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## 9. The Holy Roman Empire: A Monarchial Failure

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## 9. The Holy Roman Empire: A Monarchical Failure

### Abstract

Royal efforts to create national states and strong monarchies during the later Middle Ages succeeded in England, France, and Spain for different reasons and under different circumstances. In two of the great geographical subdivisions of central Europe the monarchs were not so successful. Eventual unification of Germany and Italy was delayed until the nineteenth century and may be explained by a number of factors, some beyond the control of individual kings and others based on weaknesses in the character of the monarchs themselves.

The political destinies of Germany and Italy became inextricably interwoven with the creation of the Holy Roman Empire. In both countries the throne involved itself in fatal disputes with the papacy, failed to get support in the towns, and over-extended itself in an attempt to rule such a large area. In addition the same conditions which resulted in feudalism in France prevailed in Germany. The crude transportation and communication facilities made virtually impossible effective government by one monarch on both sides of the Alpine barrier. German kings took seriously their emperorship, divided their attention and effort between the two lands, and except temporarily hardly exercised successful government in either. [*excerpt*]

### Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, monarchy, Rome, Roman Empire, government, nationhood, nation state

### Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | European Languages and Societies | History | Medieval History | Military History | Political History

### Comments

This is a part of [Section V: The Rise of Capitalism and the National State to 1500](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

### More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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*No big - size, cultures differing, Alps divide them.*

with the papacy, failed to get support in the towns, and over-extended itself in an attempt to rule such a large area. In addition the same conditions which resulted in feudalism in France prevailed in Germany. The crude transportation and communication facilities made virtually impossible effective government by one monarch on both sides of the Alpine barrier. German kings took seriously their emperorship, divided their attention and effort between the two lands, and except temporarily hardly exercised successful government in either.

Germany evolved from the East Frankish kingdom created in 843 by the Treaty of Verdun and awarded to Louis the German as his share of the division of Charlemagne's empire among his three grandsons. During the eighth century Carolingian kings had acquired and Christianized a number of territories east of the Rhine River, and these were added to others west of the river to form Louis' portion. Feudalism and manorialism, as they developed in the West Frankish kingdom of Charles the Bald, hardly existed outside of western Germany, and the region generally was one with varying degrees of personal freedom and local self-government. The king exercised some control over his realm through counts, who were his personal representatives with supervisory powers over local criminal courts; through scattered royal estates; and through his power to select the bishops and abbots who held the vast lands of the Church.

The inability of German kings to protect their eastern borders against the savage Magyar raids coming out of Hungary in the ninth century led the people to turn to local military leaders, who appealed to tribal patriotism, organized resistance to the invaders, and established themselves as regional rulers. These leaders, who took the title of duke, attempted to supplant royal authority in their territories and bend the counts to their will. There were four of these great duchies, virtually independent of the kings: Bavaria, Swabia, Franconia, and Saxony. German kingship might have disappeared at this time had not the Church, fearing the greed of the dukes who had freely seized ecclesiastical estates, supported the crowned and anointed king who would be its ally. In addition, the Magyar raids increased in intensity, and as a means of creating organized resistance the dukes joined to elect one of their number as king.

Conrad of Franconia, elected when the last Carolingian died in 911, did not succeed either in checking the Magyars or in establishing royal authority over the duchies. At no time during his reign of eight years was he able to summon the necessary human and material resources, and by the end of his reign he was little more than a figurehead. He was succeeded by the powerful duke of Saxony who, as Henry I (919-936), crossed the Rhine and annexed Lorraine and for a time successfully defended the eastern frontier against the Magyar invasions. His military successes enabled him to retain the support of the dukes and prepare the way for the stronger rule of his famous son, Otto the Great.

*Never an imperial tax.  
Emperor stood for anarchy.*

Germany took a step toward accepting a hereditary monarchy when the dukes agreed to the election of Otto I (936-973). They discovered, however, that the new king was ambitious to rule as well as reign. Not satisfied with the earlier arrangement by which the dukes formally recognized the kings but pursued independent courses of their own, Otto tried to undermine their power in as many ways as he could. When it served his purposes, he left offices within his power in the duchies vacant or filled them with men, often from other duchies, who were expected to do his bidding. This policy was not wholly successful and Otto contended with restive and rebellious nobles throughout his reign. Most important of all, he and his successors used the German Church as a key instrument of royal power. He made large grants of land from the scattered imperial estates to bishoprics and abbeys, and vested their incumbents with important powers of government, similar to those exercised by the French feudal nobility. Since the king controlled the choice of these churchmen, he was able to use them, not only as counterweights to the dukes and counts, but also as a dependable source of fighting men and supplies. In addition, the king called upon them constantly to serve him as royal administrators.

Under Otto Germany began pushing east of the Elbe and Saale Rivers and the Church undertook to Christianize the Slavic inhabitants who lived there. In 955 Otto succeeded in ending the Magyar menace by decisively defeating them at Lechfeld. Even before this, in 951, he had seized an occasion to invade northern Italy. Here he defeated a Lombard army, married the widow of the Lombard king, and proclaimed himself king of Italy. Ten years later he responded to an appeal from the pope, who was beset by hostile forces in Rome. As a reward for his assistance he accepted an imperial crown in 962 which had gone begging for nearly forty years. To his contemporaries, the coronation constituted a revival of the imperial idea of Charlemagne and it marks the beginning of the Holy Roman Empire which was to endure in one form or another until 1806. Its immediate significance, however, was the fact that this imperial honor involved Otto and his successors deeply in Italian affairs. In addition, they secured the right to nominate popes and thus were able to dominate the papacy for about a century.

The weaknesses inherent in this broad extension of responsibility became increasingly apparent during the reigns of Otto's immediate successors. They often tended to neglect German affairs in their pursuit of the goal of universal empire. Otto III (983-1002) even made Rome his capital, and in the process aroused rebellions in Italy and lost ground in Germany.

The death of Henry II (1002-1024) left the Saxon dynasty without an heir and the kingship was awarded by election to Conrad II (1024-1039), the first of the Salian kings whose line held the throne for a century. Conrad and his successors devoted themselves to strengthening further the power of the crown. They called into their service men from the lower ranks of the German nobility, called ministeriales, whose previous

status of dependence upon the higher nobility made it easy for the king to claim their devotion. The ministeriales garrisoned royal castles, filled important administrative offices, and aided in suppressing rebellions. In the middle of the eleventh century, the monarchy began entrenching itself in southern Saxony where, near the rich silver mines of the Harz Mountains, it hoped to build a royal domain and establish a royal capital. By the time of Henry IV (1056-1106) Germany seemed to be on the way to becoming the strongest state in Europe.

As might be expected, the German nobility was eager to reverse the direction which the course of events was taking. The opportunity came during the bitter controversy over lay investiture that began in 1075. For political reasons the nobility supported Pope Gregory VII. Henry IV fought back vigorously, fully aware that nothing less than the German monarchy was at stake. The result was a long period of civil strife, during which feudal decentralization and a degree of manorialism were introduced into parts of Germany that had never known them before. Meanwhile, some northern Italian cities gained virtual independence. The investiture controversy permanently weakened imperial authority in Germany. By the time of its formal settlement by the Concordat of Worms in 1122, Germany was no longer on the way to becoming Europe's strongest state.

Henry V (1106-1125) was the last of the Salian line to reign in Germany. The nobles refused to elect his designated heir to succeed him, in the hope that they could call a halt to the practice of family succession to the throne. The election of the duke of Saxony placed Germany under a king who was beholden to the nobles and therefore did not attempt to exercise effective authority. About this time there emerged two great families as rival aspirants for control of the kingdom: the Hohenstaufens and the Welfs. A complicating factor was the involvement of the papacy, which threw the weight of its influence against the monarchy. Germany was soon divided between a pro-papal party, the Welfs, and a proimperial party, the Hohenstaufens. A quarter century of strife ensued until 1152 when the German nobles, weary of the disorder, unanimously chose Frederick Barbarossa (so named from his red beard) to restore peace.

Frederick I (1152-1190) was a Hohenstaufen with a Welf mother, and his election was designed to bring to an end the conflict between the two families and at the same time affirm the elective principle of monarchy. He found the framework of the Salian state collapsed; even the stem duchies were disappearing under the feudalizing process. In an effort to restore effective monarchical government in Germany, Frederick was confronted by the discouraging facts that he had little land or income of his own and little bureaucracy. He sought to solve this dilemma by devoting the major part of his attention to his Italian possessions, probably because the wealth of the Lombard towns afforded him opportunities to gain large revenues. With these he could turn to Germany once more.

Frederick failed to achieve his purpose. His attempt to extend imperial control in northern Italy led the towns there, urged on by the pope, to combine against him in the Lombard League, and after temporary success he was forced to make peace with the league in 1183. Although he succeeded in winning the right to collect annual rent from the cities and established imperial officials in central Italy, this was much less than he had hoped to gain. He did strengthen his position by negotiating a marriage between his son and the heiress of Sicily. Yet only as long as his troops occupied Italian territory was Frederick able to control it, and he was quickly repudiated when rebellions in Germany compelled him to return north of the Alps.

Fractious German nobles, chief of whom was the duke of Saxony, took advantage of Frederick's involvement in Italy to expand their territory and increase their power. The king had kept on good terms with his German vassals in order to have a free hand in Italy, but in 1179 he decided that the duke of Saxony was becoming too powerful. He summoned him to the royal court, and when the proud and confident magnate failed to appear, Frederick conquered Saxony and forced the duke into exile. Frederick had accomplished much in Germany and Italy, but his dream of effective rule over the latter was ended and he had not succeeded in making a real state out of either. The news of the fall of Jerusalem to the Moslems in 1187 diverted his attention and in 1190 Frederick was drowned on his way to the East.

Frederick's son, Henry VI (1190-1197), was deeply involved in Italian politics by virtue of his marriage to the Sicilian heiress. Upon his premature death he bequeathed a shaky empire to an infant son. By birth half Norman, Frederick II (1212-1250) inherited the Norman Sicilian crown with its tradition of centralized government. From his German forebears he drew an equally strong tradition of universal empire. Although he made an attempt to carry out both traditions, it was the southern lands that claimed most of his energy. Spending only a few years of his reign in Germany, Frederick practically abdicated his rule as overlord in that country. In 1220 he granted such extensive political privileges to the ecclesiastical lords as to make them virtually independent of imperial authority, and twelve years later he extended these privileges to the secular princes. In both cases Frederick staked his hopes on the princes with whom he had allied himself against the interests of the German towns. The towns, for instance, were closed to runaway serfs and barred from constructing new fortifications. Taken together, these concessions recognized the feudal dismemberment of medieval Germany. The power of the emperor in Germany was gone and after 1237 Frederick was seen no more in his northern kingdom.

These policies were in line with Frederick's interest in keeping Germany quiet so that his attention was not diverted from his Italian plans. His heart and home lay in Sicily, and he turned to making the strong government there even stronger. In almost complete contrast with his policies in Germany,



Frederick reorganized his southern kingdom in 1231, proclaiming a centralized and bureaucratic government which stressed Roman law and abolished all vestiges of feudal privilege. He established fixed money payments in lieu of feudal dues, the right to levy taxes, and a monopoly over commerce and silk manufacturing. The income from these sources provided funds for a mercenary army and a royal bureaucracy.

Frederick II died in 1250, still engaged in a battle with the papacy which, because of their strongly conflicting interests in Italy, had raged during almost his entire life. His son died soon thereafter and between 1254 and 1273 Germany was torn once again by civil strife. This was the period of the "fist law," at the end of which nobles and pope alike agreed on the necessity for a German king if only as a symbol of the ideal of imperial unity. In 1273 the princes elected Rudolf of Hapsburg (1273-1291), who formally abandoned the imperial tradition and surrendered all claims to Italy in return for papal support. Even within Germany Rudolf interfered little in the affairs of the territorial princes, devoting himself instead to restoring peace and acquiring land for his family. The impotence of the central power was finally fixed with the Golden Bull of 1356, proclaimed by Charles IV (1346-1378). The bull confirmed the right of seven electors to choose the emperor, free from any papal influence in the process; recognized the electors' practically sovereign rights within their own territories; invested them with supervisory powers over the empire; and left the emperor himself with little real authority. Charles had, in the words of a famous historian, "legalized anarchy and called it a constitution."

By the end of the fifteenth century Germany was composed of about 1600 virtually independent political units. These fell into three main categories: the princely states, the ecclesiastical states, and the towns. The term "particularism" has been aptly used to describe the German political situation at this time. Yet within some of the princely states a concentration of authority was in process similar to that in England, France, and Spain, except on a smaller scale. The towns, many of which had grown wealthy from the economic revival, sometimes leagued together to maintain independence of the princes, but by 1500 many of them were submitting to princely rule. After 1438 and until the end of the empire in 1806, all the emperors were chosen from the Hapsburg family. What few powers were still exercised at the imperial level were shared between the emperor and a Diet, an institution which can be compared to parliamentary bodies in other countries. Only at the very end of the Middle Ages were the German towns given formal representation in the Diet.

The political anarchy in Italy in the late Middle Ages surpassed even that of Germany. Although until the middle of the fifteenth century the emperors were still crowned in Rome, they took virtually no part in government south of the Alps after Rudolf of Hapsburg renounced his claims in Italy. The

political history of the peninsula during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is one of despotically ruled principalities and independent city-states, each rent with considerable violence and confusion. By 1500 five of these units overshadowed the rest: the Kingdom of Naples, the Papal States, Venice, Florence, and Milan. The Italian Renaissance had discredited the idea of social collectivism; leading citizens were obsessed with the pursuit of material wealth; and an intense commercial rivalry sprang up among the Italian cities. The incessant intercity wars created pressures which gave rise to powerful usurpers who ruled despotically. In Milan the Sforza and Visconti families gained control, while in Florence the Medici ruled. In Venice a powerful oligarchy controlled the government. Northern Italy, therefore, was an area of chronic wars both within and between cities ruled by despots who courted the support of the wealthier bourgeoisie by pursuing policies favorable to them. None of these urban dictators were anointed kings and as usurpers they had little appeal to Italians outside the area of their own despotic authority.

Two other elements complicated the Italian scene in 1500. The first was the political policy of the papacy. Especially after the return of the popes from Avignon they attempted to maintain and increase the strength of the Papal States in an unstable situation. The popes adopted the methods of their secular contemporaries, hiring armies, making alliances, and engaging in intrigues. The success of these efforts made the papacy more than ever before a political force to be reckoned with in Italy. The second complication was foreign intervention, a continuation of the thousand-year process to which the peninsula had been subjected. After the collapse of imperial government, southern Italy fell into the hands of French and Aragonese princes. In 1443, the king of Aragon gained control of southern Italy and Sicily, which he combined into the Kingdom of Naples, the largest state on the peninsula. By 1500 the French and Spanish kings were already locked in a sixty-year struggle over Italy, one in which it was the principal battleground. In such a complicated political situation there was no one able to embody the political aspirations or patriotic ideals of the Italian people.