Holy Roman Empire

From Christmas Day in ad 800 until August 6, 1806, there existed in Europe a peculiar political institution called the Holy Roman Empire. The name of the empire as it is known today did not come into general use until 1254. It has truly been said that this political arrangement was not holy, or Roman, or an empire. Any holiness attached to it came from the claims of the popes in their attempts to assert religious control in Europe. It was Roman to the extent that it tried to revive, without success, the political authority of the Roman Empire in the West as a countermeasure to the Byzantine Empire in the East. It was an empire in the loosest sense of the word—at no time was it able to consolidate unchallenged political control over the vast territories it pretended to rule. There was no central government, no unity of language, no common system of law, no sense of common loyalty among the many states within it. Over the centuries the empire's boundaries shifted and shrank drastically.

Origins

The original Roman Empire ended in Italy and Western Europe in ad 476, when the last emperor—Romulus Augustulus—was deposed. Political power passed to Constantinople (now Istanbul), the capital of the Byzantine Empire. Theoretically Constantinople included all of Europe in its domain. Realistically, however, this proved impossible, as barbarian kingdoms were established throughout Western Europe. The only figure in the West who had any claim to universal authority was the pope in Rome, and he was legally bishop of Rome, confirmed in his position by the Byzantine emperor.

By the 8th century, Byzantine control of Italy had vanished. The Lombard kingdom of northern Italy had driven out the emperor's representative in Ravenna in 751. There were also strong religious differences between the pope and the church in Constantinople—differences that would lead to a complete break in 1054. Confronted with this situation, the Roman popes sought political protection from the only people who would give it—the kings of the Franks, the strongest power north of the Alps. In 754 the Frankish king Pippin the Short invaded Italy and conquered the Lombard kingdom. Two years later he assigned the former Byzantine territory around Ravenna to the pope. This was the birth of the Papal States of Italy, which would endure until the unification of Italy in the 19th century.

This close cooperation between popes and the Frankish kings would have far-reaching consequences. It laid the basis for centuries of conflict between emperors and popes over who had the supreme authority in Europe. According to the popes, the empire was the
political arm of the church. The emperors, on the other hand, saw themselves as directly responsible to God, and they relied on conquest and control for their power.

There is little doubt that the popes hoped to become the successors of emperors in the West. Since this was politically impossible, the next best solution was to assert religious control by means of political institutions. On December 25, 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne emperor during a service at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome (see Charlemagne). The act was illegal, because popes never had the right to crown emperors. The crowning did nothing for Charlemagne. He was as before king of the Franks and Lombards and the most powerful monarch in Europe. The main practical outcome of Leo’s act was to complete the separation between East and West. It thereby set up a rivalry with Constantinople, a rivalry in which neither side had a real advantage. Most significantly the coronation involved the new emperor and his successors in the political pretensions of the papacy.

Charlemagne’s Empire

The empire lasted as long as it did because the idea was politically and religiously appealing to the peoples and rulers of Europe. It did not endure unbroken, however. Charlemagne's kingdom did not remain whole very long after his death. His domains were fragmented by his successors. The last of his descendants to hold the title of emperor was Charles III the Fat (881–87). From 888 France, Germany, and Italy were separate states (though not unified nations by any means). A succession of emperors, mostly nominees of the popes, followed Charles. With the death of the last of these in 924, the powerful Roman family of the Crescentii abolished the title of emperor in Italy—at least for a time.

Rise of the Germanic Empire

The imperial title had died temporarily in Italy, but it persisted north of the Alps. It was a notion of empire that had nothing to do with Rome. By the middle of the 10th century there were two Frankish kingdoms—east and west. The West Kingdom was composed largely of today’s France. The East Frankish Kingdom was Germanic. From this time the Holy Roman Empire was to be basically Germanic, though it maintained pretensions of rule over greater territory, including Italy. In the German lands the kings were Saxon, not Frankish.

Otto I (died 973) was the first of the Saxon kings powerful enough to assert control over Germany and Italy. He was crowned emperor by Pope John XII in 962. Although he held the title, he made no pretense of governing the East Frankish lands. From his reign the empire was to be a union of German states and northern Italy.

Otto I did not claim the title of Roman emperor, but his descendants did. Otto II did so to proclaim his rivalry with the emperor at Constantinople. Otto III (ruled 983–1002) made Rome his capital. He felt himself to be the political power by which Christian domination
would spread throughout Europe. Popes were subject to him and his successors down to Henry III (1039–56). By that time effective rule over Germany and Italy together had become impracticable. Distance alone made it difficult.

Reassertion of Papal Power

For more than 200 years, from 1056 until 1273, the popes made a political comeback. Some very strong-minded individuals were elected pope—among them, Gregory VII and Innocent III were the most notable. They wasted no time in refuting the pretensions of the emperors to control the church.

It was the Investiture Controversy that brought matters to a head. At issue was the question whether political figures, such as emperors and kings, had the right to appoint bishops and heads of monasteries and to invest them with the symbols of their office. At the heart of the issue was the place of the emperor in Christian society, especially his relationship with the papacy. It was Pope Gregory VII (pope 1073–85) who initiated the controversy in 1076 by stating that only the pope had the right to crown emperors, just as it was his right to appoint bishops and other church officials. The controversy was brought to a close in 1122 by an agreement between Pope Calixtus II and Emperor Henry V, but future popes revived the issue as they saw fit.

The era of the Hohenstaufen emperors (1138–1254, except for the years 1198–1214) was a time of almost unceasing conflict between popes and emperors (see Hohenstaufen Dynasty). The greatest of these, Frederick I Barbarossa, added the word holy to the name of his empire to balance the claims of the Holy Church. He emphasized continuity with the past, going back to the days of Charlemagne. His rights as emperor, he determined, were not based on the deed of Leo III but on the territorial conquest of the Franks. Lawyers for the emperors argued against the popes, saying that “he who is chosen by the election of the princes alone is the true emperor.” The emperors were generally chosen by this time through an election held by German princes.

The conflicts with the popes drew the Hohenstaufen emperors into Italian politics. The temptation to control Italy, and thus Rome, was persistent. Henry VI married the heiress to Sicily, and the Norman Kingdom of Sicily was used to restore imperial power in Italy. The popes reacted vigorously to this threat. They found allies in their opposition to the emperors, and by 1245 it was possible to depose Frederick II. His death in 1250 effectively ended the Holy Roman Empire of the Middle Ages. Over the next two decades the imperial structure fell apart in Italy.

Hapsburg Rulers

If most of Italy was lost, the empire maintained itself north of the Alps in Germany for
several centuries. It became little more than a coalition of German states, each with its own ruler. When Rudolf I of the House of Hapsburg became German king in 1273, he was the head of a federation of German princes. He abandoned all claims to the center and south of Italy and retained only nominal title to the north. (The north of Italy was not entirely free of Hapsburg domination until after World War I.) After him only four emperors were crowned by a pope or his delegate. The last was Charles V, a Hapsburg who was also king of Spain.

By the end of the Middle Ages, any hope of reviving anything like a real empire in Europe had become impossible. France and Spain were the most powerful kingdoms in Europe. Both were contending for control of the continent. The weak and disunited German states were in no position to establish any kind of control, even within their own boundaries. (Germany did not become united until 1870.) Charles IV therefore set out to make the empire a solely German institution. By an agreement with Pope Clement V, he abandoned Italy. He went to Rome for his coronation on April 5, 1355. He then refashioned the empire into the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.

From then the empire was essentially part of the history of Germany. A few emperors, notably Charles V, entertained a larger vision of power, but there was no way for him to unite his Spanish and Austrian possessions with Germany as long as France stood in the way. (See also Germany, “History.”)

The 16th-century Reformation in the church further divided the weak empire. Germany was split into two religious camps, and the emperor was little more than the head of a religious faction. The electors, the real heads of the German states, were entrenched by virtue of championing either Roman Catholicism or Lutheranism.

The Thirty Years' War, originally a religious conflict, devastated Germany and further weakened what little reality the empire had left. No emperor afterward ever tried to establish a central authority. (See also Thirty Years' War.)

The end came with Napoleon. For several centuries France had been intending to annex at least the fringes of the empire. It had never happened. When Napoleon carried his wars eastward, however, he was resolved to terminate the reign of Emperor Francis II (later Francis I of Austria). The emperor saw what was coming, and he resigned his title on Aug. 6, 1806. The empire ceased to exist as a political reality. It persisted for some time as an ideal. It was used as an inspiration for the German Empire of 1870 and more so by Adolf Hitler's Third Reich (Empire) in the 1930s.

Cite

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