LORDSHIP IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES: A ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION

Late medieval lordship is having something of a moment. It is far from its first, of course: lordship has been ubiquitous in discussions of western European medieval history for many decades. Its imagined trajectory varies depending on region and national historiographical tradition, but there tends to be a broad contrast between how historians have understood lordship in the central Middle Ages and how they have understood it in the later Middle Ages. The traditional story goes something like this: in the eleventh century, private lords erupt onto the scene with a kind of irrepressible predatory vitality, ushering in a new political, social, and economic order centred on the maximization of surplus extraction from peasants, achieved mostly through violence. This is known as the 'seigneurial revolution' or 'feudal revolution', and this new order is often characterized as disastrous for pretty much everybody apart from lords themselves, though how new and how disastrous it really was has been a matter for debate, and one which in the 1990s left a strong mark in the pages of *Past and Present*.[1]

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[1] For the 'feudal revolution' debate of the 1990s, see the original article by T. N. Bisson, 'The "Feudal Revolution"', *Past and Present*, 142 (1994), and the subsequent responses: Dominique Barthélemy, 'Debate: The "Feudal Revolution", I', and Stephen D. White, 'Debate: The "Feudal Revolution", II', both *Past and Present*, 152 (1996); Timothy Reuter, 'Debate: The "Feudal Revolution", III', Chris Wickham, 'Debate: The "Feudal Revolution", IV'; T. N. Bisson, 'Reply', all *Past and Present*, 155 (1997). For a subsequent review of the debate, see Charles West, *Reframing the Feudal Revolution: Political and Social Transformation between Marne and Moselle, c.800–c.1100* (Cambridge, 2013).

For historians of the central Middle Ages, therefore, lords and their priorities are self-evidently an important force for change. Things are different in the historiography of the later Middle Ages. From this point, even in places where they remained extremely powerful, as in France, lords tend to be regarded more as an obstructive force, standing in the way of major new historical developments rather than initiating them. The centralized state, urban government, capitalism: all of these have been presented as growing at the expense of lordship, in spite of it, or in the spaces left vacant by it, and in large part through actors (kings, burghers, peasants) organizing against it. Since the 2010s, this picture has been considerably refined and in some respects overturned. The narrative regarding the growth of the state in particular is being comprehensively rewritten, and it is becoming ever clearer that, far from being a sticking point, the local power of lords and seigneurial administration played a crucial role in the formation of emerging princely and royal states.[2]

The articles under discussion in the following round table contribute to this historiographical re-evaluation of late medieval lordship; however, they move away from the preoccupation with the state and lords' relationship with it, and concentrate instead on lordship's social and economic dimensions: its relationship with towns and with peasants.[3] The three articles by Christian Liddy, Tristan Sharp, and Frederik Buylaert, Thijs Lambrecht, Klaas Van Gelder, and Kaat Cappelle were accepted in this journal within four months of each other, and this seemed a good enough reason to arrange a conversation in person, in the hope that discussing these pieces together would prove mutually illuminating and help to take the analysis further. Chris Wickham and Sandro Carocci, both of whom also

[2] Erika Graham-Goering, Jim van der Meulen, and Frederik Buylaert (eds.), *Lordship and the Decentralized State in Late Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 2025). For earlier statements from Languedoc to Scotland, see Justine Firnhaber-Baker, *Violence and the State in Languedoc, 1250–1400* (Cambridge, 2014); Alice Taylor, *The Shape of the State in Medieval Scotland, 1124–1290* (Oxford, 2016).

[3] Christian D. Liddy, 'The Making of Towns, the Making of Polities: Towns and Lords in Late Medieval Europe', *Past and Present*, 264 (2024); Tristan W. Sharp, 'Seigneurial Predation in the Late Medieval Feud', *Past and Present*, 266 (2025); Frederik Buylaert, Thijs Lambrecht, Klaas Van Gelder, and Kaat Cappelle, 'The Political Economy of Seigneurial Lordship in Flanders, *c.*1250–1570', *Past and Present*, 267 (2025).

contributed recent articles in the journal on the subject of the socio-economic impact of central and later medieval lordship, kindly agreed to take part in the discussion, as did Alice Taylor, as a member of the editorial board whose work has also dealt extensively with lordship.[4]

In his article, which deals mainly with Italy over the period 1050–1500, Carocci had stressed the need to consider the 'pervasiveness' of lordship; that is, the extent to which lordship permeated the everyday lives of the people who lived under its authority. Pervasiveness is a dimension which he shows needs to be distinguished from power as such: the lords who were most powerful politically were not always the ones with the greatest impact on the ground. In some cases lordly interventionism could secure a surprisingly high level of consent from rural populations: although the micro-managing of rural societies could, and did, sometimes serve brutal surplus extraction practices, it could also come with a high degree of economic investment.[5] Carocci makes the case that, in order to assess how lordship was experienced on the ground, broad typologies of lordship, typically based on lords' position and status in relation to other lords or to kings more than on their impact on peasant societies, are less relevant than the practical choices they made and their ability to put them into practice.

Christian Liddy, in his article on English towns in comparative perspective (fourteenth to sixteenth centuries), advocates for a similar shift in focus towards the lived experience of being under a lordship, or, conversely, of lacking one. Like Carocci on lords, Liddy notes that towns, too, have tended to be subdivided into elaborate typologies based on their relationship with higher-order political powers (for example, kings, lords, ecclesiastical jurisdictions), and ultimately aimed at distinguishing towns that were state actors (that is, royal towns) from those that were not.[6] As Liddy shows, however, from a ground-level perspective, whether or not a town like Walsall was a royal town

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[4] Chris Wickham, 'How Did the Feudal Economy Work? The Economic Logic of Medieval Societies', *Past and Present*, 251 (2021); Sandro Carocci, 'The Pervasiveness of Lordship (Italy, 1050–1500)', *Past and Present*, 256 (2022).

[5] As in the case of Sartirana mentioned in the discussion: Carocci, 'Pervasiveness of Lordship', 41–2.

[6] Liddy, 'Making of Towns, the Making of Polities', 7.

was a relatively minor aspect of its experience: what it wanted above all was to deal with a lord who would be involved locally and defend its interests, rather than an authority that was more distant and interested only in profiting economically from the relationship, as happened, if anything more often, when the town fell directly under royal authority.

Like Carocci with lords and Liddy with towns, Tristan Sharp, in his article on German lordly feuds in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, shows how much is missed by interpreting feud mainly in terms of lords' relationship with other lords. He, too, brings to the fore the socio-economic aspects of lordship over high-level political ones. The latter have tended to be strongly prioritized in this historiography as well, but in a very different way from other regions of Europe. German historiography recognized much earlier than others the fundamental interdependence between the power of lords and that of nascent states: feud, on that reading, has been seen as a legal–political practice building up a sense of order, to the point of coming across as a kind of state-building exercise in its own right.[7] Sharp stresses how much extracting resources from peasants through violence was nevertheless a central preoccupation of lords when pursuing such feuds, if anything further enabled by the use of state-like instruments of governance.

Extracting resources outside the market economy is a central, constitutive element of lordship. Since the nineteenth century, lordship had traditionally been represented as inherently economically regressive. In England, which an exceptionally good source base has made a wellspring of studies on the manorial economy, lordship was classically held responsible for holding back economic development through highly coercive demands for labour and rents. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, however, this assumption has been increasingly overturned: in the pages of this journal alone, one finds low agricultural productivity being blamed not so much on English lords' rapaciousness as on their relative lack of success in negotiating with

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[7] The key reference for this line of thought is Otto Brunner, *Land and Lordship: Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria*, trans. Howard Kaminsky and James Van Horn Melton (Philadelphia, 1992), first pub. as Otto Brunner, *Land und Herrschaft: Grundfragen der territorialen Verfassungsgeschichte Österreichs im Mittelalter*, 4th edn (Vienna, 1959).

their tenants; or lords dismissed as fundamentally ineffective and irrelevant to most rural social and economic life.[8]

The relationship between lordship and the development of markets is a key question in the article by Wickham, as well as in that by Buylaert *et al*. Taking a *longue durée* perspective, from about 1000 to 1700, Wickham argues that strong market growth was possible within feudal economies partly because of an inbuilt tendency for lords to squeeze gradually less and less out of tenants, periodically leaving the latter with enough disposable income to allow them to become more involved in market transactions. Buylaert *et al*. find very low levels of surplus extraction between 1250 and 1570 in inland Flanders (where, unlike in England, late medieval lordship has been comparatively little discussed in the historiography, in which it is dwarfed by urbanization and state formation). Their case study, however, also shows how little can be assumed about peasants' attitudes towards the market and the role of lords in mediating their relationship with it. In inland Flanders, where small-scale farmsteads constituted the main unit of agricultural exploitation, lordships became increasingly controlled by coalitions of small and middling peasants: what the article strikingly terms 'middle-class lordship'. These peasants used the regulatory powers of lordship to protect themselves against precocious experiments in agrarian capitalism, involving large-scale farms dependent on wage labour, which they could see taking place in coastal Flanders around the same time, with devastating effects on rural society. While peasants in inland Flanders clearly took advantage of low seigneurial burdens to produce for the market in just the way Wickham sets out, they at the same time took care to use seigneurial regulation to protect themselves against the market's more threatening consequences (proletarianization). In a stunning reversal of the common-sense association of lordship with social and economic oppression, peasants in inland

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[8] Bruce M. S. Campbell, 'The Agrarian Problem in the Early Fourteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 188 (2005), argues that the relatively good terms on which tenants held land compared to the open market encouraged subletting and fragmentation. On ineffectiveness, see Christopher Dyer, 'The Ineffectiveness of Lordship in England, 1200–1400', in Christopher Dyer, Peter Coss, and Chris Wickham (eds.), *Rodney Hilton's Middle Ages* (Past and Present Supplement no. 2, Oxford, 2007).

Flanders could and did, therefore, actively exploit the authority of lordships to protect themselves against market forces.

Pervasive, highly regulatory lordship, then, did not always have to be socially coercive: it could in fact play an important role in ensuring the stability of peasant societies — as well as that of towns, as in Liddy's article. In certain regions it is indeed possible, as suggested by Sandro Carocci in the round table discussion, to see a broad shift in the economic role of later medieval lordship, away from the central medieval focus on predation and relentless surplus extraction, and instead moving more towards investment and protectionism. The development of more extensive market possibilities, in particular, changed the context in which lordship operated, and might lead it to take on a protective role for local rural society alongside its more traditional exploitative one. But this was not the case everywhere: in the example of Germany studied by Sharp, it seems clear that the only protection afforded by lords was a protection racket.

The articles under discussion, then, do not build up to a homogeneous picture, nor would anyone expect them to. What they do show is that lordship, by the later Middle Ages, could be a vehicle for many and varied interests. Although clearly lords were, as ever, the main group to benefit from lordship, a surprising number of other constituencies sometimes succeeded in turning it to their own advantage. Late medieval lordship was dynamic and responsive to change, neither systematically aligned nor at odds with any single consistent interest group or any other political or organizational forces, whether state, peasants, or towns. If it often seems to clash with historical developments we see as key to the period, or to operate as a conservative force, it was not just a result of being rooted in an older, central medieval world to which it was desperate to cling: we should consider the possibility that it was also because it was sometimes being invested by others with the task of taking on this role.

The round table took place in the afternoon of 17 June 2024 at King's College London. The text below is a shortened, revised and edited transcript, adding in some detail (and footnote references) to improve accessibility to non-specialists but still aiming to retain, as much as possible, the feel of the original oral conversation.

Alice Rio
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FREDERIK BUYLAERT, THIJS LAMBRECHT, KLAAS VAN GELDER, AND KAAT CAPPELLE: 'THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SEIGNEURIAL LORDSHIP IN FLANDERS, *C.*1250–1570'

Christian Liddy

It's a fantastic piece and it's really nice to read something on Flanders where the town or city is not the focus, and I say that as somebody who works on towns and cities. But towns and cities are part of the story at the same time. My question is about the place of towns in relation to the formation of what you call 'middle-class lordships' in inland Flanders. I wonder if you could just say a bit more about the dynamics there?

Frederik Buylaert

Some of the towns were lordships themselves. I just finished the calculations last week: out of Flanders' sixty towns in the years from about 1300 to 1550, twenty-three of them were seigneuries that kind of mushroomed.

A second important factor is outburghership (acquiring citizenship from a town while mostly residing outside that town's jurisdiction).[9] What makes towns tick is the supply of labour, and you see them attempting to secure labour supplies by granting outburghership for extremely low rates: even a mid level person could afford to become an outburgher. What you see in Flemish villages is that it's not abnormal that 60–70 per cent of the male households are all outburghers, and especially the more important staff, the seigneurial administration who help to run the seigneurial court: they're all exempt from the very policies that they can enforce on the rest of the village.

What also helps us to understand how the towns promote middle-class lordship is that, from the fourteenth century onwards, you also see urban elites becoming lords: so you have wealthy aldermen from Ghent with a power base that was traditionally urban, but some are also the lord of a village. And they start lobbying within cities, even within the Estates General of Flanders,

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[9] This arrangement, which was rare or non-existent in many other parts of Europe, is discussed in Buylaert *et al.*, 'Political Economy of Seigneurial Lordship in Flanders', section III.

which is dominated by cities, to protect seigneurial privileges vis-à-vis the count of Flanders. So by virtue of the overlap between them and the traditional ruling nobility, you start to see this kind of lobbying taking shape.[10] When you quantify it, about half the Flemish nobility by the sixteenth century consists of urban families. We know nothing about their daily lives, but one imagines they spent the winter in their urban mansions and the summer in the countryside. So they have one foot in the city, one foot in the village. This certainly helps to protect middle-class lordship against very powerful urban elites that could undermine it as well.

Christian Liddy

That term 'middle-class lordship': I just wonder what it is about lordship that makes us want to use qualifiers that add to the category, without necessarily defining it? Thinking, for instance, of Sandro's category of 'pervasive' lordship: is middle-class lordship another category of lordship, to add to 'strong' and 'weak' lordship and others?[11] And do these terms occlude what actually are really dynamic processes, such as what you've been describing there, in terms of who is a lord and who is not a lord, or partial lords, etc.? 'Middle-class lordship' almost sounds like a contradiction in terms, doesn't it, like 'peasant aldermen', which is another expression that you use in the article.[12]

Frederik Buylaert

I should say we don't have any ambition to start a new concept or get lots of other people to talk about 'middle-class lordship'. There is this wonderful essay where Giles Constable makes the point that there's no such thing as a middle class in medieval society, even if the middling strata were increasingly conceptualized in the socio-economic terms that underpin our modern concept of a middle class.[13] We just use it as a way of highlighting

[10] Discussed in full in Frederik Buylaert, 'Lordship, Urbanization and Social Change in Late Medieval Flanders', *Past and Present*, 227 (2015).

[11] For 'strong' and 'weak' lordship, see Chris Wickham, 'La signoria rurale in Toscana', in Gerhard Dilcher and Cinzio Violante (eds.), *Strutture e trasformazioni della signoria rurale nei secoli X–XIII* (Bologna, 1996), 348–53, 376–93.

[12] Buylaert *et al.*, 'Political Economy of Seigneurial Lordship in Flanders', 21.

[13] Giles Constable, 'Was there a Medieval Middle Class? *Mediocres* (*mediani*, *medii*) in the Middle Ages', in Samuel K. Cohn and Steven A. Klein (eds.), *Portraits of Medieval and Renaissance Living: Essays in Memory of David Herlihy* (Ann Arbor, 1996).

something that came out of our research project, which is that lordship as an institution can be controlled by very different blocks. It's important to have that comparative analysis of who has the power to control regulatory capacity, surplus capacity, etc. That is not the same everywhere; it has a history. And that leads to the very difficult question of why it goes in such different directions in different regions.

For us it was a matter of engaging with (mainly) the work of Sheilagh Ogilvie. Partly she builds on the idea that an institution is not a neutral thing; it reflects shifting power dynamics.[14] For us, 'middle-class lordship' was just a pithy way of expressing that we needed a social history of lordship. And I think in light of the massive scholarship of the last thirty years, this is more doable now than it was, say, in the 1950s and 1960s.[15] But we have no ambition to convince others that they should speak of middle-class lordship: it's a way of asking what sorts of social configuration are behind the institution.

To be clear, I never wanted to suggest that these lords were not powerful. In some ways, they were the weakest lords in all of Europe: surplus extraction is really low, they have very little direct coercive capacity; but to make an analogy with modern politicians, if the party aligns around you, you can have tremendous power — but it's negotiated power. And that's what fascinates me about these Flemish lords. In other respects they're not particularly remarkable: 90 per cent of them are lay lords, only 10 per cent ecclesiastical. In terms of gender, too, they're nothing special: 20 per cent of lords are female, which is completely in line with what we know about elites and systems of inheritance and who inherited where there was no son; so that's all standard.

What I would point out about inland Flanders is that it's still very prestigious to be a lord; on the (admittedly rare) occasions that a seigneurie was sold rather than inherited, people paid

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[14] See especially Sheilagh Ogilvie, '"Whatever Is, Is Right"? Economic Institutions in Pre-Industrial Europe', *Economic History Review*, 60 (2007); Sheilagh Ogilvie, 'Choices and Constraints in the Pre-Industrial Countryside', in Chris Briggs, P. M. Kitson, and S. J. Thompson (eds.), *Population, Welfare and Economic Change in Britain, 1290–1834* (Woodbridge, 2014).

[15] The best concise introduction to the available scholarship is Chris Wickham, 'Defining the Seigneurie since the War', in Monique Bourin and Pascual Martínez Sopena (eds.), *Pour une anthropologie du prélèvement seigneurial dans les campagnes médiévales (XIᵉ–XIVᵉ siècles): Réalités et représentations paysannes* (Paris, 2004).

enormous sums of money to be a lord. And the criminal justice system involved in it is extremely important; but we know for a fact that it's also extremely expensive. Lords might break even, but hanging someone or executing someone is really expensive. So they're willing to pay because there's so much prestige to it, but they are not interested in seigneurie for economic reasons. In the rare cases when we can find out the total income of a Flemish nobleman, about 25 per cent of their revenue comes from the seigneurie; the rest will come from investments and landed estates.[16] So they like having lordship for social reasons, but economically the real money comes from renting out houses in towns, from leasing land on short-term leases at profitable rates. So it's not an economic calculation for them, it's a social calculation.

Alice Rio

I liked 'middle-class lordship', because of the shock value. To me it also potentially connected with the question of pervasiveness from Sandro's article. It made me wonder if the most pervasive lords are the ones who managed to make themselves matter and to represent people beyond their own interests; and also if, therefore, the most pervasive or interventionist lords are also the ones who can *look* as if they're having the most problems, as if they're having to negotiate more and having to engage with interests beyond their own. And this also made me wonder about, well, who is the agent here? Does lordship become, a bit like states or a bit like towns, actually just a form of organization, one that can be the vessel for all kinds of different interests? But *whose* interests these are isn't necessarily something that's stable?

Frederik Buylaert

On the question of who's in charge, if we define the process, I think my first instinct about lordship is that the agency is very

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[16] See, for example, the estimate for the sixteenth-century nobleman Karel de Grutere, who was lord of Eksaarde (north of Ghent), in Jelten Baguet, *'De heren van Gent': Politieke elites en sociale verandering in de zestiende eeuw* (Ghent University and Vrije Universiteit Brussel Ph.D. thesis, 2018), 103.

much with the peasants, who are in control and able to push down the rate of extraction. But you see the noble class reinventing itself as a result of this process and redefining lordship in the broad sense of the term: what they sought through lordship was to be at once a princely official and the alderman of a Flemish town, and at the same time the spokesperson or the figurehead of a seigneurial community. They are very 'pervasive', not by being in the villages and managing the peasants, but by lobbying for the village, by being a member of the princely administration and of the urban government, so they can lobby for favours for the village — by getting charters, for instance. And they are very respected for that, and from the few records that we have about this the peasants seem extremely aware of that, and are very keen to use lordships as conduits to other avenues of power, urban or statewide. For me the comparanda here are with England, where scholars have shown that the power of the great lordships of the end of the Middle Ages was not so much rooted in the old manorial courts but more geared towards manipulating royal law and how it was implemented.[17] So there are certain similarities with English history.

My instinct is to define lordship in quite a strict sense as seigneurial lordship as opposed to other forms of lordship such as royal lordship, ecclesiastical lordship, urban lordship, and so on. To me, at least, it helps to identify what social elites were doing, that is, combining different types of lordship (for example, a seigneurial lord also taking up office in the magistracy of a town, the latter endowing him with urban lordship). This capacity to combine different sources of power is what underpins the progressive integration of various types of elite, who, together, position themselves as a kind of *Führungsschicht* (ruling class). The fact that various sources of power are all referred to as 'lordship' in sources can make things very confusing. But one way forward is perhaps by distinguishing seigneurial lordship in a strict sense from the broader cultural matrix through which seigneurial

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[17] For an introduction to this vast body of literature on the gentry, manors, the polity, and so on, see Christopher Fletcher, 'Politics', in Jackson W. Armstrong, Peter Crooks and Andrea Ruddick (eds.), *Using Concepts in Medieval History: Perspectives on Britain and Ireland, 1100–1500* (Cham, 2022).

lordship combined with other sources of power; and that is historically contingent.

Sandro Carocci

A small question about a comparison with cities of central and northern Italy. In Italy, towns and cities dominate the countryside, but they also change the countryside deeply. Why didn't the towns of Flanders change the countryside as much?

And I have a comment about economics. In your paper you raise the question of the relationship between lordship and economic development. This is a very well-established question for historians, but I think it takes a different form for the later Middle Ages compared to earlier. The basic question is: what was the economic role of lordship in the late Middle Ages? We know that centuries earlier it was very important everywhere, and along broadly similar lines; Chris deals with it for the eleventh to twelfth centuries in his latest book.[18] But in the late Middle Ages there is more of a divergence. You, Tristan, find a negative impact in Germany: lordship destroying wealth. In Flanders, on the contrary, lordship has a strong economic impact, but precisely because it has such a weak economic function in terms of extraction: this is how lordship is able to become a mouthpiece for the interests of peasant families, allowing them to survive for centuries, hindering the spread of capitalism and economic growth. This is a very convincing reconstruction, and it reminds us how many different answers can be given to the question of the economic role of lordship in the later Middle Ages.

If I move to Italy, I can't see a clear answer. Italian historians have tended to consider mainly lords who invested in land reclamation, industry, machinery, and when they have wanted to understand the economic role of lordship in the late Middle Ages they have looked only at these lords. But now I wonder: is it really only when lords act as lords–entrepreneurs that they play a progressive function economically? Actually, things may be different. In an article I wrote with Federico Del Tredici, we

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[18] Chris Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat: Reinterpreting the Mediterranean Economy, 950–1180* (Oxford, 2023), 496–502.

argue that a positive economic role is also played by lords who practise clientelistic management, who impose limits on trade, who act as a barrier between small worlds and the big capital of the kind urban states bring about.[19] Because when lords involve the local elites in the management of lordship, they do not just make a clientelistic choice, which reduces their profits; they also *leave* resources to the local elites. When they impose duties on the import of goods, they are not just making an attack against economic development, but making money and protecting the producers in the lordship. In short, I have the impression that in the long run this behaviour is a form of protection for local societies and local markets in ways that are not necessarily economically regressive. To put it another way, lords contribute to maintaining wealth in a given territory, and I think that in the late Middle Ages that is one of the most important economic functions of lordship, different from the economic function it had had in the centuries before.

Frederik Buylaert

Following Tom Scott, my impression is that in many parts of the Low Countries you don't have real, powerful city states: even though they are exceptionally powerful compared to most European towns, great Flemish cities like Ghent cannot take full control of political issues.[20] When they try (and they do try), the count of Flanders is there to stop them, to roll back any aspiration to do more than control the flow of labour. In Italy the city *becomes* the state; in Flanders that doesn't happen, and I think that might explain some of the differences.

Sandro Carocci

But the important role that Italian cities had in the countryside didn't depend on the statehood of a city; it depended on private urban landowners. Urban people bought land, and they changed the contracts which peasant producers had before; that was the main change cities brought to the countryside.

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[19] Sandro Carocci and Federico Del Tredici, 'La signoria rurale nell'Italia del tardo medioevo', *Storica*, 85 (2023).

[20] Tom Scott, *The City-State in Europe, 1000–1600* (Oxford, 2012).

Frederik Buylaert

I think we would see something similar in Flanders: there is a massive influx of urban capital in the countryside. But the impression I have is that the shape that urban capital takes in the countryside differs according to the capacity of local communities to prevent the formation of large agricultural enterprises of the sort that scholars associate with agrarian capitalism. I think there's just as much urban capital in inland Flanders as in coastal Flanders, but in coastal Flanders the private landowners can build these huge agricultural enterprises, whereas in inland Flanders they cannot.

Sandro Carocci

They can't because of lordship?

Frederik Buylaert

Yes, because of the regulations that we find: in name, they were issued by the lord, but their precise content was clearly tailored to the interests of the small and middling peasants who, together, dominated the seigneurial administration.

Sandro Carocci

So lordship also prevents city capital?

Frederik Buylaert

It welcomes capital, but it's structured in such a way that capital flows are orientated away from large landownership and towards the maintenance of small-scale landownership.

As to the question about the economic culture of lordship in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it's very ambivalent: on the one hand, you find these regulations of lordship that are completely obsessed with the proper functioning of markets for land, labour, capital, food markets, etc. So I think they generate an enormous amount of economic value, in the sense that they mitigate the information asymmetry between buyers and sellers: they ensure that the market

is a safe space for consumers. But the other thing that lords do is ensure that property relations remain fragmented. So what Bruce Campbell calls the 'agrarian problem' of early fourteenth-century England, the parcelization of lands, small plots that make large-scale investment difficult: that is intentionally kept going.[21] So I don't think it's possible to calculate the net economic value of lordship, because on the one hand they help commercialization, but they also perpetuate a situation in which agricultural breakthroughs like enclosure movements are completely impossible. In that sense the costs and the benefits are very ambivalent.

Sandro Carocci

I think from a certain point of view that situation is very close to the Italian one. The difference is that lordship in inland Flanders is less heavy in terms of extraction and more connected to the state than many lordships in Italy. But they do protect localities, not just by protecting buyers, but by protecting behaviours that New Institutional Economics would think of as regressive: putting up taxes, fragmenting markets. This doesn't work in terms of creating economic growth, but for protecting the countryside it does work. If we compare Lombardy (very rich) and Tuscany: in Lombardy we find a rich countryside with proto-industries and many different economic activities. If we move south to Tuscany in the fifteenth century, we find lordship is no longer there, but rural communities are no longer there either: there are only peasants under *mezzadria*, under short contracts. And these societies are much, much poorer.

Christian Liddy

Sandro, are you arguing that there is a distinction between the central and the late Middle Ages, with a kind of more extractive lordship at first, then that breaking down and being replaced by a regulatory lordship, the sort of thing that Frederik was talking about: is that what you're suggesting in terms of the changing economic role of lords?

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[21] Campbell, 'Agrarian Problem in the Early Fourteenth Century'.

Sandro Carocci

Yes.

Chris Wickham

Middle-class lords, or towns as lords: the crucially important question is, do they behave differently from any other lord? The categories of lordship as defined by lordly action are different from the categories of lordship which are about who the lords are. I think that middle-class lords are significant only if they behave differently.

I like this paper a lot because it seemed to me that your discussion of inland Flanders was a really good empirical exemplification of the kind of argument I wanted to make — and with much better data than I had — in the sense that, in inland Flanders, you get a self-reinforcing set of economic developments and social structures at the same time. And that was really interesting to me. But you *start* the article with the discussion I had with Shami Ghosh, and you don't come back to it; and you also say rather less about the coast.[22] Clearly the idea is: the coast is different, or the coast is potentially different, and is agrarian capitalist in some kind of way, but you don't discuss it very much. So I wonder what you thought the logic of coastal Flanders was in economic terms. These are areas where there is a lot of wage labour, that's clear. But in what other respects is the economy transformed and how does it work? How does it move onwards, or does it?

Frederik Buylaert

I do see the point that we don't return to your debate at the end of the paper. For me, this is an important debate and we wanted to contribute to it; but at the same time we were very much aware of the limitations of our study: we felt that we were focusing exclusively on seigneurial lordship, whereas feudalism is a much wider category, of which princely government, cities, and ecclesiastical lords are just as much a part as seigneurial

[22] Shami Ghosh, 'Chris Wickham on "The Economic Logic of Medieval Societies": A Response', and Chris Wickham, 'A Reply to Shami Ghosh', both in *Past and Present*, 260 (2023).

lords, so we were aware we were only addressing one part of a much wider puzzle here.

As to the internal logic of agrarian capitalism: first, we call it agrarian capitalism because everyone in that scholarship calls it that, but it very much depends what definition of capitalism you're using. We are more or less in the same position as you are in the sense that neither Thijs nor I believe that there is any inherent logic to agrarian capitalism that would lead to, for example, industrial change. That said, we do believe that there is a very distinct economic logic, and also a political logic, to what is happening in coastal Flanders versus what is happening in inland Flanders. We hope to write a second article about this. We have a beautiful case study from coastal Flanders that shows how contemporaries are very much aware of where the source of power and wealth is located, and that's closely tied with the shifting property relations that historians refer to as agrarian capitalism. But I'll let Thijs talk about that.

Thijs Lambrecht

The fundamental difference between inland Flanders and coastal Flanders is that the configuration between the rural elite and political power is totally different in each region. In coastal Flanders it's based on trying to build large farms without restrictions; it's built on subjugating labour and controlling labour in ways that are very similar to what we see under the Statute of Labourers in England. So what we see in that region is totally different. We hesitated as to whether to integrate this comparison in the *Past and Present* article but it would have made the article much longer and would also have made the argument more complex. But it's still something we plan to do because the contrast is so large.

The short answer is that in coastal Flanders it's not middle-class lordship at all; it's just tenant farmers striking a bargain with the political elite, where they pay rent to the political elite in exchange for regulatory initiatives that are tailored to the specific needs of their agrarian holdings.

Chris Wickham

'Subjugated labour' is a concept that would be problematic for most definitions of capitalism, because it introduces an element

of coercion: one of the things that capitalism is supposed to involve in most definitions is free labour. If it doesn't, it doesn't mean you can't use the word 'subjugated', but you need to be quite clear that's what you're doing when you use it.

Thijs Lambrecht

We use the term 'free labour' in the sense that it's not controlled by seigneuries, or *corvées*, or other labour services, so in that sense it's free from seigneurial constraints, but it can otherwise of course be controlled by other legal mechanisms.[23] But we are aware of the complexity of using 'free labour' in that particular context.

Alice Taylor

I loved your paper, but I wondered why there wasn't more in it about competition between lords. So much of the 'seigneurial revolution' of the central Middle Ages was about competition between lords over a very finite number of resources, but that didn't seem to be happening in your material, and I wondered if you could explain why.

Frederik Buylaert

We wondered about that too. One thing that we did to try to get at that was to look at the lawsuits of the Council of Flanders, the highest court of the principality: from registers and lawsuits you can see who's prosecuting whom. And you can see that a lot of seigneuries prosecuted towns, a lot of rural districts prosecuted seigneuries, and so on; but what is very rare, and almost never happens, is seigneuries prosecuting other seigneuries. Seigneurial wars, seigneurial feuds, are basically non-existent. The phenomenon disappears after the mid twelfth century.[24] Thijs and I wondered why, but it does

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[23] See Jane Whittle and Thijs Lambrecht (eds.), *Labour Laws in Preindustrial Europe: The Coercion and Regulation of Wage Labour, c.1350–1850* (Woodbridge, 2023).

[24] Discussed in Dirk Heirbaut, *Over heren, vazallen en graven: Het persoonlijk leenrecht in Vlaanderen, c.1000–1305* (Brussels, 1997), 207.

make sense in the sense that, unlike in England and France, lordships are not touching at the boundaries, or not always. So there can be some large tracts of allodial estates (that is, land owned outright, not within a lordship) that are directly in the control of counts. There are seigneurial islands; seigneuries can touch but they rarely do, and that takes away a lot of the direct friction that fuels seigneurial warfare elsewhere. They are more like raisins in a bowl of porridge. The porridge is the power of the count: he's at the boundary of the seigneuries. So you have a lot of seigneuries prosecuting the count of Flanders over villages. Also, lords have a common enemy: from the four-teenth century you also have bands of lords coming together before the count of Flanders with petitions saying, 'Towns are undermining our position'. So in that situation we don't see the kind of direct seigneurial rivalry that you see, for instance, in Tristan's article.

Chris Wickham

That's very interesting because in northern Italy, which, as is well known, doesn't have a strong state, conflicts between lords in law courts are very common. But one other thing about Italy is that very often you get mixed lordships, where several lords have rights in a village, and that's a circumstance where you do get conflict. Do you have single lords in villages?

Frederik Buylaert

Yes and no. I should stress that for our calculations we are talking about great lordships with banal rights (rights of justice): they tend to encompass an entire village. The smaller lordships com-parable to English manors, which have only economic rights, can be much smaller and more fragmented. So it's possible to have lots of seigneurial competition but only between smaller lords. So it depends which level of lordship you're looking at.

Tristan Sharp

I was very surprised, too, that there was so little mention of lordly violence. When they band together against the towns, does that involve warfare, or is it just at a legal level?

Frederik Buylaert

The last time they try doing this through warfare is in 1350, when four or five lords, one of them very powerful, band together and they start pillaging the countryside of Kortrijk, one of the middling towns of Flanders. For a couple of months they raid just as you describe in your article. But the kind of feuding that you describe is completely unheard of after the twelfth century; this is the only anecdote that we could give you. It surprised me too. One thing that might make a difference is that, as in England, the count of Flanders adopts the right of novel disseisin as the legal form very early on (novel disseisin means that a dispossessed plaintiff could reclaim the contested land for the duration of the trial, which meant there was not as much value in attempting to seize land by force). If historians of England are correct that this has a strong dampening effect on seigneurial violence, then the same might be true of Flanders.[25]

TRISTAN W. SHARP: 'SEIGNEURIAL PREDATION IN THE LATE MEDIEVAL FEUD'

Alice Taylor

My question isn't so much about the extractive quality of lordship, which I think comes across very well in your article: you move away from this myth of constitutional loveliness, of violence somehow not being exerted on the body, and you show that it actually still has some very real material consequences that have a serious impact on people. That comes across very clearly. My question is more about: how does the fact of this violence against peasants and people of low status sit with the broader rhetoric around ruling? One of the (many) narratives about modernity in Anglophone scholarship is that you don't really get hypocrisy as such in this earlier period: you don't see political hypocrisy in the sense of saying one thing but doing another. But is there in fact a straightforward disjuncture

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[25] See also the pertinent remarks in this respect in Justine Firnhaber-Baker, 'Seigneurial Violence in Medieval Europe', in *The Cambridge World History of Violence*, 4 vols., ii, ed. Matthew S. Gordon, Richard W. Kaeuper, and Harriet Zurndorfer (Cambridge, 2020), 263.

between the very strong political rhetoric of protection that you get around lordship, and its violence? It reminds me of a point made by Tim Reuter: that the crucial question about lordship is 'How did they get away with it?'[26]

Tristan Sharp

In the German context, starting in the late fourteenth, but particularly the early fifteenth century, there's a tremendous amount of literature which revolves around reforming the empire. In the *Reformatio Sigismundi* (1439) there is a critique of the behaviour of lords. And I started my article with this poem by Michael Beheim (1416/21–1474/8), which is actually a crusading text. He's trying to get German lords to go along to fight against the Turks; and he says you're all supposed to be protectors of Christendom, but what you're doing is worse than the Turks: you are exploiting your own people. And this comes up again and again: there is a real critique going on and it's often connected with these imperial reform movements and the House of Habsburg. There are a number of manuals of conduct written later in the fourteenth century by two preachers of the Vienna school, Henry of Langenstein and Marsilius of Ingehn, that specifically have these injunctions against levying tribute when you go to war, about how you shouldn't burn down houses, all these things you should and shouldn't do.[27] So there's an awareness of it. Yet despite the awareness of it, there isn't anything that really anybody can do about it.

Frederik Buylaert

I loved your paper, it was fantastic. My question is very simple, and it's really an invitation to take your conclusion further: there's

[26] Timothy Reuter, 'Nobles and Others: The Social and Cultural Expression of Power Relations in the Middle Ages', in Timothy Reuter, *Medieval Polities and Modern Mentalities*, ed. Janet L. Nelson (Cambridge, 2006), 113.

[27] Klaus Wolf, 'Professorale Predigten und Traktate zum Nutzen der Landesherrschaft: Zu den gesellschaftspolitischen Vorstellungen von Theologen der Wiener Schule, insbesondere zum Gewaltverständnis', in Christine Reinle and Anna-Lena Wendel (eds.), *Das Recht in die eigene Hand nehmen? Rechtliche, soziale und theologische Diskurse über Selbstjustiz und Rache* (Baden-Baden, 2021).

a real problem with conceptualizing the state and lordship and how they work. Would you speak of states in fifteenth-century Germany? If so, what definition of state would you use? And I'd add to that: what I saw when I read your paper was tremendous capacity for 'state-building' (in scare quotes) in these reports of damages caused during seigneurial war. As Justine Firnhaber-Baker has shown, the French state was built not by French kings going to war and top-down government, but by their issuing pardons, issuing safeguards, creating new spaces for arbitration, and so on.[28] This is what Stuart Carroll really stresses for sixteenth-century France: the Crown as arbiter, as mediator, that was the power of the state, as opposed to the more traditional picture of kings at war and so on.[29] So I'd love to know where you stand on this: do you see the same mechanism underpinning the *Landesherrschaft* (German princes' 'territorial lordship')? Is that there too, or do you see something else?

Tristan Sharp

I'll take your second point first: this dialectic between the lord's right to feud and these increasingly powerful territorial princely lordships — there's this relationship between the lower nobility and the princes. The lower nobility gets a stake in this state formation process: they hold pledges, they're office-holders, and yet at the same time these princes use the lower nobility as a way to wage feuds covertly against their opponents, and then at the same time they also offer themselves as mediators.[30] A really good example of this in central Germany is the Wettiner, a major princely family, and they're able to do this because there's a big noble revolt in the 1330s–1340s which they put down. What ends up happening because of this is that the Wettiner are able to set themselves up as the most sought-after arbiter figures in central Germany. And you get this recurring pattern of two

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[28] See especially Justine Firnhaber-Baker, 'Seigneurial War and Royal Power in Later Medieval Southern France', *Past and Present*, 208 (2010); Justine Firnhaber-Baker, *Violence and the State in Later Medieval Languedoc* (Cambridge, 2014).

[29] Stuart Carroll, 'The Peace in the Feud in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France', *Past and Present*, 178 (2003).

[30] Hillay Zmora explores this dynamic exceptionally well in *State and Nobility in Early Modern Germany: The Knightly Feud in Franconia, 1440–1567* (Cambridge, 1997).

lords feuding with each other, then the Wettiner step in, both because they have a legal right to do so and also because people seek them out. And that pattern doesn't stop; and then there's also a fair bit of Wettiner just going around hitting people on the head when they want to. So there's a combination of this use of outright force and then setting themselves up as the primary arbitrators: it draws in the nobility. And then by, let's say, the early sixteenth century, you have something that I would call a state. It definitely contributes to state formation, at least in some contexts and some regions where there's a relatively strong princely lordship.

And then going back to the question of the state: is there a state in late medieval Germany? That's a difficult question. I definitely think there are certain princely lordships and territorial lordships which are approaching something similar to the definition of a state; they're getting there. But one of the things that I gestured towards at the end of the article is that you have all these advances in governance, in record-keeping, administration, just going on and on and on; but does that always have to lead to something that resembles modern governance? I think in certain circumstances it can, but then there are other circumstances where it doesn't, as in the German context: it can also contribute to what you might call another form of state formation, where it contributes instead to the strengthening of these smaller autonomous lordships which can then, in turn, harness these developments to their advantage and become more exploitative of the rural population.

Frederik Buylaert

Excellent! I think you should publish that answer.

Another question I had was: in view of the intensity of the violence that you describe, I wondered, is this stable? I wondered about this while we were working on Flemish lords: even when the lord is a man (which is far from always being the case), even if they are all knights with military training, an analysis of the life cycle of these men shows enormous constraints on how often they can use violence. Often the lord is too young or he's too old, or he's mutilated, or he's killed, or he's away in a princely office or in the city. So it made me think of the classic work on Roman elites by Richard Saller: you have the ideal of a Roman

patriarchy, but practice is very different because it's very diffi-
cult to sustain that kind of male aggressive presence over the
long term.[31] Similarly, you can terrorize a neighbourhood with a
small band for a couple of years, but it's another thing doing it
for forty, fifty, sixty years. So I wondered: are there constraints
in the life cycle of the noble family that dampen this conflict, or
is this actually sustainable? Is the influx of capital you mention
punctuated, with lows and highs, or is it more or less constant?

Tristan Sharp

In certain cases you have conflicts that just burn themselves out,
not in the sense that the two sides kill each other off, which is
actually rather rare, but in the sense that sometimes the regions
that they're feuding over become so devastated they're no lon-
ger useful. There's a phenomenon, starting in the fourteenth
and the fifteenth century, where certain regions of Germany are
just reduced to wastes. There's nobody living there. This was
often put down to the Thirty Years War, but actually there are
numerous examples. In Lower Saxony, close to Westphalia, the
Sintfeld districts close to Paderborn: this is an object of conten-
tion between the bishop of Paderborn and another of the local
lords, and over a thirty-year period it's depopulated completely.
There's another case, the river Leine, which is contested for a
number of years and depopulated. So that's one scenario where
it's simply that the contested area is devastated so much they've
no interest in fighting over it.[32]

The other thing is that often a lot of these lordly feuds are
very, very low-scale. There are feuds which involve thousands
of men in pitched battles and they're very large affairs, but

[31] Richard P. Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family*
(Cambridge, 2009).

[32] Hans-Jürgen Nitz, 'Spätmittelalterliches Fehdewesen und regionale
Wüstungsmassierung: Eine Untersuchung ihres Zusammenhangs am Beispiel der
umstrittenen welfisch-kurmainzisch-landgräflich-hessischen Territorialgrenzzone
im oberen Leinegebiet', in Wolfgang Pinkwart (ed.), *Genetische Ansätze in der
Kulturlandschaftsforschung: Festschrift für Helmut Jäger* (Würzburg, 1983); Gerhard
Henkel, *Die Wüstungen des Sintfeldes: Eine historisch-geographische Untersuchung zur
Genese einer alten westfälischen Kulturlandschaft* (Cologne, 1973). This territory lies
along the river Leine where the modern federal states of Thuringia, Hessen, and
Lower Saxony meet directly south of Göttingen.

often you'll have something like a dispute over a toll; there will be a little bit of back and forth, a third party will come in and arbitrate, and then that's it; and then a couple of years later it'll flare up again. But it's all small-scale. And that *is* kind of sustainable. So you have lords who are just constantly feuding with each other for generations, but it doesn't necessarily amount to much. When it does, most often it's when there's a big power disparity between them. This is what the Wettiner do a lot of the time: they will find some kind of pretext, there's a castle they want, there's a lordship they want, and they'll say, 'Well, you broke this ordinance of our territorial peace' and they'll go and smash them. But these German lords' tremendous capacity for constant violence is still very striking. I don't really have an answer on that.

Sandro Carocci

I don't know what Chris will think, but to me the strongest point of comparison for this strange world of German feud that you describe is the world of the Italian communes in the twelfth century, with the cavalcade: every season, every *good* season, knights of every city go and raid the enemy — and the enemy means everything and everyone.[33] And that was an activity that helped to define nobility, that gave economic resources but also symbolic resources to the city nobility. And this, of course, took a heavy toll on territories. But it didn't preclude their development; and it ended at a certain point because the nobility itself changed, not just because the politics changed.

Tristan Sharp

What you were saying about the cavalcade and how it defines a kind of aristocratic identity, I definitely think that is relevant to the German context. You do find families or individuals who come up again and again in the sources, and they'll go on a plundering raid against A, B, C, and D, and this just goes on for like twenty, thirty years throughout their lifetime.

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[33] The basic research on the knights of the Italian communes is Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur, *Cavaliers et citoyens: Guerre, conflits et société dans l'Italie communale, XIIe–XIIIe siècles* (Paris, 2003).

Sandro Carocci

And this predatory lordship, when does it come to an end?

Tristan Sharp

I would say probably in the seventeenth century in the German case. Though Stuart Carroll's most recent book, *Enmity and Violence in Early Modern Europe*, gives examples of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century German lords feuding in a similar way — just on a much, much smaller scale. They can't lead these massive plundering raids, but they are similar in terms of how they treat the peasantry.[34]

Sandro Carocci

Because I was thinking, from a general point of view, that there is a common tendency in the late Middle Ages for lordships to rely less and less on political means of pressure, or war, and more and more on economic ones. This is very clear with Italian lordship. At the very beginning, during the feudal revolution, there were political factors that helped lords to extract a lot of wealth from their subjects. But later we no longer find this kind of extraction; when we find a rapid increase in extraction, this increase depends more on seigneurial investment in production than on an increase in the surplus demanded from peasants' crops. I discussed Sartirana in my paper: cases like that are examples of this.[35] And in terms of 'pervasiveness' in the late Middle Ages, it's almost the same thing: pervasiveness, at its base, begins to depend less and less on justice, violence, and so on, and more and more on investments, or the economic conditioning of people. So I thought that maybe in Germany, too, this change happened when economic intervention started to matter to lords in their approach to the peasantry more than politics did? What do you think?

Tristan Sharp

That's a very good question. Off the top of my head, I would say that in late medieval Germany both of these different

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[34] Stuart Carroll, *Enmity and Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2023).
[35] Carocci, 'Pervasiveness of Lordship', 41–2.

approaches to extraction coexisted at the same time. For example, we often find forms of economic intervention/protectionism among nobles of middling rank with smaller lordships. There is a wonderful example in the seigneurial accounts of *Burggraf*s of Drachenfels (north-western Rhineland) from around 1400, which show a form of seigneurial lordship typified by economic investments and interventions.[36] This seems to be more typical for the north-west, where there are a lot of middling-sized lordships with coherent territories.

At the same time, we also have more feudal revolutionesque forms of seigneurial lordship, which are based on rapid extraction of surplus resources, diminution of peasant status, and coercion. This is prevalent in the south-west. It's associated with the establishment of territorial lordships, often abbeys, that sought to impose serfdom (*Leibeigenschaft* is the German term of art) over formerly free peasants starting in the late fourteenth century. I believe some DDR-era scholars even referred to this period of the late Middle Ages as one of refeudalization actually. And then there are the peasant revolts, something like sixty of them or more over a period of 150 years: these are a response, I think, to these increasingly harsh and extractive regimes of lordship.

So that's all to say that it varies very much from region to region. I would, however, still say that in general the economic side starts to gain precedence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But this is an excellent question that demands further attention.

Chris Wickham

I'd like to start with the historiography which you cite in your text. To Otto Brunner, violence and feud are part of the state;

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[36] Franz Irsigler, 'Die Wirtschaftsführung der Burggrafen von Drachenfels im Spätmittelalter', *Bonner Geschichtsblätter*, 34 (1982). For more examples, see Enno Bünz, 'Adlige Unternehmer? Wirtschaftliche Aktivitäten von Grafen und Herren im späten Mittelalter', in Kurt Andermann and Clemens Joos (eds.), *Grafen und Herren in Südwestdeutschland vom 12. bis ins 17. Jahrhundert* (Epfendorf, 2006); Kurt Andermann, 'Adel und Geld: Beobachtungen zu den Einkommensverhältnissen des Kraichgauer Adels an der Wende vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit (Zusammenfassung)', *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Geschichtliche Landeskunde am Oberrhein e.V.*, 319 (1992); Kurt Andermann, 'Grundherrschaft, Fürstendienst und Kreditgeschäft: Zu den wirtschaftlichen Grundlagen des Kraichgauer Adels am Ende des Mittelalters', in Stefan Rhein (ed.), *Die Kraichgauer Ritterschaft in der frühen Neuzeit* (Sigmaringen, 1993).

violence is legitimate; violence creates complicity; violence is right. This was actually a hell of a lot better than the kind of legal history that says, 'This is what the *Sachsenspiegel* says, so therefore that's what people actually did': Brunner says no, they don't, they go and kill each other. But this is all contained and orderly, with rules and limits; and to him that was just fine. And Gadi [Algazi] comes along and says these are basically Nazi ideas. Violence is not right, violence is violence: it's horrible, it's oppressive and coercive, even when strategic.[37] (I simplify considerably, of course.) I think you position yourself rather nicely in saying that actually it's both.

There are plenty of Italian parallels for using violence to establish right: people use violence to demonstrate their right, and other people go, 'Oh, well, I guess you *are* right, because my only alternative is to fight back, or else go to court, and I don't have the resources to do so'. This goes back to the issue about novel disseisin: the Italians *do* believe in novel disseisin, it's got an exact parallel in a Roman law context, and they really *don't* believe that violent seizure creates right. But at the same time they do, because it does if you don't go to court, or if courts aren't available to you. But the other thing about the Italian context is that this kind of violence is very often targeted, very often highly strategic. The feudal revolution debate has been about that as well. And I wondered about the extent to which *your* violence might have been in some circumstances quite specifically targeted too. Obviously not always, otherwise you wouldn't get entire areas depopulated, but at least sometimes.

On the other hand, with wider-scale violence, establishing right is not necessarily the point: to come back to Sandro's point, Italian city wars devastated villages on a completely regular basis too. There, however, they don't actually always kill the villagers, so the villagers come back, very angry, rebuild their houses, and hope that the next year the war won't strike in the same place; I've got examples from the twelfth century of

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[37] Brunner, *Land and Lordship*, trans. Kaminsky and Van Horn Melton; Gadi Algazi, *Herrengewalt und Gewalt der Herren im späten Mittelalter: Herrschaft, Gegenseitigkeit und Sprachgebrauch* (Frankfurt, 1996); Gadi Algazi, 'Pruning Peasants: Private War and Maintaining the Lords' Peace in Late Medieval Germany', in Esther Cohen and Mayke de Jong (eds.), *Medieval Transformations: Texts, Power, and Gifts in Context* (Leiden, 2000).

villages that are burnt three times in a fifteen-year period, and they're still there in their village a decade later.[38] So, in Italy devastation does make people poorer, even if it doesn't necessarily destroy landscapes. But what that kind of devastation *doesn't* do is establish right. Cities are doing it for fun, and out of simple enmity towards other cities. I'm sure a lot of your lords are doing it for fun.

Tristan Sharp

And for money.

Chris Wickham

And for money also. But not necessarily for right. Because you can have the same village getting devastated several times, but which city controls it doesn't change.

Tristan Sharp

I don't go into it in any real depth, but in the latter half of the article there is this conflict over a set of villages between one of these Wettiner dukes, Braunschweig-Lüneburg I think, and then the bishop of Hildesheim is there too; and we get a set of damage registers. But the violence that they're using is far more limited, and in this case it is about establishing a right. So I think there are cases where the violence is about claiming rights, but then other cases where it's not at all. There's an example of that from another one of the damage registers in the paper, when one of these advocate families launched a raid into the lordship of the burgraves of Nuremberg: at one point they massacre a whole village, but then elsewhere the level of violence they exert is pretty low, and when they do kill people, it's usually by executing them, and they'll use instruments of justice to do so ('We have local authority here and we're exercising it'), and then they may burn a few things but they mostly just extract resources or labour. They will often take somebody and hang them as an example, to show that they have high justice there, and *then* they'll extract labour and resources,

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[38] See *Documenti degli archivi di Pavia relativi alla storia di Voghera (929–1300)*, ed. Luigi Cesare Bollea (Pinerolo, 1909), nos. 45–58.

and then they'll move on. In the case where they massacre the whole village, I don't really know why they do so, but it has to do with control of a convent: the women from this one family would often be the abbesses there, and the burgraves of Nuremberg take this over, and then they set up one of their noblewomen to be the abbess; so the family then capture all the nuns, they capture the abbess, and they hold them for a very high ransom. And then they kill everybody in a village under the nunnery's lordship to make an example. Maybe they're making a claim there too; I don't know. In any case, within the same damage register, you can see different modalities of violence that I think are maybe being used for different ends: there are cases where they want to establish right, and there are other cases where they want to set an example, or they're just doing it for fun.

CHRISTIAN D. LIDDY: 'THE MAKING OF TOWNS, THE MAKING OF POLITIES: TOWNS AND LORDS IN LATE MEDIEVAL EUROPE'

Alice Rio

I really enjoyed the kind of Gestalt perspective shift where you show that what Walsall really wants out of its relationship with the state is just for it to be like a private lord, and how disappointed they are in their expectations. To connect this with the other two articles: it's hard to imagine someone in Germany being all that keen on having one of Tristan's lords as their lord in quite the same way. And it made me wonder, what creates Walsall's demand for lordship? Is it, as in Flanders, because the violent potential of lordship is being defused in some way at the same time? What interests within the town is it meant to be a vehicle for? And what is it that they wish lordship to do for them that, for much of your paper, all these various lords fail to give them? Somehow, whatever it is the town is trying to do with lordship, they're not satisfied, they're not able to get it, especially when it's being done by the Crown. Is that right?

Christian Liddy

This is a massive generalization, but if we look across all of urban Europe and ask what's the dominant story of the city, in

terms of the historiography, the common denominator is the growth of oligarchy. And this is true in towns, in cities, whether they are city states or not: it's a monopoly of power by the few, which always creates problems. There are always these attempts to call upon either outsiders or other people to help resolve internal difficulties. I think it's something inherent in the nature of the organization of power within cities, and there is no doubt, I think, that lordship is something that can be desirable in that context: it's a way of resolving potential problems; it's sometimes a way of reinforcing the authority of those in power, but also a way of countering that power as well.

Sandro Carocci

Which functions of lordship were most valued by subjects? For Flanders, I thought a fascinating example of how lords can give their subjects what they want was the bull provided to impregnate tenants' cows. Lordship can be considered as a private and public agency for the satisfaction of shared interests. Both Frederik and Thijs's and Christian's articles insist on lordship's ability to give rules to local life, acting as a functional authority to organize the life of subjects. And this seems irrefutable. But I have two points here. One is: regulating local life could be done perfectly effectively not by the lord, but by the community. In many Italian lordships, many problems of local life were regulated by the rural communities: it was the community that took care of public order, managed common resources, managed the parish, and much more. The lord was entirely marginal. Since societies that were subject to a lord did not always *need* this higher authority, if a society did need it, we must ask why.

And my second point is the one I have already made about Flanders: maybe we should give more space, among the functions of lordship, to the protection of the interests of local society against external forces. I understood that for English cities, the role of lordship was in mediating with kings, nobles, and so on; could you expand a bit on this, the role of mediating with external forces? Because I do believe that more emphasis should be placed, in the functions of lordship, on the relation between the local world and the outside world, and not just on regulating the local or the internal . . .

Christian Liddy

Great question. There are things in the English context that English kings can do, primarily by virtue of the geographical breadth of their lordship. Royal grants of freedom from toll, for example, can be beneficial to a town's inhabitants, or at least to some of them. And so that perhaps explains why a town might look beyond its locality . . .

Sandro Carocci

But do the lords mediate for the community in order to obtain this?

Christian Liddy

Well, I'm not sure that I would make that argument. The relationship I was trying to trace in the article is one in which there is much *less* communication between locality and centre than we might imagine in a supposedly highly centralized polity. At those moments when Walsall tries to speak to the king, it's really difficult to know who the mediators are; I'd assume that it probably would be the local lord. But I was trying to argue that most of the time actually a town can exist in and of itself within its locality, under local lordship. But when the town starts to appeal to the king and says, 'Look, we need your lordship', it's because the town is facing all sorts of clashes with *other* towns in its own area, and/or because it has no one else to go to. So it's more on those occasions when there's conflict between towns of similar sizes that towns have dealings with external powers.

Chris Wickham

I was going to ask a similar, but not quite the same, question. It's clear that you can't be a town in England without lordship, so it's inevitable. But I've also got the impression that it's also *necessary* for stable urban government. Is that so in your view? You didn't quite say that explicitly, but when you've got Walsall flailing around between lords who aren't really there, the sense is that Walsall would be a lot happier if it had a proper lord that it could properly relate to, and not mess about. And I wondered if that was actually the case.

Christian Liddy

The challenge of creating stable government, which applies to all political regimes, is something that is especially keenly felt in an urban context, where the way you *get* power and the terms on which you *hold* power are potentially problematic. If you are mostly chosen from within your community, if power is tied explicitly to office, and if your occupation of office is generally temporary (regardless of whether or not you want to call this political system quasi-republican or something else), this is an environment that poses a distinctive set of challenges. With lordship, what are the moments of conflict involved? Well, there are many: competing lordships; or the end of a dynasty — when a nobleman dies, who succeeds? But I think that with towns, they are *permanently* unstable. The quality of rule is different. Urban governance, whether it's the mayor, whether it's the *Bürgermeister*, whether it's the *podestà*, is much more contestable. And so I think that that's exactly why the townspeople of Walsall want a lord, one who is external but also, ideally, one who is local.

Chris Wickham

Of course, Italy is the exception that proves the rule, but it takes Italian cities a long time to *not* want that. And then (by 1170, say) they *really* don't want it, and achieve full autonomy under a collective leadership; but then, of course, it breaks down later, with signorial lordships *inside* cities — not over cities, but inside them. There is then an entire historiographical strand in Italy and the United States which takes as its premiss that urban collective autonomy is, of course, what is needed, that it's a good thing by definition, and it's a disappointment when towns aren't as enthusiastic about it as we are. But it's still the exception that proves the rule. Because the normal situation across Europe is, actually, that lordships are always useful.

Frederik Buylaert

It's fantastic, a very rich paper. For me, your article resonates closely with Christine Carpenter's *Locality and Polity*, in the sense that you show that, for towns too, their political position and identity is closely entwined with the position of the

community within the English polity.[39] What fascinates me is that this ongoing dialogue on how Walsall fits into the kingdom is articulated through lordship. Apart from this, your contribution is important to me because you show how those discussions on the lordship over Walsall were improvised and contextual, with interpretative claims that shift rapidly and which have to be communicated effectively to all stakeholders. In that sense, it greatly reinforces the point that Tom Johnson made in the pages of *Past and Present* about how jurisdiction — a key element of lordship — was a communicative and interpretative process.[40]

As a somewhat open-ended question, I wonder about the timing. As an interested outsider to the rich scholarship on the social history of England, I noted that the definition of urban elites enters a state of flux in the fifteenth century. Rosemary Horrox, reinforced with new evidence in Maurice Keen's last book, famously pointed out that, precisely in the fifteenth century, urban notables (aldermen, public officials, and even physicians) came to join the ranks of the gentry, even if they did not own a manor.[41] For me, it seems that the concept of lordship, and the social cachet that comes with it, was expanded in the fifteenth century as gentility is henceforth not only derived from the authority of manorial lordship but also from other, but similar, sources of power. This is also what you see in Italian city states, where nobility was traditionally derived from rural lordship, but with the passing of time, a seat in the urban government also made someone noble. Is it possible that this changing cultural matrix of lordship and nobility was somehow connected to the striking urgency with which fifteenth-century Walsall was now trying to reconfigure and fix its own position as a site of lordship and, concomitantly, its place in the English polity?

[39] Christine Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401–1499* (Cambridge, 1992).

[40] Tom Johnson, 'The Tree and the Rod: Jurisdiction in Late Medieval England', *Past and Present*, 237 (2017).

[41] Rosemary E. Horrox, 'The Urban Gentry in the Fifteenth Century', in J. A. F. Thomson (ed.), *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century* (Gloucester, 1988); Maurice Keen, *Origins of the English Gentleman: Heraldry, Chivalry, and Gentility in Medieval England, c.1300–c.1500* (Stroud, 2002).

Christian Liddy

In an Italian context, it's different when you have a nobility with an urban base. I think that in an English context, but also in a German one as well, we have the same debates about whether, why, and how urban elites try to become a kind of patrician class. It is in this context that we might think of the town as a site of lordship. Serving the town in a public capacity might be ennobling, but only to a point, and internal lordship was arguably more contentious than external lordship. Lordship *over* towns was not the same as lordship *in* towns. The culture of lordship and the language of honour and reputation certainly helped to legitimize the rule of urban elites. However, there were often tensions when leading citizens were seen to be acting like lords. So I would set that against the idea that there's something very particular about this time: I'd say that actually there's more continuity than change there.

Tristan Sharp

I found the lordship-shopping, where Walsall tries to get a variety of people to *act* as their lord even when that's not technically what they are in relation to the town, really interesting. I haven't come across this much in the German literature, though I suppose it existed as a practice. It seems to imply almost a kind of parity between the town and these other parties, the fact that they have the freedom, the ability, to choose lords.

Christian Liddy

Lordship-shopping is a great phrase! That sense of parity is important, actually, because it's not always true of relations between towns and lords: some towns have lordships that really are pervasive; some are *in*vasive. What I wanted to do was to reframe lordship as governance, to use that term; to suggest that it could work for both parties: the lord can demonstrate his lordship and his control over an area, but towns themselves can use lordship to their own advantage. Towns are also involved in the making of lordship: they cultivate it and they create it.

★ ★ ★

Alice Rio

Just to get us started in putting some of this together a bit: one theme that did come up several times in the discussion was what demand there was for lordship, what makes people want it.

Sandro highlighted two areas where lordship can work as a vehicle for other people's interests beyond their own. There was the dimension of economic protectionism, which took precedence over lords' earlier, more aggressive extraction practices: at the same time this helped to secure the interests of the oligarchies that Christian mentioned. Clearly this could work well for very different kinds of oligarchy: rural ones in Frederick and Thijs's paper, or urban ones in Christian's. But the other thing that lords could do was to offer protection from, or mediation with, third parties, and I wonder if this is in a way the key to integrating Tristan's article into this discussion of demand. Because obviously your own lord wasn't the one who was going to destroy your village: it was his neighbour, the one who thought he should be your lord instead. So I wonder if this high level of lordly violence might not have created an even greater need for lordship from villages. Even if, as a German peasant, it definitely looks as if you were definitely not getting as much that was positive out of lordship compared to the other people we've been talking about, you might still need and want it just as much, or even more, because you would be even worse off if you *didn't* have a lord.

Tristan Sharp

This almost makes lordship a kind of protection racket. The way that Brunner describes lordship: the lord provides protection, and then in return the peasants provide their services and loyalty. I mean, these peasants *do* need protection from the lords. And, you know, this kind of fits into this social science literature which looks at when states fall apart: you get these protection rackets where you've got multiple gangs who go around plundering people, and this plundering also creates a demand for protection; you get this synergy between plundering and protection, and this can end up transitioning into a government eventually.

Sandro Carocci

I have two general questions to contribute to a comparative approach. All the papers have largely overcome the problem of differences in the definition of lordship that caused such a complete mess in European historiography up to twenty years ago. Still, we're all talking about seigneurial lordship. My own paper is about seigneurial lordship, even if I just use 'lordship' without any qualification. Now, I would say that there is a dual risk here: on the one hand, the risk of confusing and mixing up different notions of lordship, and, on the other hand, of using a definition of lordship that is too uniform. For example, Frederik: your paper is about seigneurial lordship, but you refer in it to the debate between Wickham and Ghosh, which concerns a very different notion of lordship (even if, at the end of the day, it does not harm your article, which is very clear).

And the other thing is the feeling that perhaps we risk an excessive uniformity, a lack of articulation. If we think of Italy: every important lordship in late medieval Italy can be defined as seigneurial lordship. So, if we want to improve our knowledge, we must go inside this category and try to do something else. For example, Federico Del Tredici and I tried to distinguish between three different types of seigneurial lordship according to their origin: there is lordship that is coming from the feudal revolution, another coming from the cities at the end of the thirteenth, beginning of the fourteenth century, and then a third type, the lordship born in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when states give out fiefs and create new lordships. And these are all seigneurial lordships, but still they are very different from one another, whether in terms of their pervasiveness, or their capacity to last over a long time, or their consensual or non-consensual character, and so on.[42]

Another point is that everyone — Christian most of all, but everyone else as well — is writing against narratives of state formation and national exceptionalism; but again, I wonder if we do not run the risk, conversely, of excessive uniformity as a result? This is a risky point to make, but if we look at Italy comparatively, for instance, I do think that there is

[42] Carocci and Del Tredici, 'La signoria rurale nell'Italia del tardo medioevo'.

something distinctive about Italian lordship across the peninsula. In the late Middle Ages, we can speak of an Italian lordship characterized by three elements much less present in the rest of Europe: the city's strong interference in the seigniorial dynamic; the intrusion and conditioning of states in the relationship between lords and subjects; the strength of rural communities that were able to negotiate less pervasive seigniorial presences, to seek the mediation of state apparatuses, and to suggest to the lord a rule that passed through consensus and alliance.

Chris Wickham

I was going to say something analogous to that last point, though not the same. It is interesting that, in all the papers that were distributed, people are reaching outside their own national landscapes, making comparisons, showing that things are not so different — but then in reality all reacting against their own distinctive national historiographies, so that then things become different again. And then you start to think, well, actually, maybe they're *not* the same. Sandro asks, are we creating an excessive uniformity. I myself think, precisely because everyone's reacting against a different 'wrong' historiography, that it's not uniform, because the problematic in each case is a different problematic. But then the question is, if you actually did a genuine international comparative survey, would you find that it was the same, or would you find it was different? Sandro's just made a pitch for Italy being different; I'm pretty sure Tristan would make a pitch for Germany being different; and there is a long historiographical tradition about England being different, because there apparently you can't have violent feuds (except maybe during the reign of King Stephen) because no one will let you; whether that's true or not, of course, is a different matter. I think Castile is different again. But I think you would have to have an extremely large project in order to ascertain whether they were or whether they were not. Sandro alluded to how much worse things were twenty years ago, and it is because there have been international projects in between that some of the incomparabilities have become less incomparable. But one of the troubles with extremely large projects is that everybody just comes with

their piece, and no one does the synthesis, so it's not necessarily an answer. Actually, I suspect probably one person would have to do this, not a team, in order to establish what actually is really different and what is not. But that's too hard.

Christian Liddy

At the basis of any comparison, I think we need to be clear why we're doing it, and I wonder whether that's one of the problems in a way: whether it's national historiographical traditions or otherwise, when we write about lordship, we are usually actually using it to write about or reassess something else. There's always a deeper problematic: the transition from feudalism to capitalism; the formation of the state. Can you ever study it in its own right, or are you always coming at it with another ulterior question? This, to me, is ultimately why it's so difficult to make any comparison. We'd have to agree what it is we're looking for. Are we interested in lordship as a phenomenon, as a concept separate from narratives of national exceptionalism; is there something about it as an interpersonal relationship, as this type of power that you're interested in . . . ?

Alice Rio

You mean, rather than privileging how it interacts with other major, potentially rival structures, like states?

Christian Liddy

Yeah, yeah. But other things, too . . .

Chris Wickham

Well, the reason we're doing it is because it's interesting. I mean, we don't want to do the growth of the modern state because it's boring.

Christian Liddy

I actually wrote that down in my notes! 'Lords are more interesting than states'.

Alice Rio

Let's make that the conclusion!

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few years, a number of articles have featured in *Past and Present* on the subject of late medieval lordship. Three were accepted within a four-month period between July and October 2023 (Christian D. Liddy, 'The Making of Towns, the Making of Polities'; Tristan W. Sharp, 'Seigneurial Predation in the Late Medieval Feud'; Frederik Buylaert, Thijs Lambrecht, Klaas Van Gelder, and Kaat Cappelle, 'The Political Economy of Seigneurial Lordship in Flanders'). The three pieces approached the subject in quite different ways, and with very different findings; at the same time, they were clearly talking about the same thing, and all were concerned with assessing more closely what lords took from, and had to offer to, local societies, and their social and/or economic impact. This seemed a good opportunity to hold a workshop to place the articles in conversation with each other in order to identify commonalities, reflect on the wider field, and prompt more general questions. The round table took place on 17 June 2024 at King's College London. The version presented here is a revised and edited transcript, but aiming to retain the feel of the original oral conversation. A brief opening section introduces the articles to give context to the discussion.