

An Insight into the 29th Council of Europe Art Exhibition: “Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation 962-1806”

Dr. Alexander Schubert
Kulturhistorisches Museum Magdeburg

The Kulturhistorisches Museum Magdeburg and the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin are preparing the joint exhibition project “Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation 962-1806” for the year 2006. The fact that 2006 is the two hundredth anniversary of the end of the empire provides an excellent occasion for the exhibition. Thus from August 28 to December 10, 2006, the entire history of the empire—from its beginnings under Otto the Great in the year 962 until Emperor Franz II gave up the imperial throne in 1806—will be presented simultaneously at the two exhibition centres in Magdeburg and Berlin. Magdeburg will concentrate on the Middle Ages, Berlin on the modern era. Two hundred years after the demise of the empire, the exhibition will look back at a multi-faceted political structure that grew up in the centre of Europe and existed over the course of many centuries.

Yet it is not only a recollection of the end of the empire that makes 2006 an excellent occasion to put on an exhibition about the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. The date also proves to be opportune for another reason: the first decade of a new millennium is an appropriate time to review the history of the past thousand years. After such a turning point, many patterns of interpretation in politics, science, and society are subject to re-evaluation from a modern European perspective. This is especially true as a clear view of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation was obscured for a long time. The nationalist and national-patriotic attitudes of the 19th and 20th centuries stylized the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation as the alleged precursor of a “Second” and a “Third Reich,” and medieval and early modern history was ideologically instrumentalized by the National-Socialists to such a degree that the word “Reich” brought to mind only the years from 1933-45, making it almost impossible to deal with the Old Empire in an unbiased way.

Now, at the beginning of the third millennium, this exhibition will address the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation free of such prejudices, yet without failing to recognize the earlier abuse of the term “Reich.” Substantial inspiration for the concept of this exhibition came from the international interdisciplinary conference “Holy – Roman – German: The Empire in Medieval Europe,” which took place from 19 to 22 May 2004 in Magdeburg. In his contribution to the conference, the medievalist Prof. Dr. Bernd Schneidmüller (Historical Seminar of the Heidelberg University), who is also a member of the scientific advisory board of the exhibition, stressed that a thousand years of European history could not “be extinguished by a would-be thousand-year Reich.” “We would do well to recall the long history of the Holy Roman Empire of

the German Nation now after a gap of 200 years,” he stated, “[f]or we build up our memory of it on the knowledge of the two-hundred years that followed it.”

The scholars who participated in the Magdeburg conference clearly demonstrated how much historians’ views of the empire have changed in the last decades. Today they no longer focus on national boundaries, but rather on interconnections throughout Europe. Thus the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation has become recognized as a place in the centre of Europe where encounters, communication, life, thought, art, culture, language, religions, confessions, literature, economy, science, and society all took shape. In developing the concept of the exhibition, therefore, the organizers wanted to place the empire in its European setting and with respect to its cultural exchange with its neighbours. Furthermore, in addressing the history of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, they aimed to instil in exhibition visitors the notion of a common European cultural heritage.

The resulting cultural-historical exhibition, “Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation 962-1806,” is devoted to a topic of international importance, since it portrays a political structure that played a decisive role in the history and development of Europe between 962 and 1806. The following look at the empire’s geographical structure, the genesis of its name, the position of the imperial sovereign, and the development of the imperial constitution underscores the breadth of the exhibition’s subject matter.

For the astoundingly long period of almost eight hundred and fifty years, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation carried out a political, cultural, and economic exchange with its European neighbours. Throughout this time its borders, no less than its internal structures, were subject to constant change. The empire had a German nucleus, gradually formed during the Middle Ages out of the regions of the Franks, the Bavarians, the Alemannians, and the Saxons. Gradually, however, the peoples living in border regions, such as the Elbe Slavs in the Northeast, were also incorporated, and these and other central European areas became traditionally associated with the heart of the empire.

Thus from a modern point of view it is not only present-day Germany that is heir to the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation; other European states also have a direct share of this inheritance, including Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Switzerland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic, countries whose territories once belonged partly or entirely to the Holy Roman Empire. According to contemporary definitions, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation never constituted a true state with an enclosed territory and a unified people. Instead, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation could be characterized as a large multiethnic, multilingual empire in the Middle Ages, and as a multi-denominational and federal empire in modern times.

The terminology “Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation” first came about in its complete form in the 15th century, but today it is the term most often used to refer to the empire that existed from 962 to 1806. The

comprehensiveness of the name and the single attributes “Holy,” “Roman,” and “German,” point to the heterogeneous nature of the empire and signal the development of its political structure over the centuries.

The empire began with the imperial coronation of Otto the Great in Rome in the year 962. This coronation linked his empire with the ancient Roman past, already revived in the year 800 by Charlemagne. In the wake of the Roman Empire, the empire of Otto the Great adopted its title and lapsed claim to universality. It thereby entered into competition with the Byzantine Empire, which also saw itself as the legitimate heir to the once-great empire of the Romans. These two successor empires in the West and the East continued to make their mark on each others’ cultures through political and diplomatic exchange as well as through military conflicts.

The attribute “Holy” was first added to the title of the empire in the middle of the 12th century. It was argued in this way that the empire was not only connected with ancient Rome, but also directly tied to the story of Christian salvation. At the same time, this term promoted the claim of the emperor to be the patron of all of Christianity.

The addition of the term “German Nation” in the 15th century symbolized that the ancient tribes of the Franks, Saxons, Bavarians, and Alemannians in the central territory of the empire now saw themselves as an ethnic unit, as Germans. As a rule, in the late Middle Ages the earlier and later components of the name of the empire were listed additively, such that the concepts of “the Holy Roman Empire” and “the German Nation” were seen as a terminological pair. This pointed on the one hand to the entirety of the empire, which included many non-German areas, and on the other hand to the people of the central German area.

The division of the empire into many parts is reflected in the atypical position of the monarchy at its head. Until 1806 the empire retained the character of an association of persons bound by feudal law, with the emperor as chief feudal lord. However, in contrast to Western European kings, not all of the land belonging to the emperor’s territory was theoretically at his disposal. Instead, the nobles owned a great part of the land themselves. The preservation and growth of their possessions increased the power of the territorial nobles vis-à-vis the power of the emperor, promoted the expansion of provincial dominions, and furthered the development of a fundamental dualistic system that marked the history of the empire. The imperial claim to suzerainty thus came face to face with the attempt of the powerful princes to exert their influence. Up until the end of the empire in 1806, even after the Habsburg dynasty had long since secured the uninterrupted succession to the imperial throne, the emperor could still not derive the imperial prerogative from his noble lineage, but was always forced to submit to election by the princes.

This peculiar structure of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, which balanced the power of the emperor with strong particularistic powers, led in the 15th century to a constitutional development that deserves closer examination from a modern European perspective. In order to guarantee the

fulfilment of the elementary tasks of peacemaking, the judiciary, defence, and tax policy in the overlying “confederacy” of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, it was necessary—as in modern Europe—to develop an institutional, federal structure of order.

At the end of the 15th century, therefore, the individual members of the empire voluntarily formed an “eternal peace-keeping league” with one another, creating nothing less than a settlement of peace throughout the land. Force, the legitimate medieval solution to conflicts, was thus declared criminal and unconditionally forbidden. Instead, the so-called imperial supreme court of the German Reich (*Reichskammergericht*), a body of judges made up equally of jurists and nobles under the chairmanship of a supreme judge, provided the empire with a permanent institution of justice outside of the imperial court. This creation of peace through law can be seen as one of the great achievements of the members of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.

At the same time as this development, attempts were also undertaken to functionalise the existing regionalism of the empire in order to improve the preservation of peace, defence, and the collection of taxes throughout the empire. To this end ten imperial districts (*Kreise*) were named (the Franconian, Bavarian, Swabian, Upper Rhenish, Westphalian, Lower Saxon, Austrian, Burgundian, Palatine Rhenish, and Upper Saxon districts), which were directed to keep the internal peace and carry out the decisions of the supreme court.

Faced with the external dangers posed by the Hussites, Turks, and Magyars, in the last decades of the 15th century a *Reichstag* (or kind of parliament known as an imperial diet), began to convene in the empire, though at first only irregularly. Representatives to the diet met in three separate committees to deal with draft proposals submitted by the emperor. As the federal institutions of the empire began to take shape, the diet began to convene at more regular intervals, and as of 1663 it met continuously as the so-called “Everlasting Diet” at Regensburg. This institution provided the empire with a permanent congress of representatives from the various territories. Furthermore, it was no longer bound to treat only one case after the other, but was able to make decisions continuously on all imperial matters involving the preservation of peace, the constitution, economic policy, taxation, and jurisdiction. The “Everlasting Diet” was thus a guarantee of federalism within the framework of a system of law and order safeguarded by contract.

It would surely be going too far to call the diet one of Europe’s first parliaments. Also, contrary to democratic representation, its members were not freely elected, and the congress of representatives continued to be divided into three bodies according to estates: the electors, the princes, and the cities. It would certainly be equally wrong to interpret, as did the political theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation as an example of the future Europe. Rousseau considered the imperial system of law and order as a model for a peacefully united European system of states, but in retrospect we know that the priority given to the particularistic interests of the

territories contributed in the long run to the collapse of the empire, the end of which was marked by the abdication of the crown by Emperor Franz II in 1806.

Although one would not want to draw any direct lessons for modern Europe from the history of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, it still remains a highly interesting field of comparative observation. For, considered against the backdrop of the process of European unification, there are many parallels to the present. The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation was not a single nation of people, but rather it united many different peoples; it did not have a capital, but many prospering cities; it was not a central state, but a federal compound of regions. It was a political construct that sought and found ways of assuaging conflicts, contained and brought together many different cultures existing in close proximity to one another, and displayed enormous steadfastness over a period of almost eight hundred and fifty years despite the rather loose connections between its territories.

The planned exhibition “Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation 962-1806” in Magdeburg and Berlin will provide the opportunity to look back at this political construct from a distance of two hundred years, to inform the interested public about eight hundred and fifty years of European history, and to present the history of the empire in all of its broad diversity.

The first part of the exhibition, “From Otto the Great to the Close of the Middle Ages,” will be on display in the Museum of Cultural History in Magdeburg from 28 August to 10 December 2006. The medieval history of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation is inseparably connected with illustrious names. Be it Otto the Great, who wove imperial Roman heritage into many centuries of German history, Frederick Barbarossa, who asserted a divine right to be emperor, or Charles IV, whose Golden Bull gave the Empire its legal foundation, these were kings and emperors who left their mark on history and shaped the fortunes of an empire. They are thus a central focus of the exhibition.

The history of the empire brings to light fascinating stories about such outstanding personalities. Many of the kings and emperors of the Middle Ages are hard for us to comprehend. Brilliant deeds and groundbreaking decisions were often but a step removed from demise and failure. Emperor Henry IV’s famous act of humility at Canossa, for example, where he did penance and begged the pope to readmit him to the flock, also meant relinquishing his sacral authority. The smouldering conflict between pope and emperor over the right order of things plunged the empire into its hitherto deepest crisis—but at the same time created the preconditions for crucial reforms and innovations. Another emperor, Frederick II, was dubbed *stupor mundi*, “he who astonished the world.” On his crusade he took Jerusalem not by force of arms but by negotiation with the Arab world—despite having being excommunicated by the pope. Another fascinating story is that of Louis the Bavarian, who settled the bitter conflict with his rival to the throne, Frederick the Fair, simply by declaring that they would govern the empire together. He did not receive his imperial crown from the pope, however, but in the name of the Roman people. Finally, there is the example of

Maximilian I, who was prevented by the Venetians from being made emperor in Rome. Since he had not been crowned by the pope but endorsed only by the electors, he called himself “Elected Roman Emperor.”

The medieval history of the empire, with its crises and defeats, is at the same time a history of change, modernization, and progress. Leading this change were the great many royal and imperial figures, from Otto the Great to Emperor Maximilian, who influenced the empire’s fate over the six centuries from 962 until the late fifteenth century. These men paved the way for the splendour of the Middle Ages, which is reflected today in such precious exhibits as crowns, reliquaries, and statues. But it was by no means just the rulers who were the lifeblood of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. The exhibition thus also tells of figures on the sidelines whose influence on history was indirect but still of fundamental significance: monks in their scriptoriums, recording their valuable knowledge for posterity; nobles, replacing dying dynasties, taking power and securing it for their heirs; artisans and merchants in the cities, gradually liberating themselves from the supreme ruler, fighting for and winning new prerogatives, gaining freedom from taxation, fighting back against robber barons, and refusing the king their allegiance—or winning great victories in the name of the empire. The exhibition in Magdeburg follows all of these threads, traces the origins of progressive ideas, presents medieval courtly culture and everyday life, tells of war and destruction as well as the building of castles and the growth of cities, deals with monastery-schools, newly-founded universities, and the relations in the European power structures—and thereby shows the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation in all its diversity.

The history of the empire from 1495 to 1806 is the focus of an exhibition at the German Historical Museum that represents the second part of the joint project with the Museum of Cultural History in Magdeburg. Here attention is devoted to the structure of the “old empire” and its development from the historical turning point around 1500 through to the Principal Decree of the Imperial Deputation, which set the seal on the final dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. The central themes of this exhibition include the imperial institutions, which contemporaries called the “limbs and body” of the empire, the dominant Habsburg dynasty, the manifestations of imperial power, and the empire’s position in the European power game. For centuries the empire was enmeshed in tense relations with neighbouring states, but its territory included what is today Germany and encompassed large parts of Europe. The exhibition in Berlin, which will be held in the German Historical Museum’s new temporary exhibitions building designed by Ieoh Ming Pei, also looks beyond the end of the empire and deals with the nostalgia for it that began immediately after its fall.