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5. The Rise of National Feeling

Robert L. Bloom
Gettysburg College

Basil L. Crapster
Gettysburg College

Harold A. Dunkelberger
Gettysburg College

See next page for additional authors

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5. The Rise of National Feeling

Abstract

In the centuries under review in this chapter the self-sufficient manor, the feudal aristocracy, and the cultural isolation of Europe fell before the forces of economic change. In much the same way and for many of the same reasons the political institutions and practices of feudalism succumbed to the joint attacks of monarchs and the middle class. Even in its day of glory feudalism had within itself certain weaknesses. It had never been able to maintain more than a modicum of order, and indeed under the chivalric code the proper occupation of the knight was warfare. To the interminable civil strife that persisted were added such larger wars as the Crusades, and both sapped baronial families of men and treasure. The feudal nobility sold privileges to their tenants and disposed of land to pay ransom or buy passage to the Holy Land at the same time that monarchs were introducing taxation and tightening the royal hold on government. Furthermore, used to the near anarchy of feudal life and required to devote nearly all of their time and attention to the management and defense of their estates, the barons could engage only spasmodically in attempts to control the royal government. As the royal power grew in scope and became more complex in the hands of professional civil servants, the nobles were in an increasingly unfavorable position to check it. Finally, the prestige which the feudal polity always accorded the crown put baronial dissidents at a disadvantage in a custom-conscious age. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, manor, feudalism, aristocracy, Crusades, civil strife, nobility, taxation, government, royalty, national society

Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | European Languages and Societies | History | Political History

Comments

This is a part of [Section V: The Rise of Capitalism and the National State to 1500](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

Robert L. Bloom, Basil L. Crapster, Harold A. Dunkelberger, Charles H. Glatfelter, Richard T. Mara, Norman E. Richardson, and W. Richard Schubart

5. The Rise of National Feeling

In the centuries under review in this chapter, the self-sufficient manor, the feudal aristocracy, and the cultural isolation of Europe fell before the forces of economic change. In much the same way and for many of the same reasons the political institutions and practices of feudalism succumbed to the joint attacks of monarchs and the middle class. Even in its day of glory feudalism had within itself certain weaknesses. It had never been able to maintain more than a modicum of order, and indeed under the chivalric code the proper occupation of the

* Reprinted from Jacob Strieder, Jacob Fugger the Rich . . .
(New York: The Adelphi Company, 1931), pp. 153-155.

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As Europe moved into the High and Late Middle Ages these weaknesses became more evident and others appeared. After about 1300 the feudal class began to lose its military monopoly with the development of such new weapons as the longbow, gunpowder, and the cannon. These inventions placed the armed knight and his castle at a decided disadvantage. In addition, royal armies came to include mercenaries, skilled in new military techniques and ready to take the field for pay. Against them the feudal nobles were no match.

Economic changes too struck at the bases of feudalism. Feudal incomes were likely to be fixed or even falling at a time when the commercial revival and a money economy were raising prices, and those lords who failed to read aright the signs were caught in the squeeze. Those who attempted to adjust themselves to the new conditions and sought profits through enclosures acquired a concern for orderly government which often caused them to support a stronger monarchy against their erstwhile feudal allies. The rising towns offered competition to the feudal caste in both wealth and influence. Too often for its own good the nobility refused to offer townsmen any material reason why they should support the barons against the national state, an institution coming to characterize the political arrangement throughout Western Europe.

In the early Middle Ages Europeans were not strictly identified with particular geographical, ethnic, or linguistic boundaries. On the one hand the Holy Roman Empire and the universal Church tended to obscure differences in people, and on the other hand feudalism stressed local interests, authority, and loyalties. A high degree of political individualism among the nobility and provincialism among the people at large featured the feudal state. Nevertheless, a desire for political unity had never been completely extinguished by feudal decentralization. A nostalgic feeling for the "peace and plenty" which legend associated with the Roman Empire never entirely vanished. This sentiment perhaps aided in the short-lived attempts to revive political unity under Charlemagne and in the

*Existence of Holy Roman Empire
 though it in terms of very local or very universal. (not in between)
 King was at the top of the hierarchy. Geography played a part, but not all.*

Holy Roman Empire which followed.

It was not until 1300 or later, however, that the national state began to emerge as a separate and important entity, although the dim outlines of national feeling may be discerned in some earlier medieval art and architecture, language, and in the many folk tales such as Beowulf and the Chanson de Roland. As governments became more centralized under the authority of a king, the people of England, France, and Spain -- and to a lesser degree those of Germany and Italy -- came eventually to cherish the idea of nationhood. Even where national feeling was too weak to establish successfully a national state, the population could not remain unaffected by the new concept of political consolidation arising in Europe.

As the national state developed to become in time the key political institution of Western Civilization, it took on characteristics in direct contrast with the polity of feudalism. In nothing were these differences more marked than in the role of the king. Kingship did not disappear under the feudal system, but by the very definition of that system monarchical power was diminished and the king was little more than the "first among equals." The powers normally associated with government were exercised largely by the feudal nobility. Military power, so necessary in enforcing the law, resided in the same hands. The barons and their armed retainers operating from fortress-castles often defied the king with impunity. Since economic power was based on land and landholding was so diffused, the monarch possessed few financial resources of his own.

Nevertheless, the feudal system contained elements which aided in the eventual rise of strong monarchy. In the first place, the idea that he was first among equals in the feudal framework implied a sort of superior position of the king. The nobility were his vassals and as such owed him homage and a degree of obedience. That the throne was a desirable prize is attested by the fact that there were attempts by ambitious lords to gain it. The Church also assisted in strengthening royal claims to authority. Above all, the Church favored order, an order implicit in the preeminent temporal authority of a strong king, preferably, of course, one who was a loyal son of the Church.

Geographic influences played an important part in aiding the rise of royal authority. In England the kings could operate behind the natural moat that was the English Channel. Moreover, the length and breadth of England was not so great as to handicap centralized authority. Although France was large in area, French unity was aided by the natural boundaries afforded by the Alps and the Mediterranean to the east and south, the Pyrenees Mountains separating France from Spain, and the Atlantic Ocean and English Channel which washed her western shores. Only in the north and northeast were natural frontiers lacking, a fact which in large measure explains the territorial disputes never satisfactorily settled with the Germans.

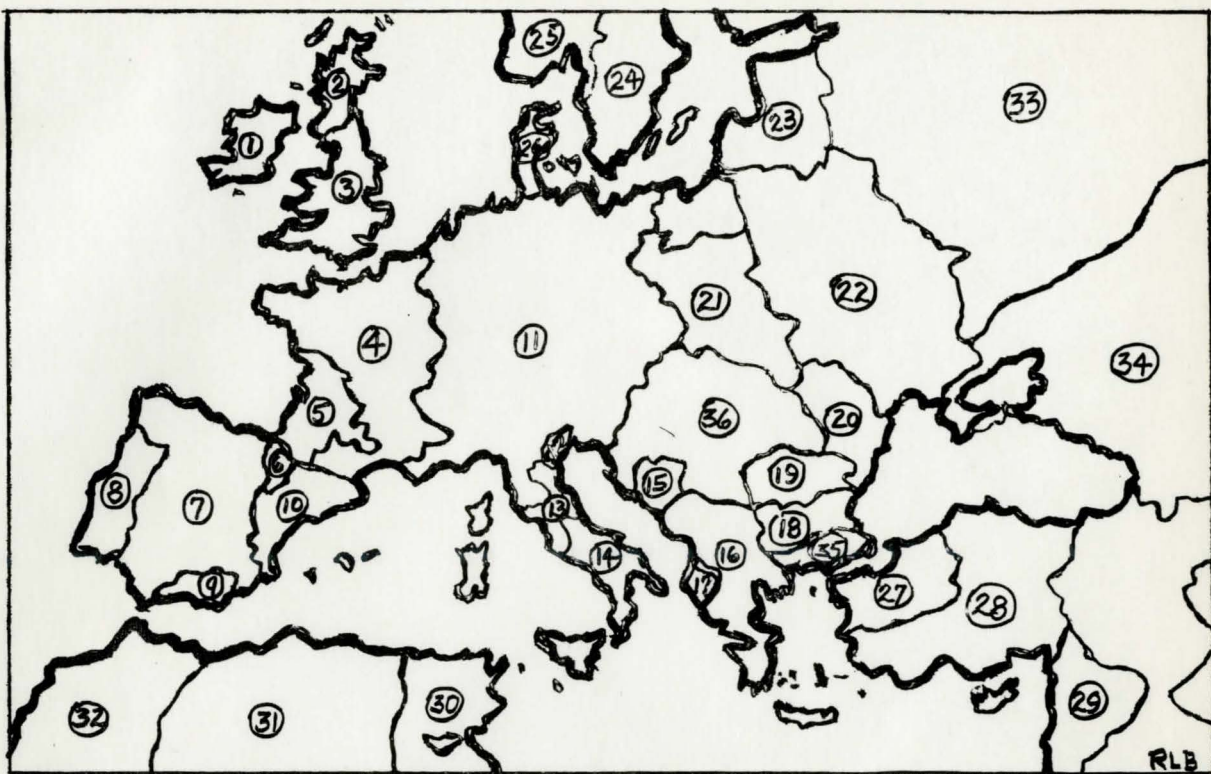
Geography is but one factor, however, in promoting the evolution of strong monarchies. Both the Spanish and Italian peoples inhabited peninsulas separated from the rest of the Continent by mountains, enjoyed similar climate, and traced their ethnic ancestry to similar origins. Yet Spain preceded Italy by about four centuries in achieving a national state and strong monarchy. Like the Italian, German national statehood was also delayed until the nineteenth century, and here too the delay was the result of historical forces. It is but accurate to say, therefore, that in England, France, and Spain the relatively early success of kings in enhancing royal power and forging national states was due to a combination of geographical and historical factors.

These factors promoted the transition from feudal kingship into the "New Monarchy" of the late Middle Ages and early modern times. Under the new arrangement the monarch gradually became the center of political authority and the wealthiest single individual in the state. Moreover, as he became the symbol and personification of the national state, the king was increasingly the object of popular loyalty. This transformation took place in a number of ways. In the first place, monarchs created a civil service, at first primarily an extension of the royal household, which enabled them to govern more effectively than before and to collect revenue. In time these officials began to specialize, some in finance, some in giving advice, and others in administering justice. A second royal strategem was to abandon the feudal notion that the king should live "of his own," from the proceeds of the feudal dues owed to him and the income of his personal domain. This meant the revival of the power to tax, which among other things enabled the king to hire mercenaries who would normally be a more loyal army than the feudal host. Finally, the long-disregarded concept of law as something made by the king through his power to legislate replaced the feudal notion that law was found in custom and tradition. It should be noted that these tactics did not follow the same course in all countries nor were they uniformly successful in enhancing royal authority.

On the Continent, the new system was aided by Roman law, interest in which had been revived during the twelfth century. Roman law appealed to a growing rationalism in the minds of medieval men, and especially to kings eager to find legal justification for concentrating power in their own hands. It is no accident that many monarchs chose their officials from the ranks of those trained in Roman law. ["What pleases the prince has the force of law," declared the Justinian Code, and its logical principles proclaimed that those who stood in opposition to the rescript of the prince were not only criminal but sacrilegious as well.] *Due to churchmen.*

It is unlikely that an ambitious monarch could achieve his ends without influential allies. Feudal kings could not look for effective aid from the serfs. Nor could they expect help from the nobility in realizing their aims. While many could

*scutage - money payment.
feudal lords paying less service and more money
concept of making law.
Parliament stems from the king's ~~council~~ council.*



EUROPE ABOUT 1360

- | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Ireland | 13. Papal States | 25. Norway |
| 2. Scotland | 14. Kingdom Naples | 26. Denmark |
| 3. England | 15. Bosnia | 27. Ottoman Turks |
| 4. France | 16. Serbia | 28. Seljuk Turks |
| 5. Aquitaine | 17. Albania | 29. Mameluke Sultanates |
| 6. Navarre | 18. Bulgaria | 30. Tunis |
| 7. Castile | 19. Wallachia | 31. Algeria |
| 8. Portugal | 20. Moldavia | 32. Morocco |
| 9. Granada | 21. Poland | 33. Russia |
| 10. Aragon | 22. Lithuania | 34. Mongols |
| 11. Holy Roman Empire | 23. Teutonic Order | 35. Byzantine Empire |
| 12. Venice | 24. Sweden | 36. Hungary |

rely on the support of important churchmen, the inevitable rivalry between the universal Church and the national state prevented sustained cooperation between monarch and prelate. In the bourgeoisie, however, the king found a group with interests opposed to those of the Church and the nobility. Kings were often successful in persuading this middle class that clerics and lords constituted a threat both to royal authority and bourgeois interests. The resulting alliance of monarch and businessman, although sometimes uneasy, provided the former with much of the liquid wealth he needed and the latter with order and protection for trade and industry.