



ARTICLE

# Central Europe in the Fifteenth Century: Patterns of Conflict and Negotiation

Christina Lutter<sup>1</sup>  and Jonathan Lyon<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of History, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria and <sup>2</sup>Department of History, University of Chicago, Chicago, USA

**Corresponding authors:** Christina Lutter; Email: [christina.lutter@univie.ac.at](mailto:christina.lutter@univie.ac.at); Jonathan Lyon; Email: [jlyon@uchicago.edu](mailto:jlyon@uchicago.edu)

## Abstract

The nine articles in this collection are the product of two workshops hosted at the University of Chicago in 2022 and 2023 in affiliation with the University of Vienna. They build on recent work that has called attention to the extraordinary political and religious diversity in the fifteenth-century Holy Roman Empire, and Central Europe more broadly. Pushing back against older historiography, in which this period was frequently overlooked or framed by uncritical use of such broad categories as the “state,” the “territory,” the “estates,” and the “feud,” this collection recognizes the polycentric nature of the fifteenth century’s structures and institutions. Specifically, these articles return to the sources, especially documents of practice rather than normative texts, to open the door to a new understanding of conflicts and negotiations. They illuminate the patterns of conflict and negotiation evident in specific historical contexts by examining actors, networks, and practices of community building—as well as the processes through which conflicts emerged, evolved, and were negotiated and settled. Rather than relying on time-honored categories and meta-narratives, the contributors embrace the messiness of social and political relations and of the extant source material to shine new light on key themes in the fifteenth century’s history.

**Keywords:** Central Europe; Holy Roman Empire; Fifteenth Century; medieval history; social networks; political communities; conflict studies

From the burning of Jan Hus at the stake in 1415 during the Council of Constance, to the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Empire in 1453, to Columbus’s first westward voyage in 1492, the fifteenth century is not lacking in notable events of European and global significance. Nevertheless, as many historians have observed, it is a century that, despite numerous studies on specific topics, has rarely received the sustained attention it deserves—outside of the field of Italian Renaissance history.<sup>1</sup> This is partly for historiographical reasons. More than a century after its publication, Johan Huizinga’s *Autumn(tide) of the Middle Ages [Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen]* and its largely negative view of the later Middle Ages continue to exert enormous influence on the field.<sup>2</sup> Because of this scholarly tradition, the fifteenth century is frequently overlooked, lost somewhere between the supposed heights of medieval

<sup>1</sup>On this point, see most recently, Mathias Herweg, “Das 15. Jahrhundert. Eine Einleitung,” in *Das 15. Jahrhundert*, Melanchthon-Schriften der Stadt Bretten 15, eds. Günter Frank, Franz Fuchs and Mathias Herweg, (Stuttgart, 2021), 9–15. See also John Watts, *The Making of Politics: Europe, 1300–1500* (Cambridge, 2009), 291 and John Van Engen, “Multiple Options: The World of the Fifteenth-Century Church,” *Church History* 77 (2008): 257–84, esp. 260.

<sup>2</sup>Huizinga’s work was originally published in Dutch in 1919; a German translation (*Herbst des Mittelalters*) followed in 1924. The most recent English translation is Johan Huizinga, *Autumntide of the Middle Ages*, trans. Diane Webb, eds. Graeme Small and Anton van der Lem (Leiden, 2020). Recent responses to Huizinga include Howard Kaminsky, “From Lateness to Waning to Crisis: the Burden of the Later Middle Ages,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 4, no. 1 (2000): 85–125; Jo Tollebeek, “‘Renaissance’ and ‘Fossilization’: Michelet, Burckhardt, and Huizinga,” *Renaissance Studies* 15 (2001): 354–66; Edward Peters and Walter P. Simons, “The New Huizinga and the Old Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 74 (1999): 587–620; and Peter Arnade, Martha Howell, and Anton van der Lem, eds., *Rereading Huizinga: Autumn of the Middle Ages, A Century Later* (Amsterdam, 2019).

European civilization in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the great changes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the field of religious history, this has traditionally manifested itself as a tendency to critique fifteenth-century religious life as lacking the spiritual vitality of the central Middle Ages, partly in order to emphasize the transformative effects of the Protestant Reformation that was to come.<sup>3</sup> For political and economic historians, the extraordinarily fragmented landscape of late medieval Europe, with its hundreds of different polities, can look daunting, especially when the sixteenth century—with its “nation-states” and great empires—beckons (although many of those empires had in fact begun before 1500).<sup>4</sup> Still other historians have been drawn to the larger-than-life personalities of the subsequent period, such as Henry VIII in England, Maximilian I in the Holy Roman Empire, his grandson Charles V in Spain, and Francis I in France; Emperor Frederick III (1440–93), in contrast, who is sometimes described as the “arch-sleepyhead” in older scholarship, struggles to attract comparable interest.<sup>5</sup>

All of these historiographical trends offer only a partial explanation, however. For historians trained to work with medieval sources, the extraordinary volume of written material from the fifteenth century—not only archival records of all shapes and sizes but also handwritten manuscripts (despite this being the century of Gutenberg)—can look overwhelming, especially since the vast majority of these sources remain unpublished. For early modernists, on the other hand, many of whom are more accustomed to working with unwieldy amounts of unpublished material, the fifteenth-century source material is still too idiosyncratic and uneven to attract and hold their attention. Academic traditions and curricula in both Europe and North America have reinforced these tendencies; for more than two centuries, students of European history have learned to take the traditional tripartite periodization scheme of ancient, medieval, and modern for granted—or at least to maintain it for the sake of convenience. In this scheme, the fifteenth century is not quite part of the “Middle Ages” from the perspective of many medieval historians, yet it is not “modern” enough to belong to the “early modern” period either.

To be sure, more and more historians are critical of the artificial line traditionally drawn around 1500 to divide these periods—and some even question the concept of the “Middle Ages” itself.<sup>6</sup> Viewed from this perspective, we might even argue that the fifteenth century was a pivotal century —“the middle century” (*das Jahrhundert der Mitte*)—because it sits at the center of many *longue durée* trends that span the period from roughly 1000 to 1800.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, few scholars frame the century in this way. It is still difficult to find clear and concise assessments of the ways in which deep-

<sup>3</sup>For the problem of reform narratives and the fifteenth century, see John Van Engen, “The Church in the Fifteenth Century,” in *Handbook of European History 1400–1600*, eds. Thomas A. Brady, Jr., Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy (Leiden, 1994), 1:306–09. For novel approaches that challenge older scholarship in this field, see Howard Louthan et al., eds., *Diversity and Dissent: Negotiating Difference in Central Europe, 1500–1800* (New York, 2011); Howard Louthan and Graeme Murdock, eds., *A Companion to the Reformation in Central Europe. Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition*, 61 (Leiden 2015).

<sup>4</sup>On empires, see Gabor Ágoston, “The Ottoman Empire and Europe,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History, 1350–1750*, ed. Hamish Scott, vol. II: *Cultures and Power*, (Oxford, 2015), 612–37 and Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2010). For the rise of the nation-state narrative, see Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990–1992* (Cambridge, MA, 1992) and, for a broader overview, Thomas Ertman, “State Formation and State Building in Europe,” in *The Handbook of Political Sociology: States, Civil Societies, and Globalization*, eds. Thomas Janoski et al. (Cambridge, 2005), 367–83.

<sup>5</sup>For a comparative perspective, see, for instance, Glenn Richardson, *Renaissance Monarchy: The Reigns of Henry VIII, Francis I and Charles V* (London 2002); for a comprehensive approach to bridge the medieval and early modern phenomena divide, see Elena Woodacre et al. eds., *The Routledge History of Monarchy* (London 2019). For Frederick III as the “arch-sleepyhead,” see Konstantin Langmaier, “Kaiser Friedrich III. (1415–1493): des Reiches Erzschlafmütze? Der ‘schlafende Kaiser’ als Klischee,” *Zeitschrift des Historischen Vereins für Steiermark* 111 (2020): 129–89.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Duncan Hardy, *Associative Political Culture in the Holy Roman Empire. Upper Germany, 1346–1521* (Oxford, 2018); David Nicholas, *The Transformation of Europe 1300–1600* (London, 1999); Tom Scott, *Society and Economy in Germany, 1300–1600* (Basingstoke, 2002). For the damage done by traditional periodization schemes, see also Constantin Fasolt, “Hegel’s Ghost: Europe, the Reformation, and the Middle Ages,” *Viator* 39 (2008): 345–86; Jacques Le Goff, *Must We Divide History into Periods?*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (New York, 2015); Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, PA, 2008), and most recently Bernhard Jussen, *Das Geschenk des Orest: Eine Geschichte des nachrömischen Europa 526–1535* (Munich, 2023).

<sup>7</sup>For “*das Jahrhundert der Mitte*,” see Peter Moraw, “Fragen der deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte im späten Mittelalter. Bericht über ausgewählte Neuerscheinungen der Jahre 1969 bis 1974,” *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 4 (1977): 59–101,

rooted traditions intermingled with newer developments to pattern life in the fifteenth century specifically.

One of the enduring effects of the century's marginalization is that it is frequently described with abstract categories and sweeping generalizations rather than carefully researched analytical frameworks. More than fifty years ago, Bernard Guenée characterized the later Middle Ages as a crucial period in "[t]he transition from the medieval to the modern State, from feudal to absolute monarchy, *Lehnstaat* to *Ständestaat*, feudalism to capitalism," and we still have not succeeded in completely breaking away from these overly-broad characterizations, which conceal more than they reveal.<sup>8</sup>

In German-language scholarship, this is perhaps most evident in the enduring influence of *Verfassungsgeschichte*, a legal-historical approach to history that emphasizes institutions and political structures over the actions of individuals, social groups, and networks.<sup>9</sup> In this tradition, the fifteenth century was a period when the territorial principalities in the Holy Roman Empire were coalescing and fulfilling roles comparable to those of the "state" in other parts of Europe (above all England and France). According to this narrative, within these principalities, political and social life was increasingly shaped by the relationships between the princes and the estates, which were comprised of aristocratic, ecclesiastical, and urban elites that operated as self-interested blocs. And when disputes broke out in these territories, especially feuds, they were neither anarchic nor gratuitously violent (as Huizinga contended) but constrained by legal norms that limited the level of death and destruction. To be sure, all of these arguments have been intensively debated, modified, and adjusted as political agendas and ideologies have shifted over the past century.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, they still hinge on assumptions about the explanatory power of such categories as the "state," the "territory," the "estates," and the "feud"—categories that have rarely been rigorously tested through close reading of fifteenth-century sources, especially documents of practice rather than normative legal, religious, or philosophical texts.

Viewed from the perspective of scholarship on the Middle Ages more generally, there is a second type of marginalization at work when we focus specifically on the Holy Roman Empire—or even Central Europe more broadly—in the fifteenth century. Many of the abstract categories used to describe this century, and the grand narratives built upon them, were explicitly or implicitly developed with "states" like England and France, or with eminent urban polities (above all the Italian "city-states"), in mind. In contrast, Central Europe, both as a region and a concept, has long remained in the shadows of international scholarship and has rarely been fully integrated into comparative work. Especially from an Anglo-American perspective, European medieval history has by and large been synonymous with *Western* European medieval history. Even today, when online databases make it easier than ever to access the newest books and articles, it remains exceedingly difficult to find English-language works on fifteenth-century Europe that effectively integrate the most recent scholarship in the field from Central Europe.<sup>11</sup> One obvious reason for this is that many historians who are native English speakers do not have the language skills needed to access much of this research. But this is not the only reason.

esp. 87); Herweg, "Das 15. Jahrhundert," 10; and Alois Niederstätter, *Das Jahrhundert der Mitte: An der Wende vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit* (Vienna, 1996).

<sup>8</sup>Bernard Guenée, *States and Rulers in Later Medieval Europe*, trans. Juliet Vale (Oxford, 1985; originally published in French in 1971), 207.

<sup>9</sup>One of the best and most concise discussions of *Verfassungsgeschichte* in English remains the "Translators' Introduction" to Otto Brunner, *Land and Lordship: Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria*, trans. Howard Kaminsky and James Van Horn Melton (Philadelphia, 1992), xiii–xlvi. See also the contributions to this special issue by Hardy, Lutter, Lyon, and Sharp, which all discuss the impact of *Verfassungsgeschichte*.

<sup>10</sup>For recent overviews and critiques of the *Verfassungsgeschichte* tradition, with a focus on the Holy Roman Empire in particular, see Hardy, *Associative Political Culture*; Jonathan R. Lyon, *Corruption, Protection and Justice in Medieval Europe: A Thousand-Year History* (Cambridge, 2022).

<sup>11</sup>This is slowly starting to change: Nada Zečević and Daniel Ziemann, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Central Europe* (New York, 2022); Florin Curta, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500–1300* (London, 2022). See also, for a German-language example, Elisabeth Gruber, Christina Lutter, and Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Kulturgeschichte der Überlieferung im Mittelalter: Quellen und Methoden zur Geschichte Mittel- und Südosteuropas* (Vienna, 2017).

As this collection of articles makes clear, Central Europe, and more specifically the Holy Roman Empire, does not fit neatly into Western European narratives of political, religious, and social history, nor does it lend itself to being analyzed easily with the classic terminological tools sketched out above. Yet, this mismatch is exactly the reason why the Holy Roman Empire, and Central Europe at large, seem particularly appropriate for studying forms of composite and shared rule<sup>12</sup> and the multiple types of interactions between various political actors in the fifteenth century. What is more, some of these actors, such as “estates,” only took the shape of institutional bodies over time in decades-long processes of interactions and negotiations between individuals who had their own political agendas—until eventually becoming institutional “facts” in the sixteenth century. A focus on political cultures, that is to say on the actions of political actors within the broader context of social networks, ritualized and symbolic forms of communication, intellectual milieus, and religious expectations, opens the door to a new understanding of fifteenth-century conflicts and negotiations that avoids older, structuralist models and assumptions.<sup>13</sup>

Viewed from this perspective, regional diversity and political fragmentation in the Holy Roman Empire<sup>14</sup>—and the influential roles played by noble families here as well as in all the other Central European kingdoms (Poland, Bohemia, Hungary)—were key factors that contributed to forms of shared responsibility and, hence, to shared claims to political representation (irrespective of these polities’ otherwise substantial differences in political structure). Noble elites’ traditional privileges included a relatively high amount of political participation in matters of (dynastic) succession and in the maintenance or restoration of peace and the “common good” (*bonum commune*).<sup>15</sup> Their involvement, especially in times of underage heirs to the throne, led to the development of various and nuanced forms of political participation and decision making, among them most prominently the formation of small and large assemblies, which provided a—albeit always fragile and contested—balance of power.<sup>16</sup>

The nine papers published here address these heterogeneous balancing acts. They directly challenge many long-standing assumptions about the fifteenth century, and fifteenth-century Central Europe in particular, by engaging intensively with the period’s rich and diverse source material, both in its normative and its practical dimensions, as well as with different scholarly traditions. The papers are the product of two workshops hosted at the University of Chicago in the spring of 2022 and 2023, funded by *The International Grant Program for University of Chicago and University of Vienna Faculty*. They build on recent work—some of it by contributors to this collection—that has called attention to the century’s extraordinary diversity of political and religious forms.<sup>17</sup> Central to our conceptualization of the fifteenth century is the recognition of the *polycentric* nature of its structures and institutions.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup>On this point, see Paul Srodecki, Norbert Kersken, and Rimvydas Petrauskas, eds., *Unions and Divisions: New Forms of Rule in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (London, 2023); Charlotte Backerra, “Personal Union, Composite Monarchy, and ‘Multiple Rule,’” in: Woodacre, *The Routledge History of Monarchy*, 89–111; and John H. Elliott, “A Europe of Composite Monarchies,” *Past & Present* 137 (1992): 48–71.

<sup>13</sup>For political culture, see, for example, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, ed., *Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen?* (Berlin, 2005); Jörg Peltzer, *Rank and Order. The Formation of Aristocratic Elites in Western and Central Europe, 500–1500* (Ostfildern, 2015); and Christian Heinemeyer, *Zwischen Reich und Region. Governance und politische Netzwerke um Kaiser Friedrich III. und Kurfürst Albrecht Achilles von Brandenburg* (Berlin, 2016).

<sup>14</sup>Graham A. Loud and Jochen Schenk, eds., *The Origins of the German Principalities, 1100–1350* (London, 2017).

<sup>15</sup>Bernd Schneidmüller, “Rule by Consensus: Forms and Concepts of Political Order in the European Middle Ages,” *The Medieval History Journal* 16 no. 2 (2013): 449–71; Julia Burkhardt, “Frictions and Fictions of Community, Structures and Representations of Power in Central Europe, c. 1350–1500,” *The Medieval History Journal* 19, no. 2 (2016): 191–228.

<sup>16</sup>On the various forms of more or less institutionalized assemblies, see most comprehensively Hardy, *Associative Political Culture*; and Julia Burkhardt, “Assemblies in the Holy Roman Empire and the East Central European Kingdoms: A Comparative Essay on Political Participation and Representation,” in *Rulership in Medieval East Central Europe. Power, Rituals and Legitimacy in Bohemia, Hungary and Poland*, East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 450–1450, vol. 78, eds. Grischa Vercamer and Dušan Zupka (Leiden, 2022), 198–214, here 199f with references.

<sup>17</sup>For works that view this diversity of political and religious forms in positive (or, at least neutral) rather than in negative terms, as much older scholarship did, see especially Van Engen, “Multiple Options” and Watts, *The Making of Polities*.

<sup>18</sup>Patrick Lantschner, *The Logic of Political Conflict in Medieval Cities. Italy and the Southern Low Countries, 1370–1440* (Oxford, 2015).

In both the ecclesiastical and secular spheres, and in the many overlaps between them, hierarchical and associative forms of social organization co-existed and interacted to create complex networks of legal, political, spiritual, and economic interest groups. This multiplicity was frequently the source of conflict and violence—sometimes physical, sometimes rhetorical—and this conflict and violence in turn frequently led to negotiations between individuals and groups, who took advantage of the many options made available by this same multiplicity to ease tensions.

Not all options were open to everyone, however. The papers collected here illuminate in various ways the patterns of conflict and negotiation evident in specific historical contexts by examining actors, networks, and practices of community building—as well as the processes through which conflicts emerged, evolved, and were negotiated and settled. Put more simply, rather than relying on time-honored and convenient categories and meta-narratives to describe the fifteenth century, the contributors embrace the messiness of social and political relations and the messiness of the extant source material in order to shine new light on key themes in the century's history.

This messiness is not just a scholarly projection. Contemporary writers, political thinkers, and practitioners—often uniting these activities in their individual biographies—had a clear sense of the growing complexity of their lifetimes, albeit not necessarily in a coherent manner. Already on the eve of the fifteenth century, there were increasingly well-articulated complaints connected to a range of grievances concerning ecclesiastical and secular matters, eventually prompting explicit calls for reform. A spirit of reform was, in fact, among the defining features of the fifteenth-century's political and religious, elite and popular cultures. This collection calls attention to the dynamism and specificity of some of these attempts at reform while also highlighting some of the countervailing trends and entrenched interests that made the implementation of reform so difficult.

The nine papers are organized around several thematically interconnected strands. The first of these focuses on visions of community, societal order, and the “common good” as ideals that could unite people living together within and across political and religious groups. The opening three papers thus pay especially close attention to the ways that individuals and communities sought to uphold or restore these ideals in times of trouble—and to prevent or solve conflicts through recourse to them.

Duncan Hardy takes the most comprehensive approach, discussing the development of imperial reform discourse in the wake of the Ottoman threat after the fall of Constantinople (1453). Drawing on a vast number of contemporary treatises, political correspondence, and ordinances, he suggests we consider the fall of Constantinople as “one of the catalyzing factors” for those institutional reforms within the Holy Roman Empire, which were eventually effectuated only at the end of the century. As he argues, these reforms should be approached more broadly in the light of the constant Ottoman threat that fueled the long-term dynamics of inner-imperial debates for over a half-century. Significantly, crusader rhetoric was closely linked to imperial as well as religious reform rhetoric; according to these visions, the success of military projects for the defense of Christendom depended on an internal consolidation of peace, justice, and order.

To this, Claire Taylor Jones adds a monastic perspective on the spirit of religious reform in the early decades of the fifteenth century. She elaborates on the famous Dominican reformer Johannes Nider's (1380–1438) theological arguments—above all in his *De reformatione religiosorum*, written at the time of his work for the Council of Basel (1431–39)—and examines how he sought to put those arguments into practice within and beyond the Dominican order. Elements of Nider's own liturgical reform project were directed at concrete Dominican communities and addressed disagreements over dispensations from liturgical assignments and over specific liturgical practices, especially musical performance. In focusing on one reformer's goals and on specific men's and women's communities, rather than falling back on general categories of “reform” to characterize fifteenth-century religious life, Jones demonstrates the local impacts and effects of contemporary reform endeavors. And yet, these endeavors were also embedded in much more comprehensive theological projects on the necessity of religious reform for monks, nuns, and clerics in other communities as well, and even society at large.

Both Hardy's and Jones's papers thus argue for a pluralizing and practical approach to “reform,” one that leaves behind overly simplistic narratives such as “reform” versus “decline” and that opts

instead to reconstruct patterns of reform argumentation across societal fields. While these first two papers draw on a variety of sources to make their arguments, Griffin Ridley presents a close reading of one specific “reform model” developed by Nider’s contemporary, the Italian humanist Leonardo Bruni (1377–1444), for Florentine urban politics. This is anything but a narrow case study, however. Bruni’s *History of the Florentine People* stretches from ancient Rome to his own time and can, according to Ridley, be read as a leadership manual for Florentine citizens, one directed against both emperors and popes because of the harm they had done to cities like Florence. Challenging recent scholarly interpretations that have mainly focused on Bruni’s “modern” assessment of ancient history, Ridley highlights the importance of the—as he terms it—“quintessential medieval struggle” between Empire and Papacy in Bruni’s political thought. He thus complements Duncan Hardy’s discussion of the enduring importance of these two powers in the fifteenth century. However, Bruni’s vision of community—of both individual and the “common good”—was built on the ideal of a self-sufficient city independent from external forces; he aimed to demonstrate through his narrative of the vicissitudes of Florentine history that this was the only means for ensuring a polity’s stability and permanence. In his role as a chancellor of Florence, Leonardo Bruni was not just a theoretical thinker but also a practical politician. Hence, the backdrop of the historical theory he developed was exactly that messy practice of politics that ran counter to many of the ideals and models he and other Humanists upheld.

The second group of papers follows closely on this last point and examines the often confusing mix of social, economic, political, and military relationships that generated conflicts and alliances within and between princes, cities, religious communities, and the officials who represented them. Three papers explore urban political life “on the ground” through a variety of typical conflicts—ones that developed in, with and beyond cityscapes in the German-speaking lands—and focus on the specific actors who shaped these conflicts.

Both Christina Lutter and Herbert Krammer test the model of cities as both pivotal nodes and polycentric entities, which Patrick Lantschner aptly develops to compare conflicts within and beyond cities in Northern Italy and Flanders.<sup>19</sup> They focus in a comparative manner on a series of upheavals that shook the city of Vienna under Habsburg rule between the turn of the century and the 1460s. Adopting a prosopographical and social network approach, they both turn their attention to the interactions and relations of those people who in fact went to war and negotiated peace, and examine their role in shaping politics. On the one hand, the great abundance of charters and administrative sources from this century makes it possible to establish the heterogeneity of politically active groups and individuals and to “profile” a surprisingly substantial number of actors in terms of their socio-political backgrounds and their career tracks. On the other hand, it turns out that prosopography only takes us so far when it comes to accurately establishing individual motives for political alliances or opposition. After all, even contemporaries eventually returned to the grand narratives of urban community values—as upheld in theoretical treatises discussed in the first section of this collection—or to ideals of dynastic loyalty when trying to explain the dynamics and contingency of social crises, which remained at least partially opaque to them.

Nevertheless, one key factor that can be quite easily established as underlying many strategic moves in these complex conflictual settings was money. Alexandra Kaar uses the example of a long-lasting feud (1413–18) between the city of Regensburg and the nobleman Hans I Staufer of Ehrenfels from the neighboring Upper Palatinate to demonstrate that the financial and social costs of warfare were key aspects in the complex dynamics of conflict escalation. In the territorially fragmented political landscape of Southern Germany, political actors of all sorts (nobles, religious communities, towns, etc.) had to constantly defend their privileges and possessions and had to be prepared to assert their political standing against a number of competing forces. Feuding and warfare were strategies as widely accepted as negotiations for all the many types of fifteenth-century polities, and actors were ready to spend enormous sums during conflicts to attain their goals.

<sup>19</sup>Lantschner, *Logic of Political Conflict*.

Lutter's, Krammer's, and Kaar's papers all reveal the polycentric nature of authority in the fifteenth century and uncover the heterogeneity of political and economic elites in different regions and cities, and even in the same city in different decades. The final three papers also insist on placing the focus on individuals and networks rather than institutions and structures when examining communities and their conflicts, and they add to this a set of reflections on people of lower or more marginalized social status.

Like Kaar, Jonathan Lyon discusses the economic foundations of rule. By questioning long-entrenched assumptions about lordly rights, princely territories, and state-building in the fifteenth century, he draws attention to the ways in which local communities could be transferred from the authority of one lord to another via economic transactions between members of elites. In the process, the members of these communities could find themselves paying taxes to, and going to the law courts of, new lords who had few incentives to treat them as anything more than a source of income. Taking as an example a small law court in Saxony-Anhalt in the mid-fifteenth century, he shows how the practice of pledging lordly rights could lead to cycles of tensions and negotiations that could persist for years or decades in small towns and rural communities. This "age of pledging" defies easy categorization in the classic feudalism-to-capitalism and origins-of-the-state narratives into which the fifteenth century is too often placed.

Tristan Sharp also questions traditional characterizations of fifteenth-century social and economic life, but he turns his lens to the subject of the feud. Challenging the traditional model of the late medieval feud—which insists that, in the absence of modern state structures, the rules of feuding served to limit excessive violence and preserve social order—he argues that the violence associated with the feud had an indelible impact on a wide range of social groups. By reading sources that uncover the local experience of feuding—rather than simply accepting how normative texts tell us feuds were supposed to work—Sharp reveals how all sorts of communities, including monasteries and even convents, could be violently attacked in the regular course of feuds. Indeed, in contrast to most scholarship in this field, he demonstrates how violence against women was not something outside the normative framework of the feud but was in fact a customary element of it. Here, Huizinga's more violent assessment of the later Middle Ages surfaces again after decades of neglect.

The final paper, by James Mixson, addresses another form of violence that was alive and well in the fifteenth century: crusading. Alongside Duncan Hardy's article at the start, it bookends the whole collection by similarly showing, through long overlooked sources, how some of the great conflicts of the century resonated with elites and non-elites alike. Mixson uncovers local responses to the Ottoman threat and Western crusading initiatives in the mid-fifteenth century in the manuscript "miscellanies" from Central European monasteries. Such manuscripts provide extraordinary insights into how religious, social, and political discourses were deeply connected—and how these discourses crossed borders of social status, religious order, and regional background. The stories contained in them traveled the continent, as did the people who acted in them, narrated them, and wrote them down. Indeed, if Lyon and Sharp emphasize how non-elites were often unwillingly caught up in the violent machinations of elites, Mixson reminds us that individuals and small groups of non-elite status also willingly took up the sword or quill to help those same elites' crusading efforts in any way possible.

The nine papers presented here are first and foremost an invitation for historians of both the medieval and modern periods to take a closer look at the fifteenth century, and fifteenth-century Central Europe in particular. We hope that readers will be inspired by the richness of the sources and the stories told here to see this time and place as fertile ground for new research.