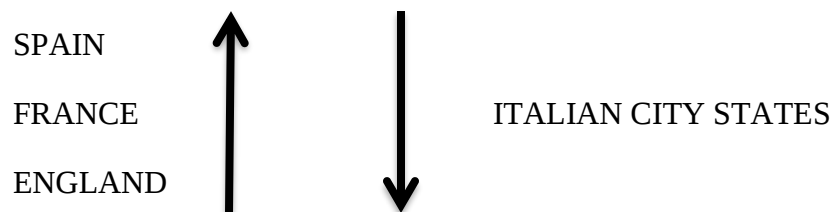


The Rise of New Monarchies in Spain, France, and England, and the Decline of the Italian City-States

As we have seen, between 1450 and 1550, Renaissance humanism reshaped European education, literature, the arts, music, and political theory. It also exposed corruption and fallacies within the Roman Catholic Church. It was a profound rejection of medieval scholasticism and traditional practices. In the arena of government, a similar trend was evident. In Spain, France, and England, monarchs were demolishing the medieval feudal political system and building strong central government in its place. As these three kingdoms rose to power and prominence, the wealth, influence, and power of the Italian city states declined.



The Medieval Feudal Political System

During the medieval feudal system, the power of monarchs was limited by the nobility and the Church. The feudal arrangement between medieval kings and their nobility was as follows. The king bestowed land (called a “fief”) and tax-exempt status on noble families. In return, that noble family pledged its loyalty to the king and his successors, and promised to provide military assistance (in the form of mounted knights and foot soldiers) in time of war. Feudalism was a symbiotic arrangement (i.e. it was mutually beneficial). However, with limited ability to tax and no standing army, medieval kings were rather politically weak. They constantly worried about powerful nobles throwing their support behind rival claimants to the throne. If a noble rebellion did break out, it was a serious problem. Nobles typically lived in large stone castles which had been built with defense in mind. Their walls were usually many feet thick, and were pierced by narrow slit windows from which archers could pick off attackers without being exposed to enemy fire. In addition, the castle was often surrounded by a moat and was accessible only by a drawbridge which could be quickly raised. Castles also had their own internal water supply.

Thus, the only way for a king to bring a rebellious noble to heel was to lay siege to his castle. A siege could take many months and there was no guarantee of success. A king had to think carefully about beginning a siege, because to fail would weaken his power even further. The weakness of medieval kings meant that, beyond the capital cities, kingdoms were rather loosely governed.

The Roman Catholic Church, which had enormous influence over the population, limited the power of medieval monarchs in three major ways.

1. The Church was the single largest landowner in every European country. Dioceses, monasteries, and convents owned vast landed estates and enjoyed tax-exempt status. The monarch was limited to taxing peasants who rented land from the Church. According to medieval tax laws, such property did not actually belong to the Church but, rather, belonged to God, and the revenues generated were used to support clergy, charity, education, and church buildings – in other words, to do God’s work. The government had no authority to tax God! In addition to its tax exempt status the Church had the authority to collect an annual tithe from all landowners in the kingdom. The tithe was 10% of the value of the produce of the land. While medieval kings were chronically short of cash and couldn’t afford to keep standing armies, the Church possessed much wealth frustratingly beyond their reach.
2. The Church operated its own ecclesiastical courts outside the jurisdiction of royal courts. Essentially, this meant that if a bishop, priest, monk, or nun committed a crime, they could not be tried in the king’s court. Instead, trial and punishment would be handled internally by the Church itself in its own ecclesiastical court. The reasoning behind this was that secular governments had no right to judge God’s representatives on earth.
3. If a monarch challenged the authority of the Church, the Pope could threaten him with excommunication. This meant that he would be temporarily excluded from receiving the sacraments until he resolved his dispute with the Church. During his period of excommunication, his membership in the Church was suspended, and the clergy preached

that he no longer enjoyed God's favor. If he should die during this period, he could not enter heaven. Excommunication was a powerful weapon that undermined the king's status among the nobility and commoners. If a king still defied the Church, the Pope could pull out an even more powerful weapon – Interdict. This suspended the administering of sacraments in the entire kingdom until the king's excommunication was lifted. This meant no baptisms, marriages, or funerals for the entire population!

Clearly, it was not in the best interest of the monarch to pick a fight with the Church.

The weakening of the Nobility and Church during the 14th Century Crises

The Black Death which hit Europe repeatedly from the mid-14th century onwards seriously weakened the Church and nobility. The Church's inability to explain the plague or to protect the population undermined its influence. The Black Death also ruined the finances of many noble families as millions of rent-paying peasants died. In the ensuing labor shortage, nobles had to compete to rent land to surviving peasants who were able to sign long-term leases on favorable terms. Nobles who weren't able to rent out land had few ways of earning money, and many went bankrupt.

The Avignon Papacy and the Great Schism did irreparable damage to the Church. As we have studied earlier in this unit, between 1309 and 1377 the Roman Catholic Church was based in Avignon, France. Losing control of much of the Papal States in central Italy eliminated a huge source of Church revenue. As a result, the Papacy came up with new means of raising money – increasing fees for baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc., selling church offices and indulgences (note: indulgences had originally been granted to crusaders going to the Holy Land but now the Avignon Papacy was openly selling them). This caused great resentment among the people who came to see the Papacy as greedy and materialistic. A wave of anti-clericalism arose across Europe. Between 1377 and 1415 the Great Schism occurred when rival popes all claimed the throne of St. Peter. At one point there were three popes excommunicating each other!

The Hundred Years' War and the arrival of new weapons weakened the military power of the nobility. During the war, the age of the mounted noble knight came to an end. Newly-invented English longbows, which dispatched arrows capable of piercing steel armor, cut down thousands of French knights. Another new weapon was gunpowder. Invented by the Chinese, gunpowder had gradually made its way across Eurasia through the Muslim world and into Moorish Spain. First used during the Reconquista on the Iberian Peninsula, its value was seen by the English and French during their century-long struggle. Monarchs were quick to monopolize this new technology. Royal gunpowder workshops became the sole source. This was deliberately done in order to keep the manufacture of gunpowder out of the hands of the nobility. This gave a distinct advantage to monarchs. Now, rebellious nobles found it more difficult to barricade themselves inside their castles since the king could bring up cannons and more easily lay siege.

The Partnership between Monarchs and Towns also weakened the nobility. Townspeople, especially the burghers (merchants and professionals) had long resented local noble interference in their affairs. During the crises of the 14th century, cash-strapped nobles frequently attempted to get their hands on the wealth in towns by taxing townspeople or by simply plundering property. In response, town councils reached out to monarchs for protection. In return for paying taxes to the monarchy, towns received royal charters stating that they could form their own councils and select their own mayors without interference from the local nobility. Nobles who attempted to plunder towns would be brought to justice in the royal courts. In addition to receiving much needed taxes, monarchs could also use educated middle class lawyers to staff their bureaucracies, thus diluting the influence of the nobility.

While these four major factors explain the rise of monarchy in general terms, let us now look specifically at the more powerful “New Monarchies” that emerged in Spain, France, and England after 1450.

The New Monarchy in Spain

The New Monarchy in Spain began with the marriage of King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile in 1469. While Aragon and Castile maintained separate systems of law and taxation, it was the beginning of a unified Spanish Kingdom. For centuries, Spanish Christians had been fighting the *Reconquista* against the Moors (Spanish Muslims). With their combined



strength, Ferdinand and Isabella completed the struggle by conquering the last Moorish Kingdom of Granada in January, 1492. The conquest of the small Kingdom of Navarre in 1512 placed the whole Iberian Peninsula, excluding Portugal, under the control of the Spanish monarchy. Ferdinand and Isabella moved to eliminate the threat powerful noble families posed to their rule. They allied with the *Hermendades*, which were militias established by towns to provide protection against marauding nobles during the *Reconquista*. The monarchy skillfully turned the *Hermendades* into sort of local police forces loyal to the Crown. To further reduce the influence of major nobles, Ferdinand and Isabella excluded them from the Royal Council (the monarchy's advisors and ministers), instead relying on educated

clergy and middle class lawyers.

Ferdinand and Isabella used Catholicism to bring greater unity to their Kingdom. Spain contained large minorities of Jews and Muslims which were beyond the usual means of control by the monarchy. Isabella was a devout Catholic and Ferdinand less so, but both believed that emphasizing a common Spanish Catholicism would bind the various kingdoms together. Furthermore, during the *Reconquista*, Spanish Christians had become quite anti-Semitic and anti-

Muslim. The monarchy used this to gain popularity. In 1492, the King and Queen issued an edict of expulsion that ordered all Jews to leave Spain. Massive amounts of Jewish-owned property were confiscated by the Crown. In 1502, the Muslims were expelled. Ferdinand and Isabella also established the Spanish Inquisition whose task was to investigate *conversos* (Jews who had converted to Catholicism) and *moriscos* (Muslims who had done the same). Tomás de Torquemada, a Dominican monk who was Isabella's personal priest, served as the first Grand Inquisitor. The methods of torture used against those accused of relapsing into their old beliefs were severe. Between 1480 and 1530, about 2,000 people were burned at the stake. Tens of thousands of others suffered physical and financial punishments but survived. Ferdinand and Isabella also took advantage of the fact that between 1492 and 1503 there was a Spanish-born Pope, Alexander VI, on the Throne of St. Peter. Alexander gave the Spanish monarchy the authority to appoint bishops and abbots (heads of monasteries) in Spain, and to control the Inquisition. This essentially put the Catholic Church in Spain under the control of the monarchy.

Charles V



The discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus in 1492, and especially the conquests of the Aztec Empire in the 1520s by Hernán Cortés, and the Inca Empire in the 1530s by Francisco Pizarro, brought tremendous wealth and power to the Spanish monarchy. This is a very important factor in establishing the New Monarchy in Spain, and we will explore it in greater detail in tomorrow's reading.

Ferdinand and Isabella recognized the rejuvenated France as its main rival, and so they used their daughters to secure international alliances. Their eldest daughter, Joanna of Castile, was married into the Habsburg family who controlled the Holy Roman Empire. Their younger daughter, Catherine of Aragon, was married into England's Tudor family. Ferdinand and Isabella had no male heir, and when they died, the Kingdom passed to Joanna's son, who ruled both Spain and the Holy Roman Empire as Charles V.

The New Monarchy in France

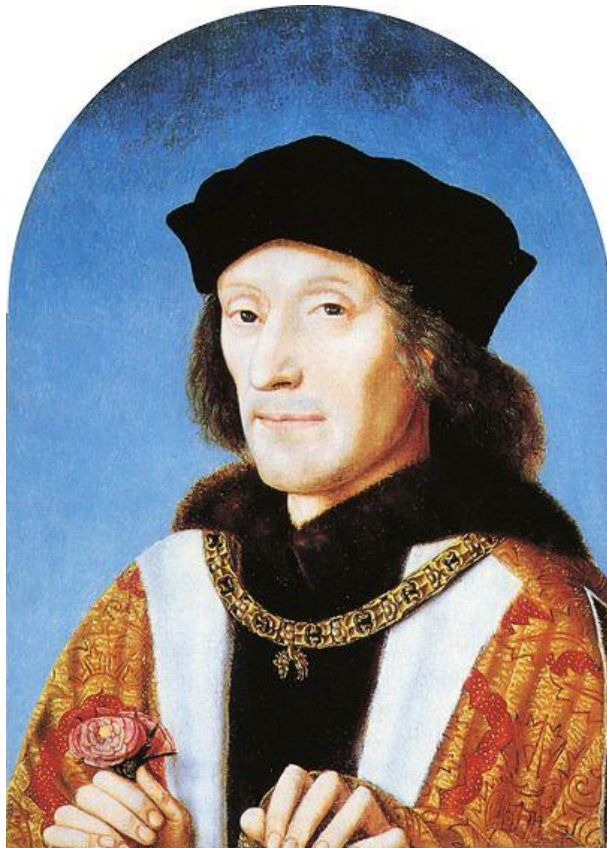


We can trace the beginning of the New Monarchy in France to the end of the Hundred Years' War in 1453. The Valois Dynasty had been in power since 1328, but its rule had been almost destroyed by the English invasion and occupation. At the end of the Hundred Years' War, except for the Channel port of Calais, the English had been driven out of France. Nonetheless, the long war had left the Kingdom badly divided, drastically depopulated, commercially ruined, and agriculturally weak. King Charles VII, who led France to victory, seemed an unlikely person to do so. He was frail and indecisive. His legitimacy was questioned because his father had been considered deranged and his mother was notoriously promiscuous! Charles, however, was made great by those who served him. Joan of Arc, the Maid of Orleans, had rallied his army to victory over the English, and the merchant-banker, Jacques Coeur, had financed the war.

While the great nobles of France had suffered terribly from the arrows of English archers, King Charles reduced their influence still further when he reorganized the Royal Council and staffed it largely with middle class lawyers. He also strengthened royal finances through taxes such as the *taille* (land tax) and the *gabelle* (salt tax). These remained the monarchy's chief sources of revenue until the French Revolution of 1789. The *taille* was levied on cultivated and pasture land. Charles had enough revenue to fund a standing army of cavalry and foot soldiers – the first permanent army in French history. He also gained control over the Catholic Church in France. The monarchy claimed the right to appoint French bishops and abbots. It also stipulated that all money collected by the Church (in the form of tithes and fees) would be used by the Church in France, and would not be sent to the Vatican in Rome. While the Pope initially objected to these

claims, he later accepted them. These rights of the French monarchy over the Catholic Church in France were called the “Gallican Liberties” (“Gaul” was the Latin word for France). When Charles VII died in 1461 he was succeeded by his son, Louis XI, who continued to strengthen France by conquering the Duchy of Burgundy and adding it to his Kingdom.

The New Monarchy in England



Henry VII pictured holding the Tudor red rose

The New Monarchy started in England with the Tudor dynasty, whose first king, Henry VII gained the throne in 1485 by defeating the House of York in the noble conflicts known as the Wars of the Roses. In these wars, the great noble families of England had seriously weakened each other, to the advantage of the new king. Henry VII eliminated the high nobility as a threat to his power. He was supported by the minor nobility and the wealthy merchant-banker class, whose property had often been destroyed during the Wars of the Roses, and who sought an end to anarchy. Since these two groups dominated the Parliament, Henry VII was able to achieve Parliamentary approval for his policies. He had Parliament pass a law against “livery and

maintenance,” the practice by which great nobles maintained private armies wearing their own livery or insignia. Parliament also approved Henry’s creation of a special court to put rebellious nobles on trial. It met in the Palace of Westminster, in a room called the Star Chamber because its blue ceiling was decorated with golden stars. Accused people were not entitled to see evidence against them, sessions were held in secret, torture could be applied to extract confessions, and juries were not called. Punishment of his “overmighty subjects” through fines

and confiscations of property raised substantial revenues for the King! In many ways, Star Chamber violated English common law, but it effectively reduced noble troublemakers. Parliament also gave Henry VII the authority to control tariffs (taxes on foreign imports). These sources of revenue enabled the King to firmly establish his authority. He reduced his reliance on Parliament for further revenues by living frugally (he had a reputation of being miserly), and by keeping England out of wars. He ensured peace with Scotland through the marriage of his daughter Margaret to the Scottish king. He created an alliance with Spain through the marriage of his eldest son, Arthur, to Catherine of Aragon, the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella. When Arthur died prematurely, Henry maintained his Spanish alliance by arranging for Catherine to marry his second son, Henry (the future Henry VIII). Finally, the King rarely included high ranking nobles in his Royal Council. Instead, he relied largely on minor nobles, educated clergy, and middle class lawyers. When Henry VII died in 1509, he handed his son, Henry VIII, a kingdom at peace both domestically and internationally, and the majesty of the monarchy greatly enhanced.

The Decline of the Italian City-States

Unlike Spain, France, and England, the Italian city-states never achieved consolidation and centralization, and instead remained a nest of fierce rivalries. Only the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 awakened the city-states to the possibility of a Turkish conquest of Italy. And so, in 1454, they signed the Peace of Lodi, in which they agreed to keep the peace amongst themselves, and to provide a unified defense if attacked by the Ottomans. The Peace of Lodi held until 1494 when Naples, Florence, and the Papal States went to war with Milan. In a panic, the Duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza, called on the French for help. Eyeing the wealth of Italy, and eager to expand his power, King Charles VIII (grandson of Charles VII) didn't need to be asked twice! The French army swept through the Italian Peninsula without much opposition, and soon Florence, Rome, and Naples had been taken. Then, Ferdinand and Isabella, fearing that French control of Italy would make them far more powerful than Spain, sent in their army to support the Papal States and to expel the French. To make a long story short, all hell broke loose in Italy. French and Spanish armies pillaged their way up and down the Peninsula while the Italian city-states made and broke alliances in futile attempts to maintain their independence and

even enlarge their territories. When Charles V (Habsburg) became King of Spain in 1516, and was elected Holy Roman Emperor in 1519, he was able to bring greater forces into Italy. Fearing a complete Habsburg victory, the Pope shifted his alliance to the French! In 1527, Charles V's troops sacked the city of Rome, looting much of its wealth. The Pope practically became a prisoner of the Emperor!

It was against this backdrop of constant war and suffering, that the Florentine diplomat, Niccolò Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*. As we have already studied, it was a book on how a ruler could maintain his power. It was dedicated to the Medici family in the hope that it could provide effective leadership for Machiavelli's dear Florence which was at the mercy of marauding armies.

The failure of the Italian city-states to form some sort of unification, or at least to establish a common foreign policy led to the subjugation of the Peninsula by outsiders for the next three centuries.