

The Holy Roman Empire in the Middle Ages

In AD 960, Pope John XII was in trouble. He had offended Berengar of Ivrea* who had invaded the territory of the Holy See from the north of Italy. At the very same time the pope also had to face serious opposition from the south of Italy. Thus, he found himself in a situation that he could not resolve alone – he was in dire need of help.

It was not difficult to find an adequate ally: the pope's searching eye fell on Otto, the king of Germany.

5 Previously, Otto had proved himself a capable ruler and a dependable, faithful friend of the Church. But who was this new king and what exactly was his motivation to help the pope?

Otto was born in 912 as the son of Henry, the Duke of Saxony*, who was made king in 919. Henry's kingship was characterised by a certain leniency towards the German aristocracy. He respected the German nobles as his equals and always listened to their opinions and needs before making any decisions. Nevertheless,

10 Henry proved to be a highly successful king since he, among other things, not only managed to stave off the Hungarians in 933, but also thwarted the last attempt of the Normans to invade the empire in 934. In the wake of his success, Henry made a decision that should shape the Eastern Frankish Realm* forever: breaking with Frankish traditions, he decided to make his oldest son his sole inheritor. This turned the empire into an indivisible unity which made the person of the king less important than the empire itself. However, it was not for
15 the king to decide who should succeed him to the throne, but for the German nobility who had to elect the new king. Possibly based on the assumption "like father, like son," it took the German nobles only five weeks to approve of Henry's decision to make Otto of Saxony the new king. Thus, a long line of Saxon kings was established in the formerly Eastern Frankish Realm.

However, Otto proved to be a very different king than his father before him. This fact should have been
20 obvious to everyone as soon as it became known that the new king was to be crowned in Aix-la-Chapelle* – Charlemagne's* imperial palace*. For those who still refused to recognise that Otto had a very different understanding of what it meant to be king, his decision to wear traditional Frankish attire and to sit on Charlemagne's throne on 7th August 936 should have been an unmistakable sign. Otto had in mind to become a very strong and undisputed ruler who would eventually follow in Charlemagne's footsteps and be made emperor
25 in Rome.

Although the German nobles had publicly sworn their oath of loyalty to the new king, it did not take them long to abandon Otto. Afraid of the new king divesting them of their power, several nobles decided to depose him and sided with the members of the royal family who were understandably disgruntled at Henry's decision not to divide his realm amongst his sons. It took Otto several years to put these various rebellions down.
30 Ironically enough, it was the ever present threat of a Hungarian invasion that eventually helped the king put an end to the rebellions and to rally the German aristocracy behind him to save the empire.

The final showdown occurred in 955: in a memorable battle Otto managed to defeat the superior and seemingly invincible Hungarians on the *Lechfeld** near Augsburg. Being firmly entrenched in a world that was characterised by the piety of its people, Otto's contemporaries interpreted this victory as an unmistakable sign
35 from God that he ultimately sanctioned Otto's kingship. In order to make good use of this triumph, Otto had to find a way to rule over his realm and to keep the German nobility under control. His solution to this very problem was strikingly simple and is named after him: the Ottonian System*.

Having learned that the nobility was unreliable in that the nobles put their own interest first and the interest of the king second, Otto had to look elsewhere to enforce his domestic policy. He eventually found a dependable
40 ally in the Church. Two very obvious reasons made the Church the solution to the king's domestic problems: the first was that church property located on a nobleman's land was not automatically the latter's property, but formed an independent property including the right to taxation and legal jurisdiction. So what the king did was to aggressively claim the proprietary rights over many churches and abbeys in order to turn these into politically

reliable strongholds of the Crown. The second reason was that the monarch perceived himself as God's representative on earth. This logically enabled him to appoint bishops and abbots without having to face any interference from the pope. As Otto had made the higher clergy his vassals, he consequently claimed the right to invest bishops and abbots with the spiritual and temporal symbols* of their offices. This made them perfect for their role as royal supporters. In addition to that, Otto saw to it that his future bishops and abbots were not only reliable members of his family, but also groomed at his own court. In order to show how effective this system was, we should look at the example of Otto's brother Bruno. Having already been appointed Archbishop of Cologne*, he was also made the Duke of Lorraine* by Otto himself. Of course, the king knew perfectly well that he had to create a number of new monasteries for this system to work smoothly.

10 With the establishment of the Ottonian System, Otto finally managed to impose a relatively secure rule over his kingdom. This fact allowed him to react to the pope's cry for help and to go on a military campaign against Berengar in 962. At first, everything went according to plan: the king and the pope signed the so-called *Diploma Ottonianum*. This document guaranteed that Otto would defend the pope against his enemies and granted the control of the Papal States* to the pope. In return, Pope John XII agreed that all future papal candidates would swear an oath of loyalty to the emperor and crowned Otto emperor on 2nd February 962. This date marks the official beginning of what is today known as the *Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation**. The new emperor stayed in Italy – the so-called *Regnum Italicum** – until 965 to attempt to establish a firm rule over his new domains.

At this point in his life, Otto I seemed to have made all his dreams come true: he finally had control over the German nobility, he had revived the idea of the Western Roman Empire and had become its first emperor, and he ruled over a vast kingdom that stretched from the North Sea to the South of Italy. But his happiness was not yet complete, for all his achievements had not been acknowledged by the Eastern Roman Empire,* which claimed to be the sole legitimate descendant of the Ancient Roman Empire. Finally, in 972, Otto was also granted that wish: the Byzantine Emperor John I Tzimisces acknowledged Otto's imperial title and agreed to a marriage between Otto's son and his niece Theophanu. About a year later, on 7th May 973, Otto I died.

Although Otto I had made sure that his successor, his 17-year-old son Otto II, would not be overwhelmed by domestic difficulties when he succeeded him to the throne, it still took the young king seven years to settle the various conflicts he encountered. Most difficult was the rising antagonism between the monarch and his nobles, epitomised by the rather severe conflict that arose between Otto and Henry of Bavaria, also known as Henry the Quarrelsome*. In addition to that, Otto II had to secure the borders to France, since the French king had attempted to seize Lorraine in 977. Eventually, in 980, Otto II returned to Italy where he successfully re-established the authority of the Ottonian emperors. He only failed to wrestle the South of Italy from the Saracens. Otto II died in Rome in the year 983 A. D.

This meant that the Holy Roman Empire was in need of a new ruler in 983. But Otto's son was only three years old when his father died and the German nobles made him king. This fact provided the German nobility with an opportunity to regain some of its former power and authority. Most noticeably, the dukes managed to make their dukedoms hereditary which became detrimental to the emperor's domestic authority in the future.

Once Otto III had become of age (in 994), he proved to be a visionary king and emperor since he wanted to re-establish the glory of Ancient Rome*. Thus, it is not surprising to learn that Otto made Rome the administrative centre of his empire in 998. Unfortunately, this highly intelligent and learned King died before he could realize all his ambitious dreams. He died in 1002 without having produced a male heir. Consequently, some troubles arose before the question of who should be crowned king was eventually solved. The nobility finally agreed on Henry of Bavaria, the great-grandson of Henry I. This new king became known as Henry (II) the Pious*.

Henry II found himself entangled in various problems: there was chaos in Rome and the borders of the empire in the east and the west were in danger. This forced the new king to abandon some of the more ambitious ideas of his predecessors and to focus on the “original German territories” of his realm. It took him 15 years to solve the problems and to re-establish a firm grip on the domestic policy of the realm. Henry achieved his aim by making extensive use of the Imperial Church System (Ottonian System). Since he had to accept that the dukedoms had in fact become hereditary, Henry placed his focus on bishoprics and monasteries. By bequeathing a lot of royal property to the Church, he made the bishops and abbots richer and more powerful. At the very same time he saw to it that all the future leading churchmen were educated and prepared for their duties at his very own chancellery. Of course, the King’s generosity was not entirely selfless. He expected the bishops to provide shelter for him and his entourage whenever he decided to honour them with his presence, as well as to supply the royal army with contingents of soldiers when they were needed. When Henry II died in 1024, he had managed to stabilise the Empire, but he had not managed to produce a male heir. Thus, the line of “Ottonian” kings ended.

As we have seen, ruling a medieval kingdom was indeed a difficult business. Not having modern technology at his disposal, the king was forced to continuously journey through his realm. This meant that it was simply impossible for him to be in complete control of the empire. Thus, at any time given, the king had to rely on allies to see to his own interests when he himself was absent. It proved to be very difficult to find reliable and dependable allies that were willing to serve the king’s interests rather than their own. Since the dukes themselves were already too powerful to be fully trusted, the Ottonian kings turned to the Church. They had almost forged the state and the church into one indivisible entity. This Ottonian System worked rather smoothly until well into the 11th century. But what would happen if the Church no longer wanted to be a pawn in the king’s game.

Finally, it was the dynasty of the Salian Emperors (1024-1125) that felt the power of the Church. In the 11th century, the Church began to feel uncomfortable about the issue of investiture by laymen. This feeling originated in Cluny*, the starting point of a monastic reform movement, which advocated a more austere, disciplined, and prayerful life within monasteries and convents. This gave rise to a new self-confidence within the Church and a growing awareness that the Church had to serve its own interests rather than those of the secular powers. The ensuing struggle came to a head under the reign of Henry IV (1056-1106). The resolution of that conflict (the Concordat of Worms in 1122) was a real compromise: the investiture of church officials in the German states was to take place in the presence of the emperor, but his right of investiture was limited to the worldly office of the future church official, whereas it was the ultimate right of the Church to choose and invest the candidate with the spiritual office.

On the surface both the king and the pope could live with this compromise, but, in reality, the power of the future kings had been dealt a real blow: the long-lasting rivalry between empire and papacy had contributed to a considerable strengthening of the German nobles since the emperor had made concessions to the nobility to gain their support against the pope. This resulted in the formation of very strong regional dukedoms* that ultimately prevented the German territories from developing into a national state for roughly 750 years to come.

When the last Salian emperor, Henry V, died in 1125 without having produced an heir, the German nobility was offered the chance to flex its muscles. For the 27 years to follow, two very powerful families – the Hohenstaufens of Swabia and the Welfs of Bavaria and Saxony – struggled for supremacy in the empire. The aristocracy used this long-lasting conflict to further its own interests by making sure that the more powerful members of the two competing families who would have exerted greater imperial control were not elected. Instead, a number of relatively weak emperors came to the throne who were ultimately unable to strip the nobility of its newly acquired power. Eventually, this conflict culminated in a civil war that threatened to tear the empire apart. Ironically enough, this would also have been detrimental to the powerful nobles, therefore, in 1152, they decided to resolve the conflict by electing Frederic of Hohenstaufen who later became known as

“Barbarossa” (due to his red beard). He was the ideal candidate to reconcile the two feuding families since he was the son of a Hohenstaufen father and a Welf mother.

Barbarossa used his 38-year-long rule to reunite the empire and to attempt to reassert imperial control in Germany and in Italy. He was also the emperor who added “Holy” to his title of Roman Emperor to emphasise his position as a religious equal of the pope. History had taught him that it would have been futile to rely on traditional means of exercising control over the empire – namely the Church and the nobility. Thus he decided to apply a twofold strategy: on the one hand, he enlarged his own property by buying or exchanging land, by revoking fiefs whose owners had died, and by founding loyal cities and imperial palaces. It was out of the question to let members of the local nobility administer the emperor’s new property. Therefore, the king came up with a new solution to this very old administrative problem: he promoted and relied on the class of people called *ministeriales*. These were not free men, but were personally bound to the king. Thus, Barbarossa could be sure that they would see to the royal interests in times of his own absence. Having secured his domestic authority, the king was, on the other hand, able to reconcile the estranged nobles by granting them special privileges. Above all, it was Henry the Lion – the Duke of Saxony – who gained most since Barbarossa made him Duke of Saxony and Bavaria. This fact might give rise to the question why the king should willingly add to the power of the already powerful German nobility. The answer is relatively simple: he needed the nobles and their respective armies since he wanted to strengthen his rule in Italy, most notably in Northern Italy, where Barbarossa fought against the wealthy cities such as Milan which wanted to gain their independence.

The reign of Frederic’s heirs to the throne was dominated by clashes with politically strong popes and an increasing number of freedom-loving citizens not only of cities in Northern Italy, but also of cities along the River Rhine. Eventually, it was Barbarossa’s grandson, Frederic II (1210-1250), who made the German dukes quasi-kings in their own territories (1232) to gain their support on his campaigns against Italy. In the long run, this charter from 1232 proved to be fatal to a strong central power in the empire and paved the way for a decentralized form of government dominated by very strong, independent dukedoms only loosely bound into what is commonly called the “Holy Roman Empire.”

After the death of Conrad IV (1254), the last of the *Hohenstaufen* kings, the central power’s already feeble grip on the empire considerably weakened in what is known as the Great Interregnum* (1254-1273). In the turmoil and chaos of these years, the German nobility made good use of the absence of an emperor to further entrench its own political independence. It was basically the Interregnum that was ultimately responsible for the emergence of seven very powerful German nobles: the prince electors. Up to 1250 it was the role of all the princes of the realm to elect the new king – this very election process should not be confused with a modern day democratic election since a simple majority was not enough to be made king. In the High Middle Ages a candidate had to win all the votes in order to be accepted by all the nobles of the empire. That is why we often encounter kings and rival kings throughout the Middle Ages. However, in 1356, when the *Golden Bull* was issued, seven nobles were finally recognized as prince electors by Emperor Charles IV. These were the Archbishops of Mainz, Trier and Cologne*; the Count Palatine of the Rhine*, the Duke of Saxony*, the Margrave of Brandenburg* and the King of Bohemia*. It was decreed that the lands of the electors were indivisible, and they were granted monopolies on mining and tolls. In addition to that, it was finally decided that the candidate receiving the majority of votes would automatically be king of the German territories. This document, which became the corner stone of the Constitution of the Empire, is tangible proof that the emperor had realised it was futile to try to exercise imperial control over Germany. It marks the emperor’s acceptance of the political sovereignty of the German cities and princely territories.