Edited by Mario Damen and Kim Overlaet

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Constructing and Representing Territory in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe: An Introduction

Mario Damen and Kim Overlaet

Over the past few decades, geographers, sociologists, and political scientists have shown an increasing interest in the layered meanings of the concept of territory in specific historical and geographical settings.[1] Taking 'territory' to mean the relationship between people, power and space, this volume sets out to explore the methodological challenges faced by historians studying the development, government, perception, and representation of territory in different city-states, principalities, kingdoms, and empires in late medieval and early modern Europe. Indeed, one of the most intriguing questions raised by scholars, such as the political theorist and geographer Stuart Elden, is to what extent the concept of territory can be used as an analytical tool to study the spatial dimensions of power relations between (political or other) actors in historical periods prior to the cartographic innovations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[2] Remarkably enough, though the term 'territory' is often used by medieval and early modern historians, they rarely clarify what exactly they mean by the concept. In research on the centralising ambitions of kings, princes, and lords in late medieval and early modern Europe, for instance, 'territory' is commonly used to designate an enclosed geographical area ruled by a central government. In other instances, however, historians use the term as a synonym for designations of geographical entities such as region or area, or even as a label for a substate.

1   Especially in the field of geography the number of publications is vast, including a dedicated journal called *Territory, Politics, Governance*, published by the Regional Studies Association since 2013. For a concise overview of most recent publications by geographers on territory and territoriality, see Antonsich, 'Territory and Territoriality'.
2   Elden, *The Birth*.

As a rule, current political historiography is dominated by a state-centric notion of territory.[3] This can be explained at least in part by the influence of the definition of 'state' by Max Weber (†1920), who considered territory as one of the three keystones of a state, along with population and a legal system:

> Staat ist diejenige menschliche Gemeinschaft, welche innerhalb eines bestimmten Gebietes – dies: das 'Gebiet', gehört zum Merkmal – das Monopol legitimer physicher Gewaltsamkeit für sich (mit Erfolg) beansprucht.[4]

Several renowned historians working on state-formation processes were clearly and often quite explicitly inspired by Max Weber. The well-known French historian Bernard Guenée, for example, defined the state as follows: 'Il y a État dès qu'il y a, sur un territoire, une population obéissante à un gouvernement.'[5] In anglophone historiography, the influential American historian and sociologist Charles Tilly likewise defined the state in 1975 as an 'organisation which controls the population occupying a defined territory'. Admittedly, he later acknowledged the existence of 'non-national states' such as empires or city-states, expanding his understanding of the state to an organisation 'governing multiple contiguous regions and their cities by means of centralised, differentiated, and autonomous structures'.[6] Still, Tilly focused on the state as the end result of a process of warfare and bureaucratisation developments, rather than on the spatial character of state-formation processes. As Jeppe Strandsbjerg stated in a recent re-evaluation of the application of Tilly's theories in historiography: '[T]here is a profound lack of attention given to how space itself is transformed over time, and how this spatial transformation played a significant role in state formation.'[7] Moreover, Tilly is by no means a unique case. Even today, many scholars devote their research on state formation almost exclusively to the last two sections of Weber's triad (territory-population-legal system), and generally consider the spatial dimension as a given or even as insignificant.

In a much-cited article from 1994, the British-American political geographer John Agnew famously called this aspatial approach the 'territorial trap'.

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3   Somaini, 'Territory, Territorialisation, Territoriality'.
4   Weber, *Politik als Beruf*, p. 4.
5   Guenée, *L'Occident*, pp. 62-63.
6   Tilly, 'Reflections', p. 70; Tilly, *Coercion*, pp. 2-3.
7   Strandsbjerg, 'The Space', p. 133.

In his opinion, definitions of the state are heavily influenced by modern geographical assumptions. According to Agnew, state territories are too often considered as 'vast units of sovereign space' and as a 'container of society'. Such definitions fail to grasp the complex reality of pre-modern European societies. During the Middle Ages, Agnew states, 'regional networks of kinship and interpersonal affiliation left little scope for fixed territorial limits'. Likewise, 'communities were united only by allegiances and personal obligations rather than abstract individual equality or citizenship in a geographically circumscribed territory'. Such communities constitute what in German historiography since the 1930s has been labelled a *Personen-verbandstaat*, a state structured around bonds of personal loyalty. The constantly changing political alliances between princes, nobles, and urban elites were more hierarchical than territorial and led to widespread violence. There were no 'fixed' boundaries, and space was organised around many centres, although sovereignty was associated closely with the authority of the prince. Moreover, in pre-modern Europe, before the rise of nation states, sometimes the greatest power was exercised in relatively small city-states, such as Venice, Florence, and Lübeck.[8]

Of course, scholars have already made attempts to redefine the concept 'territory' to allow for its application in studies on late medieval and early modern European societies. In *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees*, for instance, the American historian Marcel Sahlins tried to avoid the ahistorical use of the concept by distinguishing between juris-dictional and territorial sovereignty. He considered the Middle Ages as an important period of transition. According to Sahlins, in medieval Europe the juridical relationships between rulers and their subjects (expressed in oaths of loyalty) were far more important than territorial bonds. Moreover, rulers exercised authority in a wide range of areas, from taxation to military affairs, and from justice to economic policies. Each of these domains was geographically determined, but these geographical areas of influence did not necessarily coincide with each other, and seldom coincided with the 'political' boundaries of a ruler's polity. Finally, rulers could win or acquire (or lose or sell) a diverse set of domains with a different juridical character, such as fiefs, bishoprics, towns, and villages.[9]

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8   Agnew, 'The Territorial Trap', pp. 60, 64. For a discussion of the problems of the concept of *Personenverbandstaat*, see Althoff, *Friends*, pp. 4-22, and the contribution of Duncan Hardy in this volume.
9   Sahlins, *Boundaries*, pp. 28-29.

In-depth analyses of late medieval sources as diverse as administrative documents, account books, chronicles, and heraldic records confirm that both princes and other political actors, and even inhabitants, shared a certain awareness about the spatial extent and limits of specific areas of control (be they jurisdictional, fiscal, military, etc.). This is apparent, for example, in discussions between princes and other political actors on the maintenance of borders and on the spatial validity of privileges. These observations have caused an important shift in historiography: most historians now agree on the idea that medieval 'territories' were not top-down constructions that can be compared to modern states (i.e. nation states). This shift is also largely due to the so-called spatial turn, which has stimulated medievalists and early modernists since the 1980s to causally link power relations between individuals and groups to the space(s) where these took place – and vice versa. Inspired by the conceptual framework of Henri Lefebvre, the French sociologist and philosopher, more and more historians are considering space as an important analytical tool. Following on his book *La production de l'espace* (1974), space is understood as being both produced and defined by the interactions of individuals and groups, while it – in turn – produces and defines social agency for all actors involved.[10] Indeed, public as well as private space is much more than the mere physical or material setting for political, social, and cultural actions.

Germany in the first decennia of the twentieth century saw the emergence of the branch of historiography known as *Landesgeschichte*, with Otto Brunner as its most prominent representative. The most important conclusion of his writings was that the German territories had not been constructed from above, but were the result of the acts of both the princes and the so-called *Landesgemeinde*: the political communities of these lands.[11] It was only from the 1970s that studies of *Raumbewusstsein* and especially *Landesbewusstsein* became popular. Of course, it is very difficult to translate this 'awareness' among political actors (of varying rank and status) of the spatial extent of specific regions to identity-formation processes. Jean-Marie Moeglin argued that 'between the objective realities constructed by the political and institutional structures and the processes of consciousness which lead to identity formation, there is a dialectical and complicated relationship'. Indeed, analyses of narrative sources such as (urban and dynastic) chronicles show that identity formation in medieval Europe had

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10   Lefebvre, *Production of Space*. A good introduction to the work of Lefebvre is Elden, 'Space', pp. 262-267. See also the viewpoint of urban historians on Lefebvre in Arnade, Howell and Simons, 'Fertile Spaces', pp. 517-518, 527, 541-542; Boone and Howell, 'Introduction', pp. 2-3.
11   Brünner, *Land und Herrschaft*; Werner, 'Zwischen politische Begrenzung'.

important geographical connotations, and that the dynasty commonly functioned – and was perceived – as the link between the land and its citizens. Most of these medieval texts focus on the specific qualities and beauty of the land and landscape, as well as on the good deeds and character of the area's inhabitants, princes, saints, etc. Often, however, rather than aiming to construct group identities, such descriptions of specific regions mainly wanted to emphasise the fact that (future) rulers were expected to respect and maintain the 'age-old' privileges obtained by a land's inhabitants. In addition to written texts, symbols and emblems were made and used to represent what Moeglin has called 'land consciousness'. In this process, the different political elites played a crucial role, although their strategies could differ.[12]

Len Scales's book about the shaping of German identity in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as well as Andrea Ruddick's study on the relationship between identity and political culture in fourteenth-century England, follow up on this argument. Both authors show how medieval clerks, chroniclers, and heraldic painters tried to construct and visualise territorial units and their boundaries, and to disseminate these representations among the population. Moreover, these researchers scrutinise and problematise the words used in narrative and administrative sources to describe the territories people were living in, such as *lant*, *regnum*, and *patria*.[13] Both historians pay due attention to the concept of 'political community' – 'the community of political actors with and through whom a monarch was bound to rule', to quote Scales's definition – which was formed through history and closely connected to the territory.[14] In French historiography, too, increasing attention has been paid to themes such as space, borders, and territories, on both a regional and a supra-regional level.[15] For instance, in his book *Le royaume des quatre rivières*, Léonard Dauphant describes several techniques employed in late medieval France to represent space, which – in his opinion – led to a growing consciousness of what geographical space entailed for contemporaries.[16]

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12   Moeglin, 'Land, Territorium und Dynastie'.

13   For the terms *regnum* and *communitas regni* see the seminal book by Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, especially chap. 8, and a recent collection of essays by Barthélémy et al., *Communitas regni*.

14   Scales, *The Shaping of German Identity*, p. 189; Ruddick, *English Identity*.

15   Bührer-Thierry, Patzold and Schneider, *Genèse des espaces politiques*; Péquignot and Savy, *Annexer?*; Lienhard, *Construction*.

16   Dauphant, *Royaume des quatres rivières*, pp. 115-224. On pp. 158-164 Dauphant pays special attention to the *Livre de la description du pays* of Berry Herald from 1453, the oldest geographical

For the late medieval Low Countries, urban historians especially have used space as an analytical tool, inspired by the conceptual framework of Lefebvre. Socio-economic space as well as the ideological and political representation of space have been studied in some detail.[17] Recently, Robert Stein and Lecuppre-Desjardin convincingly demonstrated that the formation of the Burgundian composite state, a conglomerate of principalities and autonomous cities and lordships situated on the fringes of the Holy Roman Empire and France in the course of the fifteenth century, had important spatial dimensions.[18] The Burgundian dukes knew that they were not sovereign princes and that they had to share their juridical competences with the Holy Roman Emperor on the one hand, and the king of France on the other. As a consequence, the maintenance of the borders with – particularly – the kingdom of France, was of utmost importance in Franche-Comté and in the southern principalities of the Low Countries.[19] Interestingly, both authors used the 'space' and 'territories' of the Burgundian duke in fairly different ways. Stein has a more institutional approach, scrutinising the relationship between the titles of dukes with the actual principalities they came to possess. Lecuppre-Desjardin, in turn, focuses rather on the political or even 'imagined' community along the lines of Moeglin and Scales, paying attention to the 'territorial consciousness' not only amongst the dukes and their administrators but also amongst their (urban) subjects.

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The present volume aims to contribute to ongoing debates on the nature and character of territory as a meaningful spatial category and analytical tool. It does so by confronting the ideas of geographers with a variety of pre-modern administrative sources, such as fiscal account books, and narrative texts, such as chronicles. Central to this volume is the conviction that an analysis of the notion of territory in a pre-modern setting can only be achieved through an analysis of territorial practices: practices that relate people and power to space. The main inspiration for this hypothesis is a recent (re-)examination of the changing historical meanings of the concept

description of France. Here Dauphant follows in the footsteps of P.S. Lewis, whose 1967 book on later medieval France sets out to answer the same question: 'What was France in the later Middle Ages?' Lewis, *Later Medieval France*.

17   Boone and Stabel, *Shaping Urban Identity*; Boone and Howell, *The Power of Space*; Lichtert, Dumolyn and Martens, *Portraits of the City*.

18   Stein, *Magnanimous Dukes*; Lecuppre-Desjardin, *Le royaume inachevé*.

19   Lecuppre-Desjardin, 'Annexions'.

of territory by the political theorist and geographer Stuart Elden in *The Birth of Territory*. The central idea, inspired by Michel Foucault, is that territory is simultaneously a word, a concept, and a practice.[20] Through an in-depth reading of philosophical texts written by famous authors and thinkers such as Plato, Cicero, Augustine, Machiavelli, and Locke, Elden aims to reconstruct the 'genesis' and evolving meanings of the word 'territory' in Western political thought, to gain insight into the relation between space and power in the past.[21]

In classical Antiquity, the word *territorium* could be understood as farming land near a city, but it was also used to refer to the jurisdiction of a town's magistrate. By the first half of the sixth century, *territorium* had become a common term to refer to jurisdictional space, for instance, in the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, a large collection of laws and jurisprudence compiled by order of Emperor Justinian. Over the succeeding centuries, the link between *territorium* and *jurisdictio* became widespread in legal texts. However, in European regions such as France, the word *territoire* was rather uncommon until the seventeenth century.[22] In Italy, on the other hand, jurists like Bartolo da Sassoferrato (1314-1357) had already entered into lively discussions about the meaning of the concept. He considered territory as 'the very thing over which political power is exercised', and based this conceptualisation on the use of the term in Roman Law. Bartolo defined territory as a *res immobilis* ('unmovable thing'), as land and buildings. In addition, he pointed to the etymological origins of *territorium*: it was derived from the Latin verb *terrere*, meaning 'to frighten' or 'to intimidate'. An army could act in a 'terrifying and dictatorial way' over a certain area and consider that its territory. In other writings Bartolo argued that jurisdiction and practical technological resources, such as geometry, were necessary for a better understanding of the ownership rights of land.

According to Elden, Bartolo failed to fully grasp the complexity of the concept of territory because of his focus on its politico-economic and military-strategic aspects.[23] In Elden's view territory is closely correlated with the geographical concepts of 'land' and 'terrain'. Land is concerned with property, something that can be bought or sold, and primarily reveals something about property relationships. Where land is a politico-economic

20   Elden, 'How Should We Do the History of Territory?', p. 15.
21   Elden, *The Birth*.
22   Somaini, 'Territory, Territorialisation, Territoriality', pp. 24-25; Elden, *The Birth*, pp. 63-64; Elden, 'Land, Terrain, Territory', pp. 806-807.
23   Elden, *The Birth*, pp. 220-229.

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concept, terrain is more a politico-strategic concept. Therefore, terrain refers to more than the 'physical aspects of the earth's surface': it is the stage where conflicts over land take place and land is administered and governed.[24] Although land and terrain are closely related to territory, Elden points out that they should be considered as two separate analytical categories. To study the relationship between people, power, and space in the past, he proposes a new approach to the concept of territory, which focuses on the techniques and laws applied ('the legal and the technical'), including advances in geometry, cartography, and land surveying.[25] In other words, according to Elden, each 'territory' must be seen (and studied) as a 'bundle of political technologies' and 'techniques for measuring land and controlling terrain'.[26] Moreover, such an approach could help historians to grasp the spatial dimension of power struggles in the past, as these techniques and technologies did exist (and sometimes even originated) in medieval European societies. To tackle this important question and methodological challenge, we invited scholars to study territorial practices in medieval and early modern Europe, and to explore the perception and representation of land and terrain through the use of a broad range of sources: from administrative texts to maps, from stained glass windows to chronicles.

Although Elden claims that 'territory is not a term that is specifically helpful in making sense of the Middle Ages',[27] we do want to make an effort in this volume. Whereas Elden concentrates on the 'big political thinkers' of medieval Europe, we want to go beyond their conceptual frameworks. It that sense it does not matter that they did not use this exact term 'to describe the object of political rule'.[28] The first section of this volume, therefore, contains contributions problematising the use of the concepts of territory, territorial practices, and 'territorial integrity' in specific historical and geographical contexts, such as the Holy Roman Empire, Italy, and the Duchy of Guelders in the Low Countries. All articles discuss the ways in which sources such as fiscal documents, maps, and constitutional charters can reveal pre-modern conceptions and thinking about the link between certain spatial settings and political power, as well as economic, social, and cultural interactions. In addition, the widespread use in current historiography of 'a territorial vocabulary' is confronted with the contemporary use and interpretation

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24   Ibid., pp. 9-10, and especially Elden, 'Land, Terrain, Territory'.
25   Elden, 'Land, Terrain, Territory', p. 809
26   Elden, *The Birth*, pp. 323-325.
27   Elden, 'How Should We Do the History of Territory?', p. 12.
28   Ibid.

of spatial concepts such as *terra(e)* and *land(e)* in administrative sources produced by the most important political actors of medieval Europe: kings and princes, the nobility, the church, as well as urban authorities. Indeed, all authors share the idea that any kind of 'spatial stability' in (late) medieval Europe was the result of the dynamics between the various power groups involved, who discussed, maintained, and defended their areas of jurisdiction.

In this context, the first section of this volume introduces two often neglected political actors – the nobility and the clergy – who could also, and sometimes surprisingly independently, control and manage 'land'. Interestingly, both geographers and historians often tend to focus on 'secular space' and territories of (city-)states, kingdoms, and empires. The territory of the Church, 'ecclesiastical space', is relatively understudied, although it can be argued that this was one of the best documented and most stable spatial organisations of medieval Europe. The geographical boundaries of the (jurisdictional, fiscal, and political) power base of bishoprics, parishes, convents, and churches were relatively well known from late Antiquity onwards. Indeed, as Devroey and Lauwers put it in their conclusion to a volume on the construction of space in the Middle Ages, '[the] medieval cleric was at the same time a producer of traces (texts, signs, material objects) illustrating practices and a constructor of "holy" or "framed" spaces'.[29] This section poses questions such as the following: What was the impact of an advanced feudal organisation of society? Whose 'territories' were at stake? How did the presence or absence of a central monarchical authority influence the relationship between power and space?

If we consider pre-modern territories as political, jurisdictional, and/or socio-economic constructions which linked people and power to space, it follows that the concept of territory had different meanings for different people and social groups, in different times, and in different places. As we have mentioned before, in late medieval Europe the struggle for power was often defined by claiming specific rights and authority over specific spaces and their inhabitants. The question is how the inhabitants, trespassers, and conquerors of pre-modern towns, principalities, and composite states experienced these areas' political, jurisdictional, and socio-economic rights, privileges, *and* spatial boundaries. Which rights were important for which actors (e.g., the prince, the nobility, urban elites, and ecclesiastical elites), and to what extent were these rights and privileges spatially determined?

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29   Devroey and Lauwers, 'L'espace des historiens médiévistes'.

What techniques were used to define, claim, and negotiate specific rights in and over specific areas and their inhabitants?

To tackle these questions, the second part of the volume concentrates on the construction, management, and contestation of space (whether by military or other means) by various stakeholders and political actors as it is expressed in princely and urban administrative sources, as well as in cartography and legislation. A combination of traditional analytical methods with more recent digital applications, such as GIS, allows us to gain insight into various aspects of the spatial organisation of late medieval societies and royal courts in Brabant, the Meuse region, France, and the Low Countries at large. These aspects involve the construction of fiscal boundaries, and the perception of 'foreigners' during warfare, peace negotiations, and military service, as well as the creation of linear frontiers in the context of the ambitious expansion politics of the Tudor king, Henry VIII. Most importantly, all contributions pay considerable attention to the impact of the movements of both individuals and groups in times of peace and warfare. This approach not only yields promising insights in the pre-modern perception of fiscal, military, and economic boundaries, but also allows for the problematisation of concepts such as 'foreign' and 'frontier'. Moreover, it allows us to nuance the idea that itinerant courts were the principal alternative to having a single capital city in the late medieval Low Countries.

The drawback of focusing on the concept of territory as manageable land or terrain is that this fails to do justice to the concept's important imaginative connotations. In the wake of the *spatial turn*, we understand territories simultaneously as physical spaces (land), political, jurisdictional spaces (terrain), and *lived* spaces, which could be perceived (and imagined) quite differently by different actors, in different contexts. The question central to the third and final part of the volume is how inhabitants (and visitors) of principalities, lordships, and towns perceived and represented the territories (and the boundaries of the territories) they were living in or travelling through vis-à-vis the (composite) state they formed part of.[30] Indeed, territories in late medieval Europe were not only structured and divided by administrative, fiscal, or jurisdictional boundaries, but also by traditions, myths of origin, and cultural differences (e.g., linguistic or religious differences). With few exceptions, even the most ambitious European rulers failed to establish a centralised government in the late medieval period. In general, the autonomy of the constituent principalities,

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30   A similar question was central in a volume edited by Keith Lilley, *Mapping*, esp. p. 12.

lordships, and towns was protected by various socio-economic, political, and jurisdictional privileges.

In recent decades, scholars have paid much attention to the relationship between these local privileges and processes of identity formation on a local, regional, or even 'national' level. To tackle this important aspect of modern or pre-modern thinking about territory, the final chapters of this volume explore representations of territories by way of analyses of diverse narrative and pictorial sources – from chronicles, charters and travel narratives, to heraldry, to maps and paintings. First, through a close comparison of the (often strategic) use of heraldic signs in two specific geographical settings, the contributors to this third section demonstrate the importance of the communicative functions of heraldry in noble, clerical, and urban milieus. Second, they add important nuances to assumptions about the driving forces and motives behind identity politics in the late medieval Low Countries through an in-depth reconstruction and analysis of all actors involved in the production (or reproduction) of contemporary historiography and literature. Last but not least, they pose the question of to what extent people's religious affiliation might influence their perception and representation of space. In addition to broadening the scope of this volume, the analysis of Franciscan maps of the Holy Land shows that late medieval cartography, rather than aspiring to accuracy and 'realism', aimed to represent and even negotiate imagined spaces.[31] In short: this volume shows how various administrative, jurisdictional, fiscal, socio-economic, cultural, and even religious territorial practices linked these imagined spaces to very real people and considerable power. Moreover, it aims to cut across traditional geographical and chronological boundaries by considering territory over a time span of several centuries, bridging the traditional medieval/early modern divide.

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31   See also Cohen and Madeline, *Space in the Medieval West.*

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