Municipalities, Merchants, and Networks: Towns and the Operation of English Government, c. 1350-1500*

Introduction

Between 1980 and 2021, the concept of the medieval 'state' underwent a transformation. Once seen as a process of centralisation imposed from above by calculating monarchs, 'statebuilding' has been re-defined by historians of later medieval Europe as a more collaborative process.[1] In the work of Jean-Philippe Genet and John Watts, for example, European 'states' or 'polities' in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries grew from conflicts and dialogues over taxation, justice, and privileges.[2] By the fifteenth century, representative assemblies and more uniform judicial practice had become the norm, not because rulers had insisted they be so, but because negotiation between different powerholders had accustomed peoples from the same region to share political languages and institutions. As a result, practices of government were informed as much by the needs of local elites and even 'ordinary' subjects as by the ambitions of princes. For nearly four decades, continental European scholars (such as Genet and Wim Blockmans) interested in re-conceptualising the 'state' and tracing its development in the later Middle Ages have been especially concerned with how towns fit into this picture: Did townspeople embrace or resist the increasing role of central government in people's lives? Did the level of urbanisation or the degree of urban autonomy in a society determine the type of 'state' that developed there?[3]

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*Many thanks to Amanda Dillon, Jayne Gifford, and Joel Halcomb for their comments on earlier drafts and to Frédérique Lachaud for translating the article into French.

Note: The Middle English letter 'þ' (or thorn) has been replaced with 'th'.

[1] A. Holenstein, 'Introduction', in W. Blockmans et al. (eds), *Empowering Interactions: Political Cultures and the Emergence of the State in Europe* (Farnham, 2009), 1-31. See also W. Blockmans and J.-P. Genet (gen. eds), *The Origins of the Modern State in Europe, 13th to 18th Centuries*, 7 vols (Oxford, 1995-2000); iidem (eds), *Visions sur le développement des états européens: théories et historiographies de l'état moderne* (Rome, 1993).

[2] E.g., J.-P. Genet, 'Which State Rises?', *Historical Research*, 65 (1992), 119-33; J. Watts, *The Making of Polities: Europe, 1300-1500* (Cambridge, 2009).

[3] E.g., N. Bulst and J.-Ph. Genet (eds), *La ville, la bourgeoisie et la genèse de l'état moderne* (Paris, 1988); C. Tilly and W.P. Blockmans (eds), *Cities and the Rise of States in Europe, A.D. 1000 to 1800* (Boulder, 1994); A.K. Isaacs and M. Prak, 'Cities, Bourgeoisies, and States', in W. Reinhard (ed.), *Power Elites and State Building* (Oxford, 1996), 207-34.

Historians working specifically on late medieval England embraced new ideas of 'statebuilding' but took longer to accept urban society as a part of this process. In 1993 Gerald Harriss argued that English government 'was moulded more by pressures from within political society than by the efforts of kings or officials to direct it from above', citing the reign of Edward III (1327-77) as a key turning point.[4] The role of parliament expanded because gentry, yeomen, and other rural landowners demanded regular forums at which to negotiate their consent to the taxation required for the Hundred Years War. Access to royal justice increased with the delegation of legal powers to these same landholders at a local level, formally through their creation as Justices of the Peace (JPs) and informally by presiding over processes of arbitration that occurred alongside formal court proceedings.[5] Harriss's views evolved from the ideas of his mentor, K.B. McFarlane (1903-66), who precipitated a shift in scholarship of medieval England away from institutions of central government towards the men who operated them, especially the nobility and wealthy landholders outside the peerage (the 'gentry'). His vision of politics encompassed both formal and informal; nobles and gentry were agents of government not just as officeholders but also through the influence they exerted as property-holders and the alliances they made with neighbours or patrons.[6] Towns and townspeople, though, were omitted from these analyses of political structures, to the point that Christine Carpenter (herself a student of Harriss) wrote in 1997: 'Although townsmen had some influence when it came to granting taxes, … political society in late-medieval England consisted essentially of the landowners alone'.[7]

A superficial examination of England's urban system in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries perhaps lends credence to this dismissive attitude. London was reasonably large, with a population of around 40,000 in 1377, but of other English towns only the populations of Bristol and

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[4] G. Harriss, 'Political Society and the Growth of Government in Late Medieval England', *Past & Present*, 138 (1993), 33.
[5] Harriss, 'Political Society', 28-57.
[6] E.g., K.B. McFarlane, *England in the Fifteenth Century: Collected Essays*, ed. G.L. Harriss (London, 1981).
[7] C. Carpenter, *The Wars of the Roses: Politics and the Constitution in England, c. 1437-1509* (Cambridge, 1997), 34-5.

York may have exceeded 10,000.[8] English municipalities of the later Middle Ages had limited autonomy: they did not possess jurisdiction over their hinterlands, nor could they declare war on their own initiative. The ability of English municipalities to be stakeholders in royal government was also diminished by their lack of associative frameworks. Duncan Hardy has stressed the significance of leagues, whether consisting wholly or only partly of municipalities, in the operation of the late medieval Empire; they not only were a means for pooling military resources and arbitrating disputes, but the process of enforcing these agreements created a shared 'regulatory framework' for the Empire.[9] In England, however, municipalities did not form their own leagues (whether with nobles, ecclesiastical authorities, or one another) or hold separate inter-urban assemblies. The confederation of port towns on the Southeast coast known as the Cinque Ports was exceptional in an English context, in that the towns held their own representative assembly (known as a Brodhull) and had obligations to protect one another's privileges.[10]

Since 2000, however, towns have slowly entered into analyses of late medieval English political society.[11] This article draws from recent scholarship by Christian Liddy and Christopher Fletcher, among others, to create a framework that showcases the role of towns and townspeople in the English state in 1350-1500.[12] Much as McFarlanite historians stressed that royal government depended on the collaboration of aristocratic landholders in both their public and private capacities, the significance of towns to the English state was not confined to the official functions of municipal governments. Often the same men who were acting as mayor or alderman of a municipal

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[8] Obtained by applying a multiplier of 1.6-1.9 to number of recorded taxpayers in 1377. A. Dyer, 'Appendix: Ranking List of English Medieval Towns', in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Vol. I 600-1540* (Cambridge, 2000), 758; S.H. Rigby, 'Urban Population in Late Medieval England: The Evidence of the Lay Subsidies', *Economic History Review*, 63 (2010), 398-9, 402-3.

[9] D. Hardy, *Associative Political Culture in the Holy Roman Empire: Upper Germany, 1346-1521* (Oxford, 2018), esp. Part II.

[10] K.M.E. Murray, *The Constitutional History of the Cinque Ports* (Manchester, 1935).

[11] Beginning with D.M. Palliser, 'Towns and the English State, 1066-1500', in J.R. Maddicott and D.M. Palliser (eds), *The Medieval State: Essays Presented to James Campbell* (London, 2000), 127-45, and L. Attreed, *The King's Towns: Identity and Survival in Late Medieval English Boroughs* (New York, 2001).

[12] Esp. C.D. Liddy, *War, Politics and Finance in Late Medieval English Towns: Bristol, York and the Crown, 1350-1400* (Woodbridge, 2005); C. Fletcher, 'News, Noise, and the Nature of Politics in Late Medieval English Provincial Towns', *Journal of British Studies*, 56 (2017), 250-72.

government were simultaneously involved in royal government as private individuals or as part of mercantile conglomerates.

To encompass the different guises in which towns and townspeople interacted with late medieval English government, I have coined the term ‘urban sector’.[13] The ‘urban sector’ is a loose interest group of individuals, governments, and organisations based in towns and whose primary activities or identity relate to urban economies or urban life. I have not included aristocrats or clerics who lived in towns, since they typically did not identify themselves as townspeople and often drew their primary income from elsewhere. The concept of the ‘urban sector’ is inspired by multilevel analysis in contemporary urban studies, which considers local government institutions alongside national government, inter-regional or international networks, non-governmental organisations, and private individuals.[14] The ‘urban sector’ approach has three main advantages: (1) it includes the activities of townspeople in both municipal and private capacities; (2) it acknowledges the shared priorities and collective action of urban groups that transcend the boundaries of individual municipalities; and (3), unlike terms such as ‘urban system’ (or *armature*) borrowed from geography, it defines urban political action in terms of people rather than space.

This article examines three aspects of the ‘urban sector’ in late medieval English politics: municipalities, merchants, and networks. Municipalities refer to civic governments with chartered privileges; merchants refer to traders resident in towns who engaged with the Crown on their own behalf; and networks refer to the means used by civic governments, merchants, and townspeople to co-ordinate policy and act collectively. This overview focuses on England, and not its subject territories in Ireland, Wales, Normandy, or Gascony, as each of these regions had their own ‘urban sector’ that operated according to different frameworks.

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[13] E. Hartrich, *Politics and the Urban Sector in Fifteenth-Century England, 1413-71* (Oxford, 2019), 8-14.
[14] E.g., D. Kübler and M.A. Pagano, ‘Urban Politics as Multilevel Analysis’, in K. Mossberger et al. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Urban Politics* (Oxford, 2012), 114-30; M. Goldsmith, ‘Cities in Intergovernmental Systems’, in *ibid*., 133-51.

Municipalities

Between 1350 and 1500 royal government expanded its presence in the localities to meet the challenges posed by the Black Death, the Hundred Years War, and the spectre of Wycliffite heresy. This growth brought with it less centralisation rather than more. The general eyre, in which royal justices travelled in circuits around the country at periodic intervals, was superseded by Justices of the Peace (JPs) in the mid-fourteenth century.[15] JPs sat much more regularly and were tied to a particular county; the JPs appointed were typically nobles or landed gentry who already held significant power locally rather than Westminster-based bureaucrats. As we have seen, the role of rural elites in this late medieval expansion of government is well studied. Less examined is the way the Crown granted municipal officials increased powers through charters of privileges and parliamentary legislation. The English Crown in 1350-1500 granted charters empowering the officers from 36 municipalities to act as JPs within their town.[16] Charters to 15 towns designated the leading civic officer (typically called a mayor or bailiff) as royal escheator, meaning they conducted inquisitions to ensure that lands or rights belonging to the king were not alienated illegally.[17] Several municipal governments also gained the right to appoint one of their officials as an Admiral or Commissioner of the Admiralty, empowering him to requisition ships for royal service and preside over trials concerning disputes occurring on board ship, at sea, or on certain portions of rivers.[18] Parliamentary statutes, moreover, continually vested more aspects of royal government in municipal officials. A 1406 statute permitted them to identify and try suspected heretics, while the 1439-40 Alien Hosting Ordinances required mayors and bailiffs to register foreigners on arrival in their town

[15] A.L. Brown, *The Governance of Late Medieval England 1272-1461* (London, 1989), 116-28.
[16] Derived from M. Weinbaum, *British Borough Charters 1307-1660* (Cambridge, 1943). See also E. Hartrich, 'Charters and Inter-Urban Networks: England, 1439-1449', *English Historical Review*, 132 (2017), 223, 235.
[17] Derived from Weinbaum, *British Borough Charters 1307-1660*. For escheators, see Brown, *Governance*, 145-6.
[18] Hartrich, 'Charters', 236-7. Many of these duties were outlined in the custumal for Hull when it elected its first Commissioner for the Admiralty in 1447: Hull History Centre, C BRE/1/2, ff. 25-6v.

and to assign a local merchant to act as their host.[19] As a result of these changes, residents of towns now encountered royal authority on a regular basis and were no longer lumped into the wider remit of officials administering to a whole county or series of counties. Moreover, since such powers were tied to urban officeholding, citizens of a town were selecting their own agents of royal government when electing mayors, aldermen, or councillors—a privilege not accorded to other localities, where the king selected JPs, escheators, and Admirals with little or no recourse to the community.

The Crown's use of municipal governments to enforce law and order was matched by its growing reliance on urban institutions to finance, supply, and organise military campaigns. The reigns of Edward I (1272-1307) of Edward III (1327-77) saw the financial base of the monarchy transition from profits of lands and feudal dues to taxation of subjects.[20] Perhaps the most significant aspect of this transition was the regularisation of direct taxation in 1334, in the form of a tax voted by parliament (at royal request) worth one-fifteenth of the value of movable goods in the countryside and one-tenth the value of movable goods in towns. After 1334, the fifteenth and tenth was levied from whole communities rather than from individuals within them and the rate each community paid was fixed. In towns, it was municipal government officials who collected the tax for the Crown and decided what each individual townsperson would pay, whereas before 1334 such responsibilities typically lay with royal tax commissioners.[21] Christopher Dyer argues that the post-1334 powers of assessment obtained by municipal officials prompted them to re-distribute the tax burden lower down the social scale. Poorer citizens, previously exempt from contributing to subsidies, were now required to do so; the number of taxpayers in Winchester increased by more than 50% between 1332 and 1430, even though its population declined considerably. As a result, while a larger portion of a town's residents were required to contribute to taxation, the sums

[19] *Parliament Rolls of Medieval England*, gen. ed. C. Given-Wilson, online edn (Leicester: Scholarly Digital Editions, 2005), 1406 parliament, item 62; ibid., 1439-40 parliament, item 38b; Hartrich, *Urban Sector*, 86-8.
[20] W.M. Ormrod, 'England in the Middle Ages', in R. Bonney (ed.), *The Rise of the Fiscal State in Europe, c. 1200-1815* (Oxford, 1999), 19-52.
[21] Liddy, *War*, 67-8.

collected from each individual decreased.[22] Dyer interpreted this trend as a socially regressive form of taxation, but Liddy offers a more positive assessment: small tax payments from a much wider swathe of the urban population gave ordinary citizens a stake in royal government and a platform for criticising how resources were collected and spent.[23]

By the late fourteenth century, the Crown was also approaching municipal governments for loans to meet military emergencies. Previously, English kings had taken out large loans from Italian merchants, but in the 1340s the Bardi and Peruzzi firms collapsed under the weight of Edward III's demands in the early phases of the Hundred Years War, thereby causing the king to look to his subjects for quick injections of cash.[24] Loans (and their terms of repayment) were negotiated between each civic government and the Crown on an *ad hoc* basis. They were often solicited through a commission *de mutuo faciendo*: royal agents were sent into the localities with a written rationale justifying the Crown's need for advance funds. Alternatively, municipal officials could be summoned to appear before the royal council. There was an expectation that civic governments would lend some money whenever asked, but they often refused to pay the full amount requested.[25] A case in point occurred in early 1436 when the Crown sought money to defend the town of Calais against invasion by the duke of Burgundy. The king wrote letters to the municipal government of Salisbury describing how the duke of Burgundy had recently secured 30,000 troops from Flemish towns for the siege of Calais; summoning the mayor of Salisbury, together with other mayors of English towns, to appear before the royal council in April; and requesting a loan of 300 marks. Salisbury's mayor attended the April meeting of mayors, but declined to lend 300 marks. In

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[22] C. Dyer, 'Taxation and Communities in Late Medieval England', in R. Britnell and J. Hatcher (eds), *Progress and Problems in Medieval England: Essays in Honour of Edward Miller* (Cambridge, 1996), 175-7.
[23] C.D. Liddy, '"Bee war of gyle in borugh'. Taxation and Political Discourse in Late Medieval English Towns', in A. Gamberini et al. (eds), *The Languages of Political Society: Western Europe, 14th-17th Centuries* (Rome, 2011), 461-85.
[24] E. Russell, 'The Societies of the Bardi and the Peruzzi and their Dealings with Edward III, 1327-1345', in G. Unwin (ed.), *Finance and Trade under Edward III* (Manchester, 1918), 93-135.
[25] Liddy, *War*, 25-43; H. Kleineke, 'The Commission *De Mutuo Faciendo* in the Reign of Henry VI', *English Historical Review*, 116 (2001), 1-30; G.L. Harriss, 'Aids, Loans and Benevolences', *Historical Journal*, 6 (1963), 2-8.

the end, the Crown accepted a £25 loan from the corporation of Salisbury—one-eighth the sum originally requested.[26] Loans increased the role of municipalities in state finance, but often on the civic governments' terms and not the Crown's.

More broadly, royal financial policies of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries precipitated the political engagement of townspeople outside the urban elite. As with Salisbury in 1436, the Crown distributed propaganda into English towns to explain why it needed a particular sum at a particular time. Mayors or other urban officials often read out these documents to representative assemblies of citizens before seeking their consent for lending money to the Crown. In May 1435, after Henry VI sent a letter requesting a loan of 500 marks, the mayor, bailiffs, and councillors of Coventry called a 'halle of the substance of this Citie, among whom this letter [was] Rad and vnderstonden'; the group of citizens then decided that the town should lend £100 to the king and devised a schedule for how that sum should be apportioned among the town's ten wards. In the end more than 700 citizens contributed to the loan.[27] By integrating municipal institutions and the citizens they governed into the system of royal finance, the Crown sometimes fuelled popular resistance in the form of protests against the civic officials who collected and assessed the sums for taxes and loans. John Tys was imprisoned in 1421 for saying scandalous words against the mayor of London while rousing the citizenry to refuse to pay multiple tenths and fifteenths to the Crown.[28] Four years later William Reygate received the same punishment for defying the authority of London alderman John Bilnewater when Bilnewater was collecting money from citizens towards a 1000-mark loan to John, duke of Bedford, *de facto* regent for the child Henry VI.[29]

Generally speaking, the Crown requested that urban corporations supply troops only for domestic campaigns (e.g., in civil wars or for border campaigns in Scotland and Wales) and not for

[26] *Historical Manuscripts Commission: Report of Manuscripts in Various Collections*, Vol. IV (Dublin, 1907), 197-200; *The First General Entry Book of the City of Salisbury 1387-1452*, ed. D.R. Carr (Trowbridge, 2001), 154-6; Hartrich, *Politics and the Urban Sector*, 28-9, 76-7.

[27] *The Coventry Leet Book, or Mayor's Register…*, ed. M.D. Harris, 4 vols in 1 (London, 1907-13), 172-80.

[28] London Metropolitan Archives, Common Council Journal I, COL/CC/01/01/001, f. 91v.

[29] LMA, Common Council Journal II, COL/CC/01/01/002, f. 59v. See also Hartrich, *Urban Sector*, 68-9.

foreign wars, but they were key sources of ships for all types of conflict.[30] For most of 1350-1500, English kings did not have a permanent navy of ships at their disposal, and civic governments were sometimes called upon to make up for this shortfall.[31] In 1377, York, Hull, Beverley, and Lincoln were among several municipal corporations asked to build barges at their own expense for the king's use.[32] Even towns that were not ports, such as Salisbury, were asked to man and victual ships for the Crown, as in 1462 when the civic government supplied the ship *Trinity* for raids along the coast of Brittany.[33]

During this period, municipal corporations became a more established presence in parliament—the body responsible for granting taxation to the king, passing laws, and serving as the highest law court in the realm. The English parliament consisted of two Houses, the House of Lords (comprising individually-summoned nobles and prelates) and House of Commons (comprising elected knights of the shire representing counties and burgesses representing towns). By 1350 borough representatives numerically dominated the House of Commons. In 1478, at least 100 boroughs sent representatives to parliament (with each borough typically sending two MPs and London four); 202 of 294 members of the House of Commons were burgess MPs.[34] The larger towns tended to elect leading civic officials as their MPs, although smaller boroughs (especially during the fifteenth century) were often represented in parliament by men who were not citizens of the town. Even in these cases, the town usually elected a lawyer or gentleman who lived near the town and had an existing relationship with the civic elite.[35] The wages of burgess MPs were paid by the communities they represented, and these men were expected to lobby in the interests of its citizens and report about what had occurred in parliament. MPs for Lynn regularly issued oral reports to the

[30] Attreed, *King's Towns*, 181-200.
[31] Liddy, *War*, 43-4.
[32] *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1377-81*, 32-3; Liddy, *War*, 54-5.
[33] Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, Chippenham, Salisbury Ledger Book B, G23/1/2, ff. 56, 61v-2v.
[34] M. McKisack, *The Parliamentary Representation of the English Boroughs during the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1932), 106.
[35] R. Horrox, 'Urban Patronage and Patrons in the Fifteenth Century', in R.A. Griffiths (ed.), *Patronage, the Crown and the Provinces in Later Medieval England* (Gloucester, 1981), 158-60.

mayor and citizens on the activities of parliament; in 1413 they read out the acts passed by parliament and summarised the content of the opening sermon, and then faced questioning from the mayor about why the MPs had been unsuccessful in securing the renewal of Lynn's charters.[36]

In the years between 1350 and 1500, municipalities became more clearly designated as arms of the 'state', bringing citizens into more frequent contact with royal government. During periods when the Crown's legal, financial, and military needs were met principally by municipal governments, the type of 'state' that emerged was one in which a wide variety of townspeople (both in terms of wealth and geographic location) made comparatively small contributions to royal government. In return for these contributions, civic governments, their representatives, and even ordinary citizens gained the right to negotiate the terms of those contributions and to hold both urban elites and the king himself accountable for how government operated.

Merchants

Towns also participated in a different type of 'statebuilding' based on extracting resources and expertise from wealthy merchants—a form of 'statebuilding' less public and less transparent, but also less burdensome to those outside the elite of urban society. Often these merchants were, at the same time, operating as mayors, aldermen, or councillors of their hometowns, but when acting on their own behalf (rather than in their capacity as a municipal official) their decisions were not subject to the scrutiny or consent of the wider urban community.

We have already seen that mayors, aldermen, bailiffs and other members of municipal governments were made responsible for an increasing number of aspects of royal government *ex officio*. In addition, though, many held administrative roles by royal appointment, and not because they had been elected to civic office by the urban community. Typically, merchants received royal

[36] McKisack, *Parliamentary Representation*, 140-5.

posts that capitalised on their expertise in shipping and international trade. The career of Southampton merchant William Soper (d. 1458/9) is illustrative. Soper served as mayor, alderman, and MP for Southampton on multiple occasions between 1413 and 1449. At the same time, he was appointed collector of customs for the Crown at the port of Southampton, member of judicial commissions in the county of Hampshire, and, most importantly, from 1420 to 1442 keeper of the king's ships. In that role, Soper supervised the construction and re-fitting of ships at the new royal shipyard in Southampton. He was sufficiently important to earn an annual salary of £40 from the Crown and to be entrusted with diplomatic duties.[37] In 1430 he entertained the Captain of the Florentine Galleys and gave him a tour of the Southampton shipyard, and in 1445 he accompanied Margaret of Anjou from Rouen to England for her marriage to Henry VI.[38] Soper was part of a wider trend of merchants acting as diplomats, as Stephen O'Connor has shown in his study of London aldermen John Pyel and Adam Fraunceys, who were royal envoys to Flanders and Castile in the third quarter of the fourteenth century.[39]

Individual merchants also lent money to the English Crown, often in greater amounts than municipal governments were prepared to contribute—in part because mercantile loans did not require consent from an assembly of citizens. Famously, the merchant William de la Pole, a former mayor of Hull, lent over £100,000 to Edward III in 1338-9 alone, but sums on this scale were highly unusual.[40] Individual loans tended to be in the tens or hundreds of pounds rather than the thousands, but collectively the English Crown sometimes found itself more reliant on money lent by merchants in a private capacity than by municipal governments. Caroline Barron's calculations reveal that in the years 1399-1413 (roughly coinciding with the reign of Henry IV) the municipal

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[37] For Soper's career, see S. Rose (ed.), *The Navy of the Lancastrian Kings: Accounts and Inventories of William Soper, Keeper of the King's Ships, 1422-1427* (London, 1982), 6-56; L.S. Woodger, 'Soper, William (d. 1458/9)', in J.S. Roskell et al. (eds), *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1386-1421*, 4 vols (Stroud, 1993), iv, 405-8.
[38] M.E. Mallett, *The Florentine Galleys in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford, 1967), 258-9; Rose (ed.), *Navy*, 15-16, 21.
[39] S. O'Connor, 'Finance, Diplomacy and Politics: Royal Service by Two London Merchants in the Reign of Edward III', *Historical Research*, 67 (1994), 24, 30-2.
[40] E.B. Fryde, *William de la Pole, Merchant and King's Banker (†1366)* (London, 1988).

government of London lent the Crown a total of £22,000, while loans from individual London-based merchants over that period accounted for £56,960 11s 8d.[41] Richard Whittington, an alderman in London's civic government, made over £20,000 of personal loans to Henry IV.[42] The merchants who lent their own money to the Crown often became part of the machinery of the state as a means of securing repayment. The fastest way to recoup money from the Crown was to be assigned a portion of customs revenue from a particular port, so it is far from surprising that the Crown's mercantile creditors were also appointed collectors of customs, enabling them to prioritise their own before others. Whittington, for example, was collector of the wool custom in London during the same period in which he was making substantial loans to the king.[43]

The Crown also often had more success in obtaining ships from individual merchants than it did from municipal governments, in part because it was easier to offer financial inducements. Typically, the Crown requisitioned ships from merchants as need demanded, and then royal commissioners were responsible for finding supplies and crews. On rare occasions, the Crown went even further in this privatised approach to defence. In the late 1430s, Henry VI's government delegated a large portion of their naval duties to individual shipowners, who were to organise and fund the re-fitting, victualling, and manning of their vessels for military service in addition to providing the ships themselves. These grants were made to leading citizens of towns across England, from Hull in East Yorkshire to Bristol in the Southwest. In return, the Crown allowed shipowners to claim all loot taken at sea and granted them immunity from prosecution under anti-piracy laws.[44] Merchants were thus made agents of the state but were also rendered exempt from some of its laws: William Morfote, a mariner from the Sussex port of Winchelsea, received an official pardon at

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[41] C.M. Barron, 'The Government of London and its Relations with the Crown 1400-1450' (Unpublished PhD thesis, London, 1970), 611.

[42] C.M. Barron, 'Richard Whittington: The Man behind the Myth', in A.E.J. Hollaender and W. Kellaway (eds), *Studies in London History Presented to Philip Edmund Jones* (London, 1969), 237-42.

[43] Barron, 'Richard Whittington', 204, 209.

[44] C.F. Richmond, 'The Keeping of the Seas during the Hundred Years War: 1422-40', *History*, 49 (1964), 292-6.

the 1435 parliament for breaking out of Dover Castle prison because he was paying for 100 men to patrol the seas on the king's service.[45]

During the Hundred Years War, the English Crown became more adept at harnessing the resources of merchants and more likely to delegate responsibilities to them, and as a result extended the fiscal base of the monarchy and its range of agents. This form of statebuilding utilised the 'urban sector' in its private capacity: institutions of municipal government were not directly involved, and urban communities neither contributed financially nor supervised the behaviour of the merchants involved. This private aspect of the 'urban sector' was more restricted both socially and geographically: the merchants who held royal offices and lent money and ships on their own behalf tended to be very wealthy and to hail from London or leading provincial centres such as York and Bristol.[46]

Networks

Urban interactions with the 'state' were sometimes channelled through groups that amalgamated voices and resources from across the 'urban sector'. They are more accurately described as networks than urban leagues or associations, as they rarely involved a formal or institutionalised alliance between civic governments, but they facilitated co-ordination between individuals from different towns, nevertheless. These networks inhabited a grey area between the 'public' and 'private': it is often difficult to tell whether they represented urban public opinion more broadly or operated solely in the interests of their more active members.

In the fourteenth century this urban collective power came closest to taking institutional form in the 'estate of merchants'. By 1350 it was accepted that parliament was the body whose consent was required for the king to levy direct taxation on property or income, but up until the

[45] *PROME*, 1435 parliament, item 17.
[46] Hartrich, *Urban Sector*, 46-8, 82-3; Liddy, *War*.

1380s the Crown convened separate assemblies or councils of merchants from English towns when it needed consent to collect indirect taxes on imports and exports.[47] The 'estate of merchants' also acted as an advisory body, assisting the king in forming policy on coinage, the location of staple ports, and other commercial matters.[48] The meetings of the 'estate of merchants' illustrate the ambiguous nature of the 'urban sector', in that the number of members and methods of selection varied from meeting to meeting.[49] On some occasions, the merchants were present as representatives of municipal governments, as in May 1336 when the king sent writs requiring civic governments to elect people from the town to attend the assembly.[50] At others, though, the king summoned individual merchants rather than asking communities to elect representatives. Some assemblies even combined the public and private aspects of the 'estate of merchants': a July 1337 assembly at Westminster consisted of 82 merchants receiving individual summons and 28 merchants acting as representatives for civic governments.[51] After 1382, parliament authorised indirect taxation and separate 'estates of merchants' were no longer convened, but the principle remained that an amorphous group of municipal representatives and wealthy townspeople constituted a collective urban/mercantile voice in English government.[52] Into the fifteenth century, the 'merchants of England' continued to view themselves as an 'estate' acting in the interest: in the 1404 parliament, for example, 'les communes et marchantz d'Engleterre' petitioned that Ipswich be re-instated as a port for exporting wool.[53] Moreover, as Christopher Fletcher has discussed for the fourteenth century and as I have mentioned for the fifteenth, terms like the 'common profit', 'common good', or 'common weal' appeared most often in parliamentary petitions that concerned the economy,

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[47] W.M. Ormrod, 'The Origins of Tunnage and Poundage: Parliament and the Estate of Merchants in the 14th Century', *Parliamentary History*, 28 (2009), 209-27.
[48] G. Unwin, 'The Estate of Merchants, 1336-1365', in Unwin (ed.), *Finance*, 179-255; C.D. Liddy, 'The Estate of Merchants in the Parliament of 1381', *Historical Research*, 74 (2001), 331-45.
[49] McKisack, *Parliamentary Representation*, 132.
[50] Unwin, 'Estate of Merchants', 183.
[51] Unwin, 'Estate of Merchants', 189.
[52] Ormrod, 'Tunnage and Poundage', 221-6**.**
[53] *PROME*, Oct 1404 parliament, item 54.

commerce, or urban infrastructure; a sentiment existed that the public interest was synonymous with the interests of English merchants and townspeople.[54]

This sentiment is understandable when we consider the Crown's financial and military dependence on a late medieval mercantile conglomerate, the Company of the Staple at Calais. Calais, a town in northern France conquered by Edward III in 1347, was home to one of the few permanent garrisons of soldiers in the English king's dominions. From 1363 until 1558, with some temporary hiatuses, it also acted as a wool staple, meaning that all wool passed through Calais before being sold abroad. A group of English merchants, known as the Company of the Staple, was awarded a monopoly on English wool exports, in return for agreeing to pay high rates in taxation. The merchants of the Staple were often required to bring a portion of their wool profits to the king's mint at Calais to be re-issued as English coinage, thereby ensuring that the supply of English currency was maintained during the bullion famine of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.[55] This policy also put the Company of the Staple in the position of issuing frequent cash loans to the Crown, often to pay the wages for the garrison at Calais. Indeed, it was common for unpaid soldiers from the garrison to seize control of the Staplers' wool and hold it hostage until the Crown was able to secure a loan from the Staplers for this purpose, and from 1466 the middleman was removed and the Company of the Staple became directly responsible for financing the garrison.[56]

The merchants who were members of the company hailed from English towns and often divided their time between England and Calais. Many were based in London, but residents of Lincoln, Hull, York, Nottingham, Shrewsbury, Reading, and Sandwich, among other towns, were

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[54] C. Fletcher, 'De la communauté du royaume au "common weal": Les requêtes anglaises et leurs stratégies au XIVe siècle', *Revue Française d'Histoire des Idées Politiques*, 32 (2010), 369-72; Hartrich, *Urban Sector*, 95-8.

[55] S. Rose, *Calais: An English Town in France, 1347-1558* (Woodbridge, 2008), 39-53.

[56] For Staplers and royal finance, see D. Grummitt, 'The Financial Administration of Calais during the Reign of Henry IV, 1399-1413', *English Historical Review*, 113 (1998), 277-99; idem, *The Calais Garrison: War and Military Service in England, 1436-1558* (Woodbridge, 2008), 147-50; W.I. Haward, 'The Financial Transactions between the Lancastrian Government and the Merchants of the Staple from 1449 to 1461', in E. Power and M.M. Postan (eds), *Studies in English Trade in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1933), 293-320; G.L. Harriss, 'The Struggle for Calais: An Aspect of the Rivalry between Lancaster and York', *English Historical Review*, 75 (1960), 30-53.

members of the Staple, and it was common for Staplers to hold civic office in their hometowns.[57] Staplers were also frequently elected as burgess MPs. In parliament, they both represented their municipalities and co-ordinated with other Stapler MPs to secure commercial advantages.[58] It is no coincidence that a number of Staple merchants (including Thomas Thurland and Thomas Alestre for Nottingham and Hugh Cliderhowe for Hull) sat as MPs in the 1449 parliament when an act was passed confirming the privileges of the Company of the Staple.[59]

Also blurring of the boundary between municipal and mercantile were the Merchant Adventurers, a group of English merchants involved in overseas trade (typically specialising in cloth exports to the Low Countries). They, too, played a key role in English government, influencing royal policy and negotiating international agreements for the Crown.[60] Their members came from towns across England; the whole organisation elected its own governor, while some individual towns, such as York, also maintained their own branches of the Merchant Adventurers.[61] As London merchants came to dominate the group by the late fifteenth century, it became enmeshed in London municipal government; by a 1486 agreement, the mayor and aldermen of London were to elect deputy-governors of the Merchant Adventurers and supervise the enforcement of the Company's by-laws.[62]

Finally, the collective power of urban interests could be assembled in a more informal manner through inter-personal relationships and family connections. Leading officials in municipal governments were often migrants, born in other English towns or in the countryside. The ties they maintained to their places of origin could be politically significant. When the privileges of the city of Norwich were revoked by the Crown in 1443-7, one of the royal wardens installed to govern the city

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[57] Hartrich, *Urban Sector*, 34.
[58] Grummitt, *Calais Garrison*, 145-6.
[59] Hartrich, *Urban Sector*, 103-4.
[60] A.F. Sutton, *The Mercery of London: Trade, Goods and People, 1130-1578* (London, 2016).
[61] A.F. Sutton, 'The Merchant Adventurers of England: The Place of the Adventurers of York and the North in the Late Middle Ages', *Northern History*, 46 (2009), 219-29.
[62] A.F. Sutton, 'The Merchant Adventurers of England: Their Origins and the Mercers' Company of London', *Historical Research*, 75 (2002), 25-46.

was Thomas Catworth, an alderman of London who had originally been based in Norwich.[63] Catworth even assisted the citizens of Norwich in presenting a bill to parliament in 1445-6.[64] The ways in which familial links and other informal ties could reinforce a collective urban political interest group are apparent from the activities of Thomas Yong, a lawyer active in the mid-fifteenth century and a frequent MP for Bristol. Yong's brother John lived in London, where he became mayor in 1466. Yong also had two half-siblings who similarly spanned London and Bristol: Thomas Canynges was mayor of London in 1456-7, while William Canynges became an extremely successful merchant and five-times mayor of Bristol.[65] In the early stages of the Wars of the Roses, Thomas Yong was an agent for Richard duke of York and, while sitting for Bristol in the parliament of 1450-1, even advanced York's claim to be recognised as heir-apparent to the throne.[66] This political affiliation extended to his kin, with William Canynges holding Bristol Castle for the Yorkists in 1460 when it was besieged by Lancastrian troops.[67] Yong's network extended further still. He received payments in the 1440s from the municipal corporations of Rye, Exeter, and Norwich to lobby on their behalf.[68] At the 1442 parliament, Hull's civic government paid Yong £3 to dissuade the House of Commons from consenting to a new grant of indirect taxation.[69] Hull's MPs at the 1442 parliament, who probably facilitated Yong's intervention, were Richard Anson and Nicholas Elys, the former of whom was a committed Yorkist partisan; Anson was indicted in 1452 for his participation in a rising in support of Richard duke of York and, indeed, died fighting alongside York at the battle of Wakefield in 1460.[70] Yong's status as a lawyer, together with his family in London and Bristol, allowed him to become the centre of a loosely-knit network of municipalities and merchants which not only advanced the

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[63] P. Dunn, 'Trade', in C. Rawcliffe and R. Wilson (eds), *Medieval Norwich* (London, 2004), 230.
[64] McKisack, *Parliamentary Representation*, 162.
[65] Woodger, 'Canynges, John (d. 1405)' and 'Young, Thomas III (d. 1427)', in Roskell et al. (eds), *HOP: 1386-1421*, ii, 476; iv, 939-40. See also P. Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community: The Grocers' Company and the Politics and Trade of London, 1000-1485* (New Haven, 1995), 451-3, 505, 514.
[66] Hartrich, *Urban Sector*, 137-8.
[67] *The Great Red Book of Bristol*, ed. E.W.W. Veale, 5 vols (Bristol, 1931-53), i, 136-7.
[68] Hartrich, *Urban Sector*, 105, 138.
[69] HHC, Chamberlains' Accounts 1441-2, C BRF/2/358.
[70] Hartrich, *Urban Sector*, 94-5, 109-10, 140, 157-8, 171.

interests of English merchants in parliament, but also secured privileges for individual civic governments and even replaced the Lancastrian King Henry VI with a Yorkist alternative.

Conclusion

Urban elites in England between 1350 and 1500 influenced royal policy, dispensed royal justice, funded royal military initiatives, and built royal ships, but they did so in a number of different guises: as mayors and aldermen on behalf of a community of citizens, as individual merchants with personal wealth and prestige, or as members of conglomerates that pooled mercantile and municipal resources. Before dismissing towns as a relatively minor component of the English 'state' in 1350-1500, a more holistic approach to the ways in which townspeople engaged with the state must be adopted which encompasses private and inter-urban political activities alongside the actions taken by municipal governments.

Moreover, by moving from a study of municipal governments to a study of the 'urban sector', we also gain a more nuanced view of how 'statebuilding' operated. 'Statebuilding' could be a public activity that enmeshed large swathes of people in its net and encouraged debates about the exercise of power. For example, the English Crown in 1350-1500 expanded its powers by turning municipal officials into royal operatives, thereby making royal government a more consistent presence in the lives of ordinary townspeople. In connecting royal government to civic officeholding, the Crown also exposed its policies to the scrutiny of citizens who elected municipal officials and held them accountable for their actions. It was a form of statebuilding that fostered widespread political engagement, or even rebellion. Conversely, though, the English Crown also grew its financial base and military might by bypassing municipal governments to tap the personal wealth of the merchants who often held high civic office, thereby obtaining more money and ships more quickly from fewer individuals. This 'statebuilding' was deep but not broad; it increased the resources available to the Crown significantly, but involved comparatively few people in processes of

government and did not encourage the development of mechanisms for consent and accountability. Finally, the English Crown grew in dialogue with interest groups that often represented both municipalities and merchants. These associations allowed townspeople to exercise more influence in government than any one individual or municipality could alone, and they precipitated a form of politics between the 'public' and 'private'.

In the period 1350 to 1500, we do not see a transition in England from one form of 'statebuilding' to another. They operated simultaneously, although at certain points one model might be more prevalent than the others. In the 1330s-40s, the reign of Henry IV (1399-1413), and 1435-50, urban engagement with the state tended to be channelled through individual merchants or through mercantile/municipal networks; these periods saw particular townspeople gain extensive influence in national politics but fostered little interaction between ordinary citizens and the Crown. During the 1360s-70s, the reign of Henry V (1413-22), and the 1460s, relations between the 'urban sector' and the English Crown tended to be transacted on more official lines through municipal governments and their representatives; the result was fewer spectacularly successful individual townspeople and often fewer resources at the Crown's disposal, but more extensive popular engagement with institutions of the 'state'. Several factors lay behind these trends. For example, short-term military emergencies or periods of bullion shortage often prompted the English Crown to turn to individuals rather than municipalities, while when England was prosecuting longer-term offensive military campaigns a more public politics channelled through municipal institutions predominated. The English 'state', then, was not growing in a uniform manner or along a steady trajectory. It morphed into different forms as the situation demanded. The types of townspeople involved in royal government and the ways they engaged with it varied, but the 'urban sector' remained a component of all forms of English 'statebuilding'.[71]

[71] Hartrich, *Urban Sector*, esp. Conclusion.