

IV. Germany after the Frankish Union (843-)

A. The Breakdown of Central Authority and the “Problem of the Dukes”

1. To see how Germany eventually became the aggressive empire that we find in modern history, we need to take a close look at what the Frankish empire was in the first place, and how its eastern half tortuously evolved into the nation of Germany.
2. The empire created by the Franks was the product of the efforts of great leaders—first kings like Clovis, and then Carolingian “mayors of the palace,” and then Carolingian kings. Such an outcome is known as a “charismatic monarchy.”
3. The key element of such a monarchy is the special character of the king himself. However, it must be understood that any massive territory one man can hold as a king must be conquered and controlled with the help of others. Even the charismatic monarchy of Charlemagne required the *delegation* of power to trusted family and clan members, and friends.
4. This elite group that surrounds the king is generally known as an “aristocracy,” with its members possessing various roles and titles, such as “duke,” “count,” “baron,” and “margrave/marquess.”
5. In medieval times, such trusted allies of the king were granted direct control of the land conquered in the king’s name and allowed to rule it in his stead. They were “lords” over these domains, with full power to run them as they saw fit, as long as they were loyal to the king.
6. The arrangement of such territories in Germany, involving “duchies” (territories of dukes) and “marches” (territories of margraves) after the Frankish split is shown to the right.
7. As the Franks fought one another for control of the entire Frankish empire after **843 AD**, they ended up losing control of each of its separate regions to its lords, who then ruled it independently.
8. These lords then had to fight to defend themselves against the tribes of eastern Europe, and against the Vikings who raided from the north, and thus, recognizing the benefit of working together against common enemies, they resolved to create a partnership whereby one of their number would be chosen to represent the whole as its *king*.
9. The king in this situation was an elected monarch who was acknowledged as the leader of any common cause, but at other times he was just one member of a



The duchies and marches of Germany after the Frankish split.

group of equals. Thus his title was a dissatisfying pretense as far as kingship was concerned, and—not surprisingly—the more ambitious kings of Germany set about solving the problem of how to have the same kind of power over their country as the Franks had once had.

10. To do so meant having to solve the problem of how to permanently and consistently impose their authority on the dukes. (I thus call this challenge “*the problem of the dukes.*”)

B. Otto “the Great” and the Ottonian “Holy Roman Empire”

1. The king who defined the German answer of how to gain more power over his fellow dukes in this system was Otto I of Saxony (see map on previous page), who hence became known as Otto “*the Great.*”
2. The main way a king could gain more power over the dukes was to take advantage of the bargain that the dukes had agreed to when creating their country in the first place. They had agreed to be loyal to the one chosen as king.
3. Since the dukes swore an *oath of loyalty* to the king of the country in all matters relating to *the country*, if a king could entrap a lord into being disloyal he would have the right to punish him and take his land (or at least some part of it).
4. Once this task was accomplished, the king was in the same position as the previous Carolingian rulers had been, facing the dilemma of whom to entrust with the land anew. This is where Otto innovated an approach that came to be known as the “Ottonian System.”
5. Otto gave newly claimed land to family and loyal warriors as previous kings had done, *but he also gave land to the Church* (the organization of *Nicene* Christianity that accepted the leadership of the bishops of Rome, i.e. the “popes”).
6. This resulted in a new kind of powerful lord: a “bishop-prince,” who was both a leader of the Christian church *and* a lord who controlled land in the same way as a duke.
7. To cement his control over this new system, Otto marched on Rome itself to assist the pope, who continued to be disrespected by the aristocracy of Italy. Having imposed his authority there—and installed a pope beholden to him, Otto had himself crowned “*Holy Roman Emperor*” in **962 AD**, giving his kingship an exceptionally strong connection to the accepted religious authority in Europe.



Otto I of Saxony became Otto “the Great” by granting power to the Church as a way to solve “*the problem of the dukes.*”

C. So What? (The Fate of the Ottonian “Holy Roman Empire”)

1. Although the system created by Otto worked for a brief time, it gave rise to a new and insoluble problem: who was the ultimate authority—the king/emperor or the pope? This is known as the problem of the relationship between “church and state.” (A Church independent of any ruler would have its own leader. Similarly, a kingdom independent of any church would have its own leader. But an empire created out of an alliance between the two faced the challenge of defining which of the two authorities was superior and how they should interact.)
2. At first, because of Otto’s power and the relative weakness of the position of the popes in Italy, the kings had the upper hand.
3. However, as time passed, the the popes became more secure, they decided to challenge the primacy of the kings in the arrangement. They believed, as was natural for them to believe as representatives of God, that their authority over human affairs should be the higher of the two.
4. To impose their authority, the popes banned the practice of kings creating *bishop-princes* in the way that Otto had instituted.
 - a) The precise objection was based on the idea that it was religiously improper for someone not of the Church to be able to decide who should be a leader of the Church. Such a “lay” person, it was held, should not be able to “invest” a bishop with authority within the Church.
 - b) When in **1077** a descendant of Otto, king Henry IV, refused to abandon “lay investiture,” pope Gregory VII *excommunicated* Henry (expelled him from participation in Church rites, considered necessary in Christianity for the salvation of one’s soul, and a pre-requisite for legitimate, Christian kingship).
 - c) This allowed his lords to deny Henry’s authority, *and* made the bishop-princes Henry’s enemies as well, for they had to follow the authority of the pope in order to be bishops. (Thus the Ottonian solution to the “*problem of the dukes*” proved no solution at all.)
 - d) Unable to maintain his power, Henry was forced to make his way to Italy, to a castle belonging to the pope at a place called Canossa, to beg for forgiveness from the pope in order to be readmitted into Christianity.



An illustration of “lay investiture”—with a king passing a bishop’s crook/staff to invest an ally with his authority as a bishop.

- e) This event, known as the “Humiliation at Canossa” of **1077** signaled the break-down of the Ottonian System.
- 5. From this point onward, two major factions emerged in the Ottonian Holy Roman Empire. One favored the king as the supreme defender of European Christianity. The other favored the pope as the highest religious authority.
- 6. The struggle between these two factions caused the disintegration of Germany (and Italy), until such time as no group was influential enough to have its preferred king elected within the empire.
- 7. From **1254** to **1273** there was thus an “Interregnum” in Germany—a period without a king at all. This was the historical outcome of the Ottonian system, which continued to be unresolved, and which put Germany in the position in which it would find itself as the Reformation and Religious wars got underway a couple centuries later.