water-borne commerce of Europe. Just as each of these four strips developed a characteristic economic structure, so also, by the end of the fifteenth century, each had acquired distinctive regional political patterns. Beginning at the center of Europe and moving first to the west and then to the east, we shall examine each of these areas as we follow the historical process of consolidation.
THE line of the Scheldt, Meuse, and Rhone rivers separating western from west-central Europe was roughly the same as that established in 870 to divide the northern domains of Charlemagne between his surviving grandsons, Louis the German and Charles the Bald. (See, in this series, Richard E. Sullivan, *Heirs of the Roman Empire.*) This boundary remained relatively stable until early modern times, and, indeed, sections of it still constitute the long-contested Franco-German border. In the fifteenth century this line marked more than the political differences between the monarchies to the west and the city-states and principalities to the east, in central Europe. It also effectively separated the large agrarian areas in which the western monarchies were grounded from the more densely populated river valleys of Germany, the Low Countries, and northern Italy. In the latter areas the long, mutually destructive struggle between the Holy Roman Empire and the papacy had allowed the flourishing commercial and industrial towns of the Po, Rhine, and Elbe valleys and the Baltic shores to win and maintain a large degree of independence.
Grown vigorous on the trade that crossed the Alps and filtered down the rivers to the north, they were able to remain free (in fact, sovereign) or to offer sufficient resistance to both pope and emperor to preserve at least a precarious autonomy. Most, however, fell one after the other to local princes or upstarts, who, rising among the ruins of Empire and papacy, amalgamated these old independent cities into small and closely administered territorial states. The history of one city does not closely resemble that of another, but in historical perspective certain similarities appear that suggest common trends or patterns of development.

*Italy*

At the end of the thirteenth century, Italy emerged from its long struggle with popes and emperors to become the promised land of princes. Ostensibly the prosperous northern communes continued their famous experiments in republican government, but under the economic and social strains of the next hundred and fifty years, their constitutions became so corrupted that, sooner or later, they were subverted or suppressed by despots. Whether these new tyrants started as noblemen, regular citizens, or professional soldiers or whether they achieved power legally or seized power by force, they employed similar methods in their ascent: intricate marriage alliances, clever betrayals, and carefully plotted assassinations. Furthermore, once entrenched in power, they all had the same objectives: the establishment of hereditary ruling houses, the conquest of weaker neighbors, and the consolidation of administrative institutions. In the process of attaining their goals, they created the modern state, replete with armies, bureaucrats, and diplomatic corps.
Just after 1400, five territorial states rose from the welter of precariously independent cities to dominate the Italian peninsula. Under her great dukes, Milan became the Renaissance despotism par excellence, while Venice, despite her doge, remained an oligarchical republic. Without benefit of title, the Medici ruled Florence by dominating its rough urban politics, and the canonically elected popes attempted to govern the Papal States as absolute monarchs. Naples alone remained apparently unchanged, but even its feudal kingdom underwent significant administrative reform. Although originally jealous and suspicious of one another, these five powers soon agreed—in the Peace of Lodi (1454)—to live and let live. This treaty, which served as a putative constitution for the peninsula, not only ensured, incidentally, the survival of some of Italy’s lesser states, but also instituted the first modern system of permanent resident ambassadors to oversee the peace and spy on rivals. By 1500, when as a result of the great discoveries trade and wealth were beginning to shift from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, French and Spanish invasions precipitated the political decline of Italy and the waning of its cultural renaissance.

Milan

Milan, which dominated the western valley of the Po, had long constituted a natural center for the political, military, and commercial activity of the surrounding territories, but to subjugate and unify these turbulent dominions required the rapacious determination of a major Renaissance despot. Gian Galeazzo Visconti (1385–1402), who inherited half of Milan from his father, seized the rest by killing his uncle and succeeded in turn-
ing the old commercial and industrial commune into a modern territorial state. To gain appropriate status, he bought the title Duke of Milan from the Holy Roman Emperor and then married a French princess, with the immediate purpose of recovering respectability but with the ultimate result of providing the pretext for a French invasion of his ill-won duchy. Early resolved to expand his holdings into a kingdom in northern Italy, he was able, at his death in 1402, to bequeath to his son, Filippo Maria, a well-established principality together with the purchased title. The father's success, however, provoked retributive aggression by Venice and Florence; and the son had to spend his life in endless struggles to hold his legacy. When the male line of the Visconti came to an end with Filippo's death in 1447, a vicious struggle for the succession began.

The victor, Francesco Sforza, was the epitome of a particularly ruthless type of professional soldier, known in fifteenth-century Italy as condottiere. After marrying Filippo's illegitimate daughter, Sforza used his formidable military power to seize the throne of the duchy. Then, having consolidated his control of Milan, he was able, through his alliance with Florence and Naples in the Peace of Lodi, to help reduce the chronic chaos of the peninsula. Finally, by introducing irrigation, as well as the cultivation of rice and silk worms to his domains, he reoriented Milan's economy toward the exploitation of the land instead of the traditional transalpine trade and thus fostered a new prosperity. This increased wealth enabled Sforza not only to strengthen his government and army but also to patronize artists and writers, thus transforming Milan into a brilliant capital.

His son and successor, the cruel, licentious Galeazzo
Maria, left a different record. After ten years of scandalous misrule he was assassinated, to be succeeded by his brother, Ludovico, called il Moro, who, as regent for Galeazzo's eight-year-old son and heir, ruled as virtual dictator. Even though he made Milan one of the richest and most brilliant centers of the Renaissance, he sowed the seeds of ultimate disaster. Seeking revenge against Florence and Naples for disintegrating the long-standing alliance and leaving Milan isolated, il Moro succeeded in persuading the French king, Charles VIII, to come to Italy at the head of an army to press old claims to the kingdom of Naples. An unforeseen deviation in the French royal succession, however, turned this maneuver against its author.

At the time, it did not occur to Ludovico that Charles would die without a direct heir, leaving the crown to his cousin Louis of Orléans, who had already inherited claims to Milan as well as Naples. When Charles died, the victim of an accident, shortly after his Italian expedition, Louis XII (1498–1515) mounted the throne and promptly set out for Milan. The fact that Ludovico himself was driven from his duchy by the invaders, who in turn were soon replaced by the Hapsburgs as the principal foreign overlords in Italy, made little practical difference to the inhabitants of the city.

Venice

If this transformation of Milan from a mediaeval trading commune into a modern territorial state ruled by a tyrant made her typical of northern Italian cities of the fifteenth century, Venice remained unique. Secure behind her lagoons, she continued her prosperous trade. Unaffected by the confusions that wracked the rest of the
peninsula throughout the fifteenth century, the citizens of the republic had to contend with little interference, except from the dictatorial government of the city's exclusive and jealous merchant oligarchy. This rich patriciate had long promoted its economic interests by building an empire of fortified ports along the coasts and on the islands of the Adriatic and the eastern Mediterranean that discouraged or repelled foreign attack. At home factional strife was stifled by a combination of prosperity and unremitting police surveillance. The government, composed of an elected doge, or duke, a senate, and a grand council, was designed to protect the state from seizure by either a dynastic despot or a proletarian demagogue as well as from external foes.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, Venice was actually one of the leading states of Europe. Having defeated her chief commercial rival, Genoa, she dominated the silk and spice trade of the eastern Mediterranean; and as long as she resisted the temptation to seek conquests on the mainland, she was able to avoid most of the debilitating warfare that had long engulfed the rest of Italy. Eventually, however, the consolidation of the new states in the north, particularly Milan, appeared to threaten her security. After long debate, the Venetian oligarchs reluctantly reversed their traditional policy and set out to acquire territories that would establish a protective zone to the northwest of the city. Gradually they annexed the eastern half of the Po Valley, securing their western boundary with Milan at the Adda River but at the price of being drawn into the unstable politics and sporadic wars of the peninsula. With her resources thus strained by the expense of becoming a territorial state, Venice began to lose some of her pre-eminence in the
eastern Mediterranean, where her irreconcilable conflict with the Ottomans and mounting competition from the Portuguese and eventually the Dutch led to her decline in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Florence

Florence, an old commercial-industrial commune like Milan, rounded out its possessions in Tuscany by annexing the important port of Pisa in 1406. Long governed by a small oligarchy of rich merchants, the masters of the seven largest guilds, or arti maggiori, it had, by the beginning of the fifteenth century, become the political property of an even smaller faction, headed by the Albizzi family. Exploiting an extremely complex constitution which appeared to guarantee equitable representation to all classes, these patricians managed to gain effective control of the signory, or municipal administration.

In the course of the fifteenth century, however, the hold of the Albizzi faction was broken in its turn, and a new family, the Medici, gained control. Rising generation by generation from obscure origins to wealth, power, and finally nobility, the Medici personified the virtuosity and achievement associated with the Renaissance. The foundations of family power had been laid by Giovanni di Bicci de’ Medici (1360–1429), who not only amassed an immense fortune in commerce and banking, but associated himself with the lesser guilds and proletariat in their resistance to the oppressive taxation of the Albizzi. His son Cosimo, a consummate businessman, left a brilliant career in trade and banking for politics. With the support of the lower orders of society, he forced the Albizzi into exile in 1434 and proceeded to rule Florence through a balia, or reform commission with unlimited power. By engineering an alliance with Naples and Milan to rein-
force the Peace of Lodi, he contributed not only to the pacification of Italy but to the prosperity of Florence. With an earnest love of beauty and a deep reverence for learning, he was a great patron of the arts (and artists) of his day. In addition, he was a student of the classics and an important collector of ancient manuscripts. In 1464, at the age of seventy-five, he died while listening to a reading of one of Plato's dialogues. He was succeeded first by his son Piero, then in 1469 by his grandson Lorenzo.

Lorenzo maintained both the façade of republican institutions and the practice of benevolent despotism which had characterized his grandfather's rule. He also continued to manipulate the alliance with Milan and Naples to preserve peace on the peninsula. If he was a lesser businessman than his grandfather, Lorenzo was an even more enthusiastic supporter of arts and letters. Known as "the Magnificent," this versatile intellectual became not only the Renaissance patron par excellence, but the friend of the artists, writers, and philosophers he aided. He also composed poetry which, by its intrinsic merits, has rightly earned him a high place in Italian literature. Perhaps the greatest among his many contributions to the culture of his age was his leading role in re-establishing the vernacular Italian—his own Tuscan dialect—as an acceptable vehicle for serious expression.

After Lorenzo's death in 1492, the Medici fortunes wanted. His son Piero, in a desperate effort to save Florence from Charles VIII's invading armies, surrendered a number of outlying towns to the French. Disappointed and angered by such weakness, the Florentines expelled him and attempted to revive the republic. Too long unaccustomed to self-government, however, they allowed the fanatical Savonarola to seize power. This notoriously morbid Dominican employed his demagogic
powers to overwhelm his fellow citizens with remorse for their immorality and to convince them that their misfortunes were nothing less than divine retribution. True piety, he warned, required them to renounce the luxuries and destroy the splendid creations of the Renaissance as worldly “vanities.” Terrified by their new-found guilt, the populace pillaged the city for works of art, books, and rich costumes to sacrifice in public fires and then threw open the gates to the invading French as emissaries of God’s wrath.

Florence’s neighbors, unswayed by Savonarola’s prophetic exhortations, kept their minds on their own mundane survival, until they succeeded first in driving the French from the peninsula, and then in punishing Florence for what they considered treacherous aid to the common foe. This retribution broke the spell in which the fanatical monk held the people of Florence, and since his religious excesses had seriously alienated many churchmen, including the Pope, he was seized and condemned as both a traitor and a heretic. But his public execution—he was hanged and his body burned—did little to restore either the reputation or unity of the republic. Florence appeared an easy prey for any unemployed despot; yet surprisingly, the discredited regime survived until 1512, when the Medici returned and re-established their control. Twenty years later, by imperial decree, they became hereditary dukes and, as such, ruled until 1737. This “first family” of Florence, it should be noted, produced several cardinals, three popes, and two queens of France.

*The Papacy and the Church*

By the fifteenth century, the papacy, too, was creating a territorial state. The very gravity of the problems which threatened the later mediaeval church—schism, concili-
arism, heresy, and Islam—seemed to force the popes to rely more and more on their own princely resources in the Patrimony. After their narrow escape from the ultimate threat of subjection to conciliar authority, however, the Renaissance popes became increasingly preoccupied with humanism and art or simply with their own personal fortunes, to the detriment not only of the church but of the Papal States as well. Still, badly as they managed the church, these successors of St. Peter were able, thanks to the revenues they wrung from Christendom, particularly Germany, to subjugate the various local powers in the vicinity of Rome.

Having been absent in Avignon during much of the fourteenth century and then weakened by the schism, the popes had long since lost effective control of the Papal States. In 1414, after a period of almost fifty years during which there were first two, and finally three, claimants to the title (see, in this series, Robert E. Lerner, The Age of Adversity: The Fourteenth Century), cardinals from the various rival camps finally succeeded in convening one of the largest and most important councils ever held. Meeting at Constance, it began by deposing all three pretenders to St. Peter's throne and then, in 1417, elected Martin V, thus reuniting western Christendom under a single pope. Martin's successor had to beat down attempts by subsequent councils to assume control of the church and was himself forced to squander a large part of his resources fighting against the followers of the heresiarch John Hus, who had been burned by the Council of Constance.

Significantly, Nicholas V (1447–1455), the first post-conciliar pope, concentrated his energies on re-establishing his position in Rome and refurbishing his Vatican Palace. Employing humanists to collect, copy, and edit
the classical manuscripts that still form the nucleus of the Vatican Library, and enlisting countless artists and architects, he supervised the restoration of the Eternal City as the seat of Christendom. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 cast a shadow on Nicholas’ achievements, as well as on the papacy; and one of his great humanist successors, Pius II (1458–1464), spent much of his pontificate in a vain attempt to launch a crusade to free that city from the Turks.

But later, more cynical popes concentrated their efforts more openly and ruthlessly on achieving success in Italian politics. When the Spaniard Rodrigo Borgia, nephew of a previous pontiff, mounted the papal throne as Alexander VI (1492–1503), the Renaissance papacy reached a kind of apogee. Demonstrating that he recognized no conflict between his papal duties and his personal ambitions, Alexander established for all posterity a record for urbane clerical corruption. To capture the papacy, he put aside his common-law wife and, according to contemporary rumor, bought the tiara with his personal fortune. To extend his new power he directed his daughter, Lucrezia, through a series of marriages with Italian despots and used every opportunity that the papacy afforded to secure place and power for his family.

Determined to reconquer the subject cities that had been seized by local despots during the Avignonese captivity and the schism, Alexander put his son, Cesare Borgia, in command of the papal armies. Refined, elegant, and charming, though utterly unscrupulous, Cesare proved to be an excellent commander and an able administrator. In three major campaigns he restored practically all the lost territory, thus re-establishing the Pope’s political authority over the Papal States. As a result, both
Cesare and Alexander appeared to personify what the Renaissance called virtù, daring and ruthless cleverness resulting in worldly success. But this triumph of political tyranny and fiscal extortion, just like the earlier victory over the councils, had been won at the cost of spiritual leadership. Corruption flourished unheeded and unchecked throughout the western church.

Naples

In contrast to the city-states of the north, Naples was a feudal monarchy based on an agricultural economy. Geographically accessible to conquest, it had long suffered under foreign misrule; and when a century and a half of stagnation under the French house of Anjou came to a catastrophic climax in the scandalous reign of the degenerate Joanna II, even reform came from abroad. Upon the mad queen’s death in 1435, Alfonso the Magnanimous of Aragon drove out the Angevin claimant to the throne and added Naples to his Spanish and Sicilian holdings. Alfonso (d. 1458) and his bastard son, Ferrante I, strove to impose a centralized administration on the feudal structure of southern Italy. They suppressed the surviving Angevin supporters, reorganized state finances, and encouraged the investment of foreign, largely Florentine, capital. Both men, but especially Alfonso, were notable patrons of art, letters, and scholarship who sought to make their court a show place of Renaissance culture. After the Peace of Lodi, Alfonso helped construct the alliance of Naples, Florence, and Milan; but by supporting a papal attempt to break the power of the Medici, Ferrante lost the confidence of his allies. There is little doubt, however, that he and his father were the outstanding Neapolitan rulers of the fifteenth century. It was the
death of Ferrante that prompted his old enemies at home and abroad—Angevin sympathizers, the Pope, and the Milanese under the leadership of Ludovico Sforza—to urge Charles VIII of France to press his claims to the crown of Naples. The consequent French invasion of 1494 and the Spanish counterattack it provoked ravaged southern Italy, leaving it under uninterrupted foreign occupation that turned it into one of the most backward regions of Europe.

Germany

In Germany, as in Italy, the fifteenth century was the period of the prince. Since the collapse of the Empire in the middle of the thirteenth century, despite such efforts at reconstruction as Charles IV's Golden Bull (see Lerner, Age of Adversity), Germany had gradually slipped toward anarchy. The flourishing cities along the trade routes managed to affirm their de facto independence and exerted what influence they could for the maintenance of peace and order, but unlike their greater counterparts in Italy, they were unable to extend their domination to the countryside. Emperors, electors (the seven great magnates, lay or clerical, who, according to the terms of the Golden Bull, chose the Emperor), nobles, townsmen, and clerics all placed their particular interests above those of Germany as a whole. In the course of the fifteenth century, however, this disintegrative process was partially checked by the emergence of strong regional rulers collectively known as princes. A score of powerful lay and ecclesiastical lords, by consolidating medium-sized territories, managed to subdue most of their local rivals and eventually to achieve regional autonomy. Several founded major dynasties, which not only prospered
but survived until the ultimate collapse of the German Empire in 1918. Of these, the most powerful in 1400 was the House of Luxemburg, whose greatest possession was not its ancestral county but its recently acquired kingdom of Bohemia, the only monarchy in the Empire. Later the Hapsburgs in Swabia and Austria, the Wettins in Saxony, the Wittelsbachs in the Palatinate and Bavaria, and finally the Hohenzollerns in Brandenburg and Prussia were to exercise great influence in German affairs. In addition, lesser princes, including the ecclesiastical electors—the archbishops of Mainz, Trier, and Cologne—succeeded in amassing incomparably greater wealth and authority than ordinary nobles.

The Princes and the Emperors

Traditionally, princes were subordinate to the emperor, but in practice they were frequently his equals. Since he had almost none of the legislative authority that might be expected to go with his exalted title, he would have needed the cooperation of the unwieldy parliament (diet) to make new laws; and to enforce them he had little but his own personal and very limited resources. The imperial office was thus hardly more than an empty dignity.

In Germany, as in the rest of Europe, the fourteenth century had closed on a scene of mounting chaos. Electors and princes had deposed the incompetent Wenceslas, to replace him on the imperial throne with the ignominious Rupert of the Palatinate (1400–1410), who climaxed an inept reign by launching an expedition to Italy, which proved so embarrassingly futile that to get back to Germany he was obliged to pawn his crown. Upon his death, the electors transferred that tarnished symbol to Sigis-
mund (1410–1437), the younger brother of the deposed Wenceslas. Vain, profligate, and capricious, Sigismund was also charming, generous, and learned, and perhaps the most nearly illustrious emperor of the later Middle Ages. He was, however, no match for the anarchy, heresy, foreign enemies, and economic depression that plagued the Empire. (See Chapter IV.)

Although Sigismund spent his life rushing headlong from defeat to defeat, he achieved one notable success by summoning the Council of Constance. Public opinion had long favored calling an assembly to end the papal schism which had divided the western church since 1378; but none of the contending popes had ever been willing to support this solution and accept the implicit risk of being deposed. Finally, however, in 1413 the schismatic pope who called himself John XXIII, having been driven from Rome by the king of Naples, begged protection of the Emperor. Sigismund seized the occasion to force John to agree to a general council and then summoned the two other papal claimants, together with all Christian princes and prelates, to meet in the imperial city of Constance. In addition to presiding in person, the Emperor played a vigorous role in the affairs of the council, exacting submission from the rivals and guiding the assembled fathers toward common action. When the field was finally cleared of contenders and a single successor agreed on, Sigismund was the hero of the day.

In 1438 he was succeeded on the imperial throne by his son-in-law, Albert of Hapsburg. This prince, in spite of the fact that he had been looked to as a promising successor, actually achieved little beyond the acquisition of the title of Albert II, since he survived Sigismund less than a year. That act, in itself, however, sufficed to launch
the Hapsburg family on an almost unbroken line of imperial succession that lasted until the abolition of the title in 1806. During a long and empty reign, Albert's cousin and successor, Frederick III (1439–1493), allowed Germany to plunge even deeper into civil strife while he devoted his meager energies to strengthening the Hapsburg position. In this pursuit he achieved his greatest and possibly least expected triumph, the marriage of his son and heir, Maximilian, to Mary, the daughter and heiress of Charles the Bold of Burgundy. Elected official heir apparent with the title King of the Romans in 1486, Maximilian took charge of the Empire before his father's death and, from the powerful base of his Austrian and Burgundian possessions, began to restore imperial prestige by military successes.

In an attempt to capitalize on his triumphs, Maximilian convoked a diet at Worms in 1495 to draft a workable constitution for the Empire. First he secured the right to collect a tax called the "common penny," then he established an imperial supreme court, and finally he persuaded the legislators to outlaw private wars and confederations within the Empire. Maximilian intended these changes to help re-create a central government; but throughout the rest of his reign, his jealous princes forced from him one concession after another, until, at his death in 1519, little of the centralized authority for which he had struggled so hard remained for his successor. In contrast, the marriage of his son, Philip, to Joanna the Mad, the daughter and eventual heiress of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, was to leave a major imprint on European history by binding the crumbling Empire to the fastest rising national monarchy in Europe.
Rivals to the Princes: Clergy, Knights, Towns

Even if the princes did succeed in establishing themselves as the most powerful and favored class in fifteenth-century Germany, three other deeply entrenched groups managed to survive as active rivals: the clergy, the free knights, and the burghers. All three saw their positions gradually erode, in spite of their vigorous, if ill-coordinated, efforts, at self-preservation. Theoretically they could have cooperated for their common defense against the encroachments of the princes, but too often each group resorted to its own characteristic and individualistic devices.

Perhaps the chief obstacle to the political consolidation of Germany, though ironically not to the ambitions of the princely families, was the church. As a result, in part, of the early mediaeval practice of using churchmen as imperial administrators, almost a sixth of the country was under the jurisdiction of clerical rulers who acted as temporal lords. Some actually bore secular titles, but virtually all shared the views and objectives, as well as the rank and prestige, of their lay colleagues. The chief difference between the two was that the clerical lords, deprived of the possibility of legitimate heirs by their vow of celibacy, were precluded from the normal practice of bequeathing their offices and lands to their own offspring. Instead, succession was normally established by ecclesiastical elections in which local princely families frequently had sufficient influence to reserve bishoprics for their own younger sons. The bishops of Strasbourg, Speyer, and Würzburg, quite as much as the more famous archbishop-electors of Mainz, Trier, and Cologne, were in practice lay princes. The members of the lower clergy,
over which these worldly prelates presided, were left largely to their own devices, with the result that they earned a reputation for lack of discipline, mismanagement of funds, and the perversion of offices for personal or political gain. For obvious reasons, the secular princes had as little interest in the reform of such a rich and corrupt establishment as the great clerics themselves. The consequences of this shameless abuse of clerical incomes and prestige were to be experienced a century later in the wholesale confiscation of ecclesiastical lands and prerogatives during the Protestant Reformation.

Unlike the princes and upper clergy, few of the once proud barons and knights (Ritter) continued to enjoy the prestige and position accorded them during the high Middle Ages. Although many managed to maintain a precarious independence under the nominal authority of the emperor, they were jealous of the prosperous burghers, resentful of the powerful princes, and frequently in mortal conflict with both. Because as nobles they were prohibited by pride, tradition, and in some cases, law, from associating with burghers or engaging in trade, they were driven increasingly to banditry as the only occupation appropriate to their station, and even that usually failed to mend their dilapidated fortunes. The degrading poverty that transformed them into "robber barons" contributed to the mounting bitterness that would eventually incite many to join Martin Luther's revolt.

During the later Middle Ages, wealth and culture in Germany was concentrated in the cities. Although small by modern standards, these prosperous, resourceful communities produced art, architecture, literature, and scholarship of remarkable quality. Under the titular pro-
tection of the emperor, the “free imperial cities” enjoyed privileges and independence which they defended vigorously against repeated and tremendously destructive attacks by the rising princes. The greatest threat to urban survival, however, proved to be the gradual divergence to the Atlantic of the traditional north-south trade. Economically weakened by this shift, some of the cities eventually succumbed to the growing power of the princes; and all started on the gradual decline that would continue into the nineteenth century.

*Estates and Leagues*

Although all three of these threatened groups—the nobility, the clergy, and, to a lesser degree, the towns—were represented in regional assemblies called *Landtage*, or estates, they failed to make effective use of this medieaval institution in their struggle with the princes. In fact, these legislative bodies which might have been expected to oppose the growing authority of the new princely bureaucracies tended to contribute to their consolidation. Since their constituents were interested primarily in peace, order, and efficient government, the deputies in the *Landtage* were as eager as the new administrators to differentiate between public finances and the ruler's private resources and to create a quasi-independent judiciary. They even attempted to impose primogeniture on the ruling families by law, in order to obstruct their ancient custom of dividing lands among all male heirs. In the long run all these efforts at reform had the effect of strengthening the position of the princes, but probably none more than the expanding use of Roman law, which the *Landtage* encouraged in their efforts to further judicial reform. Originally revived by the Italian
law schools in the twelfth century for clerical and commercial use, the Roman code was gradually employed in Germany by all—princes and Landtage included—who were interested in reinforcing civil authority. More comprehensive and systematic than Germanic custom, the Roman code buttressed the authority of administrative government and recognized the sovereign as the source of all rights and power.

Though the Landtage ended by serving rather than opposing the forces of centralization, another mediaeval institution, the urban league, did pose a formidable obstacle to princely progress. The most famous was the organization of commercial cities in the north known as the Hansa (see above, Chapter I). In addition, the nobles, cities, and bishops of Swabia formed their own league to restore and maintain order in the south. The most notable of all, however, was the Helvetic, or Swiss, Confederation, which gained control of many of the crucial Alpine passes linking Italy with Germany. In existence since the end of the thirteenth century, it gained formal recognition as an independent power in 1394, thanks mainly to a spectacular series of military victories over the French, the Burgundians, and the Hapsburgs. As a result, the citizens of the Helvetic League enjoyed more freedom than any other Europeans, even though the member cantons squandered its benefits in fighting among themselves and refused to share them with the inhabitants of territories they conquered. Even if the members of the League, torn by tensions between German-, French-, and Italian-speaking regions, and by endemic factional strife, were incapable of consummating a stable federal organization, their stubborn courage, backed up by superb natural defenses and a formidable military reputation, preserved
their independence and, by later providing a safe haven for Zwingli, Calvin, and their followers, proved to be an important factor in the Reformation.

**Burgundy**

Among the new princes, by far the most spectacular were the dukes of Burgundy. By gaining control of the commercial and industrial cities of the lower Rhine, Meuse, and Scheldt, they had succeeded in dominating the main northern terminals of the old mediaeval trade routes and thus, in less than a century, had come into possession of wealth exceeding that of any other rulers in Europe. The founder of the dynasty, Philip the Bold (1363-1404), had received the duchy of Burgundy from his father, John of France, as a royal appanage. Then, by marriage, he added the counties of Flanders, Artois, Nevers, Rethel, and the imperial Free County of Burgundy (Franche-Comté). Not content with these acquisitions, he persuaded the widowed and childless duchess of Brabant and Limburg to bequeath her holdings to one of his sons and arranged a marriage for a daughter, as well as another son, with the family ruling Holland, Zeeland, and Hainault. Philip’s successor, John the Fearless (1404-1419), proved no less shrewd at the marriage game than his father, with the result that his own son, Philip the Good (1419-1467), found himself lord of the French and German Burgundies and all of the Netherlands.

The very extent of Philip’s holdings robbed them of any unity. The Burgundies (the French duchy and the imperial county) were primarily agricultural and therefore poorer and less populous than the duke’s other possessions in the Low Countries. All his lands, however, were inhabited by peoples of mixed Teutonic and Latin
extraction who spoke Germanic or French dialects, just as each major portion lay partly within the Holy Roman Empire (the county of Burgundy and the Low Countries) and partly within the realm of France (Flanders and the duchy of Burgundy). The only common bond between these scattered and varied territories was their duke, Philip the Good.

That ambitious prince had three major aims: first, to round out his territories by acquiring the strip separating Burgundy from the Low Countries; second, to link them permanently through a unified and centralized administration; and finally, to gain a royal crown. The first he nearly achieved. In 1421 he purchased the county of Namur and in 1455 had one of his sons invested with the rich bishopric of Utrecht. A year later he secured the election of a nephew to the still richer see of Liège, and then purchased the extensive duchy of Luxemburg. But when he set his sights on Lorraine, the last piece of the territorial jigsaw puzzle, the king of France recognized the threat and declared war.

The administrative integration of all these territories, however, proved more difficult than their acquisition. In each, Philip was accepted as the right and lawful but wholly local ruler. To the Burgundians he was their duke, to the Flemings their count, and to the Dutch the count of Holland. Thus, in the exercise of his sovereign rights in each, he was bound by local laws and customs. In spite of these restrictions, Philip and his successor, Charles the Bold, did manage to impose some degree of centralization on their various lands. By subordinating the temporal power of the church to their direct control and subjecting it to taxation, they established both an important source of revenues and a kind of ready-made bureaucracy. The
Great Council, composed of members from all the provinces, dealt with matters of general concern and gradually extended its authority over areas not protected by well-entrenched local customs. Financial matters were centralized in the Chambre des Comptes and appellate jurisdiction for all the domains invested in a parlement at Mechlin. After 1463, delegates from all local assemblies met at Bruges in an estates-general; and from 1471, a standing army was recruited from, and supported by, all the provinces.

Having thus created a de facto kingdom, Duke Philip was determined to secure the appropriate title to go with it. His establishment of the Golden Fleece, the most famous and magnificent of chivalric orders, served notice of his intention. His opulent court made this “Grand Duke of the West” the envy of his fellow sovereigns, but his dream of reconstituting the ninth-century realm of Charlemagne’s grandson Lothair—the middle kingdom stretching between France and Germany from the Low Countries to the Alps—terrorized them. Philip, as a result, found his insistent quest for the coveted royal title resolutely turned aside with offers of the humiliating compromise designation, “King of Brabant.”

In 1467, Charles the Bold inherited his father’s titles and ambitions, but as the famous chronicler Philippe de COMMINES recounts, “He had neither the sense nor the malice to carry off his designs.” Even so, he made impressive, if temporary, additions to the Burgundian inheritance and prestige. First he ruthlessly crushed revolts in several of his Netherlandish cities, and then he secured a de facto mortgage from the Hapsburgs on their holdings in Alsace. Next he annexed the duchy of Guelders, and finally he assumed the protectorate of Liège and Lorraine.
All this he clearly intended to cap with the marriage of his daughter, Mary, to Maximilian, son of Emperor Frederick III. Late in 1473, Charles and Frederick met at Trier to work out the details. Tentatively, they agreed that Mary's dowry would be the entire Burgundian inheritance; that Charles, as the defender of Christendom, would lead a crusade against the Turks; and that the emperor would create the long-desired kingdom of Burgundy, including, in addition to the existing dominions, the bishoprics of Utrecht, Liège, Toul, and Verdun, together with the duchies of Clèves, Lorraine, and Savoy. When everything seemed ready for final ratification, Maximilian suddenly and inexplicably sailed down the Moselle in the middle of the night, leaving Charles the laughingstock of Europe.

To insult was rapidly added injury. Finding himself suddenly faced with a hostile coalition of the duke of Lorraine, the Swiss cantons, and his archenemy Louis XI of France, Charles seized the initiative. After overrunning Lorraine, he rashly attacked the Swiss on their own terrain, where, at Morat in 1476, his ill-disciplined semi-feudal forces were surrounded and slaughtered by the tough mountain soldiers of the cantons. Six months later Charles suffered a final disaster when, along with most of his troops, he was cut down at Nancy. So great was the carnage that Lord Byron reported seeing bones of the Burgundian dead when he visited the battlefields in 1816.

Morat and Nancy marked the beginning of the end of the Burgundian dream. To secure acceptance as her father's successor to the ducal throne, Mary had to grant a charter of "Great Privilege" (1477) abolishing much of the centralized administration and restoring many old regional liberties. At this point Louis XI launched an
invasion to back his demand that Mary wed his son the dauphin, driving the desperate young duchess to find a protector in Maximilian of Hapsburg. Still legally his fiancée, she hastily arranged the long-delayed marriage, and Maximilian as quickly took up the defense of his new wife’s realm. Having restored order in the provinces and concluded peace with France in 1482, he was able, when Mary died the same year, to have their infant son, Philip, declared her successor in all the Burgundian territories. When Maximilian became emperor in 1493, Philip, known to history as “the Handsome,” took over actual administration of this inheritance. His marriage to Joanna the Mad, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella, however, was destined to subordinate Burgundian and Netherlandish interests to those of Spain, diverting his ancestors’ grandiose dreams of territorial aggrandizement to new regions. In 1500, with the death of the last male heir, Joanna became heiress presumptive to the several Spanish crowns and all their dependencies in the Old World and the New. Philip’s attention was inevitably and increasingly occupied by this immense inheritance.
CHAPTER III

The Western Monarchies

WHILE princes were successfully consolidating their new city-states in Italy, Germany, and Burgundy, hereditary kings were busy welding the great fiefs of France and England and the petty kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula into centralized monarchies. These royal governments, not having been undermined by papal intervention, as was the Holy Roman Empire (see, in this series, Sidney Painter, The Rise of the Feudal Monarchies), were eventually able to tighten the loose feudal bonds linking the nobles to the crown. Further, since agriculture predominated in this area west of the Scheldt, Meuse, and Rhone—at least until the trans-European trade began to be diverted from the overland routes to the Atlantic—towns were generally too weak to attempt to gain their independence. Instead, they cooperated with the emerging bureaucratic authority of the central monarchies against the anarchic misrule of the feudal nobles. With this support, and without the opposition of rich and powerful trading cities of the sort that had checked the ambitions of would-be kings in west-central Europe, the new royal governments of the West were