

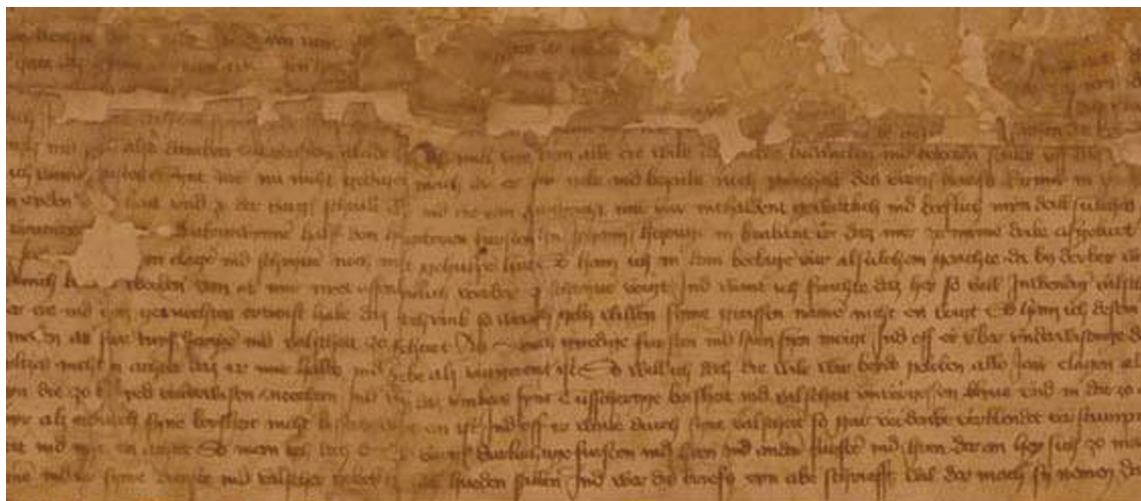
Burgundian History: a mirror of European venture? Review on *De hertog en zijn Staten* by Robert Stein

It is ironic that two European scholars decided, almost at the same time, to reconsider the classic question of the formation of ‘the Burgundian State’. Even if Robert Stein did not mention the ideological inspirations for his work, the impact of the European construction arises in a key sentence about composite monarchies, a concept that lies at the heart of this book: ‘It is impossible to understand its character [i.e. of the Burgundian Union] by looking only at the centre, or at one of the individual parts, like Flanders, for instance, just as it is impossible to grasp the character of the European Union by looking only at Brussels or Portugal or Denmark.’ (‘Het is onmogelijk de eigenheid van de Bourgondische unie te begrijpen door uitsluitend naar het centrum te kijken, of naar een van de individuele delen, zoals het onmogelijk is het karakter van de Europese unie te doorgronden door alleen naar Brussel, of naar bijvoorbeeld Portugal of Denemarken te kijken’) (p.19; p.13 in the English translation). When we compare *De hertog en zijn Staten. De eenwording van de Bourgondische Nederlanden (ca. 1380-ca. 1480)* (Hilversum 2014) [*Magnanimous Dukes and Rising States. The Unification of the Burgundian Netherlands, 1380-1480* (Oxford 2017)] with my book *Le Royaume inachevé des ducs de Bourgogne (XIVe-XVe siècles)* (Paris 2016), it is also striking that this Dutch historian is certainly more optimistic than me. While Stein points out the medieval origins of the unification of the Low Countries, I underline the flaws of a political system that led to its decay. While Stein proceeds from the northern provinces of the Burgundian union, I explore the topic from an opposite, more southbound perspective. This is most likely due to the different historical traditions we come from, but perhaps we can also detect in these choices the different views of two European citizens concerning the ‘composite state’ that is the European Union. Who knows? After all, as Paul Ricoeur said, there is no objectivity in history without subjectivity of historians. Robert Stein’s work is part of a tradition that goes back to the seminal work on the Burgundian polity by Richard Vaughan, Wim Blockmans and Walter Prevenier. But even if Burgundian studies are numerous, Stein is to be commended for his courage to address the issue head-on, and to provide readers with a synthetic overview of the extraordinary political project of the Dukes of Burgundy. Stein’s book is a ‘must have’ in the library of any specialist of the topic. While Stein and I agree that the Burgundian polity, which is as hard to name in the twenty-first century as it was in the fifteenth century, can be considered as a typical example of a composite monarchy – defined by J.H.

Elliot and H.G. Koenigsberger as a string of independent principalities that were all ruled by a single dynasty – our investigations do not follow the same path.

In a classical way, Stein studies the supposed unification of the northern part of the Burgundian *dominium* by using the criteria for state formation as set out by Wim Blockmans and Jean-Philippe Genet, namely administrative integration, legislation, and fiscal development. From Philip the Bold, the first Valois duke of Burgundy and Count of Flanders from 1384 onwards, to the death of Mary of Burgundy in 1482, the sole daughter and heir of Charles the Bold who was the last Valois duke of Burgundy, Stein's book examines all the political institutions, representative assemblies, courts of law, and chambers of account that many historians consider relevant to efforts towards state building. But the book develops a fresh and constructive approach by proceeding from the periphery (i.e. the institutions of all the separate principalities) to the centre (the Burgundian court etc.). By focusing on the distinct institutional arrangements of each region, Stein explains how regional particularism shaped the trend towards unification under Burgundian rule. Consequently, Stein argues, it is impossible to understand the nature of the Burgundian 'state' without taking into account the history of each principality that constituted it. Stein, renowned for his earlier work on late medieval historiography (especially in the duchy of Brabant and the county of Holland), has perfectly adjusted his interest in the historiographical entanglements between regional chronicles and historiographical practices at the Burgundian court to assess the composition of the Burgundian state. When fifteenth-century chroniclers adapted the literary traditions of Holland, Hainault, Brabant, Flanders, etc. to the tastes of the court, they did so to please the Duke, as well as to strengthen their own regional identity in the Burgundian composite monarchy.

In a similar vein, the subjects of each principality adopted the new rules of administration in their own institutions not only because they were efficient, but also to define for themselves a niche in the 'collection of various principalities marked by very strong cultural and political identities that is the Burgundian State' (dixit Marc Boone). Therefore Stein's approach is neither a top-down approach nor a bottom-up perspective. According to me, it is a 'periphery-core' analysis, which focuses on superstructure (legal, financial, judicial frameworks) embodied by men of flesh and blood who belonged to networks, and who were motivated by their own private interests but also a collective aspiration to administrative efficiency. Precisely because the book does not provide a bottom-up approach, we cannot hear the voices of ordinary subjects who take centre stage in the recent research of Jan Dumolyn and Jelle Haemers, including the voices of those who opposed Burgundian aspirations to authority in the revolts that frequently erupted in Flanders, Brabant, and Holland. Even if the majority of all inhabitants of the Burgundian realm approved of the new rules that purportedly helped the Common Good in



De HERTOG en zijn STATEN

Robert
Stein

De eenwording
van de Bourgondische
Nederlanden

ca. 1380

ca. 1480



that they guaranteed stability, peace and prosperity, the period was still punctuated by unrests, revolts, and strong critiques of the Burgundian regime. It is hard to forget that with the death of Charles the Bold in 1477, the entire Burgundian *dominium* fell apart: the northern, Netherlandish principalities and the southern, Burgundian principalities, now each went their own way. The crisis of 1477 is perhaps not so important for the ‘Netherlandish’ principalities, but it is a crucial milestone if we focus on, what I call, the Great Principality of Burgundy, i.e. the whole space of power of the dukes that included both the northern and southern regions.

Of course, if we follow Stein in his focus on the development of the administrative tools of government, we have to concede that, thanks to the migration of specialists from one regional institution to another, the links between all of the constituent parts of the Burgundian composite monarchy were strong and durable. After the turmoil of 1477, for example, the Flemish subjects of the Burgundian Valois decided to maintain the Council of Flanders, rather than to abolish it, or to strip this institution from all authority that the Burgundian Dukes had endowed it with. And what about the Parliament of Malines, a supreme court for the entire Low Countries that was abolished immediately after the death of Charles the Bold, but re-established in 1504 by Philip the Fair? As Stein puts it: ‘People move on but institutions remain...’ I agree with this, but if the adoption of the Burgundian administrative structure is a key parameter in the state building, I think – and this is certainly the most significant difference between Stein’s book and mine – that we cannot escape the question of the ‘imagined community’ if we want to test the strength of a state. Did subjects identify themselves with the Dukes and their political project or not? From this point of view, it is strange that the question of the war was not tackled in this book. Robert Stein brilliantly explores the classical pillars of the state building (especially in Chapter 7 which is devoted to the financial organisation), but avoids warfare.

And yet, war is a very important clue in any investigation about the history of states. War is not just a leisure activity for nobles, but a full commitment of the community as a whole. Were people of those countries ready to fight for a prince and his ideals of honour and conquest? The sources I discuss in my book suggest that they did not. The inhabitants of the Netherlandish towns, for example, were forced to pay for troops and mercenaries for the Dukes, but while they were ready to lay down their lives to defend privileges of their hometown, they were not ready to die to help their prince or people of Dijon, Salins or Besançon who, in their eyes, remained strangers. This lack of loyalty concerning a shared ideal is certainly the most important failure within this political entity: the Burgundian Dukes failed



to build a political community which included all their subjects. This is a fundamental flaw which is more important than, for example, the failure to establish a permanent taxation or the ongoing conflicts about urban autonomy or ducal justice. After all, the kingdoms of France and England faced similar troubles, but those polities did not explode as the Burgundian did in 1477. Many urban elites accepted that their relations with the princes needed to be reconfigured, so this was not a fatal flaw for the ‘Burgundian state’. A lack of ideological support of the Dukes was much more dangerous than a strictly institutional perspective on state formation usually allows to admit.

As to the social position of urban elites in the Burgundian realm, I fully concur with Stein when he ingeniously explains the sense of networks and the opportunities for bourgeois to elevate their social status thanks to ducal service. But I am not sure that those opportunities for social promotion came at the expense of other elites, as Stein suggests. The recent work of, for example, Jonas Braekevelt or Arie van Steensel suggests that nobles were perhaps not the big losers of the rise of the state. New nobles often came from the urban ‘patriciat’. Nobles in Picardy and in the Duchy and County of Burgundy often had key positions in the Burgundian government. In light of these crossovers between different social groups, a new political discourse was necessary to cement a new sense of fidelity to the Dukes. Yet, as I argue in my book, such discourse failed to emerge.

So it all boils down to a matter of focus. Viewed from the Low Countries, Burgundians have laid the foundations of a political edifice which eventually evolved into modern states. Viewed from France, however, the conquests of Louis XI in Burgundy and Picardy after the death of Charles the Bold flagged the end of the Burgundian political experiment.

I wish to conclude my review by stressing the high quality of Robert Stein’s meticulous study. Thanks to a systematic plan, graphics, maps, overview tables and very helpful interim conclusions, the reader can easily follow the author’s thinking. Thanks to a well-balanced interplay of very precise examples and general discussions, Stein developed a powerful political history which is attentive to human agency.

Élodie Lecuppre-Desjardin (1972) is Professor in Medieval History at the University of Lille (IRHiS). Her research focuses on urban history, The Low Countries and political and cultural history in the thirteenth to fifteenth century. Recent publications include *Le royaume inachevé des ducs de Bourgogne* (Paris, Belin 2016); *De Bono Communi, The Discourse and Practice of the Common Good in European City (13th-16th c.)* (Turnhout 2010) [with Anne-Laure Van Bruaene]; *La ville des cérémonies. Essai sur la communication politique dans les anciens Pays-Bas Bourguignons* (Turnhout 2004).