The Holy Roman Empire

by

Len Scales

Since the nineteenth century, the Holy Roman Empire has occupied a central but often negative place in accounts of German nationhood. 'In the beginning was the Reich', declared Heinrich August Winkler in his monumental German history, which took as its starting point the Empire's abolition in 1806.[1] It was with the Empire that, in Winkler's view fatally, 'that which distinguishes German history from the history of the great western-European nations has … its origin'. Winkler's judgement reflects a viewpoint which has been tenacious and highly influential: that at the heart of the problem of German nation-making lay the peculiar and deficient character of Germany's pre-modern 'state', the Empire itself. Whereas other European nations had developed within the framework of governments exercising sovereign power over firmly bounded populations, the Reich, after a promising start, had fallen prey to universalist fantasies, fragmentation, institutional atrophy, and the interference of foreign powers. At the Empire's final, allegedly unlamented demise, the German people constituted a mere *Kulturnation*, a scattered population of shared language and custom, but lacking the unifying steel of firm, centralising rule. That steel was destined to be supplied by Prussia.

This chapter is concerned with the medieval period, comprising roughly the first two thirds of the Empire's thousand-year history. The Middle Ages have been central to modern narratives of the tortuous and anomalous course of German nation-making, since it was in those early centuries that the prize of nationhood was supposedly first glimpsed and then fatally lost. On this view, rooted in nineteenth-century conceptions of the sovereign nation-state, nation-making in the German lands ran backwards, from early promise, under vigorous 'German' kings, to imperial hubris, overreach, betrayal, and a long decline into sleepy provincialism and political impotence. In what follows, a different account of the relationship between the Empire and collective identities is presented, setting aside ideal-typical models of the nation-state and concentrating on the medieval evidence. To do this is important, because how we judge the relationship between the Reich and conceptions of peoplehood and common belonging in the Middle Ages will affect our understanding of post-medieval German nationhood, too. More broadly, the Empire offers valuable insights into how a

[1] H.A. Winkler, *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, 2 vols. (Munich: Beck, 2000), vol. 1, p. 5.

relatively weak, decentralised but prestigious polity could foster durable collective identities – in some ways, precisely on account of its apparent shortcomings.

What, then, was the Holy Roman Empire, and how did it develop during the Middle Ages? The Empire's origins are usually traced to the coronation of the Frankish king Charlemagne (r. 768-814) by the pope in Rome on Christmas Day AD 800. This event marked the revival in western Europe of the imperial title, defunct since the abdication of the last Roman emperor in the west in AD 476. There is justification for this view, since commentators in the later Middle Ages came to appeal to Charlemagne's authority as a founder-figure. The events of 800 were also important in establishing the idea that the pope might designate a single powerful, hegemonic ruler as a guardian for the Catholic Church and a militant propagator of the Christian faith. But too much stress upon Charlemagne is misleading, because his coronation did not immediately establish a stable new institution of western emperorship in the hands of rulers from the Germanic north. That only developed, together with a supporting body of traditions, symbols, rituals, and an official vocabulary, slowly and at first fitfully, over the course of subsequent decades and centuries. (The term 'Holy Roman Empire' itself first appeared in the twelfth century and only became widespread in the thirteenth.)

Charlemagne had ruled over a large agglomeration of territories, including much of what later became the kingdom of France, as well as core regions of the medieval Empire in Germany and northern Italy. His dynasty, the Carolingians, regarded monarchy as a family affair, sharing out the rule of their accumulated patrimony between different male members. An important moment came in AD 843 with the treaty of Verdun, which divided Charlemagne's territorial empire among his grandsons, establishing separate eastern and western kingdoms, as well as a middle realm encompassing northern Italy and what came to be known as Lotharingia. Much remained fluid until the early tenth century, when the Saxon duke Henry was raised to the throne east of the Rhine by Frankish and Saxon magnates, to rule (in subsequent reckoning) as Henry I (r. 919-936). Henry was succeeded on the throne by his second son Otto, who as Otto I (r. 936-973) revived the Carolingian tradition of involvement in Italy and in 962 was crowned emperor in Rome by the pope.

The rule of these Saxon (or Ottonian) monarchs marks a turning point since henceforth the western imperial monarchy was to have a continuous history down to 1806, even though not all its medieval rulers would be crowned as emperor. Henry I established the practice, continued by his successors, of passing on his territorial power-base undivided to a single heir. The patterns set by his son Otto, of military campaigns south of the Alps, close dealings

with the papacy, and the expectation of imperial coronation in Rome, likewise proved binding in the centuries that followed. The Ottonians also continued the Carolingian tradition of war against their pagan eastern neighbors, under an ideological mantle of upholding and propagating the Christian faith, as well as in order to defend their frontiers and extend their territorial power.

Over the course of successive reigns, emperors reinforced their rule over Italy, which came to be regarded as a distinct component kingdom of the Empire, with its own crown. Down to the fourteenth century, Italy remained an important sphere of activity for the Empire's rulers, some of whom led repeated expeditions to the south and spent a significant portion of their reigns there. Only two, however, the Ottonian Otto III (r. 980-1002) and the Hohenstaufen Frederick II (r. 1212-1250), made serious attempts to rule from beyond the Alps: even in its central-medieval heyday, the Empire was a fundamentally northern institution. Early in the eleventh century a Burgundian realm was added, comprising territories in Switzerland and south-eastern France. It, too, had a crown, though few medieval monarchs troubled to undergo investiture.

Within the Germanic-speaking core-lands in the north, the focus of power shifted over time with successive dynasties, reflecting the changing concentration of familial lands and resources. Under the Ottonians these lay principally in Saxony, although the old Carolingian heartlands on the Rhine remained important. The middle Rhine provided a center of gravity for the next dynasty, the Salians, whose members ruled down to 1125, and under whom Speyer attained prominence as a royal burial site and a center for dynastic self-representation. The Salians' successors, the Hohenstaufen, who provided kings and emperors until 1254, had their power-base in the south-west, in Swabia and Alsace. One result of this changing dynastic focus was that for most of the Middle Ages there was no stable center of rule, let alone anything that might be termed a capital, in the Empire's northern lands.

Only in the final medieval centuries did this begin to change, as rulers from new families attained the throne, and assembled the resources of dynastic power. These were no longer to be sought in the properties and incomes that came with the imperial title, which by the late Middle Ages were falling increasingly under the control of local and regional powers. Nor could the new dynasties count on enjoying lasting possession of the crown, which after the thirteenth century was in the gift of a constitutionally defined college of prince-electors. The Luxembourg dynasty, which first gained the Empire with the election of Henry VII (r. 1308-1313), constructed over the course of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries a large, hereditary patrimony in east-central Europe. Charles IV (r. 1346-1378) developed Prague, the

chief city of his dynastic kingdom of Bohemia, as a major metropolis, which for a short time functioned as a de facto capital for the Empire. Following the extinction of the Luxembourgs in the fifteenth century, their place was taken by the Habsburgs, who had built a dynastic power-bloc in the far south-east of Germany. By the end of the Middle Ages Vienna had emerged as both a dynastic capital and an important site of imperial government.

Monarchical rule in the Empire was itinerant, and the locations for the ruler's material and ideological support were always plural. This principle found expression already in the process of accession to the throne, in which election by the princes, customarily in Frankfurt, was followed by coronation and enthronement at the old Carolingian center of Aachen. Power was principally exercised through ritualised face-to-face encounters. Kings and emperors summoned periodic assemblies of the ecclesiastical and secular magnates of the Empire. These met at a variety of accustomed sites, mainly in Germany, often on the high feast-days of the Church. In the late Middle Ages these meetings increasingly took place at urban centers and were also attended by representatives of the imperial towns. Institutions of impersonal government remained modest, at least when compared with the resources of central record-keeping, justice, and taxation that developed in neighboring western-European kingdoms over the course of the Middle Ages.

Although most of the Empire's medieval rulers hailed from its German territories and were raised to the throne by German princes, Italy long remained a major theatre of their activity and relations with the papacy, on whom they depended for imperial coronation, a long-running preoccupation and problem. The difficulties were partly ideological, since popes and emperors were ascribed a joint headship of Catholic Christendom whose terms, however, remained debatable, and partly material, with the emperor's territorial claims in Italy threatening the papacy's jealously guarded independence. The conflicts of emperors and popes, which were recurrent between the late eleventh and the mid-fourteenth century, proved particularly intractable and destructive because they often became entangled with political rivalries and princely ambitions north of the Alps. The damage which resulted was partly to the reputation of the imperial monarchy, which became at times a focus of bitter controversy and division. (Of the emperors who ruled during the centuries of conflict, few avoided excommunication.) But the long absences of monarchs in the south – Frederick Barbarossa (r. 1152-1190) spent over a third of his reign campaigning in Italy – tended also to reinforce the natural regionalism and constitutional polycentricity of their northern lands. Only in the last two medieval centuries did these patterns change somewhat.

For German historians writing in the nationalist tradition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the medieval Empire was a source of both allure and disappointment. Their approaches, long shaped by memories of the rise of Prussia and the founding of the German Empire of 1871, usually regarded a strong 'state' as both reflecting and providing an indispensable basis for the growth of national identity. Much attention was devoted to fixing with precision 'the origins of the German Reich' in the late ninth or early tenth century.[2] The rival merits of 843, 911 (the first accession of a non-Carolingian east of the Rhine), 919, or other purportedly axial dates were weighed, as if these marked the founding moments of a modern-style nation-state. For Martin Lintzel, for example, 'the will of the German *Volk* to independence achieved breakthrough' in the treaty of Verdun dividing Charlemagne's inheritance.[3] A concern with origins and the power of kings long survived the discrediting of German-nationalist medievalism in 1945. After mid-century, however, the task became to explain why the German nation, which had seemingly enjoyed the same promising post-Carolingian start as the French, subsequently failed to grow healthily within monarchical state structures like its western neighbor.[4] Implicitly or explicitly, Germany's imperial *Sonderweg*, lamented by Heinrich August Winkler, was ascribed much of the blame.

If one approach looked for a German nation-making moment antedating imperial titles, another, often reflecting modern imperialist longings, highlighted the power of the Empire itself, in its high-medieval heyday, as constituting proof of a strong underlying sense of nation. Founding empires was surely what proud, self-confident nations did. Wilhelm von Giesebrecht thus presented his *Deutsche Kaiserzeit* – the 'German imperial age' between the tenth and the twelfth centuries, the subject of his popular multi-volume history – as the time 'in which our people, strong in its unity, attained the fullest extent of its powers'.[5] Medieval Germans were at their most German when at their most triumphantly imperial – a view which, while it never entirely silenced the Empire's *kleindeutsch* critics, received strong affirmation in both academic and political circles after the foundation of a new German Reich in 1933. A handful of historians continued into the second half of the twentieth century to discern in the Empire of the Salians and Hohenstaufen a 'German national state'.[6] The late Middle Ages,

[2] See the essays in H. Kämpf (ed.), *Die Entstehung des Deutschen Reiches: Deutschland um 900* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1956).
[3] Cited in G. Tellenbach, 'Wann ist das Deutsche Reich entstanden?', in Kämpf (ed.), *Entstehung*, p. 175.
[4] See C. Brühl, *Deutschland – Frankreich: Die Geburt zweier Völker* (Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau, 1990).
[5] W. von Giesebrecht, *Geschichte der deutschen Kaiserzeit*, 5 vols. (Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1855-1880), vol. 1, pp. vii-viii.
[6] E.g., K.G. Hugelmann, *Stämme, Nation und Nationalstaat im Deutschen Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1955).

when the Empire no longer dominated the European political stage, were for a long time largely ignored by historians in search of a medieval German nation.

What these approaches often had in common was a tendency to focus on external, objective criteria – the foundation of new polities, the assertion of imperial power – to the relative or complete neglect of subjective expressions of medieval consciousness and mentalities. The experience of modernity seemed to make clear both that healthy nations existed within well-made political structures and that their vitality, and thus self-consciousness, waxed and waned with the tides of political and military power. What more was there to seek? The result in the German case was a concentration of studies of medieval nationhood upon centuries in which the evidence for its existence is limited and problematic, at the expense of other, later centuries when such evidence becomes more explicit and abundant.

For the much-studied, supposedly formative, late- and post-Carolingian periods, the historian has little to work with beyond names – and a meagre and unpromising tally even of those. Titles, when used politically, often placed their stress on political multiplicity rather than on unity. Ottonian kingship claimed to derive its legitimacy from acknowledgement by a plurality of established peoples ('the population of Franks and Saxons'); Otto I presented himself on occasion as a 'king of the Franks and Lombards'.[7] The idea of the imperial monarchy as the outcome of common action by a multiplicity of northern peoples proved long-lasting. As late as the thirteenth century, the widely-copied vernacular law code known as the *Sachsenspiegel* could still proceed directly from discussing the election of the monarch to claiming that the Saxons, Bavarians, Franks, and Swabians, on whom his rule rested, had once inhabited their own kingdoms.[8] When a unifying political identity was sought for the populations of the former Carolingian territories east of the Meuse and for their new rulers, until at least the eleventh century the habitual recourse was to the well-established, legitimising theme of Frankishness.

It is around the year 1000 and in the decades that follow that references to 'the Germans' (*Teutonici*) start to appear in growing, if still modest, numbers. Their provenance and contexts are revealing, since they occur mainly in writings from south of the Alps or from

[7] E. Müller-Mertens, 'Frankenreich oder Nicht-Frankenreich? Überlegungen zum Reich der Ottonen anhand des Herrschertitels und der politischen Struktur des Reiches', in C. Brühl and B. Schneidmüller (eds.), *Beiträge zur mittelalterlichen Reichs- und Nationsbildung in Deutschland und Frankreich* (Historische Zeitschrift Beiheft 24, Munich: Oldenbourg, 1997), pp. 48-50.

[8] *Sachsenspiegel Landrecht*, ed. K.A. Eckhardt, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* [henceforth *MGH*] *Fontes iuris Germanici antiqui*, Nova Series, vol. 1.i (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1955), p. 238

the southern borderlands of the Empire's cisalpine core, and they often relate to the campaigns undertaken by the monarch, with northern military support, in Italy.[9] The same sources and contexts also yield early references to a 'German language' (*lingua Teutonica*), purportedly common (and by implication exclusive) to the different Germanic groups united in imperial service. A 'German people' therefore seems first to have become visible to contemporaries in consequence of its rulers' imperial turn during the tenth century and their ventures in the south. It appears to have been southerners, responding to the incursions from across the Alps, who did much to teach 'the Germans' about their common existence as a community of imagination. But what above all transformed a collection of labels and epithets into something more substantial was the descent of the imperial monarchy's relations with the papacy into bitter, protracted controversy during the second half of the eleventh century.

Nothing did more to lend salience and lasting currency to a vocabulary of common Germanness than the campaign waged by the reforming Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073-1085) to combat and constrain what a new generation of clerical zealots had come to regard as unwarranted interference in ecclesiastical affairs by the emperor. The papal challenge had partly been provoked by the development during the eleventh century of an increasingly ambitious doctrine of Christian emperorship, which insisted on the emperor's duty and power to intervene at the highest levels within the Church for the general good. The papal party sought in response to force the monarchy back within clear boundaries, which the Church now claimed the power to define. The Empire's ruler, the pope and his allies insisted, was a mere German monarch, ruling over a German polity (*regnum Teutonicorum*), implicitly no different from other territorial kingdoms.[10]

The role of the 'Investiture Contest', as the conflict (which focused particularly on the monarch's power to install, or 'invest', bishops) is known, as a stimulus to collective identities in the Empire, is important in a number of seemingly paradoxical ways. The crucial formative interventions in imperial affairs were hostile ones, by an external actor, and they challenged some of the most explicitly universal aspects of the emperor's titles and claims. The conflict resulted in no imperial triumph, but rather contention and protracted instability, which threatened the Empire's prestige. But its effect was also to lend urgency to debates about the nature of the imperial monarchy and to compel the taking of sides, on matters where the salvation of souls seemed to be at stake.

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[9] J. Fried, *Der Weg in die Geschichte: Die Ursprünge Deutschlands bis 1024* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1994), pp. 20-1.

[10] E. Müller-Mertens, *Regnum Teutonicum: Aufkommen und Verbreitung der deutschen Reichs- und Königsauffassung im frühen Mittelalter* (Vienna, Cologne and Graz: Böhlau, 1970), pp. 388-9.

The consequences for political identities in the Empire were initially complex. One result was, in response to papal attempts at limiting the monarchy's scope, to encourage further emphasis by the imperialist party on the Empire's Roman and Christian-universal qualities. The practice, which had developed in the eleventh century, of numbering medieval emperors in direct succession from Caesar and Augustus, became established as a widespread and lasting convention. The monarch's title, as employed in his formal acts of government, now placed greater emphasis on the universal and sacral qualities of his rule. From the early twelfth century onward, he was styled 'by the grace of God ever-august king of the Romans' from the time of his first coronation in Aachen.[11] Over the course of subsequent decades, the Empire itself came to be termed 'holy' (*sacrum*), as well as Roman. The official vocabulary henceforth remained largely stable until the end of the Middle Ages. With the increasing adoption of the vernacular by the imperial chancery in the fourteenth century, the resonant Latin titles were translated directly into German.

Ruler and Reich were also Romanised and ascribed a general guardianship over the Church in Latin and vernacular literature in verse and prose from the Empire's northern lands. References to a 'German' monarchy or sphere of rule, or to the monarch's activities in 'Germany' or (in the vernacular) 'the German lands', are occasionally to be found in diplomas and letters under the imperial seal, and more often in chronicles, political verses, and imperialist treatises. More is said about these references below. In most such cases, however, an encompassing, legitimising Christian-Roman framework of rule is implied, or explicitly emphasized.

But the closer reflection upon the Empire discernible from the era of the 'Investiture Contest' also stimulated consideration of how its character had changed since the time of its foundation. In particular, the fact that, titles notwithstanding, the Empire's rulers were patently not Roman in origin but northerners, raised to the throne by princes of Germanic, not Latinate, speech and culture called for explanation. The idea that imperial rule had passed, from the Romans or the Byzantine Greeks, to a new bearer-people – the Franks – had gained currency already in the ninth century. From the late eleventh, the view began to find expression that the Roman Empire was held by the German people.[12]

[11] For what follows, see G. Koch, *Auf dem Wege zum Sacrum Imperium: Studien zur ideologischen Herrschaftsbegründung der deutschen Zentralgewalt im 11. Und 12. Jahrhundert* (Vienna, Cologne and Graz: Böhlau, 1972).

[12] See generally W. Goez, *Translatio Imperii: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Geschichtsdenkens und der politischen Theorien im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1958).

At around the same time, a legend took shape, recounting the origins of the Germans as a single, albeit composite, community. Significantly, this legend, which is first encountered in a vernacular verse Life of St Anno of Cologne, portrays the ethnogenesis of the Germans (who, however, appear only adjectivally, as 'German' men) as resulting from a union of the Franks, Saxons, Bavarians, and Swabians in common military service in the south. Caesar, so the story goes, after conquering the northern peoples, resolved to march on Rome and take sole power. His success in the venture rested upon the combined (and thereby 'German') military forces that he brought over the Alps.[13] The tale was reproduced and elaborated in the widely read twelfth-century *Kaiserchronik* and in a number of later vernacular histories, in which the element of common 'German' achievement was given greater emphasis. It presents the origins of the German people as contemporary with and causally inseparable from the foundation of the Roman Empire. The unifying element is portrayed as military prowess in service of imperial goals.

This did not, however, explain how the Empire had come into the Germans' hands. One explanation, advanced by influential Latin histories, maintained that the Franks were themselves Germans and that Charlemagne, as an imperial founder-figure, had bestowed a lasting title on his fellow-countrymen. The more developed versions of this argument made appeal to the Trojan legend in order to claim for the Franks or Germans and the Romans a common origin in migrant warrior bands from Troy. It was therefore only proper that two such illustrious and interrelated peoples should between them provide the spiritual and secular heads of Christendom: Roman popes and Franco-German emperors. On another widely-received view, which sidestepped the problem of Frankish ethnicity, the Empire had been translated to the Germans with the renewal of the imperial title under the Ottonians in the tenth century.

But translated by whom? If some accounts ascribed the foundational deed to Charlemagne, another highly influential view insisted that the initiative in the Empire's transfer had lain with the pope. The definitive statement on the matter was Innocent III's decretal *Venerabilem* of 1202, issued at a time when the pope was claiming the power to judge between rival claimants to the imperial throne. Innocent's bull explained how the Holy See, in translating the Roman Empire from the Greeks to the Germans (*Germani*) in the person of Charlemagne, had granted the princes 'the right and power of electing the king, afterwards to be raised to emperor'.[14] *Venerabilem* is important in several ways. Its

[13] *Das Anno-Lied*, ed. M. Opitz (1639, repr. Heidelberg: Winter, 1946), p. 32.
[14] *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, ed. A. Friedberg, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1872-1881), vol. 2, cols. 79-82.

incorporation into canon law ensured that it became widely known among the learned and was much cited to the end of the Middle Ages and beyond. It asserted that the Empire had been gained by the Germans through no mere act of force, but by the independent judgment of an external authority – the pope, as Christ's earthly representative – based on their suitability as temporal protectors for the Church. It implicitly raised the prospect that what the pope had given he might take away, and it invited reflection on the collective qualities that had earned the Germans the Empire, and on whether their descendants still exemplified those qualities. Importantly, it located the Germanness of the Empire not in its rulers, but in the princes who chose them.

By the thirteenth century, the old idea that the emperor ruled by the assent and acclamation of a plurality of northern peoples had developed into the belief that he was chosen by 'the Germans', understood as a composite community formed from those same ancient peoples. The *Schwabenspiegel*, a vernacular law-code, put it succinctly: 'the Germans elect the king: King Charles [i.e., Charlemagne] gained this for them'.[15] During the thirteenth century, under the impetus of recurrent disputed successions, and stimulated particularly by the struggles accompanying the fall of the Hohenstaufen dynasty, the idea of the 'German' princes as the monarch's electors was refined into a more precise body of constitutional titles and practices. By the century's close, the composition of the college of seven prince-electors (three prelates and four secular magnates), whose powers and privileges would be codified in the Golden Bull of 1356, was already largely settled.

The princes, headed by the electors, were made the subject of a Germanising political vocabulary which, in its habitual application, contrasts with the customarily Christian-Roman styles of the monarchs they created (though the princes too were often simply styled 'imperial'). To the higher nobility was ascribed collective responsibility for the Germans' continuing hold on the imperial title. Since 'German' identity was largely defined in relation to the Empire, the princes became a principal repository and measure of Germanness itself. The treatise-writer Alexander von Roes, whose works date from the 1280s, argued that the entire German people displayed the character of nobles: they were Christendom's *militia*, with the aristocrat's natural rapacity and love of quarrels. Their Italian and French neighbors, by

[15] *Schwabenspiegel Kurzform*, ed. K.A. Eckhardt, *MGH Fontes iuris Germanici antiqui*, Nova Series, vol. 4, 2nd edn (Hannover: Hahn, 1974), p. 182.

contrast, had the less bellicose attributes respectively of plebeians and clerics.[16] This was why, Alexander insisted, the Germans alone were born to possess the Empire.

That the Germans were outstanding warriors, and that they demonstrated their martial aptitudes in the service of the emperor, above all in campaigns south of the Alps, is a recurrent theme in writings from the Empire's German lands.[17] It rested upon interdependent ethnic stereotypes, contrasting the masculine harshness of the Germans with the supposed softness and submissiveness of their southern neighbors and subjects. Violence in the Empire's name attains an almost ritual quality in later medieval chronicle accounts. Henry VII, for example, is described as displaying his 'fury' at the siege of Brescia in 1311, overawing the rebellious citizens with 'the invincible eagles of Germany'.[18] Even the numerically depleted and largely pacific journeys undertaken by fifteenth-century kings to Rome for coronation were still staged at symbolically important moments as ostentatiously military spectacle.

Later medieval writers constructed the Germans as a community of honour, based on their possession of the Empire. But their title had constantly to be vindicated in the eyes of their neighbors, through warlike deeds in defence of Church and faith and in order to assert imperial rights against rebels. 'Should the German tongue lose its right [to the Empire], its *honour* will be undermined', warned a vernacular poet in troubled times in the thirteenth century.[19] The identity of the Germans as custodians of the Roman Empire came to rest upon the ascription to them, and specifically to their princes, of a body of imagined common qualities that at times appear non-Roman or even explicitly anti-Roman. The chronicler Otto of Freising imagined Barbarossa's troops, in battle with the Roman citizenry in 1155, as saying:

> 'Take now, O Rome, Teutonic iron instead of Arabian gold. This is the price which your prince offers you for your crown. Thus do the Franks purchase empire.'[20]

[16] Alexander von Roes, *Noticia seculi*, in *Alexander von Roes: Schriften*, ed. H. Grundmann and H. Heimpel (*MGH Staatsschriften des späteren Mittelalters*, vol. 1.i, Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1958), p. 160.
[17] See generally L.E. Scales, '*Germen militiae*: war and German identity in the later Middle Ages', *Past & Present* 180 (2003), 41-82.
[18] *Die Königsaaler Geschichts-Quellen mit den Zusätzen und der Fortsetzung des Domherrn Franz von Prag*, ed. J. Loserth, *Fontes rerum Austriacarum: Oesterreichische Geschichtsquellen*, vol. 1, Abtheilung 8 (Vienna: Karl Gerold's Sohn, 1875), pp. 342-3.
[19] *Politische Lyrik des deutschen Mittelalters: Texte*, ed. U. Müller, 2 vols. (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1972), vol. 1, p. 68.
[20] *Ottonis et Rahewini Gesta Friderici I. Imperatoris*, ed. G. Waitz, *MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum*, vol. 46 (Hannover: Hahn, 1884), p. 113. My translation follows Otto of Freising and his continuator, Rahewin, *The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa*, ed. C.C. Mierow (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), p. 151.

The Empire's bearers were proudly *transmontani*: men from beyond the Alps.[21] It is revealing that, despite the Roman titles of their monarchs, the beneficiaries of the Empire's translation never – as did the Byzantines as custodians of the Eastern Empire – styled themselves 'Romans'.

A problem with the anti-Roman imperial identity of the Germans, however, was that it was not entirely of their own making. And as the Empire became mired in controversy arising from its rulers' Italian wars and recurrent conflicts with the papacy, and as the power and resources of those rulers dwindled in the later Middle Ages, this came increasingly to matter. The positive self-construction of the Germans as the fierce warrior-servants of Empire and Church was disconcertingly similar to the negative portrayals of them by their neighbors in the south and west, as a cruel, turbulent, and disorderly people. Both views drew upon the same antique tropes for the barbarian: in the eyes both of their literate champions and of their Italian victims and critics, imperial armies exemplified the 'Teutonic fury' (*furor Teutonicus*) which Lucan (39-65 AD) had made proverbial and which Henry VII was praised for displaying before Brescia.[22]

To critical observers – some of whom by the later Middle Ages were themselves German – the collective qualities habitually cited to justify the Germans' hold on the Roman Empire might look more like a disqualification. After Frederick II's imperial coronation in 1220 no more emperors were crowned in Rome for nearly a century. Frederick's own bitter conflict with the papacy had seen him denounced by opponents as the biblical Antichrist and culminated in his formal deposition in 1245, at a Church council presided over by the pope in person. Although 'kings of the Romans' continued during the following century to be crowned at Aachen, none before Henry VII ventured over the Alps, and even in Germany the power of many was limited and contested. Given that the Empire was by general agreement a transferable dignity, possession of which was justified above all by the idoneity of its possessors, voices were now heard urging its transfer afresh, to a more suitable people. A candidate seemed to some readily to hand, in the kings of France, who claimed descent from Charlemagne and his Franks, and whose reputation as devout and orthodox crusaders appeared to contrast favourably with the Empire's existing incumbents.

The Empire had become the subject of a lively treatise literature already during the 'Investiture Contest', reflecting its intimate but contested relationship with the Church and its

[21] See P. Godman, '*Transmontani*: Frederick Barbarossa, Rainald of Dassel, and the cultural identity of the German Empire', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 132 (2010), 200-29.
[22] E. Dümmler, 'Über den furor Teutonicus', *Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* (*phil.-hist. Klasse*) 9 (1897), 112-26.

head. Tracts defending the Empire multiplied again in the years of internal strife and weakness, French political ascendancy, and recurrent tensions and conflicts with the Curia, in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The majority of these were the work of Germans, and the origins, character, entitlements, and defects of their people were often a prominent theme. The Empire's seeming enfeeblement and the imminent threat to what in German eyes appeared the proper order of peoples thus stimulated close reflection on the nature and implications of Germanness. Nothing of the kind was brought forth by the preceding high-medieval *Kaiserzeit* of imperial (and to an older historical generation, German) ascendancy in Europe. Often, such works addressed the princes, lauding the deeds of their ancestors and reminding them of the collective honour that they would forfeit, together with the Empire, if they continued to exemplify the vices rather than the virtues of their people.

The importance of this treatise literature as reflecting or stimulating a sense of German peoplehood should not be overstated. Before the fifteenth century, all major known works are in Latin, and they often survive in very few manuscripts. Nevertheless, they clearly reflect debates that were current in clerical circles, and there are indications that some of the participants had connections to wider literate groups and networks. The heterogeneous, sometimes relatively modest, origins of their authors are an indication that the ideas with which they dealt were no preserve of rarefied court elites. Indeed, the late-medieval imperial court played little part in the production of tracts in the Empire's defence. Characteristically for the political culture of the Reich, the households of prelates of the Church were an important venue for their composition and discussion.

It was therefore natural that the Empire should have been drawn into the debates about Church reform which became increasingly urgent during the first half of the fifteenth century. This was a time of seemingly intractable schism in the papacy, which also saw the emergence of other powerful elements of religious division in Europe. The great Church councils which met on imperial soil to address these matters, at Constance (1414-1418) and Basel (1434-1449), acted as venues for the copying and circulation of older imperial reform treatises and the writing of new ones. Partly as a result of its own perceived failings and partly in the context of wider plans for the reform of the Church, the Reich now came to be debated – and debated by German-speakers, from German perspectives – as never before.

Speaking of the existence of a 'German nation' even as late as the fifteenth century is possible only with much qualification. Quite a varied vocabulary of Latin names for land (*Teutonia*,

Alemannia, *Germania*, sometimes with the addition of the more explicitly political *regnum*, or 'realm') and people was by then well established and in fairly common use among chroniclers and polemicists.[23] Although each term had its own penumbra of meaning, they were in large degree interchangeable. They also occur quite often in the written acts of later-medieval kings and emperors, although seldom in the more dignified clauses of their documents. Cognate terms are regularly encountered in vernacular writings, mostly formed from the originally linguistic signifier *tiutsch*, though it is revealing here that the most common territorial form was the plural 'German lands' (*tiutschiu lant*, occasionally *tiutschiu rîche*). The geographical bounds of those lands were the subject of at least broad consensus, with the imperial frontier north of the Alps playing an important part in their definition. 'German tongue' (*tiutschiu zunge*) was employed to denote the Germans as an ethno-political as well as a linguistic unity.

Yet when the Germans are compared with their late-medieval neighbors, it is the meagreness of any elements of common identity that seems initially to stand out. There was no hereditary ruling dynasty to provide a spine for narratives of collective history or destiny, such as we find in France and elsewhere. Only in relation to the Empire were the Germans ascribed anything that can be termed a common history, embracing the several northern peoples to whom that name was applied. But while the honour arising from the Empire's translation was often emphasized, there was, for example, no imperial saint, enjoying a general, unifying cult among the Empire's German populations. (Veneration of Charlemagne, canonised in the twelfth century, remained largely confined to Aachen.) Germany experienced nothing to compare with the patriotic wars, with their calls to common sacrifice in the holy cause of king and kingdom, which dominated the late Middle Ages across much of western Europe. The Empire's late-medieval rulers avoided such adventures, for which they lacked the means to raise forces or revenues on anything like the English or French scale.

While awareness of the monarchy was widespread among the populations of the Empire's northern lands, there is no reason to think that many beyond a small literate minority gave it more than passing thought. It is true that the emperor's links to Christian eschatology could make him the subject of popular attention, and even wild fantasies, in times of crisis. But from day to day, the institution which he headed touched relatively few lives. If the concept of 'Germanness' was also widely (although for most people no doubt only vaguely) familiar, other common identities – local, regional, or those deriving from subjection to a lord or prince – were more intrusive and compelling. Only in the imperial and free towns, directly

[23] For what follows, see L. Scales, *The Shaping of German Identity: Authority and Crisis, 1245-1414* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), ch. 10.

subject to the Empire, was awareness of that institution, not least as a source of legitimacy and protection, more pervasive. At the close of the Middle Ages there were around seventy of these, concentrated in southern Germany and including some of the Empire's largest urban communities and principal communications hubs. In these towns, by the fifteenth century the Reich and its rulers had attained a heightened symbolic visibility through depiction in public art and sculpture. The imperial-eagle armorial was widely to be seen adorning town gates and council chambers, while the figures of kings and emperors past and present were represented – sometimes, in order to commemorate or invoke particular acts of monarchical favour – on the façades of public buildings and on urban structures such as fountains. The seven ('German') prince-electors were a recurrent subject for portrayal.

It is, by the same token, not without significance that by the late Middle Ages, at least among an educated few, German identity had become a matter for debate, bound up with ideas of possession of the Empire, with controversy, and with judgements about neighboring peoples. Something of this contentiousness was able to infiltrate broader social strata through the Empire's intimate ties, in doctrine and in political reality, with the Church and its heads. The recurrent contests of emperors and popes left their scars. The Church's capacity to address society at large with its messages and to touch people with its actions was unmatched in medieval Europe. The excommunications, preaching campaigns, and suspensions of religious services that accompanied papal-imperial quarrels had been widely felt and were not quickly forgotten. And emperors as well as popes had their vocal popular mouthpieces among the clergy. As late-medieval reform debates intersected with currents of popular anti-clericalism, it was natural that some turned, however unrealistically, to the figure of the emperor as saviour. No region of late-medieval Europe was as abundant in prophecies, including many in the vernacular, as was Germany, and often these invoked the emperor. On occasion, this imperial eschatology found expression in hopes that a mighty 'German' monarch would arise, to purge the corrupt ('Roman') Church and establish a new ecclesiastical order in the north.[24] The tension, discernible from the Empire's earliest days, between imperial *Romanitas* and its northern, in some ways anti-Roman, bearers was never more widely evident than at the close of the Middle Ages.

During the fifteenth century, major structural changes took place in the Empire which by the century's close had reinforced its German character and significantly expanded the German

[24] F. Courtney Kneupper, *The Empire at the End of Time: Identity and Reform in Late Medieval German Prophecy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 50-1.

'political nation', in size and social breadth. These developments must be understood in the context of the Empire's territorial contraction and the changing geographical scope of its rulers' activities in the late Middle Ages. Although kings of the Romans were still crowned emperor in Rome, their expeditions south of the Alps were now shorter in duration and, after the early fourteenth century, more modest in scale. Much more of their time on the throne was spent in the north. Although northern Italy remained constitutionally subject to the Empire, its rule passed into the hands of local regimes, exercising delegated powers in return for payment. Much of the kingdom of Burgundy was lost to France in the late fourteenth century, and part of what remained merged with the northern ('German') territories of the Reich. By the late fifteenth century, regions peripheral to this northern core, notably the Swiss cantons and the Netherlands, were also becoming detached, politically and to some extent culturally. After 1420 Hussite Bohemia was for two decades in full-scale revolt and the object of crusades.

Especially important were the changes taking place in the heartlands of 'imperial' Germany, in the south and west. There, a series of interconnected developments were under way in society, culture, and political life, which Peter Moraw together termed *Verdichtung* (loosely, 'densification'): processes fostering the multiplication of bonds, networks, and exchanges of diverse kinds.[25] The towns especially, as trade and communications hubs and as venues for a thriving literate culture and the sites of growing numbers of university foundations, became vibrant centers for the exchange of knowledge and ideas. By the century's close, this discursive urban culture had been further stimulated by the spread of printing with moveable type.

Political life, too, was marked by the more intensive interaction of different groups, as well as by the growing prominence of educated specialists as advisors to princes and in the government of towns. Stimuli to change came from the multiplication of external dangers, the protracted absence of the monarch from the Empire's German heartlands and, related to this, the establishment of the Habsburgs on the imperial throne. Potent threats to imperial territory (as well as to the Catholic faith) were posed by the armies of Hussite Bohemia and by the Ottoman Turks. New menaces arose after mid-century from the expansionist ambitions of the duke of Burgundy (a prince of the French royal blood, whose rich territories lay adjacent to the imperial frontier and are not to be confused with imperial Burgundy) in the westand the king of Hungary in the east.

[25] P. Moraw, *Von offener Verfassung zu gestalteter Verdichtung: Das Reich im späten Mittelalter 1250 bis 1490* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1985).

The incapacity of the Empire's military and fiscal organization to meet such challenges stimulated plans for institutional innovation and encouraged assemblies to meet, seeking solutions.[26] At a time when the monarch's attention was often diverted to dynastic affairs, these might be convened by the princes, even in his absence. The towns, too, were increasingly represented. By the time of the great reforming assembly that met at Worms in 1495, it is possible to discern the existence of a *Reichstag*, where the estates of the Empire's German (but not its non-German) lands assembled to negotiate with the emperor. New judicial and fiscal institutions, more determined efforts to enforce the public peace, and in the early sixteenth century the division of the Empire's northern territories into administrative spheres, together amounted – false starts and setbacks notwithstanding – to a substantial *Verdichtung* of the Reich itself.

These changes provide the context for the more varied and developed articulations of German identity which found expression at the close of the Middle Ages and which would form a basis for further development between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. This more articulate sense of nation was inseparable from the Empire as an idea and from its development as a political community. Although it drew upon new sources and developed new themes and foci, it would have been unthinkable without the stock of established concepts, motifs, preoccupations, and arguments, upon which writers and propagandists drew directly and to which a wider political public now responded.[27]

The heightened sense of the existence of a German political community, and of its lineaments, was expressed in various ways. The Empire itself appears to contract conceptually, to become equated increasingly with its northern core. The growing practice of using the vernacular 'Reich' to designate both Empire and German kingdom reflected and encouraged this trend. The conflation of the Reich with its German members found visual affirmation in the popular heraldic confection known as the *Quaternionen*-eagle.[28] This device, which portrayed the imperial eagle with armorials representing the Empire's German estates arranged on its wings, attained wide dissemination, boosted by the development of printing. By the sixteenth century, it is to be found adorning utilitarian objects such as drinking vessels. The vocabulary of German identity was enriched with the reception of new terms and concepts – *natio* (or *nation*) and *patria* (or *vatterland*) – which were quickly taken

[26] See generally H. Angermeier, *Die Reichsreform 1410-1555: Die Staatsproblematik in Deutschland zwischen Mittelalter und Gegenwart* (Munich: Beck, 1984).
[27] F.L. Borchardt, *German Antiquity in Renaissance Myth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971).
[28] E. Schubert, 'Die Quaternionen', *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 20 (1993), 1-63.

up in imperial proclamations, broadsheets, and other widely circulating texts, as well as in oral debates in the *Reichstag* and elsewhere.[29] It is symbolic of the new focus that the imperial herald, previously styled 'Romreich', was from 1520 known as 'Deutschland'.[30] And, in a development that had been some time in the making, 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation' became after 1512 firmly established as an official imperial title.[31]

Also new were the efforts now made by the monarch and his supporters to drum up German patriotism in support of imperial and dynastic projects. Maximilian I (r. 1493-1519) was a vocal champion of Habsburg interests who harnessed the cultural resources of the day, including the printing press, to his ends.Monarchical pronouncements now spoke a more strident language of German as well as imperial allegiance. Humanist writers with ties to the court wrote the earliest full-blown German histories and geographies. These too reflected a northward turn, in their quest, nourished by the rediscovered writings of Tacitus, for an autochthonous German past, unencumbered by Trojan or Roman ties and populated by ancient German (and anti-Roman) heroes like Arminius. But the humanists also quarried the chronicles and polemical tracts of their medieval forebears, with their heroic accounts of the deeds of Charlemagne and the Hohenstaufen emperors, their invocations of the honour that the Germans gained from the Empire, and their denunciations of the jealous French and treacherous Romans who would rob them of their prize. An expanded public for national sentiment is now discernible. The calls, at the time of the imperial election of 1519, for a German and no foreigner to be raised to the throne, were nothing new. More novel were the convictions to which some gave voice, that failure to choose a German would surely provoke popular uprisings.[32]

The Empire was different. As a framework for or catalyst to any form of nation-making it appears uniquely unpromising. Its character as a medieval polity appears to contrast sharply with its neighbors, particularly the western kingdoms. To the seemingly abundant empirical reasons for setting the Empire aside can be added the peculiar tradition within which state- and nation-making in Germany were for a long time studied, and which had its origins in the years following the Empire's abolition. Nation-making states were measured in terms of their

[29] C. Hirschi, *Wettkampf der Nationen: Konstruktionen einer deutschen Ehrgemeinschaft an der Wende vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005), pp. 124-74.
[30] E. Schubert, *Einführung in die Grundprobleme der deutschen Geschichte im Spätmittelalter* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992), p. 33.
[31] U. Nonn, 'Heiliges Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation: Zum Nationen-Begriff im 15. Jahrhundert', *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 9 (1982), 129-42.
[32] Hirschi, *Wettkampf*, pp. 400-1.

similarity to Prussia – a test constructed in order that the old Reich might fall short. The Empire fails on every count. It was heavily decentralised, extensive rather than intensive in its government and, at least until the reforms of c. 1500, institutionally weak. Its rulers professed a universal Christian mission, which found expression in their official titles and the symbolism of their rule. Although the Empire was highly prestigious to its partisans, its rulers were repeatedly drawn into bitter conflicts with the Church and with their own subjects, through which the Empire was further weakened. Its 'Roman emperors' made singularly unconvincing Romans, as medieval observers were not shy to point out.

Yet when conventional expectations about power and medieval peoples are set aside, many of the Empire's weaknesses appear instead ultimately as stimuli to a conception of nationhood. The itinerant, face-to-face character of imperial rule gave significant numbers of the emperor's subjects an opportunity to witness the ritual staging of emperorship with their own eyes. The decentralised character of the Reich, combined with its longevity, left behind a palimpsest of sites of imperial memory extending across much of the German lands, although densest in the south and west. That the Empire's rulers were better able to grant privileges than impose burdens did little to harm their standing in the eyes of their subjects. The dissonances between the Empire's official Romanism and facts on the ground, which appeared to invite different conclusions, stimulated reflection. The widespread understanding of the imperial title as elective rather than hereditary encouraged the view of it as borne collectively – by a whole people, rather than a single family – and invited examination of the character and qualifications of its bearers. The special role ascribed to the emperor in the Church made the recurrent clashes with the papacy appear especially significant, and in need of explanation. The Church's unrivalled communications resources helped to keep its imperial competitor in the public eye.

By the early sixteenth century, the Reich was widely understood as a German polity. This perception had not arisen out of the blue. The north-south polarities, with their underpinning bodies of stereotype and accumulated grievance, which Luther was to exploit, had medieval antecedents in a tradition of reflection on the wrongs done to the Roman Empire and its German custodians. The national histories and polemics of the humanists exploited and built upon a medieval tradition. Particularly the later Middle Ages, the time of apparent weakness and crisis in the Empire, furnished an extensive and influential literature of imperial German nationhood. If the nation-making potential of the medieval Reich was indeed in some ways limited, in others it was to prove uniquely rich and potent.

Further Reading

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