

# EUROPE AND ENGLAND IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

§

T.A. MORRIS



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# EUROPE AND ENGLAND IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

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- Clearly structured genealogical charts, chronologies and full glossaries
- Surveys of changing historiographical debates, including contemporary issues
- Documentary exercises related to examination questions
- Lavish illustrations including maps, tables, photographs and line drawings.

**Terry Morris** is Director of Studies at University College School in Hampstead, North London. He has taught history to A-Level for over 25 years. He is the author of *European History, 1848–1945* (1985).



# **EUROPE AND ENGLAND IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY**

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# • INTRODUCTION •

## How To Use This Book

Traditionally, the histories of England and Europe in the sixteenth century are studied separately. While such an approach may make good sense in the study of later periods, when British history and that of many continental countries developed different priorities and preoccupations, it is less easy to justify in the era of the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. Then, a variety of intellectual, economic and dynastic themes linked the affairs of the British Isles closely with those of Western Europe. This book attempts to clarify those links, and to spare the student duplication and repetition, by associating the history of sixteenth-century England with that of its nearest continental neighbours.

The coverage of so much ground dictates that the material must be presented in a concise format. The opening section of the book, therefore, sets out to define and to explain the main features of the intellectual, social and economic context in which the political events of the sixteenth century were played out. Although this section is less directly related to familiar examination questions, a thorough understanding of its contents will ensure that the student gains maximum benefit from the subsequent, examination-orientated chapters. These chapters, in their turn, provide a clear and uncluttered introduction to the major political developments of the century. While the text outlines the principal themes, much more narrative, biographical, statistical and analytical material is presented in the tables, digests and maps that accompany the text. These should not be treated merely as illustrations; they are essential

means for conveying a greater amount of information without adding to the bulk of the book. Repetition within the text is also avoided by the separate explanation of issues which are important to more than one chapter. The provision of documentary exercises also serves a dual purpose. For some time such exercises have been a central element in examination papers. Apart from providing the student with the necessary experience of such questions, the author uses documentary material here to examine areas of each topic in greater depth and detail.

The book addresses the fact that ability ranges among A level and undergraduate students are now wider than ever before. While some students will be content to limit themselves to the present text, others will wish to use it as a springboard to more advanced study. To that end, the book provides an introduction to the historiographical debates that surround each topic, together with a select bibliography of readily available works that will further enhance the student's understanding of the period.

At the same time, the book recognises the unfamiliarity to the student of very many sixteenth-century concepts. Every attempt has been made, therefore, to define contemporary terminology and to anticipate areas of confusion. Unfamiliar terms are either defined in the text when they first occur, or are indicated in bold print and defined in a glossary attached to the chapter. As a further safeguard against misunderstanding, the index at the back of the book indicates the page upon which each unfamiliar term is defined.





**— PART I —**

**THE WESTERN EUROPEAN  
ENVIRONMENT**



# • CHAPTER ONE •

## The Sixteenth Century in Context

Western Europe as a unit

The political map of Western Europe

International relations

Population

Monarchy

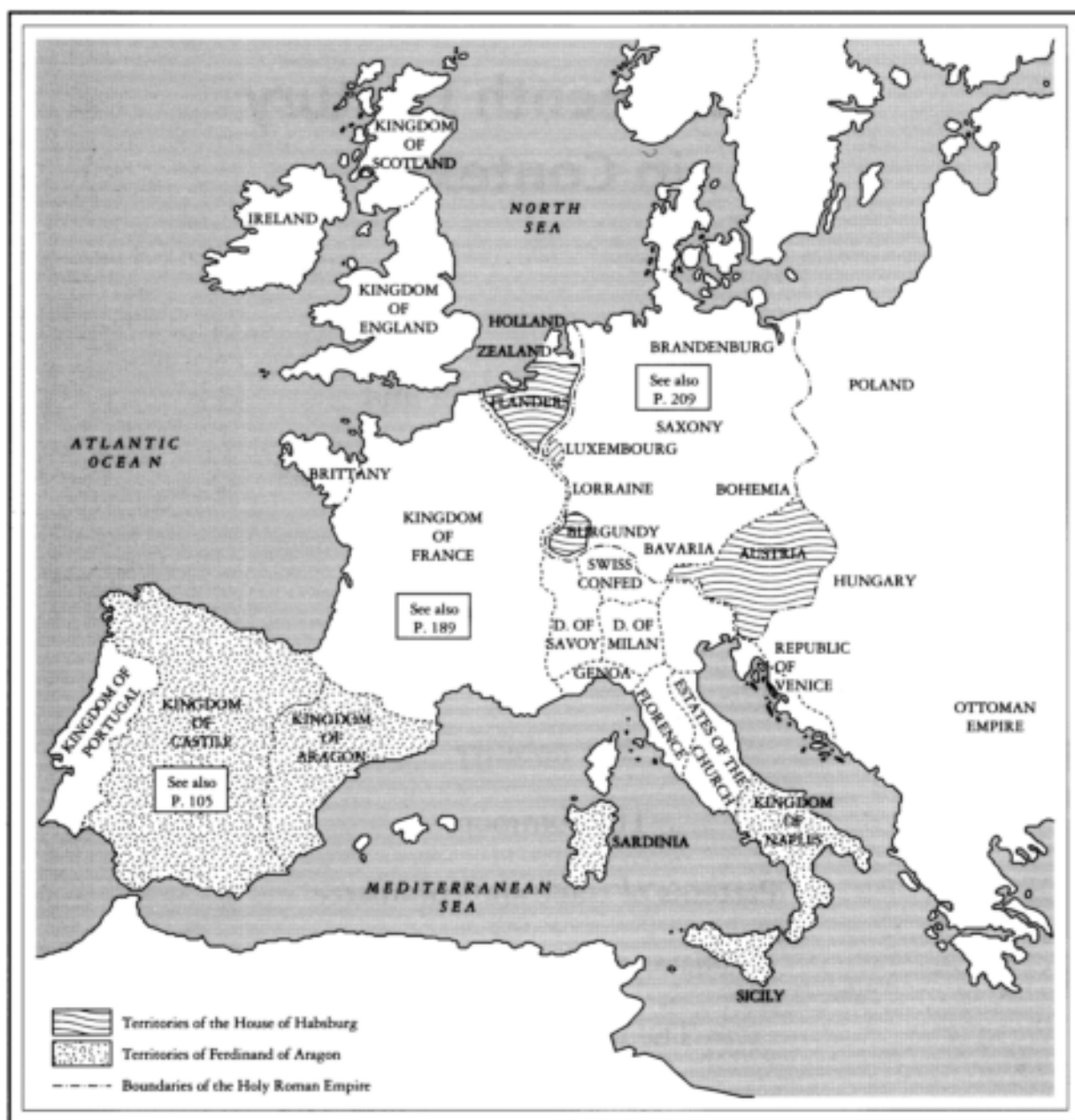
The nobility

The commons

Patterns of trade and commerce

‘Distance, the first enemy’

The fear of the Turk



*European state boundaries c. 1500*

## WESTERN EUROPE AS A UNIT

Most histories of Europe in this period deal with the continent as a whole, suggesting a unity of history, culture and economic life that did not exist in the sixteenth century. At the same time, it has become the normal practice to deal separately with the British Isles which, in this period, certainly had many cultural, economic and political ties with the opposite side of the Channel. This study presents an integrated survey of Britain and Western Europe, that part of the Continent lying west of a line from the River Elbe in eastern Germany to the Adriatic and down the east coast of Italy. East of that line lay the Ottoman Empire, whose religion, politics and culture were alien and fearful to her western neighbours. Further north, the politics of Poland, Lithuania, Muscovy and Sweden only rarely came seriously into contact with the affairs of any Western European state. When Queen Elizabeth of England sought a husband in the latter part of the century, even those Englishmen most eager for a wedding felt that proposed matches with the King of Sweden or with the Tsar of Muscovy were far too exotic to be taken seriously.

This east-west line was not impregnable. In the south, the Mediterranean was criss-crossed with traditional trade routes and with common cultural traditions that extended back into classical times. In his greatest work the outstanding French historian Fernand Braudel (*The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 1949), made a powerful case for treating the Mediterranean as an historical entity in its own right. Yet the expansion of the Ottoman Empire weakened this unity in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and one of the greatest European movements of these centuries, the European Reconnaissance, began as a deliberate and conscious attempt to bypass the traditional Mediterranean axes of trade and exchange.

## THE POLITICAL MAP OF WESTERN EUROPE

### France, Spain and England

Within this western part of Europe, by the end of the fifteenth century, an embryonic state system had developed. It was 'embryonic' in the sense

that the present political divisions of Western Europe were only vaguely discernible within it, and also in the sense that modern forms of state government and administration were only partly developed. Indeed, contemporary Western Europe displayed a wide and complex variety of political systems.

Some of the political units of Western Europe showed features of modern statehood. France, for instance, was no longer the mass of conflicting feudal interests that had made the country prey to civil wars and invasion a century earlier. In terms of territory, population and other resources, France was by 1500 the greatest state of Western Europe. A succession of strong monarchs had established a centralised kingdom ruled by the House of Valois. Even so, diversity existed within her territories in law, in language and in social customs. Although the Valois kings busily added new territories to their realm, it is certain that the populations of those territories felt themselves to be primarily Breton, Burgundian or Provençal, rather than French.

The absence of a strong national identity was even more marked in Spain. Here too a central monarchy had been created, but only by the marriage of the monarchs of the two strongest kingdoms in the peninsula. In effect, the Iberian peninsula still consisted (after the conquest of Granada) of three separate kingdoms, each the product of the various stages of the *reconquista*, the long struggle against the Moors. Aragon and Castile preserved their separate laws, customs, representative institutions and privileges deep into the sixteenth century. The independent nature of Portuguese development, despite a brief period of annexation to the Spanish crown, helps us to appreciate how different the Iberian kingdoms were from one another at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The union of the crowns of Castile and Aragon illustrates how much the shape and nature of the early sixteenth-century state were determined by the persons and policies of its rulers, rather than by any considerations of cultural, national or linguistic identity.

In many political respects the British Isles resembled the Iberian peninsula. Here, too, one realm, England, had emerged as the most populous and powerful, and a dominant monarchy was

establishing itself, more or less in partnership with the aristocracy. As in the case of Portugal, another kingdom, Scotland, maintained her separate political and cultural identity. Hard as England might try to absorb Scotland, the latter was still an independent political unit at the end of the sixteenth century. Another element also existed. Ireland displayed a mixture of political forces unique in Western Europe, feudal influences existing alongside more primitive, tribal forces, often largely unrestrained by any central authority.

### Italy and the Habsburg Territories

Many areas of Western Europe lacked even this degree of political consolidation. In many regions, by 1500, the age of the city state and of the modest **feudal fief** was by no means over. Northern Italy was one such area, where Milan, Florence, Venice and other states flourished under the rule of great families, whose mercantile wealth, or whose success as soldiers of fortune, had enabled them to impose their authority upon the city and its surrounding territories. In all three states, and in many smaller ones, a high degree of civic development and of cultural achievement went hand in hand with serious political instability, sufficient to put the independence of the state at risk. South of Florence the Italian peninsula was divided between the feudal kingdom of Naples and the territories of the Church. From the year 321, when the papacy was first granted the right to own land by the Emperor Constantine, it had steadily accumulated territory across central Italy. There the Pope ruled much like any other European prince. After the trauma of the papacy's temporary exile to Avignon (1309–78), this '**temporal** power' became a question of particular importance, and was regarded as an essential guarantee of the political independence of the papacy.

Political fragmentation similar to that of northern Italy was also found in the Netherlands. In the early years of the sixteenth century we must understand the Netherlands as including, not only the modern states of Belgium and the Netherlands, but also substantial areas of what is now western Germany and northern France. Here, theoretically, a form of central, political authority existed that

had no parallel in Italy. Initially, this was the authority of the Dukes of Burgundy, but with the death of Charles the Bold in 1477 the remarriage of his widow took these lands into the hands of the Habsburg dynasty. Nevertheless, the individual privileges of cities and provinces remained even stronger in the Netherlands than in Italy. Indeed, they remained so fresh and strong that attempts to subordinate them to centralised authority in the second half of the sixteenth century led to the revolt which destroyed Habsburg control over half of the Netherlands.

Since 1440 the Habsburgs had also monopolised the elective office of Holy Roman Emperor. The political authority of the dynasty thus divided into two distinct categories. On the one hand they were direct feudal overlords of their own territorial possessions, notably in Austria, the Tyrol and parts of the Netherlands. Within the Holy Roman Empire, however, they were elective lords, sworn to respect the privileges and the rights of the many territorial rulers within its boundaries. Here their rights derived, not from God, but from the consent of other princes.

The Holy Roman Empire, then, was not a state, but rather a collection of many states, united only by the theoretical authority and protection of the Emperor. It embraced traditional principalities such as Saxony and Bavaria, smaller feudal duchies such as Württemberg, and many independent cities governed by *bourgeois oligarchs* (Strasbourg, Nuremberg or Frankfurt) or by princes of the Church (Cologne, Magdeburg or Mainz). The idea that one prince might exercise authority over all this owed something to medieval theories about the unity of Christendom, but such an idea was extremely old-fashioned by this time. The sixteenth-century identity of the Empire owed far more to the ambition of the Habsburg dynasty in the fifteenth century.

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

### Diplomacy

The history of diplomacy in Europe was a long one. The Church had been its pioneer, with her archbishops and cardinals officially representing

her interests in their native lands. In addition, legates were dispatched from Rome to foreign courts to conduct pieces of specific and urgent business. Throughout the middle ages European ambassadors operated very much like the legates of the Church. They might be great statesmen, trusted servants of their royal master, or eminent churchmen, whose mission was to travel to a foreign court for the conduct of a specific piece of business: the declaration of war, the negotiation or ratification of a treaty, or simply an exchange of honours and assurances of friendship.

Italian city states in the mid-fifteenth century, with their increasing needs for secure alliances, began to practise a different form of diplomacy. More frequently their ambassadors operated as permanent residents in distant states, with the dual role of providing a steady flow of news and information, and of permanently and sympathetically representing the interests and values of their own state. From Italy the 'new diplomacy' spread northwards and westwards. Ferdinand and Isabella had dispatched resident ambassadors from Spain to Rome by the 1480s, and to Venice and England by the end of the century. Most other states imitated the trend over the next decade or two.

'Resident' ambassadors did not necessarily mean permanent representation. Spain sent three ambassadors to the French court in the first fifteen years of the sixteenth century, each of whom stayed between one and three years. For nine years of this period there was no Spanish ambassador in France. Sixteenth-century ambassadors could be tactless and inefficient. Dr John Man, Queen Elizabeth's ambassador to Madrid in the 1560s, cannot have helped Anglo-Spanish relations by his habit of referring to the Pope as 'a canting little monk'. Many of Man's Spanish counterparts in London were guilty of listening to the wrong rumours, of hearing what they wanted to hear, and thus of misleading their masters. A system developed in the intimate context of northern Italian politics did not always translate easily to the wider European stage, where enormous problems of distance and communications often left ambassadors without news or instructions from home for months on end.

## War

Writing of the years between 1450 and 1620, J.R.Hale concluded that 'there was probably no single year throughout the period in which there was neither war nor occurrences that looked and felt remarkably like it'. States fought one another over disputed territories; factions fought each other within states over power and precedence; the common people were moved by desperate circumstances to rebel against their rulers. Even in times of nominal peace, rulers issued licences, 'letters of marque', to their seafarers to authorise them to raid the shipping of their rivals, while on land substantial bodies of mercenary soldiers travelled the Continent to find a quarrel in which they might earn their living.

As the sixteenth century opened, Western Europe was witnessing changes in the nature of warfare which some writers have perceived as a 'military revolution'. 'Before 1494', J.R.Hale stated, 'wars in Western Europe were chiefly a matter of violent housekeeping.' The English Wars of the Roses, the French struggles against Burgundy and Brittany, and the conflict in Spain which eventually brought Ferdinand and Isabella to power were all wars to decide 'who were to be the supreme landlords of the realm'. In most cases a swift and lasting conclusion was reached, and where the issue took longer to resolve the fighting tended to be sporadic and localised.

The wars of the sixteenth century became more intense and of longer duration. In part this was due to the fact that the states that fought them were now bigger and had access to greater resources. No single battle could destroy the capability of Francis I or Charles V to continue their struggles. In part, it was because the wars of the sixteenth century came increasingly to be fought over religious ideology. Protestantism in the north and west of Europe, and the Islamic advance in the east and south, provided causes which for some men were more important than life itself, and for which they would fight on, whatever the fortunes of war. Instead of short, formalised confrontations in which the fate of a dynasty could be decided in an hour, vast armies now moved at a painfully slow pace over large distances, at a cost which frequently bankrupted their masters.



A further revolutionising factor was the spread of firearms. Developing rapidly from the largely symbolic role that cannon played in the mid-fifteenth century, artillery was effective enough a hundred years later to render obsolete all medieval concepts of fortification. The development of handguns also revolutionised the infantry tactics of sixteenth-century armies. In the mid-century Venice and France both assumed that 30 per cent of their infantrymen would carry guns. By 1600 the proportion had risen to 50 per cent in France, and to 60 per cent in Spain's armies. Firearms killed more effectively, and they wounded more dangerously, as the clean sword cut gave way to the bone-shattering impact of the musket ball. Contemporaries estimated that the use of artillery increased the cost of a campaign by between 30 and 50 per cent. Firearms also hastened the death of the *chivalric* element within warfare which, by the mid-century, would rarely be seen beyond the context of the joust. The superiority of the mounted nobleman in expensive armour meant little if his opponent could shoot him down at a range of 200 yards.

In general, armies grew in size in the sixteenth century. The French government estimated that it could call upon 20,000 soldiers in 1451, 50,000 in 1558 and 68,500 in 1610. The United Provinces of the Netherlands claimed a total of 51,000 soldiers in 1607, while Charles V calculated in 1552 that he could mobilise 150,000 men throughout his Empire. Yet such figures may be misleading. It was always easier to raise such a host for defensive purposes than it was for campaigns 'out of the realm', when it was unlikely that such forces could be kept together for any length of time. It was equally unlikely that any large proportion of them would be properly trained.

Where did the troops come from? By the end of the fifteenth century only three states, France, Burgundy and Venice, had anything that might be regarded as a standing army. In each case the force numbered about 8,000–9,000 men. In Castile, the Catholic Monarchs had a reasonable substitute in the form of the forces maintained by the *Santa Hermandad*. Only as increasing foreign commitments imposed the need for permanent garrisons did Spain undertake the expense of a permanent military establishment. In the early part

of the century, and for certain wars, the feudal system still supplied a substantial proportion of most armies. Magnates assembled forces made up of their own feudal tenants and other clients to maintain their own honour and prestige and to maintain their favour with the king. The king in turn often found it advantageous to provide military employment for men who had the capacity otherwise to make nuisances of themselves at home. Such feudal armies, however, were unlikely to travel willingly to distant foreign wars.

The military history of the sixteenth century was thus dominated by the mercenary, the professional fighting man, moving from war to war as his only means of legal livelihood. Little changed in the 150 years that followed the first French agreement (1474) to retain a force of 6,000 Swiss pikemen. Even the wars that we think of as great national enterprises were substantially undertaken by foreign labour. Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans and Flemings helped Ferdinand and Isabella to capture Granada, while Englishmen, Frenchmen and Germans predominated in the armies that fought for Dutch independence. By employing such men, kings and commanders raised the cost of warfare, and further lowered its moral tone, but they avoided the social risks of arming large numbers of their own native poor, and ensured an army that would not melt away at harvest time.

## POPULATION

Most of the estimates made of the population of Western Europe in the sixteenth century are educated guesswork. They are based upon isolated bodies of recorded evidence that have chanced to survive to the present day. Nevertheless, there is broad agreement over general population trends during this period.

The century and a half that preceded the opening of the sixteenth century had witnessed a major **demographic** disaster, a period of stagnation, and at last a period of slow recovery and growth in population. The disaster struck in the form of the Black Death, an extremely virulent outbreak of bubonic plague, which first reached the west in 1347, spread rapidly along the trade routes, and killed perhaps one-third of Europe's

population. The deaths of so many who would have been the parents of future generations meant that more than a century passed before the population of Western Europe could begin to recover. As these figures indicate, even in the middle of the sixteenth century the population of Western Europe was still way below levels pertaining before the Black Death.

	Population (millions)		
	1340	1550	1680
France	c. 24	17	21.9
England	6	3	4.9
Netherlands	4	1.2	1.9
Spain	14	9	8.5
Italy	15	11	12
Germany	17	12	12

Source: S.J.Watts, *A Social History of Western Europe 1450–1720*

The sixteenth century saw only a modest increase in population. In general the birth-rate could not outrun the death-rate sufficiently to maintain any widely sustained growth. The most widely accepted modern estimates have assumed an average annual birth-rate of thirty-eight per thousand, and an annual death-rate in normal years of about thirty to thirty-five per thousand. By modern standards the birth-rate was low, and the most widely accepted explanation for this is the comparatively late age at which people married in the sixteenth century, between 24.5 and 26.5 years for women and two or three years older for men.

A death-rate that was roughly equal to the birth-rate in ‘normal’ years would bound ahead of it in the many years which were not normal. At the best of times the rate of mortality among infants and younger children remained very high. C.Cipolla has estimated that, of every 1,000 children born in Western Europe at this time, between 150 and 350 would die within a year, depending upon local conditions. A further 100 to 200 would die before they reached ten years of age. All too often such ‘normal mortality’ would be overshadowed by one form or another of ‘catastrophic mortality’. Famines were still regularly recorded during the century, and if people did not actually starve to death malnutrition would leave them easy victims

to disease. Although the disaster of the Black Death was not repeated, epidemics of plague were still likely to occur several times in any normal lifespan. London suffered plague in twenty-six years between 1543 and 1593, and Barcelona experienced seventeen epidemics between 1457 and 1590. Even when the plague did not appear there were sufficient outbreaks of typhus, dysentery or influenza (‘the sweating sickness’) to take a heavy toll of the population. War was the third great killer, and not only in the obvious sense of casualties on the battlefield. The indirect impact of harvests spoiled by the march and the demands of armies, and of the disease which armies were notorious for spreading, contributed significantly to European mortality.

## MONARCHY

For many centuries before 1500, monarchy was the standard form of government over a very large proportion of Western Europe. Kings ruled in France, Aragon, Portugal, Castile, England and Scotland. Princes, with equal power but less territory, ruled throughout Germany and in parts of Italy, many of them acknowledging the wider overlordship of the Holy Roman Emperor, the greatest of all the European monarchs.

The institution of monarchy rested upon a mixture of at least three political principles. The principle of primogeniture, the right of the eldest son to succeed the father, was universally acknowledged. England, France and Scotland all tolerated the rule of impotent boy-kings in the sixteenth century rather than go against a principle of inheritance which in other circumstances acted as a guarantee of stability. Boys at least might be expected to grow into men. Women, on the other hand, were not seriously considered at the beginning of the sixteenth century to be capable of exercising the coercive power demanded of a monarch. Not all states followed France in formulating a Salic Law, which forbade the accession of a woman to the throne. All others, however, gave precedence to a younger prince over an older princess, and all assumed that if fate forced a female monarch upon them, then she would

have to rule, as Isabella of Castile did, in cooperation with a royal husband.

Most monarchs paid at least lip-service to the theory that they were freely accepted by their subjects. Acknowledgement by the representatives of the major **estates of the realm**, the Church, the nobility and the leading citizens of the great towns, was a ritual of great importance. The King of Castile graciously received the acknowledgement of the Cortes, and English constitutional theorists even went so far as to state that the king's power was never greater than when he sat in Parliament, surrounded by the estates of his realm.

Lastly, every Western European monarch claimed divine sanction for his royal authority. Some went so far as to claim that their dynasty was directly marked out by God with the 'divine right' to rule. The kings of England and of France proved their point in elaborate ceremonies in which they sought to cure sufferers from the skin disease scrofula ('the king's evil') by the power of their touch. Lesser princes did not claim such miraculous powers, but stressed an indirect link with God in that they were the guarantors of the peace and stability that He desired on Earth. One way or another, rebellion against the monarch was widely equated with rebellion against God, especially if the rebels were unsuccessful. Rebels were thus careful to protect themselves with euphemisms, claiming that they sought to protect the prince against evil and greedy ministers. Once defeated, however, they were punished with the same deterrent ferocity as was used against heretics or blasphemers. Where the English crown developed a taste for ritual disembowelling, the French traditionally preferred to break a traitor on the wheel, or to rip him apart between four wild horses. The message to the onlooker was the same in all cases, that here was a dreadful death to atone for a dreadful crime.

To a considerable extent the king was still a warlord. It remained a primary duty to conduct the defence of the realm, and to resist encroachments upon the territories and rights of his dynasty. It was widely expected throughout the century that he would do so in person, at the head of his army, and a king who did not do so effectively might expect to have slurs cast upon his manhood by his political enemies. It remained so important for the

king to demonstrate his warlike prowess that as late as 1559 the King of France could risk his life and the whole political stability of the realm rather than shirk the challenge of the joust. The king was also the protector and enforcer of the laws of the kingdom. Of course, he held a highly privileged position within the legal structure of the realm, but he was expected to act within it. In principle, the theory stated by the English medieval lawyer Bracton would have been accepted in most of the states of Western Europe: 'The king ought to have no equal in the realm, but he ought to be subject to God and the law, since law makes the king.' The concept of unjustifiable tyranny, the arbitrary rule of a king who refused to acknowledge such limitations upon his freedom of action, was well established by 1500, and was to prove irresistibly attractive to religious rebels who differed from their monarch over the interpretation of the laws of God.

Although the monarch was in principle the protector of all his subjects, his position in practice depended very largely upon his relationship with the nobility of the realm. He confirmed them in the possession of their privileges and wealth, and they in turn guaranteed in principle that the king's laws were enforced in the distant provinces of the realm. They also provided the king with the means to make war when the need arose. The king might adapt and modify this relationship, but he could never ignore it altogether. In Castile and in France, for example, the crown made a concerted effort to exclude leading magnates from the great administrative offices of state. In compensation for this, the great noble families were left secure in the tenure of the landed estates and provincial influence which made them the essential instruments of local administration.

Another complicating factor was local particularism. By this we mean the desire of the inhabitants of the remoter provinces in the realm to preserve traditional privileges and liberties, and thereby to protect their homeland from total domination by the national monarchy. Great as were the powers of the Spanish crown in the last decade of the sixteenth century, it still had not overcome the extensive privileges claimed by the people of Aragon. The rights and privileges claimed by many of the greatest cities of Europe

provided a similar complication, although the cities usually had less physical power with which to back their claims.

The picture was further complicated by the overlapping of royal authorities. The classic example of this was to be the Spanish Habsburg monarchy in the second half of the sixteenth century. An absolute monarch in Castile and in his dominions in the New World, Philip II found himself subjected throughout his reign to irksome constitutional restrictions upon his powers in Aragon, in Sicily, and most notably in the Netherlands. This overlapping occurred in another form in cases where one monarch claimed that he was the feudal superior to another, and that the 'vassal' monarch was subject in some respects to his will. The King of England maintained such claims in respect of some of the territories of the King of France throughout the century, even if they were seldom taken very seriously by the French. A more substantial example of this kind of complication is evident in Germany, where the claim of the Holy Roman Emperor to be the feudal superior of the territorial princes provided a major factor in German politics throughout the sixteenth century.

### THE NOBILITY

The monarch stood at the apex of a complicated social and political hierarchy. Immediately beneath him stood the nobility, a difficult concept to define, even in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In France the definition was a relatively narrow one, and thus only 1 per cent of the population could be considered 'noble'. In Castile, with its more complex gradation of nobility, as much as 10 per cent of the population claimed *hidalgo* (noble) status, although the most eminent nobles, the 'grandees', consisted of only twenty families. Nor was it clear whether nobility was a distinction bestowed by the monarch, or an independent condition enjoyed by certain families by virtue of their ancient blood-lines, a condition only a little less elevated than royalty. One way or another, noble families surrounded themselves with an array of privileges denied to lesser men. In France, Spain and elsewhere, the nobility were immune from direct taxation. Lesser

privileges, such as the right to wear clothing made of certain expensive fabrics, or to wear a hat in the presence of the monarch, marked out the special status of a privileged caste.

It is easier to define the role that the nobility played. 'War, land and jurisdiction', wrote Henry Kamen, 'were the three basic and traditional aspects of nobility.' The basis of European nobility in the fifteenth century was military, and this remained substantially true in the next century. War remained so central to the mentality of the French nobility that successive kings from Charles VIII to Henry II had to provide campaigns to supply their noblemen with the honours and material rewards that came from that source alone. If they could not do so, then they ran the risk of severe domestic instability, as the Wars of Religion were to demonstrate in the second half of the century. Even in times of peace, the military mentality of the French nobility manifested itself in jousting and duelling, so important in terms of honour and of status.

The other two elements cited by Dr Kamen were closely related to each other. In all of the major monarchies of Western Europe the great nobles were substantial landowners. In France, the Dukes of Guise owned and controlled vast tracts of Lorraine, while in Castile the estates of the Marquis of Villena covered an area of some 25,000 square kilometres. His tenants totalled 150,000 and his annual income from rents was estimated in 1470 at around 100,000 ducats. Invariably, such mighty landowners were also the governors and the lawenforcers in their localities and were indispensable to the smooth administration of the realm. On the other hand, the local, feudal patronage that they exercised was often seen as a threat to the central authority of the monarch. The relationship between these **clients** and the great magnates that they followed was indeed a smaller version of the relationship between the king and his subjects. In return for their obedience and service, the clients received favour and protection. It was no easy matter for a provincial client in the fifteenth or sixteenth century to distinguish between his obligations to the monarch and those that he owed to his direct, feudal lord.

It was a peculiarity of the English hierarchy that the nobility, distinguished by their formal titles, shared this local governmental role with another

element, the gentry. This landowning class lacked the formal privileges and titles of the peerage, but shared its influence in local government, as well as some of its social prestige. 'The titular peerage and upper gentry', Perez Zagorin has concluded, 'formed a practically homogeneous social body by the later sixteenth century'. In parliamentary terms, the representatives of the gentry came together with the peers of the realm, and with prominent citizens of the leading towns, to form a political class whose support and cooperation were vital to the monarch if the affairs of the realm were to run smoothly.

The relationship between this local power and the central authority of the monarch is one of the great political themes of Western European history in the sixteenth century. Speaking of the Castilian grandes, Henry Kamen has concluded that 'together they could have overwhelmed the monarchy', yet 'they were more concerned to consolidate their estates, live as beloved patriarchs among their vassals, and flex their muscles against their neighbours'. Neither nobility nor monarchy conceived of a society in which the other did not exist. At the highest social levels sixteenth-century politics were dominated by the desire to balance the interests of crown and nobility. Prestigious chivalric orders, such as the Golden Fleece in the Low Countries and the Garter in England, represented what Zagorin has described as the 'symbiotic relationship' between these two elements.

This picture is complicated in the sixteenth century by the emergence of a 'new' nobility. Increasingly, men were raised to noble status in return for service to the state, not on the battlefield, but in the council chamber, in the law courts, or even in the field of finance. The French distinction between the 'Nobility of the Sword' (*noblesse d'épée*) and the 'Nobility of the Robe' (*noblesse de robe*) became valid in all European states in the course of the sixteenth century. Inevitably, tensions existed between the 'old' and the 'new' nobility, and these became greater as the great economic trends of the sixteenth century eroded the traditional economic bases of the nobility's power. In particular, the relationship between the nobility and the rising forces of commerce and finance aroused enormous

controversy. A nobleman of Ferrara, in central Italy, spoke for many of his caste when he remarked that 'inherited wealth is more honest than earned wealth, in view of the vile gain needed to obtain the latter'. In France the great noble families distanced themselves consistently from trade, as a stain on their honour. In Spain, this prejudice broke down more easily, and noblemen argued that their honour could remain intact if they traded on a grand scale, or if they did so in the dominant role. In England, crown and nobility alike embraced the temptations of commercial profit with relatively few qualms. Thus George Talbot, 9th Earl of Shrewsbury, could boast interests by the end of the century in shipping, coal-mining, and in the manufacture of iron, steel and glass.

Finally, we must note that the Church provided another variant of nobility. In England the use of the term 'Lords Spiritual' to describe the archbishops and bishops of the realm indicated that they shared many of the traditional attributes of the lay nobility, the 'Lords Temporal'. They too enjoyed great wealth and substantial local authority in return for the services that they rendered. As the sixteenth century progressed, they also functioned more and more as servants of the temporal state. Although, in theory, distinctions of family and breeding did not apply to high Church offices, a very high proportion of such appointments clearly were made with the social and dynastic status of the candidates in mind. In England, France and Spain it would be hard to draw a clear distinction between the political status of a high churchman and that of a 'nobleman of the robe'.

## THE COMMONS

### The Peasantry

Sixteenth-century society in Western Europe was essentially rural. Its economic mainstays were the food and the other natural resources that came from the land. At the basis, therefore, of all the social, political and economic structures of the age stood the peasants, those who worked on and lived in the countryside.

Few of the peasants of Western Europe were serfs. East of the river Elbe it was still quite usual to find peasants on a nobleman's estate who were his private, physical property. In the west, however, different economic and political circumstances had largely eradicated serfdom, although pockets of it remained in some parts of France and in southern Germany. 'Freedom', however, was a relative term for the peasants of Western Europe. Some were the freehold owners of the land they worked and could achieve a considerable degree of prosperity. Others, probably the majority, worked land which they held from their landlord in return for certain obligations, financial or otherwise. Others had no land of their own to work, or too little to make a living from, and stayed alive mainly by hiring themselves and their families to others as wage labourers.

In most cases, therefore, the peasant worked hard for the benefit of others. This was particularly true where feudal relationships between lord and peasant tenant remained strong, and where the peasant was likely to be subject to a wide and complex series of obligations to his social superiors. Research in northern France suggests that, once all taxes and costs had been paid, the average peasant might have left some 20 per cent of his harvest for his own purposes. It was also likely that the peasant would be subject to the authority of the manorial court, which still had an important role to play in disputes over tenancies, and in disputes between tenants. In principle, the peasant might expect in return the protection and assistance of his *seigneur* in financial or legal matters, by which means the lord ensured the loyalty of his tenants.

'Agrarian revolt', wrote Marc Bloch, 'seems as inseparable from the seigneurial regime as the strike is from large-scale capitalist industry.' Under such circumstances, this can hardly seem surprising. The real surprise to the modern mind is rather how patiently the peasant bore his lot, and that he did not revolt more frequently.

### The Towns

The towns of Western Europe played an important role in many of the historical developments of the period. They contributed much of the wealth and

expertise that princes needed in order to control their territories. On the other hand, the towns often nurtured and spread radical political and religious ideas. They sometimes produced alternative power structures to challenge those of the great landowners, and they sometimes provided daunting physical obstacles to the policies of their princely rulers.

In the course of the sixteenth century urban populations as a whole grew substantially. Economic prosperity was an obvious magnet, and in many parts of Western Europe the towns offered security against the disruptions that occurred beyond their walls. In general, increases in urban population were always the result of immigration from the countryside. In London, for instance, as late as the first thirty-five years of the seventeenth century, burials consistently outnumbered baptisms, yet the population continued to grow.

The majority of town dwellers were poor people, artisans, small tradesmen, labourers, not to mention beggars and vagrants. It is an anachronism, however, to think of most of them as a separate social grouping, distinct from the peasantry that inhabited the countryside. Every rural village would contain artisans, such as blacksmiths and wheelwrights, who provided minor industrial services for the populace. Equally, the towns contained many who tilled the land, either within or without the city walls. 'The country', wrote Perez Zagorin, 'reached into the towns, which contained not only fields, gardens, orchards and livestock within their limits, but often resident peasants and rural labourers, who went out to work the surrounding fields.'

In some rare cases, all the same, as in London or Paris, this urban **proletariat** formed a distinct political and social entity. Its members were more vulnerable than their country cousins to the economic fluctuations of the period, and could more easily gather in numbers. They thus constituted a political force which princes and city fathers ignored at their peril. The population of Paris, in particular, was to play an explosive political role on at least two occasions in the sixteenth century.

If the urban poor made only fleeting appearances on the historical stage, the *bourgeoisie*, the urban elite, the substantial citizens

1.1 Urban populations

	Over 100,000	50,000 to 100,000	20,000 to 50,000
<i>In 1500</i>			
Italy	Venice Naples	Florence Milan Palermo Bologna Verona Rome	Brescia Perugia Cremona Lecce Vicenza Piacenza Ferrara Lucca Taranto Mantua Parma Padua
Low Countries		Ghent Antwerp Brussels Lille Bruges	Ypres Amsterdam Utrecht Valenciennes Arras Douai Leyden Groningen Maastricht
Germany			Nuremberg Lübeck Hamburg Augsburg Magdeburg
Spain/Portugal		Lisbon Granada Valencia Seville	Toledo Barcelona Valladolid Jaen Burgos Cordoba Segovia Salamanca Saragossa
France	Paris	Lyon Rouen	Mulhouse Marseilles
British Isles	London		
<i>In 1600</i>			
Italy	Naples (280,000) Venice (148,000) Palermo (104,000) Rome (100,000) Messina (100,000)	Florence Milan Genoa Bologna Verona	Cremona Lecce Vicenza Piacenza Padua Turin Brescia Ferrara Mantua Parma Perugia Lucca Taranto
Low Countries	Antwerp	Brussels Lille	Amsterdam Utrecht Leyden Groningen Haarlem Maastricht  Ghent Bruges Douai Valenciennes Arras
Germany		Hamburg Nuremberg Vienna Augsburg	Cologne Bremen Lübeck Breslau Magdeburg
Spain/Portugal	Seville Lisbon	Granada Valencia Madrid	Toledo Barcelona Valladolid Segovia Jaen Salamanca Cordoba Burgos Saragossa
France	Paris	Lyon	Rouen Aix Tours Toulouse Nantes Marseilles Orléans Poitiers Bourges Dijon Bordeaux Rennes Amiens Montpellier Caen Reims
British Isles	London		

of the great cities, formed a consistently influential element in contemporary politics. Contemporaries and later historians alike have found it difficult to decide how the *bourgeoisie* can be fitted into the conventional class structures of sixteenth-century Europe. Marxist historians have tended to view them as a class apart, hostile alike to the peasantry and to the national monarchies, whose growing

power increasingly invaded their local, urban privileges.

In general, however, as Perez Zagorin has concluded, ‘it makes little sense to speak of a class struggle between aristocracy and *bourgeoisie* in the period we are discussing’. The great cities often played an important role in the operation of the national monarchies and there was less and less

conflict between their interests. London, Paris, Brussels and Naples all contained major royal courts and benefited from the patronage that they provided. Only in the Dutch Republic, after it had thrown off the authority of the Spanish crown, did many of the towns retain the privileges and the degree of independence that they had enjoyed a century earlier. Some conservative noblemen, of course, continued to protest at the adulteration of the aristocracy by men who had more money than breeding. The *bourgeoises* themselves, however, eagerly sought to convert their wealth into noble status. They took part in 'the flight from *bourgeois* status' (R.Mandrou, *Classes et luttes de classes en France au début du XVIIe siècle*, 1965) by buying land or by investing in the state through such bonds as the *juros* in Spain and the *rentes* in France. As the century progressed it also became easier to acquire positions in both local and central administration as the crown created and sold offices as a further means of meeting its desperate need for money.

## PATTERNS OF TRADE AND COMMERCE

Most economic activity in Western Europe at the opening of the sixteenth century consisted of small-scale and highly localised production. Alongside this, however, there existed complex patterns of national and international commerce. The scale of this trade was to increase considerably in the course of the century, and it was to generate some vast mercantile fortunes.

Textile production, particularly the production of woollen cloth, was by a very wide margin the most important industrial activity in Europe. England and Spain boasted the finest quality of woollen cloth, but major centres of production were dotted all over the Continent. The wool guild of Florence, the *Arte della Lana*, reputedly employed 30,000 workers, and Flanders remained an important centre until the mid-century. Other forms of textile production were more largely based upon local specialisation, Italian silk production providing a prime example.

Among heavier industries, mining was the most important and the most widespread. At the opening of the century the demand for precious

metals in Western Europe was largely met by silver production in the Tyrol and in Carinthia. Other metal industries were scattered far and wide. Iron was mined in parts of England and France, or imported from Sweden. Tin was mined in Cornwall, zinc and mercury in parts of Spain. Coal production played only a small part in the mining industries of the sixteenth century, and only in England and in the regions around Liège in the Low Countries were significant quantities produced.

Technological limitations placed as many restrictions upon the distribution of goods as they did upon their production. Transport overland, in particular, was hampered by the scarcity of established roads and by the poor condition of those that existed. Few great trading centres developed as a result of their location upon important land routes, although Milan owed much of its commercial prosperity to its situation close to the great passes across the Alps.

Water played a much greater role in the definition of European trade routes. Great rivers such as the Rhine, the Seine and the Meuse were dotted with great trading centres. Quicker, safer and more reliable, river transport could nevertheless be costly as towns, feudal lords and monarchs set up toll stations at regular intervals to profit from the trade that passed through their territories. Thirty-five such tolls were payable on the river Elbe, and a startling 200 were recorded along the river Loire. Sea routes also played a major role in both local and international commerce. Smaller ships plied from port to port along the coast, while larger vessels followed international routes across the North Sea, the Channel and the Bay of Biscay, especially concerned with the cloth trade. Complex and ancient trade routes crossed the Mediterranean, where oared galleys and galleasses linked European markets with those of North Africa and the Levant. The oriental spice trade depended upon these routes, as did the trade in southern Italian grain which supplied much of the Mediterranean region.

Two other factors had greatly facilitated the expansion of international trade by the beginning of the sixteenth century. One was the number of trading fairs held at regular intervals in some of Europe's great commercial centres. Medina del



Campo hosted the greatest of Spain's fairs, while Lyon became increasingly important as a meeting-place for merchants from the north and from Italy. The greatest trading centre of all by 1500, however, was Antwerp in the Low Countries, her geographical location making her accessible to merchants from virtually every region of Western Europe.

Hand in hand with these fairs went the

development of an international banking system, dominated by such Italian families as the Medici and the Bonvisi, or by their German equivalents, the Welzers and the Fuggers. Their bills of exchange, their loans and their system of payments by transfer all aided large-scale international commerce freed from the inconveniences of limited money supply or the risky transport of bullion.

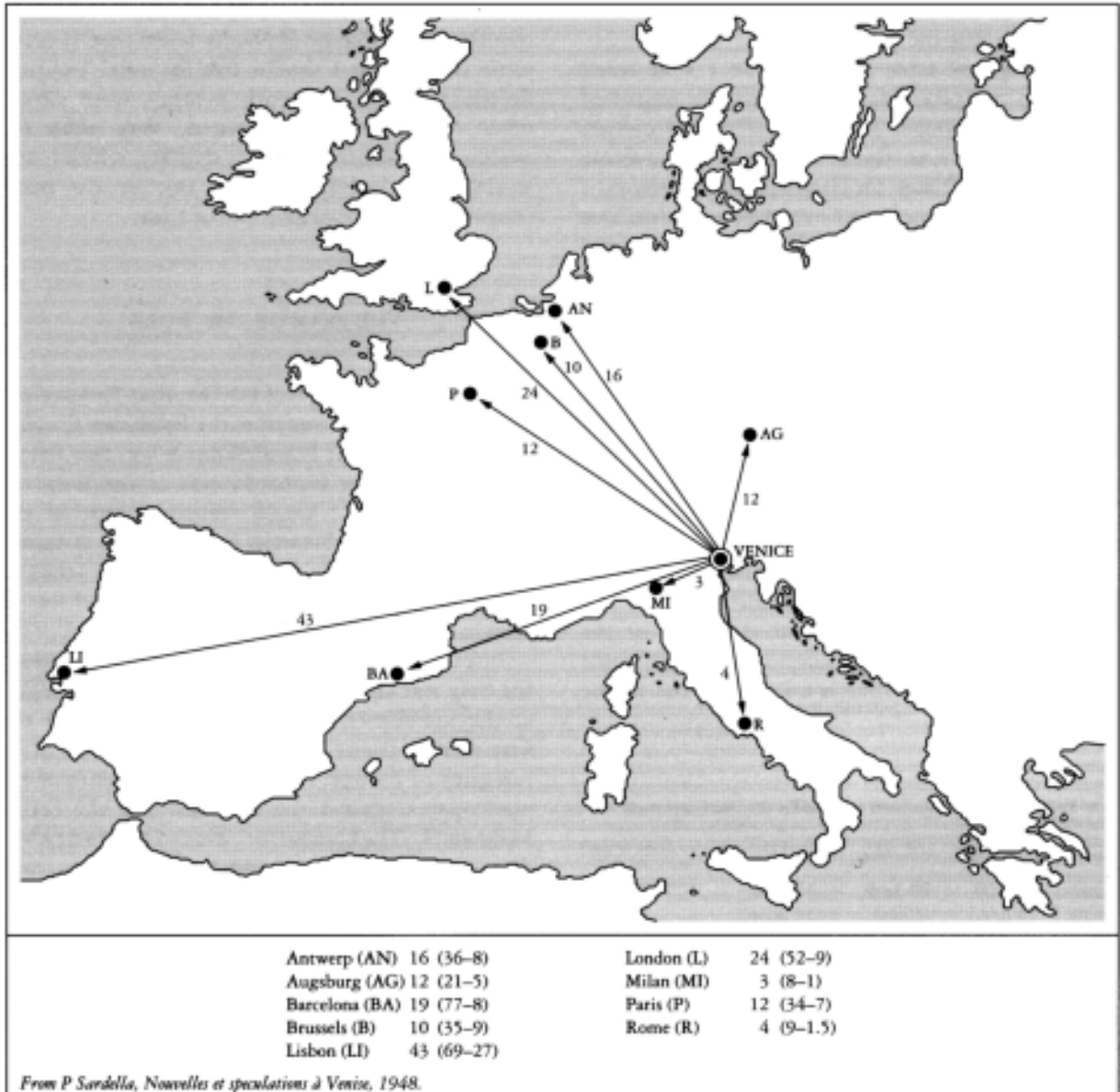


1.2 Trade and commerce in Western Europe

### ‘DISTANCE, THE FIRST ENEMY’

We will only have a very imperfect understanding of the political and economic life of Western Europe in the sixteenth century unless we grasp the pace at which such affairs were conducted. Anyone with business on an international or interprovincial scale faced problems with which we are no longer

familiar. The merchant or administrator could never feel confident over the length of time taken for news, money or supplies to cover any specified route. By land, business could at best be conducted at the pace of the fastest horse, and even then was likely to be further obstructed by natural obstacles and by local political conditions. If communications by sea were sometimes quicker,



wind and weather made such routes even more unpredictable. On the one hand, contemporaries marvelled at the fact that Cardinal Cisneros, on a crusading campaign to North Africa in 1509, could cover the 200 kilometres from Spain in a single day’s sailing. On the other, merchants and diplomats might wait for weeks on the shores of the English Channel because bad weather rendered the short passage impossible. As Fernand Braudel has written: ‘In the sixteenth century all timetables were completely dependent on the weather. Irregularity was the rule.’

The map and table in illustration 1.3 are based upon the complex information network organised by the city of Venice in pursuit of its commercial interests. The first figure indicates the average number of days taken for letters to travel between a given city and Venice, while the figures in brackets show the time-span in days between the slowest and the fastest recorded journeys. Thus the long and complicated journey between Venice and Lisbon could be completed in as little as four weeks, although seven weeks was more normal, and a journey of very nearly ten weeks was not unknown.

The problems would clearly be much greater if armies, supplies or money with cumbersome escorts were in transit. This is well illustrated by the records relating to the forces regularly sent by Spain in the second half of the century from Italy, across the Alpine passes and up the Rhine valley to the Netherlands. These figures indicate no close correlation between the size of the force or the season of the year and the duration of the 680-mile journey. Unpredictability is once again the theme for these journeys.

1.4 The transit of Spanish troops to the Netherlands

Year	No. of men	Left Italy	Arrived Namur	Journey (days)
1567	10,000	20 June	15 Aug.	56
1573	5,000	4 May	15 June	42
1578	5,000	22 Feb.	27 March	32
1582	6,000	21 June	30 July	40
1584	5,000	26 April	18 June	54
1587	2,000	7 Oct.	7 Dec.	60
1591	3,000	1 Aug.	26 Sept.	57

Source: G.Parker, *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road, 1972*

To distance, to weather conditions, to inadequacies of transport must be added the slow pace of bureaucracy. A monarch who took his duties seriously, as Charles V did by travelling to all corners of his possessions, or as Philip II did by personally reading and replying to the bulk of official correspondence, made it inevitable that decision-making and administration would proceed at a snail’s pace. The governor of the Netherlands complained (February 1575) that he had received no official communications from Spain for four months, and a viceroy of Naples joked that ‘if death came from Spain I should live for ever’. Political decisions in the sixteenth century were slowly taken and slowly implemented. Very often the weighty arguments of blood, dynasty, religion and wealth were largely cancelled out by the banal considerations of distance and of time.

THE FEAR OF THE TURK

On 29 May 1453, forces of the Ottoman Turks seized Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire. The fact that a great Islamic Empire was now firmly established on the European side of the Bosphorus initiated fears that would constitute part of the mental baggage of Western Europeans for at least a century and a half. In a Europe divided by issues of faith and dynasty, common hostility to and fear of the Ottoman Turks were rare unifying factors.

Inspired in part by the Islamic concept of *Jihad*, the holy war aimed at the conquest and conversion of the unbeliever, the Ottoman Turks posed the first serious threat in 600 years to the Christian integrity of Europe. Following the victories of his predecessors against the Bosnians and the Serbs, Mehmet II, ‘The Conqueror’, drove Ottoman power deep into European territory. Albania was conquered in 1468, and in 1479 the Venetian republic conceded control of the Balkans to the Ottomans. When Turkish forces captured Otranto, in southern Italy, in August 1480, causing the Pope himself to make preparations for flight, it must have seemed that there was no necessary limit to the Ottoman penetration of Christendom.

The respite granted by the death of Mehmet (1481) was only temporary. The accession of

Suleiman, 'The Magnificent' (1520–66), brought to power the last and greatest of the Ghazi sultans. Free from the constraints of disputed successions or domestic power struggles, Suleiman renewed the terrible prospect of Islamic conquest in Europe, capturing Belgrade in the first year of his reign, and the island fortress of Rhodes two years later. In 1526 the greatest Turkish victory since the fall of Constantinople, at the Battle of Mohacs, destroyed the independence of the Kingdom of Hungary. Vienna, the gateway to Germany and the Habsburg Empire, was first besieged by Suleiman in September 1529. By now, however, Ottoman lines of communication were stretched beyond realistic limits. Limited to a campaigning season of only a few months each year, Suleiman penetrated anew into central Europe in 1532, 1541, 1543 and 1544, but the high point of Ottoman power was passed by the time that he died on campaign in September 1566. Four generations of Europeans by this time had lived in fear of Turkish power and of the fanaticism of Islamic warriors, and the place of the 'cruel Turk' in the Western European mentality was assured.

The roots of this stereotype lay in religious differences. Centuries of crusading had firmly established Islam as the object of hatred for all good Christians. Now the Ottoman *Jihad* reversed the process and threatened to bring the rival religion to the very centre of Christendom. The division of Christendom in the course of the Reformation only aggravated the anti-Ottoman neuroses of the time. Protestant preachers with no great concern for the safety of Rome readily interpreted the Ottoman advance as the terrible judgement of God upon His corrupt servants. 'We must not be amazed', wrote one of Luther's associates, 'if God is now punishing the Christians through the Turks—for they are the rod and scourge and fury of God.'

There was also a strong element of what we would today call 'culture shock' in this fear of the Ottomans. Western European societies with shared notions of monarchy, nobility and feudal obligation received with disgust distorted reports of a society and a political hierarchy organised upon dramatically different lines. In a sense, for example, it was true that Ottoman power was based upon slavery. Under the practice of

*devshirme* ('gathering'), specified numbers of boys were taken at intervals by the Ottoman authorities from the Christian regions of the empire. From these, the servants of the court, the elite Janissary troops, and the great ministers of state were raised up. For the *devshirme* boys this was very far from the 'horrible servitude' of which contemporary western writers spoke. For the sultans, this was a source of servants and subordinates who, unlike the nobles and churchmen who served western monarchs, owed all their authority and even their very lives to their royal master. The system made a fundamental contribution to the stability and the absoluteness of Ottoman power. It is not surprising, however, that it was viewed with horror by Europeans used to systems in which the ability to build dynasties upon the power and rewards of government was not limited to one family.

The meticulous and disciplined organisation of the Ottoman armies was similarly perverted into a vision of vicious barbarian hordes, ready to ravage and plunder Europe as earlier barbarians had done. Closer acquaintance with Ottoman administration did not necessarily diminish the sense of terror felt by westerners. The Austrian emissary, de Busbecq, for all his considerable experience of the Ottoman state, could still write of its power in a manner which would have been echoed by most Western Europeans at any time during the 150 years which followed the fall of Constantinople: 'The sultan stands before us with all the terror inspired by his own successes and those of his ancestors; he overruns the plains of Hungary with 200,000 horsemen; he threatens Austria; he menaces the rest of Germany. Like a thunderbolt, he smites, shatters and destroys whatever stands in his way. He roars like a lion along our frontier, seeking to break through, now here, now there.'

### 1.5 Glossary

**Bourgeois.** A French term initially indicating an inhabitant of a market town, or trading community. It has come to mean a member, usually a prosperous member, of the urban, mercantile middle classes.

**Chivalry** (adj. *chivalric*). The code of honour which governed the military conduct, and other aspects of courtly behaviour, of the nobility. In theory, it remained an important element in the relationship

between the crown and the nobility that the former should provide the latter with the opportunity to gain honour and prestige on the battlefield ('exercising the chivalry of the realm'). In times of peace, such prestige might also be gained in formalised tournaments ('jousting'), which reproduced the challenges of the battlefield.

**Client.** An individual or family which has attached itself, for its own protection or benefit, to the service of a nobleman of higher rank. The political prestige and authority of a nobleman would be largely dependent upon the extent of his 'clientage'.

**Demography** (adj. **demographic**). The statistical study of human population.

**Estates of the Realm.** The major social and political interest groups within the kingdom. These had normally been formalised by the beginning of the sixteenth century into three: the Church, the nobility, and the 'Third Estate', technically the commoners, but in effect the wealthy, non-noble elements, such as the urban middle classes and the rural gentry.

**Feudal.** The medieval system of social and political organisation based upon the relationship between a lord and his tenants and 'vassals'. The latter usually owed military service and social allegiance to the former in return for the lord's protection. The feudal estate owned by a nobleman under this system was known as his **fief**.

**Oligarchy.** The form of government (e.g. within a city state) in which power is exercised by an elite group of individuals or families ('oligarchs').

**Proletariat.** The class(es) of society which have no other legal means of subsistence other than selling their labour. The working classes.

**Seigneur.** French term indicating a feudal lord, or a man's superior within the feudal system.

**Temporal.** (Latin: *tempus*—time). That which is subject to time and to change. In the sixteenth century the term was used to designate things of this world (e.g. political power), as opposed to spiritual things which, like God, are eternal.

### Further reading

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## • CHAPTER TWO •

# **The Intellectual Context of the Sixteenth Century**

The religion of Western Europe

The Church

Themes of religious controversy

The Renaissance

Towards an Italian Renaissance

The political and intellectual impact of Humanism

The Northern Renaissance