

Introduction

AN EMPEROR'S LIBRARY

*T*he Hofburg was the winter palace of the Habsburgs and is now Vienna's main tourist attraction. Horse-drawn carriages take sightseers through its arches and along the narrow streets of the neighbouring old city. Crowds press through tight alleys, spilling carelessly into the traffic when they spot the white noses of the Lipizzaner horses in their stables. Apart from the green-domed St Michael's wing, built in the nineteenth century, the palace exterior is unimpressive, comprising consecutive courtyards, now used as car parks, with surrounding facades in a generally subdued Baroque style.

At least today's Hofburg is in good repair. Photographs and lantern slides from the time before 1918, when it was still a 'working palace', show fallen masonry, cracked walls, and broken windows. For much of its history, the Hofburg has been a building site. Successive emperors added on wings, tore down obstacles to improvement, and rebuilt in stone rather than wood. Until the late seventeenth century, the Hofburg was also integral to the city's defences and rested against one of Vienna's bastioned walls. The Ottoman Turks last set siege to the city in 1683. With their defeat, it was finally possible for Habsburg emperors to conceive of the Hofburg as a palace and ceremonial stage and not as a fortified residence.

At the heart of the Hofburg is the so-called Old Fort (Alte Burg). The reconstruction of the palace in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has built over it so that little trace of the original fabric of the Old Fort is visible today. Put up in the first half of the thirteenth century, the Old Fort was a massive stone keep, 50 metres (160 feet) square, with four towers, each topped with high-gabled roofs and finials. Despite its size, the interior of the Old Fort was bleak. Visitors complained of the courtyard within, which was insufficiently broad for a cart to turn, of the cramped chambers, mouldy staircases, and lack of tapestries on the walls. But the purpose of the Hofburg's Old Fort was not to impress by the luxury of its accommodation. It was intended to overawe the city and countryside beyond and to communicate a message of power.¹

The Old Fort became the first Habsburg emblem. In origin the Habsburgs were a Central European dynasty and Austria was their heartland. But in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they were also rulers of Spain and of Spain's possessions in the Low Countries, Italy, and the New World. Although by then militarily obsolete, the design of the Old Fort was reproduced in the great castles that the Habsburgs either commissioned or rebuilt in Spain—in Toledo and Madrid—and it was carried to the Americas. In Mexico, the block house with four towers was a mark of the power wielded by the first royal governors—lesser men had to be content with just two towers. In the Holy Roman Empire, over which the Habsburgs ruled as emperors, and which is very roughly where Austria, Germany, and the Czech Republic are today, ambitious princes also built four-tower keeps, as a way of communicating their own prestige.²

The Habsburgs were the first rulers whose power encompassed the world, and they achieved greatness by luck and by force. The four-tower keep was in the sixteenth century an expression of their physical mastery of a part of Europe and, by its reproduction overseas, evidence of their global dominion. But it was only one symbol among many that the Habsburgs deployed, for they conceived of their power as both something that they had been predestined for and part of the divine order in which the world was arranged. This required a subtler symbolism than a threat in stone.

The rebuilding of the Hofburg in the early eighteenth century, which saw the Old Fort finally disappear from the horizon, included the construction of the Court Library (Hofbibliothek). Previously, the imperial library had been housed in an abandoned friary in Vienna, in the wing of a private

palace, and in a wooden structure in the shadow of the Old Fort (on today's Josefsplatz). The librarians complained of the damp, the dust from the street, the inadequate lighting, and the fire hazard. But it was only during the long reign of Charles VI (1711–1740) that the Imperial Library found a permanent home on a space immediately south of what had been the Old Fort.³

The new library building was put up in the 1720s, and it remains much the same today, as Emperor Charles VI intended. Some two hundred thousand books and manuscripts were shelved in a single hall, 75 metres (250 feet) long. By this time, the collection included works on theology, church history, law, philosophy, science, and mathematics, and bound manuscripts written in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Armenian, and Coptic. Charles opened his library to scholars, although they had to apply for permission, and visiting hours were restricted to mornings. In return for this act of generosity, Charles imposed a tax on newspapers. Originally temporary, to cover the cost of building, the tax soon became permanent, being ostensibly dedicated to future acquisitions. Printers were also expected to furnish the library with copies of every book they produced. Since many Viennese printers also dealt in pornography, this was an obligation that was often shirked.⁴

In the centre of the library stands a life-size marble statue of Charles VI, portrayed as Hercules of the Muses. The domed ceiling above depicts his apotheosis or elevation to the heavens and celebrates his achievements with allegorical figures. Unlike George Washington, whose apotheosis is shown on the rotunda of the United States Capitol Building, no portrait of Emperor Charles stares down at us from the ceiling. Charles was still alive when the artist began work and so not yet received in heavenly glory. But a floating figure bearing a laurel crown waits for him, leaving us in no doubt that Charles will at his life's end be received in the company of the angels and will sit among them in the clouds.

The marble statue of Charles VI was joined on the floor of the library by sixteen statues of Habsburg emperors, kings, and archdukes, starting with the thirteenth-century King Rudolf and finishing with Charles II of Spain, who died in 1700. Marble statues are expensive items to commission, so most were taken from the Hofburg's store rooms and gardens. Over time, they were added to and swapped with statues in other imperial palaces. The earliest historian of the Court Library was critical of the original selection, for he considered too many of the sixteen statues to recall Habsburg rulers who had shown no special interest in study or learning. Clearly, he imagined

that a library should have something to do with books and scholarship. But this was a Court Library, and its purpose was different: to make a statement about the Habsburgs and their place in the divine ordering of the universe.⁵

The entire decoration of the library, including its ceiling, wall frescoes, and furniture, speaks to the greatness of the Habsburgs and to their limitless power. So the four large globes of the earth and heavens that stand beneath the central cupola are metaphors for the reach of Habsburg ambition. Each bookcase is flanked by double pillars, and the motif of the twin pillars is evident throughout the library's construction, most notably in the white marble and gilt columns at each end of the hall as well as on the building's exterior facade. They stand for the Pillars of Hercules and the Habsburg watchword 'Still Further', and thus for a dominion that was unconstrained by physical geography. Above, in the fresco of the apotheosis, are three classical goddesses, who bear a banner on which is written AEIOU. The acrostic can stand for many things, and scholars have suggested that there may be as many as three hundred different solutions and combinations. But all of them point to the greatness of the Habsburgs of Austria—hence in the acrostic's most common reading, 'Austria is to rule the whole world' (in Latin, *Austria Est Imperare Orbi Universae* or, in German, *Alles Erdreich Ist Österreich Untertan*).⁶

This was not, however, a vision of worldly dominion rooted in the exercise of political power and in physical coercion. Charles poses in his library as the patron of the sciences and arts, not as a warrior bent on conquest. The apotheosis celebrates Charles's virtues—his magnanimity, fame, splendour, and steadfastness. His martial victories are hinted at by showing the three-headed dog, Cerberus, crushed beneath the feet of Hercules, but otherwise Charles's military achievements are passed over. Even the frescoes on the theme of war are understated, extolling its opposites—harmony, order, and knowledge. Above all else, Charles intended to be celebrated as the author of peace and promoter of learning. The trompe l'oeil beneath the rotunda shows realistic figures in conversation, with each cluster representing one of the branches of knowledge to which Charles had brought life—anatomy, archaeology, botany, hydraulics, heraldry, numismatics, and even gnomonology, which is the art of making sundials.

The same historian who imagined that a library should be for books also considered the rotunda and frescoes to be an allegory of a library. It may well be, but allegories in the Baroque Age often contained several hidden

messages. With its statues of Habsburg emperors and champions, the repetitive double pillars, and the artfully placed globes, the library and its furnishings are also an allegory of the unlimited and timeless dominion of the Habsburg dynasty. But, the frescoes tell us, the world for which the dynasty strives is not only to be found in the bonds of earth but also in the transcendent world of knowledge and scholarly endeavour. Like the acrostic AEIOU, no single solution explained the complexity of the Habsburg mission or exhausted its possibilities.⁷

The Habsburgs' idea of their role in the world was built up gradually, with different episodes in the dynasty's history yielding new aspirations, all of which were woven together in a single skein of ideological assumptions. It was first conceived in religious terms. Back in the thirteenth century, King Rudolf of Habsburg (reigned 1273–1291) was known as a sacker of churches and despoiler of nunneries. But just two or three decades after his death, the tale circulated that Rudolf had one day chanced upon a priest hastening to bring the Host (Holy Communion or eucharist) to a dying man and had given him his horse. The story was repeated and embellished over the succeeding centuries, so that in recompense for his horse Rudolf received an earthly crown, with the eucharistic bread and wine now mystically anointing him at his coronation. Biblical passages were also seized upon to show that in return for speeding the Host on its way, Rudolf's heirs would themselves be nourished by the eucharist in accordance with a divine plan first explained in the Old Testament.⁸

Veneration of the Host lay at the centre of the Habsburg dynasty's religious observance, being played out in processions, pilgrimages, and church festivals. Any hurrying priest spotted by a Habsburg was likely to have a horse or carriage forced upon him. During the religious struggles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the meaning and significance of the eucharist was disputed by Protestants. The exaggerated respect for the Host demonstrated by successive Habsburg rulers stood as a symbol of their dedication to the Catholic Church and of their continued service as divine instruments on earth. Even in the final years of the Habsburg Empire, the association of the dynasty with the eucharist endured, being recalled not only in ritual observance but also in more mundane contexts. When asked in 1912 to provide a trophy for a Swiss rifle club, Emperor Franz Joseph sent a figurine of Rudolf dismounting from his horse to speed the priest's journey.⁹

The Habsburgs were intermittently rulers of the Holy Roman Empire after 1273 and almost continuously so from 1438 until the empire's demise in 1806. The Holy Roman Empire had been founded by Charlemagne in 800 CE but was considered the continuation of the Roman Empire of classical antiquity. To begin with, it was known simply as 'the Roman Empire'—the adjective 'Holy' was added in the thirteenth century, but there was never much consistency in usage. The Holy Roman Empire was reconstituted in the tenth century as a largely German empire, but this did not diminish the prestige attaching to the imperial title. The emperor continued to be seen as the direct successor of the Roman emperors of antiquity, as being in some way the counterpart of the pope in Rome, and as possessed of an authority that marked him out as superior to all other monarchs. Medieval prophecies that foretold an impending war between the angels and the devil's apprentice, the Antichrist, and of how 'the last emperor' would usher in a millennium of godly rule, added to the lustre of the imperial office. On this the Habsburgs built, extolling their future role in the imminent apocalypse. Emperor Maximilian I (ruled as king 1486–1508, as emperor 1508–1519) had his portrait duly painted to give him the reputed features of the last emperor, whom prophecies foretold would have 'a lofty forehead, high eyebrows, wide eyes, and an aquiline nose.'¹⁰

The last emperor was expected not only to take on the Antichrist but also to vanquish the Turks, liberate Istanbul (Constantinople) from their clutches, and free the holy city of Jerusalem from Muslim rule. Successive emperors advertised their commitment to a crusade against the infidel, by which they might not only fulfil prophecy but also demonstrate their leadership of Christendom and dedication to the ideals of Christian knighthood. In the Habsburg imagination, the war against the unbeliever was joined in the sixteenth century to a war against misbelief. Successive Habsburg emperors and rulers cracked down on the spread of Protestant doctrines, which challenged the authority of the Catholic Church. In the religious observance of the Spanish Habsburgs, the mission to cleanse the faith was as much marked by the choreographed burning of heretics as by ostentatious dedication to the eucharist.

As part of the general renewal of learning and the arts known as the Renaissance, the study of classical texts intensified in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Renaissance literary scholars or humanists looked back to ancient Rome for inspiration and guidance. Many borrowed from Roman

antiquity the belief in a hierarchically arranged order, headed by an emperor, whose task was to mediate between rulers and usher in a reign of peace. Humanists often saw the Habsburgs as uniquely gifted by the office of emperor to restore order and harmony. They spoke thus of a 'world empire' and 'universal monarchy', shepherded by Habsburg rulers, and they recast classical epics to portray Habsburg emperors in the manner of Roman Caesars. To reinforce their message, they also included elaborate speeches by classical gods which referred to a Habsburg destiny and described how Habsburg rulers were invested with shields that bore maps of the whole known world.¹¹

Erasmus of Rotterdam, the greatest of Renaissance humanists, had no time for this erudite nonsense. Observing that 'kings and fools are born, not made', he foresaw that a universal monarch was likely to be a universal tyrant—'the enemy of all and all are his enemies.' But the Habsburgs came close to realizing the 'world monarchy' that Erasmus feared. The imperial office was elective, with the emperor chosen by seven leading princes of the Holy Roman Empire. Besides being Holy Roman Emperors, however, the Habsburgs ruled provinces and territories within the empire by hereditary right, as their own private possessions rather than ones that fell beneath their sway because they were emperors. To begin with, these private, family dominions were in the area of the Upper Rhine, but by the thirteenth century, the Habsburgs were amassing a body of lands in Central Europe, roughly where Austria and Slovenia are today. Then, in a period of just half a century, beginning in the 1470s, the Habsburg lands exploded outwards—to take in the Low Countries, Spain, Bohemia, Hungary, and most of Italy. Hungary, which was an independent kingdom and, unlike Bohemia, not a part of the Holy Roman Empire, extended Habsburg power 450 miles (700 kilometres) eastwards to what is now Ukraine. But Spain was an even greater prize, for along with it came the New World and a colonial enterprise that looked to the Pacific Ocean and Asia. The Habsburg dominions were the first empire on which the sun never set.¹²

The official title of Emperor Charles V in 1521 gives some idea of the spread of Habsburg possessions:

Charles, by the grace of God, elected Holy Roman Emperor, at all times
 Enlarger of the Empire etc., King in Germany, of Castile, Aragon, León,
 both Sicilies, Jerusalem, Hungary, Dalmatia, Croatia, Navarre, Granada,
 Toledo, Valencia, Galicia, the Balearic Islands, Seville, Sardinia, Cordoba,

Corsica, Murcia, Jaén, the Algarve, Algeciras, Gibraltar and the Canary Islands, and also the Islands of the Indies, and the mainland of the Ocean Sea etc; Archduke of Austria, Duke of Burgundy, Lorraine, Brabant, Styria, Carinthia, Carniola, Limburg, Luxembourg, Gelders, Württemberg, Calabria, Athens, Neopatras etc; Count of Flanders, Habsburg, the Tyrol, Gorizia, Barcelona, Artois, and Burgundy; Count Palatine of Hainaut, Holland, Zealand, Ferrette, Kiburg, Namur, Roussillon, Cerdagne, and Zutphen; Landgrave in Alsace; Margrave of Oristano, Goceano, and of the Holy Roman Empire; Prince of Swabia, Catalonia, Asturias etc; Lord in Friesland, on the Windisch Mark, of Pordenone, Vizcaya, Molins, Salins, Tripoli, and Mechlin etc.¹³

The list is a jumble and includes places that were no longer or never had been in the Habsburgs' possession (Jerusalem, Athens, and so on) but to which they continued to lay dubious claim. Others were added precisely because they were contested, but plenty more were left out as the succession of 'et ceteras' hints. Nevertheless, the itemized arrangement suggests a feature of Habsburg rule that would largely persist into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The parts were not unified but retained their own governments, laws, nobilities, patricians, and parliaments or diets. To that extent, they were almost independent countries, brought together only by the person of the ruler. Given the distances between the parts, disunity was to an extent inevitable, but it was also a deliberate act of policy that was intended to keep very different peoples reconciled to rule by an absent sovereign. As a Spanish jurist explained to Charles V (ruled as emperor 1519–1556), to maintain the loyalty of his dominions, he should treat them separately, 'as if the king who keeps them together were only the king of each.'¹⁴

The Habsburgs embraced a vast, all-encompassing vision of a world united under the ethereal sway of a single sovereign, who was dedicated to the service of religion, peace among Christians, and war against the unbeliever. But this was never converted into a political programme even within the territories that the Habsburgs ruled. All monarchies have started off as composite states, constructed from diverse territories, which were then welded together and made uniform. Even states built out of several kingdoms have tended, over time, to become more metropolitan, with the singularity of the constituent parts gradually effaced so that they lose their independent character and institutions. The Habsburgs never accomplished

this—indeed, except for brief interludes, they never even really tried. Despite some unification of the administrative and legislative apparatus in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, their dominions continued to be ruled as if the sovereign were only the lord of each rather than a super-monarch with limitless authority. Whereas an eighteenth-century French sovereign was styled simply as ‘king of France and Navarre’, and not listed as duke of Aquitaine and Brittany, count of Toulouse, duke of Normandy, et cetera, right through to the twentieth century the Habsburg imperial style enumerated each part of the whole as a separate unit.

Historians write with the benefit of hindsight. Because they know the future to belong to the centralized nation state, political conglomerations which rest on principles of decentralization and dissimilarity must be bound to failure. ‘Ramshackle’, ‘anachronistic’, and ‘accidental’ are the terms they most frequently use to describe the later Habsburgs and their empire. But the Habsburgs cannot be judged so simply. Theirs was a vision woven of many strands, which looked beyond territory and intimidating stone keeps. It was, as Charles VI’s library explains, rooted in complementary ideals and aspirations—in history and inheritance, in the Rome of the Caesars and of the Catholic faith, in beneficent leadership, and in a quest for knowledge, the immutable, and heavenly glory.

Of course, politics intruded, confounding the mystique of Habsburg monarchy and often rendering its manifestations redundant or banal. But something remained of the vision, even as the Habsburgs entered the last decades of their rule, little more than a century ago. It is the purpose of this book to explain their empire, their imagination as well as the ways in which they were imagined, and their purposes, projects, and failures. For half a millennium, from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, the Habsburgs counted among the most important dynasties of Europe, and for several centuries their dominions reached to the New World and beyond, making their empire the first global enterprise. What follows is partly their story, but it is partly, too, a reflection on what it meant for a Habsburg to rule the world.