

## Germany (c. 1500)

### Abstract

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At the transition from the late Middle Ages to the modern era (i.e., around 1500), the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation comprised all of Central Europe, as well as parts of western, central eastern, and even southern Europe. It included the modern-day European nation-states of Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, and Slovenia, as well as parts of France, Italy, Denmark, Hungary, and Poland.

The head of the Empire was the Roman king, who also held the title emperor. The political division of the Empire into secular and ecclesiastical territories dated back to the early medieval era, but the character of these territories and their relationship to the emperor changed repeatedly over time. As the map shows, the Empire was divided into numerous duchies, counties, and principalities, as well as Imperial and Free Cities, and bishoprics and archbishoprics. These individual territories were governed by a myriad of secular and ecclesiastical princes, also by dukes, counts, and other titled and even untitled nobles, whose ranks and possessions went back to the High Middle Ages or earlier. Thus, in terms of its territorial integrity, the Holy Roman Empire differed vastly from a modern nation-state. The emperor's powers did not correspond to those of present-day governments; central authority was still relatively weak and could not be enforced uniformly.

Originally, the emperor was elected by all the Imperial princes. From the late twelfth century on, however, the emperor was chosen by a special electoral college of "Kurfürsten." Around the year 1500, the electoral college consisted of four secular princes (the Count Palatinate of the Rhine, the Duke of Saxony, the Margrave of Brandenburg, and the King of Bohemia) and three spiritual electors (the archbishops of Cologne, Mainz, and Trier). The electors were often at odds with the emperor.

The map highlights the possessions of four ruling dynasties that would go on to play a key role in the subsequent course of German history: the Habsburgs, the Hohenzollerns, the Wettins, and the Wittelsbachs.

Initially, the Habsburgs were a minor Swabian-Upper Rhenish noble family. Their spectacular rise began in the thirteenth century. By means of enfeoffment with additional territories, a skillful marriage policy, and the consolidation of their estates, they extended their sphere of influence to the point where, under Emperor Charles V (1519-1556), it encompassed Spain, the Netherlands, Burgundy, Austria, and newly discovered American possessions. At the time, theirs was a world empire on which "the sun never set." By c. 1500, part of Burgundy and the Netherlands already belonged to the Habsburgs. In Austria, the Habsburgs would remain in power until the Revolution of 1918.

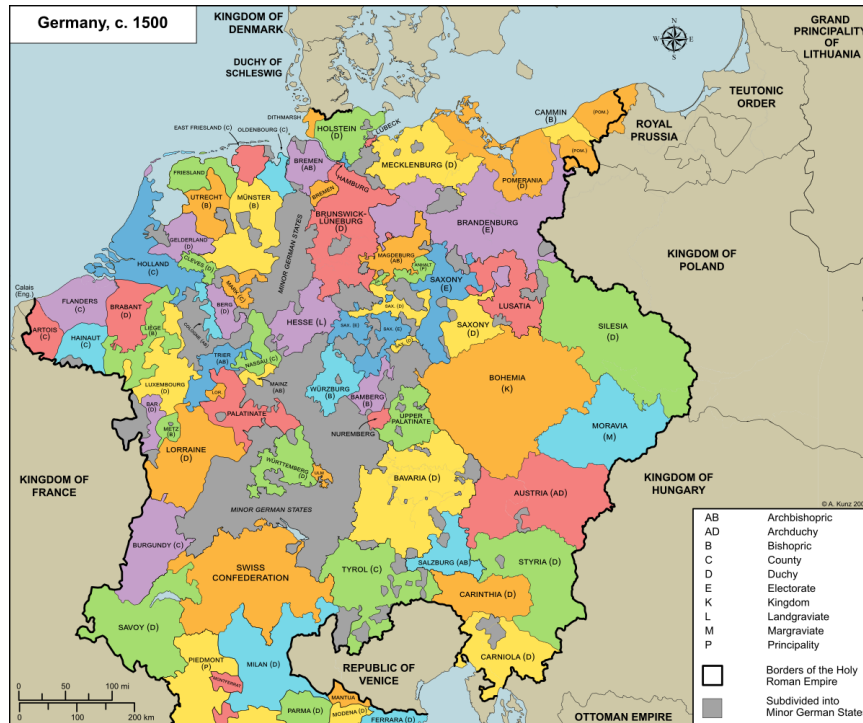
The Hohenzollerns also came from Swabia. By c. 1500, they already held considerable territorial possessions ruling over Brandenburg as well as the areas around Ansbach and Bayreuth in Franconia. Prussia, on the other hand, was still partially in the hands of the Teutonic Order, partially under Polish rule.

The Wettins came from Saxony-Thuringia, the Wittelsbachs from Bavaria. Since the Middle Ages, both dynasties had used their respective lands as bases for extending their territorial rules. Both reigned over their lands until 1918.

About a sixth of the Empire lived under the rule of ecclesiastical lords. In addition to the three aforementioned spiritual electors, this group included the archbishops of Salzburg, Magdeburg, and

Bremen, plus the bishops of Utrecht, Münster, Würzburg, Bamberg, and many others. Their territories were often larger than those of the lesser princes.

## Source



Source: Original cartography by IEG-MAPS, Institut für Europäische Geschichte, Mainz, A. Kunz/ Joachim Robert Moeschl, 2007. Revised cartography (WCAG-compliant) by Gabriel Moss, 2022.

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