by the Ottoman assault. Here the French supported the Ottomans in order to divert Vienna’s attention from the west, and later in order to keep the Russians at arm’s length. Over the next 200 years, the Habsburgs and their allies confronted the Turks, twice repelling them at the gates of Vienna (1529 and 1683), and thereafter leading a Christian reconquest of the region. Under Peter the Great, Russia became a major influence in the Balkans, starting with advances along the Black Sea, progressing through interventions and culminating in the Russo–Turkish wars of Catherine the Great’s reign. By the end of the eighteenth century, Turkey was in headlong retreat so that the great powers no longer wondered how it could be contained but how they could expand at her expense or prevent their rivals from doing so. The roots of the nineteenth-century ‘Eastern Question’ when Turkey famously became the ‘sick man’ of Europe lay here.

In the far north, the Baltic constituted another distinct theatre in the European balance. Sweden soon eclipsed Denmark and became a hegemon with lands in northern (p. 649) Germany and present-day Latvia and Estonia. She enjoyed the support of France, whose ‘leapfrog diplomacy’ sought to maintain pressure on the Austrian Habsburgs from the north. In the late seventeenth century, Sweden’s position was challenged by the Poles—unsuccessfully—and more effectively by the Prussians and Russians. Thereafter, Swedish weakness rather than power shaped the politics of the region as her neighbours piled in. Her survival was in no small degree due to outside support, not only from Paris, but increasingly also from London which was concerned to safeguard the supply of vital naval goods from the Baltic and—after the Hanoverian Succession in 1714—to safeguard the king’s German dominions.

The eastern European balance was closely related to that of the Baltic and involved most of the same protagonists, especially the rising powers of Prussia and Russia. Habsburg Austria was also highly influential. In between these three predators lay the Commonwealth of Poland–Lithuania, which was a major power in its own right until the late seventeenth century, but progressively declined thereafter. Its southern border stretched as far south as the Black Sea, making the
Ottoman Empire its direct neighbour and an important force in the eastern balance throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. An external power—France—maintained a strong diplomatic presence in the area since Louis XIV, once again to put pressure on the Habsburgs and to shut out Russian influence. Britain also became more and more concerned with events in the area, especially the rise of Russian power, expressed outrage over the partitions of Poland, and during the Ochakov Crisis (1791) towards the end of the eighteenth century came close to going to war to contain Russia by protecting the integrity of the Ottoman Empire.

There were also the various overseas balances, where Spain, Britain, France, and the Dutch Republic contested for supremacy in Asia, Africa, and especially in the New World. This struggle was partly economic, but the main motivation was strategic. It began with Christopher Columbus’s voyage to the Americas, by which he hoped to take the advancing Ottomans from the rear and to gain Spain the resources to repel them from Europe. It really took off once the conquistadores moved into Mexico and Peru, whose silver deposits helped to fund Habsburg ambitions in Europe. Thereafter, the maritime powers sought to either secure such resources for themselves, or to deny them to their rivals. The extra-European theatre thus became an extension of the European one and played an increasingly important role. Beginning with Elizabeth’s privateers such as Sir Francis Drake, England attacked Spanish shipping to starve Habsburg armies in the Low Countries and the empire of funds, and continued to do so well into the eighteenth century. Increasingly, though, the focus shifted to the North American settler colonies, whose possession both sides thought vital to the maintenance of their European position—this was the principal reason why London fought on so bitterly during the American War of Independence.

The focal point of the whole European system, however, was the Holy Roman Empire. The interests of practically all the powers increasingly overlapped there most of the time. This was partly for ideological reasons, because the Holy Roman Emperor was formally the most senior monarch and the imperial title notionally gave its holder the right to mobilize not only the empire but the whole of Europe for defence. More importantly, Germany was regarded as a populous and prosperous country, whose inhabitants were well-versed in military matters, so that control of it would determine the European balance. It also lay geographically at the very heart of Europe, and thus at the intersection of all the great power interests. From the mid-fifteenth century, therefore, European politics largely revolved around control of the empire. It was the main target of the Ottoman advance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It became the principal area of contention between Habsburgs and Bourbons. It was the biggest concern of English and later British statesmen, and of the Swedes, in both cases in order to protect their own coasts from hostile attack, from the Low Countries in the former case and from northern Germany in the latter. After the Hanoverian Succession, Britain’s preoccupation with Germany increased still further. Russia, too, repeatedly intervened in the empire throughout the eighteenth century. During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period, Germany was far from the only, but overall certainly the most important, theatre of operations.

All these theatres were, at one level, distinct, but they were also—as we have seen—very much interconnected. Most powers operated in more than one, for example, Prussia in Germany and eastern Europe, and Russia in the Baltic, eastern Europe, and the Balkans. The Ottomans were involved in the Balkan, eastern European, Mediterranean, and German balances, not to mention those of the Middle East on their southern and eastern flanks. Only three powers, however, were system-encompassing in that they took a keen interest in each and every one of the European theatres. In the sixteenth century, the Habsburgs contended in the Mediterranean, the Low Countries, Italy, the New World, and Germany. From the seventeenth century, Britain and France enjoyed a military or at least a powerful diplomatic presence in all the major theatres which lasted until the end of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

The links between the different balances encouraged and even forced the actors to think holistically about the European state system. Suleiman and his successors sought to put pressure on the Habsburgs by supporting Dutch rebels and German princes on their northern flanks. France, as we have seen, pursued a steady ‘leapfrog’ diplomacy against the Habsburgs, through its support for the Swedes, Poles, and Ottomans, and non-state actors such as the Hungarian rebels. Likewise, Britain sought to deploy the Ottomans against Russia in the early eighteenth century, and even tried to mediate a peace between them and the Persians to that end. She also saw a connection between her commitment to a continental land war
against France, which drew off resources from the enemy navy, and her victory overseas. America, the Elder Pitt famously argued, was won in Germany. The reverse was also true, in that Britain’s formidable commercial and colonial strength could be parlayed into European military and diplomatic clout.

**Challenges**

European politics were fragmented, to be sure, but for most of our period they were given coherence by the existence of a single over-arching challenge—perceived or (p. 651) real—to the whole system. For the first four decades from the mid-fifteenth century, this was the Ottoman threat. In 1453, the Turks captured Constantinople, the last remaining outpost of the old East Roman Byzantine empire. In military terms, this was of little importance because the Ottomans had long since established themselves further west on the European mainland, vanquishing the Serbs in 1389. The psychological and political significance of the event was enormous, however. It enabled Sultan Mehmet and his successors to lay claim to the imperial Roman legacy, and was an unmistakable signal to the West that the infidel onslaught on the European mainland was in the offing. Over the next 200 years, the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and south-east central Europe were the subject of repeated Ottoman attacks. They were at their most persistent in the era of Suleiman the Magnificent, who overran most of Hungary, came close to capturing both Vienna and Malta during his long reign, and whose official iconography strove to portray him as the heir to the Holy Roman Empire. Towards the end of the following century, the Ottomans once again advanced to the walls of Vienna. In both cases, the Turkish advance was widely perceived not only as a danger to the states immediately affected but as a threat to Europe as a whole.

In the early sixteenth century, however, the Ottoman challenge was relativized and in many cases supplemented by fear of Habsburg ‘Universal Monarchy’. Contemporaries were terrified by the sheer extent of the monarchy of Charles V, whose lands included Spain, Naples, Milan, the Low Countries, Burgundy, Austria, Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, present-day Slovenia, Croatia, large stretches of Hungary, and the Spanish overseas empire. To make matters worse, he was also Holy Roman Emperor. For long periods, Charles dominated Europe, especially the Holy Roman Empire. After the Habsburg conglomerate was divided in 1555 into a Spanish and an Austrian half, the two lines continued to cooperate closely. This was particularly true in Germany, where many feared the erection of a Catholic Austro–Spanish condominium at the expense of Protestantism and the rights of the princes. There were therefore moments in the 1520s, 1540s, and 1620s when a Habsburg Universal Monarchy seemed possible if not inevitable.

During the third quarter of the seventeenth century, this anxiety was overtaken by the rise of Louis XIV’s France. It had emerged from the international and internal crises of mid-century as the most populous, coherent, and powerful continental European state. In a series of wars, Louis expanded his borders northwards and came close to overrunning the Dutch Republic in 1672. He turned whole states into proxies, most spectacularly England, where Charles II and James II were reliable allies over two decades. Then Louis began to penetrate the Holy Roman Empire, slicing away at its western border and articulating at least an implicit claim to the imperial Crown. Later, he attempted to gain control of the entire Spanish Succession, by placing his grandson on the throne in Madrid. This would have joined—or at least associated—vast territories with France: the Spanish American empire, the Spanish Netherlands, the free Duchy of Burgundy (Franche Comté) in what is today eastern France, Naples and Sicily and, of course, Spain itself. Once again, there were times in the 1670s, 1680s, and around 1700 when a French ‘universal monarchy’ in Europe was on the cards.

By contrast, most of the eighteenth century was not dominated by a single threat, but individual decades were still shaped by particular challenges. In the 1720s, many (p. 652) regarded the Austrian Habsburg Emperor Charles VI as the main problem. His desire to regain his crown in Spain—which would have resurrected the empire of Charles V—and his attempts to assert imperial authority in Germany deeply unsettled other powers. They were therefore outraged by the Austro–Spanish dynastic rapprochement at the Treaty of Vienna in 1725. In the 1740s and 1750s, the determination of Frederick the Great to turn Prussia into a great power at Austria’s expense by invading and annexing Silesia riled central Europe, and caused the old Habsburg–Bourbon rivalry to be superseded by a Habsburg–Hohenzollern one. After the Seven Years’ War, a
triumphant Britain was widely regarded as a maritime hegemon, or at least as insufferably arrogant. The continental powers condemned her unilateral use of naval power, for example against France over the Turks and Caicos Islands (1763) or to search suspected enemy shipping in time of war, and her refusal to commit to European alliances on a basis of reciprocity. During this period, the Habsburg emperor Joseph II’s attempts to extend his authority in his own lands as well as in the empire also periodically appeared to pose a threat to European stability.

The main perceived threat in the late eighteenth century, though, was the rising power of Tsarist Russia. Sweden, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire were repeatedly attacked, or provoked into war, and despoiled of ever-greater tranches of territory. At the beginning of the century, Russia had only just gained a foothold on the Black Sea and was separated from Austria and Prussia by the vast Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. By the end of the century, the Tsarist empire controlled the Crimea and had advanced so far westwards that it not only commanded the entire eastern seaboard of the Baltic but also acquired a long direct land border with Prussia and Austria. In Germany itself, Catherine the Great acquired the coveted status of guarantor of the Holy Roman Empire at the Treaty of Teschen in 1779. The relentless growth of Russian power deeply alarmed the Austrians, who saw themselves threatened from the east and the south-east, and Frederick the Great, who never really got over his traumatic military encounters with Russia at Zorndorf and Kunersdorf during the Seven Years’ War.

All of these challenges paled, however, against that of Revolutionary and subsequently Napoleonic France. This initially threw down the ideological gauntlet to the old regimes. Across Europe, Jacobin or para-Jacobin societies sprang up and assailed the traditional order from below. The main danger, though, lay in the Revolutionary government’s completely new and potentially limitless grand strategy centred on the doctrine of ‘natural borders’. These lay, so the argument ran, to the south and west in the Pyrenees and the Atlantic and to the east in the Rhine. This was a radical programme in itself, for it broke with a long tradition of exercising informal influence in Germany, but it soon became clear that defending these boundaries required control of the lands beyond. This was the French security dilemma not unlike that of Louis XIV in years past. Each new conquest created a new vulnerability. The motivating factor here was often fear as much as greed, but the consequence of trying to ensure the absolute security of France was the absolute insecurity of most of the rest of Europe.

For more than twenty years, the French ran riot throughout Europe. Within a few years, the French Revolutionary armies had seen off the Prussians and Austrians, invaded Germany, overrun the Low Countries, and made their presence felt in northern Italy. After the Treaty of Basel (1795) Prussia dropped out of the contest altogether for ten years. British expeditions to the continent were easily defeated, but the French never succeeded in challenging them effectively at sea. Napoleon’s hopes of unbolting the British from their overseas empire, and thus the resources to contain him in Europe, or to gain such an empire for himself, repeatedly ended in fiasco, first in Egypt (1798) and later in Haiti (1802–04). Renewed Austro–British attempts to curb France in central Europe, this time with Russian help, failed again and again. A belated Prussian intervention was crushed. Austria and Prussia suffered extensive territorial losses. The Holy Roman Empire was dissolved in 1806. A solo effort by the Austrians was crushed by Napoleon in 1809. Russia made further substantial gains against Sweden, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire, but not enough to balance those of Napoleon. The net result was that by the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, the French empire dominated Europe, either directly through annexation or through a system of satellite kingdoms and other allies. Holland, Italy, Spain, and Westphalia were ruled by relatives foisted upon largely unwilling populations; traditional dynasties in Bavaria, Baden, and Württemberg pledged themselves to France in return for massive territorial gains at the expense of their smaller neighbours. So when Napoleon launched an invasion of Russia in 1812, it seemed as if there was no limit to his power in sight.

In the face of these existential threats to the stability of the European state system it is worth remembering that the weakness of states was often as great a problem as their ambitions. Failure, as expressed in corruption, bad governance through abuse of minorities or tyrannical rule, and military incompetence, was potentially both contagious and provocative. A ‘failed state’—to use a neologism—could export instability, or suck in outside powers, or both. The Dutch and Venetian Republics, for example, declined progressively from the seventeenth century and became the object of a tug of war between the great powers. So did the Ottoman Empire, whose weakness became as great an issue for the European states system
from the eighteenth century, as its strength had been in times past. The classic examples of what contemporaries regarded as ‘failed states’, however, were the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Holy Roman Empire. The former struggled both to keep the domestic peace and to deter outside predators. The latter continued to keep the lid on German internal dissensions, but proved unable to defend its borders against foreigners, especially France. The relationship between the weakness of a state and the strength of its neighbours was a dialectic one, of course. Poland and the empire were consciously kept weak by great powers, often the same states who lamented their inability to keep out their rivals. They became strong advocates of Polish ‘liberty’ or German ‘liberties’, that is, the power of the magnates or territorial states, against the king or emperor.

Responses

European states reacted to challenges in one of two ways. The first was to ‘balance’ against the likely hegemon through a system of alliances.\textsuperscript{36} Thus the German princes banded together in the Schmalkaldic League to curb Charles V. In the Thirty Years’ War, (p. 654) the Danes, Swedes, and French lined up to meet the Austro–Spanish threat, albeit at differing times and with varying success. In the late seventeenth century, European powers united against the ambitions of Louis XIV in the League of Augsburg. Some ten years later, the concept of a ‘balance of power’, which had long existed in practice, was formalized for the first time in the Grand Alliance of 1701, once again to justify resistance against Louis XIV.\textsuperscript{37} In the eighteenth century, European powers repeatedly rallied to contain actual or potential hegemons. Much of northern and eastern Europe combined to curb Charles XII of Sweden. The Quadruple alliance of 1718 was designed to prevent Elizabeth Farnese from reconstructing the Spanish Mediterranean empire.\textsuperscript{38} The Treaty of Hanover in 1725 was designed to oppose the Austro–Spanish rapprochement and forestall the revival of the empire of Charles V.\textsuperscript{39} Later, France and Austria came together in a ‘Diplomatic Revolution’ (1756)—soon joined by Russia—in order to put Frederick the Great in his place. After the Seven Years’ War, continental European powers reacted against British maritime dominance by intervening against her during the American war, and rallying to the League of Armed Neutrality (1780) against London’s claim to search their shipping on the high seas in wartime. In the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period, European states formed no fewer than five coalitions—six according to the French calculation—in order to contain Revolutionary France and Napoleon. It was only the final coalition, formed in the aftermath of the emperor’s failed invasion of Russia, which finally brought him down.

At other times, however, states ‘bandwagoned’ rather than ‘balanced’ against the hegemon; the neo-realist assumption that states instinctively band together does not always apply.\textsuperscript{40} This was most obviously the case with the smaller and middling German principalities, who aligned themselves with Louis XIV, and later with Revolutionary France and Napoleon. Another instance would be the Austrian and Prussian response to the rise of Russian power after the Seven Years’ War. So great was the joint fear of Russia’s strength, so great their mutual suspicion, that neither power countenanced a ‘balancing’ alliance with the other against St. Petersburg. Instead, both sought and at differing times secured, separate treaties with Russia. The net result was that the balance of power in the traditional sense ceased to function in eastern Europe. In all these cases, the motivations ranged from guaranteeing one’s own sheer survival through an accommodation with the hegemon, to seek territorial expansion under the aegis of the same. Either way, the functioning of the balance of power was neither mechanical nor automatic. It required human recognition and agency. Its price was eternal vigilance.

The protagonists also responded to challenges at the sub-state level. First, they often tried to undermine rivals at home. Philip II of Spain, for example, supported English Catholics against Queen Elizabeth I. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, France and, to a lesser extent, Spain, Sweden, and Russia, backed the Jacobite partisans of the exiled Stuart kings against the London government and the Protestant Succession.\textsuperscript{41} They retaliated by sending help to the Huguenots. The French also backed Hungarian rebels against their Austrian Habsburg rivals. In the eighteenth century, Frederick the Great supported a whole range of dissidents against Joseph II: Hungarians and Jesuits at the top of the list. During the Napoleonic Wars, the French sought to open (p. 655) up a new front in Ireland by supporting the activities of the United Irishmen rebels, while Britain sent help to Breton Chouans and the Vendeens who had revolted against the Revolutionary authorities in Paris.
Secondly, states responded to the challenges of the international system by seeking greater internal cohesion. The resulting debates and policies centred around how best to mobilize resources for external power projection, and—no less importantly—how best to articulate the interests of the state. These discussions were often at their most lively in periods of decline. Thus, the loss of France at the end of the Hundred Years’ War sparked a wide-ranging debate in fifteenth-century England on the causes of the disaster. The seventeenth-century Spanish arbitristas wrestled with the problem of how to reverse their retreat before the relentless French advance. Similar debates took place within the Ottoman Empire, where they tended to polarize between modernizers who wished to introduce European methods, and traditionalists who believed that a return to ‘true’ Islam would set free the forces necessary for a revival. This primacy of foreign policy blurred the distinction between the internal and external spheres.

There was no consensus on which form of domestic organization was best suited for international competition. Continental princes such as Louis XIV or the Great Elector of Brandenburg–Prussia argued that external threats required the suppression of all forms of political participation by the traditional representative assemblies, which had long denied them the taxes and recruits they needed. Across Europe, such policies required considerable remodelling, for example Olivares’s attempts to create a Spanish ‘Union of Arms’ linking the far-flung provinces of the monarchy more effectively for the common defence. In the eighteenth century, many of the major continental powers embarked on programmes of enlightened reform absolutism designed to remove the last remaining barriers to their authority and to maximize the extraction of resources at home for the struggle abroad. Joseph II was perhaps the most radical example. England and the Dutch Republic, on the other hand, pioneered a more participatory form of state. In both cases, the external effort was funded by a substantial debt for which the entire political nation represented in the Dutch States General and the English parliament served as collateral. This ‘fiscal–military state’ enabled Britain to punch well above its demographic and economic weight for much of our period.

If the search for external security and power projection thus profoundly shaped European domestic society and politics, it also left its mark on the map, as states banded together for mutual protection. Some of these unions were largely dynastic happenstance, such as that between Saxony and Poland–Lithuania in 1697, but others were more deep-seated. In 1707, England and Scotland embarked on a full parliamentary and fiscal union designed to close the ‘back door’ to England through Scotland for Louis XIV, to prevent him from meddling in the succession to the Anglo–Scottish crown, and to maximize the joint effort against French designs for ‘Universal Monarchy’ in Europe. Just under 100 years later, Great Britain and Ireland were joined through a similarly motivated Act of Union (1801). This was originally intended to be accompanied by Catholic emancipation in order to reconcile the various Irish groups, thus denying France a pretext and opportunity to intervene, and to rally all shades of Irishmen (p. 656) in the collective struggle against France. Likewise, the American patriots, having rid themselves of London, came together to form a more perfect union on Anglo–Scottish lines in order to deter outside predators and to prevent them from falling out among themselves.

**Settlements**

The response of the state system to each successive challenge usually ended with a new European settlement. Thus the Peace of Augsburg (1555) and its associated arrangements sought to address not only the danger of a Habsburg ‘Universal Monarchy’ but also of an interminable confessional civil war. To this end, the Habsburg conglomerate was broken up, not least because they themselves realized that it was too unwieldy to govern as a whole. Instead of a vast empire stretching from Mexico to Hungary, there were now two lines: a Spanish and an Austrian, both still formidable, of course. At the same time, the German settlement laid down the rule of **cuius regio eius religio**, in other words that the confession of the territory was determined by the ruler. This arrangement worked for some time, but its weaknesses were soon apparent. First of all, because the two Habsburg halves continued to work closely together, particularly in Germany, thus threatening the European balance. Secondly, because the religious clauses at Augsburg did not apply to Calvinism, the most dynamic Protestant sect, and—far from pacifying Germany—had actually increased the confessional wrangling as princes forced
their beliefs onto their subjects and each succession was furiously contested on account of its implications. The resulting tensions exploded in the Thirty Years’ War.

It was against this background that the Peace of Westphalia (1648) erected a new and more flexible European settlement. Contrary to widespread belief, especially among international lawyers, the treaties did not enshrine a new doctrine of state sovereignty. On the contrary, they substantially limited princely authority, in order to prevent religious disputes from escalating into open warfare. Two outside powers, France and Sweden, were given the status of ‘guarantors’, largely to protect the smaller and middling princes from too much imperial intrusion. The settlement was also designed to ensure that the Holy Roman Empire would not fall into the hands of one or the other great power, thus upending the whole system. These arrangements functioned well in Germany, where they kept the religious peace, and enabled a number of interventions against refractory princes whose behaviour disturbed the stability of the region and threatened to suck in outside powers (in this case Russia). The Holy Roman Empire struggled, however, to assert itself against external predators, especially France. It lost substantial territories to Louis XIV. Indeed, the European state system as a whole made heavy weather of dealing with France. It took no fewer than three coalitions in 1672–78, 1689–97, and 1701–13 to bring her to heel.

(p. 657) The Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 was therefore primarily designed to contain France, and it was the first settlement in which the aspiration to maintain the ‘balance of power’ was specifically mentioned. In the north, the Spanish Netherlands were given to the more dynamic Austrian Habsburgs and reinforced by a brace of Dutch-garrisoned ‘barrier’ fortresses. To the south, the Pyrenees border was confirmed by separating the French and the Spanish Bourbon lines. To the south-east, Savoy was strengthened in order to keep the French out of Italy. In Germany the Westphalian arrangements were largely confirmed. Overseas, the French were pushed out of large parts of Canada, and Britain was granted the Asiento, the lucrative right to ship slaves to the Spanish colonies. For many decades these arrangements maintained the balance of power. France was largely boxed in, and though she showed some brief hegemonic aspirations in the 1730s, she never seriously threatened the balance before she began to decline from mid-century. Challenges from Spain in the Mediterranean were seen off. The rise of Prussia caused greater difficulties, before it was ratified in two revisions to the Utrecht settlement at the Treaty of Aix La Chapelle in 1748 and the Treaty of Hubertusburg in 1763 which left Silesia in the hands of Frederick the Great. For a couple of decades after the Seven Years’ War, Great Britain was generally perceived to be acting as a maritime and colonial hegemon. This problem was addressed by her defeat in the American War and the subsequent partition of her American empire when the thirteen colonies became independent, and the Spanish recovered Florida and Minorca. It was only the relentless advance of Russia in the late eighteenth century, the explosion of French power after the Revolution of 1789, and the initial failure of Britain to defend the balance, which exposed the inadequacies of the Utrecht settlement.

For this reason the Vienna Settlement was designed to keep the British in, the Russians out, and the French down. Britain remained engaged in Europe through the Congress system, the dynastic link to an enlarged Hanover and an army of occupation to ensure that France paid her war indemnity. Russia was, if not contained, then at least hindered by giving her less of Poland than she had hoped for. France was hemmed in through the re-establishment of the barrier to her north, where the Low Countries were joined together to form the Kingdom of the United Netherlands, and the restoration of Savoy, now the Kingdom of Piedmont–Sardinia, to the south east. At the heart of the settlement, however, lay the German provisions which were intended to make sure that Germany was strong enough to deter outside predators such as France or Russia, united enough to prevent Austria and Prussia from falling out, but not so formidable that it might threaten the European balance itself. Prussia was given the Rhineland and Westphalia in order to bar France entry from the west, and the military resources of the whole of Germany were to be mobilized through the German Confederation under Austrian presidency. Underpinning these arrangements was a new way of doing business in Europe. In contrast to the beggar thy neighbour policies of the past, the powers were more inclined to cooperate, or as the contemporary parlance had it, to work in ‘concert’. There was also a firm, if short-lived, ideological consensus led by the Austrian Chancellor Metternich, that revolutionary upheavals threatened the European balance and were to be stamped out at all costs.
Conclusion

Throughout all this, the European state system was characterized by remarkable continuity. Many of the most important actors at the start of our period, such as England, the Austrian Habsburgs, and France, also numbered among the great powers at the end. Ideology was a significant factor in the early clashes between the Christian West and the Muslim East, enjoyed considerable salience during the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century wars of religion, and remained so during the confrontation between Revolutionary France and ancien régime Europe. At the same time, there were also very important changes. In general terms, there was a shift from polities with universalist programmes of varying rigour, such as the Ottoman Empire and the early Habsburg monarchy, towards great powers with more limited aims, following a narrower reason of state, such as France, Prussia, and Great Britain. There was also a gradual melding of what had been three largely self-contained state systems in the Baltic–northern Europe, western and central Europe, and the Mediterranean and south-eastern Europe into a single unified European balance of power, anchored in and determining a broader global equilibrium.

Finally, the European system showed remarkable resilience. It never lost its capacity to surprise, through the emergence of dynastic, diplomatic, or military ‘wild cards’. Nevertheless, the system was capable of accommodating and taming ‘rising powers’ such as Prussia and Russia, and it generally succeeded in containing hegemons, real or imagined. Challenges were met by settlements, which in turn created new challenges. The containment of the Habsburgs raised up France, which then became the major hegemonic threat from the late seventeenth century. The containment of France, in turn, facilitated the rise of Prussia in the Vienna Settlement, whose territorial arrangements turned the Hohenzollerns into the guardians of the gate against France in the west, and ultimately into the leaders of the German national cause. At that time, nobody predicted, and perhaps could predict, that the next major challenge to the European system would come from that quarter.

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter charts the emergence of diplomacy in its modern sense—the peaceful and continuous management of relations between states—during the early modern centuries. It was brought about by two central changes: one functional, the other geographical. The principal roles of an ambassador were providing information, representing his ruler, and conducting negotiations, and these were all established by the sixteenth century. Initially the first two were more important than the third, but by the second half of the period examined the conduct of negotiations had become the most important dimension of a diplomat’s role. The second transformation was an extension of the network of diplomacy, from its origins in the Italian peninsula to Western Europe and—by the eighteenth century—to Eastern Europe as well. These changes were not linear in nature, but collectively they created the diplomatic system and culture which prevailed until the First World War.

Keywords: Ambassador, diplomacy, embassy, government, information, international relations, modern state

DIPLOMACY in the established sense of the term—the peaceful conduct of relations between states—emerged during the early modern period. Many of its characteristic practices, together with the crucial issue of diplomatic precedence, were codified by the peacemakers who assembled at Vienna in 1814–15. The actual term ‘diplomacy’ (diplomatie) was then only a generation old. It had first entered the dictionary of the Académie française in 1798. A century before, when Jean Mabillon, a Maurist monk, wrote his great study of the science of documents and the historical method, De re diplomatica (1681), the word ‘diplomatic’ retained its traditional meaning: pertaining to the study of charters, diplomas, and other documents. Important changes in the practice of conducting relations between states during the long eighteenth century brought about a series of semantic shifts, fully evident by the 1780s and 1790s, by which first the adjective ‘diplomatic’ and then the noun ‘diplomacy’ entered the political lexicon, not merely in French but in all the major European languages. By around 1800 the modern notion of ‘diplomacy’ was securely established; it is employed in this sense throughout this chapter. Its beginnings are to be found in changes in the Italian peninsula during the second half of the fifteenth century and in their subsequent adoption by the rest of Europe.

The idea of diplomacy as a peaceful means of avoiding armed conflict, however, never fully became established during the early modern period, when it was more commonly viewed as a means of preparing for war by aggregating force for bellicose purposes. While rulers might aspire to be known as princes of peace, many sovereigns still considered diplomacy, rather than war, as the option of last resort. Only very slowly did the emergence of broadly shared conventions and the growing familiarity of practice cement diplomacy as a regular and systematized means of maintaining contacts and managing, containing, and preventing conflict. In a similar way, early modern diplomacy was always multi-layered, with informal networks structured by family ties and friendship networks alongside the more formal embassies and ambassadors.
who conducted the official level of relations. By the eighteenth century formal (p. 664) diplomacy had become proportionately more significant than informal diplomatic communication, but the latter always continued and at times could become very important indeed.

Since the 1990s there has been a significant renewal of scholarly interest in early modern diplomacy, after an extended period of benign neglect and even open hostility, as historians concentrated on social and cultural themes. This revival reflects the widespread reconsideration of the political history of these centuries, which has modified the teleological assumption that the ‘modern state’ lay around every corner. But it is also due to a recognition of the real importance of international relations, which were almost always the dominant concern of rulers and their advisers. Historians have also come to recognize that the evolution of diplomacy reflected broader transformations, such as the growth of the sovereign state, the expansion of government, the transmission of Renaissance culture, and novel attitudes toward news and information, and was thus about far more than merely politics, though it primarily concerned these. The study of what is now styled the ‘new diplomatic history’ is back on the scholarly agenda, with diplomacy, now regarded as a cultural praxis, located more fully within its social and political contexts.3

Recent historians have broadened the definition of politics, significantly expanding the activities and forms of communication deemed ‘political’. In particular German-language scholarship has located medieval and early modern diplomacy within what are styled ‘political communications’, in which diplomacy, statecraft, and even politics more broadly are seen as cultural forms reflected in shifting means and strategies of communication.4 Much of this research has been interdisciplinary, involving specialists in literature, art, and material culture, and unsurprisingly has softened the boundaries between political and non-political history. This has promoted the recognition that much diplomacy was conducted outside traditional, ‘official’ channels and by individuals other than ambassadors. Merchants, soldiers, courtiers, and even artists might be vectors of representation, negotiation, and the exchange of political information, often in locales away from the central nodes of power.5

A belated recognition of the important role of women has been a welcome by-product of this changed approach. Though official diplomacy was formally conducted almost entirely by men, at least one woman was given official diplomatic credentials during this period: in 1645 France sent what seems to have been its first female diplomat, the maréchale de Guébriant, to Warsaw to establish whether Wladislaw IV’s marriage to a French aristocrat, Louise Marie de Gonzague-Nevers, had been consummated.6 Informally women played a much larger role, at times even carrying out significant negotiations. As resident diplomacy developed, ambassadors’ wives accompanied their husbands on embassies and were a crucial source of news and intelligence, as were highly placed women at court. In an ambassador’s absence the correspondence might be maintained by his wife, often without this being fully evident.7 As the less formal dimensions of early modern diplomacy are more fully recovered, so the multiple roles of women—individually and collectively—are becoming more apparent.

(p. 665) The Mattingly Model and its Validity

Despite these new approaches, the overall framework of the subject remains that advanced in 1955 by Garrett Mattingly’s classic Renaissance Diplomacy.8 His central contention was that fifteenth-century Italy saw the creation of a new diplomatic system, especially after the Italian League of 1455 had brought together the peninsula’s major states in a defensive pact nominally directed against the Ottoman threat. This system’s salient features included the regular exchange of diplomatic representatives, the emergence of diplomacy as a permanent affair of state, the creation of dedicated chanceries and archives and, above all, the appearance of resident ambassadors. The Italian system was then adopted across southern and western Europe during the sixteenth century, and subsequently extended to include the eastern half of the continent by shortly after 1700. Mattingly’s historical vision amounted to the emergence of recognizably modern practice in foreign affairs. It was a story of how traditional dispensations were overtaken by forces that served to usher in the modern world.
That Mattingly’s work, sixty years after its publication, remains the starting point for this survey is testimony to its author’s vision and gifts as an historian. At the same time, the ‘new diplomatic history’ has questioned some of its foundations and made today’s scholars uncomfortable with the tidiness and linearity of its trajectories. Recent research has focused on practice and individual practitioners, through a close reading of the voluminous diplomatic correspondence, rather than on administrative edicts and treatises, which had been Mattingly’s major sources. Specialists on the Middle Ages have demonstrated that fifteenth-century Italian developments had important medieval precedents, while research on the decades after 1500 has shown that the adoption of these features throughout western Europe was tentative, incomplete, and in many instances impermanent. The ‘new diplomacy’ was a contingent response to distinctive circumstances and challenges, and so its wholesale transplantation in most places was impracticable. Nevertheless, Italian patterns of political communication did become characteristic of European diplomacy during the sixteenth century, providing a repertoire of vocabulary, habits, and practices, together with new institutions through which political aims could be pursued.

Despite such historical genealogies, the ‘modernity’ of this diplomacy was less complete than often assumed. Early modern diplomatic practice long remained deeply traditional. Dynastic concerns continued to be paramount, with a good deal of effort, for example, devoted to marriage negotiations. The sixteenth century’s largest polity, the empire of the Habsburgs, resulted almost exclusively from strategic marital alliances and fortuitous successions. Mattingly exaggerated both the role of the ‘omnicompetent, egotistic state’ as a driving force and the extent to which diplomacy had become depersonalized and detached from its social context. Ties of patronage and clientage remained strong. Throughout the early modern period ambassadors continued to believe that they were serving their ruler, rather than an abstract state, and that diplomatic posts were one (p. 666) among many forms of service they were expected to provide. They formally represented their sovereign, in whose name instructions were drawn up and negotiations formally conducted, and from whom they usually received their commissions and sometimes their instructions in person. The enduring importance of this attitude became clearly apparent in France at the beginning of the 1790s, when the political changes together with the oath to serve the ‘Nation, Law and King’ imposed early in the Revolution led to a flight of noble diplomats from the French foreign service. Accustomed to serving the king and the Bourbon dynasty, they were unwilling to transfer loyalty to the abstract entity of the French state, particularly after a republican form of government was established in September 1792.

In an age when sovereignty and territoriality remained imprecise, diplomacy was widely regarded as a way of legitimizing regimes and rule, and as a means of advancing such claims when they might be less than watertight. It thus possessed a jurisdictional quality, exactly as within the confined space of fifteenth-century Italy. External representation and recognition became a means of justification for ruling houses or oligarchies. The paper trail generated might itself be seen as a form of self-legitimation, as was the sending of resident ambassadors acting in a sovereign’s name.

Similarly, diplomacy often responded to the demands of domestic politics. Within composite monarchies, or in regions with cities or territories that jealously protected their own privileges, the line between internal policy and external diplomacy remained difficult to draw. There was a surprising amount of what we might today call ‘diplomacy’ within, rather than between, states. Princes of territories that were part of the Papal States sent envoys to the pontiff as a means of asserting their own sovereignty, which was naturally resented by successive popes. In a similar way the Holy Roman Empire constituted a separate diplomatic system, in which territorial rulers sent representatives to the Imperial court. Capua, which was the fourth largest city in the Kingdom of Naples and enjoyed a number of royal privileges, sent numerous envoys—always described as ‘ambassadors’—to the king during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Many condottieri and provincial lords conducted diplomacy of their own, as did leading magnates in states such as Poland–Lithuania. Such missions underlined the contested nature of internal authority and remind us that early modern diplomacy operated at numerous levels subsidiary to international politics, including within states themselves.

An emphasis on the enhanced role of the resident ambassador was central to Mattingly’s Renaissance Diplomacy. Extended stays for diplomatic agents were common long before 1450. The embassy of Luigi Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua, to Louis of Bavaria, established before 1341, seems to have been the first for which substantial records survive. Within Italy, too, there were numerous examples of systematic and intensive diplomatic activity during the hundred years before
1450. These involved individuals from many different backgrounds: proctors, merchants, nuncios and legates, and numerous others. Such figures delivered messages, conducted negotiations, and, increasingly, gathered information. The later Middle Ages witnessed the emergence of a commonly shared notion of the ‘negotiator’ (négociateur), a concept borrowed from the world of commerce, and encompassing many different kinds of individual. Such figures might fulfill these duties for prolonged periods of time, creating the impression of near-permanence. The Visconti dukes of Milan maintained a particularly extensive network of resident ambassadors controlled from a well-functioning diplomatic chancery, upon which the subsequent Sforza dukes would build; unfortunately, the records of the Visconti were lost in a fire during the upheavals that marked that dynasty’s demise in 1447.

In a similar way, late medieval monarchies such as England or France conducted a vigorous diplomacy, especially during the Hundred Years’ War, sending embassies and negotiating marriages and alliances. The Avignon popes were also highly active diplomatically, sending envoys to many European monarchs. A significant number of practices characteristic of early modern resident diplomacy can be identified before 1450, primarily within the Italian peninsula and partly due to the greater volume of surviving documentation. At the same time, however, late medieval political society presented significant obstacles to the establishment of full diplomatic relations. In a period of territorial consolidation for polities all over Europe, with the incorporation of fiefs and provinces, much diplomacy was conducted not between (presumed) equals but between superiors and inferiors, leading to the granting of privileges. Late medieval Europe saw diplomacy actively conducted by many non-state actors, as they would now be termed: towns and urban leagues, Europe’s military orders and condottieri, military entrepreneurs who conducted negotiations as a form of self-legitimation. Only with the gradual monarchical unification of the early modern period did both a clear sense of what constituted ‘foreign affairs’ emerge, and a royal monopoly of external relations become established, and even then this was periodically challenged or broke down completely.

Acknowledging these late medieval antecedents, it remains largely true that the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw real, important, and enduring changes, beginning in Italy, exactly as Mattingly argued. After 1450 there was an enhanced focus on the ambassador as the vector of information gathering, representation, and negotiation: the three functions which a diplomat came to be expected to perform. Extended stays by representatives exchanged between Italian states became increasingly common, with the effect that in practice such embassies became resident. This was then emulated by regimes outside the peninsula during the following century, particularly in southern and western Europe. The most important innovation before 1600, therefore, was the incorporation of the resident embassy into the fabric of inter-state relations. This is the feature of Mattingly’s framework whose long-term importance remains unassailable. It should be noted, however, that short-term embassies remained important, especially in ceremonial and negotiating roles. In this sense, a dual-track model of diplomacy persisted despite the increased prominence of residents.

Italian statesmen who embraced the use of resident ambassadors in the course of the fifteenth century surely did not understand themselves to be adopting a new set of assumptions about external political activity, or even engaging in a distinct realm of action called ‘diplomacy’. While there was an increase in diplomatic interactions after 1450, ‘diplomacy’ as a discrete practice operating according to its own set of norms and expectations at best remained in incubation before the seventeenth century, if not later. Until the eighteenth century there was no genuine diplomatic corps, no set cursus honorum for a diplomatic career, nor even a broadly accepted corpus of international law governing relations between states. There was instead a collection of practices, offices, and roles, an increasing number of which were coming to be associated with the ambassador.

Ambassadorial assignments were not regarded as ‘offices’ in the institutional sense, as posts in internal government were by this point. Envoys were never described as officeholders when serving on such embassies; instead they were identified as orator (because the agent ‘spoke’ for his sovereign), nuncius (adopting the terminology of papal representation, which was an important model), or (and increasingly) ‘ambassador’. This is typical of an age when external policy remained dominated by the personalities of monarchs, by semi-feudal political considerations, and by a conspicuous lack of established international law. But practice that became routine essentially amounted to institutionalization, even without statutory precision.
After the formation of the Italian League in 1455, the seignorial regimes in particular began to perceive the benefits of employing resident ambassadors at other Italian courts. Milan’s Duke Francesco Sforza was particularly significant, establishing embassies in all the major states in the peninsula and, after 1460, in France and then Burgundy. The diplomatic chancery in Sforza Milan was an extensive operation, initially headed by the irrepresible first secretary, Francesco (‘Cicco’) Simonetta, who oversaw the drafting, copying, decoding, and dispatch of thousands of pieces of correspondence every month, primarily to or from Milanese resident ambassadors. In the 1460s Duke Francesco kept as many as fifty couriers travelling between Milan, Rome, and Naples, spending the daunting monthly sum of 1,000 lire in monitoring threats to his rule and promoting his own dynastic legitimacy. Similar motivations prompted Ferrante d’Aragona, the King of Naples (1456–94), to make considerable use of resident ambassadors. Even small seignorial condottiere princes like the Este in Ferrara and the Gonzaga in Mantua employed diplomats for extended tenures. Long periods of service at a single court by an individual ambassador became quite common: Zaccaria Saggi da Pisa was Mantuan ambassador in Milan for twenty years (1468–88), Jacopo Trotti the Ferrarese representative there for fourteen (1482–95), and Anello Arcamone Neapolitan ambassador in Rome for thirteen (1473–86). The Italian republics were slower in adopting residents, constrained as they were by their own constitutional arrangements and by the reluctance of their subjects to serve abroad for an extended period of time. Ambassadors from Florence or Venice were urban patricians with pressing commercial and political concerns, and therefore loath to spend extended periods away from their business and civic obligations. But by the end of the fifteenth century republican regimes too had embraced resident diplomacy.

Thus by the 1480s there was an integrated Italian network of permanent embassies, which had arisen as a response to pressing and particular circumstances, rather than from a deliberate attempt to transform relations within the peninsula. Italy’s competitive and compact geopolitical space, the mutual suspicion of fragile regimes, the relatively short distances and reliability of communications, and the search for opportunities for territorial expansion promoted the adoption of resident ambassadors and of diplomacy as a near-constant state activity. The value of these representatives was far from self-evident to everyone, and it was widely suspected that they were simply spies, an anxiety that had led Pope Martin V (1417–31) to limit embassies to six months’ duration. Louis XI famously told the Milanese resident ambassador at the French court in 1461 that ‘the custom of France is not similar to that of Italy, because in these regions to maintain his ambassador here continually would look like an act of suspicion on his part and not at all an expression of amity, while in Italy the opposite is true’.

The Europeanization of the Italian System, 1490s–1550s

Italy’s political isolation from the rest of Europe before 1500 has long been exaggerated. Throughout the Middle Ages foreign rulers had been involved there, while long-standing European dynastic claims existed to Milan, Naples, and even Florence. Ambassadors from France, Spain, the Empire, and elsewhere were familiar figures at Italian courts, particularly after the 1480s. Only with the French invasion of 1494, however, did Italy become a principal arena for the continent’s dynastic rivalries, dramatically altering the political landscape there and far beyond. This was the context for the adoption of the ‘new diplomacy’ outside the peninsula. Its spread, nevertheless, was halting and erratic, and cannot be directly attributed to the foreign domination of Italian states such as Milan and Naples.

Ferdinand of Aragon (1479–1516) was one of the first extra-Italian monarchs to utilize resident ambassadors at all systematically, sending diplomats to Rome (1480), London (1487), the Empire (1493), Venice (1494), Portugal and Genoa (both 1495), France (1499), Savoy (1509), and Milan (1513). Yet his initiatives were episodic, driven by a desire to surround and isolate his French rival. Aragon’s king did create the office of Secretary of State, but he never developed a specialized diplomatic chancery, in part because his own court remained peripatetic. He failed to establish a reliable system of couriers, and often waited weeks before replying to dispatches from ambassadors. Interestingly, despite all his links with the peninsula, he never employed any Italians as diplomats. Though this Aragonese network was extensive, it was a pale imitation of that maintained by Sforza Milan.
Before the mid-sixteenth century, the Holy Roman emperors made only intermittent attempts to construct a diplomatic network. Throughout the 1490s, prompted by the struggle in Italy, Maximilian I (‘King of the Romans’ and then Emperor, 1486–1519) sent envoys to the major political centres, and it has been estimated that he employed at least 300 diplomats during the quarter century he was emperor. This commitment was not enduring, however, and by the early sixteenth century his efforts had largely been (p. 670) abandoned, due to a combination of his own lack of interest and inadequate resources. Rather, the activities of Ferdinand of Aragon provided the foundations for a Habsburg diplomatic network that would be both Spanish and Imperial under Charles V and Philip II. Here, then, we see that many features of ‘Renaissance’ diplomacy had been created by specific cultural conditions and distinctive regional political imperatives within the peninsula, and so there could not be a straightforward transplant of an Italian ‘model’ to a larger, non-Italian milieu.

There remained a qualitative difference between the process and expectations of diplomacy inside and outside of Italy long after 1500. ‘The ambassador of an Italian state at the French or Imperial court’, as Michael Mallett has observed, ‘was in a different world, a world in which diplomacy was regarded with some suspicion, as a poor alternative to war.’18 The difficulty in establishing historical genealogies for institutions and practices must not, however, obscure the fact that the Italian Wars (1494–1559) were the essential cockpit of change. With the advent of an increasingly complex, bitter, and wide-ranging struggle for the peninsula, foreign ambassadors were regularly consulted and thus became essential reference points, achieving an unmistakable importance in Europe’s dynastic rivalries.

Resident ambassadors did not become ubiquitous, however, even by 1600. Many rulers did not embrace the new diplomacy during the sixteenth century, whether due to its expense, a shortage of suitable personnel, or a feeling that it was unnecessary. Until Elizabeth I (1558–1603), for example, England regularly maintained resident ambassadors only in France, due certainly to the Tudor Crown’s financial weakness, but also to the persistently personal nature of English diplomacy. France, potentially Europe’s most powerful monarchy, had by the reign of Henry II (1547–59) established a diplomatic network on the Italian model, but its development was slowed by the Wars of Religion, and a wide-ranging corps of French missions did not really emerge until the second half of the seventeenth century. The real heirs of the Italian system were the Habsburgs, especially in the reign of Philip II, whose global diplomatic and informational network was unmatched.

There were also geographical limits to the spread of resident diplomacy. Dynastic rivalries inhibited any consensus on diplomatic forms and—while many regimes did view resident embassies as attractive—they adopted the practices that best suited their own priorities. Even in Italy, Genoa relied on its network of commercial consulates well into the sixteenth century. Resident embassies would long remain rare in eastern Europe, where episodic, bilateral diplomatic exchanges were the norm within an area where the advance of Ottoman power was the main factor in shaping developments during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Muscovy and Poland-Lithuania, together with smaller polities, such as the Crimea, Kazan’, and Wallachia, regularly exchanged diplomats, but these missions were temporary in nature.19 Though Western diplomatic practice was more sophisticated, developments further east resembled it at least in outline. Eastern polities also exchanged diplomatic missions with monarchies in central, northern, and even western Europe. The representatives who were sent had identical aims: information-gathering, representation and, occasionally, negotiations. Indeed, by (p. 671) the mid-sixteenth century returning Muscovite ambassadors were expected to produce relazioni on the model of Venice. The Ottoman Empire had more frequent contact with western Europe and was thus well acquainted with its new diplomatic forms, but did not send out resident ambassadors, even to other Muslim states, before the nineteenth century.20

Even in western Europe, the pattern of diplomacy characteristic of Renaissance Italy, with short-term missions existing side-by-side with resident embassies, took time to emerge. Direct encounters between rulers remained important until the mid-sixteenth century: an indication of the persistently personal nature of international relations. Examples of such summit meetings were the famous encounter between Henry VIII and Francis I at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520 and that between the French king and Charles V at Aigues-Mortes in 1538. In addition, monarchs frequently maintained their own personal channels of correspondence with other sovereigns, creating a second, parallel system of diplomacy. Lorenzo de Medici (admittedly not a monarch) had done this, supplementing (and often subverting) Florence’s republican policy-making bodies. So too did Elizabeth I, an especially avid letter writer, who maintained a personal correspondence with several fellow

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rulers. Resident ambassadors also did not possess a monopoly on news, as there remained several channels by which this might be passed on. Merchants, churchmen, and travellers, among others, continued to supply information, both directly to princes and indirectly through their ambassadors. Historians have recently recognized that the definition of political information should be a broad one and that its exchange involved a large number of interlocutors beyond the ‘formal’ ambassadorial channels. Though the proliferation of resident embassies was an important factor in the new emphasis on political information, it is best seen as a symptom rather than a root cause.

To some extent, the permanent embassy remained what it had been in fifteenth-century Italy: a response to contingent circumstances, in particular a fraught and competitive geopolitical struggle in which the maintenance of an approximate balance of power was widely desired. Emphasis upon context and recognition of the contingent nature of European diplomacy lead us to be rightly suspicious of implicit suggestions that statesmen were consciously engaging in a process of modernization through the rationalization of one sector of the state apparatus. Although the regular dispatch of ambassadors and the intensification of diplomatic contacts did contribute to institutional change, the inherent weaknesses of early modern government, with its brittle finances, unreliable communications, and limited capacity for rapid and coordinated military and political action, must also be remembered. Despite these qualifications, the growth of resident diplomacy was real, sweeping, and had important consequences for international affairs. By 1600 very few statesmen would have echoed Louis XI’s categorical rejection of resident embassies cited earlier; they were now sufficiently common for there to be a recognized distinction between them and extraordinary embassies. By the end of the sixteenth century, western Europeans had come to regard resident diplomacy as thoroughly familiar, and there was widespread recognition that ‘it would be [p. 672] more inconvenient [as Alberico Gentili affirmed in 1585] to keep sending ad hoc ambassadors than to maintain them always at one another’s court.’

Another ubiquitous feature was that the new diplomacy produced unprecedented amounts of paper, primarily correspondence with ambassadors. The volume generated in the Italian states alone before 1500 is simply staggering. It was facilitated by the increased production and availability of paper itself during the late medieval centuries, together with its reduced cost. This was indeed a ‘world of paper’, as described in Francesco Senatore’s brilliant treatment of the Sforza diplomatic network. The increasing use of resident ambassadors was the key catalyst, since it produced diverse and voluminous documentation, from letters of instruction (which were now far more likely to be written down than given orally as in the Middle Ages), to formal credentials, to ambassadorial correspondence, with several copies of each. The massive production of paper was accompanied by a wish to conserve it all in archives. Across western Europe, first in Italy and then elsewhere, space was set aside for rapidly expanding diplomatic archives primarily consisting of correspondence. Governments sought to preserve all this paper as an institutional memory of their activity; rulers now began to try—with limited success—to recover the personal papers and archives of their ambassadors and ministers, as these were increasingly coming to be seen as the preserve of the state. And sovereigns themselves were responsible for a great many letters, as frequent correspondence was becoming essential to their rule. The scale was astonishing: the Mantuan representatives in Milan in the 1460s averaged more than one dispatch a day over an entire year, while a Venetian ambassador in Rome in 1503–04 wrote no fewer than 472 dispatches in one twelve-month period. These were exceptional figures, and achieved only in the compact space of the Italian peninsula, with its good communications, but everywhere the tide of paper was relentless.

Ambassadors primarily contributed to this exponential increase as collectors and distributors of ‘news’. A good diplomat would sort and assess this material at source, but even experienced envoys would be loath to leave out rumours, snatched fragments of overheard conversation, and even seemingly inconsequential details, in case such information might reach their superior in some other way, with the result that they would be deemed insufficiently attentive. Machiavelli advised Raffaello Girolami, about to set off on an embassy to Spain in 1522, to make his dispatches ‘bulging with news’ (grasse di avvisi), full of what he heard on a daily basis, but with some indication, over an extended period, of what was most likely to be true. This established the trend for the entire early modern period. In the 1790s an experienced member of the chancery in Vienna advised the young Clemens von Metternich (the future Austrian Chancellor), setting off on his first diplomatic mission, to write frequently and at length if he wished to prosper in his career. Sovereigns found themselves caught between
competing desires: they wished to be furnished with as much news as possible but also to receive reliable intelligence that had been subjected to informed triage. In general, volume trumped precision.

This trend was reinforced after the mid-seventeenth century by the much greater availability of newspapers and journals with the development of printing, which made information easier to obtain, if not any more reliable. Diplomats continued to report (p. 673) news, and did so on an ever-increasing scale, as the proliferation of news-sheets and journals facilitated its collection. By the eighteenth century this embryonic newspaper press was being used by many governments to leak information both true and false, in an attempt to further their own policies.

In addition, around 1500, summary reports started to proliferate in several states, most notably in Venice. Here, towards the end of the fifteenth century, ambassadors were instructed to begin writing their famous relazioni, the reports to the Senate expected at the end of a mission. From the fifteenth century the history of diplomacy became a written history which can be reconstructed. Undoubtedly much was never written down: oral instructions, conversations intended to be kept secret, off-the-record negotiations, face-to-face debriefings. There remained, of course, considerable reluctance to write down sensitive information. But an enormous amount was committed to paper, including a great deal of the ‘secret’ information rendered in code or cipher. The greatly enhanced use of resident diplomats, together with the advent of secretariats responsible for managing them and the paperwork they created, were dimensions of governance that took place from a distance. This ‘intensification of contacts’, to adopt the term coined by Isabella Lazzarini, was no doubt aided by the increasingly sedentary and centralized nature of early modern monarchies.29

These developments were part of Europe’s wider transition from a notarial to a secretarial culture, driven primarily by the volume of correspondence conducted and the need to create an infrastructure capable of generating, sorting, and storing it. Diplomats, secretaries, chancellors, and in some cases even rulers who refused to delegate, like Philip II (the original rey papalero), were forced to engage in continuous information management, which became a familiar early modern challenge and is now beginning to receive significant scholarly attention.30 The foot soldiers of this early modern secretarial culture faced the task of managing massive amounts of paperwork, which was largely epistolary in origin, the product of the correspondence by which early modern statecraft was conducted. Secretaries, including the secretaries of state who emerged as the heads of foreign ministries in many European countries in this period, were figures of great political importance, as much for their shepherding of the paper trail as for their influence over policy. Thus the likes of Colbert de Torcy, the secretary of state for Louis XIV, oversaw, like Cicco Simonetta before him, a ‘world of paper’.31

The Duties of Diplomats

Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, a veritable cottage industry in treatises describing the ‘perfect’ ambassador emerged. Relatively few of these authors possessed significant diplomatic experience, and most traded in humanistic tropes about the physical, moral, and ethical qualities required and about faithful and selfless service to the ruler and to Christendom. They were an imperfect reflection of actual practice. But some of these texts, and the huge volumes of correspondence produced by more (p. 674) regular diplomacy, reveal the characteristics now demanded of the ambassador. These had been enunciated by two Milanese officials in 1486: ‘the proper duty of every ambassador is to know, to hear, and to report’.32 Such a prescription, together with the addition of conducting negotiations, was nearly identical to that set out seven decades later (1558) by the Venetian ambassador in Rome, who declared that ‘the office of the ambassador is divided in three parts: in listening and advising, which requires diligence; in negotiating, for which dexterity is required; and in reporting, where judgment matters greatly, speaking about necessary and useful things and leaving out the pointless and useless’.33

During the sixteenth century, the role of a diplomat was distilled down to three broad areas of operation: representing and embodying his sovereign; negotiating his prince’s relationship with the host court and protecting the prince’s interests (and generally some of his own); and finally, gathering information by exploiting sources cultivated at court and beyond. Dexterity
and prudence were widely seen as essential; Thomas Wolsey demanded his ambassadors should possess both, along with industry. Prudence was necessary if the ambassador were to straddle the difficult line between adhering to his formal instructions and responding to changing circumstances. In practice, governments recognized that they had to grant some flexibility, especially to resident ambassadors.

As representatives, diplomats were projections of their sovereign, the embodiment of the prince’s person and power. Audiences with the ruler to whom he was accredited were particularly important moments, and the ability of the ambassador to communicate his own monarch’s views was vital; he was his superior’s voice, hence the widely used nomenclature orator. Such interaction enabled political standing to be measured and projected, but so did day-to-day contacts at court, especially with other diplomats. In a European culture obsessed with reputation, power possessed an important symbolic dimension. This helps explain the endless disputes over precedence in processions and in formal settings, which continued throughout the early modern period and were only regulated (and then far from definitively) at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. These squabbles were most frequent and bitter at the papal court in Rome, where every Catholic polity was represented: its ceremonial and ritual set the tone for the rest of Europe. Yet its role as the continent’s diplomatic capital was already being undermined in the sixteenth century by the Reformation and by the emergence of politically significant Protestant states.

The search for reliable and up-to-date intelligence increasingly preoccupied resident ambassadors and largely determined verdicts upon their competence. Much time was consumed searching for and assessing the reliability of such information. Statecraft was now widely understood to rely on the timely provision of news, a shift that was equally apparent in the realms of finance and commerce. Predictably, merchants were widely used as diplomats. Giovanni Lanfredini was a Florentine businessman who ran the Venice branch of the Medici bank and also acted as ambassador in Naples and Rome in the 1480s, making it difficult to draw a clear line between his business and political activities. Silvestro Gigli, a merchant from Lucca, served as Henry VIII’s representative in Rome for nine years (1512–21). In Italy, the Grand-Dukes of Tuscany preferred (p. 675) to select their ambassadors from the world of commerce, while the celebrated Venetian relazioni clearly had roots in the city’s mercantile culture. This was also true outside the Italian peninsula: in both France and Sweden there were explicit connections between the practice of diplomacy and trends in early modern accounting principles. Among other things, both activities were preoccupied with the need to manage unprecedented volumes of information.

An ambassador might in practice be asked to fulfil a further and at times bewildering array of tasks, either for his own government or for his patrons and friends. These could include negotiating military contracts for condottieri, acting as a commercial agent or purchaser of luxury goods, and lobbying for secular employment or ecclesiastical preferment for particular individuals. Given that many (but certainly not all) ambassadors had received a humanist education, it is not surprising that some also became vectors of cultural exchange. Ambassadors regularly tracked down books, paintings, and other works of art, and acted as intermediaries between scholars and artists. Shared cultural interests acted as a social bridge between diplomats from different countries. Recent research on Renaissance Italy has highlighted the regular interchange of personnel between the world of humanistic learning that typified the secretariats of the Italian states, with their increasingly important diplomatic chanceries, and service in embassies. There were many prominent fifteenth-century Italian ambassadors who moved back and forward between these two functions. Similar patterns of service were evident outside Italy as well: Florimond I Robertet was a treasurer, secretary, and effectively chief minister for foreign affairs for two kings of France, and also served on a number of important diplomatic missions abroad.

Increasingly, chancery and diplomatic service involved comparable work, above all the management of large quantities of paper. By the later fifteenth century every self-respecting ambassador was supported by a secretary, and many maintained an extensive archive of their own which mirrored in miniature those of their governments. Complaints about keeping up with the required paperwork became commonplace. In sixteenth-century treatises, the skills of ambassadors and secretaries were often described in similar terms, as both had to be capable of manipulating the written word. While Torquato Tasso in his dialogue The Messenger (Il Messaggiero) (1588) suggested that the ambassador be able to ‘make things change face’, Giovanni Battista Guarini in Il Segretario (1600) wrote that the secretary ‘must know how to do with his pen and his person
what Proteus did with his body, transmuting it into all possible forms and varying it to his need’.40

Diplomacy, then, did not constitute a vocation before the eighteenth century at the earliest, and then only for minor figures rather than leading ambassadors. An individual was not trained to be a diplomat, although he might distinguish himself through such service. Training in oratory and in the law was useful, but not all prominent ambassadors had undergone such preparation. While professional diplomats were the creation of a later age, there were nonetheless many individuals whose careers came to be distinguished primarily for their extended service in embassies.

Significant developments in papal representation also took place during the sixteenth century. Medieval popes had relied on church collectors along with temporary legates, but after 1500 the nunziature gradually embraced residency. Nuncios were acknowledged to be sui generis since they represented spiritual power, but in their defence of the Pope’s political interests and their interaction with other ambassadors, they resembled their secular counterparts. By the pontificate of Gregory XIII (1572–85), there were thirteen permanent nunziature, with a clear distinction between nuncios and short-term legates. With increasing numbers of experienced men spending extended periods engaged in diplomatic activity, employing widely shared vocabulary, adhering to accepted conventions if not yet rules codified in international law, and engaging in similar activities that produced roughly comparable written outputs, there was more than enough to suggest that diplomacy was broadly regarded as a coherent sphere of activity, which provided a route by which men could advance their career.

Fewer churchmen served as ambassadors than might be expected, and clerics were employed more frequently in some countries than others. In fifteenth-century Italy, relatively few ecclesiastics acted as diplomats, except at the papal court. In Rome, cardinals effectively acted as resident ambassadors for their sovereign or family, thus serving both their church and their home state. Francesco Gonzaga, who became a cardinal in 1461, acted as the Mantuan resident ambassador in the Papal States for twenty years. Beyond Italy, nearly half of Henry VIII’s diplomats were clerics, including some prominent bishops. The proportion in England was unusually high, reflecting the prominent place of the Church within the English state, but—exactly as elsewhere—it did not survive the advent of the Protestant Reformation. Personal connections with, and proven loyalty to, the monarch remained most important in the selection of ambassadors. Diplomats, after all, were the symbolic extension of the prince’s person, and early modern rulers understandably wished to employ personnel whom they believed would represent them and their policies faithfully.

The social basis of diplomacy, however, remained less exalted than it would subsequently become. Before the final decades of the seventeenth century, diplomatic service, particularly as resident ambassadors, was relatively unusual among aristocrats. Lesser nobles and commoners were far more prominent. Of the seventy-two French diplomatic missions to England between 1485 and 1520 where the identity of the envoy is known, some 65 per cent were carried out by nobles, but only 9 per cent of these came from the aristocracy. Around a quarter were commoners. Of the reciprocal sixty missions sent by the English Crown in the same period, 48 per cent were filled by nobles (with 17 per cent from the peerage) and fully 46 per cent by commoners.41 Extended service in resident embassies often involved men further down the social hierarchy, rather than well-connected grandees. This replicated the pattern in fifteenth-century Italy, where many resident ambassadors had come from relatively modest backgrounds. Men of high social standing would usually be drafted for grand and symbolically important extraordinary missions, for example to present compliments upon a coronation or marriage, for which blue blood was more important. Even as the resident embassy became more important, it was viewed as less desirable than high offices of state by the social elite, who (p. 677) rather viewed it as a ‘gilded relegation’, in the words of the seventeenth-century Dutch statesman Johan De Witt, to be exchanged for the first suitable post at home.

A diplomatic mission was seldom a reliable path to enrichment and could involve significant financial hardship. Indeed, fifteenth-century Venetian patricians sought to avoid long-term diplomatic postings for fear of compromising their commercial and political interests, a concern also evident in Renaissance Florence. Early modern ambassadors routinely found their pay in arrears and were forced to draw on their own funds, whether to represent their sovereigns in suitable style, to pay a courier, or even simply to make ends meet.42 They were also expected to pay some of the costs—such as the
salaries of secretaries and chaplains—themselves. Many families accepted embassies in order to ingratiate themselves with the ruler; to this extent, diplomatic service might in the long run be a profitable venture. Early modern regimes, like their medieval predecessors, were more than willing to spend large sums of money on ceremonial entrances and symbolic gestures, in order to bolster a ruler’s reputation, outfitting extraordinary embassies with dozens of horses and huge entourages, and so symbolizing the monarch’s grandeur in visual and ceremonial form. But they were much stingier where diplomats were concerned. As resident embassies proliferated, it became customary for the state sending them to assume the costs involved, previously often borne by the host monarch. For diplomats, however, reliable and regular payment remained the exception. In this, they experienced the same fate as other servants of early modern rulers, who were invariably cash-strapped. These realities discouraged some qualified men from entering diplomacy; against that, noblemen expected to serve their ruler as a validation of their own status, while a period of service abroad was always a recognized path to preferment at home.

The best ambassadors were what today would be called ‘generalists’: men of culture, education, and experience who diligently represented their prince while ingratiating themselves at court. ‘The ambassador, in general, is nothing more than a “weaver of friendships” (congiungitor d’amicizia)’, according to Tasso, in The Messenger. An effective resident needed to acquire a wide range of contacts and information sources, and this could often take years, especially at a posting with a complex social topography like Rome, with its extensive diplomatic and ecclesiastical community and numerous satellite courts around the households of cardinals. By negotiating agreements, maintaining alliances, representing sovereigns, and gathering and reporting information, the resident ambassador had become an essential projection of power.

Diplomacy in Peace and War, 1550s–1650s

The impressive growth of resident diplomacy continued during the century after the 1450s, in the western half of the continent at least, if not at the same pace. By the second half of the sixteenth century, the long individual residencies characteristic of Renaissance Italy had become commonplace across western Europe. In France, even during several decades of intensive civil strife, a wide-ranging and active diplomacy based upon permanent embassies was still maintained. No fewer than seventy-two ambassadors served the French Crown between 1559 and 1600, spending a total of 436 years abroad; at any given point during these decades, there were twelve French diplomats stationed at foreign courts. With the breakdown of royal authority from the 1560s, however, several magnates, Catholic and Huguenot, simultaneously conducted parallel diplomacy to that of the ruler. The next hundred years saw near-continual warfare throughout Europe which served not merely to inhibit much further development but even undermined what had already taken place. The international and civil hostilities renewed during the 1560s were intense, wide-ranging, and enduring, with a growing confessionalization of western European rivalries by the later sixteenth century, a product of the fusing of religion with politics. The seventeenth century was to prove particularly bellicose, with several leading states on a war footing for more than one year out of every two.

These conflicts produced diplomatic activity by what would now be styled non-state actors. Both the French Huguenots, during the long civil wars after 1562, and the Dutch rebels before they secured de facto independence from Spain in 1609, sent missions seeking aid to potentially friendly courts, including the Ottoman Empire. Such initiatives, however, posed their own problems. Rebellion was still anathema to monarchical Europe, and these emissaries seldom secured any official recognition from princes reluctant to offend fellow rulers. Diplomacy by non-state actors also took place in eastern Europe. During the 1650s and 1660s in Poland–Lithuania—a period of foreign invasion and continuing monarchical weakness—leading magnates pursued their own private policies and concluded agreements which went against the king’s interests. The main impact of this extensive warfare, however, was that fewer new embassies were established and, at times, the existing network actually contracted, though diplomatic missions continued to take place. Timely information was crucial during an age of near-continual war, and this remained a central function of the diplomatic network. Such embassies were seldom permanent: two of the leading European rulers, the French king and the emperor, only exchanged temporary missions until
the second half of the seventeenth century. In an age of intense religious strife, however, compromise was more elusive than ever. The issue of the embassy chapel exemplified the problems which resulted from the confessional conflicts unleashed by the Reformation. Where relations were maintained between two rulers of different faiths, the right of each diplomat and his staff to practise their own religion had hitherto been respected. The principal exception was the Spanish Monarchy, due to the difficulties created by the Inquisition for the small number of Protestant representatives stationed there. It rested upon the notion, which was becoming recognized by Europe’s rulers, that the embassy was turned into ‘foreign’ soil by the presence of the ambassador and so was inviolate, and that the host government did not merely have no right to intervene but actually was obliged to protect the ambassador and his staff. Yet this was always a matter of custom, rather than explicit agreement, far less international law, and the extent of the immunity which the embassy enjoyed was uncertain. Tension had arisen particularly over a diplomat’s right to employ a native of the country to which he had been accredited as his chaplain, and it came to be accepted that a foreigner should fill this role.

The sharper religious conflicts of the later sixteenth century and the broader breakdown of Catholic–Protestant relations brought this issue to the fore. The greatest controversy arose over the presence of natives of the country in which the embassy was located at such services, particularly if these were semi-public: this was a particular problem in Anglo–Spanish diplomacy from the 1560s onwards, when relations also came to be exacerbated by the involvement of Spanish diplomats in Catholic plots against England’s Elizabeth I and by clashes in the colonial sphere. In an age of intense confessional strife, governments were reluctant and at times unwilling to permit the practice of a rival faith in their own capitals, and even arrested worshippers leaving the ambassador’s residence. Occasionally this even moved beyond official resentment and opposition to popular action, as hostile crowds threatened embassy chapels: as in London at Easter 1641 when the residences of the Portuguese and Spanish ambassadors were threatened by anti-Catholic rioters. Though some improvement was apparent by the mid-seventeenth century, it was the 1680s before the unquestioned right of an ambassador to practise his own religion and even to open the embassy chapel to outsiders became more generally recognized. Even then, there were periodic difficulties: as late as 1780 Catholic embassies in London were attacked by zealous Protestant mobs during the Gordon riots.

Limited expansion of the diplomatic network took place in eastern and northern Europe. Poland–Lithuania had traditionally sent embassies to important neighbours, above all Muscovy and the Ottoman Empire as well as the Crimea, Moldavia, and Wallachia. It now began to dispatch ambassadors more regularly to central and western European capitals, though these were not yet permanent missions. Sweden’s diplomatic emergence, which resulted chiefly from its successful military imperialism, was especially notable. The kingdom expanded dramatically, particularly after the accession of the warrior-king Gustav II Adolf (1611–32). It conquered a wide-ranging territorial empire on the eastern and southern shores of the Baltic Sea and by 1660 was one of the leading European states. Its rise was accompanied by the beginnings of more regular representation in key capitals, particularly in northern Europe. These posts were often filled not by noblemen, who were employed on temporary special missions, but by merchants or foreigners: no less a figure than the great international lawyer, Hugo Grotius, acted as Sweden’s ambassador in Paris.

By the seventeenth century, broad if tacit agreement existed that diplomats had certain privileges conferred by their role, and
these had to be respected, though they would only be formalized subsequently. These rested on the fiction of extraterritoriality: the notion that an ambassador carried his ruler’s territorial sovereignty with him and that his embassy was beyond the reach of the monarch to whom he was accredited. The ornate royal or ducal coat of arms erected above a diplomat’s residence proclaimed this special territorial status. The growth of resident diplomacy would eventually be accompanied by acceptance that an ambassador and even members of his suite were immune from criminal and, less certainly, civil law. Diplomats could be and were expelled, but not arrested, and if seized could expect to be quickly released. They were entitled to withdraw unmolested when fighting began, and this too was generally observed. The principal European exception was Constantinople, where throughout the early modern period a foreign diplomat could expect to be detained in the Castle of the Seven Towers (Yedikule) when hostilities began, since this was the traditional way Ottoman sultans declared war. This was not particularly oppressive: it was a relatively comfortable form of incarceration and could be fairly brief. In other European capitals, ambassadors of two countries who went to war would leave their posts as soon as fighting began. This was a considerable obstacle to the development of resident diplomacy during an age of such wide-ranging and near-continuous warfare. In a similar way it was slowly accepted that a courier carrying dispatches should be inviolable, though mail entrusted to Europe’s expanding postal network was intercepted and efforts made to break the ciphers in which such correspondence was increasingly written.

The issue of the embassy chapel, discussed earlier, exemplified the vagueness of the legal context within which resident diplomacy had first become established. Since ambassadors were the embodiment of their sovereigns, they were decreed to be inviolable according to both canon and secular law. Practices such as the granting of a safe-conduct to a diplomat or courier or the issuing of a declaration of neutrality had been familiar during the Middle Ages. Approved by tradition, they were upheld by authoritative scholars and sanctioned by natural law. The issue of the ‘just war’ had been widely debated without any overall agreement about the precise circumstances in which hostilities were permissible. During the later sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries Spanish scholastic theorists had begun to reconsider the issue, against a background of civil and international conflict in Europe and Spain’s conquest of an overseas empire, and also to formulate legal rights during hostilities, especially of countries that were neutral. These writings were drawn on by the most important figure in the seventeenth-century development of international law, Grotius. In his writings he redefined and narrowed the concept of ‘just war’, which he restricted to defence against clear-cut aggression and the recovery of lands and resources seized by an aggressor. He also set out a much clearer legal code for maritime trade, shaped by the perspective of Dutch commercial interests. Grotius’s achievements constituted an important stage in the creation of a legal and more pacific international order, but in the short term the peace settlement of Westphalia (1648) was more significant in shaping diplomacy’s development.

The Peace of Westphalia

The congress which ended the wide-ranging and extended struggle known as the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48) actually met in two distinct locations: the towns of Münster and Osnabrück, with frequent shuttle diplomacy being conducted between the two, which were as much as half a day’s travel apart. This was necessitated by the religious divide, which saw Catholic rulers and Estates at the first venue and Protestant parties at the second. Negotiations took place over an unusually extended period: the first diplomats, accompanied by large delegations of specialists, arrived as early as 1643, but the most important discussions were held in 1646–47, after which ambassadors began to leave. To talk of a ‘peace congress’ is a misnomer, at least in the sense of the subsequent meaning of that term: plenary sessions were rare, and convened largely to give formal approval to an agreement already reached through private negotiations. France and the Empire were two of the leading states at the congress, but their delegations met formally on only three occasions and then purely to ratify such deals.

The 1648 settlement was important in several ways. In the first place, it severely restricted the right to diplomatic representation. In 1645 the emperor had been forced to agree that the ‘Imperial Estates’ (Reichsstände)—an extremely ambiguous concept—could be represented at the peace conference and not simply the five leading belligerents and their
clients, as initially proposed. This concession, together with the complexity of the issues facing the peacemakers, primarily explained the vast scale of the congress, which was attended by representatives of no fewer than sixteen European states, sixty-six Imperial Estates, and twenty-seven other groups within the Empire. Some also represented other bodies, with the result that almost 180 separate interests had agents at the peace conference. The manifold problems that this caused were addressed by the final settlement, which restricted the right to send ambassadors. It was withdrawn from the German Estates and from the Hanse towns at Westphalia, and from Imperial cities and German princelings a generation later at Nijmegen (1678–79). Thereafter what were styled ‘independent political units’ alone were entitled to diplomatic representation; these were defined by their ability to act independently of the emperor, for example through their possession of a royal Crown outside the Empire, effectively meaning leading German territories such as Bavaria, Brandenburg–Prussia, Saxony, and Hanover.

The 1648 settlement also proved a landmark in the creation of a legal foundation for international relations. Though primarily a peace for Germany and central Europe, its impact was much wider because of the region’s importance for the European balance of power. The Peace of Westphalia did not create a more peaceful international order: wars remained frequent. But it marked a significant stage in the process by which diplomacy (p. 682) came to play an enhanced role in relations between states. It provided the baseline for all the major settlements concluded before the final decade of the eighteenth century and was an important stage in the modernization of the international system. A further symptom of the growing importance of legal form was the practice of issuing a formal, printed declaration of hostilities, conveyed by a diplomat, which now became more common. When France and Spain had gone to war in 1635, hostilities had been declared by heralds on the frontier, as was traditional. Thereafter, where conflicts were not launched pre-emptively, they were begun by a formal declaration of hostilities, usually conveyed by a diplomat and frequently printed and published.

The settlement also marked an important stage in the decline of the traditional device of mediation as a way of ending wars. At Westphalia, peacemaking was partly conducted by two intermediaries, who played a key role in the final settlement: the papal emissary Fabio Chigi and the Venetian diplomat Alvise Contarini. Chigi was an active mediator, but he was ordered not to recognize Protestant states nor sponsor any concessions involving church lands. This effectively excluded him from the all-important religious negotiations, enhancing Contarini’s role. A generation later, when a similar conference assembled at Nijmegen at the end of the Dutch War (1672–79), a papal diplomat arrived expecting to mediate, but was prevented from doing so. This signalled the papacy’s declining influence and also the effective end of mediation as a way of ending major conflicts. Wars with the Ottoman Empire continued to be ended through diplomatic intervention by neutral states, as at Carlowitz (1699), Passarowitz (1718), and Belgrade (1739), but by then this was becoming highly unusual. Among subsequent settlements during the ancien régime, only the Peace of Teschen, which ended the brief Prusso–Austrian War of Bavarian Succession (1778–79), was ended by joint Russo–French mediation.

After Westphalia the established way of ending major conflicts instead became a congress of all the belligerents at which the warring parties could negotiate directly and often bilaterally: as at Nijmegen (1678–79), Ryswick (1696–97), Utrecht (1712–13), Aix-la-Chapelle (1746–48), and of course Vienna (1814–15). The latter was distinctive because of its enormous scale together with the presence of rulers and leading ministers, who had not attended congresses hitherto: previously these had usually been meetings of diplomats alone. The location of such congresses was declared neutral territory for the duration of the conference. Occasionally a congress was even held not to end a conflict but in an attempt—unsuccessful though it proved to be—to avert one breaking out, as at Cambrai and Soissons during the 1720s. Though such diplomatic gatherings were exceptional, they anticipated the Congress System that emerged after 1815.

### The Formation of a Diplomatic Society, 1660s–1815

The emergence of a European-wide network of resident diplomacy during the two generations after 1660 was facilitated by the decline—though not the disappearance—of religious fervour after the Thirty Years’ War, which reduced the problems posed by the embassy chapel, and more generally made continuous relations easier to maintain. Louis XIV’s
France played the leading role, maintaining or establishing permanent representatives in all the major capitals and quite a few minor ones as well; France’s wealth enabled it to support a more extensive diplomatic network than its poorer rivals. The gathering of information remained a central task for these diplomats: around 1680 the diplomatic theorist Abraham van Wicquefort would declare that an ambassador practised ‘the trade of an honest spy’, a view confirmed in less blunt language by the French foreign office functionary François de Callières a generation later. This traditional role was increasingly accompanied by responsibility for conducting negotiations, as France led the way in developing a style of diplomacy more recognizable modern. The meticulous preparations which preceded the long-planned French attack on the Dutch Republic in 1672 were an early example of the transition underway. During the immediately preceding years, Louis XIV’s diplomats had worked to isolate France’s Calvinist, republican foe and to buttress its own position by concluding strategic alliances intended to contribute to military victory. To this extent French actions were traditional. At the same time, however, the use of diplomacy to isolate an intended enemy as well as secure allies of one’s own, revealed its creative potential in a way which anticipated subsequent developments.

Throughout his long reign, the French king sought to achieve his political goals through a mixture of diplomatic and military means, and did so with considerable success, securing important territorial gains and significantly strengthening France’s eastern and north-eastern frontier. His opponents and even, at times, his allies countered the apparent threat of French hegemony—Louis XIV’s monarchy was the strongest and most populous in Europe—by seeking to combine against it. Since diplomatic representation was reciprocal, France’s actions had led them to establish permanent embassies of their own, and they now began to negotiate intensively. States that were either intended allies or members of opposing coalitions experienced France’s more creative, supple diplomacy at first hand, and before long began to emulate it themselves. Sweden, for example, which in the earlier seventeenth century had maintained a handful of missions primarily around the Baltic, between the 1650s and the 1690s supported around twenty diplomats stationed all over Europe, symptomatic of its new-found status and ambitions as well as the influence of the French model. These men also stayed in the same post for more extended periods than hitherto, evidence of the new-style resident diplomacy which linked an increasing number of European capitals.

During the century and a half after the Westphalian settlement, diplomacy became less purely reactive, a matter of responding to events and problems only when they arose, and—more than hitherto—sought to anticipate developments and to defuse problems before they led to war. The intensive and multi-lateral, if ultimately unsuccessful, efforts to find a negotiated solution to the problem of the Spanish Succession, conducted in the later 1690s in the shadow of Charles II’s anticipated death, were a striking example. The emergence of a new style of diplomacy was incomplete even in the 1780s, but the transition was unmistakable, and ensured that political relations were no longer conducted primarily to begin or end wars as before. The distinctive diplomatic culture which would prevail until the First World War was largely created during the long eighteenth century.

The expansion of the diplomatic network possessed a further dimension. Capitals in eastern Europe, hitherto part of a separate political world where occasional, temporary missions were more normal, began to maintain continuous relations with states further west. Russia’s emergence during the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was central to this development. Hitherto Russian rulers had usually discouraged diplomats from lingering in Moscow, while themselves sending only occasional and temporary embassies, but this changed with surprising speed. Russia’s first permanent embassy seems to have been established in neighbouring Poland–Lithuania in 1668. By Peter the Great’s death (1725), there were no fewer than twenty-one missions (including consulates) located abroad, though this total would decline slightly during the eighteenth century. While the Tsar–Emperor sought to create a more modern diplomatic service, ambassadors with sufficient knowledge of western Europe and its languages were hard to find, and at first this militated against Russia’s full political emergence. But Muscovy’s earlier isolation was now a thing of the past, and by 1815 Russia would be fully integrated both politically and diplomatically.

Its neighbour, Poland–Lithuania, also acquired an enlarged diplomatic corps at this time, though during the dynastic union with Saxony (1697–1763) it was primarily directed from Dresden rather than Warsaw and conducted by Saxon rather than
Polish diplomats. The Electorate’s diplomatic service expanded rapidly, doubling from sixteen permanent posts (1709) to thirty-two (1720s), while—even more remarkably—expenditure increased ten-fold in little more than a generation. The one important exception was the Ottoman Empire, which only began to establish its first permanent missions during the 1790s and did not become a full member of the diplomatic system until the nineteenth century.

Admiration for France’s foreign policy and for Louis XIV’s political, military, and cultural achievements was central to a second important development: the enhanced importance enjoyed by French as a—and, before long, the—language of diplomacy. This was part of a wider cultural trend, as French became the primary language of court and aristocratic society and of the Republic of Letters during the long eighteenth century. Within an expanding international system, the language in which discussions were conducted and agreements concluded was increasingly important. At the Congress of Westphalia, Latin had retained its established place as the principal, though not the only, diplomatic language, with Italian and French vying for second place: their enlarged role at the congress had revealed the transition which was already underway. The use of Latin became increasingly rare: the final treaty concluded in that language was the Quadruple Alliance of 1718 between Britain, Austria, France, and the Dutch Republic. Thereafter it survived (and then side-by-side with other languages) only in Hungary, Poland–Lithuania, where Italian and, increasingly, French were also used, and within the Empire, where it was utilized alongside German and, by the eighteenth century, French.

French gained in significance almost everywhere, becoming the principal language of negotiation and even, in certain countries, replacing the native vernacular in official instructions and in reports from diplomats: this was particularly marked in ambitious states of the second or third rank. During the eighteenth century, it was adopted by the Kingdom of Sardinia (as the Duchy of Savoy-Piedmont became in 1720 through its acquisition of the Mediterranean island and the royal title associated with it), by Denmark, Prussia, Saxony, the Palatinate and, shortly after 1800, by Russia too. There were important exceptions to this picture of an increasingly Francophone diplomatic universe. A basic form of Italian continued to be the lingua franca of the Mediterranean, where the Ottoman Empire remained influential, while the situation in the Iberian peninsula was complex and also changed significantly after the accession of a junior line of France’s Bourbon royal family to the Spanish throne. But the trend towards a French-speaking diplomatic world extending across large areas of the continent was real and significant, imparting as it did greater unity and facilitating official negotiations and unofficial contacts of all kinds.

Ambassadors and envoys were now more likely than hitherto to be drawn from the social elite, whose grip on Europe’s diplomatic services strengthened considerably during the hundred years before the French Revolution. The British state and even more the Dutch Republic, with their distinctive social structures, provided something of an exception to this growing noble dominance, though a significant number of Britain’s ambassadors came from the peerage. In earlier times humanist culture had been seen as the best available preparation for a diplomatic career, but by the later seventeenth century exalted social origins together with the possession of specific skills were judged more important. The high nobility or aristocracy had always provided a significant proportion of diplomats, though often at the head of purely ceremonial missions. With the establishment of an increasing number of permanent embassies, some great noblemen were expected to stay in their post for a number of years, rather than a few months as previously. They were assisted by a growing number of specialized personnel, as embassies expanded in size to cope with the increasing volume of business they were required to transact, and these subordinates provided a core of professional expertise which was essential to the functioning of the mission.

The declining role of clerical diplomats, now only sent—by Catholic monarchies—to Rome, was one minor reason for the nobility’s enhanced importance. By the eighteenth century it was a commonplace that aristocrats would make the best diplomats. They would have received an appropriate education, both social and intellectual; they would be familiar with the world of monarchical courts; and they possessed both the social poise and the family connections to open doors, as elite lineages became more international through travel and even intermarriage. The expectation that ambassadors and envoys would meet some and perhaps all of their own costs was a further incentive to choose noblemen: they controlled by far the greatest proportion of Europe’s wealth and could contract loans or draw—however unwillingly—on their private means to meet the substantial costs of their embassy. The new scale of resident diplomacy enhanced this established motive.
Aristocrats could more easily bear the expense, whether for more lavish house decoration or larger parade coaches now expected for resident ambassadors. The principal reason, however, remained that earlier set out by the Modenese writer Gasparo Braggacio in 1627, when he declared that ‘truly the purpose of the ambassador is so intrinsic and connected to the person of his master, that he cannot be seen as separate from the prince’. This was why a portrait of the ruler was prominently displayed in the ambassador’s residence, in order to underline his representative role.

Detailed studies confirm the growing aristocratization. During the period 1648–1740, almost two-thirds (61 per cent) of Austrian Habsburg diplomats came from the Estate of Lords (Herrenstand, the titled nobility), while a fifth (21 per cent) were members of the lesser nobility (Ritterstand). In the eighteenth-century Kingdom of Sardinia, two-thirds of diplomats were drawn from long-established noble families and the remainder from more recently ennobled lineages. Spain’s diplomatic service was the most blue-blooded of all. Out of 167 individuals who headed diplomatic missions between 1700 and 1808, around thirty were grandees—members of leading and usually long-established lineages—while the remainder was drawn overwhelmingly from the traditional nobility. These figures, which could be replicated for most European countries, conceal a further trend. Great aristocrats were appointed to the most prestigious embassies—Madrid, Vienna, Paris, and Rome (for Catholic monarchies)—while members of lesser lineages tended to be sent to minor capitals or more distant locations: Munich or Naples, Stockholm or Moscow.

This preference gave old regime diplomacy a distinctly aristocratic tone, which was reinforced by the enhanced role of courts. Envoys and ambassadors had always been admitted to the court society of the rulers to whom they were appointed. During the long eighteenth century, however, diplomatic missions became longer, being measured in years, rather than months. Leading noblemen, accustomed to extended periods living at court in their own countries, expected to do the same during their missions, especially if their wife accompanied them. At many courts, moreover, ambassadorial audiences and receptions for the diplomatic corps were an important element in monarchical ceremonial. The result was that the European network of resident diplomacy became an aggregate of its court societies.

These developments further enhanced the significance of etiquette and protocol, always important in diplomacy. The voluminous fourth and fifth volumes of the second and substantially expanded edition of Jean Dumont’s celebrated collection of international treaties, bore the significant title, ‘The diplomatic ceremonial of Europe’s courts’. Consciously designed to guide working diplomats and widely used by them, it provided near-comprehensive guidance on the issues of ceremonial and protocol which an ambassador would regularly confront. By around 1700 the hierarchy of ruling titles had been generally recognized as a guide to the tricky questions of precedence. The representatives of the Holy Roman Emperor and, in Catholic monarchies, the Pope, outranked those of kings, who in turn were placed before those of dukes and other ruling dignities. It was the accepted guide as to whether an ambassador took precedence over a fellow diplomat in a court procession or other monarchical occasion, or at the ruler’s dinner table. These were issues that, because they involved questions of honour and status, took up a quite disproportionate amount of a diplomat’s time and, during the eighteenth century, reached new levels of precision and formality. With hindsight it is clear that the more complete fusing of court life and diplomacy during the final century of the old regime produced a more complex and also more formalized system of etiquette governing both.

One consequence of the enhanced aristocratic tone was that it militated against envoys or ambassadors making a career in diplomacy or preparing for it by systematic study, and thus ensured that it remained rather amateur. Members of leading lineages had internalized the notion that they owed their sovereign service, whether on the battlefield, in the council chamber, or on a diplomatic mission, and that this in turn validated their own privileged status. They were therefore willing to accept an embassy—possibly even more than one—but not to fashion a career as an ambassador. It is significant that around 60 per cent of eighteenth-century Spanish diplomats took only a single embassy; in Poland–Lithuania the comparable figure seems to have been as high as 86 per cent. In France, over the period 1648–1789, more than two-fifths of diplomats carried out a single mission, and this was probably a better indication of the wider pattern. Military service was seen as more attractive, validating as it did the nobility’s status as the fighting caste, than its administrative or diplomatic counterpart, viewed instead as a relegation which should be as temporary as possible. Service in a foreign capital denied an aristocrat the opportunity to
reside at their own ruler’s court, with its unmatched opportunities for patronage and advancement.

One consequence was that old regime diplomacy was dominated by amateurs, particularly in its higher echelons. This was why a series of well-intentioned efforts during the eighteenth century, led by the French Académie Politique, to train diplomats were all unsuccessful. It opened in 1712, but by 1721 had disappeared: exactly like all the other nurseries for would-be ambassadors established in other European countries. The main source of such training as there was continued to be subordinate positions in the embassies themselves, from which young nobles might rise to more exalted posts. A more professional, career-oriented approach was evident in some of the less important missions and especially among the growing number of subordinate personnel—secretaries and clerks, translators, specialists of all kinds—who were to be found in the enlarged missions usual by the later eighteenth century. Detailed negotiations might be handled by minor figures within the embassy, with the aristocratic ambassador reduced to the role of a figurehead.

Diplomacy’s new scale and importance led to the establishment of larger and more sophisticated foreign offices to handle the correspondence and to contribute to policy-making. Once again France took the lead. Louis XIV’s final foreign minister (1698–1715), Jean-Baptiste Colbert, marquis de Torcy, created a more elaborate framework for handling diplomacy, with a series of specialized departments and experts to staff them. Whereas at the beginning of the king’s personal rule in 1661, a single coach would have been sufficient to transport the minister and his assistants, by 1715 there were so many specialized personnel—officials, translators, cryptographers, clerks, archivists—that twenty such coaches would have been needed. France’s foreign office provided a model for other monarchies to copy, as both Spain (1714) and Sardinia (1719) soon did, creating modern secretariats to control diplomacy. Russia (1719), Prussia (1728–33), and Austria (1742–53) did likewise, ensuring that by the middle of the eighteenth century more elaborate mechanisms existed in all the major continental states for the administration of foreign policy. The systematic accumulation of previous diplomatic correspondence, memoirs, and information of all kinds to guide policy-makers had been undertaken since the fifteenth century, but it now achieved a wholly new scale and level of sophistication. The long eighteenth century was decisive for many of the great archives for the study of foreign policy, such as those of France and Austria.

The protean foreign office bureaucracies emerging at this time did not, however, weaken the strongly personal nature of monarchical foreign policy. Europe’s rulers continued to direct their country’s diplomacy on a day-to-day basis, exactly as Louis XIV did during the final phase (1709–13) of the War of the Spanish Succession. One of the best examples of this was the way in which Sweden’s diplomacy was hamstrung during Charles XII’s exile in the Ottoman Empire (1709–14), after his defeat at Pultava. The regency in Stockholm was unable to make major decisions without the King’s approval, which took months to secure from distant Bender. The degree of personal involvement, amounting almost to direction, which both Prussia’s Frederick the Great (1740–86) and Austria’s Joseph II (1780–90) exercised over policy underlined that diplomacy remained firmly monarchical and dynastic until the end of the ancien régime and beyond.

Important changes during the last century and a half of the ancien régime fundamentally changed the nature of European diplomacy. The innovations were set out in a series of handbooks, frequently reprinted and equally regularly plundered by later authors, and these in turn were read by diplomats and would-be diplomats, in this way ensuring that the new ways were widely emulated. Such guides to diplomatic practice had been produced at least since the fifteenth century, but those published at this time were far more detailed and also more closely linked to actual practice. The earliest was Wicquefort’s massive and authoritative, if rather legalistic, L’ambassadeur et ses fonctions, published in 1681. Its enduring influence is evident in the fact that a copy was to be found in the personal library of every single eighteenth-century French ambassador for which an inventory has survived. The changes between the 1660s and the 1720s were set out very clearly in two innovative works by officials in the French foreign ministry, François de Callières’s De la manière de négocier avec les souverains (1716) and Antoine Pecquet’s Discours sur l’art de négocier (1737). These differed from Wicquefort in discussing not the legal privileges enjoyed by an ambassador but the negotiations he would be called upon to conduct, reflecting the changing nature of the diplomatic craft. Such treatises were much imitated and frequently drawn upon in a series of similar works and above all by the Prussian official Baron Friedrich von Bielfeld in his Institutions politiques (1760), the second volume of which contained a detailed though highly derivative study of diplomacy.
One of these theorists, Pecquet, first characterized this diplomatic world as an ‘independent society’. Noble-dominated, court-oriented, and French-speaking, members of individual diplomatic corps identified with their fellow envoys and ambassadors, whom (p. 689) they met regularly on the social round which now existed in every major capital and who shared many of their own customs and values as well as a common lifestyle. Indeed, diplomats now identified as much with their counterparts as with the views of their own government. This strengthened the established tendency for negotiation to be a matter of discussion and compromise, also fostered by the indecisiveness of eighteenth-century warfare. Shared cultural interests strengthened this bond, as they had done throughout the early modern centuries. This was Europe’s diplomatic society, and it was fully established by the eve of the French Revolution which broke out in 1789.

That event appeared as a watershed in the history of the European state system. By 1792–93 the revolutionaries had violently rejected monarchy and the diplomacy with which it was now closely linked, instead establishing a republic and executing the king and queen. Before long many aristocrats had either resigned or been purged from France’s overwhelmingly noble diplomatic corps. Both the clothes and the conduct of their replacements highlighted the gulf opening up between the new regime in Paris and the old monarchies, whose aim was to restore the house of Bourbon. Dressed not in aristocratic finery—silk coats, ornate waistcoats, breeches, and stockings—but in simple coats and trousers, the representatives of the new French Republic rejected the language and the mores of the diplomatic society which now prevailed: by the late summer of 1796, French agents would only refer to their counterparts as ‘citizen’ (citoyen), ‘excellency’ having been banned by the Directory which now ruled France. The discussion and compromise which had been the essence of old-regime diplomacy were unceremoniously rejected. Instead, representatives of the new order in Paris expected their demands to be granted in their entirety, shouted and banged the table when they were not, and before long had victorious armies to enforce their claims. After the Rastadt conference in 1797–99, the Austrian representative Metternich declared that he had never encountered ‘such ill-conditioned animals’ as his French counterparts.

The struggle to defeat the hated Revolution and the long wars through which this was waged (1792–1815) also served to revitalize diplomacy. The scale of French victories and the enormous territorial gains which followed made political cooperation among the established monarchies imperative, particularly after Napoleon Bonaparte rose to power in 1799. Coalitions appeared the only way by which French hegemony—which far exceeded that threatened under Louis XIV—might be averted, exactly as it had been between 1672 and 1713, and with the identical result. The extensive diplomatic cooperation which preceded the final defeat of Napoleon validated and institutionalized the diplomatic network created during the long eighteenth century.

Traditional diplomacy, slow-moving and achieved by discussion and compromise, was restored at Vienna in 1814–15. Social events, integral to eighteenth-century diplomatic society but an immediate casualty of revolutionary practice, dominated the Congress itself. Indeed, these were so numerous that the Prince de Ligne, the epitome of the old regime aristocrat, died in December 1814, worn out by the obligations of the Congress glittering social round. The settlement’s restoration of the political and social world of the ancien régime, modified in ways calculated to strengthen its stability, extended to its diplomacy. With this in view, the peacemakers regulated and codified (p. 690) its intrinsic characteristics. Agreements in 1815 and 1818 regulated the thorny issue of precedence for a century to come and confirmed the strict hierarchy of diplomatic ranks which had emerged during the eighteenth century, descending from ambassador, envoy, and minister plenipotentiary, through minister resident to chargé d'affaires. These conventions also removed the scope for disputes in the future by declaring that, within the top four classes, precedence would be determined not—as hitherto—by the ruler’s title but by the date of arrival in a particular capital.

These changes were duly incorporated into the most influential diplomatic handbook of the nineteenth century, the Manuel diplomatique (1822). Its author, Karl von Martens (1790–1863), came from a dynasty of Göttingen law professors. His treatise was frequently reprinted and updated and, renamed the Guide diplomatique, remained influential until the generation before the First World War. Its assumptions were deeply eighteenth-century in nature. Martens limited what he said about the actual conduct of negotiations, instead declaring he had nothing to add to the classic accounts contained in the treatises of Wicquefort, Callières, and Pecquet, which he warmly recommended. This epitomized the extent to which the
'old diplomacy’, as it would be styled in the later nineteenth century, had largely been the creation of the period before 1800, and highlighted one of the neglected legacies of early modern Europe to the modern world.

**Further Reading**


Osborne, Toby. *Dynasty and Diplomacy in the Court of Savoy: Political Culture and the Thirty Years’ War* (Cambridge, 2002).
Notes:

(1.) We are very grateful to Professors Isabella Lazzarini, Michael Levin, Thomas Munck, and M. J. Rodriguez-Salgado, for their helpful comments on a draft of this chapter.


(5.) In this vein, see especially Filippo de Vivo, Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics (Oxford, 2007).


(7.) Alain Hugon, Au Service du Roi Catholique: ‘Honorables Ambassadeurs’ et ‘Divins Espions’ (Madrid, 2004), 162, for one example when it was.


(11.) Mattingly, Renaissance Diplomacy, 61.

(12.) A massive recent study of the diplomacy of Jaime II of Aragon (1295–1327), for example, demonstrates the capacity


(15.) For an impressively detailed treatment see Francesco Senatore, *‘Uno mondo di carta’: forme e strutture della diplomazia sforzesca* (Naples, 1998).


(23.) Alberico Gentili, *De legationibus libri tres* (Oxford, 1924), II, 53.

(24.) The great increase in letter-writing is admirably summarized by Francisco Bethencourt and Florike Egmond in the introduction to their edited volume, *Correspondence and Cultural Exchange in Europe 1400–1700* (Cambridge, 2006).

(25.) Senatore, *‘Uno mondo di carta’*.


(27.) From 1 May 1503 to 30 April 1504, published in Pasquale Villani, ed., *Dispacci di Antonio Giustianian, ambasciatore veneto in Roma dal 1502 al 1505* (Florence, 1876).


34. Catherine Fletcher, *Our Man in Rome: Henry VIII and His Italian Ambassador* (London, 2012), 18; see also Daniela Frigo, ‘Prudence and Experience’. In his study of Jaime II of Aragon (1291–1327), Stephane Péquignot concludes that the king sought loyal ambassadors who displayed prudentia and discretio (discernment) while in his service abroad, suggesting that such qualities had been prized in medieval ambassadors as well: Péquignot, *Au Nom du Roi*.


42. Venetian ambassadors, who were usually wealthy, were expected to spend their own resources: Donald Queller, *Early Venetian Legislation on Ambassadors* (Geneva, 1966), 22. For the financial challenges see Paul Dover, ‘The Economic Predicament of Italian Renaissance Ambassadors’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, 12 (2008), 137–167.


46. This has been argued by Heinz Schilling, *Konfessionalisierung und Staatsinteressen: Internationale Beziehungen*
1559–1660 (Paderborn, 2007); there is a shorter statement of his views in his Early Modern European Civilization and its Political and Cultural Dynamism (Hanover, NH, 2008).

(47.) Hugon, _Au Service du Roi Catholique_, an informative and large-scale study of Spanish–French relations 1598–1635, makes the central role of intelligence gathering very clear indeed.

(48.) Hugon, _Au Service du Roi Catholique_, 118.


(50.) Heiko Droste, _Im Dienst der Krone: Schwedische Diplomaten im 17. Jahrhundert_ (Berlin, 2006), 64ff. There is an important recent study by Daniel Riches, Protestant Cosmopolitanism and Diplomatic Culture: Brandenburg–Swedish Relations in the Seventeenth Century (Leiden and Boston, 2013).

(51.) The standard work remains E. R. Adair, _The Exterritoriality of Ambassadors in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries_ (London, 1929).


(53.) Derek Croxton, _Westphalia: The Last Christian Peace_ (New York, 2013) is an admirable, up-to-date study.

(54.) Hamish Scott, ‘Diplomatic Culture in Old Regime Europe’, in Scott and Brendan Simms, eds., _Cultures of Power in Europe during the Long Eighteenth Century, 1680s–1815_ (Cambridge, 2007), 58–85, provides a much fuller account of the developments surveyed in this section.

(55.) C.-G. Picavet, _La diplomatie française au temps de Louis XIV (1661–1715): Institutions, Moeurs et Coutumes_ (Paris, 1930) remains the best guide to these developments.


(57.) Droste, _Im Dienst der Krone_, 84.


(59.) There is an important detailed study by Guido Braun, _La connaissance du Saint-Empire en France du Baroque aux Lumières, 1643–1756_ (Munich, 2010), 187–375; see also Braun, ‘Une tour de Babel?; Les langues de la négociation et les problèmes de traduction au Congrès de la paix de Westphalie (1643–1649)’, in Rainer Babel, ed., _Le diplomate au travail: Entscheidungsprozesse, Information und Kommunikation im Umkreis des Westphälischen Friedenskongresses_ (Munich, 2005), 139–172.


(61.) Quoted and translated by Toby Osborne, _Dynasty and Diplomacy in the Court of Savoy: Political Culture and the Thirty Years War_ (Cambridge, 2002), 70.

(62.) For the figures given in this paragraph, see Scott, ‘Diplomatic Culture’, 74–75, and the sources there cited.

(63.) See the comments of Antoine Pecquet, _De l’art de négocier avec les souverains_ (Paris, 1737; The Hague, 1738 edn.), esp. 65.


(69.) (2 vols.; The Hague, 1681). Four years earlier he had published *Mémoires touchant les ambassadeurs et les ministres publics* (The Hague, 1677), which he re-worked to produce the more famous treatise.


(71.) *De l’art de négocier*, 104.


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