

Introduction

Throughout history city-states have exercised an unremitting fascination. Political scientists, eager to explore how city-states differed from monarchies and nation-states; social scientists, bent upon discovering how capital accumulation shaped state formation in contrast to judicial-political coercion; historians of political thought, keen to locate the origins of the modern democratic order in the participatory and republican practices of the city-states of antiquity and the Middle Ages; and intellectual and cultural historians, committed to tracing the literary and artistic heritage of city-states in the context of economic efflorescence and competing patronage—all have dilated upon the virtues and achievements of the city-state.

These concerns form little part of this book. They have been exhaustively studied elsewhere by scholars far better equipped to do so than the present author. Rather, this study investigates why and how—and with what consequences—cities in Europe chose to dominate their hinterlands to the point where, in a clearly discernible belt of civic territories stretching from central and northern Italy over the Alps to the German-speaking lands and the Low Countries, they succeeded in constructing polities which deserve the name of city-states. This approach owes less to political theory or social science, let alone to cultural history, than to a tradition of regional historical studies which has most vigorously been pursued in Germany. This tradition, drawing heavily upon economic and historical geography, is not the preserve of historians of Germany, yet regional structural analysis has been taken further in Germany than in Italy.¹ There a regionally and culturally fragmented sensibility—*campanilismo*, the pride in locality or city—has too often obstructed attempts to compare the city-states with each other. Much the same, it may be added, applies to Switzerland, where a pervasive *Kantönligeist* has until recently hindered any sustained effort to explore the development of the city-states in a general Helvetic context.

The historiography of the city-state in any case displays some distinct oddities. Essays on the city-state in the ancient world abound, whether they deal with Greece or Latium, or with the earlier Phoenician and Babylonian cities. But when it comes to medieval and early modern Europe, the treatment dissolves into individual regional case-studies—on Italy, the German lands, or the Low Countries. A silent assumption exists that there was no such thing as the *European* city-state, or, perhaps more pointedly, that the experience of European city-states was so diverse that any comparison must from the outset be otiose and meaningless. Were I to share that view there would have been no occasion to write this book. That is not to say that I believe that there was a single model of the European city-state—the Conclusion will indicate otherwise—but rather that it is an illegitimate intellectual foreshortening to take for granted the answer to a question before it has even been posed. In so far as pan-European comparisons have been advanced, they privilege the experience of the Italian city-states, with city-state formation elsewhere in Europe dismissed as a late, partial, stunted—and ultimately irrelevant—phenomenon: runts in the litter, as it were. The one exception, Maude Clarke's *Medieval City State*, is now not only eighty-five years old; it remains firmly wedded, as its remarkable subtitle *An Essay on Tyranny and Federation in the Later Middle Ages* suggests, to an approach which examines the government of the cities themselves, rather than the reasons for control of their hinterlands and the instruments deployed.² The chapters which follow nevertheless acknowledge the European horizons which several Italian scholars, in particular Marino Berengo, Giorgio Chittolini, and Gian Maria Varanini, have explored: not only in their willingness to look beyond the local and particular to the regional and indeed international, but also in their engagement with theories of centrality to explore issues of 'centre and periphery' or 'contado and sphere of influence'.

Yet in writing the present essay I am painfully aware of two deficiencies. I would dearly have wished, not merely as a stylistic flourish but also as an intellectual *desideratum*, to have included citations from contemporary sources. Even though much of the argument upon which the book is based is, by definition, inferential (and therefore only rarely susceptible to citations from original sources), it would for the reader assuredly have come as a welcoming lightening and leavening of what, because of severe constraints on length, is perforce a very compressed account. The fourth edition of Daniel Waley's *The Italian City-Republics*, expanded by Trevor Dean, provides a suave and elegant contrast.³ The temptation to lard the narrative with

apposite quotations from Dante or Boccaccio, Bruni or Salutati, Machiavelli or Guicciardini has likewise been resisted: this is an investigation, not of the Italian city-state, let alone of Florence, but of the city-state in medieval Europe.

My second regret is more personal. For a historian who has spent his professional career—of which the present work represents the culmination—in investigating town–country relations, regional identity, and regional economic linkages, it is mortifying that there is no room to offer anything other than casual insights into the regional economic systems which European city-states sought (or failed) to construct. The plain fact is, however, that this is a topic not yet adequately researched, or rather, one on which highly discrepant verdicts abound; to merit proper attention, an entire book would be required. For Italy alone one need only mention three bones of contention: (1) the dating, causes, and consequences of rural indebtedness;⁴ (2) the interminable but inconclusive arguments on the role of share-cropping (*mezzadria*);⁵ (3) the debate whether Florence advanced or retarded the economy of its regional state.⁶ Only when issues such as these have been resolved will it be possible to assess the balance of advantage between the urban and rural economies of city-states, and thereby overcome the unspoken assumption that the rural economy was driven by a more advanced and innovative urban economy, to which it could only react or adapt.

Notwithstanding earlier remarks, the literature on the city-state in the individual territories or regions of medieval Europe is hypertrophic. No attempt has been made to resurrect ancient controversies over, for instance, the ‘conquest of the contado’ which have bedevilled Italian historiography for generations.⁷ Likewise, the absurd delusions of the *Tell-Forum* over the origins of the Swiss Confederation have been ignored. Indeed, as far as possible I have sought to avoid outworn historiographical debates altogether. Instead, I have concentrated on literature after 1950 (except in the case of some German city-states where, significantly, little has been written since the pioneering studies of the early twentieth century). Doubtless, I have overlooked important works; no historian of such a vast canvas can hope to be comprehensive. It should be stressed, however, that the works cited in the endnotes and Bibliography bear only upon the theme of the book: a bibliography of the internal history of city-states, whether ‘republican’ or ‘tyrannical’, or of the intellectual and artistic achievements of the city-states of medieval Europe must be sought elsewhere.

The book is divided into spans of one hundred and fifty years, which broadly reflect the main periods of development. Where appropriate, however, I have looked forward or backward beyond the given dates to present a coherent account: the spans should be taken as signposts, not boundary lines. Inevitably, the earlier chapters concentrate on Italy, since its city-states outstrip in their precocity those north of the Alps by several centuries. Yet at all times I have sought to bear the wider European context in mind. The heart of the book is contained in Chapters 4 and 5, which survey the full flowering of European city-states in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The decision to deal with south and north separately was dictated by practical considerations of length, not by any belief that they followed intrinsically different paths of evolution. The main differences which did emerge are examined in the first section of the Conclusion. The remaining two sections investigate typologies of the city-state from varying methodological approaches, before considering possible new approaches to these polities in the light of regional analysis. No attempt has been made to set the European city-state in a world-historical context: that has already been done by others and would, in any case, once again require a separate book.⁸

Bibliography

The bibliography includes only works cited in the text. For greater accessibility, it is divided into geographical sections. To maintain uniformity, all names beginning with d', da, dal, de, del, or della are listed under D; likewise, the Dutch 't is listed under T, and van or von under V, even though this is unusual in Netherlands and German usage. Many volumes published by the Italian-German Historical Institute in Trent have appeared in both Italian and German versions; I have used whichever version was most readily to hand.

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