

## The Shaping of German Identity: Authority and Crisis, 1245–1414

**Review Number:**

1319

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 13 September, 2012

**Author:**

Len Scales

**ISBN:**

9780521573337

**Date of Publication:**

2012

**Price:**

£80.00

**Pages:**

636pp.

**Publisher:**

Cambridge University Press

**Place of Publication:**

Cambridge

**Reviewer:**

Shami Ghosh

In this monumental and densely-packed book on Germany identity in the later Middle Ages – the only monograph of on the subject in any language, the author informs us – Len Scales gives us a new view of Germany and the empire that is sure to be of great importance for medieval historians' perceptions of the empire, of Germany, and of the forces behind the shaping of identity. Scales shows convincingly that during precisely the centuries when the empire seemed to be losing its grip on Germany, a sense of German identity is increasingly manifest in a wide range of sources, and, paradoxically, this notion of German-ness is very closely connected with the idea of empire. Germans were well aware of the weakness of the emperor's political control over the empire's constituent parts; they were also very conscious that the empire was 'German', which fact in itself seems to have contributed to a growth in a sense of German identity.

For obvious reasons, the question of the historical roots of German identity has been a rather delicate one (albeit frequently addressed in indelicate terms). Scales betrays an admirable sense of awareness and reflexivity regarding the history of his discipline and subject throughout the book, providing his readers with useful reminders as to the extent to which the modern perception of the so-called German *Sonderweg* ('special path') has been shaped by the preoccupations and political entanglements of modern scholarship – though it is also true that German political development really was different from that in England and France. Beyond a pervasive historiographical awareness throughout, Scales also provides a full (and lengthy) chapter on the modern historiography of medieval German political history, which the present reviewer found fascinating, if not entirely novel. The frequent harping on the dodgy political history of the German historical professions sometimes seems a bit excessive, even for those with a taste for such things. Others with less of a background in German history and literature, past and present – and particularly, I suspect, anglophone medieval historians – might find themselves moving on rather rapidly to the second chapter.

This being said, Scales is probably better able to approach the concept of German identity with a lucid and clear eye than his German peers precisely because, his detailed awareness of modern historical traditions notwithstanding, he stands outside it; one can only hope that this book will nevertheless be read and properly digested in the world of German medieval historical scholarship, which at times seems as averse to absorbing English-language research on Germany as the Anglophone world is to partaking of work in any language other than English.

After his historiographical exposition, Scales presents a very useful synthesis of the political history of Germany in this period, showing that there was no movement towards a single polity that could be linked to a notion of any kind of 'national' identity. While in England and France, the makings of government and state, and thus of a national political identity, were intimately connected with an increasingly assertive monarchy, in Germany the trajectory of the monarchy seemed – even to contemporary observers – different. The *Reich* had long been a conglomerate of many old and quite independent entities, and even under the Hohenstaufen emperors this did not cease to be the case. While elsewhere in the central middle ages monarchs were often augmenting the sizes of their kingdoms by conquest, German rulers no longer expanded their territories in this way, with eastward expansion being in the hands of independent dukes. The growth in administration that we find in France and England can be seen in Germany as well – but at the level of the principalities rather than the empire, and the great expansion in the production of documentation in the imperial chancery only takes off under Frederick III in the middle of the 15th century. Income from the *fisc* seems to have dropped drastically over the 14th century, at a time when monarchs elsewhere were trying, often successfully, to increase tax revenues, and imperial power was now ever more dependent on the incomes from the dynastic lands of the incumbent. Increasingly, also, in the period under consideration here, the great dynasties that jostled for the imperial throne (Habsburg, Luxemburg, and Wittelsbach) did not intrude much into the territories of their competitors even when commanding the *imperium*; when rulers of one region did take over another, they were seen not so much as fellow-Germans, but as foreigners, and 'foreign servitude was hardly less resented when its enforcers spoke a form of German' (p. 515). Given the diffusion of power – and also, one must add, the sheer size of the empire – it is not surprising that no great residential centre arose in Germany that had a pull across all of the empire, unlike, for example, Paris or London; instead, we see the rise of Munich, of Vienna, of Prague, which were certainly great administrative, judicial, and political centres, but nevertheless could not exercise much centrifugal force beyond, respectively, Bavaria, Austria, and Bohemia. The court did attract people, but 'generally speaking, not the strong and ambitious but the weak and threatened sought in Germany the proximity of the monarch' (pp. 87f.). As a consequence of this fragmentation, although the emperors of this period were much more often to be found in the German lands than many of their predecessors, they nevertheless did not have a great deal of political power outside their own patrimonies. Many regions of Germany never saw the emperor; many, particularly along the northern coasts, conducted their foreign policies without reference to him. In general, Scales confirms the view that there was a trend 'towards the monarchy's increasingly pronounced disengagement' from the people of the realm, including those at the top of local hierarchies (p. 92).

This is where the paradox becomes apparent: despite this disengagement, despite the difficulties of communication, the internal boundaries, the lack of a unifying polity, a sense of a German *political* identity seems actually to have grown in this period. Contemporary writings (often produced by the increasing numbers of those who travelled outside Germany) often mention *Alamania*, *Theutonia*, or the *Dudesche lande*. The existence of this 'Germany' was taken for granted, its boundaries perceived as generally understood – despite the fact that there was not even a term for a unified German polity: both in Latin, and particularly in the vernacular, 'even the façade of a unitary German *regnum* [...] crumbles entirely' (p. 182). Yet the writings of the period betray an awareness of some sort of political German nation, which was closely linked to the fact that this nation was, formally if not in fact, ruled by a German emperor. Writers in different regions were often not particularly interested in what was happening elsewhere; but they were often interested in what the emperor was up to, even if he was far away. The actual weakness of imperial powers notwithstanding, 'there is little sign that interest in the ruler and his doings slackened markedly' during this period (p. 122). The very lack of a single centre of rule might, Scales argues, have increased the visibility of the emperor in different regions of his realm – though it remains a fact that each emperor tended to spread

his presence unequally, with some regions seeing rather more of that emperor than others, and many parts rarely ever experiencing an imperial visit at all. Even when imperial power did not actually have any effective influence on actions taken, towns and regions nevertheless sought and acquired imperial privileges and legitimacy. The emperor was talked, sung, and written about, and imperial insignia are increasingly evident in public spaces throughout the *Reich*.

Yet part of the paradox is that while the emperor was German, and various German lands seem to have felt some sense of identity deriving from their belonging to the empire, the *Reich* was of course a concept that embraced lands far beyond just the German ones, and indeed, what was perhaps most special about the emperor was precisely that he was the ruler of the *Romans*. This is not an aspect of empire that was forgotten in this period, and indeed, German chroniclers were well aware of foreign disdain for an emperor who did not and could not rule beyond the German lands. Nevertheless, within Germany itself, there seems to have been no sympathy for the notion of an empire stripped down to the German lands; it appears to be the case that part of what made the Germans aware of their identity as Germans, in a political sense, was the very Roman-ness of empire. One reason why *Germanitas* and *Romanitas* go together is that it was precisely German princes who had the power to elect the emperor (and when the Bohemian king's voting rights became recognised, he too was himself incorporated with a larger German identity); this German right of rule was in turn related, in contemporary perception, to a concept of a *translatio imperii* in which the Germans were the last of the peoples to receive the right and duty to rule. For this reason, even those emperors past and present who might legitimately not have been seen as German – the Carolingians at one end of the spectrum, the Luxemburger kings of Bohemia at the other – were described as being Germans, even though they were kings of France and Bohemia.

The *Romanitas* of empire was, of course, increasingly a fiction: as Scales points out, a generally accepted emperor crowned in Rome ruled for fewer than 25 of the years between 1245 and 1415. The Romance lands of the empire were increasingly independent of and un-visited by emperors, and the fact of imperial rule became increasingly restricted to the transalpine regions. Yet the perception of imperial office as being one received by Germans from ancient Rome, an office sacred because of its link with the papacy, never receded. The specialness of Germans and their suitability for empire was much debated by learned Germans, many of whom had studied and worked in Paris or Rome, and it was often precisely this experience of the Romance lands that heightened their awareness of their German-ness, and seems to have led them to discuss, debate, and defend it at length. Indeed, Scales suggests that one of the spurs to more debate of the concept of German-ness was precisely the questioning of the suitability of German emperors by people in other lands. In the Latin and vernacular literature of this period (as well as a good deal of material from the Hohenstaufen era too), Germans and Romance-speakers (*Walhen*) are portrayed as opposing, sometimes (notably in the work of Alexander von Roes) complementary, but always different entities.

Why Germans, and not another people? What favoured them to become guardians of empire? Ethnic stereotypes abound in the evidence from this period, often leaning on very ancient precedent. Germans did not, unlike some other nations, have a holy founding father; they were special for their martial qualities, which is what gave them, in their own eyes, a right and duty to protect Christendom through the office of emperor, a right that, according to the historical production of the time, was very ancient indeed. While parts of Germany had indeed been under Roman rule – and the physical evidence of this was still very much present in places like Trier – in this period we see claims of Roman history turning up in many parts of Germany that had never been Roman. Aristocratic lineages claimed Roman ancestors; towns claimed to have been founded by Rome; Caesar himself made the Germans Roman, and in one version grants the lords of the German lands (*die herren von Duczschen landen*) the Reich itself (p. 312)! The lords chose him as their ruler, however – a precedent for the contemporary rights of German electors to choose the emperor. After Caesar, the great founder of German imperium was, not surprisingly, Charlemagne, who brought empire, finally and irrevocably, to Germany. Whether Charles himself was German was a more difficult question, however: though he appears in earlier Middle High German literature as a French king, he began later to be co-opted into a German identity of sorts, even though he is always conceded to have ruled over France; but his German-ness remained a matter of some dispute.

The eastern lands present a different sort of case of the formation of a German identity: along the Baltic, two corporate markers of identity were dominant, the Teutonic Order, and the Hansa, and in these lands and beyond, large numbers of people of the German tongue settled, and German laws were introduced (though these were also often granted to Slavic-speaking settlements); but the Germans remained a (rather heterogenous) minority, and outside the Order's territories, they remained a minority in a region ruled by non-Germans. These regions thus provide an example of a different kind of identity-formation and differentiation from the 'Other' compared to what we find in the western parts. Here, according to Scales, what obtained was more the construction of German ethnicity, rather than of German nationhood; those who settled in the east did not really bring a German identity with them, but were made Germans by this process. German-ness and the presence of Germans were both more hotly contested here than elsewhere; German laws could be conferred on people who were not German speakers, but those not of the German tongue could also be excluded from German law. The Teutonic Order made no particular effort to create a particularly German state in any respect, and indeed, while it recruited mainly (but by no means exclusively) from German-speaking areas, its identity lay more in its sense of religious mission than in German-ness. The Hansa was a multi-ethnic corporate entity of such looseness that it has been questioned whether it qualifies as a corporate entity at all; it was, however, self-consciously both German and of the empire, though this did not necessarily block the inclusion of non-German cities or traders. Many of the towns in the east were dominated by a German merchant class, which became increasingly exclusive towards the close of the Middle Ages – as indeed did their non-German counterparts. Conflict existed; conflict is nevertheless not the dominant impression we should have of the lands to the east, since, as Scales shows, there was a good deal of fluidity across ethnic boundaries in many regions, and law, trade, and even culture and kinship often provided spaces in which differences could be blurred and overcome. Ethnic identity could often be simply irrelevant. Thus, although there was manifestly more conflict with an 'Other' in the eastern lands than in the heartlands of the empire, 'German identity in the eastern lands was less articulated and less theorised than was the case in certain western writings' (p. 445).

Where was Germany? It is not surprising that the sources, in particular the vernacular texts, refer to the German lands in the plural (in Latin, the singulars *Germania*, *Alemania*, or, more rarely, *Teutonia* were used); but for the most part there was little dispute about which lands these were. The problems arose, then as now, with boundary areas, principally the left bank of the Rhine, the status of which seems often to have been uncertain. An inner distinction was made between High and Low German, which was both linguistic and geographical, but regions on both sides were thought of as German – though the status of *Niderlant* remained unclear. From the early 13th century, literary works refer often to Germans as such, both in the vernacular and in Latin. The German lands were the lands inhabited by those who spoke the German tongue; and ultimately, the definition of German-ness – with some outliers like the Dutch and Frisians as partial

exceptions – rests in large part on language. The Germans were those who lived in the German lands, who, as Scales shows, were by divine right and Caesar's gift the people on whom *imperium* had been conferred; but they were German because they spoke German (and this facet of identity seems to me somewhat overshadowed in Scales's presentation by other aspects). The Germans, it seems to me, were in their own perception to a very large extent defined and united by their awareness of a common tongue (when in eastern lands distinctions were made between Germans and others, identity was often tested with recourse to language): the political nationhood that derived from *imperium* was attached to Germans, but arguably they could and did only know they were German because of their language – and the earliest evidence of such awareness can be found already in the 9th century. That there were a range of dialects is true, but the linguistic difficulties can be exaggerated: any number of literary and even legal texts wandered back and forth across the divide between High and Low German, and the literary evidence suggests that the language barrier was not an obstacle to the building of both a common literary tradition defined not least by its linguistic bounds, and a sense of identity as speakers of the German tongue. While it is true that 'the common past which united the German territories of the Empire was, necessarily, an imperial past' (p. 351), this was not the only common German past: there was also a past of the heroes of epic (texts which were widely received and copied, in Low and High German, in this period), of Siegfried of Xanten and Dietrich von Bern, which was also remembered as something uniquely German, and was so remembered, I think, primarily because these legends lived on principally in the German language (the heroes themselves occur in narratives that are often placed outside Germany). German as a literary language had already emerged before the Hohenstaufen emperors, and the decades around 1200 witnessed a remarkable flowering, the so-called *Blütezeit*, of a vernacular literary production, which, although drawing very heavily on French and antique traditions, was to have a huge influence on literature in Germany through the later Middle Ages as a *German* tradition: later authors adapted and referred more to German Arthurian romances rather than to their French sources. It is possibly no coincidence that during the period covered by this book, the vernacular became dominant in documentary sources and also law, at the same time in which most of the manuscripts of the vernacular literature of the *Blütezeit* were produced. It is also from around the middle of the 13th century that we get an explosion of vernacular chronicles from all over the German lands. It is quite impossible to argue that this spread of the vernacular was part of any sort of imperial political programme: the German linguistic identity, and as far as literature is concerned, an awareness of a German literary tradition, were spontaneous and initially local matters rather than the results of conscious policy. Nevertheless, even in the imperial chancery, in this period increasing numbers of vernacular documents were produced, and by the end of it, the vernacular dominated. Scales is, however, certainly correct that the regions in which language was the primary locus of identity-formation were those on the frontiers (I wonder, however, whether this is not equally true of other markers of identity: it is at the frontier that one needs to define oneself). The importance of language should not, of course, be exaggerated; if it was a unifying factor, that did not mean that Germans of one region resented it any less when they were conquered by Germans from elsewhere, and the sense of political identification with an individual *lant* was undoubtedly often stronger than a loyalty to a community defined as all those who spoke German – though as Scales points out, the notion of *Landesbewußtsein* (consciousness of the identity of an individual *lant*, different from a German *natio*) can be exaggerated, since this level of affiliation was no less complex and blurred than a larger German identity, and at both layers, rulers tended to prefer a loyalty to the dynasty (which ruled over or in more than one *lant*) than to a narrower regional sense of belonging. Nor did identification with a *lant* necessarily rule out a broader sense of German affinity: 'region often represented less an alternative to larger identities [...] than a standpoint from which to inspect and interpret them' (p. 522).

This is a very important book. It is obviously essential reading for anyone with an interest in medieval Germany, but it is equally crucial for those studying medieval political history or identity-formation more generally, and will in fact provide many insights for periods beyond its own as well. It therefore seems a pity that the author or publisher could not have done a bit more to make it more user-friendly to audiences beyond the rather small group of people who work on medieval Germany. With a background in German myself, it is hard for me to judge just how accessible everything here would be to those without such training, but it does seem to me that many aspects of the historiographical chapter take more knowledge about German history for granted than is probably reasonable in today's Britain, to say nothing of North

America. Even assuming that this book is intended for postgraduates and more senior scholars, how many medieval historians know the significance of the difference between *kleindeutsch* and *großdeutsch* (p. 22), or understand the full connotations of *Biedermeier* (p. 20)? Who apart from someone accustomed to reading (older) German scholarship would grasp the meaning of the last word of the following statement regarding the historian Karl Gottfried Hugelmann: ‘something of the demagogue’s tone surfaces in his learned papers, with their taste for bellowing at readers through extended passages of *Sperrdruck*’ (p. 30)? Perhaps, as one of my teachers once said to me, this is what the good lord invented Wikipedia for – though the obscurity of *Sperrdruck* is such that even Wikipedia would not help. More seriously, I do not quite understand the logic behind when primary sources are presented in translation alone, and when only in the original – and why we can never get both. Regrettably, in the groves of an academe that Timothy Reuter memorably described as ‘Anglolexic’ (1), young adepts and bearded sages alike do not wander declaiming Middle High German, and certainly not Middle Low German (all too often neither group has much, if any, modern German): one is so thankful, in today’s world, if postgraduate medieval historians can competently decipher the Latin periods of, say, Otto of Freising, that other linguistic expectations seem to be too demanding. Why, then, in a book published in English by a British press, do we get repeated extracts of German vernacular sources, with no translation? There are also some bibliographic issues: I could not, obviously, check all the short titles in the footnotes against the bibliography, but I was unable to find Ulrich Müller’s important and repeatedly cited two-volume anthology of political verse in the list of primary sources.(2)

These are minor quibbles; they do not, I must stress, in any way detract from the quality of the scholarship presented in this fascinating book. Scales shows us convincingly that German identity existed, but also that it was complex; it was defined against other Germans as well as non-Germans; it was political, cultural, linguistic, Roman, imperial, regional, and absolutely not monolithic. This multiplicity was not always easy: ‘late medieval Germans [...] suffered less from a poverty than a surfeit of identity’, since ‘the selves within their breasts, including their German selves, were too many for comfort’ (p. 524). This uncomfortable but fascinating story is compellingly told in this book, and the few flaws do not in any way diminish the importance Scales’s *magnum opus* for scholarship far beyond just the field of medieval German history.

## Notes

1. For his use of the term in print, see his inaugural lecture of 1995, ‘Modern mentalities and medieval polities’, in his posthumously published *Medieval Polities and Modern Mentalities*, ed. Janet L. Nelson (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 3–18.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The full reference is: *Politische Lyrik des deutschen Mittelalters: Texte*, ed. Ulrich Müller (2 vols, Göttingen, 1972–4). Also cited (at p. 70, n. 94), without a full reference in the bibliography, is Karl Leyser, ‘The German aristocracy from the ninth to the early twelfth century: a historical and cultural sketch’, *Past and Present*, 41 (1968), 25–53, reprinted in his *Medieval Germany and Its Neighbours, 900–1250* (London, 1982).[Back to \(1\)](#)

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1319>

## Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/32393>