

From Charlemagne to Hitler: The Imperial Crown of the Holy Roman Empire and its Symbolism

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The fabled Imperial Crown of the Holy Roman Empire is a striking visual image of political power whose symbolism influenced political discourse in the German-speaking lands over centuries. Together with other artefacts such as the Holy Lance or the Imperial Orb and Sword, the crown was part of the so-called Imperial Regalia, a collection of sacred objects that connotated royal authority and which were used at the coronations of kings and emperors during the Middle Ages and beyond. But even after the end of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, the crown remained a powerful political symbol. In Germany, it was seen as the very embodiment of the *Reichsidee*, the concept or notion of the German Empire, which shaped the political landscape of Germany right up to National Socialism. In this paper, I will first present the crown itself as well as the political and religious connotations it carries. I will then move on to demonstrate how its symbolism was appropriated during the Second German Empire from 1871 onwards, and later by the Nazis in the so-called *Third Reich*, in order to legitimise political authority.

I

The crown, as part of the Regalia, had a symbolic and representational function that can be difficult for us to imagine today. On the one hand, it stood of course for royal authority. During coronations, the Regalia marked and established the transfer of authority from one ruler to his successor, ensuring continuity amidst the change that took place. This was especially important because royal authority in the Holy Roman Empire was not, at least *de jure*, hereditary. Instead, rulers were elected by a committee of so-called prince-electors, the *Kurfürsten*. The Regalia therefore symbolically and actually established authority with a person who was not necessarily of the blood royal. But apart from that they also had a religious function that went beyond the mere transfer of secular power. Royal authority in mediaeval times was closely linked to the concept of divine justification, what in German is called ‘*Gottesgnadentum*’, the divine right of kings, or, in other words, authority by the grace of God. In that sense, the Regalia stood for the connection between secular and divine authority but they were also an embodiment of that authority. The Regalia guaranteed royal power even more than the king or emperor himself or than his blood and dynasty.¹ They were sacred objects which granted the ruler’s authority divine justification but also emphasised that even the king was subject to the laws of god.² Accordingly, up until the twelfth century, it was not even possible to keep separate the conceptual notions of divine power and royal authority. The

¹ Reinhart Staats, *Die Reichskrone. Geschichte und Bedeutung eines europäischen Symbols* (Kiel: Ludwig, 2006), 49.

² Christiane Hille, “Herrscherinsignien,” in *Handbuch der politischen Ikonographie, vol 1*, ed. Uwe Fleckner et al. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2011), 491–8, at 492 and 497.

Imperial Regalia made this connection visible for all to see, which was especially important in a society where the vast majority of people could not read or write.

Shape and decoration of the Imperial Crown underline the inseparable interconnection of divine power and secular authority. It consists of eight golden plates, four of which are set with precious stones and pearls, and the other four with images of biblical kings and prophets. A jewel-encrusted cross is mounted at the top of the front plate, and a golden arch connects the front with the back part. For all its splendour it must have been pretty awkward to wear, the inner circumference of 22 cm being too large for an average human head. But of course the practical aspect of wearing was much less important than the symbolic meaning which the crown carried.³ Its striking octagonal form for example echoes the characteristic shape of Aachen cathedral where between 936 and 1531 many German kings and queens were crowned. This is a feature that makes the Imperial Crown unique amongst all the other crowns that were in use during the Holy Roman Empire. According to Christian numeric symbolism, the number eight stands for the concept of salvation history, i.e. the process of humankind's redemption through the Christian god.⁴ The crown's very shape, therefore, is a reminder of its sacred connotations.

Right: Picture plate showing King David

The picture plates show the kings David, Solomon, and Hiskia and the prophet Isaiah, all of which are prominent figures from the Old Testament. Together with inscriptions in Latin, they stand for the qualities of a good king, namely wisdom, justice, and piety. Furthermore, the picture plates also convey a reference to the Byzantine Empire, since their making and imagery were common in the Eastern Roman Empire but not in the West. No other European crown brings stylistic elements from West



and East together like the Imperial Crown does. There is a powerful symbolism embedded here: the authority represented by the crown claims to

³ Georg Johannes Kugler, *Die Reichskrone* (Vienna and Munich: Herold, 1986), 24.

⁴ Heinz Meyer and Rudolf Suntrup, eds., *Lexikon der mittelalterlichen Zahlenbedeutungen* (Munich: Fink, 1987), 565.

be the true successor of the former Roman Empire and its geographically widespread power domain.

The stone plates follow a strict numerical pattern. The number of stones at the front and the rear part each equal twelve. In total, there are 120 precious stones and 240 pearls, both of which are multiples of twelve. Twelve is a holy number in the Christian tradition as it stands for the twelve tribes of Israel as well as for the twelve apostles. As a consequence, the number twelve also stands for propagation of faith and the Christian church itself.⁵ The crown, therefore, is clearly not only a secular but also a holy object. Like the picture plates, the number of stones underlines the mediaeval idea that secular authority derives from divine grace. The authority of the king or emperor could not be seen separately from the system of religious belief that justified it.

There have been many discussions as to how old the crown is, and for which king or emperor it had been made. Recent research indicates that it dates back to the second half of the tenth century, and that it possibly was made for the first emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Otto I (912–973).⁶ Up until 1945, however, the crown was widely – and wrongly – thought to be that of Charlemagne.

Charlemagne, or *Karl der Große*, as he is called in German, was the first to become a Frankish emperor after the end of the ancient Roman Empire. Due to the principle of *translatio imperii*, the transfer of imperial authority, the new empire was seen as the linear successor to the ancient Roman Empire; a concept which remained virulent throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. Charlemagne's military campaigns led to the enforced Christianisation of the Saxons and to a considerable expansion of the Frankish Empire. The Holy Roman Empire itself is part of his political heritage. After his death, he was glorified as an ideal ruler, and even made a saint during the reign of Friedrich Barbarossa in 1165. Over the centuries, he became a central symbolic figure for both France and Germany. By invoking Charlemagne, both German and French kings and emperors justified their own rule, thus establishing an imagined continuity of authority right up to the last emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Francis II of Habsburg. Given Charlemagne's enormous influence over the centuries, it is not surprising that 'his crown' was regarded as a central artefact of political power. The fact that the Imperial Crown is in all likelihood a good 150 years younger did not hinder the development of an iconographic tradition ascribing the crown to Charlemagne. Central to this development is

⁵ Ibid., 620.

⁶ The word 'holy' in the name of the Holy Roman Empire was only added from the twelfth century onwards (Joachim Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire: Volume I: Maximilian I to the Peace of Westphalia, 1493–1648* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 17). However, in order to avoid confusion with the ancient Roman Empire, I refer to the mediaeval political entity as 'Holy Roman Empire' throughout this article.

Albrecht Dürer's famous painting of 1513 which served as template for a veritable flood of images of Charlemagne with the Imperial Crown.



Dürer's painting had been commissioned as decoration for a chamber in the so-called *Schoppersche Haus* in the Bavarian city of Nuremberg where the crown had been transported to from Prague in 1424 in order to keep it out of harm's way during the Hussite Wars. In Nuremberg, the crown along with the other Regalia was put on public display during the annual *Heiltumsweisungen*, public demonstration of relics, on the second Friday after Easter. On a wooden pedestal erected in Nuremberg market square, the crown, explicitly heralded as that of Charlemagne, was presented to the crowd as part of a service following a strict liturgic pattern.⁷

Left: Albrecht Dürer: Emperor Charlemagne, Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nuremberg

Right: Public demonstration of the Regalia. Woodcarving, Nuremberg, 1487

Scholars have pointed out that these demonstrations indicate a change in how the Regalia were perceived: they had entered the sphere of individual worship, while gradually losing their constitutional function at the same time. Albert Bühler for instance remarks that, up to the fourteenth century, the emperors derived authority from the



⁷ Hartmut Kühne, *Ostentio Reliquiarum. Untersuchungen über Entstehung, Ausbreitung, Gestalt und Funktion der Heiltumsweisungen im römisch-deutschen Regnum* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 148.

Regalia, while afterwards it was more the other way round.⁸ The public celebration of the Regalia as holy objects in Nuremberg and elsewhere is testament to this development. In 1524, after the Reformation had spread in Germany, the *Heiltumsweisungen* were scrapped but still the crown remained in Nuremberg until 1796, when it was moved again because of the war with revolutionary France. It was brought to Vienna where, except for a short spell from 1938 to 1946, it remains until today.

After Napoleon had brought about the end of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, the Imperial Crown was no longer in use for its original purpose. It did, however, remain a powerful political symbol. The historian Reinhart Staats points out that, after 1806, the crown became popularised and romanticised to an unprecedented degree, which he sees as an indicator of a collective desire for the *alte Reich*, the Old Empire, i.e. the Holy Roman Empire.⁹ At the same time, idealisation of, and nostalgia for, an imagined past more glorious than the current state of affairs was steadily on the rise. The historian Wolfgang Burgdorf calls this longing for the mediaeval period a collective flight to the Middle Ages:

Ihre fehlgeleitete Sehnsucht nach Kontinuität fand ihr Ziel in der völlig überfrachteten und überladenen Vorstellung vom mittelalterlichen Reich. Die Flucht ins Mittelalter war auch Ausdruck eines Heimwehs nach einer nationalpolitischen Unschuld, die noch nicht von konfessionellen Gegensätzen, dem deutschen Dualismus und dem Souveränitätsstreben der deutschen Fürsten kontaminiert war.¹⁰

(Their [the Germans'] misguided desire for continuity led to an unrealistic and exaggerated image of the mediaeval empire. The recourse to the Middle Ages also indicated a longing for a national-political innocence not yet tarnished by the confessional rift, German dualism, or by the ambitions of dukes striving for sovereignty.)¹¹

Shortly after the end of the Holy Roman Empire, the mediaeval period became both an object of collective longing and an imagined and idealised blueprint of a new German empire yet to be established. In this historical context, although the mediaeval meaning of the Regalia and their historical use were largely forgotten, the crown continued to be seen as an

⁸ Albert Bühler, "Die heilige Lanze," *Das Münster: Zeitschrift für christliche Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft* 16 3/4 (1963): 85–116, at 90.

⁹ Staats, *Die Reichskrone*, 46.

¹⁰ Wolfgang Burgdorf, "Der Kampf um die Vergangenheit. Geschichtspolitik und Identität in Deutschland nach 1813," in *Krieg und Umbruch in Mitteleuropa um 1800*, ed. Ute Planert (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, and Zürich: Schöningh, 2009), 333–57, at 348.

¹¹ All translations in this text by me.

embodiment of the former Empire, the *Reich*. It constituted an important signifier of political power but also an object of collective memory. Along with the figure of Charlemagne, it served the need to construct a historic tradition of Germany as a powerful political entity. As Charlemagne, at that time, had (wrongly) been appropriated in Germany as a German ruler, the crown (wrongly) thought to be his, gave further support to Germany's claim as a key European power. Consequently, there are several German paintings from the nineteenth century showing Charlemagne wearing the wrong crown. Both the crown and the figure of Charlemagne became popular political myths in that they served as reminders of the past while at the same time promising a better future.

II

After the foundation of the Second German Empire in 1871, nationalistic perspectives on German history were developed for the legitimisation of the newly established political order. Among these, the idea of the *New Reich* as linear successor to the *Old Reich* suggested historic continuity as well as the hope of re-establishing Germany's supposed former glory through the newly established state. The historian Wolfram Siemann calls the foundation of the German *Reich* in 1871 a "Wiederauferstehung des Reiches", a resurrection of the former Empire.¹² For example, the dynasty of the new emperors, the Hohenzollerns, made sure to flaunt the fact that a southern branch of the family had been stewards of Nuremberg castle for centuries. This did not only serve the purpose to unite the north and south of Germany, and especially to bring recalcitrant Bavaria into the fold, but also to appropriate Nuremberg's standing as *the* quintessentially mediaeval German city for the new *Reich*. We will later see that the Nazis had a very similar agenda concerning Nuremberg.

Likewise, the Imperial Crown as a popular symbol of Germany's glorious past now also came to stand for its equally glorious future which the Hohenzollern state would bring about. The crown had been given a new meaning according to the needs of contemporary politics. It now stood for a new interpretation of the term *Reich*, namely a politically (and militarily) strong German national



Above: Coat of arms of the Second German Empire

¹² Wolfram Siemann, "Reichsgründung 1871: die Schaffung des ersten deutschen Nationalstaates," in *Deutsche Zäsuren. Systemwechsel seit 1806*, ed. Alexander Gallus (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006), 105–32, at 119–21; Michael Stolleis, *Heiliges Römisches Reich deutscher Nation, Deutsches Reich, 'Drittes Reich': Transformation und Destruktion einer politischen Idee* (Wetzlar: Schriftenreihe der Gesellschaft für Reichskammergerichtsforschung 37, 2007), 5.

state at the heart of Europe. Consequently, the crown, in a slightly adapted form, appears in the coat of arms of the new state but also in a multitude of paintings, monuments, and public architecture of that time.¹³

One example is the *Niederwalddenkmal* (pictured below), a monument erected between 1877 and 1883 to commemorate the unification of 1871. It shows an allegoric representation of Germany, a gigantic *Germania* figure, with the crown in her hand. Another example is the

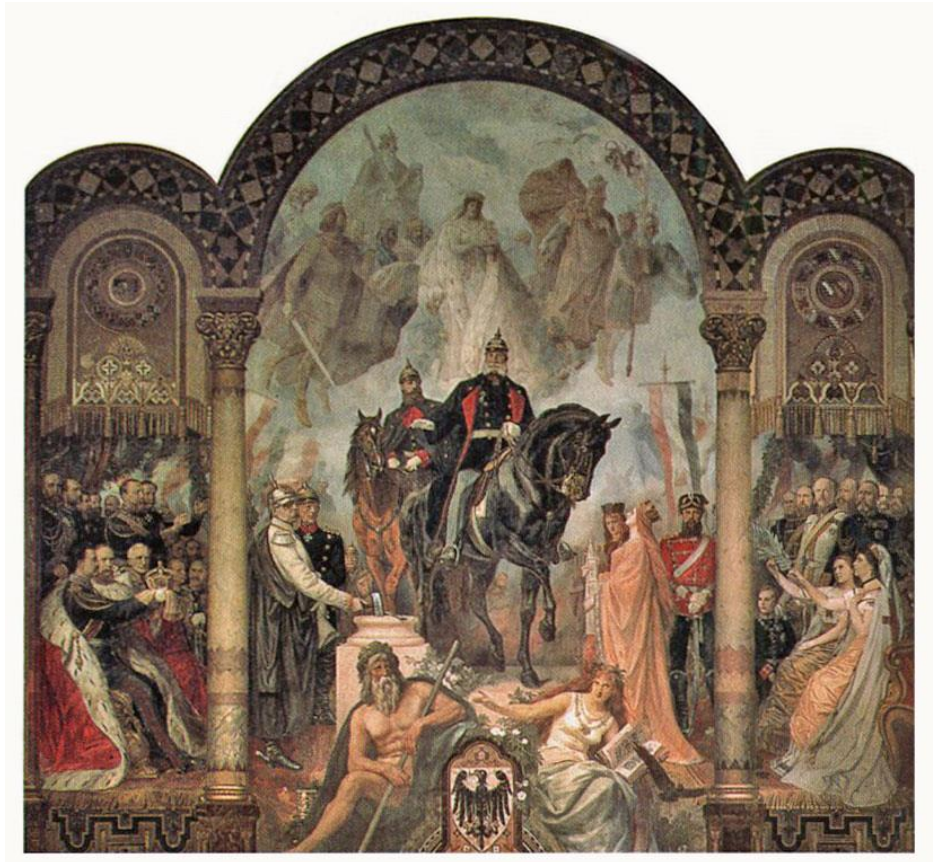


Kaiserpfalz in Goslar. It dates back to the eleventh century as a place of residence for several mediaeval emperors. Between 1877 and 1890, it was decorated with ten monumental paintings by the artist Hermann Wislicenus showing stylised events of German history. A representation of Charlemagne is among them, who is depicted in the act of destroying a Saxon pagan sanctum. The painting carries a strong nationalistic message: according to this depiction it was Charlemagne, the legendary ‘German’ ruler, who brought Christianity to Europe. This puts forward the claim that Germany, in the

guise of Charlemagne, played an extraordinary role in the forming of modern Europe, namely, by no less than having brought civilisation itself to a hitherto barbaric part of the world.¹⁴

¹³ The version of the crown depicted during the Second German Empire echoes the shape of the ancient crown of the Holy Roman Empire but is not exactly the same. It does not have one arch but two arches crossed, and the cross is not mounted on the front plate but in the middle. Only a wooden model of that crown existed but depictions can be found on illustrations, stamps, and sculptures. According to Emperor Wilhelm I the old crown had become “Catholic” through the long use of the Hapsburgs and therefore had nothing to do with Protestantism and the hereditary imperial status of the Hohenzollerns. The old crown remained in Vienna and was not given over to Berlin. It is also worth pointing out that the eagle of the *Old Reich* was depicted as single-headed until the reign of Sigismund; afterwards the eagle as emblem of the king had one head, and the emperor’s had two.

¹⁴ In this context, it is interesting to point out that aggressively jingoistic appropriations of Charlemagne as a German or French figure by Germany and France respectively only



Hermann Wislicenus: Apotheosis of Wilhelm I, Kaiserpfalz Goslar

While this painting is all about Germany's allegedly glorious past, the centrepiece of the decorations is about the present. It shows a monumental apotheosis of Wilhelm I who was German emperor from 1871 to 1888. A huge triptych after the manner of mediaeval altarpieces, it places the emperor on a black stallion with a group of former emperors floating in the heavens above him. His mother Luise holds the Imperial Crown over his head. Again, the message is very clear: the new *Reich* can boast of a long hallowed tradition of Christian rulers (starting with Charlemagne himself) and finds its completion and perfection in the new emperor Wilhelm I. Although the idea of *Gottesgnadentum* no longer had its former importance, these paintings send a strong quasi-religious message. While the centrepiece evokes Christian iconographic traditions, the symbolism in the painting is predominantly political, not religious. The emperor appears not only as a godsent but as a god-like figure himself, with his predecessors surrounding him like angels. There are no crosses but imperial flags. No saints but allegories of victory and political figures like Bismarck. And at the bottom

appeared after 1871 (Bernhard Pinsker and Annette Zeeb, eds., *Karl der Große. 1200 Jahre Mythos und Wirklichkeit* (Petersberg: Imhof, 2014), 18).

of it all is the *Reichsadler*, the imperial eagle, the symbol of the state. This painting demonstrates very clearly how former religious symbols were taken over by political contents, contexts and intentions. The more religion waned, the more politics could fill the vacuum left by subsiding religious belief towards the end of the nineteenth century. The combination of divine and secular power the Imperial Crown embodies fits in perfectly with the overall message of the painting. In the Second *Reich*, the crown still evoked its former function but had effectively been reduced to a mere prop of power.

There are many other examples of political iconography during that time which make use of the Imperial Crown in order to demonstrate the imagined connection between the old *Reich* and the new. One example are the great glass windows in the emperor's pavilion in the train station of Metz, built between 1905 and 1908; at a time, therefore, when the region of Alsace-Lorraine where Metz is located had been a part of Germany. One of these windows shows a monumental image of Charlemagne with the Imperial Crown on his head. Once again, Charlemagne had been appropriated as a German ruler in order to legitimise contemporary authority, and once again the imperial crown is wrongly depicted as his. The glass window in Metz is a poignant example of how political myths enhance each other: The popular image of Charlemagne gives meaning to the crown, and both together are exploited in order to consolidate the Hohenzollern claim to power in the occupied and long fought-over region of Alsace-Lorraine. It was without doubt also intended to send a message to the French about who's in charge. The decision to place these windows in a train station, where many ordinary people would be able to see it, reinforces that point.

As a last example, the *Weidendammer Brücke*, a bridge which is located close to the train station *Friedrichstraße* in the centre of Berlin and which has been newly constructed in 1896, boasts large imperial eagles on either side with the Imperial Crown on top.



Left: Weidendammer Brücke, Berlin

In contemporary literature in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the crown can also be found as a political motif reflecting the foundation of the Second Empire. A historical novella by the Realist writer Wilhelm Raabe called *Des Reiches Krone* (*The Empire's Crown*) first published in 1871 places the crown at the core of a narrative of German history, identity, and patriotism: In the year 1424, the inhabitants of Nuremberg fight their way to Bohemia in order to bring the crown to Nuremberg. While this transport is historically correct, Raabe underlines the importance of bringing back the 'German' crown to the 'German' *Reich* and the German people, ignoring the fact that, at that time, Bohemia actually was part of the Holy Roman Empire and there was no such thing as a 'German *Reich*' at all. When the crown triumphantly arrives in Nuremberg, the people crowd around it and experience a sense of unity and belonging that borders on the religious:

Da hat kein Unterschied unter den Leuten gegolten [...]; vor des heiligen deutschen Volkes Krone, Zepter, Schwert und Apfel [...] sind alle gleich gewesen, alle Brüder und Schwestern im Erdenjammer. [...] Ja, da ist keine Schranke aufgerichtet gewesen. Alle Kranken und Elenden, so kommen wollten, durften kommen.¹⁵

(No differences were there any more amongst the people; in the presence of the crown, sceptre, sword and orb of the holy German nation, all were equal, all brothers and sisters in this vale of tears. Yes, all barriers had been lifted. All those who were sick and miserable were invited to come.)

In the presence of the Regalia, the people become one, as if the crown were a magic artefact bringing about the political unity that had, at the time of Raabe's writing, actually become reality. It is noteworthy that there is no ruler present at the scene in *Des Reiches Krone*. The mere symbol of authority is sufficient to make the mass of the people unite in a collective gesture of worship.

III

The patriotic glorification of the German people and the idea of the *Reich*, while uncommon in the majority of Raabe's works, made this novella popular with the Nazis. In 1939, the Society of the Friends of Wilhelm Raabe presented Hitler with a handwritten copy of the novella, made by a member of the Hitler youth in gothic script.¹⁶ In 1938, Hitler had in fact

¹⁵ Wilhelm Raabe, *Des Reiches Krone*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, 9/2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1963), 369–72.

¹⁶ Franz Hahne, "Geburtstagsgeschenk für den Führer," *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für die Freunde Wilhelm Raabes*, 29/2 (1939): 79.

almost re-enacted the plot of *Des Reiches Krone* by having the crown and the Regalia brought from Austria to Nuremberg. The president of the Society of the Friends of Wilhelm Raabe called this the fulfilment of Raabe's longing by the Führer: "Des Reiches Krone und alle die ehrwürdigen Symbole des deutschen Volkes ruhen wieder in Nürnberg."¹⁷ (The Empire's crown, along with all the venerable symbols of the German people are safely back in Nuremberg.) It is, however, important to point out that Raabe had been appropriated by the Nazis undeservingly. While *Des Reiches Krone* can admittedly be interpreted in a jingoistic way, Raabe's political stance was in fact quite liberal, even pacifist. It would take several decades of research to counter his reputation as a 'Nazi writer'. As historians like Maike Steinkamp and Bruno Reudenbach have shown, the Nazis had a strong interest in legitimising their claim to power by evoking the German Middle Ages. In doing so, they created a narrative according to which their authority was steeped in history, not dating back a mere decade or two but going back to mediaeval times.

The German fascination with the Middle Ages is of course older. The Romantic movement around 1800 first discovered the mediaeval period as an epoch in which German art and culture became manifest. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, art historians emphasised the essential 'German' character of mediaeval architecture, literature, and art, declaring it simple and accessible for the common people. They also contrasted this allegedly German concept of art with the Baroque and Renaissance periods, which were perceived to be French and Italian, respectively. According to German nationalistic historiography of the nineteenth century, the Middle Ages were the truly 'German' period of history. The rediscovery of Nuremberg as the quintessentially German city of the Middle Ages also dates back to the Romantic period, namely to the young poet Wackenroder who visited Nuremberg in 1796 and whose enthusiastic praise of its mediaeval castle, narrow lanes, and ancient houses brought about a renewed public interest in the city's historic charms.¹⁸

The Nazis were not, of course, much interested in historical accuracy but rather exploited popular concepts of the German past in order to style themselves as the true heirs of an alleged former greatness. According to the Nazi narrative, power and glory of the Holy Roman Empire came to life again in Hitler's new *Reich*. This desire to suggest historic continuity is reflected in a wide range of events, exhibitions, and publications during National Socialism. For example, it is no coincidence that the most important propaganda events before the war, the annual party rallies, the *Reichsparteitage*, took place in Nuremberg. The Nazis made use of the

¹⁷ Franz Hahne, "Raabes Sehnen und des Führers Erfüllung," *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für die Freunde Wilhelm Raabes*, 29/2 (1939): 33–5, at 35.

¹⁸ Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, *Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1981), 46.

city's mediaeval architecture to suggest the new state had its roots in a long and hallowed historical tradition. When the infamous rally grounds were constructed, the slogan 'Von der Stadt der Reichstage zur Stadt der Reichsparteitage' (From the city of the Imperial diets to the city of the party rallies) was popular and also became the title of an exhibition in the year 1937.

The Imperial Regalia played a vital part in the imagination and self-presentation of National Socialism as successor of the Holy Roman Empire. In a 1937 publication on the Regalia, the director of the Germanic National Museum in Nuremberg describes the crown as a symbol of Germany's claim to imperial power (*die Reichsidee*) which Hitler, as an ingenious and long-awaited liberator, had fulfilled:

Daß sie [die Krone] nach und trotz allem in schimmernder Pracht aus der grauen Ferne unserer Vergangenheit mahnend herübergrüßt [...], das mag uns Symbol sein für die unsterbliche Idee des Reiches, an die wir alle glauben und wofür wir in Erfüllung tausendjähriger deutscher Sehnsucht durch die befreiende ungeahnte Tat eines Mannes so über alles Erwarten beschenkt wurden.¹⁹

(The fact that the crown, after and in spite of everything, greets us from the grey depth of our past with all its shining glory can be a symbol for the immortal idea of the Empire, in which we all believe and which, in fulfilment of a thousand years of German longing, came to be through the liberating and unexpected deed of a single man.)

Annelies Amberger has shown how, in 1936, replica of the regalia were paraded through the streets of Munich in a crude imitation of the mediaeval *Heiltumsweisungen*. Hitler watched the parade from a podium adorned with the imperial eagle,²⁰ underlining the *Führer's* claim to the role of the Emperor. The mediaeval symbols of imperial power were appropriated to glorify Nazi rule. The replicas shown at the Munich parade had been made in Aachen by order of Wilhelm II in 1915 and had been used in various expositions. For example, in 1931, approximately 56,000 people visited the museum in Aachen where they were kept.²¹ In 1933, another exposition in Aachen explicitly linked the 'crown of Charlemagne' and the concept of the

¹⁹ Heinrich Kohlhaufen, *Die Reichskleinodien* (Bremen and Berlin: Angelsachsen, 1939), 12.

²⁰ Annelies Amberger, "Bildhafte Zeichen der Macht als sakrale Symbole in der atheistischen Diktatur. Zur Funktionalisierung der Reichskleinodien durch die Nationalsozialisten," in *Mittelalterbilder im Nationalsozialismus*, eds. Maïke Steinkamp and Bruno Reudenbach (Berlin and Boston: Akademie, 2013), 119–136, at 119.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

Empire, the *Reichsidee*, with the national-socialist state.²² Once again, the figure of Charlemagne was appropriated as a German ruler whose tradition the Nazis claimed for themselves. Accordingly, Alfred Rosenberg, a key Nazi ideologue, proclaimed Hitler heir to Charlemagne's political strength.²³ By presenting 'his' crown in Nazi Germany, the analogy became tangible for all to see.

It was not until 1938, however, that the original Regalia were brought to Nuremberg after the Imperial Treasury in Vienna had long refused to lend them out. After the annexation of Austria by the Nazis they had no choice but to oblige Hitler's command. The Regalia were transported to Nuremberg and presented to the public in a desecrated church, the Katharinenkirche, during the so-called *Reichsparteitag Großdeutschland* (Party Rally Great Germany), the denomination deriving from the annexation of Austria in the same year. The historian Stefan Schäfer notes the symbolic significance of showing the Regalia in this context: "Ihre Repräsentation innerhalb des historischen Festzugs versinnbildlicht nicht nur die scheinbare Legitimität des 'Anschlusses', sondern auch dessen historische Dimensionen."²⁴ (The presentation of the Regalia within the historical procession symbolises not only the alleged legitimacy of the annexation but also its historical dimension.) According to this understanding, the Nazis appropriated the Regalia in order to construct a historically plausible justification for the annexation of Austria, evoking the old nineteenth-century debate whether a new German Empire should include Austria or not.

Amberger, however, argues that demonstrating the legitimacy of the annexation was less the Nazis' intention, given that the Regalia were not exclusively Austrian. Instead, she points out that Hitler was simply keen to appropriate the imperial power the Regalia stood for, thereby placing the Nazi regime within the historical tradition of the Old Empire.²⁵ The Nazis also made use of the sacral symbolism of the Regalia, albeit not in the original theological sense but rather by attaching concepts like '*Reich*' and '*Volk*' to them. Accordingly, Hitler's plan for the future was in fact not to keep the crown in a museum but rather to put it on public display during party rallies in Nuremberg.²⁶ In this way, the crown was embedded into National Socialist ideology. Its sacral connotations were in accordance with Hitler's fantasy about the '*Tausendjährige Reich*', a thousand-year long

²² Ibid., 123.

²³ Alfred Rosenberg, *Gestaltung der Idee. Blut und Ehre, vol. II. Reden und Aufsätze von 1933–1935*, ed., Thilo von Trotha (Munich: Franz Eher, 1938), 111.

²⁴ Stefan Schweizer, *Unserer Weltanschauung sichtbaren Ausdruck geben. Nationalsozialistische Geschichtsbilder in historischen Festzügen zum 'Tag der Deutschen Kunst'* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), 206.

²⁵ Amberger, "Bildhafte Zeichen der Macht als sakrale Symbole in der atheistischen Diktatur," 121.

²⁶ Ibid., 131.

kingdom; a term taken from the Bible signifying the kingdom of Christ (cf. Revelation 20). In its appropriation of the Imperial Crown, Nazi Germany used an obscure mixture of religious and historic symbols in order to consolidate its power. The Third *Reich* claimed to be the last and true successor of the former Holy Roman Empire.



Left: The Regalia are returned to Vienna

In 1946, the crown was found by American troops and brought back to Vienna where it now remains in the Treasury, an artifact of an eon-long and often troubled history which now, finally, has become an exhibit in a museum. One should think that it no longer has any political relevance, but on the other hand, who can tell? Appalling though it may seem, there are currently far-right groups in Germany calling themselves *Reichsbürger*, citizens of the Empire, who do not accept the German constitution and who claim that Germany continues to exist in its pre-1939 borders. Given the

recent rise in nationalism in Germany and elsewhere in the world, perhaps the Imperial Crown may come to be seen yet again as a symbol of a political order that some wish to reinstate, with all the dire consequences this would entail.

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