Medieval World

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Times Books
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Burgundy And The Swiss Confederation, 1300–1500

The neighbouring territories of Burgundy and the Swiss Confederation experienced a “golden age” in the late 14th and 15th centuries. A comparative examination reveals similarities, such as the small size of their constituent parts, but also two contrasting socio-political systems. As a model of noble culture and monarchical government, Burgundy differed sharply from the Swiss Confederation, a loose alliance of small urban and rural republics. By the early 16th century, however, both states had passed the peaks of their influence on European affairs.

The Swiss Confederation originated as an alliance between the rural areas of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden around Lake Lucerne. An early treaty of 1291 cites the upkeep of public peace, mutual assistance and a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1291</td>
<td>First surviving treaty of the Swiss Confederation</td>
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<tr>
<td>1363</td>
<td>Philip II (“the Bold”), from the French royal house of Valois, created Duke of Burgundy</td>
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<tr>
<td>1386</td>
<td>Battle of Sempach effectively ends Austrian claim on Swiss territories</td>
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<tr>
<td>1430</td>
<td>Foundation of the Order of the Golden Fleece</td>
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<td>1477</td>
<td>Charles the Bold’s death in the Battle of Nancy initiates the disintegration of Burgundy</td>
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<tr>
<td>1513</td>
<td>Swiss Confederation admits the last of its 13 urban and rural member republics</td>
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Charles the Bold holds a Chapter of the Golden Fleece c. 1470. Founded by Philip III the Good in 1430, the order provided Burgundy’s social elite with a platform for the display of noble virtues and an organization to defend their land and religion. Forming the central axis of the illustration, prince and clergyman represent the towering role of the monarchy and the Church in Burgundian society.

From the accession of Philip the Bold to the Duchy of Burgundy in 1363, the Burundian princes gradually acquired a coherent set of territories between the kingdoms of France and the Holy Roman Empire. The lands were divided into two main parts: the Duchy and the Franche-Comté in the South and the prosperous urban landscape of Flanders and Brabant in the North. In addition, Burgundy exerted strong influence over a number of neighbouring areas and bishoprics. Charles the Bold succeeded in linking his possessions in the north and south by conquering the Duchy of Lorraine in 1475, but his abrupt death at the Battle of Nancy brought Burgundy’s expansion to an abrupt end.

resentment of foreign jurisdiction as reasons for the union. By 1513, the Confederation had grown to 13 members, including cities such as Bern (1353). In a series of military conflicts – most notably the Battle of Sempach (1386) – the House of Habsburg gradually lost its hold over the region and the Confederates managed to consolidate their lands. There was no single treaty linking all members, but a complex network of bilateral and multilateral alliances with a few constitutional principles agreed by the Tagung. Apart from full membership, there were two other ways of “belonging” to the Confederation. Several areas sought military or political protection as “associated territories”; others were “dependent lordships” subject to two or more of the Confederates.

The long-term survival of a medieval alliance of rural and urban republics is a truly extraordinary phenomenon in European history. So is the socio-political system. The old feudal hierarchy disintegrated, while peasants overcame the burdens of serfdom. Free burghers and peasants elected ruling councils composed of merchants, artisans and major landholders. The Confederation benefited from an early division of labour. Alpine areas evolved a lucrative cattle and transport trade (over the Gotthard Pass), while the lower lands offered grain, urban services and export products. Early traces of republican pride and a Swiss identity manifested themselves in numerous illustrated chronicles. Internal
political divisions, however, halted further expansion, most notably in the Italian Wars.

Burgundy, in contrast, was much admired for its model court, noble values and innovative government. Compared to other European countries, state administration was remarkably efficient and based on extensive written records. The ruling elite aspired to high standards of chivalry and knightly valour, exemplified by the foundation of the Order of the Golden Fleece (1430).

When the French king John II the Good gave the duchy of Burgundy to his son Philip II the Bold in 1363, the princeedom embarked on a remarkable period of expansion. A number of different strategies were employed. In 1384, for instance, Philip inherited Flanders, the Franche-Comté and other lands as a result of his marriage to Margaret of Flanders. Allying himself with England against France in the Hundred Years' War, Philip III the Good (1419–67) reaped great territorial rewards in the Treaty of Arras (1435). In the 1470s, Duke
Burgundy and The Swiss Confederation

The Swiss Confederation on the eve of the Burgundian wars, 1474 (with major additions to 1513)
- boundaries of confederate territories c.1500
- boundaries of modern Switzerland
- current cantonal boundaries
- 1361 year of association with the Confederation
- full rural members of the Confederation
- full urban members of the Confederation (with dependent rural areas)
- full rural members from 1513 (Appenzell)
- full urban members joining 1481–1501 (with dependent rural areas)
- dependent lordships (subject to two or more Confederates)
- associated territories
- areas under Burgundian influence 1474
- battles, with dates

From its core areas of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, north of the Gotthard Pass and around Lake Lucerne, the Swiss Confederation expanded to eight members by 1352 and 13 by 1513. Together with dependent lordships and associated territories, a substantial part of the Alps obtained a Republican form of government. The formation of “Leagues” was quite common in the later Middle Ages, but the Swiss Confederation is unusual in the combination of rural and urban members and its long-term survival.

Charles the Bold (1467–77) strove to establish a powerful “intermediate” kingdom between France and the German empire, both of which claimed overlordship over parts of the Burgundian lands. The urban wealth of the Netherlands boosted the economic resources for the pursuit of such ambitious plans and he eventually closed the gap between his northern and southern possessions by conquering Lorraine. In the long run, however, he was outmanoeuvred by the French king Louis XI (1461–83) and defeated in successive battles by the Swiss Confederates, for whom the powerful neighbour posed a significant threat. After his death at the Battle of Nancy (1477), Burgundy disintegrated. The Duchy was annexed by France and the lion’s share of the remaining lands passed to the Austrian archduke Maximilian of Habsburg, who married Charles’ daughter Mary of Burgundy. The seeds of Austrian–French tensions over the Burgundian heritage, a source of decades of conflict, were sown.