



Fall 2014

# Imperial Electioneering: The Evolution of the Election in the Holy Roman Empire from the Collapse of the Carolingians to the Rise of the Ottonians

Louis T. Gentilucci  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship)

 Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), and the [Political History Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Gentilucci, Louis T., "Imperial Electioneering: The Evolution of the Election in the Holy Roman Empire from the Collapse of the Carolingians to the Rise of the Ottonians" (2014). *Student Publications*. 311.  
[https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship/311](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/311)

This open access student research paper is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# Imperial Electioneering: The Evolution of the Election in the Holy Roman Empire from the Collapse of the Carolingians to the Rise of the Ottonians

## **Abstract**

The Holy Roman Empire had an electoral process for choosing the Holy Roman Emperor. The heritage of this unique medieval institution can be traced through from Charlemagne empire to the Ottonians. The Empire of Charlemagne had several serious problems that led to its collapse. In the wake of this collapse, the lords of Germany asserted their power and chose leaders for themselves. Between the fall of the Carolingians and the rise of the Ottonians, Germany moved toward an elected kingship with a ducal power base. Only when Otto I became emperor was there a marriage between the German electoral system and the title of Holy Roman Emperor, resulting in the Holy Roman Empire of the late medieval period.

## **Keywords**

Holy Roman Empire, Elections, Charlemagne, Ancient Roman Politics

## **Disciplines**

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Classics | History | Political History

## **Comments**

This paper was written for *HIST 311: Medieval Europe*, Fall 2014.

## **Creative Commons License**

Creative

Commons

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

License

# Imperial Electioneering

---

## The Evolution of the Election in the Holy Roman Empire from the Collapse of the Carolingians to the Rise of the Ottonians

Louis Gentilucci

12/8/2014

The Holy Roman Empire had an electoral process for choosing the Holy Roman Emperor. The heritage of this unique medieval institution can be traced through from Charlemagne empire to the Ottonians. The Empire of Charlemagne had several serious problems that led to its collapse. In the wake of this collapse, the lords of Germany asserted their power and chose leaders for themselves. Between the fall of the Carolingians and the rise of the Ottonians, Germany moved toward an elected kingship with a ducal power base. Only when Otto I became emperor was there a marriage between the German electoral system and the title of Holy Roman Emperor, resulting in the Holy Roman Empire of the late medieval period.

The Holy Roman Empire was a unique institution in the medieval world. While it claimed a heritage from the Caesars of Rome and the Carolingian emperors, its institutions reflected a unique and somewhat confusing heritage. Technically, the Ottonian dynasty, of which Otto I, 962-973, received the title of emperor from the Pope, was anointed in the tradition of Charlemagne.<sup>1</sup> By that time, however, the Empire Charlemagne founded had been splintered apart. Otto I was able to form a kingdom out of some of the warring factions and amass the power needed to have the Pope declare him emperor. But his Empire had diverged greatly from the one of old. Now, though the emperor was the central authority of the Empire, he was chosen by the princes of the Empire through an election. This election set the Holy Roman Empire apart from the Carolingian Empire and the rest of Europe. This strange political development would define the Holy Roman Empire and central Europe for centuries to come.

The Holy Roman Empire has been a focal point of historiographical debate for centuries. The post-Roman emperors of Western Europe have been the highlights of “great man” history, ranging from the legends of Charlemagne to the ambitions of Otto III to the tragic death of Barbarossa.<sup>2</sup> However, the idea of studying the actual government and institutions of the Holy Roman Empire became highly popular after it had ended. Following the complete demise of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 at the hands of Napoleon, the value of the old system came to the fore of political debate.

The historiography of the nature of the Holy Roman Empire, as opposed to the history of the Holy Roman Empire developed as a result of the modern identity crisis of the German nation. As the German kingdoms grew closer and closer together, and the debates between

---

<sup>1</sup> Einhard and Notker the Stammerer, *Two Lives of Charlemagne (Penguin Classics)*, Revised ed. (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 38.

<sup>2</sup> Gerd Althoff, *Otto III*. (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 2-16.

*Kleindeutschland* and *Großdeutschland* ("Lesser Germany" and "Greater Germany") became more ferocious, German historians explored Germany's past to see what models had proven viable in the past. Thus Heinrich von Sybel devised his thesis arguing that the Holy Roman Empire failed to promote the German national interest. By putting the imperial ambitions of European domination over the needs of the German kingdoms, the emperors used Germany as a springboard for their conquests, as opposed to a kingdom they were obligated to manage.<sup>3</sup> To Sybel the emperors of the medieval Holy Roman Empire were as unfit to rule as the Austrian emperors, and that Prussia was a more qualified ruler of any future German Reich.

This thesis was not without its detractors. Julius Ficker argued that, while certain emperors had neglected the duties of the German kingdom for imperial glory in Italy, the Empire as an institution was instrumental in the creation of the German nation.<sup>4</sup> In this way, the Holy Roman Empire represented the pinnacle of medieval German power. This thesis was propounded by Johannes Haller, who viewed the Empire as a medieval golden age that was lost only by poor leadership and foreign intervention. He deemed the Holy Roman Empire of the Ottonian dynasty, "the Greatest Epoch of the German People."<sup>5</sup> According to Dietrich Schaefer, the name "Germany" did not exist until the late medieval period. Schaefer notes that the German nation could have suffered the same fate as Scandinavia, which broke apart into disparate and antagonistic kingdoms despite their shared history, culture, and language.<sup>6</sup> The Empire, with its

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert E. Herzstein, *The Holy Roman Empire in the Middle Ages: Universal State or German Catastrophe?*, edited by Robert Edwin Herzstein, (n.p.: Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1966), 1-4.

<sup>4</sup> Herzstein, *The Holy Roman Empire in the Middle Ages: Universal State or German Catastrophe?*, 4-9.

<sup>5</sup> Herzstein, *The Holy Roman Empire in the Middle Ages: Universal State or German Catastrophe?*, 10-12.

<sup>6</sup> Herzstein, *The Holy Roman Empire in the Middle Ages: Universal State or German Catastrophe?*, 17-20.

inclusion of foreign peoples, such as the Bohemians, the Dutch, and the Italians, helped foster a German identity in contrast to these foreign peoples. Meanwhile, Georg von Below, argued that this inclusion helped throttle German nationalism, by distracting the emperors with the petty politics of the Italian peninsula and undermining the colonization mission to Germany's north and east.<sup>7</sup> This style of debate continued to rage in German historical circles until after the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

More modern scholars have asked less politically charged, but no less pertinent questions ranging from the distribution of wealth to the role of free peasants and priests in the medieval German world.<sup>9</sup> But the historiographical record concerning the elections within the Empire can be unclear and sparse. Many scholars use the term "election" without explaining its background or rationale, focusing instead on the personal politics of the main actors. They also use the phrase in the period before 1356, after which the rules governing these elections were codified in the Golden Bull of Charles IV. Though the "dualism" of the German nation has been explored by some historians, there has not been a solid investigation into why an *election* became the norm in the Holy Roman Empire, as opposed to other forms of limited monarchical governments.<sup>10</sup> The idea of the Holy Roman Empire, and its implications for German and European history, has intrigued scholars to this day.

---

<sup>7</sup> Herzstein, *The Holy Roman Empire in the Middle Ages: Universal State or German Catastrophe?*, 46-50.

<sup>8</sup> The politics of these historians must be noted, as it belies all of their theories. Sybel was an anti-Catholic Kleindeutschland advocate employed by the Prussians. Ficker and Haller, as Catholics, fell squarely in the Großdeutschland camp. And the politics of many other prominent German historians prove troublesome, by their later association with the Third Reich. See Herzstein, *The Holy Roman Empire in the Middle Ages: Universal State or German Catastrophe?*

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Barraclough, *Mediaeval Germany, 911-1250; Essays by German Historians*, translated by Geoffrey Barraclough, (n.p.: Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1948), 95-100.

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Barraclough, *Mediaeval Germany, 911-1250; Essays by German Historians*, 1-9.

This interest has stemmed in part from how the Holy Roman Empire dispersed power amongst many different political actors. This weakness of the central authority of the Holy Roman Empire can be traced back to the original Frankish Carolingian emperors. Traditionally, the Franks practiced dividing their inheritance amongst all eligible heirs.<sup>11</sup> This meant that it was next to impossible to consolidate all the Carolingian family holdings into one Frankish kingdom. Carolingian heirs began ruling long before their father's death, through the assignment of sub-kingdoms.<sup>12</sup> The heirs were given authority over a region of the kingdom, and generally became independent as their reigns continued. This gave each heir a power base from which to contest their siblings' claims.

The Empire was at its largest and most stable when there was only one male heir to inherit all the kingdoms. The Emperor Charlemagne was able to consolidate his holdings into a mighty empire due to the death of his brother Carloman. This coincidence of history allowed Charlemagne to inherit all his family's domains, giving him authority over all the Franks. It allowed Charlemagne to unite Europe in a way not seen since the sack of Rome. Expansion into Saxony, Spain, and Lombardy became possible, and it appeared that the Carolingians would forge a great empire out of Western Europe.<sup>13</sup>

However, this new epoch ushered in by Charlemagne masked the serious divisions and weaknesses of his administration. Charlemagne's realm was vast and his personal resources limited. The people within his realm had few uniting characteristics beyond their Christianity.

---

<sup>11</sup> Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Carolingian Portraits: A Study in the Ninth Century*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1962), 7-9

<sup>12</sup> Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, C. 800-1056*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Einhard and Notker the Stammerer, *Two Lives of Charlemagne (Penguin Classics)*, Revised ed., 21-29.

And their Christianity was by no means uniform.<sup>14</sup> Though he managed to defend the Empire and suppress rebellions during his lifetime, he had pushed the Empire to the limits of its expansion.<sup>15</sup> He had also tied his title of emperor to the Pope and, by extension, the defense of Rome. This meant that the title of emperor required the emperor to control and defend Rome, and was unrelated to the other imperial lands. Charlemagne's alliance with the Pope would come back to haunt his heirs.

He had also not established primogeniture, as all of his sons still expected to gain parts of the Empire as their own. Though he intended for his eldest to inherit the vast majority of his realm, he succeeded because only one of his heirs survived, Louis the Pious. This prevented any competition amongst siblings after the death of Charlemagne. Louis the Pious would encounter a similar problem as his own sons came of age and began jockeying for power and their own domains.

Indeed, it is only due to Louis the Pious being Charlemagne's only living heir that the Empire survived his death. For it is during the reigns of Louis the Pious' successors that the decline of the Empire can be seen. He was less successful than his father in matters of succession. His sons survived, and Louis the Pious was forced to bring them to heel violently. After several civil wars and political crises, they accepted their father's wishes that the eldest, Lothar, should inherit the majority of the realm and the title of emperor.<sup>16</sup> But his sons continued to plot against this plan, while Louis was alive and after his death. Ultimately, through constant

---

<sup>14</sup> Norman F. Cantor, *The Civilization of the Middle Ages: a Completely Revised and Expanded Edition of Medieval History*, Reprint ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 245-249.

<sup>15</sup> Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Carolingian Portraits: A Study in the Ninth Century*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1962), 7-9.

<sup>16</sup> Duckett, *Carolingian Portraits: A Study in the Ninth Century*, 11-14.

warfare, they divided the realm amongst themselves into several sub-kingdoms, maintaining the Empire in name only and limiting the power of the *de jure* emperor, Lothar.<sup>17</sup>

The claims of younger sons and surviving brothers continued to plague the dynasty of the Carolingians in all of the successor kingdoms. Ultimately, these competitions over inheritance tore the Empire apart. For example, the conflicts between Charles the Bald and Louis the German over the inheritance of Lotharingia showcases the typical instability and political infighting amongst the Carolingians.<sup>18</sup> At the death of Lothar, king of Lotharingia, Charles marched east from his kingdom of West Francia to annex that land for himself, driving his brother Louis to declare war over the portion he had been promised. But before Charles could establish his rule over Lotharingia, the Emperor Louis II, Charles's nephew, died and left the kingdom of Italy open to annexation, along with the imperial title. With the Pope and local magnates appealing to him to take the realm in hand, Charles moved to claim his title by entering Rome. Shortly after that, Louis the German died while campaigning in West Francia, leaving much of the eastern kingdoms in disarray. Charles had to defeat Louis the German's sons and gain the fealty of their kingdoms and restore the Empire. Once he was anointed emperor, Charles the Bald secured the fealty of northern Italy and then marched into Bavaria to vanquish his nephews, where his army was routed by the youngest son of Louis the German. In the rout, his army collapsed and his health failed him. Thus ended the conflict between Charles the Bald and Louis the German with the death of three Carolingians and the division of all of their kingdoms amongst their sons.

The constant squabbling led each king to overextend himself. In turn, each time a king fell, he left a broken and fractured kingdom behind. For each of these kingdoms were divided

---

<sup>17</sup> Duckett, *Carolingian Portraits: A Study in the Ninth Century*, 265-274.

<sup>18</sup> Duckett, *Carolingian Portraits: A Study in the Ninth Century*, 265-274.

amongst the sons. These successor kingdoms had their own problems to address, and could not afford to be concerned with plans of conquest and expansion. For example, Louis the Stammerer, 877-879, heir to Charles the Bald, was unable to reclaim his father's title.<sup>19</sup> Viking raiders all along the northern coast forced Louis to remain in West Francia. He could not move to defend Rome, the symbolic heart of the Empire, and thus abandoned all the imperial aspirations of West Francia. His presence was demanded for the defense, taxation, and good behavior of his vassals. Similar problems plagued the sons of Louis the German. Their collective inability to defend the borders of the Empire and maintain the defense of Rome led the denizens of the Empire to look for more local solutions to their woes.

The last Carolingian emperor ruling in the east Frankish kingdom was Charles the Fat, youngest son of Louis the German. He was able to reunite parts of the Empire as the Carolingian lines died out in certain kingdoms, leaving him the logical heir. But during his reign, Scandinavian raiders harassed and occupied the northern coastlines. Local magnates asserted themselves in the wake of Charles the Fat's failure to halt the Vikings, culminating in his overthrow and death, and the end of imperial ambitions in Germany.<sup>20</sup> Charles the Fat was replaced by his nephew, Arnulf of Carinthia. Arnulf established himself as a German king, abandoning the imperial title much as Louis the Stammerer had.<sup>21</sup> Not long after his death, and the death of his son, Louis the Child, the Carolingian line of kings in Germany died out.

In the wake of Louis the Child's death, Duke Conrad of Franconia was chosen by the lords of Germany to rule the kingdom.<sup>22</sup> This is a dramatic step, because all the previous rulers

---

<sup>19</sup> Duckett, *Carolingian Portraits: A Study in the Ninth Century*, 276-277.

<sup>20</sup> "Germany" shall be used anachronistically here and throughout to designate the lands of German-speakers. It will also come to include Bohemia, the Low Countries, and northern Italy.

<sup>21</sup> Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, C. 800-1056*, 120-122.

<sup>22</sup> Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, C. 800-1056*, 136.

of the divided Empire had been of Carolingian blood. It was an imperial requirement. But the German lords offered the throne to a new king outside the dynasty, and no other Carolingian king rose to challenge his rule. This *de facto* acceptance of the rule of Conrad can be viewed as the forerunner of the imperial election. Conrad had no claim but the support of the magnates of Germany. Lords throughout the Empire had historically been able to offer the throne of their realm to other Carolingians should their king fail to produce an heir. But now, this specific group of lords was offering it to the man of the hour, Conrad. In addition, Conrad was declared king of Germany, rather than emperor. The Germans were acting as their own political bloc and were able to legitimize their actions through the compliance of the other claimants. The Carolingians had squandered the political capital associated with their bloodline, while the lords and nobles of the eastern kingdom asserted their right to offer the throne to a leader in times of crisis.

The Magyar invasion of the tenth century was another such time of crisis. The Magyars sought wealth in raiding into German lands from the east, and as a result it was in the east that the growth of the duchies was most visible. The duke Arnulf of Bavaria, amongst others, rose to power in order to combat these invasions.<sup>23</sup> Licensed by the king to defend the border, the dukes gained military might and hegemony in their local territories to combat this external threat. Men like Conrad of Franconia, Arnulf of Bavaria and Henry of Saxony rose in power by providing levies to defend against the Magyars, simultaneously building a personal power base and establishing their families in specific regions of the kingdom.<sup>24</sup> This reliance on the dukes would only grow, resulting in the establishment of the imperial election by the dukes.

---

<sup>23</sup> Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, C. 800-1056*, 129,132-135.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Arnold, *Power and Property in Medieval Germany: Economic and Social Change, C.911-1250 Vol. II*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 46-48.

Henry I and Otto I became the first rulers after the fall of the last Carolingian to establish an enduring imperial dynasty. Henry had managed to build his power and convinced the old king, Conrad, to appoint him as successor.<sup>25</sup> Henry successfully arranged for his own son, Otto, to inherit the royal domains. Due to their small size and the restrictions created by competing families of nobles, the royal lands could not be divided, putting an end to the Carolingian practice of dividing the realm.<sup>26</sup> Building on his father's successes, both against the Magyars and rivals for the German throne, Otto struggled to maintain control of the fractious dukes and lords of the kingdoms. He fought a period of civil wars after his ascension to the German throne against his brothers and defiant dukes. Otto was successful, and ultimately affirmed king by the lords of the realm. The return of Magyar incursions helped unite support behind Otto, completing the task of consolidating his power. After his success against the Magyars, Otto I did something a German king had not done in decades: turned his attention southward to Rome.

Otto I moved against a usurper king in northern Italy in 951 and, by doing so, he rekindled the imperial ambitions lost in the previous centuries. He re-entered Italy, establishing his hegemony and was anointed and crowned emperor by the Pope in 962.<sup>27</sup> Now, the German process of king-making had been reunited with the Carolingian traditions of papal-sanction on imperial office. Though Otto I was still beholden to the duchies of Germany, his rise to emperor continued the transformation of the German system of government.

The original Carolingian Empire had proven too vast to govern and defend properly. It became clear that the administration needed to be distributed. The dukes became the king's tools

---

<sup>25</sup> Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, C. 800-1056*, 137-139.

<sup>26</sup> Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, C. 800-1056*, 137-139.

<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey Barraclough, *Mediaeval Germany, 911-1250; Essays by German Historians, translated by Geoffrey Barraclough*, 76-77.

for running the Empire. But the dukes were constantly jockeying for more power and the Election was one manifestation of that power.

By electing an emperor, and pledging to honor the results of their election, the dukes and the lesser lords of Germany held influence over the emperor. The emperor held the fealty of these dukes, but they held his succession in their hands. The Empire had become permanently divided amongst regional clans rather than amongst royal heirs. Families rose up to govern the duchies and pushed for the growth of their family's power. They directly controlled a small core of land around which they based their military strength. These independent duchies were now bound to the emperor through the imperial election. The election would confer authority upon the emperor, while accepting the duchies as independent of the emperor.

The elections remained a fluid institution throughout the medieval period. From the founding of the Ottonian dynasty to the Golden Bull of Charles IV, 1355-1378, the number and power of electors varied greatly. Originally, all the duchies, fiefs, bishoprics, and domains came together to elect the emperor. The overthrow of Charles the Fat was a *de facto* election of another Carolingian. And the election of Conrad was where the lords of Germany created the precedent for having a non-Carolingian king chosen by the local lords.

These large elections were hazardous affairs, for if enough electors walked out on the event or were excluded from the vote they could convene their own election and crown an anti-king. By the end of the medieval period, the number of electors had been reduced to seven: the Archbishops of Mainz, Trier, and Cologne; the King of Bohemia; the Count Palatine of the Rhine; the Duke of Saxony; and the Margrave of Brandenburg.<sup>28</sup> These seven independent rulers would convene upon the death of the emperor and elect his successor. They represented the

---

<sup>28</sup> Joachim Leuschner, *Europe in the Middle Ages*. Translated by Sabine MacCormack. Vol. 17, *Germany in the Late Middle Ages* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Pub. Co., 1980) 156-158.

diversity of the Empire, from the foreign Bohemians to the religious authority of the archbishoprics.

The rules of the election were not formally defined until the end of the medieval period, with the Golden Bull of Charles IV. The Golden Bull of Charles IV, circa 1356, was drafted as a means to codify the historical rights of the kings and Elector-Princes of Germany. Despite its age, the document represents the older institutions and customs of the Empire. Charles IV was the first Bohemian emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, and, appreciating his vulnerability to the dominantly German Elector-Princes, he sought to extend Bohemian power while simultaneously defining imperial and Elector powers.

The most important provision of the Bull is Chapter II. In Chapter II, the rules of future elections are defined and codified, including the duties of the emperor-elect, the rights and protections of the electors and the location and ceremony of future elections. The emperor was decided by an election of a majority of the electors.<sup>29</sup> This emperor's authority was the same no matter how large or small a majority he obtained.<sup>30</sup> The electors were bound to choose a candidate within thirty days, or else they would have to "live upon bread and water and shall not leave the city until the election has been decided."<sup>31</sup> And an elector could vote for himself.<sup>32</sup> Prior to this, all lords within the Empire had a vote, and the rules of voting could vary wildly depending on the degree of discontent within the Empire. The Golden Bull designated the seven Elector-Princes, institutionalizing their preeminence in the imperial government for the first time.

---

<sup>29</sup> "The Golden Bull of Charles IV 1356." Internet History Sourcebook Project, last modified April 1996, accessed 10/7/2014, <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/goldenbull.asp>.

<sup>30</sup> "The Golden Bull of Charles IV 1356," Internet History Sourcebook Project.

<sup>31</sup> "The Golden Bull of Charles IV 1356," Internet History Sourcebook Project.

<sup>32</sup> "The Golden Bull of Charles IV 1356," Internet History Sourcebook Project.

These rules, built on the tradition of the independent duchies from the period after Charles the Bald's deposition, represent a remarkable evolution of medieval thought on government. In France, there were signs of centralization of authority and unification of the state.<sup>33</sup> In Spain, the view that all of Spain was indivisible and deserved only one Christian king can be seen throughout the Reconquista period.<sup>34</sup> And in England, the barons had fought for the rights to influence taxation and subject the king to the law by the late medieval period.<sup>35</sup> But in the Holy Roman Empire, instead of a strong monarch uniting the disparate tribes, duchies, bishoprics and kingdoms, we observe a monarch deriving his authority from his fellow monarchs as a first amongst equals. His rule and his succession must be ordained by their consent. The Empire may be ruled by the emperor, but its constituent parts maintained powerful rights and privileges independent of him.

The power of these electors should not be over-exaggerated. The emperor and the electors were even combatants for hegemony. By revoking the ruling dynasty of its imperial authority by electing another king, electors threatened to be dragged into a civil war between the king and anti-king. By resisting the election of a particular monarch, electors could create bad blood between themselves and the new emperor. Such bad blood could result in the alliance of rivals with the emperor and the diminishing of that elector's power. On the other hand, electors could vote in favor of the appointed successors and gain prestige and imperial respect, from which many rewards could flow.

---

<sup>33</sup> Hugh M. Thomas, *The Norman Conquest: England After William the Conqueror (Critical Issues in World and International History)* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 40.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 12.

<sup>35</sup> Nicholas Vincent, *Magna Carta: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 88-91.

But, politics aside, the power granted to the electors represent an important development in German history. The emperors gained the divine right to rule by the consent of their fellow sovereigns.<sup>36</sup> They were the source of his power, and their loyalty had to be maintained. Emperors would convene councils, or diets, to ensure the election of their underage heirs.<sup>37</sup> But electors could, and would, abandon the rightful heir if they deemed the dynasty weak and sought to promote their own candidates.<sup>38</sup>

But it was not only the dukes who benefited from the imperial election, for the inclusion of bishoprics amongst the electors alludes to the power and influence of the local clergy on the election. The power of both the religious and ducal authorities can be seen by analyzing the number of troops levies the emperor could call from them during wartime. This was the most direct way that the dukes of Germany could demonstrate their displeasure against the current king. The war against the Bohemian Hussite heretics in the fifteenth century will serve, as there are few earlier sources with accurate troop numbers. Out of a total of 3200 troops called by the emperor, ranging from archers to men-at-arms to heavy cavalry, the electors provided only 250 men.<sup>39</sup> The rest were drawn from an assortment of towns, nobles, and bishoprics. This wide-ranging call for levies helps explain the balance of power in the Empire. The emperor and the electors all lacked the manpower and military bureaucracy to dominate the Empire. They

---

<sup>36</sup> "...that God openly gave laws to the human race through the emperor and the kings of the world; and since the emperor is made true emperor by the election alone," *"The Law Licet Juris of the Frankfort Diet of 1338 A.D."* Internet History Sourcebook Project, last modified April 1996, accessed 10/8/2014, <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/licetjuris.asp>.

<sup>37</sup> I.S. Robinson, *Henry IV of Germany, 1056-1106*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 20-24.

<sup>38</sup> Alfred Haverkamp, *Medieval Germany, 1056-1273*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 263-265.

<sup>39</sup> *"Levy of Troops for Wars in Bohemia, 1422."* Internet History Sourcebook Project, last modified April 1996, accessed 10/9/2014, <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/imptrooplevy1422.asp>.

individually lacked the means to raise an army strong enough to bring a rebellious Elector to heel. In fact, the Empire was heavily dependent on vassals that it could not always control.

Wealth was most heavily concentrated in independent urban centers and religious establishments.<sup>40</sup> Forty-eight percent of the levies were drawn from cities and urban centers with their own lords and privileges. Amongst the electors of the Empire, the archbishoprics provided thirty-six percent of the troops. The religious establishments ranging from the electors to the abbots provided twelve percent of the total levies. This means that sixty percent of the troops the emperor was relying on came from religious authorities and free cities.<sup>41</sup> Only they had the means to raise the troops needed to defend the Empire and maintain its stability. The emperor could not rely solely on his own resources to fulfill his duties. He had to spread the burden widely amongst his vassals in order to make it bearable. This was the only way to raise the troops needed to govern the vast lands of the Holy Roman Empire. This disproportionately increased the power of the electors, for each elector had their own web of vassals within the Empire. The electors may have provided only 250 troops, but they definitely influenced the number of levies from the smaller duchies, counties, and cities.

The emperor's reliance on the electors, vassals, and princes for the maintenance of his power illustrates how much power lay outside the office of the emperor. If he acted in a way that offended the electors or the free cities, they could withhold support in times of crisis and undermine the credibility of the emperor's dynasty. A monarch brought low by foreign invaders and recalcitrant allies could cost his dynasty their imperial title. On the other hand, a monarch

---

<sup>40</sup> Arnold, *Power and Property in Medieval Germany: Economic and Social Change, C.911-1250 Vol. II.*, 40-49.

<sup>41</sup> "Levy of Troops for Wars in Bohemia, 1422." *Internet History Sourcebook Project.*

like Otto I, who succeeded in ending the trepidations of the Magyars in the east, could count on the continued support of the electors.

The relationship with the Papacy had also proven problematic. The Pope had been a powerful ally of Charlemagne at the founding of the Empire, but the relationship had become troubled as the medieval period wore on. Due to the religious nature of kingship and, to a greater extent, the Holy Roman Empire, the emperors struggled to define their power against the Popes'. Traditionally, the Pope would anoint and crown as the emperor whoever was the defender of Rome, as he had done for Charlemagne when he had conquered northern Italy. But during the Ottonian and subsequent dynasties, the electors would choose the emperor. This raised the question of whether the Popes or the electors were the source of God's will in ordaining the emperor. In the late medieval period, the emperors attempted to sever their authority from the beneficence of the Popes.<sup>42</sup>

The Empire contained a strong religious establishment and the emperors attempted to limit the foreign influence of the Pope over this establishment while raising the importance of the clergy within the Empire. The Licet Juris was issued by Louis IV, 1328-1347, in the wake of his coronation without the Pope, to specifically address the nature of imperial power. By issuing the Licet Juris, the emperor and his electors sought to define the source of God's will and blessing as the election of the emperor rather than the crowning of the emperor by the Pope.<sup>43</sup> This elevation of the electors over the Pope in the Holy Roman Empire represents the final key to understanding the Empire's political system. The electors were used as a counter-balance to papal meddling in the Empire's affairs. The election was separated from the direct control of the bishop of Rome in order to give the emperor more control over the electors and succession.

---

<sup>42</sup> "The Law Licet Juris of the Frankfort Diet of 1338 A.D.", Internet History Sourcebook Project.

<sup>43</sup> "The Law Licet Juris of the Frankfort Diet of 1338 A.D.", Internet History Sourcebook Project.

And so the electoral system of the Holy Roman Empire evolved from the reign of Charlemagne to the Ottonian dynasty. The original Empire was weakened by its size and its rules for succession. These factors tore apart the old Carolingian dynasty, and paved the way for the elections. The duchies formed in the east as a response to the power vacuum left behind after the decline of the Carolingians. They overthrew their Carolingian liege, setting the precedent for the elections. Then, once the Carolingian line had died out, the lords choose a non-Carolingian successor from their own ranks, rather than offering the throne to an outside Carolingian. Finally, the Ottonians established their dynasty as elected kings of Germany, before regaining the imperial title from Rome, merging the election and the papal-blessed imperium into one institution. As time passed, the emperors sought to eliminate the role of the Pope in the bestowing of the imperial title, affirming the importance of the elections and the electors. Ultimately, the election and the electors became the specialized tools for the governance and administration of Germany in the wake of the Carolingian collapse.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Einhard, and Notker the Stammerer. *Two Lives of Charlemagne (Penguin Classics)*. Revised ed. London: Penguin Classics, 2008.

“*The Golden Bull of Charles IV 1356.*” Internet History Sourcebook Project, last modified April 1996, accessed 10/7/2014, <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/goldenbull.asp>.

“*The Law Licet Juris of the Frankfort Diet of 1338 A.D.*” Internet History Sourcebook Project, last modified April 1996, accessed 10/8/2014, <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/licetjuris.asp>.

“*Levy of Troops for Wars in Bohemia, 1422.*” Internet History Sourcebook Project, last modified April 1996, accessed 10/9/2014, <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/impdrooplevy1422.asp>.

### Secondary Sources

Althoff, Gerd. *Otto III*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003.

Arnold, Benjamin. *Power and Property in Medieval Germany: Economic and Social Change, C.911-1250 Vol. II*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Barraclough, Geoffrey. *Mediaeval Germany, 911-1250; Essays by German Historians, translated by Geoffrey Barraclough*. n.p.: Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1948.

Cantor, Norman F. *The Civilization of the Middle Ages: a Completely Revised and Expanded Edition of Medieval History*. Reprint ed. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994.

Duckett, Eleanor Shipley. *Carolingian Portraits: A Study in the Ninth Century*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1962.

Fleckenstein, Josef. *Early Medieval Germany, Josef Fleckenstein ; translated from the German by Bernard S. Smith*. n.p.: Amsterdam : North-Holland Pub. Co.; 1978.

Haverkamp, Alfred. *Medieval Germany, 1056-1273*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Herzstein, Robert E. *The Holy Roman Empire in the Middle Ages: Universal State or German Catastrophe? Edited by Robert Edwin Herzstein*. n.p.: Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1966.

Leuschner, Joachim. *Europe in the Middle Ages*. Translated by Sabine MacCormack. Vol. 17, *Germany in the Late Middle Ages*. Amsterdam: North-Holland Pub. Co., 1980.

O'Callaghan, Joseph F. *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

Reuter, Timothy. *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, C. 800-1056*. London: Longman, 1991.

Robinson, I. S. *Henry IV of Germany, 1056-1106*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Vincent, Nicholas. *Magna Carta: a Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.