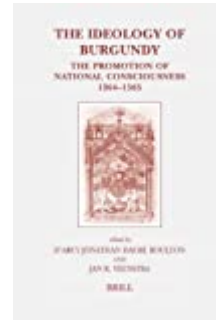




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Waving the Burgundian Flag

Ever since the first publication of Johan Huizinga's epochal *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* (1919), the Valois duchy of Burgundy has seemed like no other political formation to epitomize the Latin Middle Ages in autumnal garb. From the slow-motion formalism of its court etiquette to the luxuriating intricacies of its Gothic visual culture, everything pointed backwards. Burgundy was an anti-Renaissance anti-state, a living (or rather, undead), overextended archaism, and its political culture scarcely more than an endlessly elaborate, solipsistic, high-aristocratic shadow play. The flaws in Huizinga's vision—his neglect of the vibrant and prosperous Netherlandish towns, for example, or the “seasonal” metaphor, subsuming all beneath a single banner of over-ripeness and decay—have long been well known. In recent times, their acknowledgement has formed the basis for a fundamental reevaluation of Valois Burgundy itself. The interminable rituals and pageants of the ducal court are now most likely to be admired as sophisticated propaganda stratagems, geared to forging a single political community within the dukes' disparate and changing patrimony.

That court, it is now generally recognized, was intimately and fruitfully enmeshed with the dynamic, haute bourgeois consumer culture of the great Flemish and Brabantine cities. The Valois dukes have likewise been transformed from etiolated and hidebound feudal dynasts into forceful modernizers, state-builders, and go-ahead cultural trendsetters.[1]

The present collection of essays aims to give this modernizing bandwagon a further jolt forward. The eight papers address a range of topics loosely united by a concern with representations and perceptions of Burgundy under the Valois dukes and their Habsburg successors. The terminal dates prove to be something of a movable feast. Offered as 1364-1565 in the volume's title, the narrower bounds of 1430-1519 (from the foundation of the Order of the Golden Fleece to the election to the Empire of the Habsburg duke Charles II), proposed by the editors in their introduction, are in fact nearer the mark. The fourteenth century features hardly at all. Yet, this still leaves us with several essays with nothing to say about the post-1477 Habsburg era, while another,

by Robert Stein, focuses heavily on the late sixteenth century. There is more than mere pedantry at issue here, for the volume's wandering chronology points to a collection too loose-limbed to serve wholly successfully the tight editorial agenda announced at the start. That agenda, centered on the reevaluation of central aspects of "Burgundian ideology and propaganda" (p. x), suggests a world profoundly different from Huizinga's twilight vision. Admittedly, it is not always certain whether we are dealing here already with a fully formed unitary "nation" or still only with a "proto-nation," whether we are treating an established "state" or just an "embryonic state-building" process. Nevertheless, most of these essays do at least share a willingness to sing from broadly the same progressive hymnal. Their world is one of public "intellectuals," who have charge of a "precocious state ideology" and whose writings serve a unifying "national mythology"—which, in its turn, was capable of reaching a broad "general public," or even "the masses."

The essays that most closely conform to the volume's declared goals are, perhaps predictably, those by its two editors. D'Arcy J. D. Boulton, best known for his authoritative work on late medieval chivalric orders, here approaches the insignia of the Golden Fleece and other ducal devices not as dynastic or purely courtly symbols but as elements "promoting a sense of common Burgundian nationality" (p. xi). The aim was "to create ... a unified and self-conscious nation-state comparable to England or France" (p. 26), and in pursuit of this end, the Burgundians largely followed the late medieval Anglo-French template: a unifying historical mythology; a "national" warrior-saint (St. Andrew); the attempted acquisition of a royal crown (for historic Burgundy, or Frisia); a chivalric order for all ducal territories (the Golden Fleece); and a supporting and ramified array of readily reproducible signs and symbols. Jan R. Veenstra ascribes to the Burgundian "state" a will to "self-determination," which he seeks to trace in a range of fifteenth-century literary (and, of course, "propaganda") writings. He is in no doubt that the dukes and their literate champions worked consistently to realize "regal aspirations" (p. 197).

Several other pieces provide valuable complementary and interconnecting perspectives. Jan Dumolyn examines the political doctrines of senior ducal officials with a view to reconstructing a "Burgundian political vocabulary" (p. 1). Such men, he contends, deployed concepts such as justice, equity, and the common good in the service of a notion of Burgundian statehood distinct from, and potentially at odds with, the persons and whims of the dukes. Graeme Small, in one of the collection's

standout pieces, exploits a short vernacular chronicle (the *Chronique des roys*) from Charles the Bold's reign (1467-77) in order to reevaluate the importance of the idea of an ancient Burgundian kingdom both to the Valois dukes and their early Habsburg successors. Breaking with the rather relentlessly modernizing refrain of some other contributors, Small finds the vision of a Burgundian crown a distinctly on-off element in ducal thinking, though one which gained ground at the end of the Valois period to enjoy a late flourishing under Maximilian. By contrast, Veenstra, who discusses the shadowy idea of a Frisian realm, is more optimistic about its significance to the Burgundians.

Bernhard Sterchi, who illuminates the centrality of reputation among the courtier aristocracy, approaches political communications, and their peculiar importance for the Burgundian elite, from a different direction. Here, the chapters of the Golden Fleece played a pivotal role in affirming, and sometimes destroying, the public repute of individual members. Especially remarkable is the breadth of the public which this most self-consciously elitist of institutions was occasionally able to address. When in 1501 two controversial armorial panels were briefly displayed in the Carmelites' church in Brussels, a contemporary believed that more than six thousand people, many of whom had copied down their inflammatory inscriptions, had viewed them during a twenty-four hour period. Verbal communications are also the theme of Malte Prietzel's study of the orations of Guillaume Fillastre, a leading diplomat and spokesman for Duke Philip the Good (1419-67). Oratory, as Prietzel points out, has been a neglected theme among modern students of Burgundy, dazzled by the visible glitter of the court. Prietzel argues valiantly, though not entirely convincingly, for the nation-forging power of Fillastre's silver tongue, despite the paucity of surviving copies of his orations and the dull conventionality of those which we have. Evidently one had to have been there; but how many were? As also with some of the other papers, the audience for all this ideological bluster is surprisingly absent from the discussion.

The contribution of the two remaining papers is of a rather more tangential character. David J. Wrisley summarizes the content of two of Jean Wauquelin's prose translations of French verse romances. Despite Wrisley's insistence upon the "inherently ideological" character of Wauquelin's work (p. 131), it seems hard to credit these two literary pieces with more than an implicit role in legitimizing contemporary political relationships to their readership—the composition of which, again, is not dis-

cussed. Finally, Robert Stein's essay is set apart by engaging mostly indirectly with Burgundian political culture, in the course of an investigation into the significance (greater, as it turns out, than Huizinga for one suspected) of the number seventeen as applied to the territories of the late medieval and early modern Low Countries. Yet Stein also concedes—tellingly, in a volume avowedly concerned with the dissemination of ideas—that few people at the time would have been aware of the mystical calculations (first elucidated by St. Augustine) upon which rested this number's peculiar significance.

Does the collection as a whole convince? At the very least, it certainly sounds a powerful warning to anyone still tempted to find the modern map of European nation-states pre-programmed in the late Middle Ages. As the contributors implicitly and explicitly remind us, much remained fluid in the fifteenth century. Given just a little more time and luck, the prospect of the consolidation of a kind of precocious Greater Belgium, stretching from the Zuider Zee to the Alps, no longer seems wholly incredible. True, Valois Burgundy was a highly artificial, multicultural, territorial patchwork, initially held together by little beyond dynastic titles; but as Boulton rightly points out, the same can also be said of the early history of other medieval European realms. If the linguistic, cultural, and other differences between Flanders and the Franche Comté, Zeeland and Lorraine were sharp, they were no greater than those between highland and lowland Scotland, or the Breton subjects of the French king and the inhabitants of the Île-de-France.

Clearly, the dukes had some catching up to do, but time and location were in some ways on their side. If what they needed was a fast, penetrative image-raising program, symbols of princely (and proto-“national”) rule had never been as numerous, as visible, and as amenable to wide dissemination—on a host of artifacts, from coins and badges to tents, banners, and military uniforms—as they became in the fifteenth century. It was a communicating age; and as these essays repeatedly underline, the Burgundians were master communicators. Nor did fifteenth-century Europe contain more sophisticated communications landscapes than the bustling, closely packed, heavily urbanized world of their northern territories. These essays, moreover, provide some tantalizing glimpses of how a process of cultural integration, linking established regional elites to the ducal court, might have worked. As Graeme Small shows, the regional histories of his far-flung territories, with which Philip the Good stocked his famous library, often owed their origins less to central command than to the initiatives of lo-

cal historiographers and their patrons, offering up their own illustrious pasts for insertion into a larger, developing, territorial jigsaw. No ducal propaganda megaphone here, then, but a dialogue between country and court, in which provincial men of power were often willing participants. That there was much more to Burgundy than just an epic raid on the dress-up box is therefore no longer in doubt.

And yet, although much of value, and some original perspectives, may be found in this collection, it is also somewhat unbalanced, both in content and approach. For a volume focusing on “propaganda” as an instrument of late medieval “nation”-making, the limited range of media covered is rather surprising. Despite the fabled predominance of ritual, ceremony, and all manner of visual splendors, within the repertoire of ducal self-representation, seven of these eight papers concern themselves substantially or exclusively with written texts and their authors. A compilation concerned, as this one is, with the popular reception of political identities within a polyglot patrimony, ought surely to have given greater weight to those constructions of community that did not presuppose access to the spoken or written word. (Boulton's immensely rich and detailed piece on ducal symbols is a lone beacon here.) Many of the sources discussed were composed in the French vernacular, whereas—for a polity which conducted such a vigorous hearts-and-minds operation in its rich and turbulent northern cities—texts in the Germanic tongues feature hardly at all. Indeed, the world of the towns is discussed surprisingly little in these pieces, despite both the opportunities and the difficulties which urban audiences and their values presented to Burgundian “state”-making endeavors.

On the whole, the focus here falls more upon the message than its reception, while the character and purpose of that message are treated in most of these pieces as largely axiomatic. For a volume that pins to its masthead that fashionable but question-begging term “national consciousness,” it is disconcerting to observe how little interested most of the contributors seem to be in the problems, debates, and vast scholarly literature around premodern and modern nation-making. Troubling, too, is the tendency in some essays to reify Burgundy: to write of “Burgundian self-awareness” (p. 119) or of “the national mythology that Burgundy developed in order to establish its own identity” (p. 221). In a “state” as short on natural bonds and unities as was the Valois ducal patrimony, the reader really needs to be told more explicitly *who* was representing *what* to *whom* (and with how

much success). The explanatory model underlying the contributions is, on the whole, rather unilinear: images of “state” and “nation” were projected from the ducal center, to be received and reproduced in the localities. (Small, as noted above, proposes a more complex—and, for this reader, more convincing—model.) But showing that ducal symbols were thickly sown in the Burgundian lands is not the same as showing that they were either widely internalized or widely accepted (although Boulton’s demonstration of the extent of their reproduction in contexts remote from and independent of the court is certainly suggestive). Emblems such as the St. Andrew’s cross and the flint-and-firesteel were hardly neutral: they spoke a language of sovereign lordship, and spoke it to communities with a track record of fiercely defending their ancient privileges and autonomies. There is a strange absence of conflict from these studies of a polity born and nurtured amid endemic war and violent social unrest.[2] A consistent ducal will to forge “state” and “nation” is more often assumed than demonstrated, and the fitness-for-purpose of the communications media discussed here is likewise accorded little scrutiny. Yet the dense and, to the modern observer, bewildering panoply of signs, badges, devices, sacred images, colors, mottoes, and symbolic letters which crowd the field of Burgundian political culture is far removed from the stark directness of modern political propaganda. Just how well *did* they communicate? And did “state”- and “nation”-making really loom quite as large, or have quite as solid a meaning, among the dukes and their high-aristocratic hangers-on as they patently do for some of the contributors to this volume?

The evident lightness with which the editorial hand has lain upon these pieces causes few real problems. Readers are unlikely to be troubled by references, in dif-

ferent papers, to “Luxemburg” and “Luxembourg” or to Duke “Philippe” and “Philip” the Good, or even to be thrown by Charles le Téméraire manifesting himself both as “Charles the Bold” and “Charles the Rash.” Most will realize that Duke Philip’s consort, “Isabel of Bavaria” (p. 141), is Isabella of Portugal—though the misrepresentation, in the same essay, of *translatio imperii* as “the desire for the reunion of western and eastern Christianity” (p. 146) is a more troublesome error. The standard of English in some pieces, it is true, does not always serve well their ambitious ends; and some might judge it superfluous, upon almost reaching the end of these highly specialized papers, to be gently informed that “the Burgundian dynasty was a younger branch of the French royal house of Valois” (p. 226). Nevertheless, this collection offers much of interest and importance. And if, in the end, it remains just a little less than the sum of its often admirable parts, the reader might be tempted to reflect that—fifteenth-century “nation”-making notwithstanding—it forms in this respect a rather fitting epitaph to the Burgundian duchy itself.

Notes

[1]. For a modern perspective, see Wim Blockmans and Walter Prevenier, *The Promised Lands: The Low Countries under Burgundian Rule, 1369-1530*, trans. Elizabeth Fackelman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

[2]. The intense, periodically violent, negotiation of rights, status, and the bounds of community within the Netherlandish towns and between the towns and the dukes is illuminated in Peter Arnade, *Realms of Ritual: Burgundian Ceremony and Civic Life in Late Medieval Ghent* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

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