

The Pre-Westphalian State System

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2025.10120074>

Received: 04 January 2026; Accepted: 10 January 2026; Published: 17 January 2026

ABSTRACT

In this article, the characteristics and functioning of the pre-Westphalian state system will be examined, detailing its political and diplomatic structures prior to the emergence of modern sovereignty. It provides a conceptual framework that defines state, sovereignty, and international order, underscoring the hierarchical nature of relations, the fusion of religious and political authority, and the flexible territorial boundaries that characterised this period. The article examines mechanisms of governance and diplomacy, such as tributary networks, religious and cultural norms, dynastic marriages, and warfare as a means of conflict resolution. Additionally, it traces the transition from this fragmented medieval order to the emergence of sovereign states, highlighting the impact of the Thirty Years' War and the Peace of Westphalia (1648) in establishing legal territorial sovereignty and secular diplomacy. By emphasising the historical development of sovereignty, the paper sheds light on the evolution of the international system from a complex, overlapping order to the modern state-centric framework that remains influential today.

INTRODUCTION

We often tend to think of the modern state as the standard model for political organisation. A government rules a defined territory, exercises exclusive authority, and is recognised by others as a sovereign entity. These ideas are so familiar that they almost feel timeless. However, they are not. The modern nation-state is a relatively recent invention, and for most of human history, political life looked nothing like this.

Before the mid-seventeenth century, when the Westphalian system began to take shape, the organisation of power followed very different principles. Political authority was often shared, fragmented, and built on relationships rather than fixed borders. That earlier period is sometimes described as “pre-Westphalian,” but the term can be misleading. It tends to suggest disorder or a lack of development, as though people were waiting for modern states to come along and fix everything. That is not quite accurate.

In many cases, what existed before the state was not a chaotic void but a layered and complex system of governance. Power could be spiritual, hereditary, or earned through custom. It could rest in the hands of several actors at once. Authority might shift from place to place or even coexist in the same space. This did not necessarily result in constant conflict. More often, it reflected a different way of understanding how power should work.

Still, when we look back, it is easy to read history as a straight line, with the modern state at its end. That kind of thinking flattens the past, making earlier systems seem like failed experiments or half-finished versions of what we have today. However, those systems were not just precursors. They had their own logic, values, and sense of order. This writing questions the linear view. It asks what came before the modern state, and how people understood authority, legitimacy, and governance in a world that did not yet follow the rules we now consider normal. It does not argue that those earlier systems were better or worse. It simply suggests that they were different, and that recognising that difference might help us see the present more clearly.

Conceptual Foundations

To understand the pre-Westphalian state system, one must begin by rethinking what is meant by “state,” “system,” and even “order.” The categories commonly used in international relations and political theory, that is, sovereignty, territoriality, autonomy, and governance, are heavily influenced by the legacy of the Westphalian settlement and the subsequent development of the modern nation-state. However, these categories

were not universally applicable in earlier eras. In fact, applying them retrospectively may obscure more than it clarifies.

Feudal Europe provides a particularly instructive example. The system was not characterised by clear vertical hierarchies or bounded jurisdictions that typify modern political organisation. Instead, feudal relationships were defined through a web of personal obligations and loyalties. A single territory might be claimed by multiple authorities simultaneously, and legal norms varied not just between regions but within them. Authority was frequently a matter of negotiation and recognition, rather than imposition or legal entitlement (Kayaoglu, 2010).

Equally important is the religious dimension of pre-Westphalian authority. The Catholic Church wielded immense spiritual and temporal power that often rivalled, and at times superseded, that of secular rulers. According to Straumann (2008), the Pope could excommunicate kings and absolve subjects of their loyalty. This entanglement of the sacred and the political means that the Westphalian separation of church and state, and the accompanying shift to secular sovereignty, marked a dramatic reordering of political thought, not simply a linear progression. However, it would be a mistake to limit the conceptual foundation of the pre-Westphalian system to the European experience. Doing so risks both Eurocentrism and historical inaccuracy. In the Islamic world, political authority was exercised through caliphates, sultanates, and various regional dynasties, all of which combined religious and political functions in ways that defy modern categorisation (Rózsa, 2018). The caliphate, in this regard, symbolised a universal Islamic polity, but its actual control varied widely and was constantly negotiated with local rulers.

In East Asia, particularly under the Chinese imperial dynasties, a different political logic was at work. A political logic centred not on sovereignty in the Westphalian sense, but on civilizational hierarchy and the tributary system (Kang, 2005). States such as Korea, Vietnam, and even some Central Asian polities recognised the suzerainty of the Chinese emperor not because they lacked autonomy, but because the prevailing cultural and diplomatic norms emphasised relational legitimacy over territorial independence. Such relationships complicate attempts to define sovereignty purely in terms of exclusive control over a defined territory.

Sub-Saharan African empires, such as Mali and Songhai, demonstrated another variation. Here, authority was often itinerant and rooted in oral traditions, kinship networks, trade routes, and spiritual cosmologies. These political entities commanded loyalty and enforced norms, but their structure and logic diverged significantly from the territorial-bureaucratic model that would later define the modern state (Molineux, 2021). Their absence from traditional international relations theory is less a reflection of political incoherence than of disciplinary blind spots.

What emerges from this global and comparative perspective is a need to de-centre the narrative of state development. The pre-Westphalian world was not a waiting room for the modern state; it was a pluralistic and dynamic landscape of political authority that operated according to different, but no less sophisticated, logics. To treat it as a mere precursor is to flatten the historical and cultural specificity of diverse political systems and to project backwards a normative model that was, in truth, the product of specific European conditions.

Conceptually, then, this paper is grounded in a commitment to historical contextualization and analytical pluralism. It rejects the teleological view that political development inevitably led to the emergence of the Westphalian state system, and instead asks what the world looked like before such a system existed. It acknowledges that the very vocabulary we use, i.e. State and Sovereignty, carries assumptions rooted in a particular tradition, and that to study the pre-Westphalian order is also to interrogate those assumptions.

This approach does not aim to romanticise the past, nor to deny the violence and fragmentation that often accompanied pre-modern political life. Instead, it seeks to understand political order on its own terms. In doing so, it opens the door to a richer understanding of global political history and perhaps even offers tools for imagining alternative forms of order in the present.

Historical View of the Pre-Westphalian State System

When we look back at the political world before 1648, it is tempting to project onto it the outlines of the modern state, to search for early versions of sovereignty, borders, and governments as we now understand them. However, the truth is that the pre-Westphalian state system was not a proto-modern world waiting to

mature. It was a distinctly different system altogether, with its own assumptions, logic, and contradictions. It worked, in many cases, precisely because it was not centralised or neatly territorialised. However, it is often reduced in historical narratives to a kind of prelude; chaotic, transitional, or incomplete. That is a simplification, and a misleading one at that.

In medieval and early Renaissance Europe, for example, the political order was anchored less in institutions than in relationships. Land was not merely owned; it was held, as part of a broader social and military obligation. A noble might hold estates from several lords, all at once, creating webs of allegiance that overlapped and conflicted. Authority was negotiated constantly. A king might claim dominion over a realm. However, in practice, that authority could be challenged or diluted by local barons, autonomous cities, or even clerics with their land and armies. Saberwal (1991) asserts that loyalty was personal, and identity, too, was often local or religious, rarely national in the modern sense.

Take the Angevin Empire under Henry II. He ruled over large parts of what we now consider France and England, but not as a single, cohesive state. Instead, he was a feudal lord over multiple holdings, each with its own customs, laws, and obligations. His power came not from a centralised state apparatus but from his ability to maintain loyalty and control across a fragmented landscape. That was typical of the time. Even “empire” meant something different. It was more of a loose aggregation of domains than a tightly integrated polity.

The Holy Roman Empire is perhaps the most revealing case. It is not easy to describe it in modern terms. It was not a state, nor an empire in the Roman sense. It was an amalgamation of duchies, principalities, free cities, and church lands, with each governed with varying degrees of autonomy. The emperor’s authority depended heavily on negotiation and consent. There was no single legal code, nor was there a uniform administration. Power was layered and plural. What bound the empire together was less force and more mutual recognition of rank, ritual, and inherited privilege (Sulovsky, 2019). Church authority added another layer. The Catholic Church was not simply a religious body; it was a transnational political actor. The Pope could crown kings and emperors, excommunicate them, and intervene in disputes as a kind of supreme arbitrator. Canon law ran parallel to secular law and often trumped it. In some regions, ecclesiastical courts held more power than royal ones. This was not unusual; it was built into the system. For much of Europe, secular and sacred authority were entangled, not separated.

However, Europe was not the only centre of political innovation. Across the Islamic world, from Al-Andalus to the Abbasid and Ottoman empires, governance was rooted in a combination of divine law (sharia), dynastic legitimacy, and pragmatic administration. The caliphates often claimed universal authority over the Muslim ummah, though this was rarely matched by complete territorial control (Rózsa, 2018). Instead, local rulers, i.e., emirs, sultans, and tribal leaders, governed semi-autonomously while still recognising a broader religious political order. The ulama (religious scholars) played a central role, often providing continuity and legitimacy where dynastic rule was unstable.

Similarly, in East Asia, the Ming dynasty offers an entirely different model of order. It was one based on Confucian bureaucratic governance and a ritualised foreign relations system. The Chinese emperor was not simply a ruler; he was the “Son of Heaven,” occupying the pinnacle of a cosmic hierarchy (Hompot, 2020). The tributary system reflected this worldview. Neighbouring states, such as Korea or Vietnam, sent missions not because they were colonies or client states, but because ritual submission was part of maintaining harmony. These relationships were formal, symbolic, and durable, although they again defy Westphalian ideas of sovereign equality. In South Asia, the Delhi Sultanate and later the Mughal Empire also provide examples of layered sovereignty. The Mughals ruled a diverse and enormous population through a mix of military conquest, administrative innovation, and religious accommodation. Local leaders, such as zamindars, chieftains, and tribal elites, often retained control over their regions as long as they paid tribute and maintained loyalty (Kinra, 2020). Governance here was not about uniform control, but about tolerating complexity and leveraging it.

In sub-Saharan Africa, empires such as Mali, Songhai, and Kanem-Bornu thrived through their control of trade routes, their influence in religious affairs (especially Islam), and their sophisticated oral and diplomatic traditions. Timbuktu, for example, was both a commercial hub and a centre of Islamic scholarship. These empires had armies, taxation systems, and courts, but their conception of power was more relational than territorial in nature. Influence extended through tribute, alliances, and symbolic authority, not necessarily through fixed borders or bureaucracy (Dyke, 2005).

Even in the Americas, before European conquest, large-scale polities had emerged, each with its own distinct social and political systems. The Inca Empire governed vast areas through a highly organised administrative structure centred around a figure of authority known as the Sapa Inca (Dillehay, 1977). Similarly, the Aztecs combined military dominance with tribute relationships, religious rituals, and alliances among city-states. These systems operated efficiently within their respective cultural frameworks, long before European contact imposed new structures.

What we observe, looking historically, is not a world moving inevitably toward the modern state, but one in which different forms of authority coexisted, overlapped, and evolved according to local conditions. Political legitimacy may stem from a bloodline, divine will, military prowess, religious scholarship, trade wealth, or a combination of these. The modern obsession with borders and sovereignty was not present. It was not necessary.

What makes the Peace of Westphalia historically significant is not that it created the state system from nothing; it did not. Instead, it began to codify certain norms that would become dominant in Europe and later exported globally: territorial sovereignty, non-intervention, and the formal equality of states. However, that shift occurred after centuries, arguably millennia, of different experiments in political order. The world before 1648, according to Reus-Smit (2020), was no less sophisticated; it was ordered according to different logics.

If anything, the pre-Westphalian period forces us to question our assumptions. It reminds us that statehood, sovereignty, and even diplomacy is contingent, historically produced concepts. They are not universal truths. Moreover, perhaps by studying the past on its own terms, we open ourselves to imagining more varied and plural futures.

Characteristics Of the Pre-Westphalian State System

Having established the conceptual framework and historical context of the pre-Westphalian political order, it is essential to examine the defining characteristics that distinguished this system from the modern international order.

The most obvious feature of the pre-Westphalian order was the diffusion and contestation of sovereignty. Authority was rarely centralised or exclusive. Take, for example, the Holy Roman Empire, a political entity often described as a patchwork of duchies, principalities, free cities, and ecclesiastical territories. The emperor's power, while symbolically important, was limited in practice, as many constituent parts exercised considerable autonomy. The Free Imperial City of Nuremberg's independence in local governance exemplifies this (Close, 2017). Sovereignty, in this context, was not a singular or absolute concept but rather a shared and often negotiated reality.

Closely intertwined with this diffusion of power was the fusion of religious and political authority. Unlike the later secular states, political legitimacy was frequently grounded in religious sanction. The Catholic Church, especially the papacy, was a prominent political actor, capable of influencing kings and emperors. The Investiture Controversy illustrates this dynamic vividly, as it centred on the question of whether spiritual or temporal leaders held the right to appoint church officials (Thompson, 1918). Outside Europe, similar patterns existed. For instance, the Abbasid Caliphate retained its religious legitimacy, which bolstered the authority of various Muslim rulers despite their differing degrees of temporal control (Yücesoy, 2011). This close relationship between church and state blurred the boundaries of political authority and emphasised the importance of spiritual legitimacy in governance.

The pre-Westphalian system also rested on a personalised, dynastic conception of rule. Unlike the impersonal, institutionalised sovereignty of modern states, medieval and early modern polities were often understood as extensions of ruling families. Political power is frequently derived from hereditary claims rather than abstract legal principles. The Hundred Years' War, which arose from Edward III's dynastic claim to the French crown, underscores how disputes over lineage could spark major conflicts. Similarly, the union of Castile and Aragon through the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella created a personal alliance of crowns rather than a fully integrated political entity, preserving distinct legal and administrative systems within the same monarchy (Sharma, 2015).

This personalisation of authority fostered a complex web of overlapping loyalties. Subjects often owed simultaneous allegiance to local lords, monarchs, and religious figures. The Burgundian Netherlands, where provinces maintained unique customs while recognising the Duke of Burgundy's authority, exemplifies these layered allegiances. Such overlapping loyalties challenge modern assumptions about exclusive citizenship or singular political identity, revealing a contingent and situational political landscape instead.

Territorial control during this period was equally fluid and imprecise. Borders were understood more as zones of influence subject to constant negotiation rather than fixed, inviolable lines. The Mali Empire's governance relied on tributary relationships and symbolic gestures of submission rather than direct administration across its vast territories. Similarly, European borders were frequently reshaped by inheritance, warfare, and diplomacy. This fluidity contrasts sharply with the Westphalian principle of fixed territorial sovereignty. Administratively, pre-Westphalian polities often lacked centralised bureaucratic institutions. Governance relied on local intermediaries, including nobles, clergy, and officials, whose authority was contingent and sometimes autonomous. Even monarchs with ostensibly centralised power relied heavily on these agents to implement their policies, resulting in uneven and negotiated authority across their realms. While empires such as the Ottoman and Ming demonstrated more complex bureaucracies, much of medieval Europe was governed through personal networks and feudal ties rather than systematic administration (Grzymala-Busse, 2020).

Ultimately, the pre-Westphalian order was characterised by a fundamental hierarchy. The latter principle of sovereign equality was absent; political relations were structured through systems of rank and status. The Chinese tributary system, in which neighbouring states acknowledged the emperor's supremacy in exchange for political legitimacy and trade access, provides a clear example. Similarly, the European political order recognised the spiritual authority of the pope above kings, who in turn ranked above lesser nobles (Grzymala-Busse, 2020). This hierarchy shaped diplomatic and political relations in ways quite different from the egalitarian framework that emerged after the Treaty of Westphalia.

CONCLUSION

Studying the pre-Westphalian state system becomes evident that this political order differed significantly from the structured, sovereign states we recognise today. The disintegrated nature of authority, the intertwining of religious and secular power, and the personalised dynamics of rule reveal a system that was, in many ways, less about clear boundaries and more about superposed influences and negotiated relationships.

It might be tempting to view this as disorderly or inefficient, but perhaps that overlooks how well people of the time understood and operated within these systems. Borders were not fixed lines, loyalties were rarely exclusive, and sovereignty was a fluid and contested concept. This fluidity, while challenging from a modern perspective, was integral to the political fabric of the era.

At the same time, these characteristics set the stage for the transformation that followed. Understanding the pre-Westphalian order, therefore, is not just about tracing the past; it helps us appreciate how political authority and sovereignty have evolved, and how they remain influenced by the legacies of this earlier system.

In this sense, the pre-Westphalian state system offers more than historical curiosity. It challenges some of our assumptions about sovereignty and reminds us that political order, even today, is complex, sometimes ambiguous, and never entirely settled.

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