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.

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THE MAKING OF POLITIES
EUROPE, 1300–1500

JOHN WATTS
Corpus Christi College, Oxford
For Adrian
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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
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
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 intro-
duction, 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
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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
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some ways from his interpretation of the developments of this period,
I have gained enormously from his conversation and his work, from
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debts are to David Abulafia and David D’Avray. Both of them have
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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.