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The quest for a shared identity in a composite monarchy

Review on *Le royaume inachevé des ducs de Bourgogne by* Élodie Lecuppre-Desjardin

In 1473 Charles the Bold made his famous entry in the town of Trier to impress Emperor Frederic III with his astonishing wealth, and to convince him to promote his lands into the double kingdom of Friesland-Burgundy as one of the parts of the Holy Roman Empire. Although this was not the first time the Burgundian dukes of the house Valois became associated with a kingdom of their own, it was certainly the closest they ever came to the realisation of their dream. When I started to read *Le royaume inachevé des ducs de Bourgogne (XIVe-XVe siècles)* (Paris 2016), I expected Charles's endeavor to lie at the heart of the argument, but this is not the case. Only five of the ca. 350 pages have been devoted to the Trier episode. Essentially, this book deals with another, equally interesting question, namely the question of the coherence of the Burgundian lands.

The author of this book, Élodie Lecuppre-Desjardin, is one of the best-known specialists of the relation between princes and their subjects in the Southern Low Countries. *Le royaume inachevé* shows the impressive knowledge that she built up during many years of research and teaching.

The chronological demarcation of this book is the reign of the Burgundian dynasty, which for nearly a century (1384-1477/1482) ruled over an ever-changing series of principalities and lordships in the border region of the Holy Roman Empire and the Kingdom of France – Lecuppre-Desjardin uses the pertinent expression 'chronic incompleteness' ('incomplétitude chronique') in this context (14). Not only was the composition of the Dukes' lands variable, from the outset there was no unity in language, political tradition and historical culture. The oath of allegiance which subjects pledged to the Burgundian duke as their prince of a certain principality was the only perceptible bond between such varied and far-away territories as Charolles in Southern Burgundy and the isle of Texel in Northern Holland. It is no wonder that both contemporary people and modern scholars struggled to find an encompassing term to attach to the polity governed by the dukes of Burgundy; in this book the expression 'Great principality of Burgundy' is used. The central question of *Le royaume inachevé* is whether the reign of the four subsequent dukes of Burgundy resulted in a shared identity which encompassed all the separate principalities under Burgundian rule or not. Given this point of departure it is logical that the main focus of the book is on the dukes and on the policies

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they pursued. Essentially the author limits herself to the fifteenth century, with a strong emphasis on the second half of the reign of Philip the Good and the reign of Charles the Bold (ca. 1450-1480).

Of course, Lecuppre-Desjardin is not the first scholar to concentrate on this question. In her book she points at the two most important historiographical traditions which grappled with it. On the one hand, Henri Pirenne and Richard Vaughan claimed that Philip the Bold (r. 1384-1404) and John the Fearless (r. 1404-1419), as scions of the French royal house of Valois, should be considered French princes, whereas Philip the Good (r. 1419-1467) and especially Charles the Bold (r. 1467-1477) began to create a new, sovereign 'state' by gradually loosening their ties with France. On the other hand, Johan Huizinga and Paul Bonenfant suggested that the dukes of Burgundy remained 'French' princes. In her book Lecuppre-Desjardin takes up a middling position. While emphasizing the feudal, emotional and cultural attachment of the Burgundian house to the French Crown, she argues that Charles the Bold was the first Burgundian duke to seriously aim for independence from France and to create a sovereign polity for himself.

The first chapter of *Le Royaume inachevé* is devoted to political communication, with special attention to the ways in which the dukes presented themselves to their subjects, especially during *joyous entries* and comparable festivities. This was a delicate affair. They not only had to propagate their splendor as (sometimes contested) successors to their predecessors, the indigenous dynasties of the various Netherlandish and Burgundian principalities, they also had to secure the social and political stability within the towns.[1] The message conveyed was in most cases tailored to address regional or local sensitivities rather than to foster an overarching sense of unity of the Burgundian lands. In the end, there was not much to gain for the imagined community of the 'Grand Duchy de Bourgogne'. The loyalty of the high nobility was doubtful, as is explained in the second chapter. Their attitude was characterized by self-interest, and by an affection for the old principalities, rather than by loyalty to a faraway prince they did not understand.

The dilemma of unity in the Burgundian lands is laid out in full in the third and fourth chapters. Here Lecuppre-Desjardin makes two important points. The first is that the Burgundian dynasty nearly always remained loyal to the French King. This loyalty was hardly shared by the inhabitants of the Low Countries, who paid for the Burgundian adventures and were, for commercial reasons, especially interested in good relations with France's hereditary enemy England. It was not until the reign of Charles the

1 Compare Hugo Soly, 'Plechtige intochten in de steden van de Zuidelijke Nederlanden tijdens de overgang van Middeleeuwen naar Nieuwe Tijd: communicatie, propaganda, spektakel', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 97 (1984) 343.

Bold that the dukes of Burgundy went their own way, steering away from France. The second is that Charles the Bold, far more than his predecessors, held a view of the Common Good which differed from that of his subjects. Charles considered himself to be a prince by the grace of God, and therefore a personification of the Common Good. This autocratic viewpoint served as a framework for Charles' ambitions to create a sovereign kingdom. This attitude was at the basis of his more distant attitude vis-à-vis France, but it was also at odds with the more Aristotelian viewpoint of his subjects who saw the prince primarily as the servant of *their* interests, of *their* Common Good. It was Charles the Bold who most explicitly sought (and found) sovereignty vis-à-vis the French Crown, by creating the new Parliament of Mechelen, the short lived Supreme Court of the Burgundian lands (erected 1473/1474, dissolved 1477). Within this context Charles' ambitions with regard to the creation of a sovereign kingdom in the Holy Roman Empire are discussed (182-187).

In the fifth chapter the importance of the belligerent undertakings of Charles the Bold are discussed. Following the famous maxim by Charles Tilly ('Wars make states and states make wars'), most historians are inclined to consider war as the motor of the formation of the modern state. Burgundy might be considered as an example in case, for Charles the Bold famously issued a series of ordinances to create a professional standing army, forcing his subjects to bear the great costs. With good reason Lecuppre-Desjardin casts some doubt on the importance of warfare for state formation. In the case of the Burgundian polity, there was no enemy common to the dwellers of all principalities, and more importantly, a fundamental rift existed between the ambitions of the mercantile elites of the towns and their prince: the merchants aimed for the promise of profit, guaranteed by peace, but this was at odds with the duke's craving for glory and recognition from other princes.

The territorial aspects of the Burgundian 'state' and the depiction and naming of lands is discussed in the very interesting sixth chapter of Lecuppre-Desjardin's book. The dukes distinguished themselves through the large number of princely titles they carried, ranging from the prestigious but imaginary Duchy of Lorraine to the humble but real Lordship of Mechelen. Charles the Bold, for instance, prided himself of eighteen titles. Lecuppre-Desjardin points out that this in itself does not signify a lack of unity, but that the aggregate of titles does reveal that the Burgundian rulers imagined their own power in a distinctly feudal – i.e. fragmented – way, and that in some ways this hindered political integration. The Burgundian lands lacked a proper capital city and even a central place of residence for the ducal court, even if there was some institutional centralization in Lille, and later in Mechelen. The dukes themselves kept moving back and forth between Paris, Brussels, Bruges, and Ghent. The lack of a common denominator for the Burgundian state is well known. As Hugo de Schepper and later

Alastair Duke have pointed out, it was only during the reign of Charles v that the singularity of 'Het Nederlandt' or 'Belgium' was used for the Low Countries.[2]

Clearly, the policies pursued by the Burgundian dukes, characterized by monomania and inconsistency, could barely result in a common identity among the subjects. Lecuppre-Desjardin rightly emphasizes the lack of a common historiography which created a shared historical past for the inhabitants of the Burgundian lands. The well-known chronicles by Molinet, Chastellain and De la Marche only served to glorify the deeds of the dukes, not the creation of community rooted in a distant past. Inversely, the chronicles of Brabant, Hainaut, Holland and Zeeland placed the dukes in a regional tradition, as heirs to the former regional dynasties, without much reference to bonds with other regions and communities which were also ruled by those Dukes of Burgundy. Nor did the dukes succeed in creating a common enemy for both the inhabitants of the northern and the southern Burgundian lands. To quote *Le royaume inachevé*: 'Lorsque l'adéquation n'existe pas entre un pays, une dynastie, et une communauté juridique, il est difficile de forcer le sentiment d'appartenance à une nation.' (339) It might be interesting to further investigate the development of identities, not just as a spatial, but also as a social phenomenon. In this case the territorial range of collective identities did not necessarily correspond with the dominion governed by the dukes.

The last, concluding chapter of the book provides a reassessment of the character of the Burgundian lands. These lands lacked the fundamental characteristics of a feudal state, in which the state's power is mediated by the prince, and is based on inheritance and birth, and of a territorial state, in which there is a large measure of autonomy for the towns. The 'Great principality of Burgundy' can only be considered a composite polity: 'Un territoire d'une immense richesse, définitivement composite, aux allures de royaume inachevé' (356). One can only agree with this.

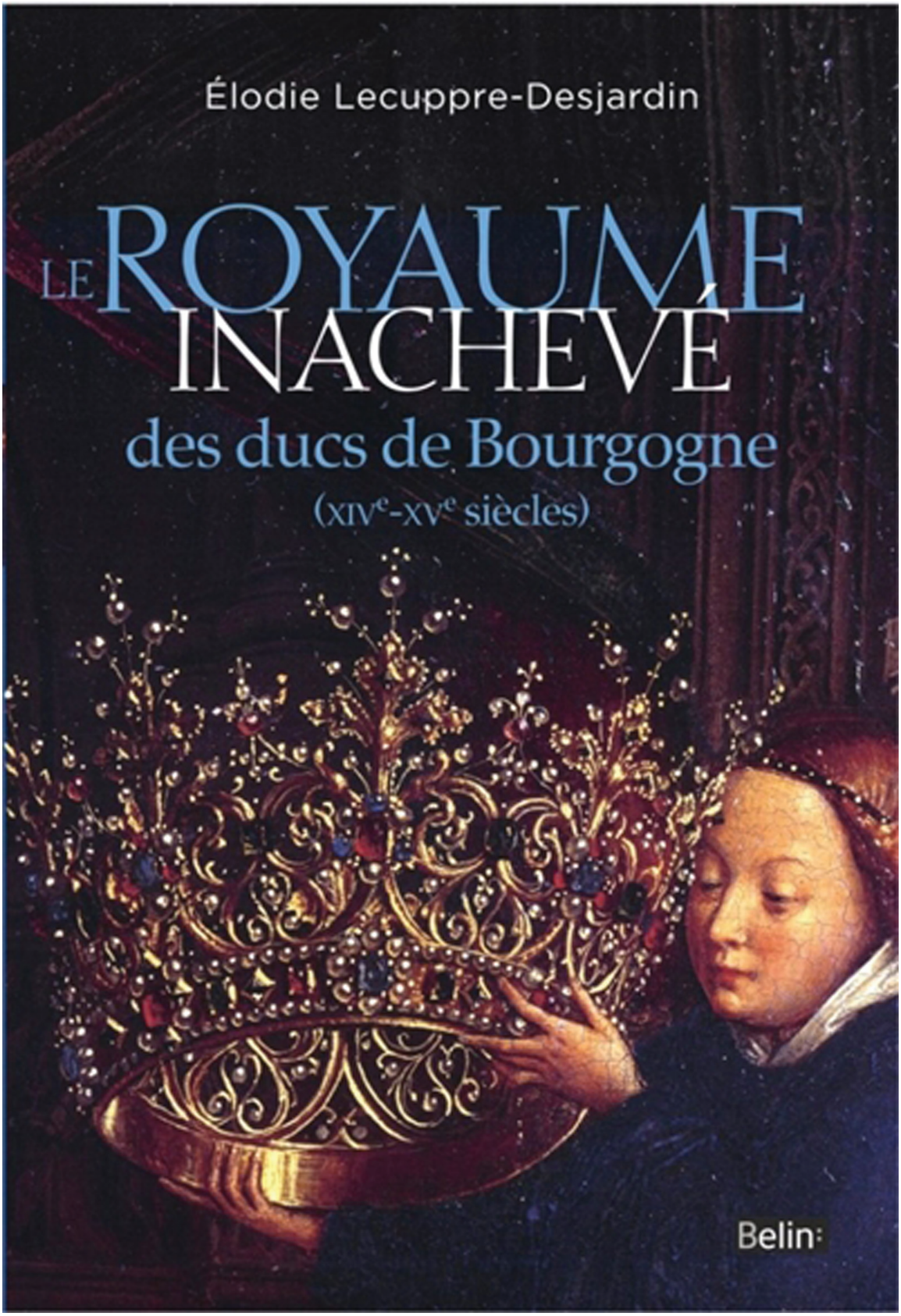
I am impressed by the richness of this book and by the consistency of its arguments. On the basis of a sound knowledge of contemporary sources and modern literature – in four languages – Lecuppre-Desjardin presents the reader with a well-written and convincing story of the dilemmas and ambiguities which came with the creation of a polity in a patchwork of principalities with different political, economic and social characteristics. The Burgundian lands were a new political construct, situated in the border zone of the Holy Roman Empire and France. This undertaking was possible only

2 Hugo de Schepper, *'Belgium nostrum' 1500-1650: over integratie en desintegratie van het Nederland* (Antwerp 1987); Alastair Duke, 'The Elusive Netherlands. The Question of National Identity in the Early Modern Low Countries on the Eve of the Revolt', BMGN – *Low Countries Historical Review* 119 (2004) 10-38.

because of the power vacuum which was caused by the structural political weakness of the Empire and the detrimental impact of dynastic calamities and the Hundred Years' War in France. Focusing on the third quarter of the fifteenth century especially, the author convincingly shows that the 'Great principality of Burgundy' was a composite monarchy, a polity consisting of different principalities, each of which held its own laws, customs and institutions, kept together by rather superficial links to a French dynasty.

Le royaume inachevé and my own *De hertog en zijn Staten* have a lot in common regarding chronology and the central question of coherence or fragmentation of a polity. However, there is a remarkable but fundamental difference in the geographical focus: Lecuppre-Desjardin deals with the 'Great principality of Burgundy', while I focus on the northern parts of this personal union, that is, the Low Countries. The implications of these different scopes are far-reaching: Lecuppre-Desjardin deals with the whole realm of the Burgundian dynasty, and underlines the centrality of the position of the dukes as well as the role of the civil servants of the 'central' government, the noblemen and the courtiers. For the heavily urbanised Netherlands, I would argue that close cooperation with the urban elites was of vital importance for the expansion of Burgundian power. In my view, their political and especially economic interests were best served by the Burgundian house. Therefore, these urban elites acted as powerbrokers, embracing, promoting, and financing the dukes and their policy. Without any doubt, the role of the urban elites would have been less prominent in the less urbanised regions in the south, that is, Burgundy proper and Franche-Comté.

Books like this of course leave their readers with several questions. One might ask if Lecuppre-Desjardin's approach of the dukes of Burgundy as French princes is not a simplification of a far more complex reality. The author justly points at the contrast between the northern parts of the Burgundian lands (especially the highly urbanized counties of Flanders and Artois), and the southern parts (the Duchy of Burgundy and Franche-Comté), mostly situated in the Kingdom of France (see pp. 19, 47, 111, 222-223 especially). Only during a very short and hectic period of time did Charles the Bold manage to bridge the rift between both parts. But did the heart of the Burgundian polity truly lie in France? Although the Burgundian dynasty had its roots in France, and even though until 1420 they derived their power mostly from the duke's strong position in the French royal government, the situation changed dramatically during the reign of Philip the Good. At this point the principalities of Namur, Hainault, Holland, Zeeland, Brabant, Luxemburg and Guelders, all situated within the Empire, were added to the Burgundian realm. If we take the situation in 1470 as a benchmark, ca. 50 per cent of the population and ca. 60 per cent of the territory belonged to the Holy Roman Empire. In the same period ca. two-thirds of the taxes were raised in parts of the Burgundian lands belonging to the Empire. What is more, when one considers the creation of a polity in the Low Countries in the


Élodie Lecuppre-Desjardin
LE ROYAUME INACHEVÉ
des ducs de Bourgogne
(XIVe-XVe siècles)
Belin

first half of the sixteenth century, its nucleus appears to be more situated in the Holy Roman Empire than in France: in 1512, Emperor Maximilian of Austria created the so-called Burgundian Circle within the Empire, in which he included the French counties of Flanders and Artois. Henri Pirenne rightly remarked that the rise of the Burgundian house resulted in the creation of a new polity in the border zone between two much older entities: 'The Burgundian state appears to us as essentially a frontier state, or, more exactly, as a state made up of the frontier provinces of two kingdoms.'[3] Ultimately, the foundation of a new polity may have been the greatest accomplishment of the Burgundian dynasty – and its Habsburg successors. In this respect Charles entry in Trier in 1473 was a sign on the wall.

The problem with the French perspective on the dukes of Burgundy is that the position of the 'German' principalities within the 'Great principality of Burgundy' cannot be compared to that of Flanders-Artois and the Duchy of Burgundy. In the Empire, the relations between prince and subjects were often characterised by constitutional and semi-constitutional engagements (Brabant, Guelders, Hainaut and to a lesser extent Holland and Zeeland); the role of the Emperor as suzerain was far less prominent than that of the King of France; the imperial traditions of institutionalized, bureaucratic government were not so deeply rooted and accepted. Also, in the Empire, the level of urbanisation was generally substantially lower. The relative disregard in this book of the developments of the principalities within the Empire also reveals to what extent especially Dutch historians have neglected the Burgundian period.

With regard to the position of the dukes between the Empire and France another point deserves to be highlighted. Lecuppre-Desjardin rightly emphasises the importance of the physical presence of the dukes in the towns and principalities they governed. They confirmed their own power – and that of the governing elites – just by being there (29-33). However, when studying the itineraries of the dukes, it is remarkable to find how limited their radius of action was. When not in Paris, they stayed most of the time in the French parts of their possessions, in Flanders (Lille, Ghent, Bruges) or in the heavily Gallicised parts of western Brabant (Brussels) and Hainaut (Valenciennes). Only rarely did they visit their northern and eastern possessions, and when they did, then mostly for financial or military reasons: to ask for money or to

3 H. Pirenne, 'The Formation and Constitution of the Burgundian State', in: *American Historical Review* 14 (1907-1908) 478-479.

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Book cover *Le Royaume Inachevé des ducs de Bourgogne* (Belin; Paris 2016).

wage war. One wonders in this context what importance they attached to their role as a binding agent within the composite monarchy.

In conclusion, one can always find points of discussion in a wide-ranging, stimulating, and thought-provoking book like *Le royaume inachevé*. As Lecuppre-Desjardin rightly states on several occasions (see pp. 16, 315-316, 343 especially), the question of the composite nature of the Burgundian realm has some topicality attached to it, for it bears clear resemblances to the modern European Union with its French-German axis. In this respect the book holds elements for a future research agenda, in which scholars from Germany, France and the Benelux should all participate.

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