

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79232-5 - The Making of Polities: Europe, 1300–1500

John Watts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## The Making of Polities: Europe, 1300–1500

This major survey of political life in late medieval Europe – the first for more than thirty years – provides a new framework for understanding the developments that shaped this turbulent period. Rather than emphasising crisis, decline, disorder or the birth of the modern state, this account centres on the mixed results of political and governmental growth across the continent. The age of the Hundred Years War, schism and revolt was also a time of rapid growth in jurisdiction, taxation and representation, of spreading literacy and evolving political technique. This mixture of state formation and political convulsion lay at the heart of the ‘making of polities’. Offering a full introduction to political events and processes from the fourteenth century to the sixteenth, this book combines a broad, comparative account with discussion of individual regions and states, including eastern and northern Europe alongside the more familiar west and south.

JOHN WATTS is Fellow and Tutor in History, Corpus Christi College, Oxford. His previous publications include *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship* (1996) and, as co-editor, *Power and Identity in the Middle Ages* (2007).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79232-5 - The Making of Polities: Europe, 1300–1500

John Watts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

### Cambridge Medieval Textbooks

This is a series of introductions to important topics in medieval history aimed primarily at advanced students and faculty, and is designed to complement the monograph series *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought*. It includes both chronological and thematic approaches and addresses both British and European topics.

*For a list of titles in the series, see end of book.*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79232-5 - The Making of Polities: Europe, 1300–1500

John Watts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

THE MAKING  
OF POLITIES  
EUROPE, 1300–1500

---

JOHN WATTS  
*Corpus Christi College, Oxford*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-79232-5 - The Making of Polities: Europe, 1300–1500  
 John Watts  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
 São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org  
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521796644

© John Watts 2009

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
 and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
 no reproduction of any part may take place without  
 the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2009  
 3rd printing 2012

Printed at MPG Books, Group, UK

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*  
 Watts, John, 1964–

The making of polities : Europe, 1300–1500 / John Watts.

p. cm. – (Cambridge medieval textbooks)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-521-79232-5 – ISBN 978-0-521-79664-4 (pbk.)

1. Europe – Politics and government – 476–1492. 2. Political culture – Europe – History – To 1500. 3. State, The – History – To 1500.
4. Middle Ages. I. Title. II. Series.

JN7.W38 2009  
 320.9409'023–dc22  
 2009007358

ISBN 978-0-521-79232-5 Hardback  
 ISBN 978-0-521-79664-4 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for  
 the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or  
 third-party internet websites referred to in this book,  
 and does not guarantee that any content on such  
 websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-79232-5 - The Making of Polities: Europe, 1300–1500  
John Watts  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

For Adrian

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79232-5 - The Making of Polities: Europe, 1300–1500

John Watts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

CONTENTS

	<i>List of maps</i>	<i>page</i> ix
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
1	<b>Introduction</b>	1
	Historiography	9
	Three grand narratives	13
	Social and economic crisis	13
	War and disorder	19
	The rise of the state	23
	Structures	34
2	<b>Europe in 1300: the political inheritance</b>	43
	Forms of government and resistance	48
	Empires	48
	Kings and kingdoms, lords and principalities	68
	Communes and leagues	98
	Churches	116
	Conclusion	122
	Forms of political culture	129
	Ideas and discourses	131
	Communication	148
	Networks	153
3	<b>The fourteenth century</b>	158
	The course of events	159
	c.1300–c.1340	159
	c.1340–c.1400	180
	Conclusion	201

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-79232-5 - The Making of Polities: Europe, 1300–1500  
John Watts  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
	The growth of government	205
	Justice and law	207
	Military service	219
	Taxation	224
	Representation	233
	Administration and office	238
	Informal structures	244
	Political thinking and writing	254
	Government and political life	263
	Conflicts of jurisdiction	264
	Conflicts of political community	270
	Resolution	282
4	<b>The fifteenth century</b>	287
	The course of events	291
	c.1400–c.1450	291
	c.1450–c.1500	339
	Co-ordination and consolidation: the regnal polity	376
	Political culture	381
	Developments in government	393
	The practice of politics	410
5	<b>Conclusion</b>	420
	<i>Bibliographical notes</i>	426
	<i>Index</i>	453



Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-79232-5 - The Making of Polities: Europe, 1300–1500  
John Watts  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

MAPS



1	Europe in 1300	<i>page 160</i>
2	Europe in 1500	288

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Three things prompted me to set about researching and writing this book. The first was a desire to know more about the politics of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe and about how they fitted together. In Oxford, pre-modern historians, regardless of specialism, routinely teach large amounts of British and European history, and I wanted to have a sounder grasp of what it was I was discussing in tutorials and lectures. A second factor was a dissatisfaction with what appeared to be the prevailing narratives of the period: not only did they not seem to explain very much about political life, they also set out from questionable assumptions; it seemed to me that the big picture might be understood and reconstructed differently, and what follows is an attempt to do that. One reason why these narratives appeared unconvincing is that they are rather different from the ways in which most British historians think about later medieval English political and constitutional history: I found that, when reading or teaching European material, I was required to accept perspectives that I would instantly reject if I encountered them in an English context. This was my third motivation: to think about the political life of the whole continent with the conceptual tools derived from a couple of decades spent studying English history – and equally, of course, to look again at what I thought I knew of England from a wider, European field of vision. As a historian of English politics, with a research experience that has not strayed much beyond the Public Record Office and the British Library, I have often felt anxious about attempting to write about Europe, even in the synthetic and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79232-5 - The Making of Politics: Europe, 1300–1500

John Watts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgements*

xi

introductory manner of this book, which draws on the first-hand research of others. (On that note, indeed, I would like, at this moment, to express hearty thanks to those proper continental historians who forbore to say, ‘What, *you?*’, when I told them of my plans.) But of course, the kingdom of England is a historic political unit readily comparable to others in Europe: it may have been distinctive in certain ways, but it was not at all detached or unique; its affairs, as we all know, overlapped with those of every part of the continent. The English historiography of the later middle ages, for all its insularity, is rich and subtle; it engages with many of the same themes, problems and past realities as the historiographies of continental states; and, given that most European historians are really experts in one place or another, familiarity with the affairs of this small, outward-looking, but highly governed, lowland realm began to seem a reasonable qualification for embarking on a wider comparative study.

That said, I am very conscious of the gap between what I would like to have achieved and what I have been able to do. I have read as much as I can, but I have not read as extensively as I would have wished, especially in foreign languages. My strategy has been to try to read enough continental writing, whether in the original or in translation, to understand how the historians of other countries think, and then to fill the gaps in English or translated material from what I could get at in French, or – on a more restricted scale – in Spanish, Italian and German. No doubt the limitations of my linguistic knowledge have skewed my understanding, and better-informed readers will see how. I am also well aware that the treatment of some parts of Europe is better and thicker than that of other parts. There are some justifications for this. The west, south-west and centre of the continent have long dominated treatments of Europe, so an introductory and interpretative text like this one needs above all to engage with these areas. Equally, it can be argued that the relatively urbanised regions of west-central and Mediterranean Europe experienced a particular kind of political complexity which demands space to discuss and which, for various reasons, it has been a principal aim of this book to untangle. Finally, it is simply much easier to find out about these regions than many others (and easier, in English, to study east-central Europe than Scandinavia, Russia, the Balkans and the Byzantine/Ottoman world). Even so, I regret that I have not managed to learn more about the east and north, and it is clear to me that comparisons between ‘west’ and ‘east’, and ‘north’ and ‘south’ (acknowledging the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79232-5 - The Making of Politics: Europe, 1300–1500

John Watts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

crudity of these terms) would teach us a great deal. It would be very good to look in depth at the Holy Roman Empire alongside Byzantium, or to compare the expansion of Muscovy and the Ottomans, or to place a kingdom like Scotland alongside Denmark or Sweden, but this is beyond what I could do. At any rate, I hope that I have learned and considered enough to provide some sort of introduction, and to support a broad interpretation which others, if they find it worthwhile, can challenge, refine or develop.

I have benefited from the help of many people in working on this book. First of all, I am most grateful to those who encouraged me at the outset – to the late Rees Davies, and Barrie Dobson, Michael Jones and Steven Gunn, who read my initial proposal and made valuable comments. To Steve, I owe several other debts: he was kind enough to read and comment on Chapter 4, and has been a consistent source of support and advice throughout my time in Oxford. It was also his idea to start a seminar in later medieval European history, which he and Malcolm Vale and I – latterly with Natalia Nowakowska – have run for the last decade. I have learned a huge amount from my co-conveners, and also from the eighty-plus people who have given papers at our seminar; I have tried not to pinch their ideas, and to credit their published work wherever possible, but I would like to acknowledge here, with his permission, the influence of a brilliant and unpublished overview paper presented by Henry Cohn on ‘The Empire in the Fifteenth Century: Decline or Renewal?’. I would also like to thank Jean-Philippe Genet for involving me in a number of collaborative projects and conferences: while I differ in some ways from his interpretation of the developments of this period, I have gained enormously from his conversation and his work, from the connections he has opened up for me with other scholars in France and elsewhere, and from his generosity of spirit. Two other debts are to David Abulafia and David D’Avray. Both of them have kindly supported me through a series of AHRC applications, only the last of which was successful, and I thank them for their help and patience. To the former, I owe even more. I first learned about medieval Europe from David Abulafia in the autumn of 1983, and his inspiration, advice and criticism have been absolutely invaluable throughout the six years I have been working on this book. In a very busy schedule, he has somehow found the time to read the whole typescript, some of it twice, and has given both generous encouragement and face-saving correction: I am extremely grateful. A number

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79232-5 - The Making of Politics: Europe, 1300–1500

John Watts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgements*

xiii

of other colleagues and friends have also made time to read sections of the book for me: to Catherine Holmes, Natalia Nowakowska, Jay Sexton, Serena Ferente, Jan Dumolyn, Jenny Wormald, David Rundle and Len Scales, I am very grateful indeed for the trouble they took with my work, often at highly inconvenient moments. Finally, I would like to thank Robert Evans, Jeremy Catto and Craig Taylor for various bits of reading advice, and Magnus Ryan for many inspiring discussions about later medieval Europe: Magnus and I once thought of writing a book like this together, and I'm sure it would have been a more distinguished effort if we had done so. While all these people have tried to save me from error, and I have done what I can to save myself, I naturally take full responsibility for any and all mistakes.

I have also been helped by a number of institutions. I feel that I owe a great debt to the History Faculty at Oxford, and also to my college, Corpus Christi. For one thing, I would never have dared attempt a book like this without the encouragement and stimulation of Oxford colleagues. For another, University, Faculty and College have helped in tangible ways: I am very grateful for two terms' special paid leave from the University, and for a further term from the Faculty; Corpus too has given me two terms' leave, and I am grateful to the President and Fellows, and especially to my excellent History colleague, Jay Sexton, who has held the fort during two lengthy absences. I also thankfully acknowledge a term's paid leave from the AHRC under its (now threatened) 'Research Leave' scheme: I can't imagine when I would have been able to finish the book, had I not received this grant. Finally, I would like to thank Michael Watson, Helen Waterhouse and other members of the History team at Cambridge University Press: apart from the beautiful job they have done with this book, I am grateful for their helpfulness and patience.

And lastly I thank my partner, Adrian. This book has been a great trial for him – not least because he thinks the only interesting thing about the Middle Ages is the Black Death, which gets barely a mention (see p. 14) – but I promise that I won't write another one. Well, not for a bit, anyway.