



THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE

A THOUSAND YEARS
OF EUROPE'S HISTORY

PETER H.
WILSON

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PETER H. WILSON

The Holy Roman Empire

A Thousand Years of Europe's History



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For Janine Marret

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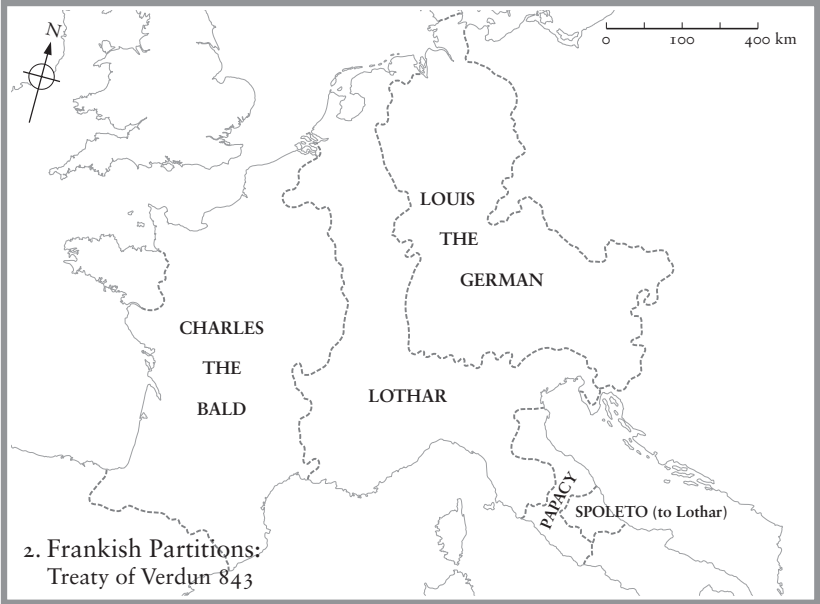
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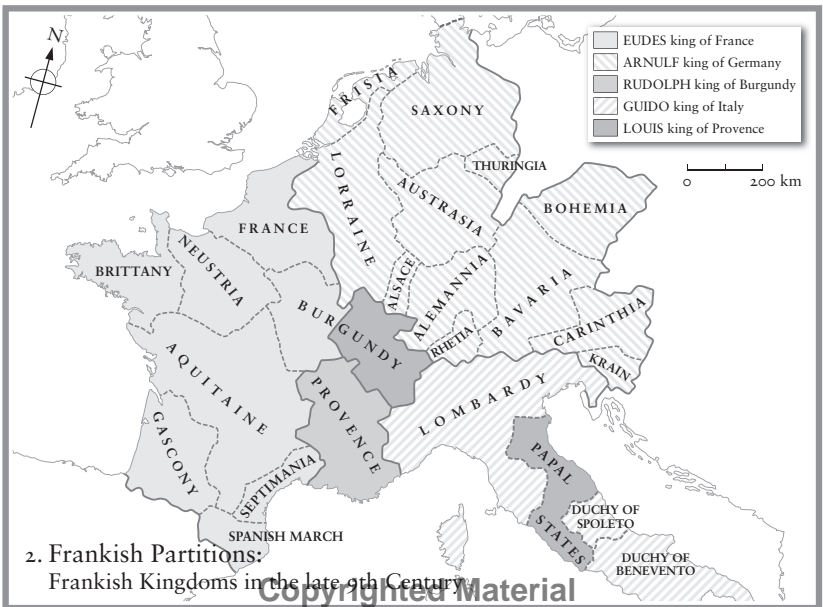
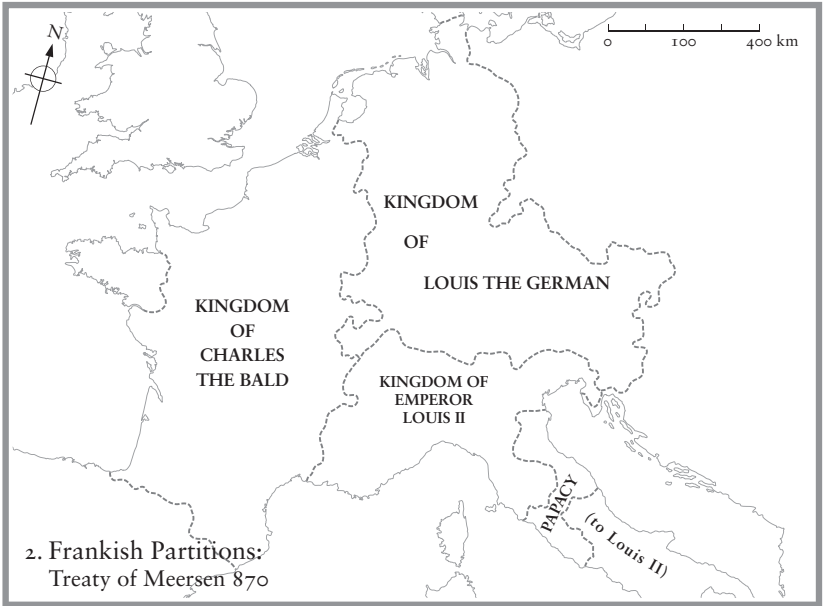


1. The Empire in 800

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3. Ottonians: the Empire in 962

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4. Salians: the Empire around 1050

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— Imperial frontier
 ■ Imperial Crown lands and Staufer allodial possessions

0 100 200 km

5. Staufers: the Empire in 1195

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6. From Little Kings to Big Dynasties:
the Empire in 1378

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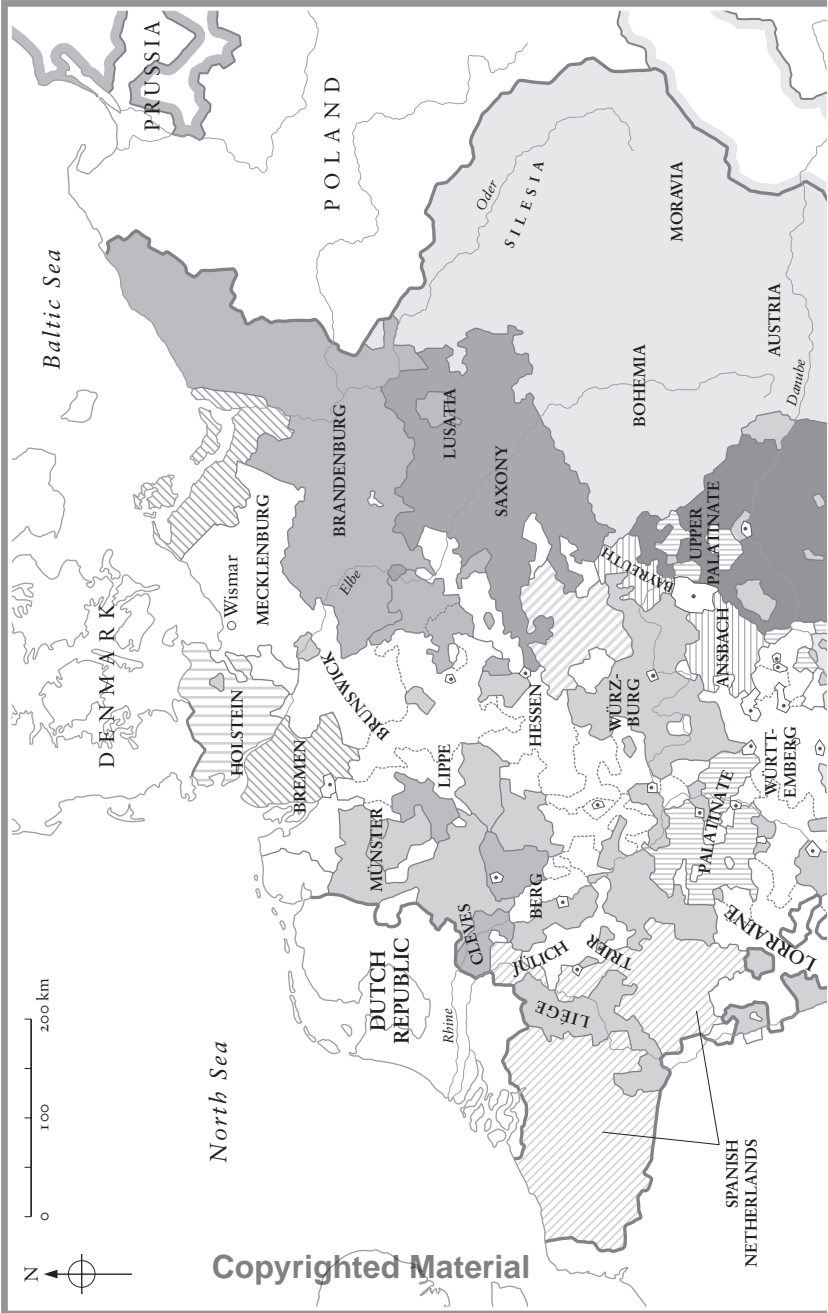


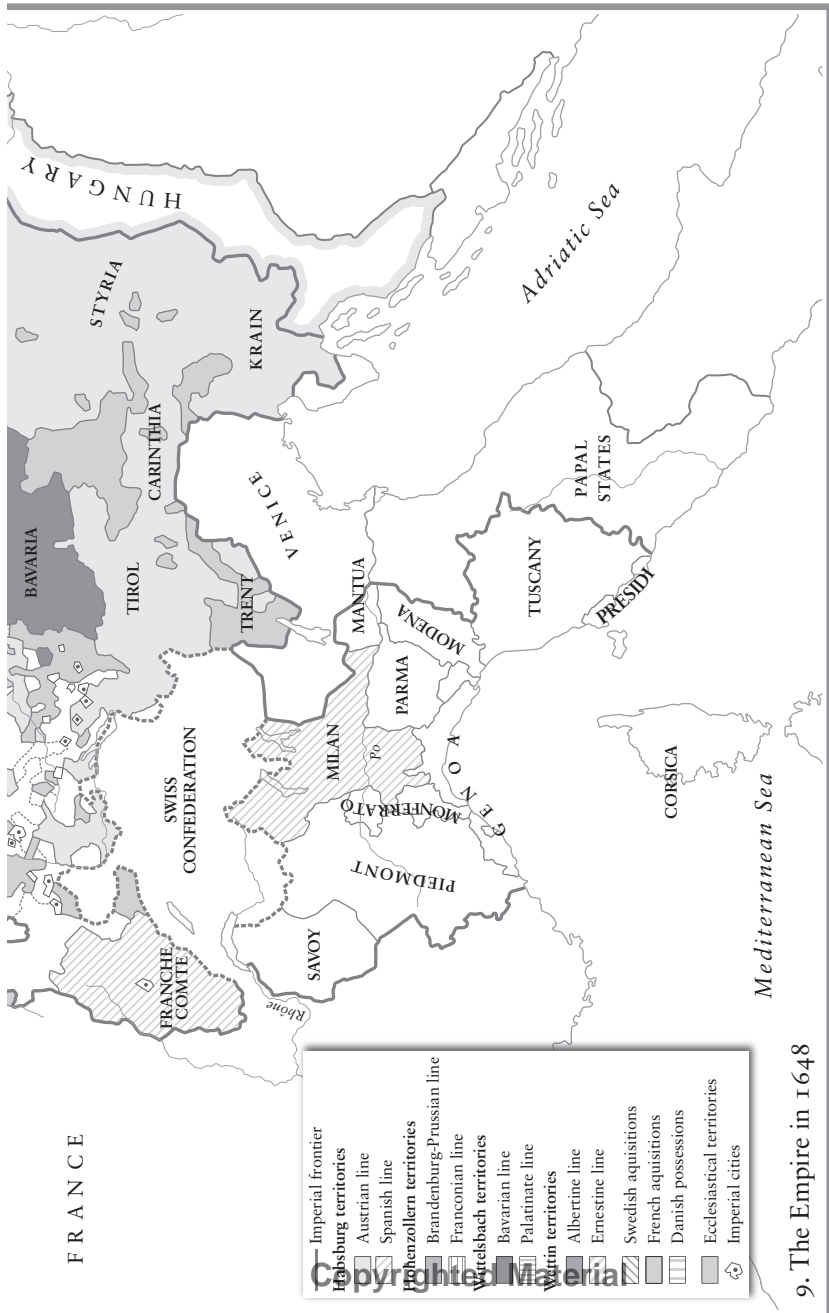


8. The Empire in 1555



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9. The Empire in 1648



To. The Empire in 1792

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11. The Empire in 1803

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12. The Empire in 1806



13. The Imperial Church, c. 1020

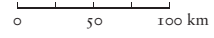


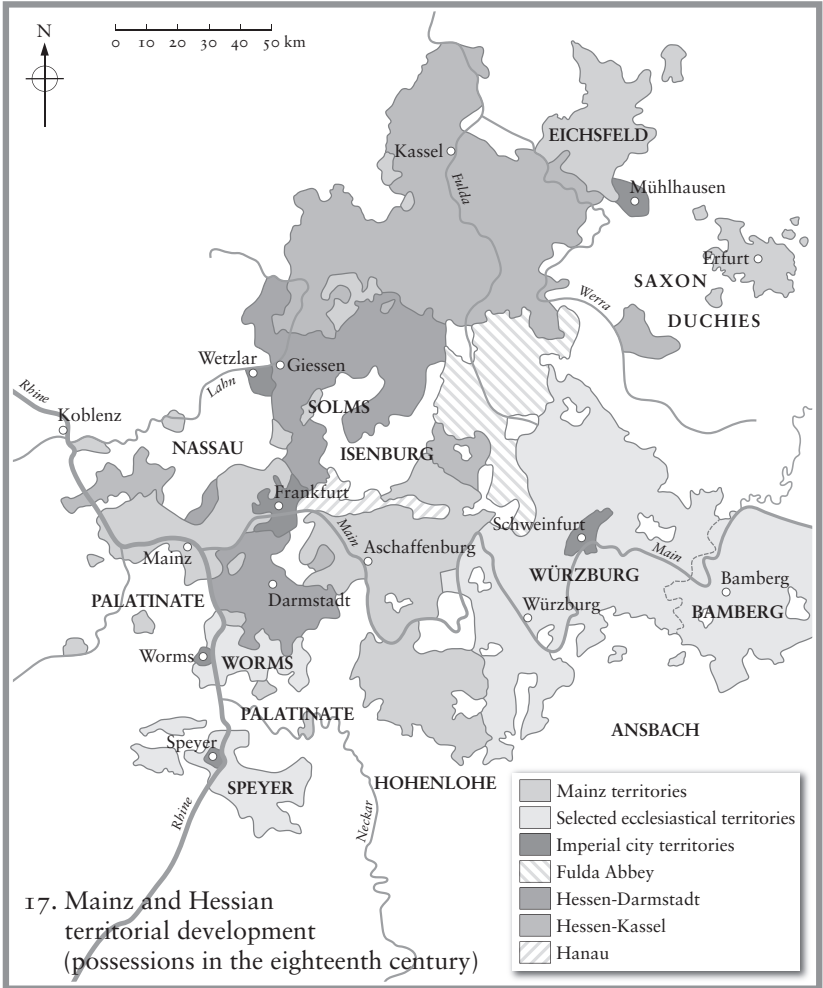


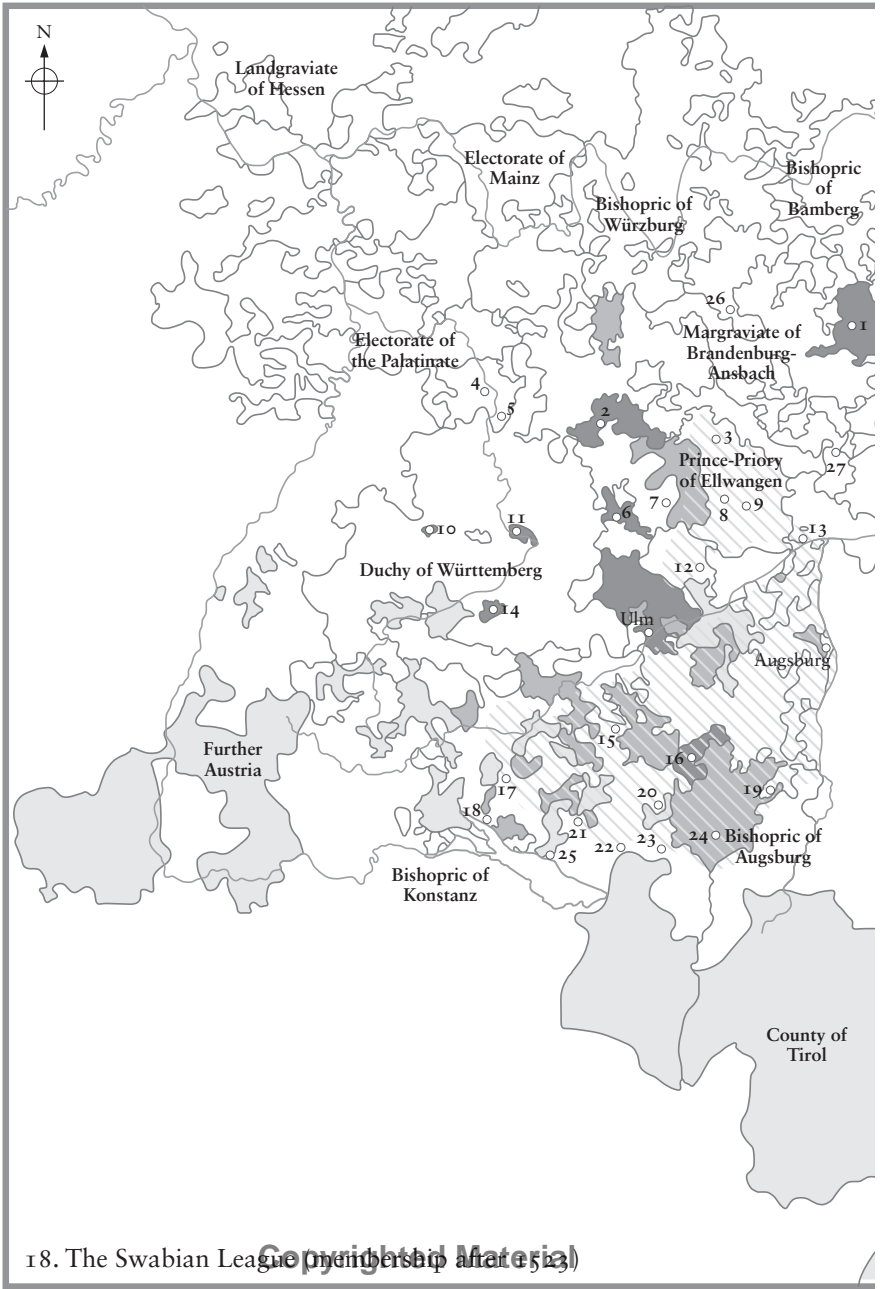


15. Ducal Burgundy in 1477

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18. The Swabian League membership area (1531)



Imperial cities

- 1 Nuremberg
- 2 Schwäbisch Hall
- 3 Dinkelsbühl
- 4 Wimpfen
- 5 Heilbronn
- 6 Schwäbisch Gmünd
- 7 Aalen
- 8 Bopfingen
- 9 Nördlingen
- 10 Weil der Stadt
- 11 Esslingen
- 12 Giengen
- 13 Donauwörth
- 14 Reutlingen
- 15 Biberach
- 16 Memmingen
- 17 Pfullendorf
- 18 Überlingen
- 19 Kaufbeuren
- 20 Leutkirch
- 21 Ravensburg
- 22 Wangen
- 23 Isny
- 24 Kempten
- 25 Buchorn
- 26 Windsheim
- 27 Weissenburg

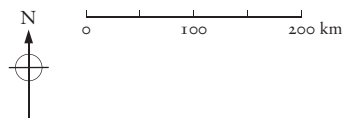
-  Imperial city territories
-  Zone of Knights who were members
-  Habsburg territories
-  Prelates

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50 100 km

- A The Palatinate
- B Baden-Durlach
- C Württemberg
- D Ansbach
- E Kulmbach
- F Hessen-Kassel
(resigned membership Dec. 1619)
- G Hohenlohe
- H Weimar (joined late 1619)
- I Strasbourg (city)
- J Ulm (city)
- K Nuremberg (city)
- L Brandenburg (resigned 1617)
- M Anhalt (personal membership)

- 1 Bavaria (duchy)
- 2 Mainz (electorate)
- 3 Cologne (electorate)
- 4 Trier (electorate)
- 5 Speyer (bishopric)
- 6 Worms (bishopric)
- 7 Strasbourg (bishopric)
- 8 Würzburg (bishopric)
- 9 Bamberg (bishopric)
- 10 Fulda (abbey)
- 11 Münster (bishopric)
- 12 Konstanz (bishopric)
- 13 Augsburg (bishopric)
- 14 Eichstatt (bishopric)
- 15 Passau (bishopric)
- 16 Freising (bishopric)
- 17 Swabian prelates



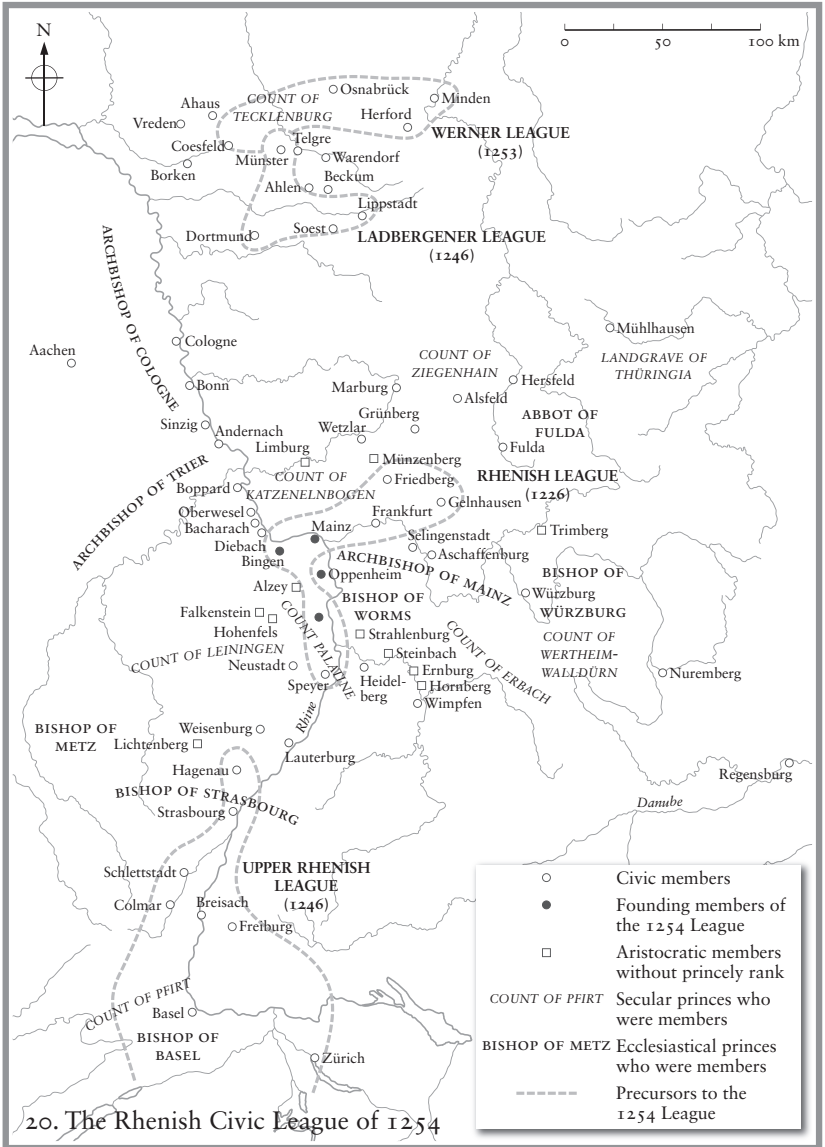
North Sea

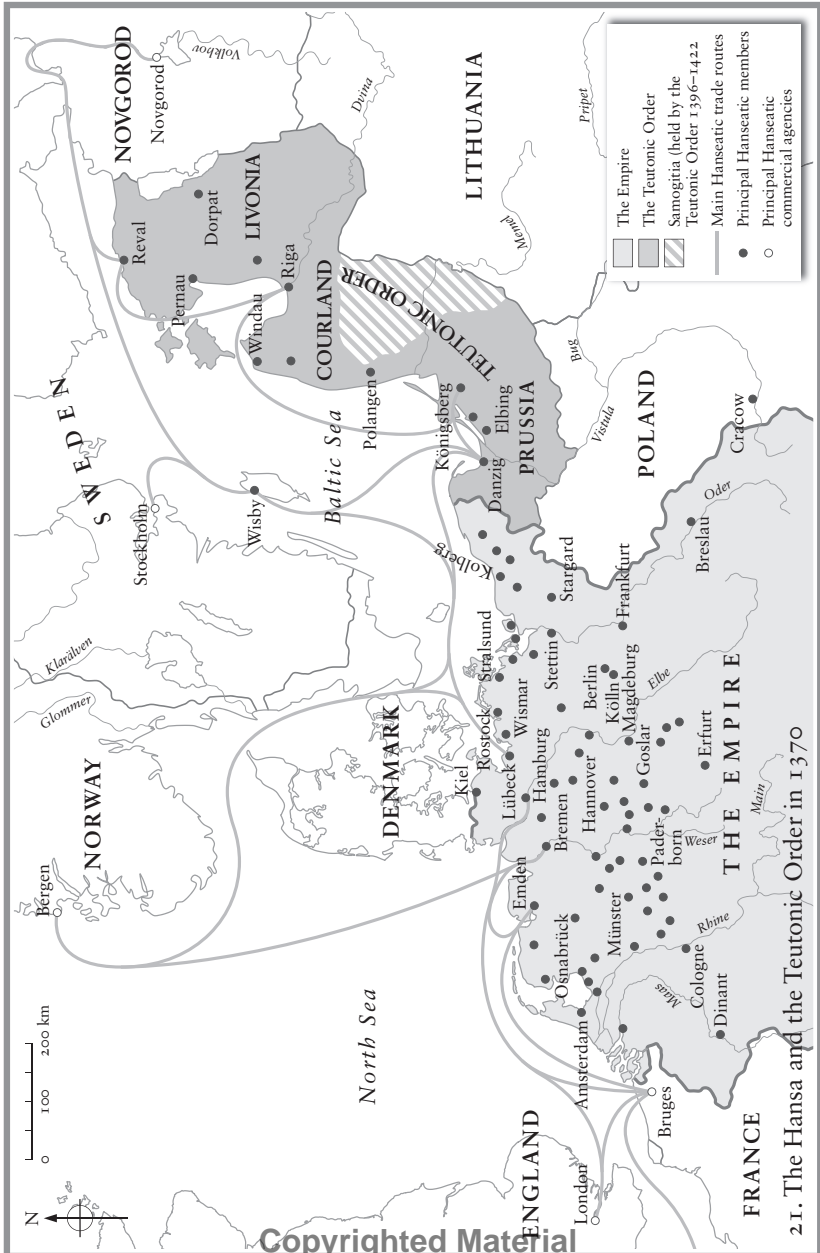
- boundary of the Empire
- Austrian Habsburg territories
- Spanish Habsburg territories
- Catholic League members
- Protestant Union members
- ▨ Brandenburg
- Major Protestant territories abstaining from Union membership
- ⊙ Imperial cities

FRANCE



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	The Empire
	The Teutonic Order
	Samogitia (held by the Teutonic Order 1396-1422)
	Main Hanseatic trade routes
	Principal Hanseatic members
	Principal Hanseatic commercial agencies



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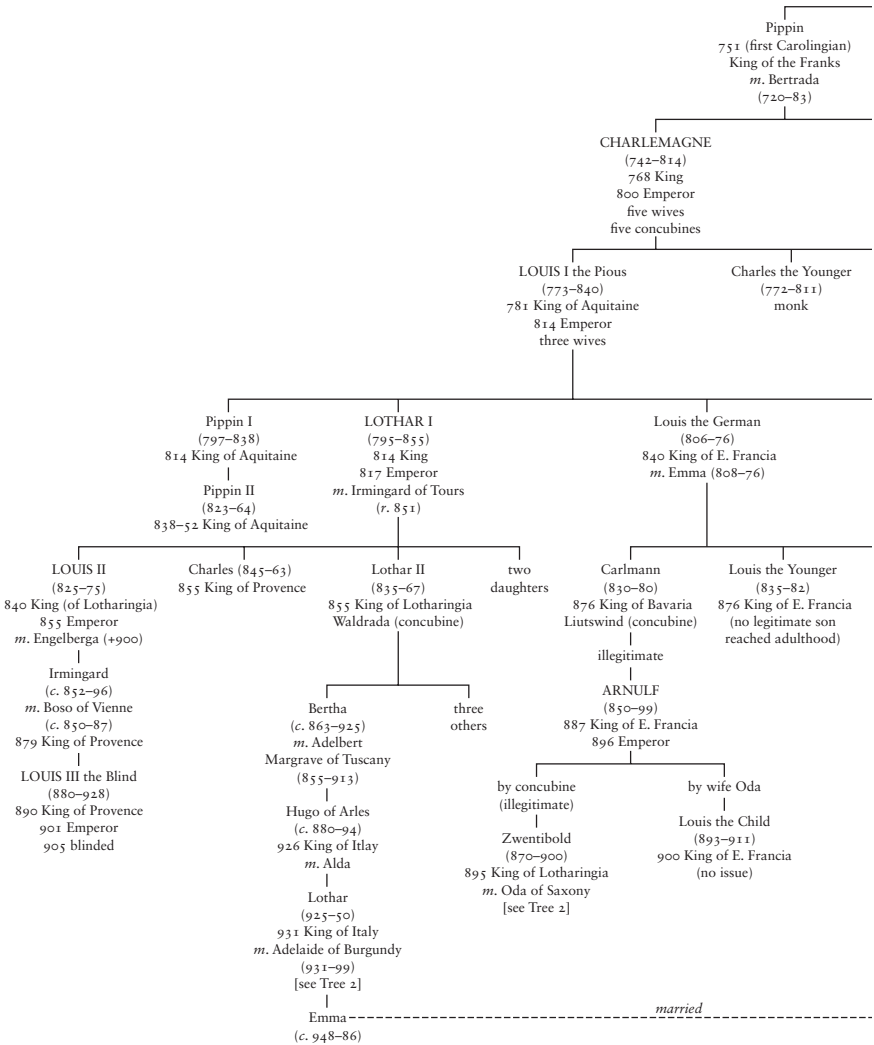
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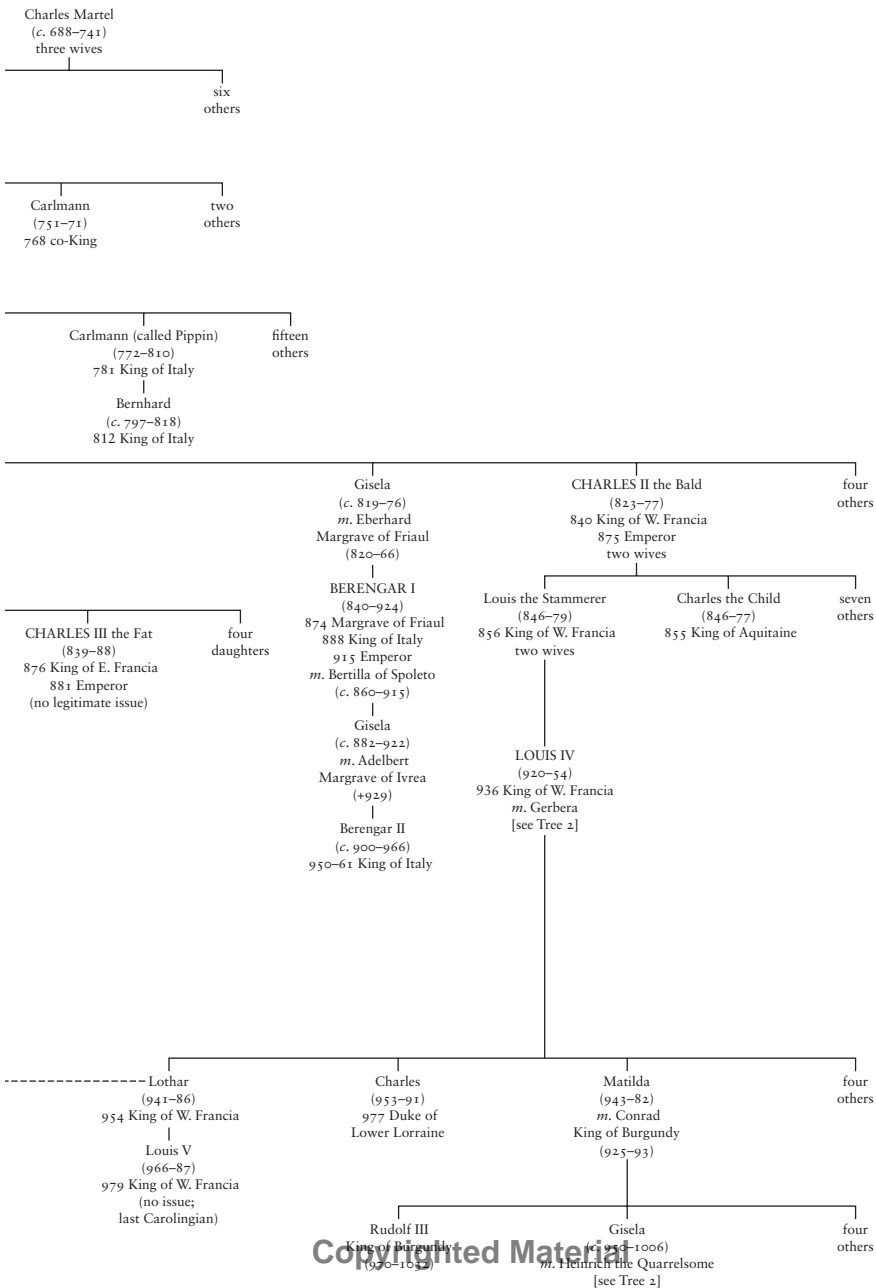


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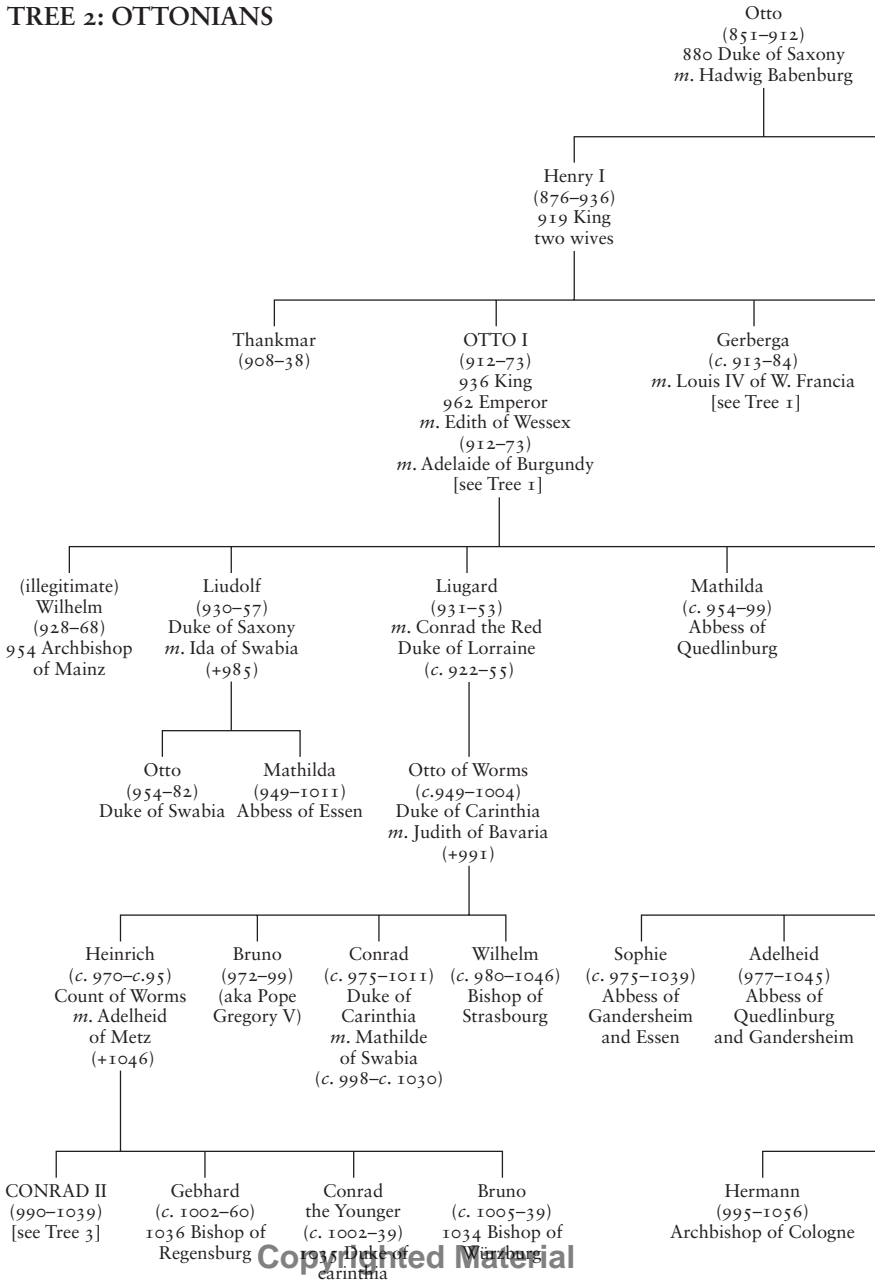
TREE I: CAROLINGIANS

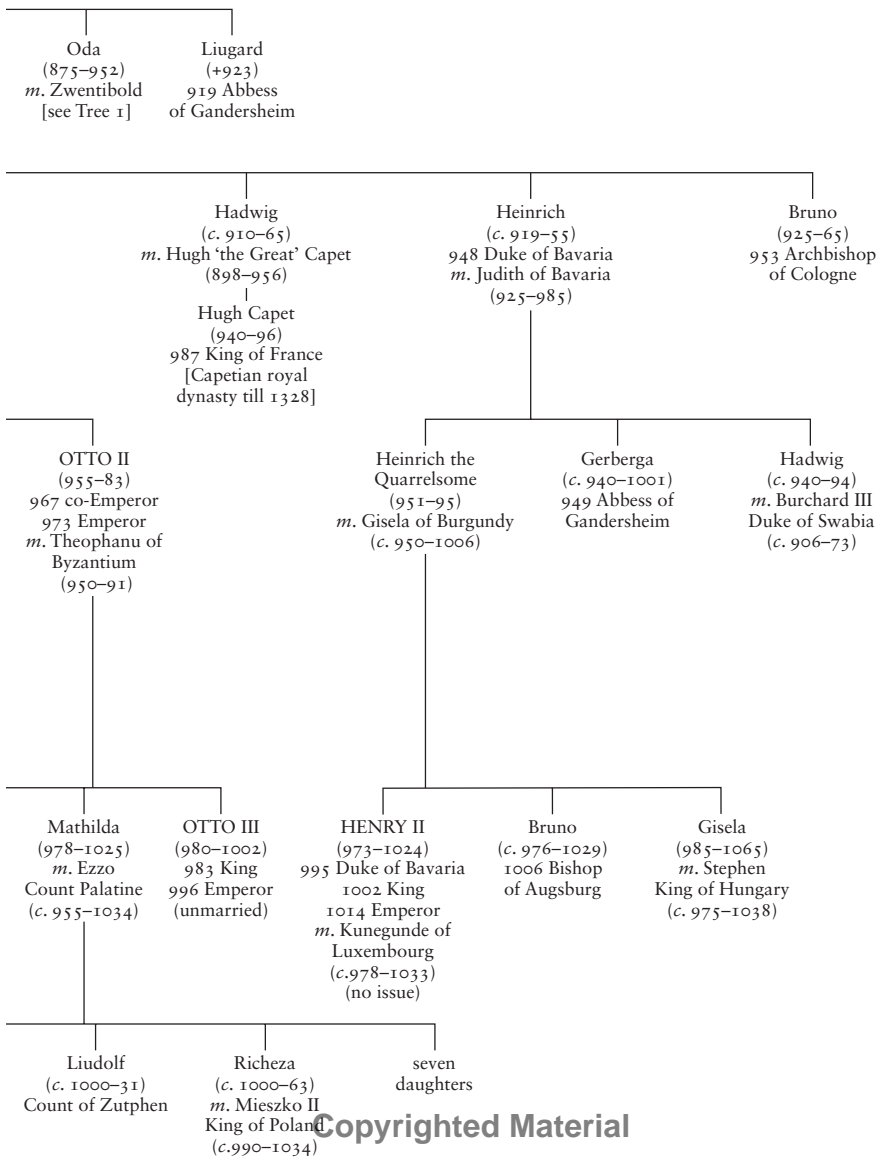




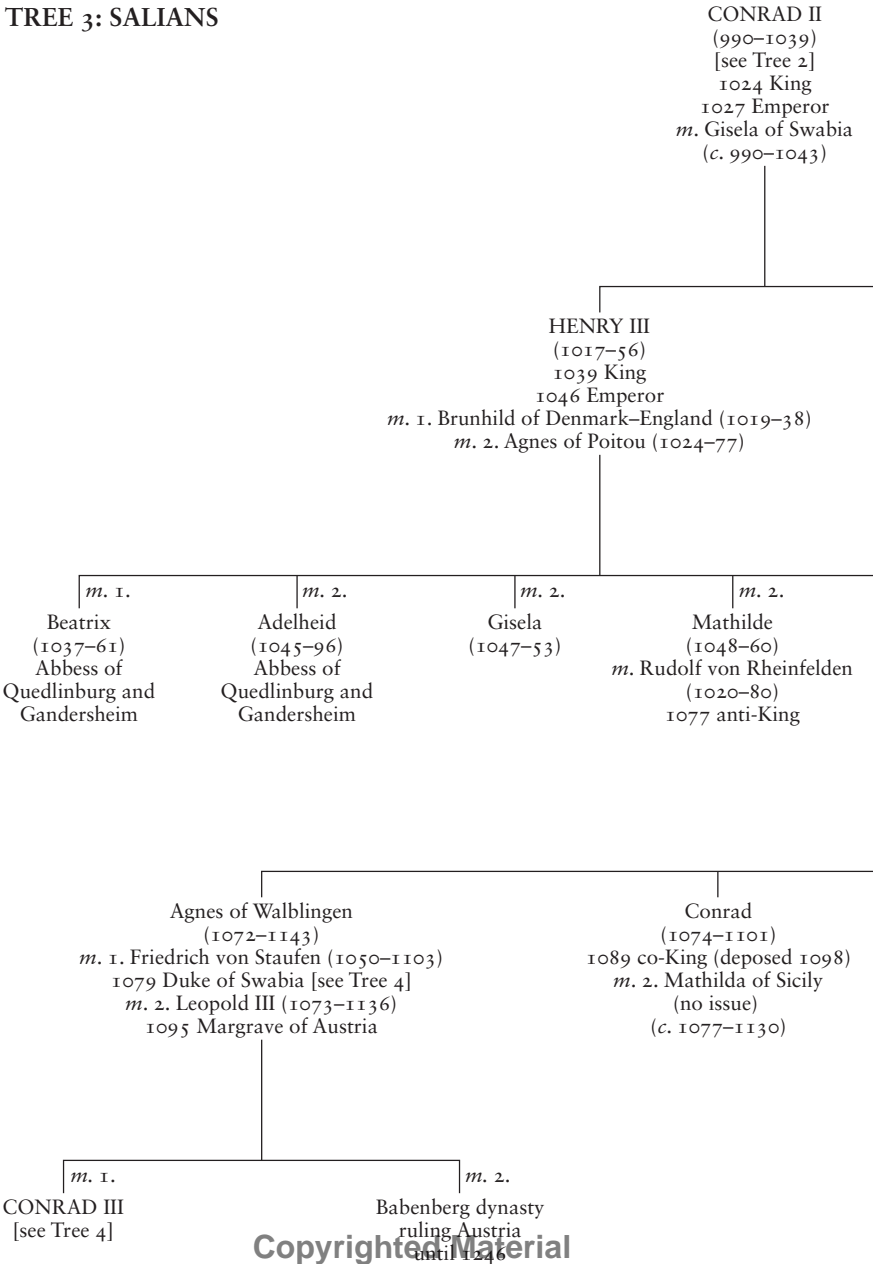
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TREE 2: OTTONIANS





TREE 3: SALIANS



Beatrix
(1030-6)

Mathilde
(1027-34)
engaged to Henry I
King of France

m. 2.
HENRY IV
(1050-1106)
1056 King
1084 Emperor
m. 1. Bertha of Savoy (1051-87)
m. 2. Praxedis of Kiev (c. 1067-1109)

Judith (Sophie)
(1054-c. 94)
m. 1. Salomo King of Hungary
(1052-87)
m. 2. Vladyslav I Hermann
Duke of Poland
(1043-1102)

Conrad
(1052-5)
Duke of Bavaria

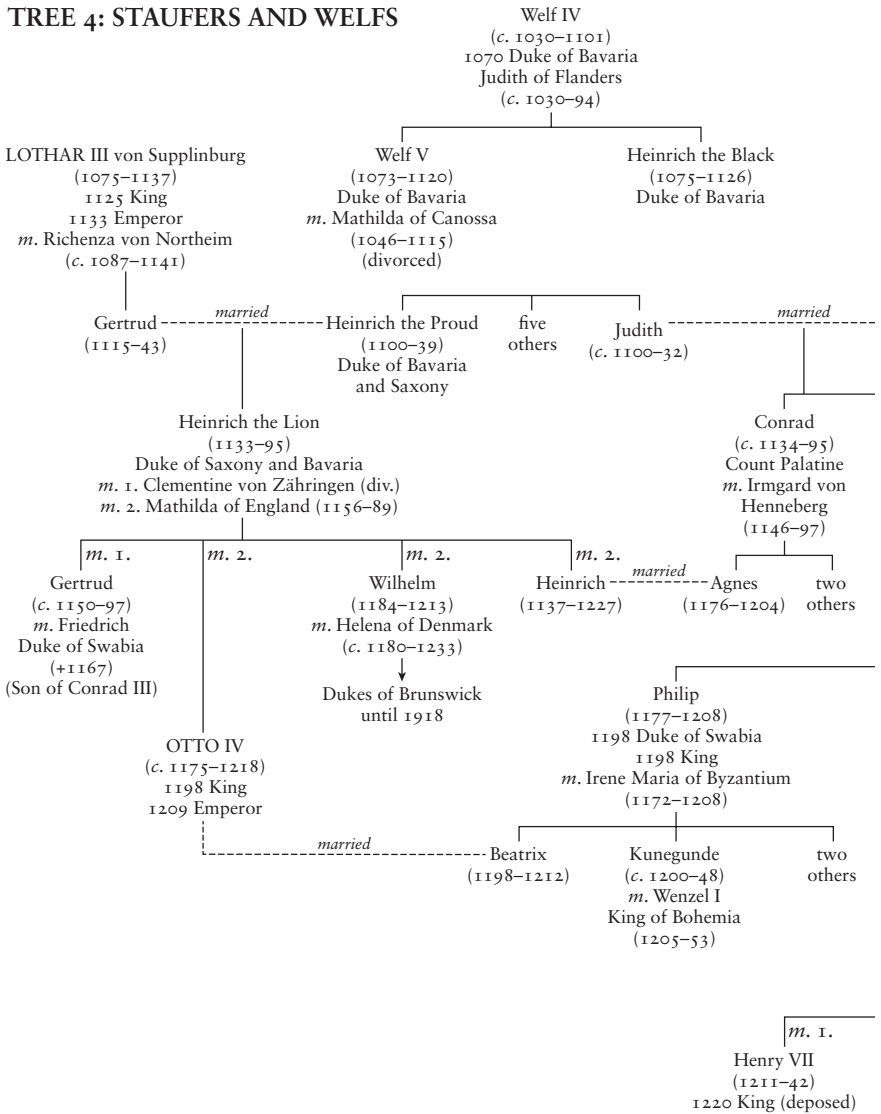
HENRY V
(1086-1125)
1098 co-King
1106 King
1111 Emperor
m. Mathilda
(1102-67)
daughter of Henry I of England
she remarried Godfrey of Anjou

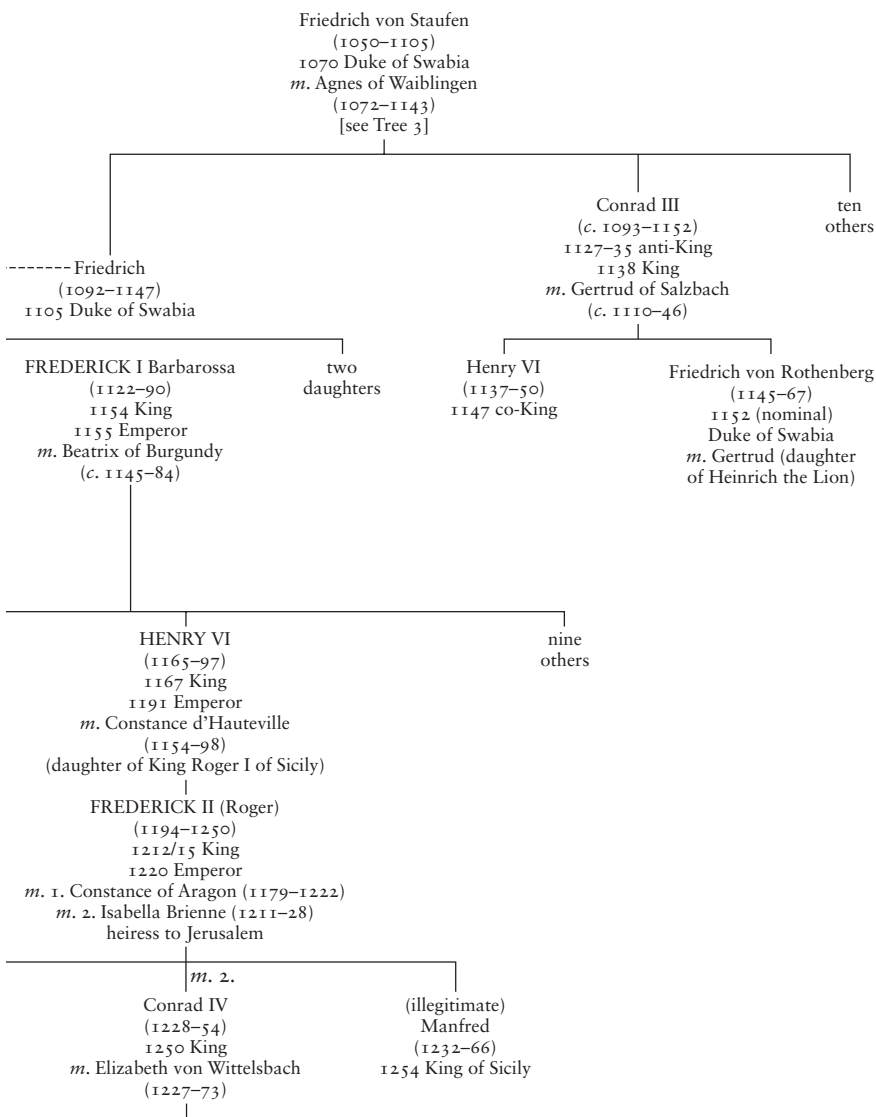
two
others

↓
Plantagenet
Kings of England
until 1485

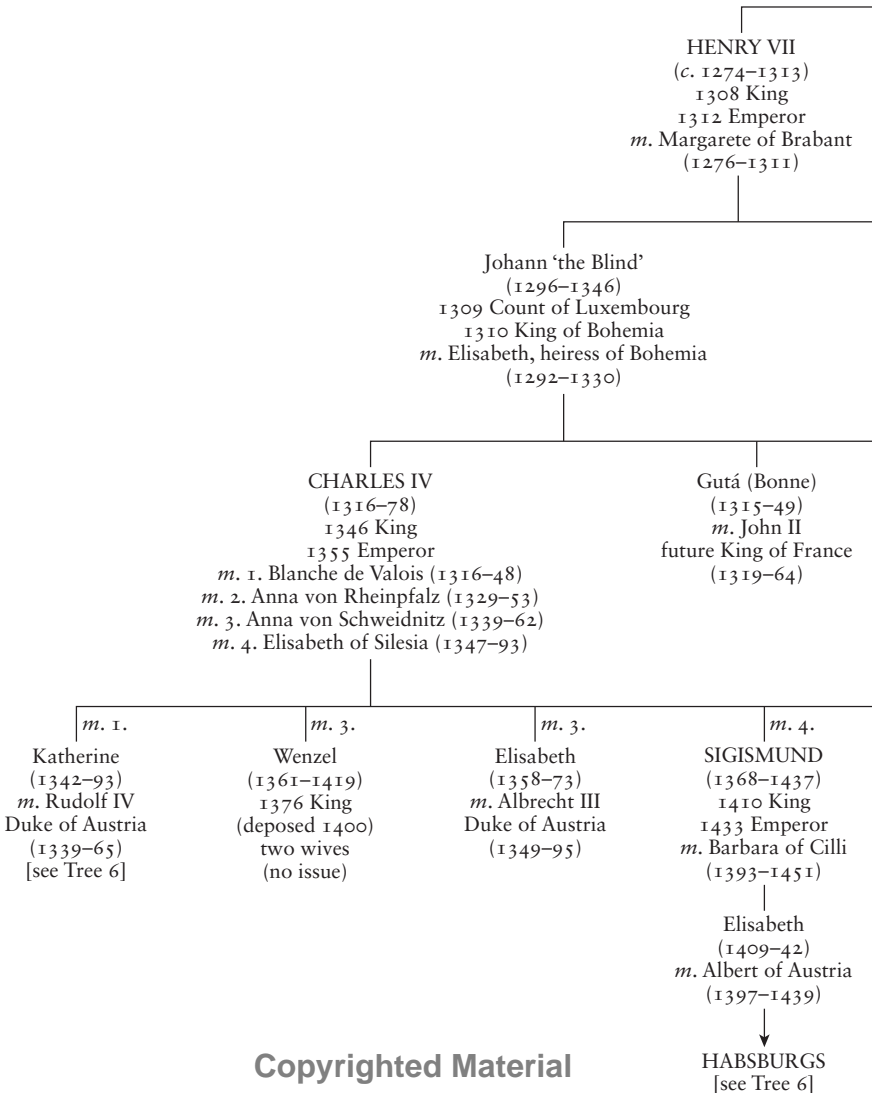
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TREE 4: STAUFERS AND WELFS





TREE 5: LUXEMBOURGS



Heinrich
(1240–88)
(killed at Wörringen)
1281 Count of Luxembourg
m. Beatrix of Avenses-Beaumont
(+1321)

Walram
(+1311)

Baldwin
(1285–1354)
1307 Archbishop of Trier

two
daughters

Maria
(1302–49)
m. Charles IV
King of France
(1294–1322)

Beatrix
(1305–19)
m. Charles II d'Anjou
King of Hungary
(1288–1342)

Anna
(1319–38)
m. Otto
Duke of Austria
(1301–49)
[see Tree 6]

three
others

Johann Heinrich
(1322–75)
1349 Margrave of Moravia
m. 1. Margarethe Maultasch
Countess of Tirol
(1316–48)
m. 2. Margarethe of Troppau
(c.1330–63)

Johann
(1370–96)
1373 Elector of Brandenburg
1378 Duke of Görlitz

five
others

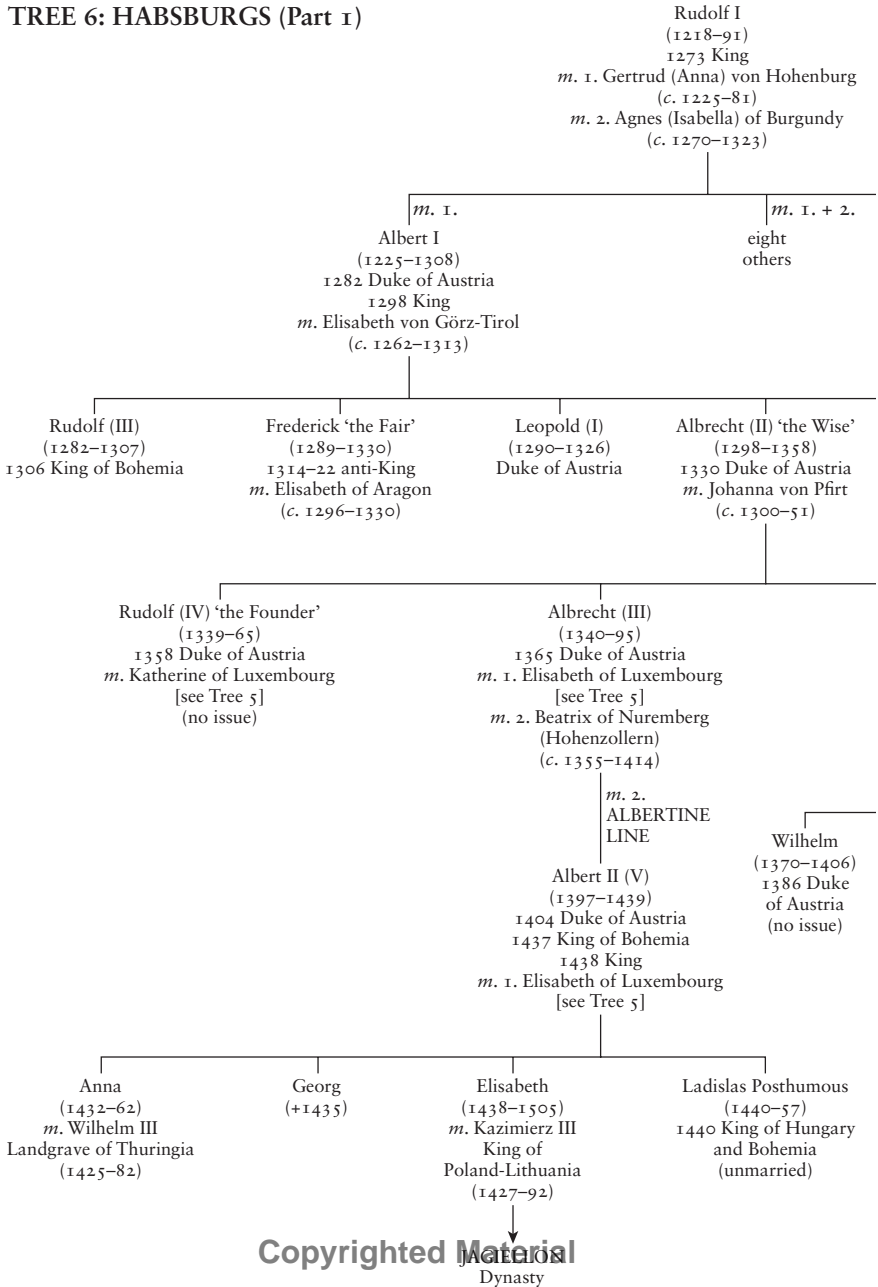
Jobst
(1354–1411)
1373 Margrave of Moravia
1388 Elector of Brandenburg
1410 anti-King

Johan Sobieslaw
(1355–94)
1387 Patriarch
of Aquileia

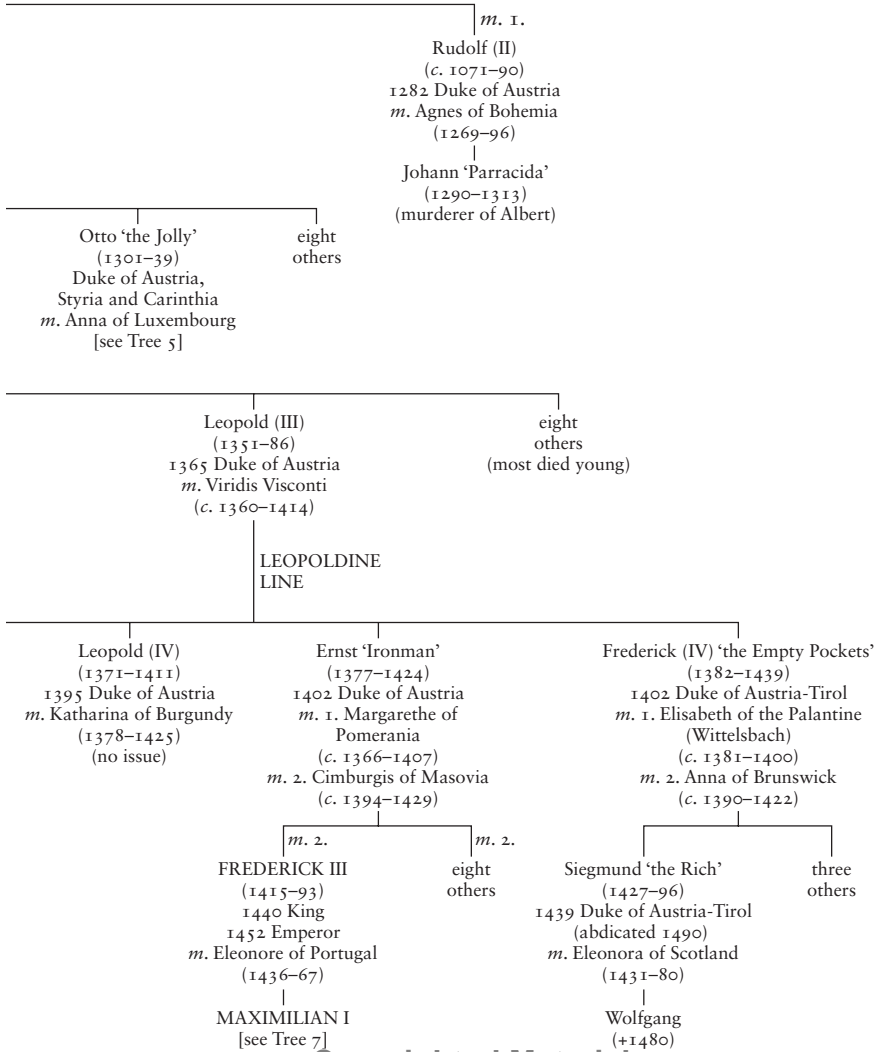
three
others

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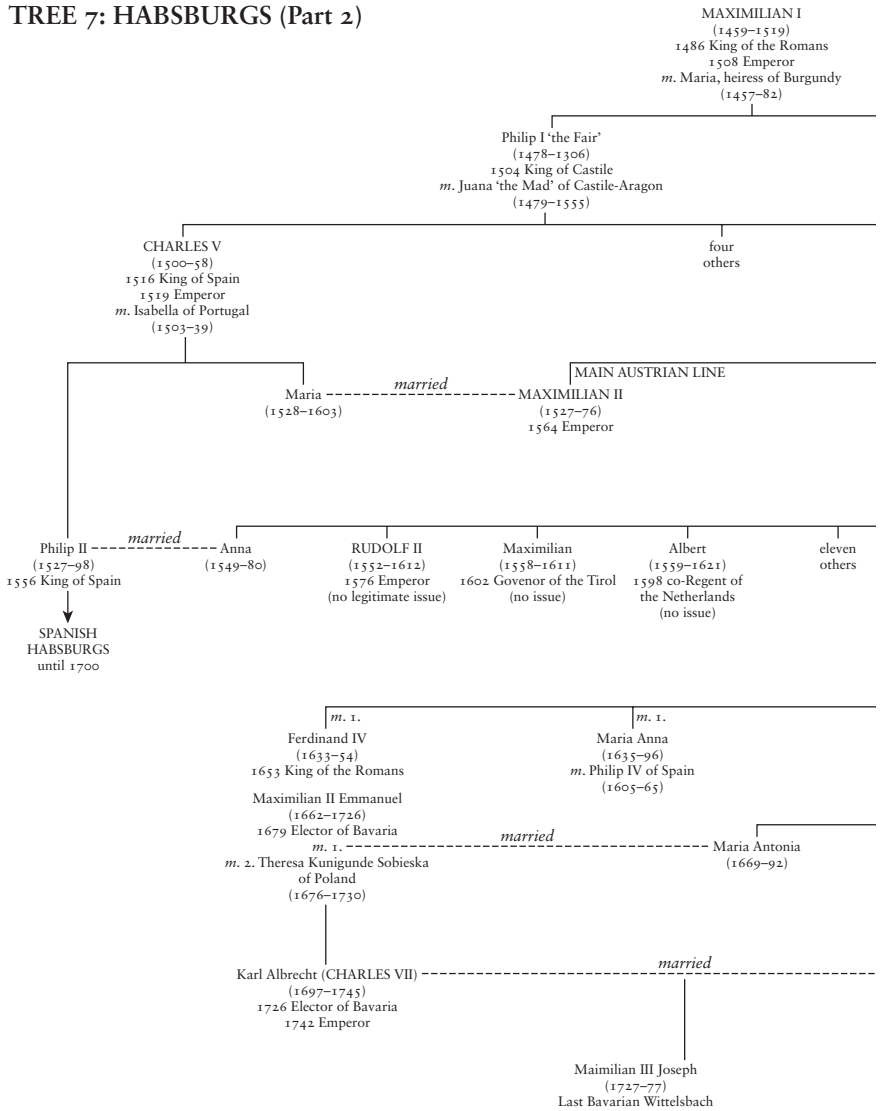
TREE 6: HABSBURGS (Part 1)



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 ALBERTINE
 Dynasty



TREE 7: HABSBURGS (Part 2)



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Note on Form

Place names and those of emperors, kings and other well-known historical figures are given in the form most commonly used in English-language writing. For east central European locations, this tends to be the German version. Lesser-known individuals are generally identified using the modern version of their names. This at least helps distinguish royalty (e.g. Henry) from aristocracy (e.g. Heinrich) for periods where only a few names predominated amongst the elite. The term 'Empire' is used throughout for the Holy Roman Empire, distinguishing this from references to other empires, such as those of the Byzantines and Ottomans. Likewise, 'Estates' refers to corporate social groups, like the nobility and clergy, and to the assemblies of such groups, whereas 'estates' identifies land and property. The Empire endured throughout the periods when it was ruled by a king who had not been crowned emperor. Use of the terms 'king' and 'emperor' reflects the status of the Empire's monarch at any given period. Foreign terms are italicized and explained at first mention, generally with additional information provided in the glossary. Terms and their definitions can also be accessed using the index.

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Introduction

The Holy Roman Empire's history lies at the heart of the European experience. Understanding that history explains how much of the continent developed between the early Middle Ages and the nineteenth century. It reveals important aspects which have become obscured by the more familiar story of European history as that of separate nation states. The Empire lasted for more than a millennium, well over twice as long as imperial Rome itself, and encompassed much of the continent. In addition to present-day Germany, it included all or part of ten other modern countries: Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland and Switzerland. Others were also linked to it, like Hungary, Spain and Sweden, or involved in its history in often forgotten ways, such as England, which provided one German king (Richard of Cornwall, 1257–72). More fundamentally, the east–west and north–south tensions in Europe both intersect in the old core lands of the Empire between the Rhine, Elbe and Oder rivers and the Alps. These tensions were reflected in the fluidity of the Empire's borders and the patchwork character of its internal subdivisions. In short, the Empire's history is not merely part of numerous distinct national histories, but lies at the heart of the continent's general development.

This, however, is not how the Empire's history is usually presented. Preparing for the Continental Congress that would give his country its constitution in 1787, the future US president James Madison looked to Europe's past and present states to build his case for a strong federal union. Reviewing the Holy Roman Empire, then still one of the largest European states, he concluded it was 'a nerveless body; incapable of regulating its own members; insecure against external dangers; and

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agitated with unceasing fermentation in its own bowels.’ Its history was simply a catalogue ‘of the licentiousness of the strong, and the oppression of the weak ... of general imbecility, confusion and misery.’¹

Madison was far from alone in this opinion. The seventeenth-century philosopher Samuel Pufendorf famously described the Empire as a ‘monstrosity’ because he felt it had degenerated from a ‘regular’ monarchy into an ‘irregular body’. A century later, Voltaire quipped it was neither holy, Roman nor an empire.² This negative interpretation was entrenched by the Empire’s inglorious demise, dissolved by Emperor Francis II on 6 August 1806 to prevent Napoleon Bonaparte from usurping it. Yet this final act itself already tells us that the Empire retained some value in its last hours, especially as the Austrians had already gone to considerable lengths to prevent the French from seizing the imperial regalia. The Empire would be plundered when later generations wrote the stories of their own nations, in which it appears positively or negatively according to the author’s circumstance and purpose. This trend has grown more pronounced since the later twentieth century, with some writers proclaiming the Empire as the first German nation state or even a model for greater European integration.

The Empire’s demise coincided with the emergence of modern nationalism as a popular phenomenon, as well as the establishment of western historical method, institutionalized by professionals like Leopold von Ranke who held publicly funded university posts. Their task was to record their national story, and to shape it they constructed linear narratives based around the centralization of political power or their people’s emancipation from foreign domination. The Empire had no place in a world where every nation was supposed to have its own state. Its history was reduced to that of medieval Germany, and in many ways the Empire’s greatest posthumous influence lay in how criticism of its structures created the discipline of modern history.

Ranke established the basic framework in the 1850s which others, notably Heinrich von Treitschke, popularized over the course of the next century. The Frankish king Charles the Great, who was crowned first Holy Roman emperor on Christmas Day 800, appears in this story as the German *Karl der Grosse*, not the Francophone *Charlemagne*. The partition of his realm in 843 is interpreted as the birth of France, Italy and Germany, with the Empire thereafter discussed in terms of

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repeated, thwarted attempts to construct a viable German national monarchy. Individual monarchs were praised or condemned according to an anachronistic scale of ‘German interests’. Rather than entrench the imperial title in Germany itself as the basis of a strong, centralized monarchy, too many monarchs, it seemed, pursued the pointless dream of re-creating the Roman empire. To rally support, they allegedly dissipated central power in debilitating concessions to their senior lords, who emerged as virtually independent princes. After several centuries of heroic efforts and glorious failures, this project finally succumbed in a titanic clash around 1250 between German *Kultur* and the treacherous Italianate civilization represented by the papacy. ‘Germany’ was now condemned to weakness, divided by the dualism between an impotent emperor and selfish princes. For many, especially Protestant writers, the Austrian Habsburgs wasted their chance once they obtained an almost permanent monopoly of the imperial title after 1438, by again pursuing the dream of a transnational empire rather than a strong German state. Only the Prussian Hohenzollerns, emerging on the Empire’s north-eastern margins, carefully husbanded their resources, preparing for their ‘German mission’ to reunite the country as a strong, centralized nation state. Although shorn of its nationalist excesses, this story still continues as the ‘basso continuo’ of German historical writing and perception, not least because it appears to make sense of an otherwise thoroughly confusing past.³

The Empire took the blame for Germany being a ‘delayed nation’, receiving only the ‘consolation prize’ of becoming a cultural nation during the eighteenth century, before Prussian-led unification finally made it a political one in 1871.⁴ For many observers this had fatal consequences, pushing German development along a deviant ‘special path’ (*Sonderweg*) away from western civilization and liberal democracy and towards authoritarianism and the Holocaust.⁵ Only after two world wars had discredited the earlier celebration of militarized nation states did a more positive historical reception of the Empire emerge. The concluding chapter of this book will return to this in the context of how the Empire’s history is being used to comment on and inform discussions of Europe’s immediate future.

The term ‘empire’ requires some clarification before proceeding further. The Empire lacked a fixed title but was always referred to as imperial, even during the long periods when it was governed by a king

rather than an emperor. The Latin term *imperium* was gradually displaced by the German *Reich* from the thirteenth century. As an adjective, the word *reich* means ‘rich’, while as a noun it means both ‘empire’ and ‘realm’, appearing in the terms *Kaiserreich* (empire) and *Königreich* (kingdom).⁶ There is no universally accepted definition of an empire, though three elements are common to most interpretations.⁷ The least useful is a stress on size. Canada covers nearly 10 million square kilometres, over 4 million square kilometres larger than either the ancient Persian empire or that of Alexander the Great, yet few would contend that it is an imperial state. Emperors and their subjects have generally lacked the obsession of social scientists with quantification; on the contrary, a more meaningful defining characteristic of empire would be its absolute refusal to define limits to either its physical extent or its power pretensions.⁸

Longevity is a second factor, with empires being judged of ‘world historical importance’ if they pass the ‘Augustan threshold’ – a term derived from Emperor Augustus’s transformation of the Roman republic into a stable *imperium*.⁹ This approach has the merit of drawing attention to identifying why some empires outlived their founders, but it should be recognized that many which did not nonetheless left important legacies, such as those of Alexander and Napoleon.

Hegemony is the third element and perhaps the most ideologically charged. Some influential discussions of empire reduce it to the dominance of a single people over others.¹⁰ Depending on perspective, the history of empire becomes a story of conquest or resistance. Empires bring oppression and exploitation, while resistance is usually equated with national self-determination and democracy. This approach certainly makes sense in some contexts.¹¹ However, it often fails to explain how empires expand and endure, especially when these processes are at least partly peaceful. It also tends to conceive of empires as composed of a fairly stable ‘core’ people or territory, dominating a number of peripheral regions. Here – to use another common metaphor – imperial rule becomes a ‘rimless wheel’, with the peripheries connected to the hub but not to each other. This allows the imperial core to govern through ‘divide and rule’, keeping each peripheral population separate, and preventing them combining against the numerically inferior core. Such a system relies heavily on brokerage provided by local elites acting as the spokes between the hub and each periphery. Rule does not have

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to be overtly oppressive, since the brokers can be coopted and can transmit some benefits of imperial rule to the peripheral population. However, imperial rule is tied to numerous local bargains which can make it difficult to mobilize substantial resources for common purposes, because the core has to negotiate separately with each set of brokers.¹² The core–periphery model is helpful in explaining how relatively small groups of people can govern large areas, but brokerage has been a part of most states as they have expanded and consolidated and is, in itself, not necessarily ‘imperial’.

A major reason for the Empire’s relative scholarly neglect is that its history is so difficult to tell. The Empire lacked the things giving shape to conventional national history: a stable heartland, a capital city, centralized political institutions and, perhaps most fundamentally, a single ‘nation’. It was also very large and lasted a long time. A conventional chronological approach would become unfeasibly long, or risk conveying a false sense of linear development and reduce the Empire’s history to a high political narrative. I would like to stress instead the multiple paths, detours and dead ends of the Empire’s development, and to give the reader a clear sense of what it was, how it worked, why it mattered, and its legacy for today. An extended chronology is included after the appendices for general orientation. The rest of the book is divided into 12 chapters, grouped equally in four parts that examine the Empire through the themes of ideal, belonging, governance and society. The themes have been grouped for natural progression so the reader approaches the material like an eagle flying over the Empire. The basic outline will be visible in Part I, with the other details becoming clearer as the reader nears ground level by the time he or she reaches Part IV.

It makes sense to examine how the Empire legitimated its existence and how it defined itself relative to outsiders. This is the task of Part I, which opens with a discussion of the Holy Roman Empire’s basis as the secular arm of western Christianity. Historically, European development has been characterized by three levels of organization: the universal level of transcendental ideals that provide a sense of unity and common bonds (e.g. Christianity, Roman law); the particular and local level of everyday action (resource extraction, law enforcement, etc.); and the intermediary level of the sovereign state.¹³ The Empire was characterized for most of its existence only by the first two of these. The emergence of the third from the thirteenth century was a

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major contributory factor in its eventual demise. However, the evolutionary progression once imagined by historians, culminating in a Europe of competing nation states, no longer appears the terminus of political development, contributing to the recent renewed interest in the Empire and to comparisons between it and the European Union.

Chapter 1 opens with the circumstances of the Empire's foundation through an agreement between Charlemagne and the papacy, which expressed the belief that Christendom constituted a singular order under the twin management of emperor and pope. This imparted a lasting imperial mission, anchored on the premise that the emperor was the pre-eminent Christian monarch within a common order containing lesser rulers. Moral leadership and guardianship of the church were the emperor's tasks, not hegemonic, direct rule over the continent. As with other empires, this imperial mission imparted a 'quasi-religious sense of purpose' transcending immediate self-interest.¹⁴ The belief that the Empire was far bigger than its ruler and transcended whoever was currently emperor took root very early on, and explains why so many emperors struggled to fulfil that mission rather than settle for what, with hindsight, seems the more realistic option of a national monarchy. The rest of the chapter examines the holy, Roman and imperial elements of this mission, and explains the often difficult relationship between Empire and papacy into early modernity.¹⁵

The specifically religious dimension is explored in Chapter 2, which shows how the Empire embraced the typically 'imperial' distinction between itself as a single civilization in contrast to all outsiders, who were 'barbarians'.¹⁶ Civilization was defined as Christianity and the ancient imperial Roman legacy as embodied by the Empire after 800. However, the Empire's dealings with outsiders were not always violent, while its continued expansion into northern and eastern Europe in the high Middle Ages was partly through assimilation. Chapter 3 shows how the concept of a singular civilization prevented the Empire dealing with other states on equal terms. This became increasingly problematic as Latin Christian Europe divided into more clearly distinct sovereign states, each with monarchs claiming to be 'emperors in their own kingdoms'.

Part II aims to transcend the traditional dismemberment of the Empire by nationalist and regionalist historians in discussing how its many different lands and peoples related to it. The Empire lacked a stable core, unlike those provided by the Thames valley and the Île de

France for the English and French national states respectively. It never had a permanent capital or a single patron saint, common language or culture. Identity was always multiple and multilayered, reflecting its imperial extent over many peoples and places. The number of layers grew over time as part of the evolution of a more complex and nuanced political hierarchy sustaining imperial governance. The general core came to rest in the German kingdom in the mid-tenth century, though imperial monarchy remained itinerant into the fourteenth century. A stable hierarchy emerged by the 1030s, establishing that whoever was German king also ruled the Empire's other two primary kingdoms of Italy and Burgundy and was the only candidate worthy of the imperial title. Chapter 4 explores the actual shape of these kingdoms and their component lands, as well as how the Empire related to other European peoples. The relative significance of ethnicity, social organization and place to identities is discussed in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 examines how concepts of the nation, emerging from the thirteenth century, reinforced rather than undermined the identification of many inhabitants with the Empire. Germans already saw themselves as a political nation well before unification in 1871, identifying the Empire as their natural home. The Empire never demanded the absolute, exclusive loyalty expected by later nationalists. This reduced its capacity to mobilize resources and command active support, but it also allowed heterogeneous communities to coexist, each identifying its own distinctiveness as safeguarded by belonging to a common home.

Part III explains how the Empire was governed without creating a large, centralized infrastructure. Historians long expected and wanted kings to be 'state builders', or at least to have consistent, long-term plans. States are judged by a singular model, expressed most succinctly by the sociologist Max Weber as 'the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory'.¹⁷ National history thus becomes the story of creating an infrastructure to centralize and exercise exclusive sovereign authority, and the articulation of arguments to legitimate these processes. Equally, the arguments delegitimize rival claims both from insiders, like would-be autonomous nobles or regions, and from outsiders seeking hegemony over the 'national' territory. Measured against this yardstick, it is scarcely surprising that the Empire's history is reduced to a repetitive and chaotic cycle lasting at least into the fifteenth century. Each ruler assumed the throne as king recognized by his peers amongst

the senior nobles. He then toured the German kingdom seeking homage, thereby providing opportunities for his rivals to deny this and rebel. Most kings at least asserted their authority, though there were lengthy periods involving rival kings and even civil war, notably 1077–1106, 1198–1214 and 1314–25. Many kings faced external raids and invasions by the Vikings, Slavs or Magyars until the tenth century. Once secure, these kings generally made a Roman expedition (*Romzug*) to seek coronation as emperor by the pope. Those that dallied too long were apt to face renewed rebellion north of the Alps, often precipitating an early return. Others found repeated expeditions necessary to assert even a modicum of authority in Italy. They either died prematurely of malaria whilst on campaign, or, worn out, hastened to some appropriate spot in Germany for a ‘good death’. Then the whole wearisome cycle seems to begin again, continuing until the Habsburgs finally established their own dynastic territorial dominions in the early sixteenth century that partially overlapped those of the Empire.

This narrative rests on Ranke’s influential conception of the Empire’s history as the story of failed nation building. Most observers have followed his lead in arguing that the ‘decline’ of central authority was inversely proportionate to the growth of the princes as semi-independent rulers. This argument has been underpinned by a century and a half of national and regional histories, charting the separate stories of modern countries like Belgium or the Czech Republic, as well as those of the regions of modern Germany and Italy, such as Bavaria or Tuscany. Each of these stories is so persuasive, because it is constructed around the development of centralized political authority and associated identity focused exclusively on its given territory. The overall conclusion is often that the Empire was some kind of federal system, which it became either immediately after Charlemagne’s death in 814 or by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 at the latest.¹⁸ The enormous difference between these dates is an indicator of the problems with confidently pinning down these structures. Nonetheless, this is an attractive idea not only because, as we shall see, some of the Empire’s inhabitants claimed it was a confederation, but also because this definition at least allows it to be fitted into the accepted taxonomy of political systems. It was this aspect that drew Madison’s attention and his conclusion that it was ‘a feeble and precarious union’, a conclusion intended to encourage his fellow Americans to agree to a stronger federal government.¹⁹

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Federal systems are not unitary, in that they have two or more levels of government rather than a single, central authority. Additionally, they combine elements of shared rule through common institutions with regional self-rule in constituent territorial segments.²⁰ These elements were certainly present in the Empire after the ‘imperial reform’ of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries gave the imperial constitution its definitive, early modern form. However, the concept of federalism requires careful handling, because it easily confuses more than it clarifies. Defining the Empire as federal perpetuates the narrow, dualist view of its development as solely defined by emperor-princely tensions, with the latter winning out by establishing fully sovereign kingdoms and principalities in 1806. Worse, it is very difficult to disassociate the term from its modern political usage, particularly in the German and Austrian federal republics, as well as Switzerland and other contemporary states, including the USA. In all these cases the component elements interact as equals, sharing a common status as parts of a political union. The differences are genuinely dualist: their dynamics provided by how far key powers are shared through common central institutions, and how far they are devolved as ‘states rights’ to the component units. Finally, modern federal states act directly on all their citizens equally. Each citizen is meant to have an equal participation in his or her own state, and in the union as a whole. All are bound directly by the same federal laws, even if some aspects of life are covered by arrangements specific to each component state. These forms of equality were completely and fundamentally alien to the Empire, which always had a dominant, if shifting, political core, and always ruled its population through a complex hierarchy defined by socio-legal status.

Part III charts the evolution of this hierarchy, with each of the three chapters 7–9 covering one of the fundamental shifts in the basis of imperial governance. Carolingian rule established a basic political and legal framework for the Empire, but this did not develop further and even partially disappeared around 900. The absence of formal institutions should not, however, be taken as the lack of effective governance. This book follows the lead of those who have drawn attention to the informal aspects of a political culture based on personal presence rather than written, formalized rules.²¹ Symbols and rituals were as much a part of politics as formal institutions; indeed formal institutions cannot function without the former, even though their role is

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often no longer acknowledged openly in the modern era. Any organization is partly 'fictive' in that it depends on the conviction amongst those who engage with it that it really exists. The organization is sustained because each individual acts in the expectation that others will behave similarly. Symbols and rituals provide markers for participants, helping to sustain the belief in the organization's continued existence. The organization is threatened if its symbols lose their meaning, or are challenged, such as during the iconoclasm of the Protestant Reformation. Likewise, an organization risks being exposed as fictive if it no longer meets common expectations, for example if the anticipated repression fails to materialize or is exposed as feeble when a government is confronted with open defiance.

Imperial governance entailed fostering a consensus amongst the Empire's political elite to ensure at least minimum compliance with agreed policy, enabling the emperor to dispense with the burden of both forcing cooperation and of ruling the bulk of the population directly.²² Consensus did not necessarily mean harmony or stability, but it did achieve the 'crude simplicity' of imperial rule, allowing the emperor and elites to pursue policies without requiring a radical transformation of the societies they governed.²³ This imposed limits on what emperors could do. They needed to uphold the legitimacy of imperial rule through demonstrative acts, such as punishing obvious wrongdoers; yet emperors also had to avoid personal failures that would undermine their aura of power and could be interpreted as the loss of divine favour.

A key characteristic of imperial governance was that institutional development was primarily driven by the need to foster and sustain consensus, rather than by attempts by the centre to reach directly into the peripheries and localities. The Ottonian line of kings during the tenth century ruled through a relatively flat hierarchy of senior lay and spiritual lords. The Salians, their successors after 1024, shifted to more of a command style without breaching the established pattern. Broader socio-economic changes meanwhile supported a longer and more complex lordly hierarchy, both reducing the average size of each jurisdiction while multiplying their numbers. The Staufer family ruling after 1138 responded by formalizing the lordly hierarchy, creating a more distinct princely elite internally stratified by ranks denoted by different titles, but united through a common immediacy under the emperor. Lesser lords and subjects were now more clearly 'mediate', meaning that

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their relationship to the emperor and Empire ran through at least one intervening level of authority. This hierarchy crystallized around 1200, consolidating the complementary division of responsibilities within the Empire. The emperor got on with the business of the imperial mission, assisted by the immediate princely elite who meanwhile assumed more functions within their own jurisdictions, including peace-keeping, conflict resolution and resource mobilization. These jurisdictions became ‘territorialized’ through the need to demarcate areas of responsibility. The Staufers’ demise around 1250 was a personal, not structural failure, since the basic pattern of imperial governance continued to evolve along the same lines into the fourteenth century.

The next shift came during the line of Luxembourg kings (1347–1437), who changed the emphasis from imperial prerogatives to hereditary dynastic possessions to provide the material basis sustaining imperial governance. The new methods were perfected after 1438 by the Habsburgs, who amassed not only the largest hereditary lands in the Empire, but acquired a separate dynastic empire outside it, initially including Spain and the New World. The transition to Habsburg rule occurred amidst new internal and external challenges, prompting the period of imperial reform that intensified around 1480–1520. The reforms channelled established patterns of consensus-seeking through new, formalized institutions, and entrenched the complementary distribution of responsibilities between imperial structures and princely and civic territories.

The development of imperial governance through a long lordly hierarchy appears to detach the Empire from its subjects. Certainly this is how most general accounts have treated its history: as high politics, far removed from daily life. This has had the unfortunate consequence of contributing to the widespread sense of the Empire’s irrelevance, especially as social and economic historians have largely followed their political counterparts and traced developments like population size or economic output using anachronistic national frontiers. Part IV addresses this, arguing that both the governance and patterns of identity within the Empire were closely entwined with socio-economic developments, notably the emergence of a corporate social structure combining both hierarchical-authoritarian and horizontal-associative elements. This structure was replicated – with variations – at all levels of the Empire’s socio-political order.

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A full social history of the Empire is beyond the scope of this book. Rather, Chapter 10 traces the emergence of the corporate social order, showing how it embraced both lords and commons, and how it became anchored in rural and urban communities with varying but generally wide degrees of self-governance. These associative aspects are explored further in Chapter 11, which demonstrates the importance of corporate status in all forms of leagues and communal organizations from the high Middle Ages onwards, from the smallest guild to groupings that resulted in major challenges to imperial rule, such as the Lombard League or the Swiss Confederation. Like jurisdictions, corporate identities and rights were local, specific and related to status. They reflected the belief in an idealized socio-political order, which placed a premium on preserving peace through consensus rather than through any absolute, abstract concept of justice. The consequences of this are explored in Chapter 12, which shows how conflict resolution remained open-ended, like the Empire's political processes generally. Imperial institutions could judge, punish and coerce, but they mainly brokered settlements intended as workable compromises rather than as definitive judgements based on absolute concepts of right and wrong.

The Empire thus fostered a deep-rooted, conservative ideal of freedom as local and particular, shared by members of corporate groups and incorporated communities. These were local and particular *liberties*, not abstract *Liberty* shared equally by all inhabitants. Here, this book offers an alternative explanation for the hotly contested 'genesis of German conservatism', without, however, claiming any continuity beyond the mid-nineteenth century. Usually, the authoritarianism of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany is attributed to the supposedly dualist political development prior to the Empire's demise in 1806.²⁴ Attempts at genuine egalitarian liberty are ascribed solely to 'the people' who are crushed by 'the princes', notably during the bloody Peasants War of 1524–6. Meanwhile, the princes usurped the ideal of freedom for themselves to legitimate their privileged position as autonomous rulers. 'German liberty' thus supposedly narrowed to the defence of princely autonomy against potential imperial 'tyranny'. Simultaneously, as the 'real' governments in the Empire, the princes allegedly introduced the rule of law, protecting their subjects' right to property, whilst denying any meaningful political representation. Liberty thus became associated with the bureaucratic state and transposed to

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national government when this was created in the later nineteenth century.

This argument has never explained why central Europeans remained so unreceptive to nineteenth-century liberalism. Either they were too cowed by a repressive police state to embrace it, or they were duped by a naive faith in princely benevolence and their own ingrained sense of subordination.²⁵ Yet liberals discovered that ordinary people often did not want their version of liberty, because uniform equality conflicted with treasured corporate rights which appeared to offer superior safeguards against capitalist market exploitation.²⁶ Later problems stem at least partly from how those corporate rights were stripped away amidst rapid industrialization and urbanization after the 1840s. These matters lie beyond the scope of this book.

The attachment to corporate identities and rights helps explain why the Empire endured despite internal tensions and stark inequalities in life chances. However, it was neither a bucolic, harmonious old-worldly utopia, nor a direct blueprint for the European Union.²⁷ The question of the Empire's long-term viability by the late eighteenth century is tackled at the end of Chapter 12. For now we need to note, as an important factor in changing the Empire across time, the long-term shift from a culture of personal presence and oral communication to one based on written communication. This transition was common throughout Europe and is one of the general markers of the shift to modernity. However, it had particular consequences in the Empire since this relied so heavily on consensus-seeking and on delineating power, rights and responsibilities along a status hierarchy.

Oral communication and written culture co-existed throughout the Empire's lifespan, so the transition is one of degrees, not absolutes. Christianity is a religion of the book, while both ecclesiastical and secular authorities used written rules and communication (see Chapter 7, pp. 320–25, and Chapter 12, pp. 603–10). Yet messages generally only acquired full meaning when delivered in person by someone of appropriate rank. Early medieval theology believed God's intentions to be transparent, with individual actions merely demonstrating divine will. Face-to-face contact was generally necessary for binding decisions to be reached. However, writing was a good way to fix such decisions and to avoid potential ambiguities and misunderstandings. Like the more recent and certainly more rapid media revolution, participants

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found the new forms of written communication unsettling, but appreciated their benefits. Ancillary techniques, like the use of seals and particular forms of address and styles of writing, were developed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries to convince recipients of letters that such techniques represented the authentic voice of the writer by imparting a permanent authority to the text.²⁸ The use of paper rather than parchment facilitated a significant growth of written culture from the mid-fourteenth century, while the invention of printing a century later changed both its volume and its use.

Unfortunately, writing also makes discrepancies more obvious, as the papacy already discovered during the twelfth century when it began to be criticized for issuing patently contradictory pronouncements. A paper trail could also demonstrate how knowledge was conveyed, making it harder for authorities to claim ignorance of wrongdoing. Theologians and political theorists responded by elaborating a hierarchy of communication. The idea that divine intentions were directly manifest in human action already threatened to make God the servant of His own creation. From this it was logical to develop the idea of a mysterious God whose actions were beyond the comprehension of ordinary mortals. To elevate themselves above their subjects, secular authorities were credited with an exclusive ability to understand the 'mysteries of state' that would otherwise only baffle common folk. Those in power tailored their choice of words and images to suit specific target audiences. Communication became as much – if not more – about signalling the authorities' superiority over their subjects as about conveying messages.²⁹

The elevated language of the mysteries of state used to promote centralization elsewhere in Europe was ill-suited to an imperial governance based more on consensus than command and where high politics continued to rely primarily on face-to-face communication. Although the princes did adopt a more exalted style of rule during the sixteenth century, they remained bound within a common framework, which exposed their actions and pronouncements to audiences they could not control. The imperial chancellery was usually at the forefront of employing written culture, but used this to record and fix the status and privileges of those entitled to participate in the political process. Broadly similar developments took place within the Empire's constituent territories, where communal and corporate rights were enshrined in

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charters and other legal documents. Increasingly, imperial institutions were called upon to broker disputes arising from the interpretation of these rights. While the system retained some flexibility, contemporaries were increasingly aware of the discrepancies as settlements relied on compromise and fudge, almost inevitably contravening some formal rules. In the late eighteenth century, the gap between formal status and material power became glaring at the highest political level with the growth of Austria and Prussia as European powers in their own right. While the refusal to abandon hallowed practices gave the Empire some coherence, this also made it impossible for its inhabitants to conceive of any alternative structure. Reform narrowed down to mere tinkering with existing arrangements and ultimately proved unable to cope with the overwhelming impact of the French Revolutionary Wars, forcing Francis II's decision in 1806 to dissolve the Empire.

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PART I

Ideal

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I

Two Swords

HOLY

The problems of defining the Empire are already apparent in the confusion over its title. For most of its existence it was simply ‘the Empire’. The words Holy, Roman and Empire were only combined as *Sacrum Romanum Imperium* in June 1180, and though used more frequently from 1254, they never appeared consistently in official documents.¹ Nonetheless, all three terms formed core elements of the imperial ideal present from the Empire’s foundation. This chapter will consider each in turn, before investigating the Empire’s troubled relationship with the papacy.

The holy element was integral to the Empire’s primary purpose in providing a stable political order for all Christians and defending them against heretics and infidels. To this end, the emperor should act as chief advocate, or guardian, of the pope, who was the head of a single, universal Christian church. Since this was considered a divine mission, entrusted by God, it opened the possibility that the emperor and Empire were themselves sacred. Like the Roman and imperial elements, the holy character of the Empire was rooted in the later, Christian phase of the ancient Roman empire, rather than the pagan past of the first Caesars or the earlier Roman republic.

Christian Rome

After more than three centuries of persecuting Christians, Rome adopted Christianity as its sole, official religion in AD 391. This step partially desacralized the imperial office, since the singular Christian

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God would not tolerate a rival. The emperor no longer considered himself divine and had to accept the church's development as a separate institution throughout his empire. These changes were eased by the church's adoption of a clerical hierarchy modelled on Roman imperial infrastructure. Christian bishops resided in the chief towns, exercising spiritual jurisdictions (dioceses) that generally matched the political boundaries of the empire's provinces. Moreover, though no longer considered a god, the emperor retained a sacral role as mediator between heaven and earth. The *Pax Romanum* remained an imperial mission, but changed from providing an earthly paradise to advancing Christianity as the sole path to salvation.

The later Roman empire faced internal tensions and external pressures. Parts of the empire were already devolved to co-emperors after 284, and this resumed after a brief reunification under Constantine I, who revived the ancient Greek town of Byzantium as a new capital, immodestly dubbed Constantinople in the 330s. The split into eastern and western empires became permanent after 395. Both halves survived through accommodating invading warriors, especially the western empire, which absorbed successive waves of Germanic invaders, notably the Goths and, later, the Vandals. These poachers were turned into gamekeepers through the attractions of Roman culture and settled life. They abandoned raiding to serve as the empire's border guards and became partly Romanized, including adopting forms of Christianity.

Their embrace of Rome was always conditional on the benefits of subordination outweighing the lure of independence. This balance tipped against the western empire during the fourth and fifth centuries. The western Gothic tribes, known as the Visigoths, established their own kingdom in former Roman Spain and southern Gaul in 395, and sacked the imperial capital only fifteen years later. The Franks – another tribe about which we will hear more shortly – assumed control of northern Gaul around 420 after 170 years of alternately attacking and serving the local Roman defenders.² Having seen off the Huns, a fresh set of armed migrants arriving in the mid-fifth century, the victorious Goths under Odovacar toppled the last western emperor, fittingly called Augustulus, or 'Little Augustus', in 476.

Only later was this regarded as the 'fall of the Rome empire'. For contemporaries, Rome simply contracted to its eastern half based in Constantinople, which still regarded itself as a direct continuation of

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ancient Rome, despite its much later distinctive label as the Byzantine empire. Nonetheless, the events of 476 were significant. The city of Rome was no longer capital of the known world, but a precarious outpost on the western periphery of an empire whose primary interests now lay in the Balkans, Holy Land and north Africa, and whose culture was predominantly Greek rather than Latin by the seventh century. Byzantium underwent periodic revivals, but was short of manpower, especially after costly wars against the Islamic Arabs, generally known as Saracens or Moors, who emerged as a new enemy as they overran Palestine and north Africa by 640.

Byzantium was obliged to secure Rome by relying on the Ostrogoths, another tribe displaced by the Huns' eruption into central Europe in the fifth century. Following established practice, Byzantium offered status and legitimacy in return for political subordination and military service. The Ostrogoth leader, Theodoric, had been raised in Constantinople and combined Romanized culture with the Gothic warrior ethos. Having defeated Odovacar, he was recognized as ruler of Italy by Byzantium in 497. Cooperation broke down during the reign of Emperor Justinian, who capitalized on his temporary reconquest of north Africa to try to assert more direct control over Italy. The resulting Gothic War (535–62) saw the eventual defeat of the Ostrogoths and the establishment of a permanent Byzantine presence in Italy. Known as the Exarchate, this had its political and military base at Ravenna in the north, with the rest of the peninsula divided into provinces, each under a military commander called a *dux* – the origins of both the word 'duke' and the title *duce* taken by Benito Mussolini.

Success proved temporary as the Lombards, another Gothic tribe that had served as Byzantine auxiliaries in the recent war, launched their own invasion of Italy in 568. Unlike Odovacar's Goths, they failed to take Rome, or the new Byzantine outpost at Ravenna, but nonetheless established their own kingdom based initially in Milan, and then Pavia from 616.³ Italy was now split in three. The invaders' new kingdom of Langobardia extended along the Po valley, giving that region its modern name of Lombardy. Lombard kings exercised only loose control over southern Italy, which was largely organized as the separate Lombard duchy of Benevento. The remainder was known as the Romagna, or 'Roman' territory belonging to Byzantium, and surviving today as the name of the region around Ravenna.

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The Emergence of the Papacy

A fourth political factor emerged with the growing influence of the papacy, based in Rome. The popes traced their origins as the church's 'father' (*papa*) through 'Apostolic Succession' from St Peter, though they were only really free to function once ancient Rome tolerated Christianity. Rome was only one of five primary Christian centres, but the loss of Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria to the Arabs (638–42) increased its importance alongside Constantinople. Additional prestige derived from Rome's own continued importance as an imperial city, and its emotional and spiritual significance in the development of early Christianity. Beginning with the execution of St Peter and St Paul in the year 64, all 30 Roman bishops prior to Constantine's toleration Edict of Milan (313) were subsequently recognized as saints and claimed as martyrs by the church.⁴

It was important for the later Holy Roman Empire that the Roman papacy developed differently to the eastern patriarchate in Constantinople. Byzantium retained the centralized imperial structure, with its culture of hierarchical subordination and written administration deriving directly from ancient Rome. This imparted two characteristics largely absent in the early western church. The patriarch remained subordinate to the emperor, while the desire to fix theology in written statements made doctrinal differences much more pronounced than those in the western church, which was both more decentralized and less concerned with communication in writing. The eastern church distanced itself from the version of Christianity known as Arianism, which retained a strong following amongst the Lombards, while a dispute over the human and divine aspects of Christ's nature had forced the emergence of a separate Coptic church in Syria and Egypt when these were still Byzantine provinces.

The absence of durable imperial structures in the west deprived the Roman popes of the strong political backing afforded the eastern patriarch. Papal authority relied on asserting moral rather than direct administrative leadership of the western church, which remained a loose agglomeration of dioceses and churches. Since the fifth century, popes used the argument of Apostolic Succession to claim the right to pronounce on doctrine without reference to any political authority. This was extended to the right to judge whether the candidates chosen

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by the various Christian Gothic kings and nobles were suitable to become bishops or archbishops. Authority was symbolized through the practice of investiture developed in the seventh century: no archbishop could take office without receiving a special vestment known as the *pallium* from the pope. In turn, popes made archbishops responsible for checking the credentials of bishops within their archdiocese, thus extending papal influence indirectly deeper into the localities. Wynfrith, an Anglo-Saxon monk later known as St Boniface, who was the first archbishop of Mainz and a key figure in the Empire's church history, was given cloth that had lain across St Peter's tomb as his *pallium* in 752. The message was clear: opposing the pope was equated with disobeying St Peter.

The early medieval popes would have preferred a strong emperor who could protect them and allow them to pursue their spiritual mission. Rome was one of the military duchies established in Italy after the Gothic War, but Byzantine power was flickering, while Byzantium had to deal with its own practical problems. As bishops of Rome, popes were further bound to local society through canon law, the as yet largely uncodified customs governing the management of the church and its personnel. Bishops were to be elected by the clergy and inhabitants of their diocese. Local young men tended to be preferred: 13 of the 15 popes in the century before 654 were Romans who often had an uncomfortable relationship with their city's clans, or leading families, who held much of local wealth and power. Gregory I, the most important of these popes, hailed from a family of Roman senators and pushed the papacy into the void left by contracting Byzantine power. Within a century, his successors had assumed ducal authority across the city and its hinterland, known as St Peter's Patrimonium (*Patrimonium Petri*), a coastal strip either side of the Tiber.⁵ Over time, this territory became the material basis for papal claims to supremacy over the western church. Popes steadily appropriated the symbols and political claims of Byzantine emperors, whilst simultaneously deliberately obscuring or minimizing their continued ties to Constantinople. For example, by the late eighth century, popes issued their own coins and dated their pontificates like the reigns of kings.⁶ Meanwhile, their spiritual influence grew while Byzantine political authority contracted. Gregory I and his successors sent missionaries to Christianize Britain and Germany, areas long since outside any Roman imperial orbit.

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However, the popes did not follow seventh-century Islamic leaders in establishing their own imperial state. Latin Christianity alone proved insufficient to reunite the kingdoms and principalities emerging from the former western Roman empire. The papacy still needed a protector, but Byzantium proved increasingly unhelpful. Constans II made the last serious attempt to eject the Lombards from southern Italy in 662–8, and was the last Byzantine emperor to visit Rome, but he spent his time transferring ancient treasures to Constantinople. Friction increased after 717 through Byzantine tax demands and interference in western Christian practices. The Lombards seized the opportunity to capture Ravenna in 751, essentially extinguishing Byzantine influence. The pope was left alone facing the Lombards, who now claimed former Byzantine rights, including secular jurisdiction over Rome and thus the papacy.

The Franks

The pope looked north-west to the Franks as alternative protectors. Like many of the peoples of post-Roman western Europe, the Franks had emerged as a tribal confederacy; in their case in the Weser-Rhine area of north-western Germany known then as Austrasia and later, loosely, as Franconia. Unlike their southern neighbours, the Alamanni of Swabia, the Franks assimilated much from Rome as they spread westwards into Gaul after 250.⁷ By 500 they controlled all Gaul under their great warrior, Clovis, who united all the Frankish tribes and was proclaimed king. Clovis accepted baptism directly into the Roman church, rather than the usual Germanic choice of Arianism, while his successors cooperated with papal missionaries, notably St Boniface's activities on the eastern and northern fringes of their realm.

These factors probably influenced the pope's choice, as did the extent and proximity of the Frankish realm. By 750 it extended beyond Gaul and north-western Germany to include Swabia, and – crucially – Burgundy, which then encompassed western Switzerland and south-east France, and so controlled access over the Alps into Lombardy. These huge territories, known as Francia, were ruled by the Merovingian family descended from Clovis. Unfairly criticized by later French historians as *les rois fainéants* ('the do-nothing kings'), the Merovingians had achieved much, but they were suffering from inbreeding and the

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Frankish custom of partitioning property amongst sons, which led to repeated civil wars during the seventh and early eighth centuries. Power slipped to what became known as the Carolingian family, which held the office of ‘mayor of the palace’ controlling the royal household.⁸

Accordingly, the first papal appeal was addressed not to the Merovingian king, but to his mayor Charles, known as *Martel* (‘the Hammer’) after his victory over the invading Moors at Poitiers in 732. Cooperation was frustrated by Charles’s death within a year, followed by renewed Frankish civil war. As the pope’s situation deteriorated after the fall of Ravenna, he took the bold step of assuming the Romano-Byzantine strategy of offering status to a ‘barbarian’ leader in return for submission and support. Acting through Boniface, Pope Zachary crowned Martel’s son Pippin the Short as Frankish king in 751, thereby sanctioning Pippin’s coup overthrowing the Merovingians. Pippin signalled his subordination to the pope at two meetings in 753 and 754 by prostrating himself, kissing the papal stirrup and helping the pontiff dismount. Unsurprisingly, Frankish accounts contain no record of this ‘Strator service’, which was to assume considerable significance in later papal-imperial relations as a highly visible means of demarcating superiority.⁹ More practically, Pippin invaded Lombardy (754–6), capturing Ravenna and relieving the pressure on Rome without removing it entirely.

The papal-Frankish alliance was renewed in 773 by Charlemagne, Pippin’s eldest son, who answered renewed calls for assistance as the Lombards again tried to assert secular jurisdiction over Rome. The future emperor looked the part at 1.8 metres, towering over his contemporaries, even if he was developing a pot belly from over-eating. Detesting drunkenness and dressing modestly, Charlemagne nonetheless clearly enjoyed being the centre of attention.¹⁰ Recent attempts to debunk him as a military leader are unconvincing.¹¹ The Franks were simply the best organized for war of all the major post-Roman kingdoms, as Charlemagne amply demonstrated in his campaign to rescue the pope in 773–4 (see Plate 4). Charlemagne besieged Pavia for a year, and its capture in June 774 ended two hundred years of Lombard royal rule. In keeping with Frankish custom, Lombardy was not annexed directly, but preserved as a distinct kingdom under Charlemagne. Following the suppression of a rebellion in 776, Charlemagne replaced most of the Lombard elite with loyal Franks and spent the next three decades

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ruthlessly consolidating his authority throughout Francia and extending his influence with new conquests in Bavaria and Saxony.

Foundation of the Empire

The Holy Roman Empire owed its foundation to the pope's decision to dignify this expansion by conferring an imperial title on Charlemagne. The reasons for this step remain obscure, but can be reconstructed with reasonable certainty. It seems likely that the pope initially regarded Charlemagne as a second Theodoric, the fifth-century Ostrogothic chieftain who acted as Byzantine governor of Italy: a useful, domesticated barbarian king, rather than a substitute for the Byzantine emperor. However, the failure of a Byzantine expedition in 788 to eject the Franks from Benevento, which they had just conquered, seemed to confirm the new balance of power. In December 795 Leo III notified Charlemagne of his election as pope, a favour normally reserved for the Byzantine emperor. Nonetheless, contingency rather than systematic planning characterized the next five years leading to Charlemagne's coronation.¹²

Three aspects stand out. First, the Empire was a joint creation of Charlemagne and Leo III, 'one of the shiftiest occupants of the throne of St Peter'.¹³ Accused of perjury and adultery, Leo was unable to assert authority over the Roman clans, who orchestrated a mob which attacked him in April 799, nearly cutting out his eyes and tongue – acts of mutilation that were considered to render their victim unfit for office. Already at his accession, Leo had sent Charlemagne a banner and the keys to St Peter's tomb, symbolically placing the papacy under Frankish protection. Charlemagne was reluctant to assume this responsibility, which could require him to judge and possibly remove a wayward pontiff.¹⁴

Writing a generation later, the Frankish chronicler Einhard claimed Leo sprang the idea of an imperial coronation when Charlemagne finally visited Rome in November 800. We should not be misled by this typical hagiographic device stressing Charlemagne's supposed modesty in not seeking worldly ambition.¹⁵ The details were agreed in advance and carefully choreographed, with the participants fully aware they were taking a significant step. Leo rode 12 miles from Rome to meet Charlemagne, double the usual distance accorded a mere king. The

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ambassador from the patriarch of Jerusalem was on hand to present the keys to the Holy Sepulchre. Although the actual site was in Arab possession since 636, this act symbolized Charlemagne's assumption of the ancient Roman mission of protecting Christianity. Finally, the choice of Christmas Day 800 for the coronation was deliberate. This was not only a central Christian holy day, but that year fell on a Sunday and was believed to be exactly 7,000 years since the Creation.¹⁶

Just what Charlemagne thought he was getting into is not clear, because – like virtually all medieval emperors – he left no written insight into his motives. His concern was unlikely to have been the purely immediate one of convincing the recalcitrant Saxons to accept his rule.¹⁷ The Franks had long regarded themselves as rightful rulers over the Saxons and the other Germanic tribes that were not formally constituted as monarchies. Rather, it is more likely Charlemagne saw his accession as a way to consolidate his hold over all Italy, since the former Lombard kingdom only covered the north, whereas the idea of the Roman empire had great resonance throughout the entire peninsula.¹⁸ Additionally, in accepting the various religious symbols, Charlemagne signalled his partnership with the pope as joint leaders of Christendom.¹⁹

Alongside the joint effort and careful choreography, the third factor is that it is highly likely Charlemagne believed he was being made *Roman* emperor. The Byzantine throne was technically vacant, since Emperor Constantine VI had been deposed and blinded in 796 by his mother Irene, who assumed power herself. As the first woman to rule openly in Byzantium, her authority remained hotly contested, with her immediate opponents claiming the throne as vacant to legitimize their own counter-coup, which toppled her in 802.²⁰ This had lasting significance. To its supporters, the Empire was not an inferior, new creation, but a direct continuation of the ancient Roman one with the title simply being 'translated' (transferred) by Leo from Byzantium to Charlemagne and his successors.

Spiritual and Secular Authority

Nonetheless, a whiff of illegitimacy still surrounded the Empire's birth. It was questionable whether the disreputable Leo had the authority to transfer the imperial title to the Frankish strongman, not least since the

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pope had already symbolically submitted to Charlemagne by greeting him outside Rome. These specific problems betray the deeper difficulties that contemporaries faced over the relationship between spiritual and secular authority.²¹ Two biblical passages exemplify this. Jesus's response to Pontius Pilate's question 'Are you the king of the Jews?' was the potentially revolutionary: 'My kingdom does not belong to this world . . . My kingly authority comes from elsewhere' (John 18:33, 36). This opposition to secular authority made sense during Christianity's time of persecution by the Romans, and was underpinned by the doctrine of Christ's second coming, which suggested the secular world was of little significance. However, the delay in the Messiah's return made accommodation with secular authority unavoidable, as exemplified by St Paul's response to the Romans: 'Every person must submit to the supreme authorities. There is no authority but by act of God, and the existing authorities are instituted by him; consequently anyone who rebels against authority is resisting a divine institution' (Romans 13:1-2).

Christians owed obedience to all authority, but their duty to God trumped that to secular power. It proved impossible to agree whether they should suffer tyrants as a test of faith or were entitled to oppose them as 'ungodly' rulers. Attempts to resolve these tensions also drew on Scripture, notably Christ to the Pharisees: 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars; and unto God the things that are God's' (Mark 12:17). In short, Christian thought tried to distinguish separate spheres of *regnum*, denoting the political realm, and *sacerdotium* for the spiritual world of the church.

Delineation of separate spheres merely raised the new problem of their mutual relationship. St Augustine was in no doubt of the superiority of *sacerdotium* over *regnum*.²² Responding to Roman intellectuals' attribution of the Gothic sack of their city in 410 as the wrath of their former pagan gods, Augustine argued this merely demonstrated the transience of temporal existence compared to the enduring Christian 'city of God' in heaven. This distinction was later elaborated by Latin theologians to reject Byzantium's continuation of a semi-divine imperial office. Pope Gelesius I used the influential metaphor of two swords, both provided by God (see Plate 1). The church received the sword of spiritual authority (*auctoritas*), symbolizing responsibility for guiding humanity through divine grace to salvation. The state received the secular

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sword of power (*potestas*) to maintain order and provide the physical conditions to enable the church to perform its role. Christendom had two leaders. Both pope and emperor were considered essential to proper order. Neither could ignore the other without negating his own position.²³ Both remained locked in a dance that each struggled to lead, yet neither was prepared to release his partner and go solo.

Disagreements were expressed in texts that circulated in only a few handwritten copies and that are much more widely known now than they were at the time. They were position statements prepared to provide arguments to wield in oral debate, rather than to be used as mass propaganda.²⁴ Their impact on daily life was limited. Clergy and laity generally worked together, while spiritual and secular authority generally proved mutually reinforcing rather than conflictual. Nonetheless, the issues remained clear enough. Secular power was inconceivable without reference to divine authority. Likewise, the clergy could not dispense with the material world, despite waves of enthusiasm for those seeking ‘freedom’ from earthly constraints as hermits or monks. The Franks gave Ravenna to the pope through the *Donation of Pippin* in 754, presenting this as restoring it to the *Patrimonium*, yet they retained secular jurisdiction over the entire area, asserting claims not dissimilar to those of the Lombards they had just displaced.

The difficulties with ultimate authority were obvious at the Empire’s birth. Pope Leo’s public obsequiousness extended – if we believe the Frankish accounts – to prostrating himself before the newly crowned emperor. Yet, moments before, he had placed the crown on Charlemagne’s head in a ceremony invented for the occasion; Byzantine emperors did not use crowns before the tenth century. The coronation thus enabled both parties to claim superiority. It was not in Charlemagne’s interest to contest papal claims directly, since the process of translating his imperial title from east to west required a pope with wide-ranging authority. Thus, the Franks did not seriously question the inventions of previous popes; notably Symmachus, who claimed in 502 on dubious precedents that no secular power could judge a pontiff. Nor did they challenge the *Donation of Constantine*, purportedly dating from 317, but probably written around 760, which presented the pope as temporal lord of the western empire as well as head of the church.²⁵

From Sacral Kingship to Holy Empire

Other arguments favoured imperial supremacy. The idea of the secular sword elevated the emperor above other kings as ‘defender of the church’ (*defensor ecclesiae*), extending the Franks’ existing Christianizing mission to include repelling external threats from the Arabs, Magyars and Vikings. Defence could also entail combating internal enemies, including corrupt or heretical clergy, thus suggesting a spiritual as well as a military and political mission. Petrus Damiani, shortly to become one of the Empire’s most vocal critics, called the Empire a *sanctum imperium* in 1055. By that stage, many had gone further to assert that the emperor was not merely sanctified, but intrinsically sacred (*sacrum*).²⁶

Ancient Roman emperors had been regarded as demigods, with Caesar posthumously pronounced divine by the senate. The idea continued under his successors, but the need to respect Rome’s still powerful republican traditions prevented this developing into full, theocratic kingship – something that was further curbed by the conversion to Christianity early in the fourth century. While ancient practice continued in Byzantium, the western Empire emerged amidst post-Roman ideas of piety as a guide to public behaviour.

Charlemagne’s son and successor, Louis I, is known in Germany as ‘the Pious’, but in France as *le Débonnaire*; both soubriquets capture aspects of his behaviour. He was sufficiently sinful to require three rites of penance during his reign, yet devout enough to perform them. His more grievous sins included cloistering his relations to remove them as rivals to his succession in 814, mortally blinding his nephew for revolt, breaking a sworn treaty with his sons, and allowing his marriage to deteriorate to the point of his wife having an affair with a courtier. Interpretations differ whether the Carolingian bishops regarded him as an errant member of their flock or used the rites of penance as show trials to discredit him politically.²⁷ Either way, Louis certainly emerged stronger, even though he never silenced his opponents.

The obvious benefit of penitential acts was that they allowed you to do bad things and get away with them. For example, the tenth-century Emperor Otto III walked barefoot from Rome to Benevento to spend two weeks as a hermit after violently crushing a rebellion in 996.²⁸ Piety peaked under Henry III, who banished musicians seeking work

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at his wedding in 1043, and who often wore penitential clothes and even asked for forgiveness *after* his victory over the Hungarians at Menfö in 1044, in contrast to the usual prayers before battle.²⁹ Nonetheless, as the controversy over Louis I's behaviour shows, penitence could easily appear humiliating, as will be seen later with Henry IV's experience at Canossa (see pp. 57–8).

Piety remained important, particularly with the start of the First Crusade in 1095, but otherwise it became less obviously politicized until the emergence of baroque Catholicism in the seventeenth century when emperors regularly led religious processions and dedicated elaborate monuments as thanksgiving for victories or deliveries from danger. Throughout the Empire's existence, the routine of the imperial court remained regulated by the Christian calendar, with the highly visible presence of the imperial family at important religious services.³⁰

The notion that emperors were sacred rather than merely pious took hold during the tenth century. Its most visible expression was the practice of appearing at public events accompanied by 12 bishops, such as the consecration of new cathedrals – something that contemporaries clearly understood as *imitatio Christi* with the Apostles. Otto I's deliberate *Renovatio*, or renewal of the Empire in the 960s, included emphasis on his role as Christ's vicar (*vicarius Christi*) wielding a divine mandate to rule.³¹ Some caution is required in interpreting such acts, not least because the primary evidence is liturgical texts. Early medieval emperors remained warriors, including Henry II, who was subsequently canonized in 1146 and who consciously presented the Empire as God's House. Nonetheless, the period 960–1050 clearly saw a more sacral style of kingship (*regale sacerdotium*) intended to manifest the divine imperial mission through public acts. The most prominent of these was Otto III's grand tour in the millennial year 1000, which assumed the character of a pilgrimage via Rome and Gniezno, culminating in Aachen, where the young emperor personally opened Charlemagne's tomb. Finding his predecessor sitting upright 'as if he were living', Otto 'robed him on the spot with white garments, cut his nails, and [replaced his decayed nose] with gold, took a tooth from Charles's mouth, walled up the entrance to the chamber, and withdrew again'.³² Treating the imperial corpse like a holy relic was an obvious first step towards canonization; this project was interrupted by Otto's death shortly after, but completed by Frederick I 'Barbarossa' in 1165.

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Like their Roman predecessors, the Empire's rulers stopped short of claiming to be priests, but their coronation ritual resembled a bishop's ordination by the mid-tenth century, including anointing, assuming vestments and receiving objects that symbolized spiritual as well as secular authority.³³ In the two centuries following Charlemagne, emperors regularly followed Constantine's example from 325 and convened church synods to discuss ecclesiastical management and doctrine. Otto II introduced new images on coins, seals and illuminated liturgical texts showing him elevated on a high throne, receiving his crown directly from God, while the royal insignia were increasingly treated like holy relics.³⁴ Otto and his next three successors assumed positions as cathedral and abbey canons, thereby combining secular and ecclesiastical roles, though not in top clerical positions.³⁵

This trend was interrupted by the seismic clash with the papacy known as the Investiture Dispute (see pp. 56–60 below), in which Henry IV suffered the humiliation of being excommunicated by the pope in 1076. After this blow, it was harder to believe the emperor was holy, let alone pious, and the stress on the divinity of the imperial mission sounded increasingly shrill. It proved impossible for kings to live up to the ideal of Christ in their personal lives and public actions. More fundamentally, as Henry IV's notary Gottschalk pointed out, claims for the emperor's sacrality derived from anointing by the pope and so risked acknowledging papal supremacy.³⁶ Thus, the Empire did not pursue sacral monarchy to the extent found in England and France, where kings claimed the miraculous powers of the Royal Touch.³⁷ This probably explains why the cult of St Charlemagne took firmer roots in France, where it was celebrated as a public holiday from 1475 to the Revolution of 1789.³⁸ Neither Charlemagne, nor Henry II and his wife Kunigunde – both of whom were canonized (in 1146 and 1200, respectively) – emerged as royal national saints of the Empire, unlike Wenceslas in Bohemia (from 985), Stephen in Hungary (1083), Knut in Denmark (1100), Edward the Confessor in England (1165), or Louis IX in France (1297).

A renewed bout of papal-imperial tension in the mid-twelfth century (see pp. 63–7) confirmed the impracticality of sacral kingship to legitimate power in the Empire. The Staufer family, ruling from 1138, changed the emphasis from the monarch to a transpersonal holy Empire, first using the title *Sacrum Imperium* in March 1157.³⁹ Already sanctified by its divine mission, the Empire did not need the pope's

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approbation. This powerful idea survived the Staufers' political demise in 1250, persisting thereafter even in the long periods when no German king was crowned emperor.

ROMAN

The Legacy of Rome

The Roman legacy was powerfully attractive, but hard to assimilate within the new Empire. Knowledge of ancient Rome was imperfect, though it improved during the ninth century with the intellectual and literary movement known as the Carolingian Renaissance.⁴⁰ The Bible and classical sources presented Rome as the last and greatest in a succession of world empires. Both the German *Kaiser* and Russian *tsar* derive from *Caesar*, while the name *Augustus* was also synonymous with 'emperor'. Charlemagne was depicted on coins in profile dressed as a Roman emperor crowned with oak leaves.⁴¹ However, he quickly dropped the title *Imperator Romanorum* conferred by Leo III, perhaps to avoid provoking Byzantium, which still regarded itself as the Roman empire (see pp. 138–43). Another reason was that the adjective 'Roman' was not considered necessary since there was no need of such a qualification at a time when no other power was recognized as 'imperial'.

There were also domestic pressures against embracing Rome. Charlemagne already ruled his own realm, which itself stimulated imitation: the Polish *król*, Czech *král* and Russian *korol*, all meaning 'king', derive from 'Charles'. The Franks were not prepared to renounce their own identity and merge themselves with the peoples they had recently conquered to become a common body of Roman citizens. While the Franks were Romanized, the centre of their power lay on or beyond the *Limes* – the frontiers of the ancient Roman empire. Memories lingered, such as the widespread stories that Caesar himself had laid the foundations of various important buildings, but most Roman settlements had contracted or been abandoned completely. Likewise, Roman institutions influenced Merovingian governance, but had also been heavily modified or replaced by entirely new methods.⁴² The situation was different in Italy, where three-quarters of ancient towns were still economic and population centres in the tenth century, often retaining their

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original street pattern.⁴³ Frankish control of Italy only dated from 774 and was disrupted by the partition of the Carolingian empire in 843. Italy and the imperial title were reunited with the former eastern Frankish lands in 962, but by this point these were ruled by the Ottonians from Saxony – a region that had never been part of the Roman empire.

The Ottonians carried favour north of the Alps by ostentatiously incorporating Frankish traditions. Otto I dressed as a Frankish noble and presented himself at Aachen as the direct continuation of Carolingian, rather than Roman, rule. His court chronicler, Widukind of Corvey, ignored the lavish imperial coronation in Rome (962) in his history, and instead presented Otto as already ‘Father of the Fatherland, Master of the World and Emperor’ after his victory over the Magyars at Lechfeld in 955.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Roman traditions were important to Otto I and his successors. It is unlikely that Otto III’s adoption of the motto *Renovatio imperii Romanorum* in 998 was part of a coherent plan, but the subsequent historical controversy is useful in pointing to Rome’s dual significance both as a secular imperial centre and as the city of the Apostles and mother of the Christian church.⁴⁵

The title *imperator* originally meant ‘military commander’. It acquired political meaning through Caesar and, especially, his adoptive son and successor, Octavian, who assumed the name Augustus and ruled as the first full emperor from 27 BC. The title avoided offending Roman identity, which rested on the expulsion of the original kings at the end of the sixth century BC, and disguised the transition from republican to monarchical rule. A victorious general’s acclamation as emperor by his troops suggested choice by merit and ability, rather than hereditary succession, and could be reconciled with the continuation of the Roman senate, which formally endorsed the soldiers’ action.⁴⁶ This method could be easily accommodated within Frankish and Christian traditions. Germanic kingship also rested on the idea that rulers were acclaimed by their warriors, allowing the Frankish elite to buy into Charlemagne’s coronation in 800. Victory was regarded as a sign of divine favour, while the fiction that all present voiced their consent unanimously was interpreted as a direct expression of God’s will.⁴⁷

While Roman traditions could be accommodated, the actual city of Rome was another matter. In 754 the pope had already granted Pippin the title of Roman patrician, suggesting some kind of stewardship for