



## *Introduction*

# AN EMPEROR'S LIBRARY

The 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 carparks, 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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*).<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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.'<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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.'<sup>14</sup>

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.



## CASTLE HABSBURG AND THE 'FORTINBRAS EFFECT'

*A*t the beginning of the last century, an unusually diligent student set himself the task of establishing the descent of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, who was at that time Emperor Franz Joseph's heir. The genealogy he established ran to thirty-three tables and listed more than 4,000 of Franz Ferdinand's ancestors, going back to the sixteenth century. On account of intermarriage, however, there were so many overlaps that the student found only 1,500 separate individuals, for many husbands were also cousins, and wives were often nieces several times over. So Franz Ferdinand was related to the sixteenth-century Emperor Ferdinand I through more than a hundred separate descents and to Ferdinand's distant cousin, the unmemorable but deeply pious Renate of Lorraine, by twenty-five.<sup>1</sup>

Dedicating his research to Franz Ferdinand, the student glossed over the extent of Habsburg intermarriage by demonstrating statistically that all the ruling families of Europe had in the past been equally incestuous. He also apologized that he had been unable to take his investigations further back into the Middle Ages. But had he tried to track the archduke's descent back to the eleventh century, he would have had to fill in the names of several

hundred thousand ancestors, for every generation back yields double the number of forebears. Even so, our student's task would in some ways have been made easier the further back he dug, for the written record becomes correspondingly sparser and the blanks accumulate. By the tenth century, the ancestry of the Habsburgs contracts from, in theory, the hundreds of thousands to, in practice, just a few shadowy individuals.

Books on early Habsburg history often read like mystery thrillers, with speculations that trace a Habsburg bloodline back through the shadowy Eti-chonid family of Alsatian counts to the French Merovingian kings, whose mythical fifth-century progenitor was a quinotaur, or bull with five horns. In fact, the earliest Habsburgs can only be tracked back to the late tenth century, when they lived in the region of the Upper Rhine and Alsace, on the present border between France and Germany, and in the Aargau, in today's northern Switzerland. All this territory constituted a part of the Holy Roman Empire, belonging to the duchy of Swabia, and was divided into largely self-governing counties or *gaus*, each with several counts. The first Habsburg of whom we have definite knowledge was a certain Kanzelin (sometimes given as Lanzelin), who is associated in later accounts with a small fort at Altenburg, near the town of Brugg in the Swiss Aargau.<sup>2</sup>

On Kanzelin's death around 990, his two sons, Radbot (985–1045) and Rudolf, divided up his lands. Among Radbot's possessions was the village of Muri, twenty-five kilometres (fifteen miles) south of Altenburg. Upon his marriage, Radbot gave Muri as a wedding gift to his bride, Ita (Idda), who in 1027 founded there an abbey of Benedictine monks. Ita's piety was rewarded with a resting place next to the altar of the abbey church. Notwithstanding the sack of the abbey by Protestant Berne in 1531, Ita's grave survives to this day. She is joined there in death by the partial presence of the last Habsburg emperor and empress, Karl and Zita, whose hearts are kept in urns in a chapel by the altar. Since it was not allowed to be returned to Austria after the First World War, the rest of Karl's body is on the Portuguese island of Madeira, where he died in 1922, although Zita's is in the Capuchin Crypt in Vienna.

The abbey at Muri prospered from the generosity of the faithful and of its founders. It accumulated property in more than forty neighbouring villages as well as a treasury of relics, which included the bones of over a hundred saints and martyrs as well as fragments of the True Cross, of the tablets on which the Ten Commandments had been written, and of the pillar beside

which Pontius Pilate had judged Christ. Radbod and Ita's descendants considered all this, however, to be their own. Established and made rich by their family, the abbey counted as a 'proprietary monastery'—a place of burial where masses were said for their forebears and over which they appointed an abbot of their choosing. They also assumed the duties of protector or *Vogt* (sometimes rendered as 'steward' or 'advocate'), in return for which they extracted an income from the abbey.<sup>3</sup>

Radbod's son, Werner (1025–1096), later called 'the Pious', was alert to the new trends in monastic life emanating from the great abbeys of Cluny and Hirsau, which favoured obedience, continuous prayer, and disengagement from the world. Disappointed by the brothers of Muri, who (we are told) came and went as they pleased, Werner brought to Muri disciplined monks from the Black Forest to set an example. But Werner's reverent act backfired. The monastic reform movement was never concerned only with monkish morals. It also stressed the right of ecclesiastical superiors to oversee religious houses, and it opposed the practice of having laymen treat monasteries as their own private property. This directly affected the interests of Werner, who foresaw that he would lose all control over a monastery in whose foundation his family had invested.<sup>4</sup>

During the mid-1080s, Werner forged a charter, which he pretended had been written six decades earlier by his uncle (or possibly, great-uncle), Bishop Werner of Strasbourg. The charter gave its alleged author, the bishop, credit for founding the abbey and vested the office of *Vogt* in perpetuity in his family. The fake charter was recorded at an assembly of the principal men of the Aargau and later confirmed in Rome by the College of Cardinals. To add credence to their story, a group of monks loyal to Werner composed a necrology, which listed the dead for whom masses should be said. The necrology highlighted in red Bishop Werner but omitted Ita entirely. The foundation of the abbey was thus linked not to Ita but to the bishop and so, by implication, to the rights enumerated in the charter that had been forged in his name.<sup>5</sup>

The terms of the fake charter were approved in 1114 by the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry V. On this occasion, however, the emperor added the proviso that the abbey's protectors should neither profit from their duties nor interfere in the running of the abbey. From this point onwards, Werner's heirs were gradually stripped of their powers over the abbey. In order to make sure that they did not go off with the abbey's property in the meantime, the

monks composed a detailed list of their lands and itemized their precious relics. They also put together an account of Muri's early history, which depicted its founding family as plunderers and thieves, who had given land to the abbey to relieve their guilty consciences. Although there may be some truth in the stories the monks of Muri told, their work fostered the belief that the earliest Habsburgs were no more than robber barons, who in one modern description 'rode across the countryside, murdering and looting.'<sup>6</sup>

Landowners founded monasteries as prayer factories where masses would be endlessly rehearsed to speed their souls through Purgatory. To protect themselves on this Earth they built castles. Whereas fortifications had in the past been mostly earthworks, the fashion from the eleventh century onwards was for keeps of wood and stone. Their purpose was to defend, dominate, and overawe the surrounding countryside, but castles also stood as symbols of the increasingly independent power of counts and lords. The Swiss Aargau had one of the densest concentrations of castles in medieval Europe. One late-nineteenth-century antiquary counted no fewer than seventy stone forts, most of which had their origin before 1300, in an area of just 1,400 square kilometres (550 square miles). The Aargau needed them, for its rich pastures and control over the roads leading through the Alps made it the prey of avaricious neighbours.<sup>7</sup>

Legend has it that Radbot was out hunting one day when he lost his favourite hawk. Searching for it, he came by chance on a rocky outcrop, next to the River Aare, on the very edge of his properties, which seemed an ideal site for a stronghold. Radbot named the fort that he built there the Habichtsburg or Hawk's Castle (in Old High German, a hawk is a *Habicht* or *Habuh*). This, in the contracted form of Habsburg, became its name and thus, over time, the toponymic embraced by Radbot's heirs. Centuries later, the tale of Radbot's hawk and of the castle's origins still excited the romantic imagination. The earliest English historian to write a history of the Habsburgs, Archdeacon William Coxe (1748–1828), ascribed his own inspiration to the sight of Castle Habsburg and likened himself to Edward Gibbon surveying the ruins of the Roman Forum.<sup>8</sup>

Set on a steep escarpment, Castle Habsburg is still an imposing structure, notwithstanding its conversion into a restaurant, with parasols on the battlements. The story, however, of Radbot's hawk is plainly borrowed from elsewhere. The name of Habichtsburg first occurs only in the 1080s. In origin, it probably had nothing to do with a hawk, but instead with a ford or *Hafen*, the castle being located close to a crossing point on the River Aare.

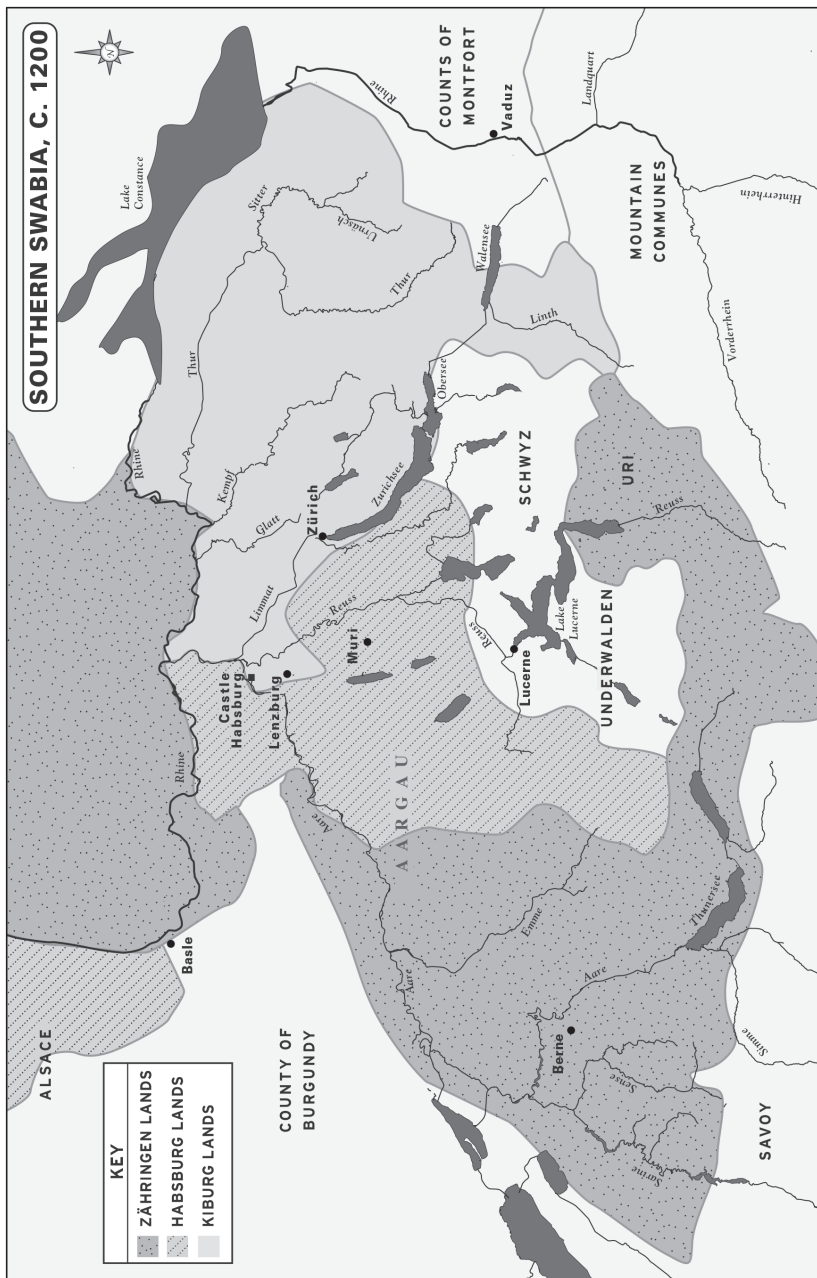
Moreover, 'Habsburg' in its various early forms (Havechisburg, Havichsberg, Havesborc, and so forth) was only one of several places referred to in the family's preferred list of titles. Once the family began to accumulate properties elsewhere, reference to the Habsburg slid down the list, eventually to be lost in the thicket of the family's other properties and possessions. The name of Habsburg was revived only in the eighteenth century, at a time when it was fashionable to recall ancestral origins, and it became common currency with Schiller's popular historical ballad, 'The Count of Habsburg' (1803). Until that time, the only family to have consistently embraced the name of Habsburg were the earls of Denbigh from Warwickshire in England. Complete parvenus, they made up ambitious descents and cultivated spurious foreign titles in the hope of adding lustre to their name.<sup>9</sup>

Castle Habsburg was not a 'robbers' nest' but intended to be a home as much as a military stronghold. The original heart of the castle was a rectangular stone keep, measuring over eighteen metres by thirteen metres (sixty by forty feet), with walls almost two metres (six feet) thick at the base. Over this was later built a four-storey residence, which was connected on its north-eastern side to a square tower. In the late twelfth century, both the keep and the tower were surrounded by a long flanking wall, which served also to create a courtyard. A second tower was constructed around this time to the west of the main keep, which subsequently became the kernel of a separate complex, to which a hall and living quarters were attached. It is this more recent construction that tourists now visit, the rest consisting only of heaps of stones.

During the second half of the thirteenth century, the Habsburgs relinquished the castle, preferring the Lenzburg, which lay ten kilometres to the south. But they also had seats at Brugg, where Werner's great-grandson, Albert the Rich (died 1199), had previously built the so-called Black Tower (which survives) and later the hilltop castle at Baden in Aargau (which is a ruin). Both Brugg and Baden were preferable to Castle Habsburg as residences, since their proximity to marketplaces made their provisioning easier. Meanwhile, the old Castle Habsburg was assigned to vassals of the Habsburgs, being subsequently divided into two separate redoubts. It was finally captured by the city of Berne in 1415.

The Habsburg heartland lay around the confluence of the Aare, Limmat, and Reuss, all of which were in the Middle Ages navigable rivers. The region was also situated at a crossroads that connected the mountains of Inner Switzerland to the lowlands of the plain. The opening of the Alpine





St Gotthard Pass at the beginning of the thirteenth century drew the commerce of northern Italy through Lucerne and the Aargau to the great fairs of Champagne and Flanders. Altogether, the Habsburgs owned several dozen toll stations which milked this trade, which was at this time mostly in wool, cloth, metals, and fish. The table land of the Aargau was also agriculturally lush, and the peasants who worked its fields paid the Habsburgs rents, in cash and kind, as well as dues for rights to forage, milling, and pasture. Hence, from one early fourteenth-century register for a village close by Castle Habsburg, 'The two crofters at Windisch shall give annually as rent two pecks of rye each, making a bushel, two pigs, one of which shall be worth eight shillings and the other seven shillings, two lambs, each worth eighteen pennies, four hens and forty eggs.' (Twelve pennies make one shilling, and one bushel is sixty-five pints or thirty-five litres).<sup>10</sup>

Elsewhere on the Habsburg estates in the Aargau, the obligations of the peasants included a payment of three shillings to the lord 'for the wife's first night.' Nationalist historians need villains, and in Swiss accounts the Habsburgs have traditionally played the role. So much was later made of the three shillings by Swiss historians, who saw it as a demeaning tax levied upon them by their former Habsburg masters in lieu of a degrading sexual right. The *droit de seigneur* is, however, the prurient invention of later generations. The three shillings were simply a payment given upon marriage and no different from the Lenten gift that marked the end of Carnival. It was common enough elsewhere in the Swiss lands. In fact, Habsburg charges on the peasantry were seldom pursued with much vigour, and many lapsed over time. The crofters of Windisch were hardly burdened.<sup>11</sup>

By the thirteenth century, the bulk of Habsburg income derived from tolls, particularly those raised on the bridges at Baden and Brugg. Further income came from the administration of justice. In the register of properties and incomes drawn up at the start of the fourteenth century for the Habsburg estates, this was the right that was usually first enumerated—'to fine and compel, and to judge theft and violence.' Since fines and confiscations often went to the lord, this was an important source of revenue. With their wealth, the Habsburgs attracted other landowners into their service. In return for serving as vassals, they were given or allowed to build castles, which they held on behalf of their Habsburg overlords. By the fourteenth century, the Habsburgs had about thirty castles stretching from Lake Constance to the left bank of the Rhine and Alsace, to each of which were

attached villages, manors, and farms. The Habsburgs were emphatically not the ‘poor counts’ of some historians’ imagination.<sup>12</sup>

To begin with, the Habsburgs were just one of many lordly families in the Swiss Aargau. Historians usually attribute their rise to politics. In the twelfth century, they backed Emperor Lothar III (1125–1137) against his Staufen rivals, on account of which Lothar gave them a bundle of new properties in Upper Alsace as well as the prestigious title of landgrave. Then, in the middle of the century, the Habsburgs swung round to supporting the Staufen. Werner II, the grandson of the first Werner, died near Rome in 1167 while fighting for the Staufen emperor, Frederick I Barbarossa. His son, Albert the Rich, and his grandson, Rudolf the Old (also the Kind or Good, died 1232), supported respectively the claims of the Staufen heirs, Philip of Swabia and Frederick of Staufen. Rudolf later bankrolled Frederick’s military campaign that resulted in Frederick taking power in the Holy Roman Empire in 1211, subsequently becoming Emperor Frederick II. Rewards followed—marriage into the Staufen line, Frederick II’s gracious decision to stand as godfather to Rudolf the Old’s grandson, and further swathes of territory in the south-west of the Holy Roman Empire.

The rise of the Habsburgs owed more, however, to what may be called ‘the Fortinbras effect.’ In the final scene of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, all the protagonists lie dead, at which point Prince Fortinbras of Norway arrives to claim the vacant throne, to which he recalls ‘some rights of memory.’ Like Fortinbras, the Habsburgs swept up after everyone else had perished. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, they intermarried with the neighbouring lordly families in what is now Switzerland and south-western Germany. When their lines faltered, the Habsburgs claimed their own rights of memory, obtaining either fully or in part the vacant estates of the Lenzburg, Pfullendorf, and Homburg families. Although to begin with the Habsburgs took over only a part of the Lenzburg inheritance, the land obtained in the 1170s brought with it the title of count. Hitherto, the Habsburgs had only held the title honorifically.<sup>13</sup>

But the most significant addition to the Habsburg properties in the south-western part of the Holy Roman Empire came with the extinction of the Zähringen and the Kiburg lines in 1218 and 1264 respectively. The Zähringen were old foes of the Staufen, and their possessions were extensive, reaching from the Black Forest to Savoy. On the death without heir of the last duke, Berthold V, the Zähringen property was divided up. Much of it

went to the Kiburgs by virtue of the previous marriage of Berthold's sister to a Kiburg. But in 1264, the Kiburgs also died out in the male line. Since his mother was a Kiburg, Count Rudolf of Habsburg (1218–1291), who was the grandson of Rudolf the Old, took the bulk of their patrimony, which lay between Zurich and Constance. With the Kiburg estates came the Zähringen lands and that part of the Lenzburg inheritance that the Habsburgs had missed out on a century before.

The territorial foundations of Habsburg power were weaker than a list of their acquisitions suggests. The family's properties and possessions were not contiguous but intersected by church lands and other lordly estates and by cities and free villages. Some Habsburg estates were pawned, while others were given over to servants and officials in place of an income. Rents and other dues had also been sold or farmed out in return for a lump sum. The complexities and changes in even small parts of the Habsburg lands make it hard to conceive of a uniform and unified lordship, for each fragment stood in a separate relationship to its Habsburg master. Even so, by the mid-thirteenth century the Habsburgs were the most powerful family in the duchy of Swabia. Their estates reached from Strasbourg to Lake Constance and from the Aare River to the wooded valleys of the Alps, so from what is now eastern France to Austria's western border, taking in a chunk of northern Switzerland. It was from this broad band of territory that Rudolf the Old's grandson, Count Rudolf, would launch the Habsburgs' most ambitious enterprise yet: to capture the Holy Roman Empire itself.<sup>14</sup>

The Habsburgs were lucky to have their heartland straddling the roadways and toll places that led from northern Italy to France. They were fortunate too in their political alliances. Yet behind the early growth of Habsburg power lay their genealogical endurance. As the diligent student of Franz Ferdinand's ancestry learned, the Habsburgs were survivors. Generation after generation, they produced heirs; if sons were missing, then cousins and nephews were always at hand. With longevity came the opportunity to take the wealth of the less-enduring families into which they had married. Over the centuries that followed, the Habsburgs would have equal biological good fortune and other Fortinbras moments of opportunity. 'Who talks of victories when to survive is all?' asked the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926). In the case of the Habsburgs, it was their survival that brought their earliest victories.



## THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE AND THE GOLDEN KING

In 1184, Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (ruled 1155–1190) built a toll tower at Kaiserswerth for the purpose of taxing more intensively the river traffic on the Rhine. He dedicated it with the inscription, ‘Emperor Frederick built this splendour of the Empire to enlarge justice and bring peace to all.’ A tax demand bearing such lofty sentiments would today be scorned, but Frederick’s words tell us much about the way the Holy Roman Empire was understood at the time. It was not seen as a unified kingdom at all, but as an association of increasingly independent territories and cities, each of which had its own ‘rights and freedoms.’ The purpose of the empire was to provide the mechanisms and context whereby these rights and freedoms were protected so that, in accordance with the contemporary understanding of justice, ‘to each be rendered his due.’ Tolls justly levied by a just ruler amplified the good order that he was expected to promote. They were to be celebrated, in the same way as illegal tolls gathered by unscrupulous lords were to be deplored.<sup>1</sup>

The problem was that the Holy Roman Empire had no government with which to maintain each in their rights and freedoms. There was no central administration, no regular revenue, no capital city, and no hierarchy

of courts dispensing a delegated justice on behalf of the ruler. Power rested instead with the great lords and princes, and it was they who elected the monarch as ‘king of the Romans’—only when crowned by the pope did he become emperor. The lords, churchmen, and representatives of cities, who intermittently gathered in what were known as ‘court assemblies’ or ‘court diets’, found consensus difficult. They still looked to the ruler for leadership, but he lacked the capacity to coerce. To persuade, he often had to concede, making compromises that nibbled away at what little influence he had left. In one vivid description from the late thirteenth century, the emperor was shown no longer as the eagle that he bore on his coat of arms, but as just a woodpecker on a rotten tree.<sup>2</sup>

The solution was for the ruler to build up his private wealth in order to wield public power. Historians continue to criticize this policy, accusing successive emperors of establishing their own personal power bases and of ignoring the larger need. It was, however, precisely because they developed such extensive properties in Swabia that the Staufen rulers, of which Frederick Barbarossa was the first to become emperor, were able to exert influence. But the Staufen line of emperors also looked to make their mark in Italy and to establish a territorial base there. This brought them into conflict with the popes and with other contenders for Italy’s riches. In his last dozen years as emperor, Frederick Barbarossa’s grandson, Frederick II, was first excommunicated and then deposed by the pope. In the two decades following Frederick II’s death in 1250, his son, bastard heir, and eldest grandson all perished in Italy—the last on the executioner’s block in the square of Naples.

In the Great Interregnum that lasted from 1250 to 1273, all semblance of government evaporated. Since there was no agreement on who should succeed Frederick II, unlikely outsiders forced an entry. For reasons that even his latest biographer cannot fully explain, the Spanish Alfonso X of Castile put himself forward as ruler, but he never bothered to visit the empire. The rival Richard of Cornwall, younger son of England’s King John, had the broad support of the three archbishops and of the dozen or so lay lords that chose him as their king in 1257. But his interest was to outmanoeuvre the last of the Staufens to make good the fantastical English claim to Sicily. Richard was effective on those four occasions on which he visited the empire, but he stayed too briefly to leave any lasting mark.<sup>3</sup>

The death of Frederick II in 1250 was followed by the wholesale destruction of the Staufen lands, offices, and revenues in Swabia. The Staufen