

THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE

By Raymond H. Schmandt

The Holy Roman Empire was the medieval state that embraced most of central Europe and Italy under the rule of the German kings from 962 to 1806. It was considered to be a restoration and continuation of the ancient Roman Empire, although in fact it had little in common with its predecessor. Earlier, the Frankish king Charlemagne had revived the same name. His Roman Empire lasted from 800 to 925. In 962, Otto I of Germany and Pope John XII cooperated in a second revival. Threatened in his possession of the Papal States by Berengar II, king of Italy, John begged Otto to come to his aid. Otto did so, and the Pope solemnly crowned him Emperor of the Romans as a reward. From this time, the German kings claimed the right to rule the empire.

The Theory of the Empire

In theory, the Holy Roman Empire (the word "Holy" was added during the 12th century) reflected two important medieval values: the unity of all Christians, or at least all Western Christians, in a single state as the civil counterpart to the One Holy Catholic Church; and a concept of hierarchical political organisation that called for one ultimate head over all existing states. In practice, the empire never fully conformed to either ideal. **France and England, for example, never acknowledged any real subordination to the emperor, although they recognised a vague supremacy in him.** The empire's aims varied according to the program and philosophy of the many emperors and popes who controlled its destiny. **The German kings—who called themselves kings of the Romans, not kings of Germany,** as soon as they were elected by the German princes—considered themselves entitled to become Roman emperor as soon as they could arrange the imperial coronation, which was supposed to take place in Rome at the hands of the Pope. (By later convention, they are called kings of Germany, however, and many of them never secured imperial coronation.) From the ruler's point of view, the imperial title established his right to control Italy and Burgundy as well as Germany and was thus a potential source of power, wealth, and prestige. The Empire's vast size and the disparity of its peoples, however, were serious obstacles to effective rule and good government.

The churchmen who crowned the emperors, and thus actually sustained the Empire, considered it to be the church's secular arm, sharing responsibility for the welfare and spread of the Christian faith and duty-bound to protect the Papacy. **This view of the relationship between church and state, which dated from the reign of Roman emperor Constantine I, was generally accepted by both emperors and Popes. In practice, however, this partnership seldom worked smoothly, as one of the partners inevitably tried to dominate the other.** Frequent fluctuations in the actual power and vitality of each individual as well as changes in the prevailing political and theological theories gave a fluid, dynamic quality to the empire's history.

History

The history of the Holy Roman Empire can be divided into four periods: the age of emperors, the age of princes, the early Habsburg period, and the final phase.

(i) Age of the Emperors

The first age, from 962 to 1250, was dominated by the strong emperors of the Saxon, Salian (or Franconian), and Hohenstaufen dynasties. These emperors made serious efforts to control Italy, which in practical political terms was the most important part of the empire. Their power, however, depended on their German resources, which were never great. Italy consisted of the Lombard area, with its wealthy towns; the Papal States; scattered regions still claimed by the Byzantine Empire; and the Norman kingdom of Naples and Sicily. The emperors generally tried to govern through existing officials such as counts and bishops rather than by creating a direct administrative system. The papacy, weak and disturbed by the Roman aristocracy, needed the emperors, who, during the Saxon and early Salian generations, thought of the Bishop of Rome as subject to the same kind of control that they exercised over their own German bishops. Henry III, for example, deposed unsatisfactory Popes and nominated new ones as he deemed fit.

During the reigns of Henry IV and Henry V in the late 11th and early 12th centuries, the papacy was influenced by a powerful reform movement that demanded an end to lay domination. Popes Gregory VII and Urban II insisted on independence for the papacy and for the church in general during the Investiture Controversy. Later Popes continued jealously to guard their freedom, and this produced conflict with the Hohenstaufen emperors Frederick I and Frederick II, both of whom wanted to exercise control over all of Italy. The later Hohenstaufen emperors gained control of the Norman kingdom in southern Italy and declared it a fief of the popes, who nevertheless worried about their independence and often supported the emperors' Lombard foes. In the 13th century, Popes Innocent III, Gregory IX, and Innocent IV restricted the authority of Otto IV and Frederick II in many bitter disputes.

(ii) Age of the Princes

During the age of the princes, from 1250 to 1438, the emperors were much weaker. They exercised minimal authority in Italy, and many of them were never crowned emperor by the pope. Even in Germany their power was reduced, for Frederick II had dissipated royal prerogatives and resources in his northern lands while struggling to dominate Italy. The emperors were unable to restrain the German nobles or to resist French encroachments on the western frontiers of the empire, and the Slavic rulers in the east rejected all imperial overlordship. The Guelphs, or anti-imperialists in Italy (see Guelphs and Ghibellines), spoke of ending the empire or transferring it to the French kings. Political theorists such as Engelbert of Admont (1250-1331), Alexander of Roes (fl. late 13th century), and even Dante, however, insisted that the German emperors were needed. Marsilius of Padua, in his *Defensor pacis*, argued for the end of all papal influence on the empire.

At this time the practice of electing the German king, or emperor, was given formal definition by the Golden Bull (1356) of Emperor Charles IV. This document, which defined the status of the seven German princely electors, made it clear that the emperor held office by election rather than hereditary right. The electors usually chose insignificant rulers who could not interfere with the electors' privileges, but such rulers could neither govern effectively nor maintain imperial rights. Their power was largely limited to strengthening their own families. The empire consequently began to disintegrate into nearly independent territories or self-governing groups such as the Hanseatic League.

(iii) Early Habsburg Period

After 1438 the electors almost always chose a member of the Habsburg dynasty of Austria as king; the one exception was the election (1742) of the Bavarian Charles VII. **The Habsburg Frederick III was the last emperor to be crowned in Rome; his great-grandson Charles V was the last to be crowned by a pope.**

By this time a few of the more farsighted princes saw the need to strengthen the empire's central government. From 1485 to 1555 these reformers strove to create a federal system. The diet, originally a loose assembly of princes, had been organised into three strata—electors, princes, and representatives of the imperial cities—by the Golden Bull and came to resemble a legislature. In 1500 it was proposed that an executive committee (Reichsregiment) appointed by the diet be given administrative authority. A system of imperial courts was created, and permanent institutions to provide for defense and

administrative authority. A system of imperial courts was created, and permanent institutions to provide for defence and taxation were also discussed. The various states were organised into ten districts or circles.

These reform efforts seldom worked, however, because the princes would not relinquish their jurisdiction. The situation was further complicated by the advent of the Reformation, which fostered religious conflicts that divided the principalities against one another. In addition, the princes became alarmed at the sudden growth of power of the Habsburgs when that dynasty acquired Spain. Under the guise of the Counter-Reformation, Ferdinand II and Ferdinand III tried to concentrate power in their hands, but defeat in the Thirty Years' War undid their efforts and proved that the empire could not reform itself.

(iv) Final Phase

After the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) the Holy Roman Empire was little more than a loose confederation of about 300 independent principalities and 1,500 or more semi-sovereign bodies or individuals. Threats from the Ottoman Empire or from Louis XIV of France occasionally stimulated imperial cooperation, but usually each state considered only its own welfare. The Austrian-Prussian wars, Hanover's acquisition of the English throne, and Saxony's holding of the Polish crown exemplify the particularism that prevailed.

Napoleon I finally destroyed the empire. After defeating Austria and its imperial allies in 1797 and 1801, he annexed some German land and suggested that the larger territories compensate themselves by confiscating the free cities and ecclesiastical states. By the Diet's Recess (1803), 112 small states were thus seized by their neighbours. Three years later Napoleon compelled 16 German states to form the Confederation of the Rhine and to secede from the empire. **On March 6, 1806, Francis II, who had previously assumed the title of Emperor of Austria, abdicated as Holy Roman Emperor and declared the old empire dissolved.**

Bibliography

Barracough, Geoffrey, *The Origins of Modern Germany*, 2d rev. ed. (1947; repr. 1984) Bryce, James, *The Holy Roman Empire*, rev. ed. (1978)
Heer, Friedrich, *The Holy Roman Empire*, trans. by Janet Sondheimer (1968)
Zophy, Jonathan W., ed., *Holy Roman Empire: A Dictionary Handbook* (1980)

THE NOBILITY of the HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE

Guy Stair Sainty

The Holy Roman Empire, ended by a decision of the last Emperor, Francis II, on 6 August 1806, had already long ceased to be a major political power even though the prestige of the Imperial title conferred immense status and influence. Indeed, its description as neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire was peculiarly apposite. **The Holy Roman, or German Empire as it should better be described, could justly claim to be the successor of the Western Roman Empire despite its later foundation.** Although the Eastern Empire of Byzantium, which expired in 1453, had enjoyed an unbroken succession from the time of Constantine the Great, its claim to jurisdiction beyond the boundaries of the western Balkans was never acknowledged.

The Empire of the Germans was founded by Charles the Great (Charlemagne), whose coronation on Christmas Day 800 gave Papal approval to the unification of France, most of modern Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, and northern Italy under his rule. Although his male line descendants had died out within little more than a century, **Charlemagne is the ancestor of every existing Christian European ruling or former ruling dynasty. The only modern survivors of the Empire are the ecclesiastical Princes—the German Archbishops and Bishops—and the Sovereign Princes of Liechtenstein. With the death of Charlemagne no ruler until Napoleon ever held sway over his lands and the Imperial title became the legacy of the Germans.**

The Emperor, although himself usually an hereditary ruler of one or more states within the Empire, was elected to office. Nonetheless, several dynasties managed to perpetuate their grip upon the Imperial title. The surest means of establishing dynastic rule was for the Emperor to insure that his immediate heir was the inevitable choice of the "Electors" by having him nominated King of the Romans in his own lifetime. Those Princes who, by the early thirteenth century, had established their claim to the title of Electors of the Empire were the Prince Archbishops of Koln (Archchancellor of Italy), Trier (Archchancellor of Gaul) and Mainz (Archchancellor of Germany), the King of Bohemia (Imperial Cup Bearer) the Duke of Saxony (Imperial Marshal), the Count Palatine of the Rhine (Imperial Seneschal), and the MarkGraf (Margrave in English) of Brandenburg. Their number was formerly codified in an Imperial Bull issued by the Emperor Karl IV (of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia). That this Bull was issued without reference to Papal authority indicates the decline of Papal power since the Avignon schism. Henry IV's humiliation at Canossa would never be repeated.

The Reformation was the greatest blow to Imperial power, resulting in increasing Hohenzollern power with the acquisition of the Duchy of Prussia and the conversion of Church lands into hereditary fiefs. The religious wars of the sixteenth century and the Thirty Years war in the early seventeenth led to a further diminution of Imperial power, even though the Habsburgs' rule in Bohemia was consolidated. The number of Electors was increased to eight with the elevation of the Wittelsbach Duchy of Bavaria to the status of Electorate (giving that family two Electors, the other being the Elector Palatine) in 1648, following the changes wrought by the Thirty Years war. In 1692 a fourth was added in the person of the Duke of Brunswick-Luneburg-Hannover, who became Elector of Hannover (united with the British crown in 1714). Shortly before the collapse of the Empire, the Emperor Napoleon imposed his own reorganisation of the German states and four more princes were added to the ranks of the Electors (three lay Electors, Hesse-Cassel, Baden and Wurtemberg, and one ecclesiastical, the Archbishop of Salzburg—an Austrian Archduke) while the Archbishops of Mainz, Trier and Köln lost their sovereignty and electoral rank.

From 1438 until 1740 the Imperial Crown was held continually by the Habsburgs, who initially did not hold an Electoral seat. The German Electors, however, chose the first Habsburg Emperors because most of their hereditary territories were outside the formal boundaries of the Empire itself. Until the late fifteenth century the Habsburgs still followed the German practice of dividing their territories between sons so Austria, Styria, Carniola, Carinthia and the Tyrol—which were later to compose part of the Empire of Austria—were often ruled by different members of the family. In 1437, Sigismund of Hungary and Bohemia died leaving an only daughter, to be succeeded by his son-in-law Albrecht V (of Habsburg), Duke of Austria. Albrecht was now elected King of the Romans as Albrecht II but died before the coronation which would have allowed him to take the Imperial style. While the Crowns of Bohemia and Hungary passed first to his short-lived son and then to his son-in-law the King of Poland, in 1440 the Electors chose Albrecht's cousin and successor as ruler of Austria, Frederick V of Styria (first Archduke of Austria in 1458), to be Emperor. The Imperial Crown remained the privilege of the Habsburgs for the next three hundred years.

Frederick was the last Emperor to be crowned by the Pope in Rome and did much to consolidate the Habsburg possessions. His great-grandson, the Emperor Charles V (1500-1558) united in his person the Imperial Crown, the hugely wealthy Duchies of Burgundy and Brabant, the Duchy of Milan, the Kingdoms of Naples and Sicily and the Crown of Spain. The latter's brother Ferdinand acquired by marriage the Crowns of Hungary and Bohemia in 1526. Unable to rule this vast Empire effectively, Charles abdicated the Crown of Spain, the Italian possessions and the Burgundian inheritance to his only son, Philip II, in 1556, and resigned the Imperial Crown to insure its inheritance by his brother Ferdinand, who was the first Habsburg to combine the Imperial Crowns with those of Austria, Hungary and Bohemia.

The male line of the Habsburgs became extinct with the death of Charles VI in 1740. The senior line, of Kings of Spain, had died

out in the male line with the death of the unfortunate King Charles II in 1700 when his Spanish possessions passed to his Bourbon great-nephew. The Spanish Netherlands (originally part of the Burgundian territories) then passed to Austria, while Naples and Sicily were divided, to be temporarily reunited before being reacquired by the Bourbons in 1734. Charles VI left an only daughter, Maria-Teresa, who had been married off to Francis, Duke of Lorraine, founding the Habsburg-Lothringen dynasty which ruled in Austria, Hungary and Bohemia until 1918. Francis surrendered Lorraine (an Imperial fief) to Electors as the temporary sovereign Duchy of the French King's father-in-law, the former King of Poland, from whom it passed to France on his death in 1766. After a five year interregnum, during which time the Elector of Bavaria held the Imperial Crown, Francis was elected Emperor. Following his death his eldest son, Joseph II, succeeded as the first Habsburg-Lothringen Emperor.

The Empire included not only the territories of the nine Electors, but also more than three hundred small lay and ecclesiastical states whose numbers fluctuated when male lines died out and families merged or divided. These petty rulers enjoyed limited "sovereignty" over states which sometimes included no more than a few villages. Many of the Bishopsrics governed small territories which gave them the status of "immediate" [1] Imperial vassals. Some of the larger Abbays and Convents enjoyed similar status—their superiors composed the largest number of "elected" rulers, both men and women, Europe has ever seen, even though only chosen by their fellow religious brothers or sisters. A smaller number of these "immediate" sovereigns had the right to a seat in the Imperial Diet, a jealously guarded privilege which gave them some say in the legislative and governmental affairs of the Empire and considerable prestige. In the middle of the seventeenth century there were forty-three lay members and thirty-three ecclesiastical members of the Diet but their numbers expanded steadily until the Empire's collapse. The Diet included the Electors, the rulers of the larger Duchies such as Wurtemberg, and Oldenburg, the smaller Saxon states and Anhalt, and a larger number of Sovereign Princes and Sovereign Counts. Some of the ecclesiastical rulers enjoyed the status of Princes, others only that of Counts and were ranked accordingly. The High Master of the Teutonic Knights, the Grand Prior of Germany of the Order of Saint John (Malta), and the Master of the Knights of the Johanniter Order also had seats in the Diet, ranking as Princes of the Empire.

The titles of Duke, Prince, Count, Baron, Knight and Noble of the Empire were conferred by Imperial patent. The vast majority of the lower ranks never enjoyed any kind of sovereignty, however, having been elevated on the basis of services to their superior lord, the Emperor himself, or by right of some territory they owned which was itself subject to an immediate Imperial vassal. Most such conferrals were made at the request of the superior lord of the beneficiary—an Elector or Duke perhaps, but the MarkGraf of Brandenburg as King *in* and then *of* Prussia was able to confer titles in his own right. Later the Electors of Bavaria conferred titles as did some of the other greater Princes while many of the rulers of smaller states had been invested with the right to confer nobility. Imperial Nobility and titles always passed by male succession, most titles being inherited by all the male descendants and by females until marriage (or religious profession). Noble territories could pass by female succession but use of the corresponding title would have to be confirmed in a new Imperial patent.

Imperial authority extended also to the Netherlands and Italy, and some of the higher North Italian titles (particularly that of Prince) and Netherlandish titles were conferred by Imperial grant. The Imperial Viceroy, as rulers of the Netherlands, Milan and Naples and Sicily also conferred titles but these were *not* Holy Roman Empire titles and their recipients did not rank as Reichsherrn, Reichsritter, Reichsfreiherr or Reichsgraf.

During the years preceding and immediately following the collapse of the Empire there was considerable readjustment of territories between states—mostly to the benefit of the larger states which were consolidated within contiguous borders—and of the titles of their rulers. The Electors of Saxony, Wurtemberg and Bavaria became Kings, as did the Elector of Hannover following the downfall of Napoleon, although as King of Great Britain he already enjoyed the royal style. The Kingdom of Westphalia was created for Jerome Bonaparte after territories seized from Hannover, Brunswick and various ecclesiastical states on the right bank of the Rhine but ceased to exist in 1814 when its lands were redistributed—those on the Rhine being given as a prize to the King of Prussia.

The Duchies of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, Mecklenburg-Strelitz, the Duchy of Oldenburg, the Duchy of Saxe-Weimar, and the Margravate of Baden were elevated to the status of Grand Duchies as was the Landgravate of Hesse-Darmstadt. The Grand Duchy of Berg and Cleves (given first to Murat and his wife Caroline Bonaparte, then Napoleon-Louis, the second son of Hortense de Beauharnais and Louis Bonaparte), the Grand Duchy of Frankfurt (given first to Emmerich de Dalberg and then Eugène de Beauharnais), and the Grand Duchy of Wurzburg (given to the Grand Duke of Tuscany as compensation for the loss of his Italian states) were all created out of former ecclesiastical states or the territories of Napoleon's enemies. Their territories were redistributed after 1814 and their rulers deposed, while the Grand Duke of Tuscany was restored to Florence. The Duchy of Luxembourg was raised to the status of Grand Duchy and added to the Kingdom of the United Netherlands (until 1890 when it passed to the Duke of Nassau), as were the former Austrian Netherlands, until they gained their independence as the Kingdom of the Belgians in 1830. Some states which survived the initial dissolution of the Empire, notably the Duchy of Arenberg which was actually enlarged after 1806, and the Principality of Leyen, were unable to hold onto sovereignty in 1814, lacking the close family relationships to the sovereigns of the victorious powers whose influence might have enabled them to hold their thrones.

The Imperial nobility enjoys a more elevated status than the nobilities of the German successor states and, indeed, of the Italian states. The descendants of Italian Holy Roman Empire titles have formed an [Association](#) to which every male line descendant of someone ennobled by Imperial Patent is entitled to belong. The Principality of Liechtenstein has also claimed to be able to confirm the succession to Imperial titles and has confirmed the right of a Spanish nobleman to be heir to such a title, for purposes of the Spanish law requiring the successor state to confirm that the claimant to a particular title is in fact the heir. Thus there is a remaining jurisdiction, even though no Imperial titles have been conferred since 1806.

The Reigning Houses from 1815-1918 were as follows: [2]
Emperors — Austria (1804-1918), Germany (1870-1918)
Kings — Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony, Wurtemberg, Hannover (1815-66)
Grand Dukes — Baden, Hesse & the Rhine, Luxembourg, [4] Mecklenburg-Schwerin, Mecklenburg-Strelitz, Oldenburg, Saxe-Weimar and Eisenach
Electors — Hesse (Kassel) was the only state to retain this title after 1815 (1815-1866)
Reigning Dukes (1815-1918) — Saxe-Meinungen, Saxe-Altenburg (from 1826), Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Augustenburg (1815-1863), Brunswick (1815-84, 1913-18), Nassau (1815-66)
Reigning Princes (1815-1918) — Lippe, Schaumburg-Lippe, Schaumburg-Sondershausen, Schaumburg-Stollberg (until 1909), Waldeck and Pyrmont, Liechtenstein, Hohenzollern-Hochzollern & Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen (1815-1849), Fries (senior line), Fries (junior line)
The ranks of former Reigning & mediatised Houses after 1815 (Standesherrn)
Landgraf — Hesse (junior line) — Highness (Hoheit)
Mediatised Dukes [3] — Serene Highness (Reichsherr & Durchlaucht)
Mediatised Princes — Serene Highness (Reichsherr — Durchlaucht)
Mediatised Counts of Princely rank (elevated after 1806) — Serene Highness (Reichsgraf — Durchlaucht)
Mediatised Counts — Illustrious Highness (Reichsgraf — Erlaucht)
All of the above rank above the non-mediatised noble Houses. The ranks of the latter are as follows:
Duke (Reichsherr) — variously Serene Highness or High Born (Durchlaucht or Hochgeboren)
Prince (Reichsherr) — variously Serene Highness or High Born (Durchlaucht or Hochgeboren)
Markgraf [5]
Land Graf [1]
AR Graf
Rhein Graf
Wild Graf [5]
Reichs Graf
Reichsfreiherr
Reichsritter
Reichsbar

Footnotes

[1] I.e. they held their lands by virtue of a grant from the Emperor, and owed him feudal homage.

[2] (this section omitted)

[3] Not including those Houses elevated after 1806 to the rank of King or Grand Duke, which ranked accordingly.

[4] United with the Crown of the Netherlands until 1890; then ceded to the former reigning Duke of Nassau.

[5] Arenberg only; Loss-Corvaerem although a Duchy were mediatised by right of the Principality of Rhine-Waldeck

[5] Arenberg only, Loos-Corswarem although a Duchy were mediatised by right of the Principality of Rhema-Wolbeck.

[6] The Pallavicini, and the Gonzaga, are still Markgrafen of the Holy Roman Empire; the latter are also Princes.

[7] Only the Furstenbergs, a mediatised house, and the Hesse family, possess this title although the Saxon Dukes were entitled Landgrafs of Thuringia among their subsidiary titles.

[8] The titles of Alt, Rhein and Wild Graf were ancient privileges which have been perpetuated by certain families but do not actually confer any particular precedence between them.

ASSOCIAZIONI dei NOBILI del SACRO ROMANO IMPERO
(HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE ASSOCIATION)

This Association was established in 1963 to unite in its membership descendants in the male line of individuals invested with nobility of the Holy Roman Empire. It also includes a number of honorary members. It was founded by Prince Giovanni Alliata di Montereale and Count Giancarlo Bonifazi di Statte.

The Chancellor (in succession to Prince Alliata) is Prince Mario Pignatelli Aragona Cortes; the President of the Court of Honor is Count Giancarlo Bonifazi di Statte; the Co-ordinators of the Council are Prince Domenico Napoleone Orsini and don Carlo dei Principi Giovanelli; the members of the Historical Council are: Marchese Henri de Thoran, Marchese Cosimo Dragonetti di Torres, Prof Riccardo Capasso, Monsignor Antonio Bittarelli, Monsignor Sandro Corradini; Avv. Giuseppe de Rosa. Representative in the USA: Mr. Guy Stair Sainty. Members (titles not in parentheses are the Holy Roman Empire titles of the Family): Count Clemente Alberti di Poja, Marquess (Prince) don Camillo Aldobrandini; Princes don Francesco and don Gabriele Alliata di Villafranca; Prince don Giovanni Francesco and Fabrizio Alliata di Montereale; Nobile (Count) Carlo Antonielli; Prince don Alessandro d'Aquino; Count Federico Attems; Prince don Francesco Avalos; Nobile Luciano Aventi; Nobile Giangiorgio Barbasetti; Count Guido Barbiano di Belgioioso; Count Ferrante Benvenuti; Nobile Luigi Bertolini; Nobile Lanfranco Blanchetti Revelli; Dama Bona (Marchesa) Bonacossi; Prince don Gregorio Boncompagni-Ludovisi; Count Giancarlo Bonifazi di Statte; Conte Federico Bossi Fedrigotti; Nobile Marc'Antonio Bragadin; Barone Guido Buffa; Count Neri Capponi; Prince Marcello Caracciolo. hrea.htm

<http://www.biblebelievers.org.au/>