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'Territorial state capacity and violence, 500-1900 CE'

We present new evidence for elite violence using regicide, the killing of kings, and investigate the role of the state in European violence between the 6th and 19th centuries.

It has been argued by Pinker (2011) that the development of state capacity and stable political institutions has enabled human societies to dramatically reduce interpersonal and interstate violence over centuries. In the very long run, the state was able to reduce violent behaviour through policing and educational functions. However, in spite of suggestive evidence on the hypothesis, our knowledge about early state capacity and early violence has been very limited until now. Hence, we provide and carefully evaluate a large new data set on Europe between 500 and 1900 CE.

First, regicide is critically assessed as a proxy for interpersonal elite violence. We show that both components of overall elite violence are in fact highly correlated. As such, this approach allows us to study more than a millennium of the history of violence and state formation.

Second, we present new evidence on state capacity, developing a new proxy indicator, namely 'territorial state capacity' as a measure of states being able to keep or even expand their territories. We find that this is correlated with overall tax capacity and even with tax capacity per capita. This encourages us to interpret territorial state capacity, which can be traced back to the early medieval period, as a proxy indicator for overall state capacity.

Finally, our findings indicate that territorial state capacity has a robust and statistically significant negative correlation with elite violence, measured by regicide. Our empirical analysis is consistent with an interpretation that during the High and Late Middle Ages, changes in territorial state capacity played a violence-reducing role through its impact on interpersonal elite violence. Growing state capacity came with a lower risk of being murdered, although the speed varied between European regions – and sometimes the process was dramatically reversed.