

**Reply**

by Anne Huijbers

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**Linguaggi dell'imperialità  
nell'Italia del tardo medioevo**

a cura di Pietro Silanos e Gian Maria Varanini

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## Reply

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This essay responds briefly to contributions by Éloïse Adde-Michel Margue, Étienne Doublier and Giovanni Francesco Contel discussing the volume *Emperors and imperial discourse in Italy*.

Middle Ages, 13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Italy, Holy Roman Emperors, Law, Diplomacy, political theory.

I am very happy that *Reti Medievali Rivista* dedicates attention to the volume *Emperors and imperial discourse in Italy* and I thank my colleagues for their kind and insightful reactions to the volume. In this short reply, I cannot address all the input they gave, but I will first briefly revisit the main goal of the volume, and then I will comment on a few of the points raised by my colleagues.

The volume *Emperors and imperial discourse in Italy* aimed to question the traditional view of a 'declining' late-medieval Empire that was little respected in Italy. Older research presented the late-medieval emperors of the Holy Roman Empire as shadows of their early and high-medieval predecessors: military weak and dependent on diplomacy and alliances, they had no 'real' power in Italy: they moved through the peninsula as if on a chessboard, directed by the Italian power constellations. However, as Claudia Märzl warns in the conclusions to the volume, we cannot easily compare the realities of the late-medieval Empire with those of the early and high Middle Ages, since there is a great increase of sources in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These sources present us with a variety of perspectives from both actors and observers that is absent in earlier centuries. If one compares, for instance, the quantity and quality of sources on the imperial coronations of the fifteenth century with those before the fourteenth century, the difference is striking. Whereas for early and high medieval imperial coronations in Rome we have to work with a handful of sources (mostly short and sporadically of direct witnesses) we possess at least 25 contemporary accounts of the last imperial coronation in Rome in 1452, including several detailed eyewitness accounts.<sup>1</sup> This

<sup>1</sup> See for an overview of the sources on Frederick III's imperial coronation: Hack, *Das Empfangszeremoniell bei mittelalterlichen Papst-Kaiser-Treffen*.

increase of sources has not been considered sufficiently. So, Märtl asks: “What impression [of the late-medieval Holy Roman Empire] would we get if only rulers’ charters, historiographical texts and a few panegyric or polemical poems were handed down from the late Middle Ages?” (p. 330) Moreover, was it really a novelty of the late Middle Ages, that the emperors were dependent on diplomacy and alliances and mainly performed their power through rituals?

Different kinds of late-medieval texts that have been handed down in large quantities – and nevertheless have been largely ignored by older research – enable us to take on new perspectives on the late-medieval Holy Roman Empire and its relation with Italy: humanistic oratory, Latin and vernacular historiography, texts on political theory and legal doctrine. The volume can indeed be considered as an exploration of imperial discourses in sources that await more and further study. More dissertations and monographic studies (as the one by Veronika Proske focused on Sigismund) would be welcome and could deepen the research lines opened up in the volume.

As Étienne Doublier has observed, the volume does not provide a clear definition of what is meant by an “imperial discourse”, but the articles in the volume show what could be meant by the term. In order to increase our understanding of “imperial discourses”, it would be helpful to make a list of Latin keywords that mark the political lexicon of the period and to try to define (and thus translate) them accurately: this, however, immediately asks for a thorough study, since the keywords had shifting meanings according to the author using them, the context in which the word pops up, the period in which it was used and so on. A first step in describing, for instance, the (changing) meaning of the term *res publica* in this period, is made in the contributions by Carole Mabboux and Anna Modigliani. It would be worthwhile to extend this research with a quantitative approach: the digitization of Latin chronicles and political treatises makes this possible. One could, for instance, compare whether Italian authors used the term differently or more often than Germanophone chroniclers. What other pivotal words are used in connection with the term *res publica*?

As Éloïse Adde and Michel Margue rightly point out, the exact meaning of the term *imperium* in late-medieval texts should also be subject to the same kind of analysis. This is not explicitly done in the volume, but again, the various contributions demonstrate that the term could take on different meanings.<sup>2</sup> Adde and Margue indeed recall that the *imperium* manifested itself concretely as, for instance, a legitimizing resource (Cola di Rienzo), as a guarantor of established privileges (Charles IV in Florence), as a means of imposing a change of power (Henry VII and the exiles), as a symbolic model to be imitated or as a vague ideal of the past. When trying to define what contemporaries meant, when they referred to the *imperium* generally or more

<sup>2</sup> For a general introduction to the polyvalent usage of the term in the Middle Ages and for useful references to this question, see the recent article by Christoph Mauntel, “Beyond Rome.”

specifically the *imperium romanum*, we enter into the research on the imperial idea, or *Kaiseridee*, in the Middle Ages, a subject that has been intensively researched,<sup>3</sup> although the late Middle Ages mostly come off poorly in general overviews on the theme.

Beside chronicles and political treatises, scholarship which aims to understand “imperial discourses” should also continue examining the Latin orations that Italian humanists dedicated to the emperor. The appendix to Riccardo Pallotti’s article shows that this genre remains to be more fully explored. What themes do the humanists develop when addressing the emperors? What is rhetorical and what is political in these orations? And what are the keywords that regularly come up? Do all humanists present the emperor as the wished-for defender of peace on the Italian peninsula – and the Christian world at large – as the orations examined by Pallotti suggest? Regarding humanist orations dedicated to emperors or with discourses on the Holy Roman Empire, I would also like to stress the importance of the availability of translations that can be used in teaching, to generate interest in the subject and to increase the visibility of the late-medieval imperial topic. In this respect, I draw attention to the work of Michael von Cotta-Schönberg, who makes many little-known texts, including orations, of Enea Silvio Piccolomini available in English translations, so that a larger audience can get acquainted with his efforts in the service of the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>4</sup>

This about “discourses”. The volume, however, is not only about discourses but also about the realities hidden behind the abstract name of Empire in this period: what networks created links between the German- and Italian-speaking world? Len Scales and Claudia Märzl already pointed at the importance of reconstructing the entanglements of the Empire north and south of the Alps, which were constituted not only through the politics of noble marriage, but also through students, merchants, mercenaries and pilgrims. The importance of this aspect is indeed emphasized in the reactions by Contel, Doublier and Adde/Margue. A greater awareness of those networks increases our understanding of the interconnectedness of the subalpine and northalpine areas. As Doublier pointed out, the sharp separation between a subalpine and a northalpine cultural and political space can then be relativized. The recent publication of a volume dedicated to Charles IV and Italy can be considered as an important follow-up of this research line, since it pays ample attention to this interconnectedness, including the networks of Charles IV in Italy.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Compare the 67 hits with the word “*Kaiseridee*” and the 23 hits with the word “*idea imperiale*” in the Regesta Imperii OPAC (< <http://opac.regesta-imperii.de/> >). To list just a few: Schramm, “Die Kaiseridee des Mittelalters;” Duprè Theseider, *L’idea imperiale di Roma*; Fried, “Imperium,” and more specifically, for instance: Zeillinger, “Kaiseridee, Rom und Rompolitik;” or Heidemann, “Die Kaiseridee Heinrichs VII.”

<sup>4</sup> Von Cotta-Schönberg, *Collected Orations of Pope Pius II*.

<sup>5</sup> Rando and Schlothuber (eds.), *Carlo IV nell’Italia del Trecento*.

With Giovanni Contel, I agree that we need to assess to what extent there was a certain chronological “continuity” of these networks in the time period under scrutiny here. Gerd Tellenbach and Herbert Grundmann emphasised for earlier periods that there was not *one* Holy Roman Empire: the institution was born anew with dynastic changes and after several interregna.<sup>6</sup> Francesco Somaini already pointed out that there literally was no *regnum Italicum*, which Henry VII could simply “revive” when he came to Italy in 1310 after a long interregnum. He had to start from scratch. Even the so-called “iron crown” was gone and had to be made anew.<sup>7</sup> How was this for his fourteenth- and fifteenth-century successors? To what extent could they build on and benefit from the networks their predecessors had established in Italy?

For an increasing understanding of the late-medieval Empire, it is necessary to further uncover who were the persons that literally embodied the Empire in late-medieval Italy. In his contribution, which is rich of useful references, Giovanni Contel recalls that the men who made politics, such as chancellors, vicars and ambassadors often circulated widely. He points out that, although several case studies of Italians in the service of late-medieval emperors already exist, the bigger picture still needs to be drawn. In other words, we should link what exactly Cino di Pistoia meant for Henry VII, Marsilio di Padua for Ludwig the Bavarian, Cola di Rienzo or Petrarch for Charles IV, Eneo Silvio Piccolomini for Frederick III, etc.

Lining out a research agenda, Claudia Märthl mentioned three interrelated complexes that should be in the centre of future research (*Überlieferung - Menschen - Ereignisse*): beside the sources that have come down to us, the persons and networks that formed the Empire, also the research on the concrete events and actions of the emperors in Italy has to be elaborated. To this, I would like to add two aspects. It is important to question, with Adde and Margue, whether, in coping with urban powers, the Empire really functioned so differently north and south of the Alps. In their reaction, Adde and Margue bring in the case of the late-medieval city of Metz, which presented itself and its hinterland as an Italian “republic”. They speak of the “co-production of power” of Empire and city: the emperors of the House of Luxembourg supported the local patriciate in Metz, which guaranteed an important degree of stability. The inextricable links between Empire and city were then praised in local historiography.

Furthermore, as pointed out by Doublier, in order to better understand how the late-medieval Empire worked, we have to move away from *Verfassungsgeschichte* toward a *Kulturgeschichte des Politischen*, which takes into account the importance of rituals in the process of consensus-building. Therefore, I am working on a monograph on the imperial coronations in medieval

<sup>6</sup> Tellenbach, “Kaiser, Rom und Renovatio,” 202: “War nicht auch im Mittelalter... mehrmals ein neues Kaisertum geschaffen worden?”

<sup>7</sup> Somaini, “Henri VII et le cadre italien,” 397-428.

Rome. Along this line, more attention could also be paid to the coronations in Milan. The recent edition of the ordines for these coronations by Achim Thomas Hack could indeed form an incentive for such a project.<sup>8</sup> Henry VII, Louis IV, Charles IV, and Sigismund were all crowned in Milan before the imperial coronation in Rome – and the somewhat odd coronation with the iron crown of Frederick III and Eleonora of Portugal in Rome shortly before their imperial coronation only stresses its importance. It seems that these Milanese events indeed were a *sine qua non* for the acceptance of the so-called “King of the Romans” in Italy and a prerequisite for the use of the title *cesar* for the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, used by, for instance, Albertino Mussato.

A final point that I would like to add, is the importance of including the possible influence of imperial women into future considerations. It is known that the history of the Empire in the Middle Ages is traditionally almost exclusively focused on the deeds, words and networks of emperors and kings and their male allies. But there were also women. Amalie Fössel emphasized that (at least for the high Middle Ages), the emperor and his wife ideally governed as a team, as the name *consors regni* or *consors imperii* for the *regina* (or *imperatrix*) *Romanorum* indicated.

The historiographical idea that the Holy Roman Empire was in decline after 1250 has, in fact, also influenced the historiography on the female representatives of the Empire. Although a monographic study of “Roman” queens and empresses in the late Middle Ages is still lacking, historians seem to agree that their agency and political role had largely disappeared by this time. To explain this, they pointed, among other things, at the constitutional change of the Holy Roman Empire, which changed from a hereditary monarchy to an electoral monarchy. The “Queen of the Romans” was no longer automatically the mother of the new king and, as a result, she lost her central importance for the continuity of the empire. Franz-Reiner Erkens indeed connected the disappearance of the title *consors* for the imperial women with the disappearance of their influence on the *Reichspolitik*. But such conclusions are premature.

Rino Modonutti already emphasized the presence of Margarete of Brabant, the wife of Henry of Luxembourg, in the works of Albertino Mussato. In a recent article I have drawn further attention to the important diplomatic and moral role played by Margarete of Brabant on the *Romzug* that started in 1310. She helped her husband build a political network in Italy and acted as merciful mediator to solve conflicts.<sup>9</sup> Both Albertino Mussato and Giovanni Cermenate used the title *consors* for Margarete of Brabant: so, this title had not disappeared in the late Middle Ages – as some scholars have assumed. Whether it was used for other emperors’ wives in this period is still to be researched. Indeed, in general, the discourses on imperial women are a field

<sup>8</sup> Hack, *Die Ordines*.

<sup>9</sup> Huijbers, “De barmhartige Augusta.”

to further explore. Scholars like Achim Thomas Hack, Amalie Fössel, and Katherine Walsh already emphasized the necessity of archival work to better understand the roles of Barbara of Cilli and Eleonora of Portugal aside their husbands Sigismund and Frederick III – but this applies in general and does not relate exclusively to the Italian peninsula.<sup>10</sup> What is important here is that, in order to better understand the workings of the *konsensuale Herrschaft* at the top of the Empire (both north and south of the Alps), we should not forget the possible role of the “Queens (or Empresses) of the Romans” – as the case of Margaret of Brabant makes clear.

In conclusion: although the reactions to the volume rightly show that there is still much scholarly work to be done, I am confident that the volume has contributed to a re-appreciation of the imperial theme in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy and has shown what research lines can be deepened and continued in the near future.

<sup>10</sup> Hack, “Eleonore von Portugal;” Föbel, “Die Korrespondenz der Königin Barbara;” Walsh, “Deutschsprachige Korrespondenz.”

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