Preface

This book has a rather long history. It is the result of a decade of questions about the nature and the genesis of the medieval state. From this point of view, I am deeply indebted to the students who never failed to ask me questions which might have seemed obvious, but which were always stimulating, forcing me to re-examine my own research in light of their doubts and their need for clarity. ‘What is clearly thought out is clearly expressed’, said the French author Boileau … and the necessity to be well understood and to explain again and again what at first seemed obvious led to new questions and to new lines of research. Since the nature of what historians usually call the ‘Burgundian state’ is the central concern this book, I am also indebted to generations of colleagues past and present whose work has helped me to reinterrogate the notions of state, nation, political communication and belonging at the end of the Middle Ages. This book can be seen as a testimony to the pleasure I have had in reading them and debating with them. Wim Blockmans, Marc Boone, Patrick Boucheron, Philippe Contamine, Estelle Doudet and Pierre Monnet are some of them. Bertrand Schnerb, who accepted to play the game of pro et contra for many years in our common seminars, must be particularly thanked.

We are used to saying that ‘translation is treason’, and I must admit that making my language and concepts relevant for English readers was a major challenge. Fortunately, Christopher Fletcher, as a friend, presumably unaware of the scale of the task, did not hesitate to take up the gauntlet. With patience, subtlety and a remarkable feeling for two languages, he did his best to give a translation as close to the original as possible. I would like to thank him very warmly. My book in this version is now also his. Other
good fairies were present at the birth of this book. I would like to thank Graeme Small for his enthusiasm. As a go-between for me and Manchester University Press, he actively argued for an English version of this study and confirmed his true support for my work. At my side two other men helped me to finalise the text. One of them, Alun Richards, exercised critical analysis of the last version. The second, Stephen Rigby, as a sort of reincarnation of Boileau, spared no effort or time to read again and again, chapter after chapter, sentence after sentence, word after word, forcing us to amend and polish the text in the aim to offer to a large audience a study as learned as it was accessible. His role of rigorous series editor has proved indispensable and has been much appreciated.

I was born in the 1970s, and my first civic involvement was an enthusiastic ‘yes’ in 1993 to the Maastricht treaty. Through the hazards of history, the English version of this book, first published in French in 2016, is now published in the aftermath of Brexit. In the fifteenth century, as in the twenty-first, I am more and more convinced that a political union cannot only be based on administrative institutions and economic treatises. It needs common ambitions, ideas and dreams. That is the story written in this book.

Lille, April 2021