Woodcut from the Nuremberg Chronicle, 1493.

Imagine There's No Countries

The beginnings of all things are small.
Cicero

ANYONE ALIVE IN EUROPE IN THE year 180 CE would likely have thought the Roman Empire would last forever, with the phrase *Roma invicta* (*Unconquered Rome*) inscribed on statues throughout the empire, which at the time was at its greatest extent.

Rome was at its peak in 180 CE, with the reign of the Stoic philosopher, Marcus Aurelius, last of what would later be called the 'Five Good Emperors' that ruled during the century-and-a-half long *Pax Romana*.

But with the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 and the reign of his tyrannical son, Commodus, the empire began to go inexorably …well, down the commode.

It didn't happen overnight, of course; in fact it took several centuries. But the pace of disintegration quickened with the Sack of Rome in 410, and by the year 476, the Western Roman Empire had disappeared.

In retrospect, there were clear signs that the Roman Empire had passed its peak— notably a string of incompetent, corrupt emperors (the assassination of Commodus in 192 sparked a civil war and succession battle) and the revolt of subjugated tribes on the periphery, the so-called 'barbarians.'

But before we mock the Romans for failing to prevent the decline of their once-invincible empire (like, indeed, all those before it), we might ask if our own age of living in countries or nation-states isn't ultimately just as precarious and temporary.

With a few exceptions, the whole of the modern world is comprised of nation-states, defined as a group of people (typically with a common history, culture, or language), governed by an organized political system, with sovereignty over a defined territory generally agreed upon by other states.

It's easy to forget that until the mid-19th century, the world was a patchwork quilt of empires, kingdoms, city-states, and other entities, which people usually crossed without the need for passports or border guards.

It was only when industrialization made societies too complex to manage without large, centralized bureaucracies that nation-states began to emerge, proving to be more suitable for organizing and controlling large populations, especially during wartime. (It was, in fact, imperial expansion that spread the nation-state model worldwide.)

With 193 nation-states in the world today, one might assume it's the best possible model for organizing people. But there are many problems with nation-states, which are only becoming more apparent as as time goes on.

Globalization has chipped away at the nation-state's power, leading to the rise of 'supranational' governing bodies that are undemocratic and authoritarian, while a decentralized, borderless Internet heralds a more free, empowering future for the masses.

The nation-state increasingly seems too small and parochial to deal with intractable global problems, yet too big and ponderous to address more local concerns. Recognizing these limitations, a growing number of people see themselves as 'global citizens.'

The best contender to replace the nation-state may be, ironically, the city-state, a very old form of governance that was the basis for the earliest civilizations in history.

The city-state model stretches back to at least the 26th century BCE, with the Sumerian city-states of Uruk and Ur—although most people are more familiar with Greek city-states like Athens and Sparta and Italian city-states like Venice, Florence and Milan, which flourished from the Middle Ages to the early modern period.

Even the Roman Republic and Empire began as a city-state. In fact, in the span of history, nation-states are a very recent invention, while city-states are the norm.

Cities have long been centers of finance, commerce, innovation, and technology—all of which also apply to regional metropolises like, for example, Silicon Valley. But around 2014, for the first time in history, cities became the dominant form of habitation.

Independent, sovereign city-states still exist today in a few places like Monaco and Singapore, along with a number of non-sovereign but largely autonomous cities like Hong Kong, Macau, and Dubai—whose populations range from less than 700,000 (Macau) to 7.4 million (Hong Kong).

While there is no firmly accepted ideal size for a city, smaller seems to be better, with a tradeoff between optimal livability and maximization of cultural, economic, and environmental benefits favoring a population of roughly 2 to 5 million.

While Rome eventually fell, its spirit and influence live on in our language, literature, and laws, and in the vast reservoir of art and culture the Romans bequeathed to humanity.

Similarly, whatever takes the place of the current model in our (perhaps not so distant) future will hopefully preserve the best of the nation-state, while discarding nationalism's worst excesses. It's a balance the city-state seems ideally suited to manage. ∎