THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE.

Lecture 3. The empire 1100 - 1450

The High Middle Ages.

Holy Roman Empire – 1100

After the Investiture Dispute Ended in 1122.
The princes of the empire were now determined to curtail the power of the emperor but competing dynasties resulted in a century of strife between two groups – the Welf family and the Staufen family. Conrad III of the Staufen family finally ousted the Welfs from their possessions. Conrad died in 1152.
The Staufen Dynasty.

Frederick I (1122-1190) – “Barbarossa” – was emperor after Conrad III. Historians consider Frederick I to be the Holy Roman Empire’s greatest medieval emperor. Under Frederick the name Holy Roman Empire was first used and was in common usage later.

Crowned emperor in 1155, he made peace with the Welfs and then spent much of his life fighting. He had six campaigns in Italy, some successful, others not.

In order to regain the power of the emperor independent of the pope, Frederick, at an imperial assembly at Roncaglia (near Piacenza in Italy), in 1158, enumerated for the first time a list of the rights of emperors (regalia) that included public roads, tariffs, coining, collecting punitive fees and the investiture, the seating and unseating of office holders. This was a far-reaching act.

A further important constitutional move at Roncaglia was the establishment of a new peace mechanism for the entire empire. This was an attempt to abolish private feuds and to tie the Emperor’s subordinates to a legal system of jurisdiction – along the lines of the Ancient Roman Empire “rule by law”.

Barbarossa was involved in three crusades, but on the third crusade he drowned in a river in Turkey in 1190. He was 67.

Lack of a Crowned Emperor 1245-1415.
There were only 25 years with a crowned emperor between 1245 and 1415, but the empire’s monarchs
continued to be considered more than an ordinary king. Even if they acknowledged practical limits to imperial authority, most writers still believed in the desirability of a single, secular Christian leader.

**Formation of the Knight Class.**
The Staufer rulers increasingly lent land to service men. Initially used mainly for war services, this new class of people formed the basis for the later knights who became another basis for imperial power.

They were famously involved in the Crusades. There were 9 crusades from 1096 to 1270. The success of the early crusades added greatly to the prestige of the Popes as secular leaders of Christendom. Here were Kings and Emperors essentially doing the Pope’s bidding.

The collapse of the Pope’s moral authority and the rise of nationalism rang the death-bell for Crusading.

During the Staufer period German princes facilitated a successful peaceful eastward settlement of lands that were uninhabited or inhabited sparsely by West Slavs. The gradual Germanisation of these lands was a complex phenomenon but it expanded the influence of the empire to include Pomerania and Silesia. The Teutonic knights were invited to Prussia to Christianise the Prussians but Prussia was never part of the Holy Roman Empire.

The Staufer dynasty reached its apex in about 1200 with the Norman kingdom of Sicily added to its domains. Pope Innocent III feared the threat posed by the union of the empire and Sicily and excommunicated the emperor
Frederick II. Frederick gave up a number of the rights and privileges of the emperor in favour of the bishops, among them tariffs, coining and fortification and further extended these privileges to secular territories. A 1232 document marked the first time that the German Dukes were designated owners of their lands. Frederick’s rule was a major turning point towards the disintegration of central rule in the Empire. After his death in 1250, his line quickly died out and the House of Staufen came to an end.

The Duchy of Bohemia was raised to a kingdom in 1212 by Frederick with the proviso that Bohemian kings would be exempt from all future obligations to the Holy Roman Empire except for participation in the imperial councils.

External Threats to the Empire.
Until 1220, Byzantium and France were the only significant outsiders from the empire. They were not major external threats to the empire. This changed with the arrival of the Mongols and the Ottoman Turks.

Mongol Invasions of Europe.
Under Genghis Khan, from 1206, the Mongols swept westward, creating the largest empire ever.
Mongol Empire at Genghis Kahn’s death in 1227.

Although known for his brutality, Genghis Kahn (1162-1223) is credited with bringing the Silk Road under one cohesive political environment. This brought communication and trade from Asia into Muslim areas and Christian Europe.
Mongol Invasion of Europe – 1220-1242

In Europe there was severe destruction of East Slavic principalities and major cities such as Kiev and Vladimir. There was conflict in Hungary and Poland in 1241. The conflicts meant that the feuding states of the Holy Roman Empire put aside their differences to fight the common enemy. The Mongols withdrew back to Asia in 1242 and the threat was over. Reasons for the withdrawal are still being debated.
Invasion of the Ottoman Turks.

Byzantine Empire - 1180

Byzantine Empire - 1263

Constantinople fell in 1453 and the Ottoman’s continued their westward expansion. However they did not become a major threat to the Holy Roman Empire.
The Romans had believed that their empire was a unitary state inhabited by a common people who had submerged any previous identities through the acceptance of common citizenship. By contrast, the Franks and their imperial successors saw themselves as “king of kings”, ruling empires composed of discrete kingdoms inhabited by different peoples. The imperial title retained prestige while peoples and lands were only indirectly subject to the emperor.
Virtually all the men ruling the empire before the 16th century were successful warriors, with many of them owing their position to victory over domestic rivals.

Lords rarely sort to displace the king or to establish independent kingdoms of their own. Rebellions were about individual influence, not alternative forms of government. The most important liberty was the right of lords to participate in the greater affairs of the empire by having a voice in forming political consensus.

The multilayered structure allowed individuals and groups to disobey one authority whilst still professing loyalty to another. Consider the refusal of Counts Frederick and Anselm to join their immediate lord, Duke Ernst II of Swabia in rebellion against Conrad II in 1026. They write “If we were slaves of our king and emperor, subjected by him to your jurisdiction, it would not be permissible for us to separate ourselves from you. But now, since we are free, and hold our king and emperor the supreme defender of our liberty on earth, as soon as we desert him, we lose our liberty, which no good man, as someone says, loses save with his life.”
Establishment of Universities.
The first University was founded in Bologna in Italy in 1035.

This was quickly followed by many universities throughout Europe.
The Late Middle Ages.

The Avignon Papacy.
This was the period from 1309 – 1377 during which 7 successive popes resided in Avignon rather than Rome. At that time Avignon was in the kingdom of Arles in the Holy Roman Empire.
Election of Emperors by Seven Electors. (1356).
The right of princes to choose their king was precisely codified in 1356 by a proclamation, called a “Golden Bull”, of Charles IV. This bull limited the right to elect the king of the Romans to seven leading princes: three ecclesiastical electors, the archbishops of Mainz, Trier and Cologne; and four lay electors, the king of Bohemia, the duke of Saxony, the margrave of Brandenburg and the count Palatinate of the Rhine.

Originally, the king of the romans received the title of emperor only through coronation by the pope. This tradition was set aside after 1519 when Charles V was the last emperor to be crowned in Italy. Subsequent emperors were still elected and crowned king of the Romans by the electors and simply assumed the title of emperor without a separate coronation. Only males were allowed to hold the imperial office.
There were a number of small groups opposing the Catholic religion. As these grew in size the church introduced the Inquisition. The first inquisition was in the south of France in 1184. They were designed to prevent the spread of heresy. A papal bull of 1252 explicitly authorised the use of torture by the inquisition for obtaining confessions from heretics.

Early Protestantism - The Hussite Wars.
A large group of non-conformists were the Hussites. Jan Hus, 1369-1415, was a Bohemian priest who made significant attempts at church reform before Luther came into prominence in 1517.
He attacked the church by denouncing the moral failings of clergy, bishops and even the papacy. John Wycliffe of Oxford had a major influence on Hus. Hus was condemned by the church but King Wenceslaus had some sympathy for the non-conformists. Sigismund was King of the Romans, but not yet emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, when in 1414 he promised safe conduct to Hus to attend a ecumenical council meeting at Konstanz to present his arguments for reform. In the event Sigismund did not keep his promise; Hus was seized, tried, convicted and burnt at the stake in 1415. This outrage sparked a revolt and led to the Hussite wars. These lasted some 15 years and ended in a compromise which allowed for a reformed church in Bohemia. A century later and 90% of Bohemians were Hussites. Hus’ teachings were very influential on Luther.
Tournaments.
Tournaments in Europe were extremely popular during this period. As they developed some events attracted thousands of knights. Jousting, involving one on one combat was popular but by far the most important events were the melees. Two groups of knights would face off against each other and charge.
Der herzoge von Anhalte.
Courtly Poetry and Songs.
In courtly poetry and songs we enter a world that gave birth to romantic ideals for about 200 years (1100-1300) and created a literature based on song.
Gottfried von Strasburg (died 1210) wrote a courtly poem Tristan and Isolde. It was very popular and much later inspired Wagner’s opera.

Troubadours were composers and performers of lyric poetry during this time but they died out around the time of the Black Death.

**Black Death.**
One of the most devastating pandemics in human history occurred during this period. Originating in Asia, the pathogen reached southern Europe in 1343, carried by fleas on black rats. It spread throughout the Mediterranean and Europe and lasted some 10 years. The number of people killed is estimated to have been of the order of 100 million, about 30-60% of the population.

**Power in the Holy Roman Empire.**
In the 12th and 13th centuries the importance of the secular rule of the popes had peaked. In the early 14th century the papacy was well past the prime of its secular rule. Nevertheless in 1302, in a papal bull Pope Boniface VIII decreed that “it is necessary to salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman pontiff.”

Following the Ottonian dynasty (962-1014) were the Salian dynasty (1027-1125), the Staufen dynasty (1155-1268) and the House of Luxemburg (1346-1437). In 1438 Albert II of Habsburg was elected to the imperial throne and from that point forward all emperors were of the Habsburg dynasty and the office of the emperor became quasi-hereditary.
By this time the prestige of the emperor’s position far surpassed its actual power. The princes of the empire – rather than the emperor – collected taxes, administered justice, minted coins, and claimed responsibility for the material and spiritual salvation of their subjects.

By 1450 the empire contained the seven electoral principalities; 25 major secular principalities, such as the duchies of Austria, Bavaria, and Brunswick; about 90 archbishoprics, bishoprics, and imperial abbeys; over 100 independent counties of very unequal importance; and 70 free imperial cities such as Cologne, Bremen, Lubeck, and Hamburg in the north, Strasbourg, Nuremberg, Ulm and Augsburg in the south; and Frankfurt and Mulhausen in central Germany. These cities were subject to no one but the emperor, which made them effectively independent.

The Empire was divided into Duchies as military districts, subdivided into Counties for the maintenance of public order.
Holy Roman Empire 1400
In an article “The Ideal of Unity” in the magazine History Today (November 2003), Russell Chamberlin wrote:

“Neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire’, Voltaire’s gibe about the Holy Roman Empire was literally true but, like all such glib jibes missed the essential point. For a thousand years people believed it existed or thought it ought to exist. For a thousand years, as they tore at each other in fratricidal wars, Europeans nevertheless nursed the idea of a unity that would bind, not destroy, their racial identities.”