

William D. Godsey, Jr. *Nobles and Nation in Central Europe: Free Imperial Knights in the Age of Revolution, 1750-1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xi + 306 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-83618-0.

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The Geo-Cultural Landscape of the Free Imperial Knights

In recent years the study of nobles has benefited from a limited, but significant, renaissance of interest in the historical community, but little of this research has focused on the Free Imperial Knights, the lower immediate nobility of the Holy Roman Empire. Godsey's monograph fills this lacuna admirably. The importance of this book is twofold: first, we learn a good deal more about the knights both before and after the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire. Second, Godsey goes beyond a purely empirical study to describe the mental world of the pre-revolutionary Imperial Knights, defined as a "geo-cultural landscape," and then proceeds to explain how this old understanding of nobility changed under the impact of both Herderian cultural nationalism and the French Revolution. Ultimately, he argues, the destruction of the old habitus led various families of knights to choose differing strategies of accommodation or resistance to this altered terrain. In short, Godsey attempts to bridge the mentality gap between early modern and modern historians of the nobility, as well as explain the significant differences that developed between the so-called feudal elite of the Habsburg realm and those who inhabited the new Germany.

The book is divided into seven chapters with four thematic bases: the position of the Free Imperial Knights in Mainz before the revolution, the process of nobles becoming Germans, the two different paths of the former Imperial Knights (accommodation and nationalization or rejection and supra-nationalism), and the beginnings of conservative German nationalism with Carl Baron Stein

as the paradigmatic example.

Fundamental to Godsey's work is his conception of a "geo-cultural landscape" common to many European nobles before the French Revolution. This landscape was an overlapping series of "corporate, dynastic, local, and religious allegiances" united by a "common, cosmopolitan culture" (p. 13). In other words, the nobility of the Holy Roman Empire might have thought of themselves as Germans, but in a political and constitutional rather than ethnic/cultural sense. What mattered was "purity above antiquity, quarterings above patrocliny, and virtue above ethnicity" (p. 1). Knights not only married other nobles exclusively, but nobles with unblemished (i.e. without non-noble or unequal noble) ancestors. This was a world where a "German" nobleman could equally be at home in France, current-day Belgium, Bohemia, Sweden, or Italy. This early modern "geo-cultural landscape" critically informs and contextualizes the radical reconstitution of the German nobilities after the dissolution of the old order.

Godsey contends that the forces of the revolution discredited the older "geo-cultural landscape," forcing a mentality shift or change of habitus on the nobility. The transformation of the Free Imperial Knights led many to the Herderian interpretation of the cultural nation, and from that to a domesticated national-cultural identity (p. 10). German nobles, with the former knights in the vanguard, ceased to think of themselves as a political nation, or a caste apart, but as Germans who were the leading element of a cultural community. In this way, the

German nobility avoided the fate of their French peers—banishment from the nation.

Some knights chose not to integrate into the national community, but emigrated to the Habsburg Empire where the old “geo-cultural landscape” continued to thrive. After 1848, the aristocracy of the Habsburg lands moved towards a supranational orientation while still maintaining the importance of pedigree and loyalty to the sovereign rather than the nation (many Hungarian families excepted). Thus, the former nobility of the German political nation divided into those who shifted towards the bourgeoisie (here Godsey tacitly contests one of the central tenets of Heinz Reif’s Borussia-centered school), and those who maintained their distance.[1] This division corresponded more or less to the separation between the lands of the Habsburg Monarchy and the other German states that eventually amalgamated into the Hohenzollern-led German Empire.

Godsey’s work is an important contribution to historical knowledge on a variety of levels. It explicitly differentiates between the pre- and post-revolutionary worlds of the German nobility, rather than projecting nineteenth- and twentieth-century realities back in time. This not only clarifies our understanding of the early modern nobility, it creates a plausible explanation for their subsequent acceptance of German nationalism, among other constructed identities. Moreover, it makes concrete the real distinctions between nobles in Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony, and the other German states, and those who constituted the more than four hundred families of Habsburg first society. It also suggests an explanation for the first-society, second-society dichotomy in Vienna that was lacking in Berlin, Dresden, Munich, and Stuttgart.

Further, Godsey has written the first monograph on the Free Imperial Knights in the English language, and in so doing has attempted to posit a theory on the response of the former knights to the dissolution of their order. To go from immediate vassals of the emperor to subjects of a territorial prince, often with a less distinguished pedigree than their own, was a precipitous decline in fortune. Godsey clearly explains the various choices made by individual knights when confronted with this unpleasant reality: from anti-Napoleonic German nationalism (Stein,

Hardenberg), to conservative reaction (Metternich).

Although they disappeared as an order after 1806, individual knights continued to contribute to the political, philosophical, and cultural life of the German states well into the twentieth century. In Bavaria alone, the knights produced several government ministers (Crailsheim, Feilitzsch, Leonrod), innumerable army officers, political party leaders (Franckenstein, Schenck von Stauffenberg), professors (Guttenberg, KÄnsberg, Reitzenstein), medical doctors (Schenck von Geyern), Freudian analysts (Gebaettel, Stauffenberg), industrialists (Bechtolsheim, von der Heydte), museum founders and collectors (AufseÄ, Marschalk von Ostheim), artists (Habermann, Massenbach, PreuÄ en, Seckendorff), architects (Haller von Hallerstein), composers (Hornstein, Stain), and dramatists (Bodman, Falkenhausen, Gleichen, Wolzogen). With these examples in mind, one suspects that Godsey has discovered a key to the survival, and in some cases, the dramatic transformation of the traditional habitus of the former Free Imperial Knights in the nineteenth century.

The book concludes with an appendix of families included in the membership rolls of the knightly cantons, excluding the personal lists. Godsey visited the major archival repositories of the former knights to perform his meticulous research, no small accomplishment considering the widely strewn holdings and losses from wartime destruction. For all its merits, the work would have benefited from a glossary that explained esoteric terms, such as prebends, for a non-specialist audience. Godsey’s title is also a bit misleading, since his examples have more to do with the revolutionary and post-revolutionary mentality than with the romantic consciousness that developed post-1830. In spite of these minor quibbles, Godsey’s book is a must for both historians of the nobility and those interested in the transformation of mentalities that marked the transition from the *ancien regime* to the advent of bourgeois modernity.

Note

[1]. Heinz Reif, *Adel und BÄrgertum in Deutschland Band I: Entwicklungslinie und Wendepunkt im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000); *Adel im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (MÄnchen: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1999).

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