

EUROPEAN POLITICAL HISTORY – Postclassical Period

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Contents

Part I : Government

Part II : Military

Western European Government – Postclassical Period

Overview It is worth starting with the sense that the ‘idea’ of nationality’ came only recently into the western world: such an idea was hardly imaginable to a citizen of the Middle Ages in Europe--for that matter, perhaps, to any earlier citizen of West European society, in which tribalism, monarchy, and regionalism--cf. the city-state in Greece--had hitherto provided the available exemplars. Similarly, it was still to be a good three to four centuries, after the end of the Middle Ages, before Mediaeval culture could fall under the organizational spell of the notion of the nation.

The early mediaeval period, in Western Europe The early mediaeval period, let’s say from 400-1000 C.E., brings together many kinds of governmental process--much of it constructed around the institutions of Feudalism, and its regional agricultural underpinnings. During this period there were significant moments of ‘coming-together,’ when a competent ruler and a cultural milieu coincided, as during the reign of Charles Martel (686-741 C.E.), in what was a proto-France, or of the Emperor Charlemagne (742-814 C.E.), around whom what we call the Carolingian Renaissance of literature and art took shape. There was the fictive Holy Roman Empire, often traced in origin to Charlemagne himself, sometimes to Otto I (dating from 962 C.E.), and nominally existent until the early 19th century, after dynastic episodes of many varieties. In the larger sense, however, the governments of early mediaeval Europe were fleeting operations, rarely far from the kinds of threat posed by Barbarians to the Late Roman Empire, and frequently harassed almost to death by the incursion of tribal forces like the Huns, Magyars, Vikings, and Anglo Saxons, who appeared out of nowhere and undermined the best efforts of settled life.

The Church It is no surprise that the Catholic Church entered the picture early, by the third and fourth centuries C.E., to provide structure and, increasingly, secular possessions and power. Following on such Church Councils as Nicaea (325 C.E.), in which the Church consolidated its fundamental beliefs, and asserted its primacy as an interpreter, for the civilized world, of the ‘mysteries of faith,’ the Church in Rome, and its satellite power centers throughout Europe and North Africa, became the firmest structure for communities cut loose, in the earlier centuries of the Middle Age, from any kind of secular governance.

The later Middle Ages The last centuries of the Middle Ages (1000 C.E.-1400 C.E.), while known for such world transforming achievements of mind as Scholastic Philosophy or the Gothic Cathedral, was unfortunately fraught with social-political instability and with such dreadful interventions as the Black Plague, a pandemic thought to have halved the population of Europe in the 14th century. The Frankish Empire pushed its boundaries significantly into northern Europe, as did the equally loosely constituted Germanic empire, which is estimated to have tripled its nominal size during the centuries in question. The expansion of the Franks into Spain, in the 12th and 13th centuries, was directed to (eventually) expulsion of the Moors from Spain.

Observation The history of the centuries that precede the Renaissance, and follow the Greco-Roman, are hard to beat into intellectual shape. Huge cultural achievements there were, the greatest of them powered by the strange risk of faith, and both science and innovation, as well as the explosion of universities, marking new growth points for humanity. However the thread of social-cultural maturing was snapped, and it would be here, if anywhere, that the word ‘dark’ could be invoked for these ages.

Reading

Jordan, William, *Europe in the High Middle Ages*, Harmondsworth, 2004.

Power, David, ed., *The Central Middle Ages, Europe 950-1320*, Oxford, 2006.

Discussion questions

Many causes are given, for the political disorganization of Mediaeval Europe: barbarian invasions; plagues and famines; the unbalance between Church and State; the Islamic eruptions into European polity. What do you think? Have you other explanations to suggest?

Did human culture emerge enriched from the 'mediaeval experience'? Did that experience stamp a new readiness and openness on the mankind that made its way over the sill into the Renaissance?

What role did international trade play, in building a sense of common values and common political will in mediaeval Europe? Did the international alliances, created by such trade, build new and larger political communities?

Western European Military History – Postclassical period

Overview Throughout the post classical period in Europe, the Middle Ages, there was a slowly growing development of larger and more coherent social units; not yet states in the modern sense, even at the end of the postclassical period, but coherent language and culture units which resembled the states to be of France, Italy, Spain, England, and Germany. As these coherent units grew, representing as they did coagulations of capital and assets--as in the powerful centers of Feudalism--it became increasingly necessary to provide effective defence machineries for centers of settlement, just as, in the late Mediaeval period, hungry and aggressive nomadic groups--the Magyars, the Huns, the Mongoils, the Vikings--staged frequent aggressions against settled communities, thus helping to hone the arts of attack machinery.

Warfare in Theory The military textbook of prime importance, throughout the post classical period, was Rhenanus' *De Re Militari, On Military Affairs*, composed in the 4th century C.E. On the whole--and this betrays the lag time between theory and the growing practice of the period--Rhenanus formulates a guidebook for successful military practice. He recommends that the infantry be considered the core of the army, and that generals should initiate battle only when they are sure of winning. Pitched battles were to be discouraged, and were in fact rare. This textbook, influential still in the fifteenth century, though long supplanted by skills and materials on the ground, was still being ordered into translation by Henry VII of England, in the fifteenth century--evidence of the distance theory was behind both the growing technologies of defensive and proactive warfare.

Defensive warfare The evolution of walled cities, in the post classical period, made for styles of warfare sharply different from those in the Greco-Roman period. Against invaders it was important to oppose the most impregnable possible defence, which was becoming the *castle*. Throughout Europe castles sprang up wherever there was a considerable Feudal community, and with time these castles became harder to breach. The best engineers of the times were recruited for castle construction, and made regular advances in such technologies as drawbridge construction, the creation of heavily fortified walls, the assurance of a long term fresh water supply within the castle precinct, the construction of hidden wall slits for arrow or crossbow shooting, and the perfection of the resources needed for pouring down cascades of boiling water or hot lava on the heads of the enemy.

Siege warfare The obverse of defensive warfare, of course, was siege warfare, the most common form of organized military aggression in the post classical period. This kind of assault procedure demanded money, time, and expertise, just as did the defensive strategies of the castle. New devices were invented for scaling castle walls, for battering foundations, for hurling catapults, and, In the final centuries of the post classical period in Europe, for employing cannon and gunpowder, with increasing accuracy and effect. While the initial introduction of gunpowder into Europe can be credited to Mongols working from China, by the fifteenth century European gunpowder manufacture was well developed on its own.

Recruiting and soldiery The manpower behind the above warfare forms was throughout the Mediaeval period recruited along lines dictated by the social agencies involved. For a long time there survived the ancient Greco Roman practice by which citizens saw to their own arming, and considered it part of their individual duties to

prepare for and enter into the military actions of the community. This involved considerable outlays of personal expenditure for armor, a practice which survived at many points in the Middle Ages, when knights supplied themselves and their feudal retainers with armor and cavalry for a large number of supporters. There were at the same time, throughout the later Middle Ages, occasions on which ever larger communities, small cities, found themselves obliged to finance standing armies, as supports for the entire community.

Reading

DeVries, Kelly, *Mediaeval Military Technology*, Peterborough, 1992.

Nicholson, Helen, *Mediaeval Warfare: Theory and Practice of War In Europe, 300-1500*, Basingstoke, 2004.

Discussion questions

How long did sieges of individual castles last? What kinds of preparation did the besieged citizens have to make, for prolonged survival inside castle walls?

What was the effect of the introduction of gunpowder into Feudal society? What effect did it have on city planning and defensive protection?

What was the role of the clergy, during the repeated military actions of the Middle Ages in Europe? Was there protest against warfare?