

Politics and State-building

The mid-fifteenth to the late sixteenth century saw the emergence of powerful kingdoms under strong monarchs in Spain, France, and England, as well as the rise of territorial states organized under republican forms of government in Venice, Florence, and the Swiss states. In all of these areas, power and state authority became centralized in a way it had not been before. Monarchs in Spain and France expanded their landholdings through inheritance and marriage and consolidated their rule at the same time. The French King Louis XI (r. 1461-1483), for example, took over Burgundy with the duke, inherited Anjou territory in southern France, and pressed his claims to the Duchy of Milan and the Kingdom of Naples when he came to the throne. In Spain, the marriage of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon in 1469 allowed the two kingdoms to combine their resources, while still ruling over their dominions separately. Their successors, however, inherited both kingdoms. In England, Henry VII of the Tudor family—who emerged successful from the dynastic civil war, the War of the Roses in 1485—worked to ensure a secure line of inheritance, control the bishops and ecclesiastical appointments in England, and collect the rising rents in the countryside. He also worked closely with Parliament to issue and collect taxes, and he promoted the textile industry in England. In the Swiss states, merchants dominated city councils and joined with other cities in a confederacy by the end of the fourteenth century to protect them from the Holy Roman Emperor, fixing and acknowledging the borders of fellow members of the confederacy. The republics of Venice and Florence in Italy were governed by oligarchies. The Great Council in Venice, for example, was drawn from a closely controlled list of families from which the head magistrate—the doge—was elected. Both cities expanded their territorial claims by extending their rule over neighboring cities, levying taxes, and sending officials to govern in the mother city's name.

Whether organized under a monarch or a governing assembly, states threw off the last vestiges of feudal obligation, in which public and legal powers such as the administration of justice and the right to make and wage war were hereditary and in private hands, producing increasingly large bureaucracies to handle all official correspondence, to enforce laws, to meet out justice through regional law courts, and to issue and collect taxes. States' borders were marked by defensive fortifications. The new, sovereign state also produced state-funded armies, which, at times, were permanent, with soldiers providing their service to the king or governing assembly voluntarily, for which they would be compensated. Professional armies practiced drills, marched in formation, and donned uniforms. Advances in artillery, most notably the ascendancy of gunpowder in western warfare, meant that more infantry than cavalry were needed. Foot soldiers usually did not come from the nobility, yet kings still appointed members of the nobility as captains.

In order to support the shift from the feudal state to the sovereign state, monarchs paid close attention to their self-image, merging their person with the state and employing political theory to underscore their legitimacy. This self-image included grand building projects, patronizing painters and sculptors to reproduce their image and to decorate their new palaces, participating in elaborate processions into important cities within state boundaries, and employing intellectuals and authors to compose orations praising the monarch's virtues. The courts of monarchs were increasingly lavish and became a means through which monarchs curbed the power and authority of the nobility. Kings summoned nobles to his court, limiting their exercise of power in their regional strongholds. In Spain and France, the traditional powers of the nobility were further circumscribed through prohibitions on the nobility from engaging in trade—making them dependent on the monarch for financial and political and social favors (e.g. the selling of offices in the bureaucracy that the monarch controlled). In a sovereign monarchy, the king maintained and controlled a large bureaucracy. The sale of an office provided immediate revenue for a king, which he always seemed to need, and security for the noble, so long as he remained in the king's good graces. If not, the noble could be dismissed at any time, which was indispensable leverage for the king and a key means of ensuring the king's control over his officials.