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The Holy Roman Empire and colonization

By Gabriel Redon

What role did the Holy Roman Empire play in the first colonial conquests of the early modern period? What was the role of its princes, institutions, diplomacy, sailors, and merchants?

Reviewed: Indravati Félicité, *Le Saint-Empire face au monde. Contestations et redéfinitions de l'impérialité, XVe-XIXe siècle* (The Holy Roman Empire Before the World: Contestations and Redefinitions of Imperiality from the Fourteenth to the Nineteenth Century) CNRS Éditions, Paris, 2024, 456 p., 27 €.

The modern period is marked by the expansion of the European powers overseas and the emergence of the first colonial empires. Initiated by the Portuguese and the Spanish in the late fifteenth century, the movement was continued by the Dutch, the French, and especially the British. In this historical process, one major European actor would appear to have been missing: the Holy Roman Empire.

Over the centuries, historical studies have emphasized the Holy Roman Empire's alleged diplomatic passivity, lack of political unity, and inability to establish efficient and centralized institutions. Compared to France and England, the Holy Roman Empire stands guilty, in sense, of not becoming a "full" modern power. In fact, the "old empire," at the dawn of the modern era, felt its very existence being challenged by new forms of imperialism.

Was the Holy Roman Empire really a state? It did not, of course, have a regular army or a genuine navy. Its diplomatic services were scattered and its affairs often conducted by rival chancelleries. As an empire consisting of dozens autonomous states, its fragmented bureaucracy lacked the relative coherence of its French neighbor's. From Vienna, the emperor, who was recognized by all as the supreme authority, was the structure's cornerstone. If it was not a "state" in the modern sense of the term, the Holy Roman Empire could nevertheless be described as a "system."

Indravati Félicité's book is remarkable for its rigorous use of an abundance of sources. Most are from German-language publications from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of which Félicité has translated many extracts. Others were found in the state archives of Germany (including Hamburg, Lübeck, and Schleswig-Holstein) and Austria. Covering a little more than three centuries, the book follows the Holy Roman Empire's story over the modern period.

Defining the "modern" Holy Roman Empire

As the heir of the Carolingian restoration of 800, the Holy Roman Empire saw itself from its foundation as the successor to the old Western Empire. The Emperor of the Romans, who held the titles of King of Germany and King of Italy, was in feudal times often seen as a unique sovereign, ranked higher than other European monarchs. This theory was, however, difficult to apply in practice: the Holy Roman Empire was an elective monarchy and difficult to govern, as many actors sought to preserve their privileges in a towering pyramid. The emperor was often seen as politically weak, and at times was simply absent. This resulted in succession disputes between aristocratic clans which gave rise, beginning in the Middle Ages, to long interregnums during which the empire was rarely ruled by a single person.

Even so, the establishment of the Habsburg dynasty and its long tenure, first on the imperial throne, then in the Iberian kingdoms in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, relaunched the international diplomatic game. When the Spanish and the Portuguese began colonizing the Americas, residents of imperial states and cities gained many opportunities, participating in the great global "opening" (p. 12). Yet the fact that the Holy Roman Empire did not have the structural tools to consider colonial expansion in its own name has led historians to examine its role from the perspective of particular states. The novelty of Félicité's approach is to consider the

Holy Roman Empire's role in the modern world exclusively from an "imperial" perspective. She sees all the actors mentioned in her sources as participating in a single system.

The question of the identity of the Holy Roman Empire--which many see as the medieval ancestor to modern Germany--has always had a peculiar status in the German-speaking world. The perception of the empire as "Germanic" came late--in the fifteenth century. Though the imperial throne had been occupied by a German prince since 962, the latter reigned, depending on the period, over peoples who were culturally diverse, distributed across territory extending from southern Denmark to central Italy. Imperial merchants whose maritime aspirations brought them to the Americas, Africa, and the Far East were sometimes called "Germans" by other Europeans, but were also described as "Flemish," "Belgian," and "Austrian" (p. 305-306). They were, however, never referred to as "Imperials," even though their ships sailed under the same flag.

A fragmented empire with many networks

Another recurring question that the book poses concerns borders, which shapes how imperials conceived of relationships with foreigners. Which states belonged to the empire? Whose inhabitants were imperial subjects? If they were subjects, what authority did the emperor have over their internal affairs (p. 211-261)? If they were not, did the state have the right to interfere in imperial affairs with impunity if its ruling aristocrat--like the British king, who was also king of Hanover--was an elector-prince (p. 285)?

These actors were all in fact interdependent. The emperor could do nothing without the imperial states, at least when these states had limited political latitude. While the Duke of Mecklenburg was allied with Louis XIV during the Franco-Dutch War (1672-1678), he abandoned his intention to make his armies available to the French king when Emperor Leopold I published an advocatory letter prohibiting imperial states from allying themselves with France (p. 238-241). Félicité shows that such questions shaped how imperial officials thought about plans to expand beyond their "borders," which even they could not easily define.

For several centuries, this political fragmentation impacted the Holy Roman Empire's diplomatic relations. The "Persian embassies" of the seventeenth century, which are considered in several early chapters, are good examples of this lack of unity. Though the Persians who visited the German states in 1600 did visit Emperor Rudolf II, they first had to visit the court of the Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel (p. 118-126). Conversely, thirty years later, the Duchy of Gottorp took the initiative of sending a diplomatic mission to the Shah's court (p. 131-141). Félicité reverses the standard perspective by arguing that imperial diplomacy's numerous actors significantly increased the Holy Roman Empire's presence on the international stage.

The brutal rivalry between the archduchy of Austria and the Brandenburg electorate--which in 1701 became the Kingdom of Prussia--is also illuminating. Finding itself paralyzed as its states competed for influence, the Holy Roman Empire had a difficult time existing on its own terms. Foreign powers, regularly challenging international treaties signed by the empire during the eighteenth century, prevented the creation of an "imperial Indian company." Attempts to establish enduring trade relations between the empire and China, based either at the port of Hamburg (p. 323-324) or Ostende (p. 318-321), were utter failures. Finally, several chapters (p. 309-415) rightly examine a process already underway before 1806: the gradual "decentering" of Habsburg monarchy as its center of gravity shifted from Germany to Austria.

A German critique of imperialism and colonialism?

For the Holy Roman Empire, the eighteenth century was a time of existential concerns. In his *Explanation of Germans' Right to Trade with India* (1752), the jurist Johann Julius Surland sought to justify his fellow citizens' pretenses to place themselves on a level playing field with rival powers (p. 336). While he was not blind to the deeper reasons for the political division afflicting the German world, his bold ideas placed Germans who had been excluded from international trade on equal footing with foreign colonized peoples (p. 342-343).

For some intellectuals, this commercial jealousy soon turned into full-fledged anticolonialism. This was particularly true in cameralist circles, which in the mid-eighteenth century theorized two distinct conceptions of imperiality: the colonial version, embraced by the British, French, and Dutch, which the economist Johann Heinrich Gottlob Justi viewed as piracy on a grand scale, and the German version,

whose "nobler" conception, inherited from the Middle Ages, supposedly implied greater historical legitimacy (p. 349).

While this opportunistic denunciation of colonization raises questions, it is also surprisingly modern. In the 1750s, Justi took slavery to task and deemed Europeans morally responsible for colonization's excesses (p. 350-352). Even so, these arguments served primarily to justify the old imperial regime's universalist aspirations, which he presented as a moral rampart against colonial adventurism. Half a century later, when Bonaparte dissolved the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, these arguments had ceased to serve their purpose.

Despite a lack of maps, which makes it difficult to grasp the geographic scope of some chapters, Félicité's book goes a long way in redefining the standards of Holy Roman Empire historiography. Her decision to situate the imperial "system" in a global context might trouble German historians. The "Germanic" empire that she describes in her book rarely acknowledged itself as such. By including in a single framework actions that were previously considered distinct from one another, the book makes it possible to understand the difficulties of forging German national identity prior to the nineteenth century. It also shows how long a Roman political ideal with universalist dimensions remained important. Felicité thus shows that the old system, obsessed with ancient and varied bonds, was a major player in the transformation of modern Europe.

Félicité's book contributes to a better understanding of the ambiguities of the Germanic world towards colonization. It brings into clear relief the double game that eighteenth-century German intellectuals played when it came to modern colonial imperialism, which differed radically from the global expansionism pursued by the Hohenzollern emperors a century later. Even so, Félicité's book opens important new avenues for specialists of modern German colonial history.

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