Unitas and *Diversitas:* Sigismund's Empire as a Model of Late Medieval Rulership

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This article analyzes the emperorship of Sigismund (1368–1437) as a particular configuration of rule in the fifteenth century. Research on the medieval Holy Roman Empire in the Latin West has traditionally focused on the great emperors from the ninth century to the thirteenth. In contrast, imperial coronations and imperial rule in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries have received much less attention. The article first presents the structural features of the Holy Roman Empire and then focuses on the significant changes to this structure in the late Middle Ages. Discontinuities made imperial rule the exception rather than the rule. Long intervals between imperial coronations always required reinventions of traditions, which led to situational negotiations among popes, authorized cardinals, and emperors. In 1433, Sigismund was the first emperor since 1220 to receive his coronation from the pope himself in Rome. The article makes it clear that Sigismund was a master in the creation of new rituals and symbols. During his reign, the imagery of the empire expanded significantly. Alongside unity *(unitas)* came diversity *(diversitas)*. The article shows how differently the imperial coronation of 1433 was perceived and narrated by contemporaries in Italy and Germany.

Keywords: Holy Roman Empire, emperorship in the late Middle Ages, coronation, Emperor Sigismund, Roman popes, perceptions of power

Through his imperial coronation on May 31, 1433, Sigismund (1410–1437) aligned himself with the long-established traditions of papal elevation ceremonies in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.[1] In the Middle Ages, the concept of Latin emperorship elevated kingship to a heightened status and gave it a unique and universal dignity. This was deeply rooted in salvation history, yet it did not necessarily translate to a practical increase in power. This article outlines the overarching framework encompassing the images, assertions, and actualities of emperorship in the late Middle Ages.[2] It then delves into Sigismund's emperorship, exploring four lines of inquiry: (1) the novel notions of parallels between Roman emperorship and kingship in the context of Sigismund's dual kingship in 1410–11; (2) the reasons

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1 Hoensch, *Sigismund*; Pauly, *Sigismund*; Schlotheuber, "Sigismund."
2 Scales, *Shaping*; Jones et al., "World of Empires"; Schneidmüller, "Kaiser sein."

behind the absence of Sigismund's imperial coronation during the Council of Constance despite his role as a patron of the Holy Roman Church; (3) the question as to whether the Roman king truly needed a ceremonial elevation to emperor in Rome; and (4) the motivations behind the late achievement of Sigismund's imperial coronation. Was it merely a matter of preference or was it a belated pursuit of a missed opportunity?

The essay begins with an introduction of depictions of an emperor, laying the groundwork for a comprehensive analysis of sources that have been acknowledged but not yet systematically contextualized. Sigismund emerges as a ruler around whom there was a rich array of imagery and who was skilled in grand presentations and a creator of rituals and symbols of authority. The work on monuments of German kings and emperors by Schramm and Fillitz fail to capture this abundance.[3] Only the exhibitions in 2006 in Budapest and Luxembourg made an earnest attempt to amass these images.[4] Claudia Märtl has recently highlighted the disparity in research attention to emperorship between the early and high Middle Ages compared to the fifteenth century, which has led to an uneven focus on written and visual sources.[5]

Proceeding with a focus on Emperor Sigismund, the essay first offers three illustrative examples. Firstly, "the man with the fur cap," a parchment on wood housed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, garners attention for its quality and uniqueness. Its creation is dated to around 1420 or 1436–37.[6] Multiple representations of Sigismund wearing a fur cap suggest its significance to the king and emperor. The depiction reveals a diadem atop the fur cap and the opulence of his robe.

Secondly, the image of Sigismund's Roman imperial coronation by Pope Eugene IV (1431–1447) in 1433 endures visually. Bronze reliefs by Filarete, commissioned by Eugene between 1433 and 1445, adorn the central portal of the new St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. These reliefs portray significant scenes, including Sigismund's coronation and his journey with the pope to the Ponte Sant'Angelo. The images symbolize the submission of the Christian emperor to the authority of the pope.[7]

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3 Schramm and Fillitz, *Denkmale*, 75–77.

4 Takács, *Sigismundus*, 122–67. Cf. Kéry, *Sigismund*.

5 Märtl, "Kaisertum und Italien," 328–35.

6 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sigismund,_Holy_Roman_Emperor#/media/File:Pisanello_024b.jpg. Accessed March 17, 2024. Cf. Takács, *Sigismundus*, 153–54.

7 https://www.wga.hu/html_m/f/filarete/stpete7.html. Accessed March 17, 2024. Cf. Takács, *Sigismundus*, 460–61.

A third image is sketched in the words of the Mainz merchant Eberhard Windeck. He wrote his "Book of Emperor Sigismund" soon after Sigismund's death. It has survived in several text manuscripts and in two illuminated manuscripts. Windeck tells a scandalous story denouncing the negligent treatment of the Germans at the Roman Curia. It is said that Sigismund's imperial crown was placed crookedly on his head during the coronation: "So the emperor knelt before the pope. Then the pope lifted his right foot and placed the crown straight on the emperor's head, as is right and customary." In his narrative of the presentation of the sword, Windeck amplified the scandal of the "foot-crowning." Allegedly, during the reading of the Gospels, the pope gave the emperor the bare sword "with the top to his hand. The emperor's marshal reversed it and placed it correctly in the emperor's hand. And then the emperor finished singing the gospel."[8] The narrative presentation of this double affront was intended to scandalize and provoke German sentiment against the Curia. This tale, while probably not historically accurate, provides insight into the contemporary perspective on imperial coronations.

These images present emperorship characterized by humility and humiliation. Eberhard Windeck's chronicle defines Sigismund as the "Light of the World," emphasizing his role as both Roman king and emperor.[9] In his account of the emperor's death, Sigismund's flair for drama in his presentation of himself is evident, as he dons ecclesiastical vestments and the imperial crown before passing. Windeck describes Sigismund's desire for his corpse to put on display for days to show that the ruler of the world had died.[10]

The juxtaposition of the titles "Light of the world" and "Lord of the world" raises questions about the essence of emperorship in the fifteenth century. This assertion of universal primacy contrasts with the submissiveness Sigismund displayed before the pope. These observations prompt an exploration of the evolving nature of late medieval emperorship in Latin Christianity, leading back to a deeper examination of Sigismund's role as emperor.

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8 Windeck, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 343–44. Cf. Bojcov, "Kaiser"; Schneider, *Windeck.*

9 *Römscher kunig und keiser,* [von] *dem man sprach lux mundi, das ist ein liecht der werlt.* Windeck, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 1–2.

10 *Also saß er uf eim stuole und verschiet. also soltu nü merken, waz er in befalch, e er starp: wanne er sturbe, so solt man in ston lossen zwen oder drige tage, daz alle menglichen sehen sollten, das aller der welt herre dot und gestorben were.* Windeck, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 447.

Emperorship as a Figure of Order

Emperorship represented an elevated form of kingship, but what contributed to this elevation? Who played a role in shaping it? Who embraced it? It is worth examining the foundational principles of emperorship within the Holy Roman Empire.[11] Below, I present nine key aspects in a simplified breakdown.[12]

(1) Emperorship drew its inspiration from ancient models of order. It embodied both a sense of exceptional universality and the ability to accept external rulers, without making this apparent contradiction a central challenge. The concept of earthly superiority was developed to boost the legitimacy and authority of the emperor, although this concept did not necessarily extend beyond the empire's borders. A strict hierarchical structure was not theoretically established. The distinction between higher-level emperorship and subordinate kingship was context-dependent and pragmatic. An early medieval doctrinal text offered the following formulation: "King is he who rules over one people or more. Emperor is he who rules over the whole world or takes precedence in it."[13] While some sources did describe emperorship as dominion over the entire world, these memorable phrases did not align with the reality of diverse rule on earth. Despite being perceived as universal during the Latin Middle Ages, emperorship functioned within the plurality of monarchies.

(2) The restoration of the Roman Empire in the West by Charlemagne in 800 endowed the notion of emperorship of the Latin Middle Ages with a new dimension. After initial experimentation with rituals in the early nineth century, emperorship formed a liturgical partnership with the papacy as the second universal authority that claimed unique dominion on Earth. The "ordines" of crowning and anointing in St. Peter's Basilica integrated the spiritual agency of the popes and the religious devotion of the emperors. The historical primacy of the Roman Empire, established in ancient times, shifted to emphasize collective responsibility for Latin Christianity. This conferred a sacred grandeur and distinct Christian charisma on the emperorship, rooted in its foundation at the tomb of Peter, prince of the apostles. This evolved into the idea that Augustus' empire preceded the Christian church and laid the groundwork for the Savior's birth. However, imbuing secular rule with spiritual significance led to functional

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11   Sulovsky, "Concept"; Sulovsky, *Making.*

12   For the following paragraphs cf. Schneidmüller, *Kaiser des Mittelalters*, 10–15; Schneidmüller, "Kaiser, Kaisertum."

13   *Super totum mundum aut qui precellit in eo.* Beyerle, "Schulheft," 7.

dependencies and personal considerations, preventing a comprehensive political embodiment of imperial dignity throughout the Middle Ages. This complexity should not be seen as a missed opportunity of the imperial state or as capitulation to papal precedence, as once argued by German scholarship. On a pragmatic level, the Frankish and later East Frankish kings' patronage of the Holy Roman Church offered a significant opportunity for participation in the imperial traditions of the ancient Mediterranean world.

(3) The unity of the Mediterranean region as a whole was disrupted in the seventh century. First, the Arab expansion and the formation of the Muslim empire fractured this unity. Subsequently, in the eighth century, the Franks gained political ascendancy in the West. This prompted the Roman papacy to shift its allegiance from Constantinople to rulers in Gaul and Italy, resulting in the coexistence of two Roman and Christian empires. Thus, the once unified ancient world empire gave way to three separate empires. From Charlemagne's re-establishment of the western *imperium Romanum* in 800 until the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, Christendom navigated the presence or contestation of two Christian emperors. During Sigismund's reign, genuine attempts were made to reconcile Eastern and Western Christianities, yet the competition between Christian and Muslim universal claims persisted beyond the Middle Ages. Between 800 and the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, the emperorship of Frankish, East Frankish, and German kings played a significant role in shaping the history of Latin Europe. Additionally, variations of imperial concepts emerged at times in regions such as the British Isles, Iberian Peninsula, and France.

(4) The notion of the shared responsibilities of emperors and popes en-countered challenges during the Investiture Controversy, during which the popes asserted their authority more forcefully than the emperors. This period marked the onset of conflicts over primacy and the nature of their mutual relationship. These disputes often revolved around ritual actions during personal encounters, with both pope and emperor demanding obedience from each other.

(5) Around the year 1200, Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) heightened the papal claim to examine the eligibility and qualification of the future Roman kings. This pretense was grounded in the earlier papal transfers of the emperorship from the Greeks to the Franks and then to the Germans *(translatio imperii)*. According to Innocent III, this historical transfer granted the popes authority over the empire's destiny from its inception. Since only the Roman king would later be crowned as the Roman emperor by the pope, it was deemed essential for

the pope to assess the king's suitability at the time of election. While the Roman kings never fully acknowledged this approbation claim, they had to contend with it consistently. In 1338, the prince electors in the "Rhenser Weistum" and Emperor Louis IV (1314–1347) in the "Licet iuris" imperial law codified their interpretations of the election of kings and emperorship. According to this perspective, a person elected by a majority of electors would automatically become a Roman king without requiring papal approval. Going one step further, Emperor Louis IV even linked the Roman emperorship directly to the electors' election. This pragmatic understanding, which dispensed with the papal coronation, gained acceptance in the sixteenth century. Until that point, a few more emperors negotiated situational compromises during their coronations. Charles IV, Sigismund, and Frederick III each made adjustments during their respective coronations to accommodate the shifting dynamics of their time.

(6) The most significant impact of emperorship on Latin Europe emerged indirectly. The very notion of universality and supremacy fostered a heightened sense of dignity and independence among neighboring realms. In personal encounters, the primacy of the empire was acknowledged only as a matter of ceremony, if at all. Within their own domains, rulers like the French king perceived no higher authority than themselves. This perspective was shared by Roman popes, as well as legal scholars in Italy and France. This political parity between emperor and king laid the groundwork for the principles of state sovereignty that took shape in the sixteenth century, influencing the global political landscape of the time. Consequently, the diverse characteristics of different realms took precedence over the concept of imperial unity.[14]

(7) A chronological overview reveals a lack of consistent theoretical continuity in the concepts of empire and imperial ideals during the Latin Middle Ages. Despite established "ordines" for imperial coronations, the institution of emperorship required reinvention and redefinition with each succession. The temporal disparity between kings' elections north of the Alps and their subsequent papal coronations in Rome hindered any continuous imperial narrative. Between 800, the year of Charlemagne's coronation, and 1519, when Maximilian I passed away, 30 emperors ruled in Latin Christianity. For 413 of these 720 years, a Roman emperor ruled. After Otto the Great revived the Roman emperorship in 962 and linked it to the East Frankish or German kingship, his eight successors held the title of emperor in continuity until 1137. In contrast, from 1138 to 1519, most

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14   Schneidmüller, "Imperium."

Roman kings did not proceed to the Roman imperial coronation. Within the 300 late medieval years spanning Frederick II's imperial coronation in 1220 to Maximilian I's death in 1519, periods of active emperorship were exceptions rather than the norm. Between Frederick II's coronation in 1220 and the subsequent coronation in Rome in 1312 of Henry VII, 92 years passed without an imperial coronation. Henry VII's elevation marked the next imperial coronation, achieved without the participation of the reigning pope based in Avignon at the time. Authorized cardinals conducted the coronation of two Luxembourg dynasty rulers, Henry VII in 1312 and Charles IV in 1355. The coronation of Louis IV from the Wittelsbach dynasty in 1328 was carried out by opposing bishops or an antipope. This increasing temporal and personal detachment led to a divergence between the election of the Roman king and the emperorship in the fourteenth century. Sigismund, in 1433, became the first emperor since Frederick II in 1220 to receive his imperial crown from a legitimate pope, a span of 213 years. This period encompassed 55 years since the passing of Sigismund's father, Charles IV, in 1378. Thus, the concept of imperial continuity or living memory is not applicable. After Sigismund, Frederick III from the Habsburg dynasty was the final emperor to be crowned at the Roman apostle's tomb in 1452. Subsequent rulers often retained the title "Elected Roman Emperor" without undergoing a papal coronation. Only one more instance of the liturgical collaboration between pope and emperor occurred for Charles V in Bologna in 1530. The three-century span from 1220 to 1519 underscores that a reigning emperor was the exception rather than the rule. While the royal throne in the Roman-German Empire was rarely vacant, and sometimes multiple contenders vied for the crown, there were 118 years of emperorship contrasted with 181 years without an emperor. The lengthy reigns of Frederick II (30 years) and Frederick III (41 years) accounted for 71 of those 118 years. The remaining four emperors – Henry VII, Louis IV, Charles IV, and Sigismund – reigned for periods ranging from one to 23 years.

(8) While contemporary encomiums praised the emperor as "Lord of the World," rulers themselves were cautious when making assertions about their global primacy or dominion over the entire world. The chancellery and court focused primarily on the emperor's protective role over the Holy Roman Church and Christianity. Few exceptions saw imperial claims encroach upon neighboring kingdoms. Notably, in 1240, Emperor Frederick II and the pope engaged in heightened disputes that briefly rose to the level of claims to imperial supremacy. Even then, the Hohenstaufen chancellery made clear distinctions between

recipients within the Holy Roman Empire and other kings. A circular letter sent in 1240 to King Henry III of England requested solidarity, while a similar version for the Archbishop of Trier invoked the Germanic peoples' defense of the empire and world dominion.[15] This was a critical moment of imperial superiority propaganda. However, instances of such explicit claims diminished in the subsequent years. During Henry VII's reign, particularly on the day of his imperial coronation in 1312, he disseminated circular letters throughout the Latin Christian world, conveying his vision of a universal monarchy on Earth.[16] This rhetoric surprised both his contemporaries and later historians, with its emphasis on his unique authority. Malte Heidemann's analysis of these texts and their reception demonstrated how exceptional these expectations of universal subjugation under his rule were. The reactions to this rhetoric were equally telling: the French king impetuosly defended the independence of France, while the king of Naples vehemently rejected any notion of *imperium* or *unitas*.[17] It is significant that Henry VII's grandson Charles IV and his great-grandson Sigismund chose to distance themselves from their ancestor's claim to world dominion. In his election proclamations in 1433, Sigismund expressed joy at being raised to the rank of emperor of the Romans, without delving into sweeping claims.

(9) While the emperors themselves exercised restraint in their assertions, fifteenth-century scholars exhibited a greater degree of ambition. They articulated imperial hopes and claims, deriving these visions from the continuation of the *imperium Romanum* and its role in Christian salvation history. Soon after Sigismund's passing, the "Reformation of Emperor Sigismund" emerged as a manifesto for empire reform. In this document, Sigismund only serves as a precursor to the prophesied future peace emperor, *Friderich von Lantnewen*. This imagined emperor would usher in an era of peace and rule as a priest-king in the tradition of the Old Testament figure Melchizedek, thereby fulfilling God's order on Earth. This harmonization of divine and worldly realms would be symbolized by the eagle on a golden background, representing the empire and God.[18] Nine years after Sigismund's death, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini wrote a letter to King Frederick III (1440–1493) exploring the origins and authority of the *imperium Romanum*. This letter positioned the empire as a divine creation, with the author dissociating it from any dualism with the papacy. Aeneas Silvius then emphasized

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15 Weiland, *Monumenta*, 312.
16 Schwalm, *Monumenta*, 801–7.
17 Heidemann, *Heinrich VII*.
18 Koller, *Reformation*, 332–42.

the empire's specific political mission for the present and future. The core ideas of this letter revolved around the necessity of monarchy to curb individual excesses and ensure peace. This political unity could only be realized under a unique ruler, appointed by God, who could bring about universal peace *(pax universalis)*.[19] The *imperium Romanum*, from this perspective, was God's creation, initially ruled by kings or magistrates and later by an emperor. The empire's legitimacy stemmed from both the power of nature and the recognition of Jesus Christ, born during the reign of Emperor Augustus. Christ's acknowledgment of the *imperium* solidified its status as a temporal power, coexisting alongside the papacy as two distinct powers. This notion surfaced in humanist discussions about Sigismund's coronation as well. Some even suggested that the existence of the *imperium Romanum* would prevent the advent of the Antichrist. The Roman people, as the originators of the empire and world monarchy *(monarchia orbis)*, proclaimed Charlemagne as Patricius and later as Augustus. This lineage extended to the Teutons and culminated in Frederick III. To King Frederick III, Aeneas proclaimed the highest earthly authority, emphasizing his role as the guardian of secular concern.[20] Aeneas's words, while suggestive and subject to qualification, highlighted the evolving perceptions of imperialism in the mid-fifteenth century.

Profiles of Sigismund's Empire

For an extended period, Sigismund's tenure as emperor remained a lesser explored topic among medievalists. This could be attributed to waning interest in late medieval emperorship compared to earlier periods, coupled with Sigismund's relatively belated ascendancy to imperial status, which lasted only four years. During his lengthy term as Roman king from 1410–11 to 1433, an imperial coronation could have followed the Council of Constance's conclusion in 1417–18. Such an event was indeed on the horizon and had been contemplated by the court. However, Sigismund's engagement with the ill-fated Council of Basel and the ultimate failure of the conciliar approach cast a shadow over the emperorship of the last of the Luxembourger emperors.

Hönsch's comprehensive biography adeptly amalgamated the components of imperial action. However, the focus here is more pointedly directed towards

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19 Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, *De ortu*, 58–59. English translation: Izbicki and Nederman, *Three Tracts*, 95–112.
20 Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, *De ortu*, 60–69.

the councils and imperial reform.[21] Regarding Sigismund's imperial coronation, Hermann Herre's compilation found in the volume of the Reichstag records[22] held sway for an extended period. Nonetheless, the attempt to reconstruct the reality of the day of Pentecost 1433, as undertaken there, was hampered by the favored analysis of the late medieval coronation ordo. We do not know for certain whether this text was indeed utilized for the imperial coronation. The epistolary and historiographical sources do not confirm this with any conclusiveness.

Only recently have the Italian campaign and imperial coronation of Sigismund garnered the requisite scrutiny in in-depth examinations by Péter Kovács[23] and Veronika Proske.[24] Kovács and Proske dispel the notion of a seemingly unequivocal reality of the event through successful individual analyses of the numerous and highly diverse written, visual, and musical sources. These documents unveil a vibrant panorama or a polyphonic symphony, thus providing a varied foundation for an understanding of the events of 1431 to 1433. In contrast, Duncan Hardy's essay on Sigismund's emperorship is notably concise.[25]

In six points, I explore the theme of "emperorship as a figure of order" for Sigismund. In doing so, I must extend my temporal scope beyond the recently extensively researched final six years of Sigismund's life.

(1) Responsibility and Imperial Kingship: In the 1390s, as king of Hungary, Sigismund called upon the Christian community to organize defenses against the Ottomans. The Hungarian army, however, joined by crusaders mainly from Burgundy, suffered a crushing defeat at Nicopolis in 1396. Sigismund narrowly escaped capture. He upheld his commitment to the crusade until the end of his life. Even in his last year, while fatally ill, he supposedly expressed his intention not to pass away before embarking on a crusade to the Holy Land.[26] Following his election and subsequent establishment as Roman king in 1410–1411, Sigismund renewed his dedication to Latin Christianity. Despite limited means, he engaged with personal charisma in preparing for the Council of Constance. Martin Kintzinger and other researchers have meticulously studied Sigismund's extensive travels in Western Europe, as well as his active involvement in the Council.[27] Until 1414, Sigismund effectively pursued the Roman king's responsibility to

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21 Hoensch, *Sigismund*, 371–99.

22 Herre, *Reichstagsakten*, 701–848.

23 Kovács, "Coronation"; Kovács, *König Sigismund*.

24 Proske, *Romzug*; Proske, *"Pro duobus."*

25 Hardy, "Emperorship."

26 Beckmann, *Reichstagsakten*, 259–64, cit. 263.

27 Kintzinger, *Westbindungen*.

reform the Holy Roman Church. He consistently motivated monarchs, nobles, and clergy from different regions of Latin Christianity to participate in the Council. Rarely in the late Middle Ages was the will of a Roman king asserted so forcefully beyond his imperial borders. Sigismund subsequently augmented his Hungarian kingship with the Roman kingship and later the Roman emperorship. This dominion over multiple realms established a composite and even imperial kingship. The official title emphasized the superior authority of the Roman king and emperor preceding the Hungarian royal title, symbolizing kingship over various realms. His documents' *intitulationes*, following the dignity of Roman king or emperor (Latin with plural genitive: *rex / imperator Romanorum*), presented his kingship over Hungary, Dalmatia, and Croatia, followed by "etc." (in the singular genitive for the names of countries). After Sigismund had attained the Bohemian kingship, the chancery appended the kingship of Bohemia following Hungary and preceding Dalmatia and Croatia. Sigismund's second significant Hungarian seal specified the scope of his kingship as Hungary, Dalmatia, Croatia, Bosnia with Herzegovina (Latin: *Rama*), Serbia, Galicia, Volhynia (Latin: *Lodomeria*), Cumania, and Bulgaria.[28]

(2) Familial Bonds: Sigismund's ascent to the Hungarian throne and his entry into the politics of the Holy Roman Empire were initially shaped by family negotiations and considerations concerning his elder half-brother Wenceslas and his nephews Jobst and Prokop. Wenceslas, as the heir to Emperor Charles IV's throne, had assumed kingship over both the Holy Roman Empire and Bohemia. Even after having been deposed as Roman king by the prince electors in 1400, he continued to assert his claim to the Roman kingship. From Sigismund's election as Roman king in 1410 until Wenceslas' death in 1419, this resulted in an unprecedented and delicate duality. Sigismund demonstrated a flexible disposition, adhering to or diverging from binding agreements depending on circumstances. Early agreements between Wenceslas and Sigismund, opposing King Ruprecht, attest to this. In 1402, as king of Hungary and Vicar General of the Roman Empire, Sigismund informed Giangaleazzo Visconti of the settlement among the four Luxembourg princes and the impending campaign in Italy, wherein Wenceslas would participate as *rex Romanorum*.[29] The division of the Roman emperorship and Roman kingship was repeatedly contemplated within the Luxembourg family. Initially, in 1410, between Wenceslas and Jobst,[30]

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28   Kondor, "Two Crowns."

29   Weizsäcker, *Reichstagsakten*, 190–92.

30   Leuschner, "Wahlpolitik," 552; Hoensch, *Sigismund*, 152.

and subsequently in 1411, between Wenceslas and Sigismund. While distinctions between father and son existed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (such as between Emperor Frederick II and King Henry (VII) and between Emperor Charles IV and King Wenceslas), the functional partition among brothers was novel. The plan was for Wenceslas to retain the Roman imperial dignity, the imperial regalia, and his kingship over Bohemia. Sigismund upheld his promise not to seek the imperial crown during Wenceslas' lifetime.[31] Noteworthy was the agreed separation of the Roman emperorship and Roman kingship. This evolution would have rendered the imperial dignity a mere ornamental distinction for a Bohemian king, lacking imperial agency within the empire and Christianity.

(3) *Defensor et protector*: Sigismund asserted this agency as Roman king. Throughout the preparations for and course of the Council of Constance, he functioned as protector and defender of the Church, as well as of the Council itself. During the Council's rituals, the Roman king presented himself adorned in imperial regalia *(in habitu imperiali)* and seated prominently at the southern crossing pillar of Constance's cathedral. In terms of rank, Sigismund held a position above the nations, though he was de facto limited to the German nation. For the council, he adopted a distinctive visual depiction, wherein a prince aims the tip of a bare sword at the king's head or crown. Werner Paravicini referred to this depiction, observed during the royal Christmas service or princely enfeoffments, as the "Constance gesture."[32] Sigismund embraced a ritual that had been pioneered by his father Charles IV. During the Christmas service, the ruler read the Gospel of Luke's account of Jesus' birth with an unsheathed sword, akin to Augustus, whose decree marked the inception of Christian salvation history.[33] Sigismund's dramatic entrance at the beginning of the Council of Constance was of such significance that he endured considerable hardships during the hastened procession to Constance, and he instructed Pope John (XXIII), present at the event, to await his arrival. Achim Thomas Hack characterized the grand entrance before the Council in the following words: "At the seventh reading during Matins and the first Mass, Sigismund, donning the liturgical attire of a deacon and accompanied by candle bearers, ascended the cathedral pulpit and, with his sword unsheathed, recited the Gospel *Exiit edictum*

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31 *Nach dem keiserriche und siner wirdikeite nicht stehen noch werben noch uns der annemen oder underwinden.* Kerler, *Reichstagsakten*, 102–6.

32 Paravicini, "Schwert," 279–304.

33 Heimpel, "Weihnachtsdienst auf den Konzilien," 388–411; Heimpel, "Königlicher Weihnachtsdienst," 131–206.

a Caesare Augusto."[34] Thus, Roman royalty laid the groundwork for the Council to reunify Latin Christianity. While the council did not address all the formidable challenges, the election of Martin V (1417–1431) in 1417 marked the end of the papal schism and a return to the papal office's singular authority. It is perplexing that Martin's return to Rome in 1420 did not lead to Sigismund's elevation as Roman emperor after Sigismund's endorsement by the new pope. While the chancellery was already planning to give the emperor a novel emblematic, the opportunity was ripe after Wenceslas' demise in 1419.

(4) Ritual Dynamics: The previously mentioned "Constance gesture" exemplifies Sigismund's mastery of ritual. His flair for attire and ceremony is evident in various contexts. Yet, Sigismund also fostered the creation of new symbols and signs for the imperial imagery.[35] In 1415, he commissioned a mural fresco in Frankfurt, the place of the royal elections, to depict the new quaternion system.[36] Post the emperor, empire, and prince electors, this fresco integrated dukes, margraves, landgraves, burgraves, counts, nobles, knights, towns, villages, and peasants as representatives of the empire in groups of four. While the rationale behind selecting and combining these 40 members remains enigmatic, this societal hierarchy illustrates a noteworthy innovation. It intertwined the responsibilities of the king and elector, as formulated in the Golden Bull of 1356, with the medieval community of princes, forming an elite action group of the empire. Numerous depictions since the fifteenth century underscore the integrative power of this model, linking its constituents to the emperor and empire's distinctive position within salvation history. Sigismund's influence extended beyond the structure of quaternions. The double-headed eagle with a halo, symbolizing emperorship, also traces back to him. Its significance is evident from an entry in the "Hauskanzleiregistraturbuch." In November 5, 1417, six days prior to Martin V's papal election, the protonotary Johannes Kirchen ordered two imperial majesty seals *(sigilla imperialis majestatis)* from a goldsmith, specifying the double-headed eagle as the seal's image.[37] In Sigismund's imperial seal since 1433, the intricate idea of the double-headed eagle is codified into an enduring iconographic order. On the obverse, Sigismund presents himself

34   Hack, *Empfangszeremoniell*, 567.
35   Kintzinger, "Zeichen," 365–69; Scales, "Illuminated Reich," 73–92.
36   Schubert, "Quaternionen," 1–63; Hoffmann, *Darstellungen*, 53–58.
37   Altmann, *Regesta Imperii*, no. 2662a; Sickel, "Geschichte," 14. Archival Manuscript: Vienna, Öster-reichisches Staatsarchiv, Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, RK Reichsregister F Hauskanzleiregistraturbuch Kaiser Sigismunds, 1417-1418, fol. 72r. Accessed March 17, 2024: https://www.archivinformationssystem.at/bild.aspx?VEID=4089040&DEID=10&SQNZNR=151.

with five coats of arms: the haloed double-headed eagle representing the Holy Roman Empire and the coats of arms of Luxembourg, Bohemia, Hungary, and Upper Hungary (patriarchal cross). The reverse bears only the haloed double eagle, accompanied by a programmatic inscription referencing the eagle of the prophet Ezekiel, symbolizing the sanctity of the *imperium Romanum* and the interweaving of the spiritual and temporal realms. The inscription reads "The eagle of Ezekiel has been sent to the bride from heaven. Higher than the eagle flies no seer and no prophet." *(Aquila Ezechielis sponse missa est de celis. Volat ipsa sine meta, quo nec vates nec propheta evolabit alcius).*[38] Bettina Pferschy-Maleczek delves into the mystical and allegorical dimensions of this symbolism in an extensive article. Based on the vision of Ezekiel (Ezek 1:4–28), the eagle signifies both the fourth gospel and the fourth and final world empire, the *imperium Romanum.*[39]

(5) Union of the two greatest lights: Using these words, the papal secretary Cencio Rustici extolled the liturgical harmony between the pope and the emperor in his celebratory oration during Sigismund's coronation as emperor. As was customary for this genre, the accolades for the new Rome and for Pope Eugene IV as a "celestial man and earthly deity" *(celestis homo et terrenus deus)* resonated with grandeur.[40] With great ceremony, Sigismund, 65 years of age at the time, made his entry into Rome on Ascension Day in 1433 and encountered the pope there. A few days later, the imperial coronation took place in St. Peter's Basilica during Pentecost. The recent works by Kovács and Proske provide detailed accounts from eyewitnesses and distant chroniclers, offering insights into an imperial coronation that shared essential elements with the models of the fourteenth century. Noteworthy is the repeated mention by Gimignano Inghirami, dean of the Sacra Rota and a man who was deeply involved in the ceremony, of the new emperor's struggle with gout. Due to this ailment, Sigismund needed assistance and was provided a small seat near the altar.[41] Why did Sigismund, a Luxembourger, subject himself to over two years of challenging and at times degrading travel through Italy? A little more than a decade earlier, after the successful conclusion of the Council of Constance, he could have celebrated his journey to the Roman tomb of the Apostles as the successful protector of the new elected pope. The motivation to travel to Rome was evidently driven by the changes in the papal office in 1431 and the threat to the established principle of

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38   Allgeier, "Adler-Siegel." 37; Bleisteiner, "Doppeladler," 4–52.

39   Pferschy-Maleczek, "Nimbus," 448–50.

40   Cencio Rustici, "Oratio," 157–58. Cf. Proske, *Romzug*, 192–93.

41   Guasti, "Ricordanze," 46–47.

recurring councils of the Roman Church, as outlined in the Constance Council decree "Frequens." The rejection of the Council of Basel by Pope Eugene IV and the Council Fathers' plans to depose him led Sigismund to resume his diplomatic endeavors from before the Council of Constance. His aim was now to secure the imperial crown, which would grant him greater influence over the council proceedings. The well-documented negotiation process sheds light on the extensive efforts Sigismund undertook to maintain his authority over the church and council. The initial period from the start of the Italian campaign on April 1, 1431 to the acquisition of the Iron Crown in Milan on November 25, 1431 was relatively brief. In contrast, the time leading up to the Roman imperial coronation dragged on tediously. The succinct account by the Liège chronicler Cornelius Menghers of Zantfliet, who described Sigismund's move to Rome to obtain the third crown as the holder of already two crowns, presents the extended duration as part of the lawful progression from Italian king to Roman emperor.[42] However, the reality was far more demanding. In the end, the mutual benefits for the emperor and the pope prevailed, as Eugene IV's rule remained tenuous. By accepting Eugene as the person to crown him, Sigismund reinforced Eugene's authority. Thus, Sigismund's entry into Rome and the imperial coronation were staged as a continuous display of harmonious agreement. In an encomium of Sigismund, possibly delivered at the Council of Basel, a Bolognese orator recalled the closeness between the pope and emperor, characterized by kisses, tears of joy, and overwhelming ardor. The bond was so strong that onlookers perceived their distinct bodies as a singular entity, "marvelous in our eyes."[43] The musical composition "Supremum est mortalibus bonum," a motet by Guillaume Dufay, a member of the papal chapel, praised the pope and king as peacemakers and celebrated the long-awaited peace as the ultimate good for humanity and a divine gift.[44] However, amidst the abundant praise, it is important not to overlook the fact that Italian humanists also subjected Emperor Sigismund to ridicule. A mere four days after the imperial coronation, Poggio Bracciolini wrote a letter to Niccolò Niccoli in which he gave an eyewitness account of Sigismund's time in Rome. The letter compared the medieval imperial coronation tradition, stemming from Charlemagne,

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42   Zantfliet, "Chronicon," 433.

43   Edited by Proske, *Romzug*, 184.

44   Text, accessed March 17, 2024: https://www.diamm.ac.uk/documents/174/08_Du_Fay_Supremum_est_mortalibus_bonum.pdf. Music, accessed March 17, 2024: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4x85jsfbiVQ.

to the Roman empire of antiquity. Poggio's disdain was directed at the term "king of the Romans," which the present emperors adopted even before their consecration and coronation. He perceived this term as perverse and believed it originated from barbarians unfamiliar with ancient history and the power of words. In this manner, Poggio derogated Emperor Sigismund as an uninformed individual. This remark from the scholar dismissed the four-century-long self-assuredness of Roman royalty as a privileged monarchy within Latin Christianity. The glory of Roman antiquity now became the benchmark for a late medieval period that highly valued the legitimizing "power of words" *(vis verborum)*.[45]

(6) Recollected emotions: Prior to his coronation, Sigismund had been accepted into the community of the canons at St. Peter's in the church of Santa Maria in Turri. Following the imperial coronation, on the Tiber bridge, he elevated numerous followers to knighthood in the traditional manner. A letter documents as many as 180 honors.[46] After the knighting at the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, this elevation during the imperial coronation held the highest distinction for a Christian knight. This triumph might still have been rooted in the belief articulated by Emperor Frederick Barbarossa in 1155 that he possessed the right to rule over Italy and be crowned emperor as a conqueror. Notably, no German princes or Hungarian magnates were present at Sigismund's imperial coronation. Consequently, numerous knightly and patrician attendants carried their knightly pride back to the land north of the Alps, enhancing the memory of the 1433 imperial coronation. This was accompanied by numerous imperial confirmations of privileges, noble grants, coat of arms enhancements, favors, and legitimizations of illegitimate birth.[47] The news of the imperial coronation prompted celebrations in German cities, with bells ringing, bonfires blazing, and grand processions taking place in imperial cities.[48] The response in Nuremberg is meticulously documented, where accounts detailed the costs and benefits of the imperial coronation for the city. A decade earlier, Sigismund had entrusted the imperial regalia to Nuremberg's Holy Spirit Hospital in perpetuity. They arrived in 1424. The Nuremberg City Council sent a legation to Rome for the imperial coronation, led by Erhard Haller and city clerk Ulrich Truchsess. The city's records chronicled expenses of 2296 ¼ florins and 8 pounds of Nuremberg

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45 *Existimo autem hoc a barbaris derivasse, qui priscas historias ignorarunt, neque verborum vim tenuerunt.* Poggio Bracciolini, *Lettere*, 122–24, cit. 124.

46 Herre, *Reichstagsakten*, 844.

47 Kovács, "Coronation," 126–34.

48 Herre, *Reichstagsakten*, 844.

Heller for the legation's 14-week absence.[49] In return, the envoys secured 23 imperial privileges, including nine with a Golden Bull. One of these documents confirmed the perpetual residence of the imperial regalia in Nuremberg. This golden-bull document from the new emperor upheld the king's privilege from 1423, which had previously only been confirmed with a wax seal. In total, the imperial city of Nuremberg held 27 rulers' charters with golden bulls issued between 1313 and 1717. Remarkably, a third of these charters dated back to the day of Sigismund's coronation as emperor alone.[50] The expenses associated with issuing eight golden bulls and 14 charters under majesty's seal on coronation day were meticulously recorded: 600 ducats for the imperial chancery, 200 ducats for the gold used in the bulls, 40 ducats for the goldsmith, and 50 ducats in gratuities for the chancery clerks.[51] With this extraordinary abundance of costly gold bulls, Nuremberg compensated for not having received the renowned "Golden Bull" of Emperor Charles IV and the Electors in the fourteenth century. Of the seven originals of this pivotal document, six were reaffirmed at the time with the imperial gold bull, while only Nuremberg relied on the more affordable wax seal version. Five members of the Nuremberg delegation, identified by name, were among the newly knighted individuals in 1433. Ulrich Truchsess and Erhard and Paul Haller, were granted an imperial confirmation and augmentation of their coat of arms.[52] The benefits of Sigismund's reign for Nuremberg were commemorated in the renowned artworks by Albrecht Dürer in the early sixteenth century, dedicated to the shrines of relics kept in the city. Alongside the portrait of Charlemagne, credited as the originator of the regalia, stood Sigismund, to whom Nuremberg owed the preservation of these cherished artifacts.[53] Nonetheless, the jubilation over the imperial triumph in Germany was coupled with a disconcerting sentiment that the Curia had treated the emperor with disrespect. Eberhard Windeck presented a thought-provoking anecdote that likely was not considered in the historical reconstruction of the events within the Roman St. Peter's church. Windeck's intention was to evoke emotions through his narrative. Allegedly, the cardinal designated for the coronation had questioned the emperor in advance about his legitimacy of birth and piety.

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49 *Die Chroniken*, 451–52.

50 *Nürnberg – Kaiser und Reich*, 26; *Norenberc*, 62–63, 66–67.

51 *Die Chroniken*, 451–52.

52 Kovács, "Coronation," 130–32; Altmann, *Regesta Imperii*, no. 9459–9461. Cf. *Die Chroniken*, 304, 387.

53 Accessed March 17, 2024: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sigismund,_Holy_Roman_Emperor#/media/File:Albrecht_D%C3%BCrer_082.jpg.

Sigismund affirmed his legitimacy but then added that the cardinal himself was neither pious nor fit for coronation due to his alleged act of mutilating a woman's breasts. According to this story, the cardinal in charge then carelessly placed the crown on the emperor's head during the coronation, causing it to tilt to the right side. In response, as mentioned earlier, the pope straightened the crown with his right foot, adhering to custom.[54] This tale of the papal foot-adjustment roused sentiments in Germany. The story contrasted moral righteousness and concern for Christianity with the perceived moral decay within the Curia and the popes' perceived arrogance. This account, passed down even during the Reformation, fueled the grievances *(gravamina)* of the German nation during the late Middle Ages. Consequently, the image emerged of the virtuous emperor humiliated by a cunning pope.

Conclusion

In her analysis of Sigismund's political system, Sabine Wefers evaluates the role of the emperorship as follows: While the emperorship was undoubtedly a form of "elevated kingship," its practical function was essentially equivalent to regular kingship.[55] This assessment seems accurate, but it underestimates the legitimizing significance of imperial dignity for the emperors of the late Middle Ages. Hence, the approach taken in this article diverges from examining the utilitarian aspect of the emperorship and instead proceeds from the perspective of the emperorship as a splendid symbol of order. Consequently, alongside modes of action, there arises a focus on interpretations, perceptions, rituals, and their impacts. In terms of functionality, the limitations of imperial authority were repeatedly demonstrated during the later Middle Ages. Nonetheless, no other monarch would have undertaken Sigismund's ambitious efforts to organize Latin Christianity and enable the Council of Constance. The institution of emperorship provided a framework for a vision of unity even amid enduring diversity.

In this paper, I have outlined three conceptions of emperorship, delineated nine characteristics typical of emperors, and presented six distinct profiles of Emperor Sigismund. A key argument of this article centered on the fluidity in the conception and structure of empire in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

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54   Windeck, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 343–44.

55   Wefers, *System*, 213.

This openness was largely attributed to the frequent interruptions in the reigns of emperors. Only the Roman kingship succeeded in establishing lasting continuity. A detailed comparison of the reigns of Roman kings and emperors reveals that imperial rule between 1250 and 1519 was more of an exception than the norm. Consequently, each late medieval imperial coronation should be seen in its exclusivity rather than as a recurring pattern. This perspective lends significance to Sigismund's delayed decision to seek coronation as emperor from the pope, underscoring his understanding and vision of himself as the defender of the Roman Church as well as the protector of the Council. Thus, Sigismund's stance is revealed within a comprehensive framework of emperorship, allocating roles to the participants in the reenactment of crowning and sacring as established rituals. Nevertheless, the significant interruptions in late medieval imperial coronations led many of Sigismund's contemporaries to perceive and portray imperial authority in varying ways.[56]

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56 This paper was initially presented in German. I improved the English translation by making use of the "rephrase" feature on chat.openai.com.

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