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**THE RISE AND DECLINE OF ITALIAN CITY
STATES**

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The rise and decline of Italian city-states¹

1. Introduction

The understanding of the institutional features of Italian city-states has suffered from a terminological and conceptual confusion between “city-state” and “commune”. The two terms have been used interchangeably, but they refer in reality to only partially overlapping entities. Communes, as they became known by the thirteenth century, developed into municipal bodies engaged in local government, which depended on external seignorial or monarchical authority for fiscal, military and trade relations and matters of high justice (applied to crimes entailing the death penalty). Most medieval and early modern European towns and cities were municipalities of this kind – and called themselves *universitates* (associations or corporations) as a consequence.²

Communes gained these rights or liberties between the late eleventh and thirteenth centuries. In the same period, some of them managed to turn limited into full sovereignty and transform themselves into independent city-states. City-states were a special kind of *universitas* or commune that in addition to municipal self-rule practised their own foreign policy, were fiscally independent, could raise an army and enforce the death penalty, and could mint coins, sign commercial charters with other independent states, and requisition foreign merchants’ goods. Self-ruling urban communes were ubiquitous in the late medieval and early modern West; city-states

¹ I have greatly benefited from John Najemy’s detailed criticisms.

² See S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900-1300*, Oxford, 1984, pp.168-83. Thus, for example, late medieval south Italian urban communities quite legitimately styled themselves *universitates*, even though they came under either feudal or royal jurisdiction. “Commune” (*communis*) was at first used adjectivally in connection with the municipal features of “common property” and “common council” (J.K. Hyde, *Society and Politics in Medieval Italy. The Evolution of the Civil Life, 1000-1350*, London and Basingstoke, 1973, p.54.).

were not.³ But as this fact makes clear, city-states were an institutional variant of a pattern of urban enfranchisement common to the whole of Europe, and by and large they played by the same rules.⁴ Conversely, the assumption that the rise of Italian city-states north of Rome was fundamentally different from urban developments in the Italian South and north of the Alps, has obscured the genuine differences between city-states and politically dependent communes. In particular, it has made it harder to explain why, despite its important political, institutional and economic achievements, the Italian city-state managed to survive as a *sui generis* organisation for a relatively short period of time.

A long-standing belief in the uniqueness of the northern Italian city-state movement – Italy’s *Sonderweg*, one might well say – has also given rise to the claim that modern southern Italian “backwardness” is due to the lack of a medieval “city-state culture”.⁵

³ The term “state” is used throughout in the sense of “seat of sovereignty”. Where I employ the term in its narrower senses to define the territory of a community or the apparatus or machinery of government will be apparent from the context.

⁴ On this definition, which follows that of the fourteenth-century commentator Bartolus of Sassoferrato that the city-state was a “*civitas se superiorem non recognoscens*”, sovereignty was the main distinguishing feature of medieval European city-states.

⁵ Three “frontier” cities, Teramo, L’Aquila and Messina (with the possible addition of Naples, whose vast fiscal and juridical privileges garnered after 1450 turned it into a *pars superior* among Southern cities), are the closest late medieval southern Italy came to producing city-states. In practice, these were subject communes of the Sicilian and Neapolitan monarchies that had been granted unusually extensive economic privileges. R. Putnam (with R.D. Leonardi and R.Nanetti), *Making Democracy Work. Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Cambridge, MA, 1993 has argued that the roots of the current lack of “civic culture” in southern Italy go back to the destruction of independent urban government by the Normans and Hohenstaufen rulers. Although Putnam has been strongly criticised for his abuse of historical evidence, he does little more than report popular Italian prejudice. For a recent suggestion that the dissolution of the state in tenth-century southern Italy led to the region’s marginalization from “European history”, while the same phenomenon in north-central Italy for no apparent reason produced the opposite effect, see O. Capitani, *Storia dell’Italia medievale*, Bari, 1987, pp.106-7. For an authoritative restatement of the traditional view, see P. Jones, *The Italian City-State. From*

Historians of Italian city-states have contrasted the successful struggle for liberty and the cultural and economic “modernity” of the northern republics with the feudal oppression, stagnant economic performance, and lack of “civic culture” of the *Mezzogiorno*. Yet this is to forget that by about 1400 most north Italian city-states had been swallowed up by larger, hybrid territorial or quasi-monarchical states, which tended over time to become *more* rather than less similar in structure to the South Italian monarchy (Naples and Sicily having been re-united under a single ruler in 1442). It also ignores the fact that historians of more recent periods have more frequently charged the city-states with delaying Italy’s recent development than praised them for their cultural and institutional precocity.⁶

While historians seldom draw a clear terminological distinction between commune and city-state, they also apply the terms to different analytical problems. Viewed as a *sui generis* institutional form, the city-state has been defined primarily as a form of institutionalised power and as a self-contained institution, a *closed* society in political and economic relation with the outside world. The commune has been examined instead as a way of life whose most distinctive features were political, economic, religious and cultural *openness* and high rates of social mobility. But although city-states as a type of commune initially displayed the social, political and cultural

Commune to Signoria, Oxford, 1997, pp.258-63. For an overview of debates on southern Italian “underdevelopment”, see S.R. Epstein, *An Island for Itself. Economic Development and Social Change in Late Medieval Sicily*, Cambridge, 1992, ch.1.

⁶ The suggestion that traditional comparisons between southern Italian *universitates* and north Italian city-states are misplaced has been muddied by the persistent confusion between “city-state” and “commune”; see for example G.Tabacco, “Il potere politico nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia dalla dominazione normanna alla dominazione aragonese”, in P. de Leo ed. *Il Mezzogiorno medievale nella storiografia del secondo dopoguerra: risultati e prospettive*, Soveria Mannelli, 1985, pp.65-111, with references. For the related erroneous assumption that the absence of city-states in the Mezzogiorno induced a low rate of urbanization and economic development, see S.R. Epstein, “Dualismo economico, pluralismo istituzionale in Italia nel Rinascimento”, *Revista d'història medieval* 6 (1995), pp.63-78.

“openness” that was a basic feature of the “communal” way of life, I shall suggest that extreme openness sustained a form of “permanent revolution” that threatened the city-state’s survival as a distinctive mode of organised power. In the short term, city-states sought to solve the problem by restricting governance to a carefully selected oligarchy; in the longer run, they were superseded by more stable monarchical rule. By contrast communal societies or *universitates*, which according to the previous definition included most late medieval and early modern urban centres within and outside Italy, flourished without achieving full-blown independence. Our analysis of Italian city-states will therefore dwell on social, political and institutional developments within the commune defined in its broadest terms only inasmuch as they affected the city’s political independence.

The fact that city-states were an institutional outgrowth of self-administered communes also raises questions about certain Whiggish assumptions of city-state historiography. Success or failure in the establishment of city-states was never predetermined. It depended crucially on factors outside the control of individual cities. Thus, in the mid-eleventh century southern Italy seemed far better placed to establish independent city-states than the North; but two centuries later, at the height of the city-state movement in the centre-north, the rise of city-states in the *Mezzogiorno* was well-nigh unimaginable. The roots of the divergence owed much to the interaction of historical chance and geographical good fortune. For while with hindsight it appears unlikely that full-blown independent city-states could have developed in the Italian South, on several occasions the north Italian communes could also have been stopped in their tracks. In addressing the following four questions, therefore, we will keep in mind that history could have followed a different path: First, how did communes emerge? Second, why was one social practice (the city-state) chosen over another (the self-governing but dependent commune)? Third, how did the practice develop, and how was it transmitted to other institutional “carriers”? Fourth, what caused the city-states as an institutional arrangement to disappear?

2. Origins of the commune

The rise of communes and city-states in late eleventh and twelfth-century Europe was driven by two main factors: the fragmentation of territorial rule into small-scale seigneurial and urban jurisdictions that began in the late ninth century, and the quickening of the pace of trade after the mid-late eleventh century. The communal movement in Italy was influenced by several additional circumstances. These included the Roman tradition of municipal government that had been translated from late Antiquity by the bishops; the related cultural and occasionally political hegemony of urban over rural life, which drew the post-Roman landed elites inexorably towards the cities; and the early division of the country between two spheres of cultural and political influence, the Byzantine and the Lombard, the latter subsequently replaced by the Franks.

The Lombard invasion of 568 divided the Italian peninsula into two political zones. The Lombards, who controlled most of central and northern Italy, established two duchies in Spoleto in central Italy and in Benevento in the South that became effectively independent by the end of the sixth century. Romano-Byzantine power centred on Ravenna on the eastern seaboard south of Venice, and on Rome, Naples and along the coastal areas of Apulia and Calabria in the South. During the seventh century the exarchate of Ravenna, the Byzantine Pentapolis to its south, and the duchy of Rome came under the control of the papacy, and the duchy of Benevento took over much of Apulia, Campania on the western seaboard, and northern Calabria. In the same period the duchies of Naples, Amalfi and Gaeta broke away and became *de facto* if not *de iure* self-ruled.

Over and above these political and ethnic divisions, the late imperial Roman cities provided Italians with powerful everyday symbols of physical and cultural continuity with the past. In regions under Lombard control the cities were placed under the tacit rule of the bishops. Although the bishops were replaced during the seventh century by Lombard dukes and gastalds, from the eighth century Frankish rulers once again resorted to the bishops' leadership, on this occasion to exert a political counterbalance

to the Frankish counts. While a tradition of central administration held up longer in the Byzantine South than in the more politically fragmented and ruralised North, the bishoprics also maintained a central role in local administrative, political and military activities. However, in the South – where late Roman cities had been far thicker on the ground – it is estimated that less than half survived the sixth- and seventh-century hiatus.⁷

The death without heirs of Louis II in 875 set in motion the dissolution of the Frankish kingdom north of Rome. The process was merely delayed under Berengar I, who ruled intermittently from 888 and became sole king in 902-24 and who systematised fiscal and other concessions of rights to the kingdom's notables. The bishops gained most from these grants, not least because they restricted the powers of the Lombard and Frankish counts to the countryside while keeping the latter's rural power base fragmented. By the end of the tenth century the bishops were politically dominant in most of the Lombard plain, which included the regions of Emilia, Lombardy and Veneto; they were less powerful in Tuscany and Piedmont. Nowhere, however, did state authority collapse into anarchy; it simply became more localised and more focused on individual cities.

Although no such clear-cut political watershed can be discerned south of Rome, centrifugal pressures worked just as powerfully because of the *Mezzogiorno's* frontier position which Byzantines, Arabs, Lombards and Franks competed to control. By the end of the ninth century the duchy of Benevento split up and gave rise to seven quasi-autonomous states vying for power: Capua, Salerno, Benevento, Naples, Amalfi and Gaeta in the centre-west, and Byzantium in Apulia to the east. Conflict and political instability among the western coastal cities were intensified by the frequent raids and attempts to establish more permanent settlements by Arab forces based in Sicily, which also intervened in support of different parties to the conflicts. From the tenth century the small villages of Amalfi, Atrani and Ravello (collectively known as "Amalfi")

⁷ C. Wickham, *Early Medieval Italy. Central Power and Local Society 400-1000*, London and Basingstoke, 1981, p. 80.

based their extraordinary commercial success on opportunistic alliances with the Arab world, which rewarded them with trade privileges. Salerno, Gaeta and Naples also had their own fleets, but Naples seems to have been less commercially active. Also by the tenth century, the duchy of Capua took on some of the co-ordinating functions that had previously been of Benevento. The eastern Byzantine administration was unable to withstand increasing Arab, Dalmatian and from the tenth century Norman incursions, and Apulian cities began to organise their own defences and to develop forms of communal self-government.⁸

3. Rise of the commune

Political and administrative powers throughout the South were concentrated in the larger cities under the lordship of the counts and dukes; bishops and local elites controlled the smaller towns. Politically, seigneurial control over the land was marginalized to the mountains to a possibly even greater degree than in north central Italy. Ninth- and tenth-century Southern towns displayed stronger continuity with the late Roman world and better opportunities for trade with the eastern Mediterranean, and were therefore both politically and economically more active, than their northern counterparts. The mainly administrative centres of Benevento and Capua and the ports of Gaeta, Naples, Salerno, Sorrento, Amalfi on the Tyrrhenian coast, and of Trani, Bari, Brindisi, Taranto and Barletta on the Adriatic coast, still had few obvious competitors north of Rome. Not surprisingly, by the early eleventh century most Southern towns had a clear sense of communal identity as *universitates* (municipal associations) led by groups of *boni homines* (the “better sort”), judges and notaries.

⁸ See A. Guillou, “L’Italia bizantina dalla caduta di Ravenna all’arrivo dei Normanni”, and F. Burgarella, “Bisanzio in Sicilia e nell’Italia meridionale: I riflessi politici”, both in A. Guillou et al., *Il Mezzogiorno dai Bizantini a Federico II*, Turin, 1983; J.-M. Martin, *La Pouille du VI^e au XII^e siècle*, Rome, 1993, chs.4-5.

Nevertheless, self-administered Southern communes seldom tried to establish public (“state”) authority, possibly because the supra-urban authority of the duchies of Capua and Salerno never wholly disappeared.

The first communes began to appear in north-central Italy in the late eleventh century. A “commune” (*communitas*) was named at Cremona in 1078, at Pisa in 1081 (when Henry IV renounced his imperial jurisdiction), at Genoa in 1098, and at Verona in 1107, and communes were declared in Florence, Siena, Bologna and Ferrara following the death in 1115 of the powerful countess Matilda of Tuscany. The development is usually interpreted as a response to the void left by the collapse of central government or to the opportunities for political autonomy opened up by the struggle after 1076 between the German emperor and the papacy over episcopal appointments, known as the Investiture Contest. Neither explanation is very convincing. Central authority in Italy had disappeared more than a century before the communes emerged and had been replaced quite effectively by the bishops; on the other hand, the communal movement was a pan-European phenomenon whereas the effects of the Investiture Contest were felt most strongly in Italy and Germany.

A more convincing explanation of the origins of the communal movement and of the transformation of the north Italian communes into city-states connects them both to the growing volume and complexity of trade.⁹ The communes did not initially aim to create a new kind of institutionalized power. In Italy, where townsmen had retained their status as freemen and therefore looked upon the ruling bishops as peers, most communes grew up in the shadow of the episcopal palace and drew upon the authority and expertise of the bishops’ administrators, military retainers and feudal clients, merchants, urban judges and notaries. For a long time, “communal” associations of

⁹ R.S. Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950-1350*, New York, 1971. The investiture contest did however play an independent role in the development of city-states: in Germany and France it increased feudal, respectively monarchical authority, whereas in Italy it undermined both and made it easier for Italian communes to turn into city-states.

sworn freemen disbanded after a certain specified period of time.¹⁰ The early commune's inherent instability meant that established local political figures initially took on an important co-ordinating role and made it easier to overcome the commune's organisational difficulties. This lot fell most frequently to the local bishop,¹¹ although in some cases an informal military aristocracy (which presumably had some experience of acting collectively through *consorterie*) took on the same functions¹².

The first associations of urban notables were therefore seldom the kind of full-blown private *conjuraciones* that challenged episcopal and seigneurial authority in towns north of the Alps. But although Italian communes did not initially aim to replace the bishop's rule, they soon took on quasi-public functions. They did this not so much to subvert the status quo as to improve it: in the absence of powerful elites with large and compact power bases in the countryside, reform was easier than revolution. Political and cultural continuity with the real and imaginary past was upheld by the continued importance of the bishop as the main focus of public authority and by institutions like the public *forum* inherited from Antiquity. The communes' aristocratic leaders called themselves *consules* in a self-conscious appeal to, and continuity with, the cities' Roman heritage; the first known consuls date from Pisa in 1085, and groups of consuls appear in many other cities in the next few years.¹³

¹⁰ Hyde, *Society*, p.96. The habit carried over into the later practice by Italian city-states of establishing military and commercial alliances only for specified periods.

¹¹ In the early days of the Pisan commune bishop Gherardo asked potential troublemakers to post bonds to ensure peaceful behaviour, and his successor acted as peacemaker (*ibidem*, p.56).

¹² For *consorterie* see J.Heers, *Le clan familial au moyen âge. Etude sur les structures politiques et sociales des milieux urbains*, Paris, 1974.

¹³ G.Tabacco, *The Struggle for Power in Medieval Italy. Structures of Political Rule*, Engl. transl., Cambridge, 1989, p.185 suggests however that the naming of consular magistrates preceded the appearance of the first commune.

The status of the communes as sworn associations of like-minded men who promised to abide by their own rules and to be sanctioned for any infringement is similar to that of the craft and merchant guilds that were being set up in the same years. The purpose of both kinds of *universitas* was to establish and uphold reciprocal rules of engagement and to protect merchants against reprisals and the confiscation of goods; the main difference between them was that the communes could also benefit non-members by promising to render impartial justice.¹⁴ That the main purpose of communal associations was to provide members with secure property rights, arbitration and dispute settlement for trade is suggested by the fact that they first arose in the most advanced mercantile centres like Genoa, Pisa, Venice and Milan, which required naval and military training and co-ordination, and by the nature of the communes' first public activities, which aimed to secure commercial and other economic rights in the town's hinterland.¹⁵

Although the bishop was likely to perceive the benefits of such services, he lacked the resources and the specialised knowledge to supply them; this implicit division of labour explains why the first consular assemblies aimed to complement rather than replace the bishop's rule. Bishops may also sometimes have used the consuls to achieve objectives they could not openly acknowledge. Although their jurisdiction extended nominally over the entire ancient Roman district, in practice much of it had

¹⁴ Against the traditional view of the original commune as a sworn association of private individuals, Tabacco argues that it "was born with an explicit political and territorial significance, through the desire of the leading citizens to represent the whole urban collectivity" (*ibidem*, pp.185-86). But see also *ibidem*, p.190, for qualifications.

¹⁵ Although Henry V's charter to Bologna in 1116 made no mention of a commune, it offered the citizens (*conciues*) respect for their ancient customs, protection for their property, and commercial freedom throughout the kingdom of Italy. Smaller, quasi-rural communities established "communes" to organise collective usage of pasture and watercourses and to negotiate with their feudal and urban counterparts; the first known example is that of Biandrate in the province of Novara. On the origins of Italian rural communes, see C.Wickham, *Community and Clientele in Twelfth-Century Tuscany: The Origins of the Rural Commune in the Plain of Lucca*, Oxford, 1998.

been granted away in former times by kings or by the bishops themselves to military retainers in the countryside. *Raison d'état* thus placed severe constraints on the episcopate's freedom of action against rural lords; but that was no reason why his urban associates and clientele should be so beholden. It is no coincidence that much of the communes' efforts during their first century and a half were spent gaining rights of jurisdiction over the episcopal district. In their more ideological moments, the communes suggested that this did no more than reclaim the rights that the episcopate had incautiously alienated in earlier times. Still, communes and city-states never saw jurisdictional and territorial expansion except instrumentally as a means to achieve economic hegemony. The limits of this approach to state formation would become painfully apparent after the mid-thirteenth century.

4. Origins of the city-state

Trade was not, of course, an entirely new phenomenon in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Italy's position at the cross-roads between the Levant and north-western Europe virtually ensured that long-distance commerce never wholly dried up even during the ninth and tenth-century political hiatus. Pisa's maritime tradition dated back to the seventh century, as did that of Venice, which drew its early wealth from the salt trade in the Comacchio and Rialto lagoons. Pavia, the capital of the Lombard kingdom in the north, had trading relations stretching from Byzantium to the east to Burgundy in the west. By the tenth century Milan was also once more a major regional centre. During the later eleventh century, however, the extent and complexity of commerce increased sharply. The changes posed new organisational challenges that existing imperial institutions – whose legitimacy was in any case under attack as a result of the Investiture Crisis – were hard pressed to meet.

Possibly the greatest of these challenges was to establish fair and permanent trade relations with like-minded merchant communities elsewhere. City-states were an efficient institutional response to the dilemma. The growth in the volume and

complexity of trade required that merchants have recognised, enforceable property rights over the things they traded, and that they recognise the same in those they traded with. There was thus a strong need for protection of contract, all the more in the case of goods that were not physically present when traded: “trading is trading in promises; but it is futile to trade in promises unless there is some reasonable assurance that the promises will be kept”. For contracts to be reliable, some arrangement for settling disputes must exist. The matter becomes even more complex when settlement and potential disputes occur outside one’s own community, perhaps with individuals one does not personally know. Hence, rulers sympathetic to the merchants’ needs might offer them help and protection; but they were not best placed to provide the initial and detailed technical solutions to the merchants’ problems. For that, small, face-to-face trading communities were best.¹⁶

Although commercial agreements between cities were not unknown before this time – for example around 945 Brescia, Mantua and Verona had entered into a joint currency agreement – city-states made them easier to set up and therefore vastly increased their number and sophistication. As Hicks has put it, “the core of the City State, regarded as a trading entity, is a body of specialised traders engaged in external trade”. The whole body of traders, in mercantile relations with one another, over the whole group of city-states, constitutes what Hicks terms the Mercantile Economy and what Hansen in the introduction to this volume defines somewhat more broadly as “city-state culture”. The mercantile economy is “a system of trading centres, trading with one another but ultimately dependent upon trade with the outside world”.¹⁷

City-states were best placed to develop medieval trade because they could establish networks of like-minded mercantile communities. Such networks provided two sorts of benefit. First, the mercantile network lowered transaction costs between distant traders and reaped economies of scale from increased trade. This further lowered

¹⁶ J.Hicks, *A Theory of Economic History*, Oxford, 1969, ch.3 (quotation from p.34).

¹⁷ M.H. Hansen, ‘Introduction’, in M.H. Hansen (ed.) *City-State Cultures in World History* (Copenhagen, forthcoming); Hicks, *Theory*, pp.42-43.

trading costs and compensated merchants for the lower prices caused by greater competition. Second, the expansion of individual city-states and the multiplication of trading centres stimulated specialisation and the division of labour in production and distribution – which reduced costs – and in the collection and diffusion of information – which reduced risk. Interactions between city-states produced some of the most salient features of the medieval commercial revolution – the *commenda* (sleeping partnership) contract, maritime law and insurance, financial hedging, IOUs and giro cheques, and public debt. Not surprisingly, these major commercial innovations originated in north-central Italy where city-states and city-state interaction were most advanced.¹⁸

The preceding argument is open to criticism as a form of vulgar functionalism. It seems to confuse the claim that city-states emerged *because* they were economically more efficient with the claim that, *having* emerged, city-states were the most effective political organisation in an economically insecure world. After all, if city-states arose because they were more efficient than politically dependent towns, why were there not more city-states? Why in the Italian example did communal *universitates* become independent city-states in North Italy and fall under Norman and Hohenstaufen rule in the South?

The most frequently invoked explanation for the divergence is warfare. It is argued that whereas the north Italian communes banded together in the Lombard League to beat Frederick I at Legnano in 1176 and force him into the compromise of Constance (1183) that sanctioned the Lombard cities' independence, the south Italian communes were blandished or coerced by the Norman adventurers into the authoritarian rule of Roger II. But the argument is unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, it suggests improperly that the rebellion by north Italian cities against the emperor was a consciously revolutionary act. In fact, when Frederick Barbarossa passed the Alps in 1158 to re-establish order and reclaim the emperor's sovereignty,

¹⁸ R.S.Lopez and I.W. Raymond, *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World*, Oxford and London, 1955.

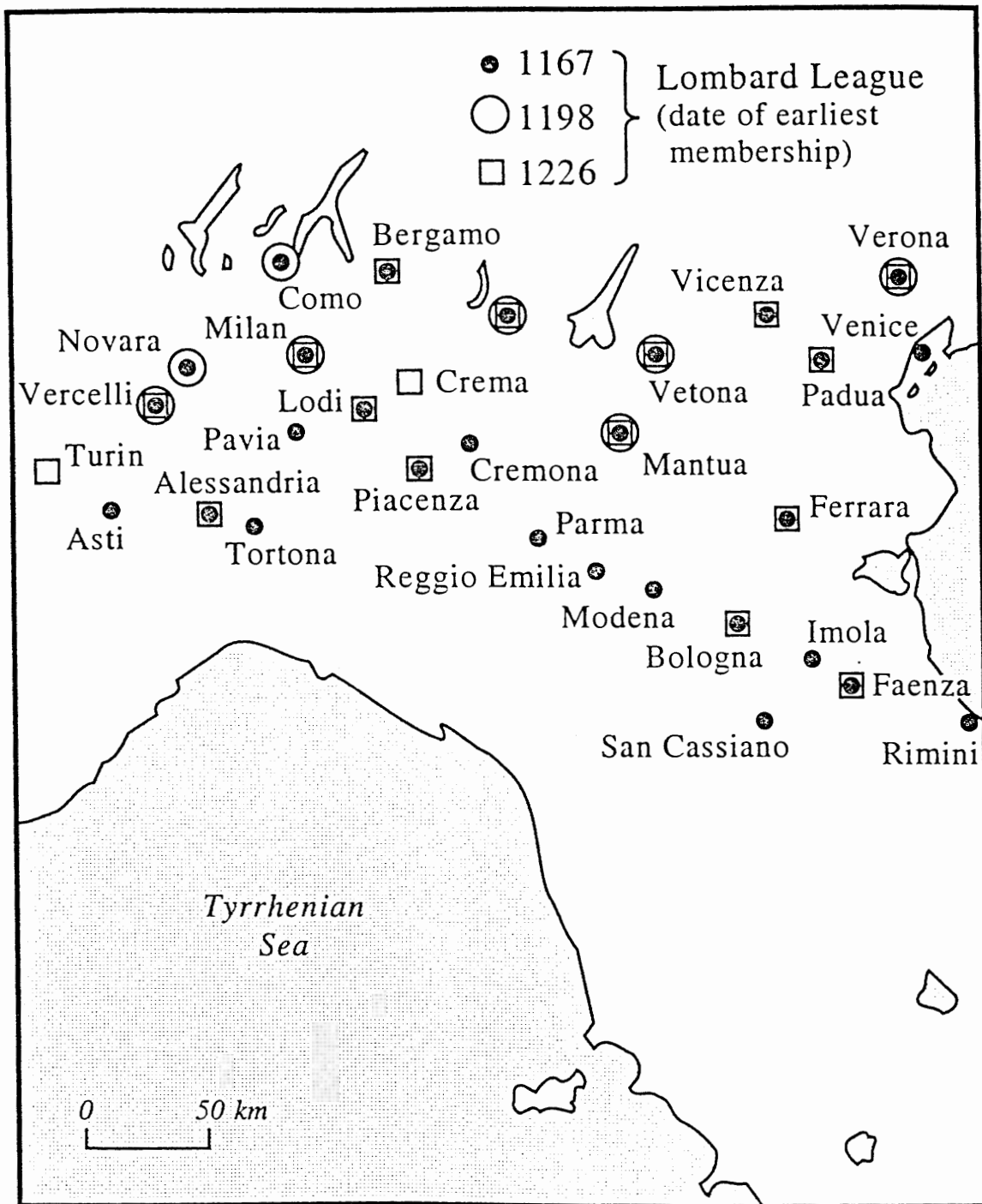
particularly his military and fiscal rights, he did not aim to abolish the cities' administrative autonomy, nor did the cities perceive the defence of their rights as an attack on imperial authority. Several cities (including Pavia, Como, Lodi and Novara) even fought on Frederick's side in his victorious battle against Milan at Roncaglia (1158), and received extensive privileges as a sign of gratitude. Most communes even accepted the emperor's autocratic legislation, the *Constitutio de regalibus* promulgated at Roncaglia that formally re-integrated Lombard towns within the feudal hierarchy. Only after Frederick, buoyed by his victories, decided to raze Milan to the ground after a further rebellion in 1162, did the north Italian communes decide that the emperor's political project threatened their very survival and had to be forcefully resisted. Urban liberties, it has been remarked, "remained perfectly compatible with hierarchy, order, and customary government".¹⁹ Indeed at no point in their history did the Italian city-states challenge the terms of the German emperor's (admittedly increasingly legalistic) suzerainty. Before the early fourteenth century city-states practised sovereignty but did not theorise it; and, when such theories did appear – notably, at a point in time when the city-state as a political form was being increasingly challenged – they restricted it to sovereignty within the city's territory alone.²⁰

Second, a strictly military explanation of the rise of north Italian city-states does not explain why those cities won and why, by contrast, Southern communes were so ineffective. The Normans' slow rise to domination and their initial willingness to confirm the cities' liberties may have lulled the Southern communes into a false sense of security, but their reaction to Roger II's revocation of most of their privileges after

¹⁹ Reynolds, *Kingdoms*, p.182. For Frederick's attempts to integrate the Lombard cities into a feudal structure, see Tabacco, *Struggle*, pp.215-16.

²⁰ See e.g. J.Canning, *The Political Thought of Baldus de Ubaldis*, Cambridge, 1987, pp.150-51.

Figure 1. Participants in the 3 Lombard Leagues



his rise to the throne in 1130 was nonetheless remarkably weak.²¹ Such pusillanimity was hardly foreordained and needs to be explained.

The crucial difference in this respect between south and north Italian cities lay in the extent to which they could reap the military and commercial benefits of co-operation. The first anti-imperial alliance between Lombard cities including Vicenza, Padua and Treviso was drawn up in Verona in 1164; the following years saw similar leagues being drawn up between Milan, Ferrara, Parma, Modena and Bologna, trial runs before the great Lombard League of 1176 (Figure 1). South Italian cities never did anything of the kind; they did not benefit from the economies of scale and interactions that underwrote the Lombard victories. Since north Italian cities were famously pugnacious and uncooperative, we must ask why they were able to collaborate so effectively when circumstances required it. We must also ask why South Italian cities were unable to do so. Why was urban co-operation easier in the North than the South?

The southern cities' main disadvantages over their northern peers were the greater distances between them and the lack of navigable waterways.²² In the South the Apennines made travel slow and costly, restricted domestic trade, and forced most towns to develop in the narrow coastal strips. With the exception of the Neapolitan hinterland and the central Apulian plain, the South lacked large and well-watered flatlands. Consequently the cities of Puglia had stronger ties with Venice to the north than with Naples, Gaeta, Salerno and the other Southern centres across the Apennines to the west. Gaeta had better links with Genoa than with the cities in the Southern interior. In 1122 Bari signed a mutual aid treaty with Venice against the Norman threat; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was still cheaper to send wheat

²¹ For Roger II as the founder of the "first modern state" before either Henry I Plantagenet or Philip Augustus of France, see Martin, *La Pouille*, pp.768-69.

²² The conditioning role of topography and climate are emphasized by Jones, *Italian City State*, p.267, and Wickham, *Early Medieval Italy*, ch.1.

from Bari to Naples by sea around the Italian boot rather than by land across the mountains.

The *Mezzogiorno*'s harsh topography and climate raised two major obstacles to urban collaboration and undermined the cities' resistance against the Norman invaders. First, they meant that southern Italian towns were both few and physically isolated. Second, they meant that southern Italian towns had no experience of the intensive co-operation between towns over maintaining the watercourses that was practised in the Po plain for centuries before the rise of the communes.²³ Inasmuch as the "mercantile economy" required politically autonomous and economically co-operative city-states, its roots in southern Italy could not sink very deep. Since stable alliances ("leagues") between city-states required frequent and intense business relations, cities in the densely urbanised and well watered Po plain were more likely to overcome obstacles to collective action than in the South, where urban relations were more costly, more irregular and less stable. Southern cities were unable to resist the Norman conquest because they were unable to co-ordinate military and political activities along the lines of the Lombard League. For the same reason they found themselves equally impotent against Frederick II's *Constitutions of Melfi* (1231) which imposed centrally named magistrates on urban administrations and revoked earlier privileges.²⁴ Military failure was consequence, not cause, of the South's failure to establish city-states.

²³ P. Squatriti, *Water and Society in early Medieval Italy AD400-1000*, Cambridge, 1998, ch.3.

²⁴ The preceding argument may help account for a puzzling exception to this account posed by the collective uprising known as the Sicilian Vespers of 1282, which saw the island's cities expel the Angevin regime and call upon the Catalan-Aragonese Peter II in the name of the *communitas Siciliae*. Sicily was, by urban density and proportion of the population living in towns, quite as advanced as the more developed north-central Italian regions. See Epstein, *Island*, ch.2 for Sicilian urbanisation, and Tabacco, "Il potere politico", p.100 for the "puzzle" posed by the Sicilian Vespers.

5. Rise of the city-state

Although at first communes experimented with a broad range of governments, they began quite soon to adopt similar patterns of government and administration.

Pressures to converge institutionally came from the need to rationalise domestic administration and to establish effective control over the countryside, and from the long-running conflict between papacy and empire between the Investiture Contest and the death of Frederick II Hohenstaufen in 1250. Each of the three main phases in the papal-imperial struggle produced a step change in urban constitutional structures aimed at reducing escalating conflicts within the towns.²⁵ First, Henry IV's defence of the papacy's attack on the imperial right to name bishops hastened the transition from the informal structure under *boni homines* to the consular regime. Then, when Frederick I crossed the Alps in the 1150s to re-establish control over the Lombard cities he introduced them to the office of local commander or *potestas*. Although the cities proceeded to murder or expel the emperor's representatives after their victory at Legnano, the idea stuck and gave rise to the Italian *podestà*. Lastly, when Frederick II attempted to repeat his grandfather's exploits in the 1230s and 1240s, the city-states gave birth to the *capitano del popolo* and, in the same years, to the first "tyrannical" *signorie* that prefigured the late medieval principalities.

Pressures for institutional change also arose from interaction and conflict between city-states themselves. We saw that city-states established alliances to reap the benefits of the "mercantile economy" and to share military resources. One of the first such coalitions, which was struck in 1092 between Milan, Crema, Lodi and Piacenza to support Conrad against his father, emperor Henry IV, was later used to create several new fairs and markets. Generally, however, alliances were fickle and short lasting, for each town aimed to monopolise the trade of its hinterland and to divert commerce to the city itself. Agreements between city-states were made and dissolved for

²⁵ L.M.Batkin [L.M. Braghina in the index], "L'età comunale", in Accademia delle Scienze dell'URSS, *Storia d'Italia*, Milan, 1979, I, p.226.

opportunistic reasons; long-term co-operation foundered upon commercial and territorial competition. Warfare was just as much a part of everyday life as commercial interaction. No frontier was permanent; boundaries were constantly being pushed to the limits of and beyond the old episcopal district. The most famous of these associations, the Lombard League, first established to resist Frederick I and later resurrected against Frederick II, was never intended to become a stable federation of independent city-states like the north European Hansa. It was simply a military alliance which happened to learn from the legal negotiations with the emperor prior to Constance how to solve judicial controversies among its members.

Constant interaction also made it easier to learn about neighbouring cities' experiences and to share institutional and commercial improvements. The possibility to learn through imitation explains just as much as the benefits of urban networking why city-states proliferated in north-central Italy even where smallness in size and poor economic circumstances militated against them. By the end of the twelfth century up to 300 entities were functionally city-states (although many did not remain so for long).²⁶ An example of institutional imitation is the growth in the thirteenth century of a professional body of *podestà*. These were minor members of the military aristocracy who moved peripatetically for a statutory 6-12 months' service, and who prompted the development of a didactic literature for teaching them rhetorical, social and political skills. Similarly, local experiments with taxation (an early concern of the city-states) and food supply were observed, copied and adapted by neighbouring towns. Because city-states acted within similar political, military and economic constraints and had access to a common pool of political and institutional information, by about 1300 their administrative systems had converged to a set of broadly common features.²⁷

²⁶ For population estimates see M.Ginatempo and L.Sandri, *L'Italia delle città. Il popolamento urbano tra Medioevo e Rinascimento (secoli XIII-XVI)*, Florence, 1990.

²⁷ For taxation see P. Cammarosano, "Il sistema fiscale delle città toscane", in S.Gensini ed. *La Toscana nel secolo XIV. Caratteri di una civiltà regionale*, Pisa, 1988, p.201-13.

Although warfare was the major trigger for change, it generally intensified internal pressure to reform.²⁸ Far more than dependent municipalities – which did not command large economic or political resources over which their inhabitants could fight – city-states were riven by conflict from the start.²⁹ It used to be argued that these struggles were purely class-based and that the constitutional changes I have sketched followed a Whiggish, broadly democratising trajectory. According to this line of argument, the aristocratic consular regime of the *maiores* was replaced after about 1210 by the rule of the *podestà* that attempted to mediate between the landed nobility and upper- middle class and merchant interests; then (the first instance being in Florence in 1250) by the “captain of the people” (*capitano del popolo*), who drew his strongest support from the guild-based middle class *popolo grasso* or *mediano* which included merchants, bankers, large-scale industrialists, notaries and the better-off craftsmen, and who acted as a counterpoint to the aristocratic and landed elites; and finally by seigneurial “tyrants” whose often unstable power base might include both magnate and popular elements. The minor ranking guilds and salaried workers (*popolo minuto*) were only included in response to armed uprisings between the 1340s and 1380s.

While more recent research has by and large confirmed earlier descriptions of the social composition of these regimes, it has also shown that the transition from one phase to the next was never smooth and that the sources of conflict were less clearly “political” or class-based than was previously assumed. In many cities the rule of the

²⁸ Warfare played a more important role in driving domestic change from 1380-1400, when city-states were being transformed into, or conquered by, larger territorial states.

²⁹ Conversely, during the often lengthy period separating the formal subjection of a previously independent city-state from the community’s full political integration as a dependent commune, domestic conflicts might continue to be based on factional enmities established before subjection. The transition in fifteenth-century Pistoia from conflict based on inward looking factionalism to conflict drawing on outward looking patronage with the Medici is sketched by S. Milner, *The Government of Faction in the Florentine State 1380-1512*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of London, 1997.

“people” never came to pass or was quickly overthrown by a reconstituted middle-cum-upper class. Elsewhere the *podestà* and the *capitano del popolo* coexisted uneasily, the former keeping his military functions but losing his political duties to the captain of the people in cities where craft guilds were strong, and so exacerbating the social friction that they were meant to reduce. Perhaps the most paradoxical aspect of the movement of the *popolo* from a modern standpoint is the fact that it existed both as a state within, or in competition with, the regime of the *podestà*, and as a movement that aimed to overcome the factionalism and class privilege of existing consular-cum-*podestà* rule and of the family-based, aristocratic *consorterie*. Although the movement of the *popolo* can be seen retrospectively as helping to extend public over private rights and middle over upper class rule, the *popolo* was so riven by dissent and by shifting coalitions that contemporaries found it hard to discern any pattern amongst the noise.³⁰

Political reform in the Italian city-states was not motivated by popular aspirations for progressive enfranchisement and for republican civic values. Civic values (and their later, humanist incarnation into “civic virtue”) were not the source of communal political activity; they were its consequence. The enlargement of the political

³⁰ At its most successful, the *popolo* went through three stages: from pressure group, to ‘state within (or parallel to) the *podestà*’s regime, to dominant “party” or regime (Hyde, *Society*, p.114). John Najemy has suggested *per litteram* that “it was the regimes of the *popolo* that turned semi-sovereign communes, still enmeshed in the quarrels of papacy and empire and Guelphs and Ghibellines, into sovereign city-states that declared their autonomy from those external powers and defended the supremacy of their impersonal public authority”. This seems to me to impute the *popolo ex post* with a greater degree of political intentionality and institutional modernity than it actually had. The *popolo* was a “class in itself” rather than a “class for itself”. See also J.M.Najemy, “The Dialogue of Power in Florentine Politics”, in Molho, Raaflaub and Emlen, *City States*, pp.269-87, which forcefully and convincingly challenges the widespread view that all communal politics (at least in Florence) was elitist and oligarchic, and emphasizes the countervailing power and influence of the *popolo*. My point is not that the *popolo* was an oligarchy dressed up in popular clothes, but that the political and institutional logic that drove its actions was as fundamentally divisive and unstable as that of its class rival (which also explains why the *popolo* did not remain for long in power).

franchise through the *popolo* served two mutually incompatible purposes, neither of which was “democratically” inspired. The first objective was to improve the city leaders’ political, military and economic co-ordination so as to project more effective authority beyond the city walls. In this light the consular, *podestà*, *popolo*, and “tyrannical” *signoria* regimes appear as increasingly centralised responses to the recurring problem of family, clan, and guild-based “factionalism”, partisanship or “partiality” (*partialitas*), whose “winner takes all” approach to political action posed the most serious challenge to social stability (or the “common good”, as it was termed).

The second purpose of institutional reform was, by contrast, to shape domestic policy so as to divert resources from one class, alliance or coalition to another. City-states were embedded in a social and institutional system in which political authority was a source of economic rent just as much as market competition. Economic success in Italian cities depended in no small part on political rights, which served both to exclude competitors from markets and to neutralise rivals.³¹ Indeed, the pursuit of commercial monopoly rather than collaboration between cities may have been a peculiar feature of the Italian city-states, which excelled in the kind of high value, high profit commercial and financial activities in which a winner-takes-all strategy was most effective.³² Government was clearly not a matter to be left to technicians, but equally, its roots in communal factionalism were being constantly replenished.

The invention of the *capitano del popolo* – an official explicitly charged with defending the interests of the “people” against other organised groups, particularly regarding taxation and food supply – was unusually explicit in its recognition of the political dimensions of resource distribution. But we should not be taken in by the

³¹ Tabacco, *Struggle*, p.232 makes a similar point with respect to the sources of economic power of the feudal nobility.

³² H.Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors. An Analysis of Systems Change*, Princeton, 1994, pp.133-50 contrasts the competitive nature of urban relations in Italy with the co-operation and federal structures that developed in Germany, where there was a similar absence of a strong state.

seemingly more independent regimes of the *podestà* and consuls: in the absence of a modern theory of party politics, the partisan use of “public” resources for “private” use (insofar as a distinction between public and private spheres in these societies had any meaning)³³ was an intrinsic feature of the city-state regime. In sum, the city-state’s twin objectives of domestic collaboration and redistribution were mutually incompatible. It thus comes as no surprise that over time the contradiction became increasingly difficult to resolve.³⁴

6. Territorialisation of the city-state

City-states may have risen against seigneurial and imperial oppression, but they showed little compunction in enforcing similar forms of control over their rural hinterlands (*comitatus*, *contado*). The city-states’ policy of unremitting territorial and jurisdictional expansion, which became the main source of inter-urban antagonism after 1200, also brought the cities into conflict with the rural aristocracy. In Tuscany, where seigneurialism had never spread very far, the towns had made near *tabula rasa* of feudal lordship by the mid-fourteenth century.³⁵ In Lombardy, where seigneurialism put down stronger roots, urban control was more patchy though still extensive. In more peripheral and mountainous regions like Piedmont, parts of

³³ For the later Middle Ages see G. Chittolini, “Il ‘privato’, il ‘pubblico’, lo Stato”, in G. Chittolini, A. Molho and P. Schiera, eds. *Origini dello Stato. Processi di formazione statale in Italia fra medioevo ed età moderna*, Bologna, 1994, pp. 553-89.

³⁴ “Underlying the forms the struggles took and the swaying fortunes of the antagonists, there runs one basic theme: it is the endeavour to make a system presupposing consensus respond to the *libido dominandi* of one part of the *de facto* dissensus” (S.E. Finer, *The History of Government From the Earliest Times, II. The Intermediate Ages*, Oxford, 1997, p. 974).

³⁵ P. Cammarosano, “Feudo e proprietà nel medioevo toscano”, in *Nobiltà e ceti dirigenti in Toscana nei secoli XI-XIII: strutture e concetti*, Florence, 1982, pp. 1-12.

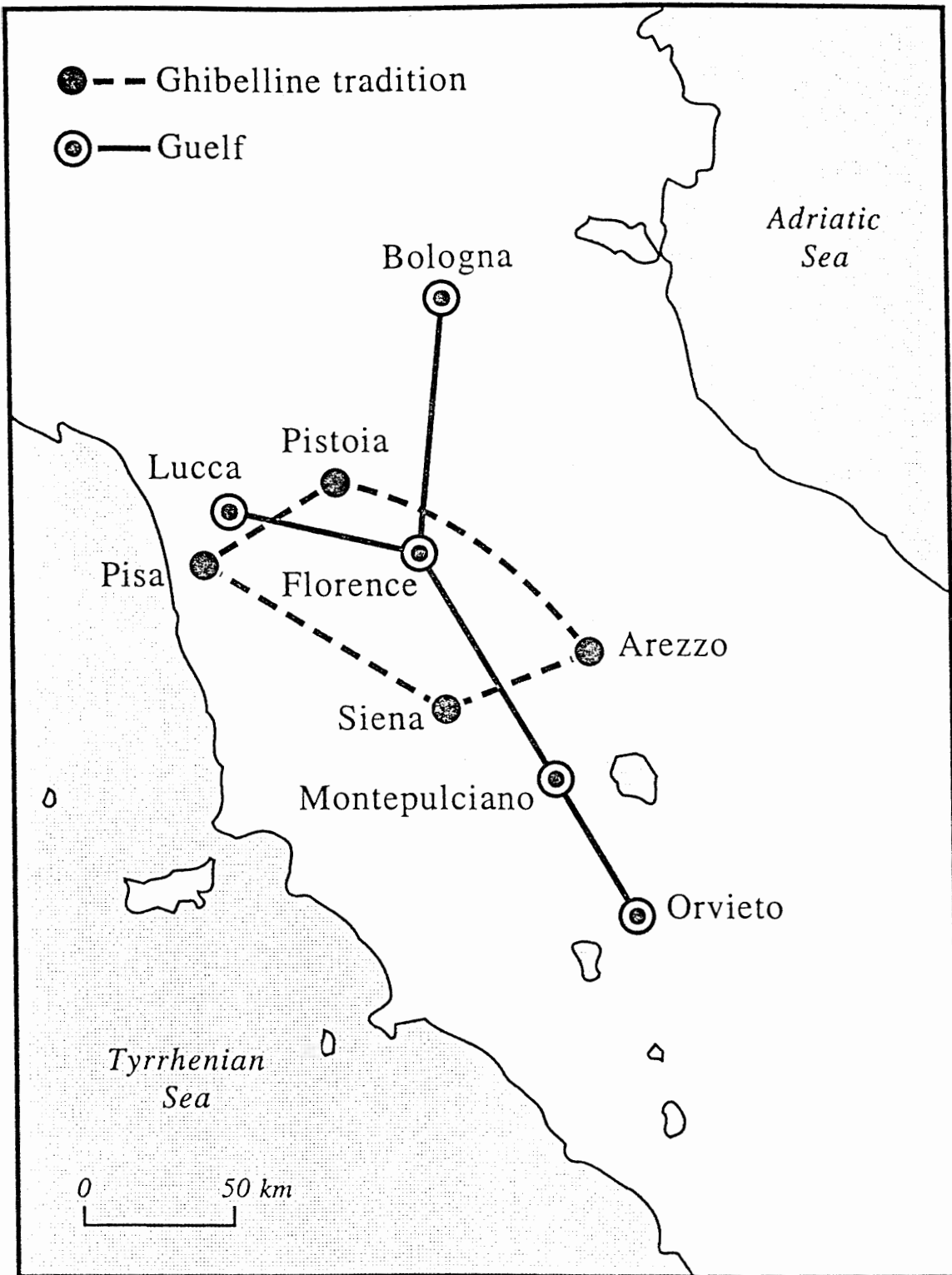
Veneto, Friuli, and Romagna, on the other hand, city-states were always surrounded by a feudal sea. Regional differences in the balance of power between towns and rural lordships affected the size of city-states and their relations with the *contado*.³⁶ Urban size was usually proportionate to the size of the *contado*, but there were also important exceptions like Siena, whose vast territory was too poor to provide the city with much economic support, and like the maritime states of Genoa, Pisa and Venice, most of whose food supplies came by sea and whose *contado* was relatively small and abandoned to its own devices.

As this suggests the hinterland was normally the city-state's first port of call for food. There were several reasons for this, including the fact that transport overland was expensive and that buying supplies elsewhere was politically unreliable. There is evidence already from the late 1100s that towns were putting special officials in charge of food supplies, including the acquisition of grain for public storage to stabilise prices, at times of dearth. Florence seems to have been the first to adopt these measures, perhaps because it was surrounded by frequently hostile cities that could make it very hard to import food from abroad (Figure 2).³⁷ The introduction of the *annona* (as it became known in memory of its Roman forebear) was also politically meaningful, because it was often associated with price controls, compulsory deliveries from the countryside, and other anti-speculative measures that were popular among lower and middle class consumers but were particularly unpopular with landlords with large surpluses to trade. These political considerations explain why these measures were introduced towards the end or after the end of the consular regime and were particularly associated with the *capitano del popolo*.

³⁶ G.Chittolini, "Centri minori e città fra Medioevo e Rinascimento", in *Colle di Val d'Elsa: diocesi e città fra '500 e '600*, Castelfiorentino, 1995, pp.11-37; M.Ginatempo, "Gerarchie demiche e sistemi urbani nell'Italia bassomedievale: una discussione", *Società e storia*, 72 (1996), pp.347-83; eadem, "Le città italiane, XIV-XV secolo", in *23 Semana de estudios medievales. Estella, 22-26 julio 1996: Poderes públicos en la Europa Medieval: Principados, Reinos y Coronas*, Estella, 1997, pp.149-209.

³⁷ H.C. Peyer, *Zur Getreidepolitik Oberitalienischer Städte im 13. Jahrhundert*, Vienna, 1950.

Figure 2. Guelf and Ghibelline towns in Tuscany



City-states also responded to local dearth by raising barriers to export. Protectionism by one city bred protectionism among its neighbours, however, and exacerbated the uncertainty and high transport costs that the *annone* were meant to overcome. This “prisoner’s dilemma” or co-ordination failure – in which the rational actions of one city-state had the opposite of the desired effect – also characterised other urban policies towards the *contado*. Industrial and commercial protectionism that made sense from the point of view of an individual city that wished to pursue self-sufficiency, increased transaction costs and barriers to industrial and commercial entry between members of the “mercantile economy” and raised prices for consumers. In achieving the jurisdictional integration of its hinterland, the city-state paradoxically also magnified the territorial protectionism, particularism, and fragmentation against which it had initially fought.

Urban hegemony was justified ideologically and legally through the Ancient world’s contrast between *civis* and *rusticus*, cultured townsman and boorish peasant. By the fourteenth century the opposition had given birth to a new urban literary genre, the *satira del villano*, whose tropes swung uneasily between ironic distance and class hatred for the rural inhabitants. In practice, towns were virtually omnipotent in all major administrative, legal, fiscal and economic activities in their *contado*. The republican cities acted as collective lords in fixing weights and measures, raising taxes, setting markets and fairs, and exacting labour services and grain at below-market prices from the peasantry. By the fourteenth century the hinterland had also begun to offer urban elites the prestige of local office, whose costs were mostly borne by the peasantry. The major law courts sat in the cities, upheld statutes that favoured citizen over peasant rights and landlord claims over tenants, and supported the expansion of urban property in the countryside.

Fiscal policies discriminated by social status, and in north central Italy status descended from the place of residence. Townspeople paid mostly with taxes on trade; from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, large commercial cities like Florence, Venice and Genoa began to raise interest-bearing forced loans from their wealthier citizens that paid the unfortunate lenders guaranteed and lucrative (10-15 per

cent) returns. Peasants paid non-refundable poll and hearth taxes set by the ruling town. Burghers not surprisingly resented any kind of taxation that required assessing their real wealth: in Republican Florence, direct taxation was attempted only twice during the early fourteenth century by two short-lived seignorial regimes, and became associated thereafter with political “tyranny”. *Contadini* on the other hand were less concerned about how taxes were collected than about how the burden was shared. Not that they had any say in the matter: “taxation without representation” was without doubt the most resented feature of the republican city-state.³⁸ Peasants particularly disliked the fact that both the level and the distribution of taxation were controlled by the city, with predictable consequences for fiscal equity; that urban property was exempt from rural taxes, so that land transfers to townspeople or concessions of burgher rights to peasants eroded the rural tax base and increased the burden proportionally; and that the highly infrequent revisions of the assessments exacerbated inequalities between the peasants themselves.

While the frequent portrayal of town and *contado* as locked in never ending conflict is thus not wholly misplaced, there were nonetheless several mitigating factors. This unremittingly hostile picture of relations between town and country did not just apply to city-states; less powerful urban communes were just as anxious to exploit their rural hinterland.³⁹ It also probably more accurately depicts conditions after 1300, when population reached its medieval peak and the city-state was entering its twilight zone, rather than conditions during the thirteenth century, when city-states

³⁸ Paradoxically, the republican principle “Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus comprobari debet” (“What affects all, must be approved by all”) was enshrined in the thirteenth-century manual of the *podestà*, the *Oculus pastoralis* (R.Fubini, “From Social to Political Representation in Renaissance Florence”, in A.Molho, K.Raaflaub, and J.Emlen, eds. *City States in Classical Antiquity and Medieval Italy*, Stuttgart, 1991, p.224). But some were more equal than others: the “omnes” referred only to those possessing rights of citizenship, that is (in a circular definition) those with the power and right to chose.

³⁹ See S.R.Epstein ed. *Town and country in pre-modern Europe*, forthcoming Cambridge, 1999.

were still consolidating their boundaries and developing their administrations. Neither can one ignore the substantial benefits brought by the city-states. Their systematic pursuit of jurisdictional sovereignty over the countryside improved transportation, increased the mobility of labour, extended the reach of the market, stimulated the division of labour and specialisation in agriculture, and raised average living standards. City-states provided a better home for craft guilds – which were the principal source of pre-modern skills training and technological innovation – than did the towns and communes living under the suspicious gaze of strong central monarchies, which frequently (as in southern Italy and Castile) banned them outright. The astonishing increase in the rate of urbanisation between the late twelfth and the early fourteenth century in the core regions of the Italian city-states, from c. 10 to 30 per cent of the population, suggests that for a long time – possibly until the mid-fourteenth century – the economic benefits of the *contado*'s subjection significantly outweighed the costs.

One should also avoid exaggerating the effects of the city-states' territorial policy. On the one hand, territorialisation was never entirely successful. In addition to the large areas of the country that remained under seigneurial control, there was also strong resistance to city rule within the urban district. Many of the larger villages and boroughs and the more peripheral Alpine valleys gained partial freedoms from urban lordship that gave them some fiscal and judicial immunity and exempted them from the jurisdiction of the urban guilds.⁴⁰ When large cities subjected smaller ones, most of the latter's administrative, legislative and judicial prerogatives (including those over their *contadini*) were left in place. The new rulers simply took over the trappings and burdens of sovereignty: high justice, coinage, general taxation, foreign policy and military organisation.⁴¹ On the other hand, as Philip Jones has remarked, "the high

⁴⁰ These communities would subsequently use their privileges to develop "proto-industrial" activities in the countryside against the dominant city's objections. See S.R. Epstein, *Freedom and growth. Markets and states in pre-modern Europe*, forthcoming London, 1999.

⁴¹ The converse of this attitude, of course, was that the ruling city "systematically cultivated and defended its juridical and political supremacy and distinctiveness from those lands which comprised its

capitalist sector of grand commerce” that has so dazzled historians was restricted to two regions, a small core area in central Tuscany and the broad swathe of Lombardy and central Veneto, and to a few individual coastal cities. In many other Italian regions (the Marche, southern Tuscany, Umbria and Lazio) city-states did not fundamentally transform the agrarian economy; elsewhere (in southern Tyrol, Friuli, Piedmont, north Veneto, and Romagna) they were incapable of overcoming the surrounding feudal powers.⁴² Thus even in north-central Italy, the Mercantile Economy was less developed than the Political Economy of city-states.

7. Decline of the city-state

Nonetheless, the principal limitation of the city-state – and the reason for its ultimate failure as a political experiment – was its inability to act as an equitable lord.

Between the mid-thirteenth and the early fifteenth century, most “city-state cultures” were subsumed into the small number of regional states that dominate early modern Italian history. Before 1200 relations between city-states were generally quite amicable, for they still expanded mostly at the expense of rural lordships rather than of other towns. But as soon as the cities’ boundaries began to touch, communal expansion turned into a zero-sum game. Formidable struggles for territorial control and economic hegemony broke out, at first locally (led by Asti in eastern Piedmont, by Genoa in Liguria, by Milan over Lodi and Novara, by Bologna in adjacent parts of

territory” (A.Molho, “Commentary”, in Molho, Raaflaub, and Emlen, eds. *City States*, pp.628-30 (quotation from p.630)). The imposition of a monopoly over high justice was probably the most politically fraught and hence one to be treated with utmost delicacy. In possibly the most extreme example of political hesitancy, Venice appears to have established full judicial sovereignty *de facto* on the *Terraferma* only after the mid-sixteenth century. See A. Viggiano, *Governanti e governati. Legittimità del potere ed esercizio dell’autorità sovrana nello Stato veneto della prima età moderna*, Treviso, 1993.

⁴² Jones, *Italian City State*, pp.272-3.

Emilia and Romagna, by Pisa and Siena over the Tuscan littoral, by Perugia in Umbria), later on a regional scale (headed by Pisa, Genoa, and Venice, and subsequently by Florence and Milan).⁴³

Economic hegemony required political hegemony to remain stable. Two routes to stability were attempted. The first – out and out conquest – was generally unsuccessful. Although city-states began to complement urban militia with professional mercenary forces on a regular basis from the mid-thirteenth century, in reality most of their “conquests” were straightforward commercial transactions. Florence, perhaps the most successful “territorial” city-state of them all (Venice being a hybrid between a city-state and a principality), was notoriously inept militarily and preferred to pay for new subjects rather than storm walls.⁴⁴ No city-state was able to extend its rule permanently over other city-states of comparable size through the force of arms alone: in the one case attempted by Florence, the capture of Pisa, the effort contributed to Tuscany’s economic decline and created a constant source of friction that culminated in Pisa’s bid for freedom in 1494-1509.⁴⁵

The second solution to inter-urban instability was for the city-state – or rather, for the dominant class, party or grouping within it – to submit to the lordship or “tyranny” of one ruler. Not surprisingly, the first such *signorie* were attempted in Lombardy, where strong urban interaction and the crucial importance of keeping the major transalpine trade routes open made instability more costly than anywhere else in Italy.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 276.

⁴⁴ Pisa was conquered militarily in 1406, after Florence had paid 200,000 florins to buy it but had been unable to take possession. The military leader who first entered the city was a member of the Gambacorta family that had ruled Pisa in the late fourteenth century, and was paid handsomely by Florence for his troubles. Old habits die hard.

⁴⁵ For Tuscan economic decline, see S.R.Epstein, “Stato territoriale ed economia regionale nella Toscana del Quattrocento”, in R.Fubini, ed. *Istituzioni, cultura ed arte in Toscana nell'età di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, Pisa, 1996, pp.869-90. For the Pisan rebellion, see M. Luzzati, *Una guerra di popolo. Lettere private del tempo dell'assedio di Pisa (1494-1509)*, Pisa, 1973.

Lombard *signori* were frequently successful *podestà* backed by significant landed property, whose families had played important roles in local society for several decades. From the mid-thirteenth century much of Lombardy, including Ferrara, Verona, Vicenza, Padua (the latter three under the lordship of Ezzelino da Romano from 1237), Cremona, Piacenza (under Oberto Pallavicini, 1250-53), Alessandria (under the marquis of Monferrato), even Milan (under the Torriani and Visconti), was ruled by quasi feudal leaders who ensured a degree of peace by co-ordinating their rule over neighbouring and competing towns.

The main drawback of the *signoria* was that it was vested individually and dissolved at the lord's death. Local dynasties like the Della Scala in Verona were usually unable to bring more than a handful of towns under their control. Only the Visconti of Milan, through a combination of dynastic good fortune and of Milan's role as the regional economic hub, were able to establish a large and comparatively stable territorial unit which by the peace of Lodi of 1454 included most of central Lombardy. Although political centralisation by the Visconti suffered several setbacks – due largely to the subject cities' considerable margins of political and administrative autonomy: up to the mid-fifteenth century it is perhaps more apt to speak in Lombardy of a city-state federation under Visconti leadership than of a principality with a recognised head of state – they never lost control over the core of the territories around Milan. From the cities' side, the political and social anarchy unleashed when the city-states bid for autonomy after the death of duke Gian Galeazzo Visconti in 1402 probably showed them the need for some kind of territorial co-ordination and integration. Once the attempt by the Milanese oligarchy's *Repubblica ambrosiana* to establish a Lombard urban federation (1447-50) also failed – for lack of political experience and leadership – the principality became the only viable alternative.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ For Milan's inability to project regional hegemony, see G. Chittolini, "Di alcuni aspetti della crisi dello stato sforzesco", in J.M. Cauchies and G. Chittolini eds. *Milano e Borgogna. Due stati principeschi tra medioevo e Rinascimento*, Rome, 1990, pp.21-34.

For about a century between 1330 and 1406 Florence seemed to offer a historically pregnant alternative to the Lombard model of urban lords and territorial princes, by extending the model of the Republican city-state – whose objective was, “economically – as politically – (...) territorial sovereignty, a reconstituted *civitas*, closed and autonomous, of town and *contado*”⁴⁷ – to a region measuring more than 12,000km².⁴⁸ But in retrospect the Florentine project was a failure. The end of the city’s territorial expansion after a disastrous war against Lucca in the 1430s marked a turning point in the Republic. The rise of the informal Medici *signoria* was also in part an attempt to mitigate the consequences of previously punitive fiscal and economic policies that had caused bitter resistance and even armed opposition by the territory’s subjects.⁴⁹ The Florentine elites treated their new state like the city-state’s *contado*, as a source of fiscal income and of personal gain for office-holders and as a market to be monopolised by Florentine interests. That is why, although much has been made about how the Medici rose to *de facto* and ultimately *de iure* princely power through political patronage and manipulation *within* Florence, their role as *territorial* brokers may have had greater historical significance. Their increasingly regional horizon, conveyed through quasi-princely interventions in local conflicts and through offers of political advancement, also marked an important institutional and cultural break with

⁴⁷ Jones, *Italian City State*, p.275.

⁴⁸ E.g. about four times what has been suggested was the maximum territorial size of a city-state (Hansen, ‘Introduction’).

⁴⁹ For constitutional change see J.M. Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus in Florentine Electoral Politics, 1280-1400*, Chapel Hill, 1982; N. Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence under the Medici (1434 to 1494)*, Oxford, 1966. On fiscal policy see S.R. Epstein, ‘Taxation and social representation in Italian territorial states’, in M. Boone and W. Prevenier eds. *Finances publiques et finances privées au bas moyen âge (14e-16e siècle): intérêts individuels et gestion collective?*, Ghent-Leuven, 1996, pp.101-16, with references.

the inward-looking, faction-based tradition of the Florentine city-state.⁵⁰ The emergence in the 1430s of Cosimo de' Medici as political *padrino* or *pater patriae* with regional concerns reflects the incapacity of the Italian "city-state culture" to integrate subject cities and territories into traditional republican structures of consent and representation.

The causes, nature and significance of the transition from city-state to *signoria* and later to regional state have been central issues of Italian historiography at least since Burckhardt's *Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860).⁵¹ Until recently the most frequent explanation for the decline of city-states was one suggested by Machiavelli in the early sixteenth century. Taking his cue from a rhetorical and political tradition that stretched back to the mid-thirteenth century, Machiavelli argued that the demise of the city-state was caused by internal failings, most notably by its inability to achieve domestic peace: "the grave and natural enmities, which arise between the common people and the nobility, because the latter wish to command and the former shun obedience, are the source of all the instability and conflict in the cities [city-states]".⁵²

⁵⁰ W. Connell and A. Zorzi, eds. *Florentine Tuscany: Structures and Practices of Power*, forthcoming Cambridge, 1999. It was probably no chance that within Tuscany it was Florence that pursued economic and finally political hegemony most systematically, for it was the most susceptible of all the large Tuscan cities to being cut off from vital lines of trade and food supply by regional rivals. In Lombardy, by contrast, the larger number of cities and the highly developed transport network (shipping canals were being dug from the twelfth century) made it both harder and less pressing for one city to pursue political hegemony. Milan's direct sphere of influence reached only as far as the neighbouring towns of Lodi, Monza, Como (much of whose food supplies must come from the Milanese contado) and, to a far lesser extent, to the old Lombard capital, Pavia.

⁵¹ *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien. Ein Versuch*, Basel, 1860.

⁵² "Le gravi e naturali inimicizie, che sono intra gli uomini popolari e i nobili, causate da il volere questi comandare e quegli non ubbidire, sono cagione di tutti i mali che nascono nelle città" (N. Machiavelli, *Istorie fiorentine*, III, 1). From which "in Florence at first the nobility split, then the nobility and the common people, and lastly the people and the plebs; and many times it occurred that as one group prevailed it again split into two parts. Which divisions gave rise to more deaths,

Before returning to the question (which Machiavelli leaves unanswered) *why* political stability was so hard to achieve, let us turn instead to more recent explanations for city-state decline which emphasise external forces of change: trade and war. As regards trade, we might paraphrase Lenin on imperialism to suggest that city-states were forced to extend their territories to shore up the long-run decline in the rate of commercial profit.⁵³ Merchants could increase profits either by trading more efficiently in existing markets – by enforcing clearer property rights and rules of commercial engagement (monopolies) in subject territories – or by expanding into new markets. Increased competition between merchants led to diminishing returns to trade; commercial monopolies that in the city-state’s early days had helped to lower transaction costs turned into constraints on further growth. City-states could overcome bottlenecks through trade agreements with rival cities, but in the absence of a single jurisdiction such agreements were difficult to enforce: each state was liable to free-ride or to default on its obligations. The absence of co-ordination could only be remedied by establishing a single authority who could monitor and enforce the rules of the game. In this view, territorial states expanded territorially to enforce secure property rights to trade.

The second source of pressure came from war.⁵⁴ In this account, territorial expansion was driven by economies of scale: small city-states were less efficient war machines than large ones, because a given extension of state boundaries produced a more than proportional territorial gain and so also a proportionally larger demographic and tax base to wage war with. However, the underlying assumption that larger states

exiles, and destroyed families than in any other city” (ibidem, “Proemio”: “di Firenze in prima si divisono intra loro i nobili, dipoi i nobili e il popolo, e in ultimo il popolo e la plebe; e molte volte occorse che una di queste parti rimasa superiore si divise in due. Dalle quali divisioni ne nacquero tante morti, tanti esili, tante distruzioni di famiglie, quante mai ne nascessero in alcuna città”).

⁵³ This paragraph develops the argument in Hicks, *Theory*, p.57.

⁵⁴ C. Tilly, *Coercion, capital, and European states, AD990-1990*, Cambridge, MA - Oxford, 1990; see also P. Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, London, 1974, p.159.

could raise more taxes than smaller ones is questionable. Fiscal efficiency was a function neither of territorial size nor of the total number of taxpayers, but of taxpayer wealth and especially of administrative efficiency. Consequently, late medieval Florence, Genoa, and Venice could mobilise more resources for military purposes than many contemporary monarchies, and were not, as a result, ever conquered by larger states before Napoleon.⁵⁵

Consolidation was not forced upon city-states by larger outside powers, like the Holy Roman Empire, France, the Neapolitan Angevins, or the Catalan-Aragonese monarchy. Pressure to consolidate came overwhelmingly from other city-states. A first phase of consolidation began during the imperial campaigns of the 1230s, but only accelerated after 1250 when imperial influence in Italy was in retreat. The centre of territorial expansion during the second phase in the 1320s and '30s was Lombardy, when rivalry between autonomous cities was increasing. The third and final phase occurred in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries when neither the Empire nor the Angevins offered any palpable military or political threat. Although Florentine propagandists would claim from the 1390s that the city's military adventures were a forced response to the Visconti threat, Florence had laid the ground for its territorial state long before the Milanese lords appeared on the horizon.

The fact that city-states extended their territory independently of outside military pressure supports the view that domestic economic factors were paramount. But it does not explain why Italian city-states were unable to rule effectively over subject cities and their *contadi*, why their rule faced systematic resistance, and why therefore they were led to forsake their original identity and transform into principalities. Why could *urban* republics not become effective *territorial* republics? Why were city-states unable to turn economic hegemony over a region into consensual and stable political rule? To return to Machiavelli's question, why did city-states fail?

A complete answer to Machiavelli's question must include both the class structure of Italian city-state elites (which he identified) and the character of city-state

⁵⁵ Spruyt, *Sovereign State*, p.158.

constitutions (which he did not mention). Unusually for medieval Europe, the Italian urban oligarchies included both the landed aristocracy and the commercial bourgeoisie. Although the cleavage between the two classes and their “cultures” was never clear-cut and their relationship was highly ambiguous (nobles did not despise commerce and merchants aspired to aristocratic status),⁵⁶ their interests and political strategies were fundamentally at odds. For magnates, who had a comparative advantage in warfare and claimed seigniorial rights over trade and people, political fragmentation was both a prerequisite and the effect of independence; instead, merchants required jurisdictional integration, the rule of law, political stability and predictability. Landlords wished to sell their produce free of urban controls, but also claimed rights of passage on trade; merchants might consent to controlling urban food supplies so as to stabilise prices and industrial wages, but they were just as keen to do away with barriers to trade.

The conflict between landed and commercial interests was seldom successfully resolved. If the former prevailed, urban growth was stifled; if the latter emerged victorious, territorial expansion was curtailed. Florence is a rare example of a city-state which struck a balance between landed and trade interests that for many years enabled it to sustain strong commercial growth and considerable territorial expansion at the same time. But Florence also epitomises the weaknesses inherent to the republican city-state mode of power. Florence’s turn towards territorial lordship after 1350 caused the city’s and region’s economic decline and gave rise to such intense instability (with major uprisings in subject cities in the 1430s, 1470s and early 1500s,

⁵⁶ As exemplified in the two fundamental essays by P. Jones, “La storia economica. Dalla caduta dell’Impero romano al secolo XIV”, in R.Romano and C.Vivanti, eds. *Storia d’Italia*, Turin, 1974, vol.2, pp. 1467-1810 and idem, “Economia e società nell’Italia medievale: la leggenda della borghesia”, in R.Romano and C.Vivanti, eds., *Storia d’Italia: Annali 1: La transizione dal feudalesimo al capitalismo*, Turin, 1978, pp.185-372, which analyze respectively the “bourgeois’ and the “aristocratic’ aspects of Italian “city-state culture’. See also Finer, *History of Government*, p.960; and the overview of debates on this issue by G.C.Cracco, ‘social Structure and Conflict in the Medieval City’, in Molho, Raaflaub and Emlen, eds. *City-States*, pp.309-29.

in addition to Pisa's bid for independence referred to previously) that the old republican structures were unable to survive.

Florence failed to transform its urban republic into a territorial republic because its political elites combined, on the economic front, commercial and landed power, and on the political front, legislative, executive and judicial powers. The consequences were twofold. First, the elites deployed their power to manipulate the commercial and agrarian economy within the state. Second, the elites did not distinguish their interests as rulers from their interests as merchants and landowners: they did not distinguish clearly between government and state. As territorial rulers, they were charged with acting impartially as "collective prince" between competing interests, but as political and economic elites they had a stake in the outcome. Individual members of the elite also stood to lose more from power-sharing than they might gain.⁵⁷ As Machiavelli's Florentine contemporary Francesco Guicciardini explained, this dilemma was the root cause of city-state republics' unhappy rule. For "it is most desirable not to be born a subject; but if it must be so, it is better to be under a prince than a republic. For a republic oppresses all its subjects, and shares out its benefits only among its citizens; whereas a prince is more impartial, and gives equally to one subject as to the other, so that everyone can hope to be beneficed and employed by him".⁵⁸

David Hume later fleshed out the details:

⁵⁷ Whereas the costs of power-sharing were borne fully by the elite, the benefits would be spread across the entire population.

⁵⁸ F. Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, ed. R.Spongano, Florence, 1951, n.CVII: "È da desiderare non nascere suddito; e pure avendo a essere, è meglio essere di principe che di repubblica; perché la repubblica deprime tutti e sudditi; e non fa parte alcuna della sua grandezza se non a' suoi cittadini; el principe è più commune a tutti, e ha equalmente per suddito l'uno come l'altro; però ognuno può sperare di essere e beneficiato e adoperato da lui." See also A.Brown, "City and Citizen: Changing Perceptions in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries", in Molho, Raaflaub and Emlen, eds. *City States*, pp.108-9.

It may easily be observed, that though free governments have been commonly the most happy for those who partake of their freedom; yet are they the most ruinous and oppressive to their provinces (...). When a monarch extends his dominions by conquest, he soon learns to consider his old and his new subjects as on the same footing; because, in reality, all his subjects are to him the same, except the few friends and favourites with whom he is personally acquainted. He does not, therefore, make any distinction between them in his *general* laws; and, at the same time, is careful to prevent all *particular* acts of oppression on the one as well as the other. But a free state necessarily makes a great distinction, and must always do so, till men learn to love their neighbours as well as themselves. The conquerors, in such a government, are all legislators, and will be sure to contrive matters, by restrictions on trade, and by taxes, so as to draw some private, as well as public advantage from their conquests. Provincial governors have also a better chance, in a republic, to escape with their plunder, by means of bribery or intrigue; and their fellow-citizens, who find their own state to be enriched by the spoils of the subject provinces, will be the more inclined to tolerate such abuses. Not to mention, that it is a necessary precaution in a free state to change the governors frequently; which obliges these temporary tyrants to be more expeditious and rapacious, that they may accumulate sufficient wealth before they give place to their successors.⁵⁹

Compromise, which required that both parties exchange some power for a more stable and prosperous future, was hindered by the conflict of interest between the landed and mercantile classes that lay at the heart of the Italian city-state. The unavoidable consequence of this confusion of powers and rights was political uncertainty and

⁵⁹ D.Hume, "That politics may be reduced to a science (1777)", in *Selected essays*, Oxford, 1993, p.17.

economic short-termism . Born in response to feudal insecurity, the Italian city-states failed because of their inability to offer subjects the stability of the new Prince.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Venice would seem to offer an obvious counterexample to this theory. But Venice never experienced “that collision between the old feudal warrior families and the wealthy merchant class that animated the early politics of the other cities. On the contrary, the patriciate of Venice were the merchant-adventurers and the merchant-adventurers were its patriciate’. Manufacture was also underdeveloped until the late Middle Ages and therefore the working class (*popolo minuto*) was comparatively weak. The Venetian elite was therefore united in its interests and ruled on the basis of co-optation to, rather than exclusion from, its ranks, and hence was concerned with introducing checks and balances to individual or factional rule (Finer, *History of Government*, pp.986 (quotation), 994-96, 1006, 1008, 1012). Moreover, its interests were focused only marginally on its rural hinterland. This had profound effects for the character of its territorial rule. First, Venice’s decision to establish a mainland state after 1415 came more in response to the threat from the Lombard duchy and to the nascent power politics of the Italian peninsula, from which it did not wish to be excluded, rather than from a desire to control a territory for economic purposes (though the latter objective was also there). Second, it led to a more balanced policy towards its territorial subjects. Rural communities in particular seem to have appreciated the cautious support offered by Venice against their fiscal, legal and commercial grievances against their direct urban overlords. The consequences became apparent after Venice’s defeat in 1509 at Agnadello at the hands of the League of Cambrai, when it seemed for a time that the *Terraferma* would be entirely lost as subject cities transferred their allegiance to the French and to the emperor Maximilian. To Machiavelli’s amazement, the peasantry rallied to the Venetian cause and the city was able to reclaim the Lombard and Venetian cores of its state a few years later (I.Cervelli, *Machiavelli e la crisi dello stato veneziano*, Naples, 1974; Epstein, “Taxation”). Venice’s main weakness arose from its refusal to countenance the separation of powers.

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