The Pre-Westphalian World

Most international relations theorists date the contemporary system from 1648, the year the Treaties of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years War. These treaties marked the end of rule by religious authority in Europe and the emergence of secular authorities. With secular authority came the principle that has provided the foundation for international relations ever since: the notion of the territorial integrity of states—legally equal and sovereign participants in an international system. Yet key developments preceded and shaped the Westphalian order, especially changes in centralization and decentralization during the Middle Ages.

When the Roman Empire disintegrated in the fifth century, power and authority became decentralized in Europe, but other forms of interaction flourished—travel, commerce, and communication, not just among the elites but also among merchant groups and ordinary citizens. By the year 1000, three civilizations had emerged from the rubble of Rome. First among them was the Arabic civilization, which had the largest geographic expanse, stretching from the Middle East and Persia through North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula. United under the religious and political domination of the Islamic caliphate, the Arabic language, and advanced mathematical and technical accomplishments, the Arabic civilization was a potent force. Second was the Byzantine Empire, located nearer the core of the old Roman Empire in Constantinople and united by Christianity. Third was the rest of Europe, where with the demise of the Roman Empire central authority was absent, languages and cultures proliferated, and the networks of communication and transportation developed by the Romans were beginning to disintegrate.
Much of western Europe reverted to feudal principalities, controlled by lords and tied to fiefdoms that had the authority to raise taxes and exert legal authority. Lords exercised control over vassals, who worked for the lords in return for the right to manage the land and enjoy the lords’ protection. Feudalism, which placed authority in private hands, was the response to the prevailing disorder. Power and authority were located at different overlapping levels.

The preeminent institution in the medieval period in Europe was the church; virtually all other institutions were local in origin and practice. Thus, authority was centered either in the pope in Rome (and in his agents, the bishops, dispersed throughout medieval Europe) or in the local fiefdom. Yet even the bishops seized considerable independent authority despite their overarching allegiance to the church. Economic life was also intensely local.

In the late eighth century, the church’s monopoly on power was challenged by Carolus Magnus, or Charlemagne (742–814), the leader of the Franks in what is today France. Charlemagne was granted authority to unite western Europe in the name of Roman Catholicism against the Orthodox Christian Byzantine Empire in the East; the pope made him emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. In return, Charlemagne offered the pope protection. The struggle between religious and secular authority and the debate over which should rule would continue for hundreds of years, with writers periodically offering their views on the subject. One such
writer was Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), who argued in *De monarchia* that there should be a strict separation of the church from political life. This question was not resolved until three hundred years later by the Treaties of Westphalia.

The Holy Roman Empire itself was a weak secular institution; as one famous saying goes, it was not very holy, very Roman, or much of an empire. Yet Charlemagne's successors did provide a limited secular alternative to the church. The contradictions remained, however, in the desire of the church for universalism versus the medieval reality of small, fragmented, diverse authorities. These small units, largely unconnected to one another and with dispersed populations, all prevented the establishment of centralized governmental authority.

Similar trends of centralization and decentralization, political integration and disintegration, were also occurring in other geographic areas. In Africa, for example, the ancient kingdom of Ghana (not to be confused with the contemporary state) centralized power between the fifth and thirteenth centuries. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the kingdom of Mali prevailed. Each was a powerful political and economic entity. Each had a sophisticated system of tax collection and was an important center of commerce with the Muslims in North Africa, trading gold and salt with their Arab neighbors. Each was an empire with a standing army but with traditional rulers left in place in the outlying districts. On the opposite side of the globe, in what is now Latin America, independent civilizations flourished—the Maya from 100 to 900 C.E. and the Aztecs and Incas from 1200.

Japan was another country where centralization followed a period of warfare and decentralized authority. Whereas the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were largely characterized by turmoil, a period of over two hundred years of more centralized control followed. During the Tokugawa period from 1603 to 1868, Japan was ruled by a shogun. This was a period of strict class hierarchy, led by the warrior caste of samurai, followed by farmers, artisans, and traders. Although the disparate economic conditions led to unrest and violent confrontations occurred, none of these events posed a direct threat to the established feudal system. Yet in Japan as in other regions, it was intervention by Europeans in later centuries that challenged this order.

Although the intellectual debate was not yet resolved, after the year 1000 secular trends began to undermine both the decentralization of feudalism and the universality of Christianity in Europe. Commercial activity expanded into larger geographic areas, as merchants traded along increasingly safer transportation routes. All forms of communication improved. New technology, such as water mills and
windmills, not only made daily life easier but also provided the first elementary infrastructure to support agrarian economies. Municipalities such as the reinvigorated city-states of the northern Italian peninsula—Genoa, Venice, Milan, and Florence—established trading relationships, setting up meeting places at key locations, arranging for the shipment of commercial materials, and even agreeing to follow certain diplomatic practices to facilitate commercial activities. These diplomatic practices—establishing embassies with permanent staff, dispatching special consuls to handle commercial disputes, and sending diplomatic messages through specially protected channels—were the immediate precursors of contemporary diplomatic practice.

These economic and technological changes led to fundamental changes in social relations. First, a new group of individuals emerged—a transnational business community—whose interests and livelihoods extended beyond its immediate locale. This group acquired cosmopolitan experiences outside the realm of the church and its teachings, which had so thoroughly dominated education up to this point. Individual members developed new interests in art, philosophy, and
Niccolò Machiavelli's famous treatise *The Prince* reflected the shift away from religious authority and toward secular government in the Late Middle Ages. Written in 1513, *The Prince* was not published until 1532, after Machiavelli's death.

strength and security of the state. Realizing that the dream of unity in Christianity was unattainable (and probably undesirable), Machiavelli called on leaders to articulate their own political interests. He argued that having no universal morality to guide them, leaders must act in the state's interest, answerable to no moral rules. The cleavage between the religiosity of medieval times and the humanism of the later Renaissance was thus starkly drawn.2

The desire to expand economic intercourse even further, coupled with the technological inventions that made ocean exploration safer, fueled a period of European territorial expansion. Spaniards and Italians were among the earliest of these adventurers. Christopher Columbus sailed to the New World in 1492, Hernán Cortés to Mexico in 1519, and Francisco Pizarro to the Andes in 1533, all disrupting the existing indigenous orders. During this age of exploration, European civilization spread to distant shores. For some theorists, it is these events—the gradual incorporation of the less-developed peripheral areas into the world capitalist economy and the international capitalist system—that mark
acquiring considerable wealth along the way, becoming the supporters of the Renaissance. Writers and scholars discovered ancient Roman literature and the works of the Greek philosophers. During the 1500s and 1600s, as explorers and even settlers moved into the New World, the old Europe remained in flux. In some key locales such as France, England, and Aragon and Castile in Spain, feudalism was being replaced by an increasingly centralized monarchy. The move toward centralization did not go uncontested; the masses, angered by taxes imposed by newly emerging states, rebelled and rioted. New monarchs needed the tax revenue to build armies; they used their armies to consolidate their power internally and to conquer more territory. Other parts of Europe were mired in the secular-versus-religious controversy, and Western Christianity itself was torn by the Catholic and Protestant split. In 1648, that controversy inched its way toward resolution.

**In Focus**

- The sovereign Greek city-states reach the height of their power in 400 B.C.E., they carry out cooperative functions through diplomacy and classic power politics.
- The Roman Empire (50 B.C.E.-C.E. 400) originates imperialism, developing the practice of expanding territorial reach. The empire is united through law and language, while allowing some local identity.
- The Middle Ages (400-1000) witness the centralization of religious authority in the church, with decentralization in political and economic life.
- The Late Middle Ages (1000-1500) foster the development of transnational networks during the age of exploration.