

Premodern State Formation: New Themes and Directions

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Late medieval and early modern societies are often considered to be relatively static: They were estate-based with limited demographic and economic expansion and relatively stable forms of rule, even though dynasties came and went, and multiple regions were part of different composite polities over the centuries. One of the most important challenges in explaining this period remains, however, that these were also, and at the same time, societies in transition. A highly promising model of not only describing but also explaining change with a view to these societies was and still remains the theory of state-building that seeks to explain the transition from medieval forms of statehood to the “modern” state. It underlines the increasing involvement of the state in everyday matters, the growth of its bureaucratic apparatus, its territorial expansion, and its growing authority. Nevertheless, the causes, catalysts, chronology and consequences of these processes of state-building remain hotly debated until the present day.

This conference seeks to resume a discussion on state-building that has been somewhat neglected in recent years. Nearly twenty years after the publication of the seminal 2009 volume on “Empowering Interactions” by Wim Blockmans, André Holenstein, and John Mathieu, a wide array of works on the various issues connected to state-building (i.e. taxation, litigation, fiscal-military expansion, etc.), has been published, but what is lacking is a forum to bring this research together and discuss the state of the art of the field in a more condensed manner. “Empowering Interactions” was, after all, the temporary endpoint of a long debate around the question whether state-building was best described as happening “from above” or “from below”. In the shadow of this larger debate, however, other topics have emerged and other problems are being discussed that only marginally touch on this debate. The role of gender (and more particularly: women) in processes of state-building is a case in point, but so is the question on how rural landscapes can be integrated in processes hitherto largely conceived by “centrist” perspectives dominated by courts, capitals and cities. Cases such as these are not adequately addressed in what is currently often considered to be the state of the field, and there are likely still more. Furthermore, new and promising analytical concepts have been developed that urged historians to pay greater attention to specific aspects of the aforementioned processes, such as ‘accountability’ and ‘popular control’.

This conference aims to take stock of the current state of the research connected to, resulting from and inspired by the Empowering Interactions approach. It is an open invitation to researchers working in the field of late-medieval and/or early modern state-building to showcase their research and explore the conceptual and methodological lacunae in current research. What is – above and beyond the “Empowering Interactions” – the state of the field? What are the most pressing blank spaces? What are the most promising new avenues of research? Topics of interest include (but are not limited to):

- Litigation
- Rural communities
- Petitions
- Representative institutions
- Dynasties
- Women
- Public administrations
- Cities and towns
- Republicanism
- Media and print

We are currently looking for papers (ca. 25min) addressing one or more of the above aspects. If you are interested in participating, please send an abstract by 31 October 2026 of no more than 500 words and a short CV (1-2 pages) to klaas.van.gelder@vub.be and hannes.ziegler@tu-dresden.de. The organizers are hoping to reimburse participants for travel and accommodation costs.