

Free Imperial City 1219 - 1806

As a royal city, Frankfurt was first administered by a governor. However, fairly early in its history, from 1189, it was actually headed by a sheriff, as a representative of the king and chairman of the royal court. In 1220 the office of royal governor was withdrawn, and the sheriff became the sole guardian of imperial rights and the imperial estate, which he administered together with a group of lay judges.

Political power continued to be in the hands of the patriciate, consisting of ministry officials and rich merchants. Like all other citizens, however, these patricians were restricted in their rights. It was not until 1232 that Henry VII renounced his imperial right to match the daughters and granddaughters of Frankfurt citizens with members of his entourage without asking the prospective brides or grooms.

In 1219 Frederick II gave the citizens part of his royal estate for the construction of a second church. In 1323, after the church had been incorporated into a collegiate monastery and the relic of an arm had been purchased, it was dedicated to St. Leonhard. The seal of the city, first in evidence in 1219, was circumscribed with the words *specialis domus imperii*.

At about the same time a number of men and women formed a secular nursing order, founding the Hospital zum Heiligen Geist (Hospital of the Holy Spirit), which still exists as an endowment today. In the 14th century the hospital was taken over by the city, with the staff appointed by the city council.

In 1235 Henry VII donated part of his income to the town for the repairs of a Main bridge damaged by floods. This was when the Alte Brücke (Old Bridge) was mentioned for the first time, though it had probably been built as early as the second half of the 12th century.

In 1241 religious fanaticism led to a pogrom against Frankfurt's Jews who were still living among the Christians near the cathedral. In the First Battle against the Jews most of the 200-plus members of the Jewish community were either killed or expelled. It took until 1255 for Jews to start settling in Frankfurt again.

In 1254, during the Interregnum and after the end of the Hohenstaufen dynasty, Frankfurt joined the Association of Rhenish Towns, which had been formed in order to secure peace within the empire. In this way, the city demonstrated its increasing independence. From 1266 official records start mentioning city councillors and citizens' representatives in addition to the sheriff and lay judges. Frankfurt's First City Charter - a collection of rights and privileges - was recorded in writing in 1297. The office of a mayor was created as a further step towards the citizens' self-government. From 1311 two mayors, elected by the city council, gradually took over the administrative functions of the sheriffs.

In 1372 the council finally succeeded in acquiring the office of the sheriff, which had been pledged by the emperor, as well as a number of taxation rights and imperial estates (the city woods) which had also been pledged. The total price was 12,800 guilders. Having secured autonomous status, Frankfurt was now directly answerable to the emperor.

The council started keeping records in a Bürgerbuch (citizens' book) as early as 1312. This is the oldest evidence of the council's administrative activities. The introduction of a fixed city tax was accompanied by a system of tax administration from 1320 onwards. In 1333 the Emperor Louis granted an extension of the municipal housing area, which led to the building of the Neustadt (New Town) outside the Staufen wall.

The Golden Bull of 1356, promulgated by Emperor Charles IV, was an imperial constitution that specified the procedure of electing the German king and claimant to the imperial crown. The electors were to be three ecclesiastical and four secular princes. The edict confirmed Frankfurt as the place for royal elections.

The dispute about the throne, which followed the death of Louis the Bavarian and the plague in Europe led to the Second Battle against the Jews in 1349. The Scourge Brothers blamed the plague not only on the sins of Christendom but also on its toleration of Jews. Again, Frankfurt's Jews were expelled or killed.

Between 1350 and 1366 the city was shaken by conflict between the patrician council and the various guilds seeking a share in political power.

From the early 14th century onwards the city council consisted of three benches, of which the first two were occupied by lay judges and the "municipality", and the third bench by a number of guilds (though by no means all) that were deemed worthy of serving on the council. However, as the lay judges and the "municipality" consisted entirely of a small number of patrician families who were all related by marriage, the influence of the guilds was rather limited. Whenever a councillor died or resigned, he was replaced by someone co-opted by the others, so that the election of new members was in the hands of the council itself.

After some initial success, the guilds were finally defeated by a coalition between parts of the patriciate and the imperial government. In 1366 Charles IV withdrew all constitutional changes that had been made and reinstated the council in its original form. This meant that the guilds continued to play only a minor role in city politics.

In 1405 the council purchased the house Zum Römer (The Roman), which it combined with the adjoining Zum Goldenen Schwan (The Golden Swan), to form a town hall. The construction of the cathedral tower started in 1415, designed by Madern Gertener.

From 1461 to 1465 the council set up a ghetto next to the Wollgraben (Wool Moat), outside the Staufeu Wall, where Frankfurt's Jewish population was resettled at the insistence of the church and at the order of Emperor Frederick III. Relations between the city and its Jews were specified in regulations called Stättigkeiten. From now on every Jew had to wear a special ring whenever he or she left the ghetto.

The constituent convention of the Imperial Supreme Court took place at Braunsfels House in 1495. However, due to resistance among the council, the court did not settle in Frankfurt, but moved several times until it found a permanent venue in Wetzlar.

The Swabian painter Jerg Ratgeb (around 1480, executed in 1526) started decorating the Carmelite monastery in 1514. Covering 107 metres (351 ft) of length within the cloister, he depicted the story of Christ's life and suffering as well as parallels from the Old Testament. This cycle of murals is the biggest north of the Alps. He also decorated the refectory of the monastery. These murals and other works of art were funded through donations from rich Frankfurt citizens.

From 1520 the Reformation began to win more and more adherents in the city. In 1521 Martin Luther spent a night in Frankfurt on his way to the Imperial Diet in Worms and then again two nights on the way back. By 1523 the Reformation had become a mass movement.

Despite its affinity towards the new doctrine, the city council decided to yield to pressure from the Archbishop of Mainz and to the threat of losing its trade fair privilege. This led to a religiously, socially and politically motivated revolt by the guilds in 1525. The revolt was directed not only against the orthodox clergy, but also against the patrician regime in the city. The insurgents formulated their demands in 46 articles, which were initially accepted by the council, though, after the suppression of the peasants' revolts, the paper had to be withdrawn and the original system of rule was re-established. To ease the situation, the council did, however, employ two Protestant clergymen.

In 1533, after much manoeuvring and a survey among the citizens of Frankfurt, the council officially introduced the Reformation and prohibited all traditional Roman Catholic church ceremonies. To resist pressure from its Roman Catholic opponents, Frankfurt joined the Schmalkaldic League in 1536, though after its defeat the city rejoined the emperor's camp again in 1546/47, and St. Bartholomew's Church (the cathedral) had to be returned to the Roman Catholic clergy. In 1552 the city resisted a siege by the emperor's allied princes.

One important result of the Reformation was the General Alms Box in 1531, which was established as a municipal welfare institution to fulfil the tasks previously performed by the Roman Catholic orders.

The reinstatement of Roman Catholic rites in autumn 1548 made Frankfurt a permanently mixed Catholic/Protestant city, a situation which was legally endorsed in the Religious Peace of Augsburg in 1555. As a result, Frankfurt also became a safe haven for religious refugees, and a Dutch Reformed contingent arrived as early as 1554. Dutch Protestants soon formed a fifth of the city's population and began to be a decisive factor in its economy.

Although refugees were at first welcomed with great openness, a number of clearly defensive tendencies could be observed by the 17th century. All French Reformed church services, for instance, were

prohibited as early 1595. From 1628 onwards the council refused to grant citizens' rights to Calvinists.

In 1562 Maximilian II became the first emperor not only to be elected in Frankfurt, but also to be crowned there. Frankfurt continued to be the preferred venue for coronations until the end of the ancient empire (with a total of ten coronations by 1792).

From 1546, Frankfurt was forced to take out increasingly higher loans to pay for the Schmalkaldic War and for other conflicts between Roman Catholic and Protestant estates of the empire. By 1548 the city had run up a debt of over 180,000 guilders. Further loans and ruinous speculations in the Mansfeld copper trade had pushed up the city's debts to a million guilders by the year 1575. With an average municipal revenue of about 50,000 guilders per year, Frankfurt, with a population of approx. 12,000 at the time, had to spend 44,600 guilders on interest alone.

The enormous debts led to a steadily growing tax burden, which particularly affected the poor among the population. At the same time, the presence of the Dutch immigrants was causing competitive pressure, and these two factors caused both economic and social tension in the city. In 1613 a revolt broke out, called the Fettmilch Rebellion after the gingerbread maker Vincenz Fettmilch. The revolt was directed against the high-handed rule of the city council as well as against "foreigners" and Jews. Although it was kept in check by means of a citizens' treaty in 1613, it flared up again in 1614.

Although the revolt failed, partly because of the intervention of imperial troops, it nevertheless curbed the powers of the ancient patrician families on the city council. From 1614 the council also comprised numerous representatives of the merchant class as well as lawyers and physicians. However, the guilds themselves were largely stripped of their powers and placed under the supervision of the city council. Fettmilch and six of his fellow-conspirators were publicly beheaded on the Rossmarkt (Horse Market) in 1616, in the presence of Frankfurt's citizens. As a deterrent, their heads were placed on iron spikes next to the bridge tower, where they could still be seen in Goethe's day..

As so often, the main victims of the revolt were the Jews. The Judengasse (Jews' Lane) was looted and ravaged in 1614. The 1,380 Jews had to leave the city but returned again in 1616, at the emperor's command. New regulations were issued for the Jewish population, limiting the number of its households in the ghetto to 500 and the number of its annual weddings to twelve.

The Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) had very little effect on Frankfurt at first. Through political manoeuvring, the Lutheran city council largely succeeded in keeping the city out of all turmoil. Although the council was Protestant, it remained loyal to the emperor. As a result, Frankfurt was not confronted with Swedish troops marching through its streets until 1631. King Gustav Adolph stopped briefly in Frankfurt in 1631/32 and donated to it the property confiscated from Roman Catholic clergy.

In 1635 Frankfurt came under fire from both imperial and Swedish troops. At the same time - between 1634 and 1636 - a number of epidemics broke out. In 1636 alone about 7,000 people died of the plague in the city. Most of the victims were soldiers billeted here as well as refugees from the surrounding area. The population shrank from over 20,000 at the beginning of the war to about 17,000 in 1655. However, by 1700, Frankfurt had about 32,000 inhabitants again.

The intellectual life of the time was significantly influenced by the humanist education of the upper classes and a generally profound level of piety. Printing and the book trade, which were based in Frankfurt, contributed to the increase in middle-class urban culture. Although, both culturally and religiously, Frankfurt was lagging behind places such as Strasburg, Augsburg, Nuremberg and Marburg, it nevertheless registered and responded to new intellectual developments. The beginnings of pietism are associated with Philipp Jakob Spener, from Alsace, who chaired the city's Predigerministerium (Lutheran pastors' assembly) from 1666 to 1668. In letterpress and fine art printing Matthäus Merian made a name for himself: he had moved to Frankfurt from Basle in 1624 and received Frankfurt citizen's rights in 1626. In 1712 the city of Frankfurt employed Philipp Telemann as its music director and kapellmeister of the Barfüsserkerche (Barefoot Monks' Church) and, later, as kapellmeister at the Katharinenkerche (St. Catharine's Church), constructed as a prestige building by the Lutheran citizens of Frankfurt.

In the early 18th century a new conflict began to emerge between the city council and sections of Frankfurt's citizens. It eventually turned into a constitutional dispute - called "Frankfurt vs. Frankfurt" - and was taken right before the emperor, from 1708 to 1732. As before, the disagreement was about greater involvement of craftsmen and small merchants in the city's administration - people who were largely excluded from political responsibility. The protest was directed against the council's mismanagement, the

city's enormous debts, preferential economic treatment of Jews, the arbitrary raising of taxes and charges and general disregard of the citizens' treaty of 1613. A committee, set up by Charles VI, reached conclusions that were devastating for the council. Numerous imperial decrees and resolutions vindicated the citizens of Frankfurt in their requests and led to administrative reforms. The council had several monitoring committees assigned to it, with particular responsibility for supervising its financial policies. However, the reforms did not change the basic power structure in Frankfurt. All the important political decisions were still taken by the council which continued to be dominated by a small number of noble families.

In 1676 Don Domenico de Brentano di Tremezzo became a citizen of Frankfurt and founded a trading company. In 1724 Prince Anselm Franz von Thurn und Taxis moved the head office of the postal service from Brussels to Frankfurt, into Grosse Eschenheimer Strasse, where he built a baroque palace. In 1744 Meyer Amschel Rothschild was born in a house called Zur Hinterpfann in Judengasse (Jews' Lane). In 1748 Johann Philipp Bethmann and his brother Simon Moritz Bethmann founded the trading partnership Gebrüder Bethmann (Bethmann Bros.), which soon grew into an important bank.

But while banks and trading companies could spring up in the city, the council took rather a negative view of the establishment of factories and large-scale business enterprises. In 1771 the two snuff manufacturers Bolongaro and Crevenna therefore preferred to accept an offer from the Archbishop of Mainz to settle down in Höchst, where, in 1772/74, they built Bolongaro Palace, a baroque three-wing stately home with a garden terrace facing the river Main.

The disasters of the 18th century included fires and epidemics. In 1711 nearly all the houses in Judengasse (Jews' Lane) were destroyed in a fire, followed by another 110 houses in 1721. In 1719, about 400 houses burnt down at the big "Christian Fire" in the area between Fahrgasse and Töngesgasse. In 1709 and 1713 Frankfurt was overtaken by the plague, and in 1728/33 and 1781/82 numerous people died in influenza epidemics. Another hard test of endurance was the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) and the resulting French occupation of the city.

After the fires hundreds of new houses were built in Frankfurt. They reflected not only a greater awareness of fire hazards, but also the latest changes in fashion. By the end of the century numerous reconstruction projects had transformed the face of the city, though without changing it out of all recognition. The city owed the French occupants the introduction of house numbers, street lighting and the improvement of the road surface.

This was also the time when the Imperial Counsellor Johann Caspar Goethe had his house rebuilt at Grosser Hirschgraben. On August 28, 1749, at 12 noon, a son, Wolfgang, was born to him and His wife Catharina Elisabeth, née Textor. Years later, in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (Poetry and Truth) Wolfgang was to describe his childhood in Frankfurt and his experience with the French occupation. When a woman called Susanne Margarethe Brand was executed with a sword on Rossmarkt (Horse Market) for murdering a child, she later became the model for the character of Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust*.

From the mid-18th century a growing sense of middle-class identity gave rise to a marked system of patronage. In 1763 the physician Johann Christian Senckenberg left his entire estate as an endowment for scientific-medical institutes and a citizens' hospital. The innovations of this period also included several pioneering inventions. In 1781, after a burnt-down church had been rebuilt in Bornheim, a lightning conductor, invented by Franklin, was installed on the church for the first time. In 1785, the French aeronautics pioneer Jean-Pierre Blanchard made a successful ascent in a balloon on Bornheimer Heide (Bornheim Heath).

The big social events of the century included the five imperial/royal elections of 1711, 1742, 1745, 1764 and 1790, and the subsequent coronations. In 1742, following the confusion of the War of the Austrian Succession, Frankfurt became the imperial residence and de-facto capital under the Wittelsbach Emperor Charles VII.

In July 1792 Francis II was elected and crowned in Frankfurt as the last Holy Roman-German Emperor, before the city was occupied by the French revolutionary troops from October to December. Further French occupations followed in 1796, 1800 and 1806.

The establishment of the Rhine Confederation under Napoleon's protectorate in 1806 marked the end of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, and Francis II renounced his emperor's crown. Frankfurt therefore lost its status as an imperial city and as a city for imperial elections and coronations. A few

years earlier, in the Final Recess of the Imperial Deputation (1803), the city had been given control of its monastic establishments with all their estates. The city's fortifications, which had become useless and partly fallen into disrepair, were demolished and replaced by walls.

At the end of its time as an imperial city Frankfurt had a population of 35,000, of whom about a quarter had citizens' rights and thus (at least theoretically) access to municipal offices. The remaining inhabitants had no full citizen's rights or political powers. The same was true for a number of surrounding villages, with a population of about 6,000. Neither did Frankfurt's Jews - some 3,000 in all - have any citizens' status, but continued to be officially confined to their ghetto.

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