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How vulnerable was England in late fifteenth-century Europe?

4A Europe in 1485

England – minor league player?

Internally riven by the Wars of the Roses, England had seen little active involvement in European affairs since the end of the Hundred Years War in 1453. Although an island, England had limited military forces at its disposal and so was vulnerable to attack from foreign powers, especially France. English concerns and interests were as follows:

- Calais and its hinterland were still controlled by England and remained a highly valued English foothold on the Continent.
- The Netherlands, especially Antwerp, were an essential centre of the cloth industry and it was important for England that they remained accessible.
- Yorkist pretenders were likely to generate foreign-backed invasion attempts.

Brittany – Henry's protector during his exile

Brittany was an independent duchy in the north-west of France ruled by Francis II. After fleeing Britain in 1471, Henry VII had remained in Brittany for most of his exile, so he owed the Duke a debt of gratitude.

France – Europe's greatest power

On becoming king in 1483, Charles VIII inherited a France that had increased quickly in size and power during the fifteenth century. France was strong because of its resources:

- It had the largest and most professional army in Europe.
- It was financially strong – the state had considerable powers in the collection of taxes.
- It had the largest population in Europe at about 15 million.

This 'rejuvenated' France (J. D. Mackie, *The Earlier Tudors, 1485–1558*) could now look to secure Brittany and to pursue its claims to Milan and Naples.

Ireland – beyond the Pale?

By 1461 English rule in Ireland was limited to the Pale, a strip of land about 32 kilometres deep which stretched along the east coast for 80 kilometres. The rest of Ireland was governed by independent chiefs, the greatest of whom were the Fitzgeralds of Kildare. Ireland was a central concern in English foreign policy:

- It provided an ideal springboard for invasion attempts.
- It had deeply held Yorkist sympathies.
- The area beyond the Pale was not under English control.

Scotland – a thorn in the side

Scotland was a nation of about 400,000 people (about the size of Bristol today) with an annual Crown income of only £8,000. The King of Scotland was utterly reliant on the co-operation of the nobility and was vulnerable to violent usurpations. Despite these weaknesses, Scotland remained a considerable thorn in England's side:

- Its vast and rugged countryside made conquest impossible and invasions difficult.
- The traditional alliance between the Scots and the French could expose England on two flanks simultaneously.
- The threat of border raids necessitated two financially draining, permanent garrisons in Berwick and Carlisle.

BURGUNDY

The territory ruled by the Dukes of Burgundy may be referred to as Burgundy, the Netherlands or the Low Countries.

Burgundy – a serious powerbroker

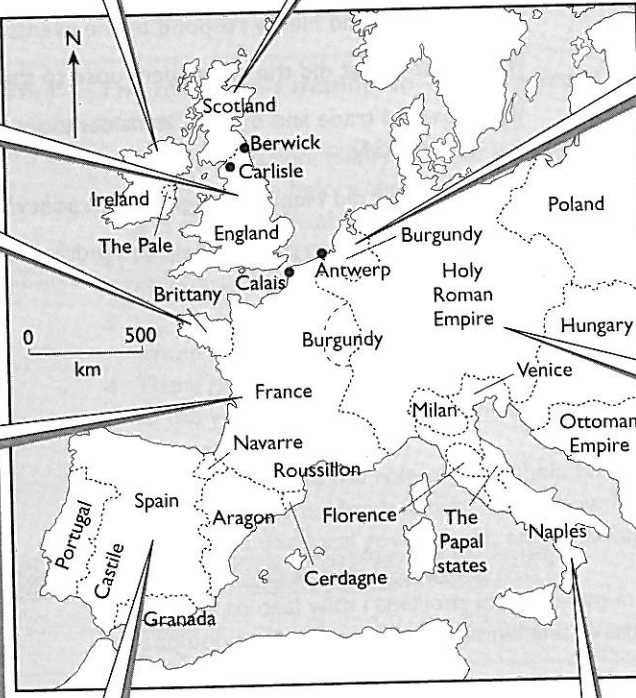
BURGUNDY was a peculiar collection of towns and states that had been rapidly created by three generations of dynastic matchmaking, diplomacy and war. Burgundy was an important territory:

- It was the principal trade and cloth-finishing centre for England.
- Edward IV's sister, Margaret of Burgundy, could act against England.

Holy Roman Empire – a ramshackle collection of states

The Holy Roman Empire stretched over much of central Europe and comprised about 20 million inhabitants and a myriad of different states. The Emperor (Frederick III, 1448–93, then Maximilian, 1493–1519) was a force to be reckoned with. The Empire was a central concern in Europe:

- It was large and strong.
- It had claims and ambitions in Italy.
- It had acquired Burgundy when Maximilian had married Mary of Burgundy in 1477.



Spain – a newly unified force

Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile had become joint monarchs in 1479. Their marriage gave Spain an 'international existence' (J. H. Elliot, *Imperial Spain*) and its armies were soon to command Europe-wide respect. The priorities of Ferdinand and Isabella were as follows:

- They wanted to drive the Moors (the Muslims) out of Granada in the south of Spain. They had started the reconquest in 1482.
- They wanted to secure their northern border by retaking the territories of Cerdagne and Roussillon (seized by France in 1462) and by capturing the French-supported territory of Navarre.
- Ferdinand also had an inherited claim to Naples.

All three of these foreign policy objectives created the possibility of conflict with France, but not with England.

Italy – the big prize

'Italy' did not exist as a country in early modern Europe. What did exist were a number of wealthy and competing states, the principal ones being Milan, Venice, Florence, Naples and the Papal States. Italy was the crucial political target in the late fifteenth century:

- It was weak and divided into different states.
- It was geographically and commercially at the 'crossroads' of Europe.
- It was hugely wealthy and was experiencing a cultural revolution – the Renaissance.
- France and the Habsburg Empire had dynastic claims in Italy that they wished to pursue.