

‘All ideology and no reality’: is this an accurate assessment of the German Empire 1050-1200?

In a post-Roman world the continuing existence of not merely one but two versions of the old Roman empire made a standing ideological challenge to all other sources of authority. The notion of Empire, certainly in the West, was a strange conjunction of the legacy from the classical and Germanic worlds. Perhaps because of this, the exact implications of imperial status were extremely fluid, and even through the century in question, meant different things to different people. Yet there was no doubt that it existed, and that it inspired respect. The attempts of successive popes to deprive emperors of their lands either failed or succeeded only for very short periods - for the very reason that in the same way that the papal position was seen as essential, so to was the imperial. If Gelasius could use the ‘Two swords’ theory from Luke’s gospel to buttress his own *sacra pontificum auctoritas*, he also depended on there being an imperial *potestas regalis*. And although clerics might claim that various emperors were in fact the Anti-Christ, they also believed that the Roman empire would last until the Last Day. The history of the church, with its support for temporal powers and yet shadowy claims to sovereignty had confused the issue to an extent that when clarification was sought in Rome under Gregory VII, all sides attempted to secure their positions before the oncoming storm.

On the other hand, no source served definitively to define exactly what a Roman emperor actually *did*. As far as Otto of Freising wishes to comment on this, ‘not only the unprecedented brightness of peace has dawned again, but the authority of the Roman empire prevails so greatly by reason of the virtues of our most victorious prince.’¹ - the Roman empire was a creature of the prince and the exact nature of the empire was fluid. Ideology, however necessary it might be for the maintenance of imperial glory, was at the command of the emperor himself.

First of all one must note that at the end of the eleventh century and the beginning of the twelfth, the ideology of the empire in itself was certainly not its most distinguishing feature. Certainly in the sense of perceived aims and preferred outcomes, men such as Henry IV wanted no more than to maintain what they had directly inherited. Indeed with threats to their position from all sides - from Saxons ‘no longer able to conceal the wickedness long since conceived in their hearts’² and from reforming Rome - there was precious little time for Henry in particular to formulate a complete ideology. The seriousness of this threat is seen clearly from Otto of Freising’s comment that ‘I read the history of the kings and emperors of Rome again and again, and I cannot find anywhere that any before Henry IV had been excommunicated by the Roman pope and robbed of his kingdom.’³ Nevertheless the need to present the empire to advantage is still obvious such as in Henry’s letter of response to the above threat from Rome. One letter was addressed to ‘Hildebrand, no longer pope but a false monk’ while a longer manifesto-like second was intended for public consumption. There did also exist very strongly the elements of sacral kingship which were so central to the earlier emperors from Charlemagne to Otto the Great and beyond. When Henry IV closed the above letter by saying ‘We Henry, by the grace of God, with all our bishops say to you: come down! come down!’ it implied a genuine belief in the integration of clerical and temporal interests that the empire represented. In fact, this was true in Germany much more than elsewhere in the Europe of the time. The existence of ecclesiastical princes, even up until 1806 was unique and pointed to a common purpose in kingship so that Frederick Barbarossa was able in 1157 to tell Pope Adrian that ‘the free crown of our empire we ascribe only to divine favour’ the archbishop of Mainz has the first voice in the election; the archbishop

¹ Otto of Freising *Deeds of Frederick Barbaross* p.25

² Otto of Freising *The Two Cities* p.399

³ quoted in Fuhrman *Germany in the High Middle Ages* p.51

of Cologne the right to perform royal unction; 'the highest which is the imperial, is for the pope; whatever is more than these is of evil.'⁴ This interpretation of the role of empire, is as an apex of the concept of sacral kingship, with the emperor in the role of the chief shepherd; it perfectly justified the investiture of bishops with the ring and staff, and it was this which plunged it into dispute with the papacy. To further this, the empire in the twelfth century increasingly referred to itself as *sacrum imperium* - a Holy Empire which could therefore achieve at least parity with the Holy See of Rome and the eastern Roman Empire. However by the twelfth century, these ideas were only very vaguely worked through, and it is hard to claim that the emperors Henry V and Lothar for example had the same kind of manifesto as was used by Frederick I towards the end of the century. What gave new life into imperial ideology was the revival of Roman law, which not coincidentally was centred in the imperial town of Bologna. Certainly Frederick was not displeased when Martinus assured him that he as Roman emperor was 'lord of the world', and presented the fortunate scholar with his horse he was riding on. Admittedly Frederick was not the first emperor to claim ancient powers in this way - since Irnenius had provided Henry V with proof that Roman emperors had exercised the right to install popes - however it was he who first presumed to refer to Constantine and Justinian as 'our predecessors, the sacred emperors' and he who first manipulated Roman rights as at Roncaglia to enrich his coffers.

It was plain to all, on the other hand, that none of Frederick's rhetoric nor the verbal dexterity of his chancellor Rainauld could square the well-ordered realms of Constantine with the loose conglomeration under Salian and Staufen suzerainty. Much of Germany for a start had never come in direct contact with the very Roman law which the Bolognese jurists were unearthing. To this end it is noticeable that Henry the Lion of Bavaria and Saxony was summoned to answer charges in 1178 not under the auspices of written law but of tribal law, and his downfall came through *Oberacht* outlawry after failure to observe the feudal duty of attending a lord's court. In this world it was very much the symbols of rule which counted as much as rights on paper. Thus when an emperor was crowned by the pope in Rome, the very fact that he was crowned was as significant as his new status. In this vein one of the keys to the Concordat of Worms was that the emperor was allowed to retain his rights of investiture, albeit with a sceptre and not a staff.

Yet this Germanic system of rule also served to highlight the fact that it was the local magnates who continued to retain powers of jurisdiction and initiative which the emperor, despite his apparent glory, could not match. Was the empire even a viable concept if it maintained almost no demesne lands of its own? Henry III's personal tenure of the duchies of Bavaria, Swabia and Carinthia was almost unique in the ruling family, and noticeably he granted them to supporters very quickly after his accession in 1039. In this respect we see a sharp contrast with other countries in Europe, such as France for example where the Capetians were jealously guarding their demesne land. Instead it shows again a central feature of the Frankish kingdom, noted by the Caliph of Cordova Abd Al-Rahman III who said of Otto the Great that 'he divides the regions of the kingdom between them, as if to make them more faithful and subjected to him; but this is far from the case since pride and rebellion are forthwith nurtured and equipped.'⁵ Although in many cases - such as Henry IV's problems in Saxony and Frederick Barbarossa's with the Lombard towns - this is correct, Abd Al-Rahman's criticism misses the central strand of Frankish government, such that the maintenance of the kingdom was the result of a co-operation between the main political players, which the growing feudal ties served to strengthen. Thus in the drive to the east, successive kings in this period saw the greatest progress made independently of themselves by their chief nobles. The new archbishopric of Magdeburg did not merely concern itself with the Christianisation of the heathen east, but also the Germanisation - a process somewhat more crudely helped by the arrival of Henry the Lion in Brandenburg in 1150.

⁴ quoted in Arnold *Medieval Germany 500-1300* p.146

⁵ quoted in Arnold *Medieval Germany 500-1300* p.181

New towns could also be formed and sponsored by local lords without reference to the crown, such as Lübeck on the northern coast, and Freiburg im Breisgau, a co-operation between Henry the Lion of Bavaria and the duke of Zähringen. However, the kings alone did hold certain rights everywhere which lords could only abuse at their peril. The best example is on Archbishop Anno of Cologne who in 1074 attempted to confiscate a boat, but set off an uprising since he was only allowed to do this while on the king's service.

Yet the Caliph's point does hold true that in that the Frankish system of government allowed such freedom of government to the main nobles that provinces could very quickly consider themselves virtually independent of the crown. The prime example is that of the north in 1181, when Barbarossa forced the city of Lübeck to capitulate. The imperial *iter* had not come to that part of the realm for decades, and it was only then that heavyweight magnates such as Waldemar of Denmark and Bogislav of Pomerania decided to reaffirm their allegiance to the German throne. Yet we must not go on from this to assume that though the imperial demesne was much smaller, it was in fact non-existent. Wipo noted that Henry II back in 1024 was able to reprimand the people of Pavia for destroying his palace, They replied by saying 'We were faithful and honoured our Emperor until the end of his life. Since we had no king after he died, we will not be accused legally of having destroyed the house of our king,' yet Henry could say in reply 'I know that you have not destroyed the house of your king, since you had none at the time; but you cannot deny that you have rent asunder a regal house. Even if the king died, the kingdom remained, just as the ship whose steersman falls remains.'⁶ Later on, the conflict between Lothar III and Frederick II of Swabia was because the latter refused to hand over the crown lands to the king - there were therefore sufficient lands reserved for a viable demesne to secure him.

A viable demesne to secure the king possibly, but nowhere near enough to allow him to act on the international stage as he felt he should. Unfortunately due to the lack of detailed records we cannot say where imperial money actually came from. However, unlike in Greece, the Western Imperials had not maintained the old Roman taxation system, and therefore relied on a succession of exactions, fines, bribes, money for imperial favour or mercy, ransoms, reliefs and church gifts and at least until around 1100, simony. The size of Henry V's treasury for instance, remains a mystery to us except for three payments which clearly show the need for grand status which the empire continued to provide. The first was a fine of 5000 silver marks levied on the burghers of Cologne for daring to support his father Henry IV against him. The second was a payment of 10,000 marks from a contender to the duchy of Bohemia, of which nearly 7,000 was paid. However the largest was undoubtedly the 10,000 marks which was sent as a dowry from his daughter from Henry I of England. Would any of these payments have been exacted if the empire was not entirely secure and a palpable reality? When fifty years later the council of Roncaglia attempted to recover *regalia*, Rahewin estimated the revenue from it at 30,000 silver talents per year, making the revenue from Italy alone equal to 84,000 pounds per year. In a time when the king of France could count 60,000 pounds a year and the king of England 90,000 pounds, the empire can be seen to be increasingly a viable economic unit.

Could the imperial ideology then be said to have merely been a screen to hide the inherent instability of the German and Italian kingdoms? In many respects there was a marked incongruity between the dynastic aims of a restoration of the Roman ideal and the existing elective monarchy. Certainly Henry VI's attempt to do just this failed since 'the emperor wanted to confirm with the princes a new and unheard of decree in the Roman realm that just as in France or the other kingdoms, kings should succeed him by hereditary right.'⁷ How could this be compared with the sacerdotal image of 'the free crown of our empire we ascribe to divine

⁶ quoted in Arnold *Medieval Germany 500-1300* p.164

⁷ quoted in Arnold *Medieval Germany 500-1300* p.174

favour', as Henry's father had put it? In fact it was the dislike of heredity which most compromised the empire - ironically not through succession of the crown, but rather of bishoprics. In an empire still based primarily on personal feudal ties, the main danger for a king was that if offices and duchies were heritable, royal control over them would diminish. The easy answer therefore was to give offices to a celibate organisation whose representatives were conveniently at the emperor's disposal - the Church. There was no fear of alienating offices to the church if the emperor could maintain control over church appointments; in the most part this was why successive emperors fought so hard against the reforming papacy of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. All land held by bishops and imperial *eigenklöstern* was at risk, since bishops *were* dukes in the empire. Otto of Freising can therefore describe not the archbishop of Mainz's ecclesiastical virtues, but that he was 'the cleverest and richest of all the princes of the realm at that time.'⁸ However it was shown most demonstrably when the bishop of Liège attended the Lateran Council of 1215 not clad in clerical vestments like his fellows, but in ducal finery.

In itself the imperial title did not change realities. Conrad III, for instance, failed to achieve coronation in Rome by the pope; yet although he could not title himself *imperator*, he remained *rex Romanorum* - a clear indication of the fundamental sameness of his position and that of an emperor after coronation. Yet further he styled himself *Romanorum rex Augustus*, though patently this could only be the mark of an emperor. The imperial title was in fact just that - a title. It had no institutions of its own which were in any way different from the constituent kingdoms of Italy, Germany and Burgundy, and even when Frederick Barbarossa's lawyers set about trying to recover his rights, they were looking for *regalia* - the trappings of kingship not empire. The assumption of ever more grand ideology was therefore directly dependent on the very same movement happening at Rome, where the pope was no longer successor of St Peter but Vicar of Christ as well. If it did not accurately reflect the true extent of Germanic power, certainly in the twelfth century, this should be unsurprising. Yet conversely it was not merely a facade to a hollow interior, since imperial power was acknowledged and unchallenged by any other temporal ruler. Instead we should look at the imperial ideology in the period as being a somewhat negative reaction to a very real threat from outside - the possible separation of church and crown. If the Pope could claim complete dominance, the governance of the empire was in very deep trouble; if the emperor could achieve parity or surpass it, the empire's future was more secure.

⁸ Otto of Freising *Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa* p.45