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This is a book about an empowering force in European history. Lacking privileges conveyed by birthright (like the nobility) or religious authority (like the clergy), the common people acquired social and political influence through association. From the High Middle Ages, out of a variety of causes, Europeans developed local communities in which they organized public affairs with at least partial autonomy and relatively broad participation. These became the chief frameworks for the articulation of interests by burghers and peasants until the rise of general enfranchisement in the modern period. The following chapters offer an introductory survey to the ‘Communal Age’ in western Europe between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries. In an attempt to overcome common demarcations in the field, the perspective extends over different settings (urban, rural), spheres (secular, ecclesiastical), timeframes (medieval, early modern) and regions (especially English-, German- and Italian-speaking areas).

At the centre of attention, therefore, are the towns, villages and parishes in which people lived. The first two settlement types dominated the secular landscape: villages provided homes and protection for the peasantry, i.e. the vast majority of pre-modern Europeans, while a much smaller number of towns distinguished themselves by a separate legal status and a stronger focus on market exchange. Parishes, the basic units of the ecclesiastical network, cut across this urban/rural divide by providing every man, woman and child with access to the Christian sacraments and a place of worship in the local church. At first sight, therefore, the three types of association appear quite distinct, but – once we turn to underlying structures, collective activities and cultural values – they also had much in common. The ensuing survey attempts to assess these similarities, differences and their wider significance for pre-modern
European society. Following remarks on definitions, thematic structure, regional coverage and chronological scope, the remainder of this Introduction summarizes the state of scholarship and the principal research questions underlying the argument.

**Definitions, themes and chronological scope**

The notion of ‘community’ continues to fascinate scholars as well as a wider public, particularly at a time when a process of accelerated ‘globalization’ threatens to efface regional identities and loosen small-scale associations [49; 47; 303]. This is not, however, a book about the concept of ‘community’ in general. Mindful of legitimate reservations against its proliferation, ambiguity and indiscriminate application (George A. Hillery identified roughly a hundred varieties well over fifty years ago [53]), the focus here lies on bonds of a very specific nature. Terminological definition thus forms an essential first task.

Throughout this study, the phrase ‘local communities’ will be used as a generic term for small-scale topographical units, in which more or less extensive bodies of (male) members utilized shared resources and institutions to exercise a range of rights and duties on behalf of their fellow inhabitants. The combined features of locality, spatial circumscription, horizontal social organization, (relative) inclusiveness, multifunctionality and collective liability distinguish local communities from other types of association built on biological or cultural affinities (e.g. families/ethnicities), personal power (noble leagues), vertical subordination (manors, clientele systems), spiritually motivated separation (religious orders, sects), central direction (states) and specific shared interests (scientific networks, religious fraternities, political parties). ‘Local community’ is preferred over ‘commune’ because of the latter’s predominantly secular and political connotations. The principal types of towns, villages and parishes, furthermore, will be reassessed in the light of both traditional scholarly priorities – like their constitution and social structure – and more recent ‘cultural’ approaches – i.e. with sensitivity to their identities, representations, inter-personal relationships, dynamic evolution and often fluid boundaries [238; 278].

Concentration on local communities as defined above does not imply that other types of association were of little importance.
Corporations of various kinds, such as Alpgenossenschaften in mountainous areas, or craft guilds in towns, united members with shared socio-economic interests; religious houses provided intercessory and charitable services for the local laity; wards and neighbourhoods served a wide range of administrative and practical purposes; bodies of court jurors and representative assemblies fostered further ties within districts and counties. All of these would have to be taken into consideration for a full assessment of socio-cultural organization, but none acquired quite the same overarching local position as towns, villages and parishes. Neighbourhoods functioned as sub-units of larger urban entities; hundreds and counties represented organs of central government; while socio-economic corporations usually focused on the control of specific resources (like trades, pastures or forests). Yet the boundaries were blurred, and closer investigations into the manifold connections and overlaps remain a task for future research.

Part I of this book provides the empirical foundations through brief overviews of paradigmatic case studies. Focusing on regions where the respective units were particularly strong, we shall look in turn at the ‘Italian city’, the ‘German village’ and the ‘English parish’. The purpose of these broad overviews is to distil the complexity of actual situations into ‘ideal types’. Rather than on exhaustive chronological coverage from 1100 to 1800, the emphasis lies on key themes, such as the emergence, characteristics and transformations of the communal principle. Part II then proceeds to a wider comparative analysis of common features, contextual variables as well as interactions with other local, regional and central bodies. Given the ubiquity of all local communities – there were, of course, parishes on the Italian peninsula, villages in England and numerous towns in the Holy Roman Empire, the results should yield insights for western European society more generally. Eastern parts of the Continent, where feudal powers remained considerably stronger and urbanization relatively less advanced, lie beyond the scope of this inquiry, even though communal structures were certainly not absent there [243; 200]. Part III, finally, focuses on period perceptions, conceptual models and current debates, i.e. the ways in which contemporaries as well as modern observers have engaged with the role of urban, rural and parochial communities in European history.

The chronological scope of this study is large, perhaps over-ambitious. It starts in the High Middle Ages, the time of the first
firm evidence for ‘local communities’ in the narrower sense, and extends over several centuries right up to the Atlantic Revolutions of the late eighteenth century, i.e. the moments when ‘equality’ and universal political rights became fundamental constitutional principles (not always, of course, fully implemented in practice). The latter part of this timespan, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, is often linked with the ‘rise of the individual’, i.e. a period in which confessional division, educational opportunities, growing commercialization and economic self-interest weakened collective bonds, creating tensions within local communities which will need to be addressed in Chapter 4 [237; 242]. It goes without saying that the long-term perspective necessitates a concentration on principal features, prevalent patterns and general change rather than a detailed appreciation of the heterogeneity of situations on the ground. Pre-modern history is rightly characterized as primarily local, and few of this book’s findings will be applicable in full for all specific environments, but the main objectives are to lay the foundations, to establish a comparative framework and to propose preliminary conclusions on the nature and significance of the Communal Age in European history. In line with the remit of the ‘Studies in European History’ series, the argument aims for a balanced discussion of sources, methods and concepts, but also for a fresh interpretation of the phenomenon as a whole. As always, such an account can be neither unbiased nor ‘objective’. The author, to lay the cards on the table, leans towards a ‘bottom-up’ school of historiography, seeing the historical process as shaped, if not driven, by the ‘many’ rather than the ‘few’.

**Historiographical approaches**

Scholarship in the field is of a bewildering richness and variety. Historiographies of individual regions, types, periods and processes all have a bearing on the study of local communities, not to speak of the various scales – from micro to macro – and national traditions [236]. Again, it would be futile to aim for comprehensive coverage (and indeed even listing) of all relevant contributions. The emphasis has to be on comparative and general works. Naturally, studies in English predominate, but – given the wider geographical scope – many important French, German and Italian
titles will also be drawn upon. An annotated list of further reading can be found at the end of the book. The bibliography is divided into primary sources, secondary literature and online materials, each in turn arranged into thematic sections.

So where to start? Two essential points of reference are the works of Otto von Gierke and Ferdinand Tönnies first published in the late nineteenth century. The former studied the long-term development of the phenomenon of association (Genossenschaft) as a whole, particularly from a legal and Germanic perspective, covering phenomena as varied as guilds, clubs, sects as well as local communities [50], while Tönnies traced the gradual transformation from a ‘natural’ society based on custom, personal bonds and shared resources (which he termed Gemeinschaft) to one defined by man-made rules, contractual agreements and private property (Gesellschaft) [65b]. For much of the twentieth century, where constitutional history loomed large, we find sustained interest in the medieval concept of universitas, an umbrella term for different types of association linking people with shared interests, common rules and independent institutions – including bodies as diverse as monasteries, towns and universities [56]. Alongside, students of political thought focused on the ‘great minds’ and intellectual schools which generated new ideas and ultimately transformed the ways communities, especially in northern Italy and England, were organized [224]. From our perspective, works on guilds (including both secular craft associations as well as religious fraternities), the conciliar movement (which placed the collective power of assembled Church prelates above that of an individual pope), and the development of republicanism are of particular interest [210; 259; 231; 219]. For the latter, concerned with polities in which sovereignty rested in a wider body of citizens rather than a single monarch, scholars usually draw a pretty straight line from classical models – Aristotle’s Greek polis, where the need for face-to-face exchange among equals limited the size to a few thousand inhabitants [33: iii. 17, vii. 4] – via the constitutional debates of the Italian Renaissance, English seventeenth-century revolutions and the Enlightenment – represented by jurists and philosophers like Bartolus of Sassoferrato, Machiavelli, James Harrington, Montesquieu and Jean-Jacques Rousseau – to the proto-democratic revolutionaries of the Atlantic world [222].

While of unquestionable contextual relevance, the above are probably not the best places to start investigations of local communities
as just defined. Neither are many of the older specialized studies, because of the marked broadening of historiographical agendas over the last generation. The closing decades of the twentieth century saw the rise of, first, social and economic approaches and, more recently, the cultural turn. History as an academic discipline now aspires to capture the entire range of past human interactions, i.e. not just facts, deeds and ideas relating to elites, but also the contributions, perceptions and values of humbler groups. Over and beyond the legal, constitutional and intellectual framework of associations, therefore, relevant works – including those of the ‘new’ political history (which applies a broad cultural approach to the study of government at all levels) – are now expected to address issues like social composition, economic importance, everyday practice, communication structures, gender roles, symbolic representations and spatial constitutions. As yet, many answers remain elusive, not least due to the fragmentary and terse nature of primary sources, but innovative studies like those of Richard C. Trexler (on civic ritual), Katherine French (on late medieval gender roles), and Rudolf Schlögl (on early modern communication systems) provide tasters of what can be achieved.

Regional and period-specific surveys of towns, villages and parishes as well as essay collections on the wider concept of community offer the most convenient introductions to date. Léopold Genicot and Jerome Blum examine developments in the pre-modern countryside; Mack Walker, Eberhard Isenmann, Marino Berengo and Christopher Friedrichs discuss towns; a number of anthologies address medieval parishes; Tom Scott and Richard Mackenney offer comparative studies of city states; Alexandra Shepard and Phil Withington survey community studies for early modern England; Robert Armstrong and Tadhg ÓAnnracháin for early modern Ireland; and Michael Halvorson and Karen Spierling for Europe as a whole. Charles H. Parker and Jerry H. Bentley adopt a yet wider comparative scale, while Anthony Molho, Diogo Ramada Curto and Niki Koniordos focus on related discourses and perceptions. All of these works offer distinctive approaches to key themes such as forms of community, inner structures, conflicting loyalties, patterns of inclusion/exclusion and trends over time.

For theoretical guidance, however, pride of place belongs to Peter Blickle’s concept of ‘communalism’ (discussed in more detail...
in Chapter 6 [42]), which embeds the constitutional and ideologi-
cal affinities of German towns and villages into a much wider inter-
pretive framework for pre-modern Europe. Many disciplines in the
humanities and social sciences provide additional methodical tools
to study networks and hierarchies of communal units [66], while
the late twentieth-century ‘communitarian’ movement attempted
to re-balance the weight of individual interests and the needs of
wider societies [230]. Closer integration of sociological, anthropo-
logical and philosophical perspectives clearly provides a fruitful
challenge for future investigations.

Last but not least, numerous sceptical voices have to be taken
into account. The concern about terminological imprecision has
already been mentioned, but other common charges include the
tendency of ‘community studies’ to romanticize the past by pack-
ing it with homogenous Gemeinschaften [267]; to downplay struc-
tural tensions within towns, villages and parishes [63]; to ignore
the strength of individualist forces [256] and to exaggerate conti-
uities between medieval communes and modern political systems
[220]. ‘What is common in community’, as David Sabean famously
stated, ‘is not shared values so much as the fact that members of a
community are engaged in the same argument’ [145: 29–30].

Such reservations need to be taken seriously, but – as the following
chapters aim to demonstrate – they do not overturn the historical
role and relevance of towns, villages and parishes throughout the
areas examined here (and, as an extension of the regional scope
to Scandinavia would surely underline, beyond). As long as ‘com-
munity’ is not merely understood as a vague sense of belonging, but
a conceptual tool to analyse networks of relationships prompting
members to take specific actions, it retains the ability to illuminate
‘a very significant part of social life’ in pre-modern Europe [45: 127].
It is hoped that the ensuing argument will substantiate this point.
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