

PROPOSAL FOR THE 2024 SSHA CONFERENCE:

Marriage between Warfare and Religion? State capacity and cults of personality in the late medieval and early modern period Northern Europe

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In the current interdisciplinary literature on state capacity, which has had a consequential impact on the recent economic history debates, the role of religion and church as fundamental societal structures shaping state formation and economic development has been discussed only occasionally, typically in conjunction with institutional evolution (see e.g. Johnson & Koyama, 2019). Religion and church have had a significant role in the development of early state capacity, especially in often complementing the power of the (somewhat) secular state (Möller, 2019). There is ample recent research connecting the roles of religion and the rise of capitalism, which suggests that we should explore further the nexus of religion and societal development (Friedman, 2021). Furthermore, war shaped the development of the European states, namely by increasing their competitive ability to project violence (Hoffman, 2015), which in turn led to higher fiscal capacity growth (Dincecco & Katz, 2014).

Here we will connect these various strands of literature to suggest that while the power of the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and the Lutheran Church in late medieval and early modern period waned in favor of stronger nation states and secular rulers, this meant a re-orientation of the power and role of religion in state formation, not that it disappeared entirely. First, churches and church leadership retained their *strong governing roles in local communities* well into the 20th centuries. Second, these churches functioned as *multinational entities* and thus were able to extend leadership via these networks. Third, *churches and religion amplified the power of rulers*, creating mutually beneficial governing relationships, which tied them into the warfare efforts and shaping of the expanding of the states. We will explore in this paper these three different dimensions via various conflicts and the expansion of fiscal capacity in Northern Europe.

Furthermore, we will examine in more detail the use of personality cults, such as saint cults, by the churches to retain their secular political and economic power. There has been relatively little previous economic history scholarship and state capacity research concerning the role of saint cults in general or the use of saint cults (or other cults of personality) in promoting specific conflicts or the warfare state overall. There is some initial research done on the Saint Olav and the role of Saint Olav's cult in the political context of late medieval Finland. (Knuutila, 2010). This research has mainly explored the early history of church and warfare, yet it can lead us to understand better the overall role of religion and church in conflicts and state formation. We will examine these similar cults of personality as a way for the churches to expand or at least retain their political and economic power. In particular, we will analyze how the growth of institutions, markets, and warfare states were integrated; i.e. was it possible to advance a ruler's power as well as the church's power through conflict preparation and execution? Moreover, did religious cults of personality in the form of worshipping saints enable these churches to engage in trade and wage war, similar to most

nascent states? Were these cults of personality, in fact, a way for the churches to retain their roles in the warfare states in the longer run, while the nation states were getting stronger and more define? We indeed argue that this was the case. While some of the outward signs of the power of the churches slowly eroded in this period, they retained their power within the three dimensions mentioned above. Cults of personality were one of the tools at their disposal to do so. As such, we maintain that the closer examination of the role of religion and churches in this period help us understand better the evolution of state capacity on the whole. Given that these dimensions have barely been studied before, our contribution will make a significant contribution to the interdisciplinary research on the formation of state capacity.

Sources:

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