

# Count Johann Anton Pergen's Memorandum to Austrian Co-Regent Joseph II "On the Value of the Imperial Crown" (1766)

## Abstract

---

Johann Anton Pergen, a seasoned diplomat and high official in the Austrian service, responds to Joseph II's canvassing of his chief ministers on ways to strengthen the value of the Imperial office to the Habsburg monarchy. Though Pergen acknowledges the limits of the emperor's power and the weaknesses of the Empire, he regards possession of the Imperial office as a tangible advantage to Austria in its diplomacy and military campaigns. The Imperial office enabled Austria, for example, to allocate vacated fiefs to itself or its clients, and to legally recruit troops throughout the Empire, not only in its own provinces.

## Source

---

1<sup>mo</sup>: Whether the possession of the Imperial crown has value, and [if so, then] what kind of value?

Ad 1<sup>mum</sup>: That the Imperial crown is the most excellent prize of any in the empire, and that the attainment thereof is fortunate, will be doubted by no one, when he considers the tremendous eminence and authority attached to the Imperial dignity in his capacity as the highest judge and head of so many powerful princes and estates, some of whom are attached to foreign crowns, and the kind of overwhelming advantages that the Holy Roman emperor, as the first leader of Christendom, has over other foreign crowns, to say nothing of the essential advantages that are known to flow from such eminence and which will be given extensive verification here. If the answer to this first question rests on truths all too obvious for us to dwell upon, then:

2<sup>do</sup>: whether, and for what reasons the Imperial crown must be seen as having inestimable value for the Most Serene Arch-Ducal House [of Austria]?

Ad 2<sup>dum</sup>: The most important reasons whereby it can be convincingly shown that the Imperial crown is the original source of the flowering and the ascension of the Most Serene Arch-Ducal House, the foundation of its greatness, power, and eminence, and that the retention thereof has become crucial. History teaches everyone how the power of the Most Serene Arch-Ducal House has grown step-by-step, and it shows that this power has been secured by the radiance of the Imperial crown from time to time. The inestimably valuable privileges, liberties, and precedence, with which Austria outshines all other states of the empire, have freed this princely house from the greatest difficulties of the German social federation, and at the same time made it easier for it to enjoy the resulting advantages. The more important the distinction that gives the Most Serene Arch-Ducal House precedence before all other powerful German ruling houses, the more certain the conclusion that these privileges could not be claimed without possession of the Imperial throne, and therefore its retention has become crucial. The brief period of the reign of Carl VII is still all too fresh a memory for anyone not to be convinced by the aforementioned argument.

The Imperial crown has always reduced the number of enemies and increased the number of friends of the Most Serene Arch-Ducal House in wartime and peacetime alike, just as those Roman emperors who stemmed from it [i.e. the arch-ducal house] have drawn the strongest extraordinary aid from the empire

---

when they knew how to make use of this prize.

The foreign crowns with whom Austria has stood in alliance have constantly paid attention to it, and even France, in consideration of the anticipated alliance, remained still for the very first time at the Imperial election of Your Imperial Majesty, who now gloriously reigns. Thus the election was unanimous and the great costs that your predecessors incurred to accomplish this ultimate goal [the Imperial election] could be avoided.

Possession of the Imperial crown even makes an impact on the *Pforte* [the Ottoman Turks], because of the easy attainability of Imperial aid and the tax for fighting the Turks [i.e., "the Turk Tax" or *Türkensteuer*].

The aforementioned questions are superfluous, because in reality the Imperial title rests with the Most Serene Arch-Ducal House, so only these questions remain:

3<sup>to</sup>: whether a Roman emperor can attain something great in the German empire?

Ad 3<sup>tium</sup>: consider the following explanation. If the greatness of a Christian monarch exists in the serenity of his conscience by means of the precise fulfillment of his duties and in the attainment of fame and eminence, then Your Imperial Majesty, who now gloriously reigns, certainly has the most excellent opportunities to achieve a great deal. Considering the deteriorated system of justice, the rivalry between the two religions, the deficient execution of law, the feudal system, the minting [of coins], and many other matters, some referenced in the Imperial electoral agreement, some referenced in the latest committee statement of the electors, these offer the most appropriate opportunities.

It was precisely this concern for the best interest of the empire that won Maximilian I (who deserves thanks for the general peace, the division of the empire into circles, and many other noteworthy accomplishments) and his descendants such great acclaim, which might have led to a universal monarchy if this good work had not been undone by the then new teachings of Luther and the resulting religious divisions, the ensuing sinister politics, some abuse of authority, and the machinations of the crown of France, which could have easily been eliminated at the time.

Your Imperial Majesty, who now gloriously reigns, has already won great fame through Your well-known love of justice and passion for the well-being of the fatherland. Your steadfast behavior has drawn the attention and esteem of all the empire and has cleared the way for the pursuit of great things.

Should the greatness of a Roman Emperor be regarded in light of those opportunities to obtain advantages for his own house, besides the associated eminence and fame, [and if] so:

4<sup>to</sup>: what kind of essential advantages are to be obtained for his own house?

Ad 4<sup>tum</sup>: it can be presented with validity, that extraordinarily many, yes, the essential and most important factors in the expansion of the power of the house of Austria are dependent upon possession of the Imperial crown, in part through notable damage done to its enemies, in part through the efficacious demand for support.

Certainly it is worthy of attention that:

First, the Most Serene Arch-Ducal House always has the means and the opportunity, as it pleases, to draw into its dynastic wars and affairs, if not the whole empire, then at least great parts of it, primarily the Catholic parts, and furthermore that:

Second, the Imperial crown provides the greatest imaginable ease in acquiring men and money for a war

---

against the *Pforte* [the Ottoman Turks], and that:

Third, a Roman Emperor from the Most Serene Arch-Ducal House in wartime has the means and ways to receive voluntary taxes from the clergy, with evidence thereof being provided by recent memories of the tithes offered by the German clergy and the gift of a hundred thousand gulden voluntarily offered by the Archbishopric of Fulda at the beginning of the last war, and that:

Fourth, in emergencies, a Roman Emperor can deploy the Imperial military levy and use it for his purposes, to some extent, if it is managed correctly. That:

Fifth, with skill, he can steer the affairs at the Imperial diet and the circle diets to the advantage of his ducal house, and by withholding his ratification he can hinder them, so that disadvantageous Imperial bills cannot become law. That:

Sixth, he is in a position to guide the Imperial political apparatus according to his dynastic interests. And not least:

Seventh, a Roman Emperor has in his hands the most convenient opportunity to bring the most respectable princely Imperial fiefdoms to his house with little effort or cost. That:

Eighth, he can march his troops through the empire with less cost and fewer unpleasanties than any other state in the empire, which is of great use to the Most Serene Arch-Ducal House because of the [Austrian] Netherlands. That:

Ninth, he can, with certain limitations, partly through law, partly through tradition, openly recruit soldiers in the empire, whereas other states in the empire are dependent upon the will of their fellow states. Given the current, that is greater, number of troops, the usefulness of this privilege in preventing the depopulation of one's own territories is clear to anyone.

Yes, and furthermore:

Tenth, if the correct means are used, a Roman Emperor finds it easier than others to compensate for depopulation in his lands by attracting subjects from other states. This matter appears to be of such importance that it deserves the establishment of a relevant plan. Of no less use is that:

Eleventh, a Roman Emperor receives money and men from the free Imperial knights in emergencies. Furthermore:

Twelfth, when a [tax] assessment is done, it is known what great advantages a Roman Emperor has on account of his dominion over the Imperial cities. Finally:

Thirteenth, everyone knows that the allotted Roman month tax<sup>[1]</sup> adds up to quite a sum, even if a part is not collected. In fact, all these advantages are entwined with the duties of the Imperial office, and, in this sense, Your Imperial Majesty, who now gloriously reigns, can also do a great deal in the empire for your Most Serene Arch-Ducal House.

However, as considerable as the uses of the Imperial crown can always be:

5<sup>to</sup>: Whether possession of the Imperial crown can be disadvantageous?

Ad 5<sup>tum</sup>: indeed, one can be reasonably assured that the Imperial crown would become highly disadvantageous if a ruling emperor showed disrespect towards the estates, or let them sense any indifference or negligence towards matters affecting the empire's well-being, or dared to openly

---

encroach on the Imperial estates' rights, or gave them cause to suspect that he was thinking of abusing his power to subjugate those estates which did not want to see things his way, or indeed if aggressive intentions come to light via an apparently high and arbitrary [tax] assessment. Given the aforementioned factionalism in the empire, and the inner strength of the Protestants, and the uncertainty in which the Catholics and the well-intentioned find themselves, these would be the cause of the demise of the Most Serene Arch-Ducal House. Considering the first [the Protestants], everything depends on Prussia and Braunschweig, but the Catholics throw themselves into the arms of foreign crowns for the sake of their own security. If Your Imperial Majesty makes himself unpopular inside and outside the empire, and stands without support, then that will give the King of Prussia the power to do all possible damage and thereby weaken the Most Serene Arch-Ducal House. It is indeed, that:

6<sup>to</sup> Question: Whether, and through which available means, Your Imperial Majesty can win renown and respect, and truly promote Your house's best interests?

Ad 6<sup>tum</sup>: the available means whereby Your Imperial Majesty, who now gloriously reigns, can still gain the greatest renown and respect, and your Most Serene Arch-Ducal House can gain the most important advantages through the imperial crown. [Although the means are at hand], there is no time to waste, since Your Majesty's well-known great qualities, and especially your eagerness to expand the power of your house, have aroused all kinds of attention. The Protestant side is wise and stands in good shape [militarily] and is bound together ever more closely. The Catholics, however, are weak and are still in poor shape militarily and find themselves in such uncertainty that they either exhibit complacency regarding the growing Prussian power, or they join alliances supported by foreign crowns, so that there won't be any more of them who depend on their association with Your Imperial Majesty and the Most Serene Arch-Ducal House. Thereby the foreign crowns will be handed the best opportunity to play the master in the empire, and besides eclipsing the supreme eminence of Your Majesty, so to speak, they will force the solicitation of their assent and intermediation in all ventures. These crowns would be thankful for the advantages which Your Imperial Majesty would be otherwise authorized and capable of receiving without the assistance of foreign powers. The very strong efforts of the crowns of England and France to gain greater influence in the cabinets of the states in the empire have recently been redoubled. They are trying to utilize the existing uncertainty, especially among the Catholics. There is reason to worry that they will suddenly appear as guarantors of various alliances of the states in the empire if there is no effort to win the inclination and trust of the latter [i.e., the states in the empire] and preempt the foreign powers.

It is easy to find the means and methods whereby Your Imperial Majesty can attain respect and fame, fulfill your official duties while simultaneously gaining important advantages for the Most Serene Arch-Ducal House, and thereby ease your conscience and ensure a successful reign. From the aforementioned it is self-evident, and it seems to rest on the following general rules, which can be applied to specific cases without difficulty. [...]

## NOTES

[1] An imperial tax, originally calculated based on the cost of sending an army to Rome for one month – trans.

Source: Hans Voltelini, "Eine Denkschrift des Grafen Johann Anton Pergen über die Bedeutung der römischen Kaiserkrone für das Haus Österreich", in *Gesamtdeutsche Vergangenheit. Festgabe für Heinrich Ritter von Srbik zum 60. Geburtstag am 10. November 1938*. Munich: Bruckmann, 1938, pp. 158–68; reprinted in Helmut Neuhaus, ed., *Zeitalter des Absolutismus 1648-1789*. Deutsche

---

Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, edited by Rainer A. Müller, volume 5. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1997, pp. 121–30.

Translation: Ben Marschke

Recommended Citation: Count Johann Anton Pergen’s Memorandum to Austrian Co-Regent Joseph II “On the Value of the Imperial Crown” (1766), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/the-holy-roman-empire-1648-1815/ghdi:document-3518>> [June 16, 2026].