Magnanimous Dukes and Rising States: the Unification of the Burgundian Netherlands 1380-1480

Review Number: 2177

Publish date: Thursday, 12 October, 2017

Author: Robert Stein

ISBN: 9780198757108

Date of Publication: 2017

Price: £85.00

Pages: 336pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Publisher url: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/magnanimous-dukes-and-rising-states-9780198757108?cc=gb&lang=en&>

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: Katherine Wilson

In an excellent monograph, Robert Stein investigates the background and the unification of one of Later Medieval Europe's greatest polities, The Burgundian Netherlands. This book, published in the *Oxford Studies in Medieval European History* is a revised translation of its Dutch version *De hertog en zijn Staten* in 2014. It is a fundamentally important contribution to both the scholarship and teaching of the Burgundian Netherlands and to our understanding of the patchwork of European polities in the later Middle Ages.

In his introduction Robert Stein sets out the main tenets of his thesis. He states that the study will focus on 'the administrative establishment of the Burgundian Netherlands, namely the organization of governance, justice and finance'. Of course, in a book as masterful as this, he does even more, also considering the establishment of the Burgundian Netherlands, the expansion and limitations of Burgundian power and the institutions of the polity from their social and political contexts. Stein carefully lays out the parameters for his study in the introduction. The monograph mainly considers the integration of ten principalities of the Netherlands with a focus on the principalities of Flanders, Artois, Brabant, Hainault, Holland and Zeeland. Its chronological scope takes in the rule of the four Burgundian dukes, Philip the Bold (1363–1404), John the Fearless (1404–19), Philip the Good (1419–67) and Charles the Bold (1467–77), with a particular focus on Philip the Good.

The introduction includes a very useful overview of the most up to date historical thinking on the process of later medieval state formation as well as the way in which that work intersects with the historiography underpinning scholarship on the Burgundian Netherlands. In terms of state formation, Stein asks 'Is a state exclusively the child of princely aspirations for power?'. He makes clear that recent literature on the subject has underlined that in fact 'interdependence' between a prince, government and subjects was the key to a unified state. The prince needed the nobility and the elites of his towns for political and fiscal support, in turn these nobles and elites required stability and clear systems of law and order from the prince. If provided by the prince, their subjects were then more likely to invest in the prince and their territories. Stein outlines that this approach taken by New Institutional Economics, and reinforced by the work of historians such as Bernard Gueneé and John Watts, emphasizes the interaction of prince and subject. It thus suggests that Later

Medieval polities were, as John Watts has stated, forged 'from below or from within, as they were from above'.

Stein's neat assessment of Burgundian historiography will be useful for any budding student of these important territories. Here the reader is presented with a clear picture of the way in which the Burgundian Netherlands has been treated historiographically. First, it was viewed as a hiccup in the story of French state formation. Second, the polity created under the four dukes was characterized in the 19th century as a struggle of Belgian cities against Burgundy. Third, in the later 19th century when Belgium began operating on an international stage, the dukes became the heroes of Belgian unity in the eyes of Henri Pirenne, shaping the modern Belgian state. A major legacy of these earlier works has been the focus on the dukes as actors in all elements and institutions of their polity, and while Stein acknowledges their role, he also asks the important question, 'was it a dominant role?'. Here he suggests the idea of a 'composite monarchy' for the Burgundian territories under the four dukes. Taken his lead from John Elliott, Stein explains that a composite monarchy is a personal union under one prince, with different principalities which are still treated as independent administrative entities with their own laws and customs. Given the number of territories and peoples ruled by the dukes (by the rule of Charles the Bold the Burgundian Netherlands comprised some three million people) the term 'composite' monarchy is an appropriate one for Stein to use as a tool to examine the formation of the Burgundian union. The book is clearly divided into two main sections to develop his assessment of the administrative establishment of the Burgundian Netherlands. In chapters two, three and four, the way in which the Burgundian Dynasty acquired their principalities from other rulers (especially given their own weak claims to some of these principalities) is assessed. In chapters five, six, seven and eight the administrative, judicial and financial institutions within the Burgundian union are examined.

The main thrust of the argument in chapters two, three and four, are the ways in which Philip the Bold, John the Fearless, Philip the Good and Charles the Bold amassed territories. Chapter two provides an excellent overview of the territories they acquired during their rule, and their shifting political relationships with other European powers. In particular there is a welcome emphasis on the importance of the duchy of Burgundy to the dynasty (often forgotten once the acquisition of Flanders comes into the Burgundian historical narrative) in its attempts to legitimize itself. In chapter two Stein's key finding is that the claims of the Burgundian dukes over territories they sought to acquire (especially those within the Empire) were in his words, 'highly dubious', but that nonetheless they were generally successful in their aims due to financial transactions for these territories. As early as 1390 Philip the Bold bought the county of Charolais adjoining Burgundy for 60,000. However, at the end of the chapter, setting the scene for chapter three, he concedes that these financial transitions for territories were only one part of the foundation to Burgundian power. More importantly in his eyes, was the need of the dynasty to develop the recognition of their subjects in their right to rule and to establish support from various regional institutions in that rule.

In chapter three the significant role these representative institutions played are carefully considered. Stein rightly reminds the reader that conflict between ruler and representative institutions is often overemphasized, as in reality both were bound together (if at times uncomfortably). The representative institutions existed in all the territories that made up the Burgundian union and were usually made up of nobles, clergy, urban elites, entrepreneurs, merchants and patricians. These institutions, Stein outlines, entered into dialogue with the prince and were important in the politics of each territory they represented. Their importance to a prince, or to a Burgundian duke seeking to consolidate a territory over which they had a dubious claim, was in part due to a symbiotic relationship that worked for both prince and members of the representative institutions. Stein emphasizes what he terms the 'confluence of interests' between these two players. The towns required the support of the duke in maintaining order, which gave them financial stability. Even if the duke might threaten urban privileges from time to time, this risk was nothing in comparison to the threat town elites faced from lower social groups in urban centres. In turn, for dukes with dubious claims to rule, the support of representative institutions was invaluable. First, they provided important financial backing for the Burgundian project. Second, they promoted the duke's right to rule and thus bolstered their rather fragile claims.

Financial elements underpinning the success of the Burgundian union and its acquisition of territories come to the fore in chapter four. Here Stein builds his thesis by making painfully clear that the later Middle Ages is also a story of the bankruptcy of princes and polities; a situation skillfully exploited by the Burgundian dynasty. The increase in the size of courtly households, the astronomic costs of warfare and the expense of diplomatic agreements and peace treaties saw many provincial households incur vast amounts of debt. In short, Stein demonstrates that the Burgundian princes became successful rulers, not solely through their own personal agency or personality traits, but because they were seen as the most fiscally sound alternative as rulers. In the face of financial ruin, money talked, and no matter how weak Burgundian ducal claims to some provincial titles might have been, their contemporary reputation as one of the richest dynasties in Europe served their acquisition of these territories well. In addition, Stein makes clear that the systematic fiscal policy developed under Philip the Bold and their canny exploitation of any political disputes played into their expansion of power. Finally, by holding Flanders as one of their territories, Flanders gave the Burgundian dukes the final financial heft to make them attractive as feudal lords to any struggling principality. Flanders was one of the most economically prosperous regions in Western Europe, and the Flemish groat was the most important and stable currency in the Netherlands, which Stein points out, was a great attraction for the towns of Holland. His chapter presents two very important conclusions for the historiography of the Burgundian Netherlands. The first is the demolishing of the agency of the dukes in the formation of the Burgundian union. The second is the re-focusing on the importance of political elites to the success of the Burgundian union. In his words, 'For the classes of merchants and owners in the towns and for a large number of powerful nobles, the Burgundian dukes represented a guarantee of the economic and societal stability they so desired'.

Chapters five, six, seven and eight seek to underpin and build the case for this thesis by examining the institutions themselves. It should be noted that Stein makes what are rather complex administrative systems very accessible and easily understandable to the reader, a laudable feature of this work, which will make it valuable to a wider readership as well as a teaching tool. Chapter five seeks to focus on the administrative structure of the union, examining the way in which the Burgundian privy council operated, and asking how far former principalities were integrated. The chapter examines the Burgundian court from this perspective, Stein revises down some of the numbers of the court, but makes it clear that numbers aside, the courtly household and the presence of the courtly household were important for the towns it visited; a perspective that reinforces years of work on the Burgundian household, its structures and its expenditure. Given that the Burgundian household was itinerant throughout the reign of the four dukes, Stein gives an interesting overview of the ways in which ducal power was administered in their absence through stadtholders or governors. In this chapter he returns to consider what might have set the Burgundian dynasty apart in terms of their relative success in incorporating and managing different territories, pointing towards a shift from a more feudal mode of service in terms of who was selected to serve for the Burgundian dukes in such

positions, to a mode of service where individuals were selected on the basis of competence. In addition, he stresses that though the princely courts of the territories acquired by the Burgundian dukes had disappeared, the territories themselves did not disappear under the Burgundian union, which in part helped to retain the support of the political elites in these regions. As he concludes, 'The union was not in fact a unit but an association, the "Burgundian State" was the dream, the composite monarchy was the reality'. His conclusion is underlined by an examination of the jurisdiction of the Burgundian territories in chapter six, which emphasizes the different systems in operation in the territories but underlines the key point that while centralization may have been an almost impossible goal to obtain, the dukes did manage above all to promote the legal security of those subjects they most relied upon to support their claims and rule, those who could afford to pay for it.

Chapter seven again drives forward Stein's view that the Burgundian Netherlands under the four dukes can be considered a 'composite monarchy' by examining the fiscal organization of the Burgundian territories. Here he demonstrates that although the dynasty aimed for financial unification, it was never really achieved, and could even be considered a failure after 1465. However, according to Stein what was the great success of the system was in its personnel, those individuals who almost 50 years ago Richard Vaughan highlighted as of crucial importance to the Burgundian 'state' and of whom there has been much study since, namely the administrators (and their administrative culture). His study of the taxes raised and used by the Burgundian state emphasizes the need for the co-operation of local and provincial elites, and that their support in raising the revenue the Burgundian state needed to operate at a European level, only served to strengthen the dukes and the public role of the Burgundian union.

In his conclusion three main areas developed in the book are highlighted once again. First, Stein emphasises that though the dukes of Burgundy 'did not actually create a modern state, but during their reign a process of state formation was set in motion...'. Second, he stresses the importance of the social and political contexts that allowed the dukes to achieve the former including the professional officers and the debt crisis of other dynasties. Third, he revisits the role of wealthy merchants and urban elites underlined by the New Institutional Economics. These were given stability and economic security, and they therefore in the main threw their support behind the Burgundian dynasty. In Stein's eyes, 'Beside the Burgundian dynasty and the government officials, they were the biggest winners from the unification of the Netherlands'.

Given Stein's careful scholarship, mastery of the archival material and persuasive arguments, there is very little to critique about this monograph. Indeed, the following comments come from a consideration of what might now be pushed further forward as a result of this excellent work. First is the approach of the New Institutional Economics and the notion of the Burgundian Netherlands as a 'composite monarchy'. Such an approach gives us a secure framework using which historians can emphasize and study the role of political and economic elites in terms of state formation. However, just as Stein is careful not to do in this book, we should not assume these overarching structures are fixed or to drive the archival material to fit with these structures. Further case studies from the archival material (in all its forms) are needed to 'test' these models even further. Stein's work does this excellently through the administrative structures. Thus there is now scope for a bigger study examining the cultural construction of the Burgundian State to test and seek out the 'messiness' or the particularities of exchanges that might lie below these structures.

Stein's work is a huge contribution to the scholarship of the Burgundian Dominions for several reasons. First, it sits alongside the great monographs that take on the geographical scope and complexity of the growth and development Burgundian Netherlands (for example, those produced by Richard Vaughan, including *Valois Burgundy* and Wim Blockmans and Walter Prevenier's *The Promised Lands*).⁽¹⁾ It is a welcome addition to this canon as it incorporates and builds from much of the more recent scholarship that has been produced since 1988. Second, its translation will allow a new generation of English speaking undergraduate students a chance to be introduced to and inspired by the Burgundian Netherlands and it is an important resource for those lecturers (of whom this reviewer is one) who seek to bring alive the Burgundian Netherlands for them. Third, it is of great importance to later medievalists as a whole who want to think about the particularities of the polities across Europe in a comparative context. Hopefully this monograph is

just the start of more translations of important works on the Burgundian Netherlands.

Notes

1. Richard Vaughan, *Valois Burgundy* (London, 1975); Wim Blockmans and Walter Prevenier, *The Promised Lands: the Low Countries Under Burgundian Rule, 1369-1530* (Houten, 1988). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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