

1622

The Battle of Höchst

A story from the 30 Years' War

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The antecedence

The Battle of Höchst is now understood to be part of the 30 Years' War, which lasted from 1618 - 1648. But at the beginning of 1622, of course, people could not have known that the conflict, which had begun as a regional dispute in Bohemia, would last so long and almost bring the entire Holy Roman Empire to ruin. The armed conflicts had begun in the summer of 1618, but until then only limited parts of the empire had been directly affected. Before that, the empire had experienced a 60-year period of relative stability and peace following the religious peace of Augsburg in 1555, which led to economic prosperity. In the west of the empire, the war had only arrived in the summer of 1620, so there was still hope that the war would soon be over.

But what was the reason for the conflicts? As so often in history, a long, complex chain of circumstances and causes led to the war that subsequently resulted in the Battle of Höchst. In order to better understand the actions of the people involved, it is therefore necessary to at least sketch the prehistory.

The Bohemian Rebellion

It all began when the Bohemian Estates, representing the privileged part of the Bohemian population, broke with the Austrian Habsburgs and elected Frederick V Count Palatine of the Rhine as king. The Kingdom of Bohemia had been an important part of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation for centuries.

At the beginning of the 17th century, the Bohemian throne had been occupied by Catholic Habsburgs for about a hundred years. However, most of the Bohemian population and also the nobility adhered to one form of Protestantism or another. After Emperor Matthias began in 1612 to gradually revoke the promises of religious freedom made by his predecessor Rudolf II in 1609, the situation escalated under his successor Ferdinand in 1618. Ferdinand was an ardent Catholic - one could also say a religious extremist - who immediately tried to initiate a re-Catholicisation of Bohemia and to revoke all privileges. Since this was done in breach of their chartered rights, the Bohemian Estates resisted. On 23 May, representatives of the Estates entered the seat of the Habsburg administration, Prague Castle, and brought

the hated governors present before an improvised court. After a heated argument, three Habsburg officials were finally thrown out of a window several metres above the ground. Throwing magistrates with whom one disagreed out of windows had a certain tradition in Prague. Almost 200 years earlier, such a defenestration had already been the trigger of the Hussite wars, which were also religiously motivated. But while all those who fell then were beaten to death to make sure, this time things went off without a hitch. Since

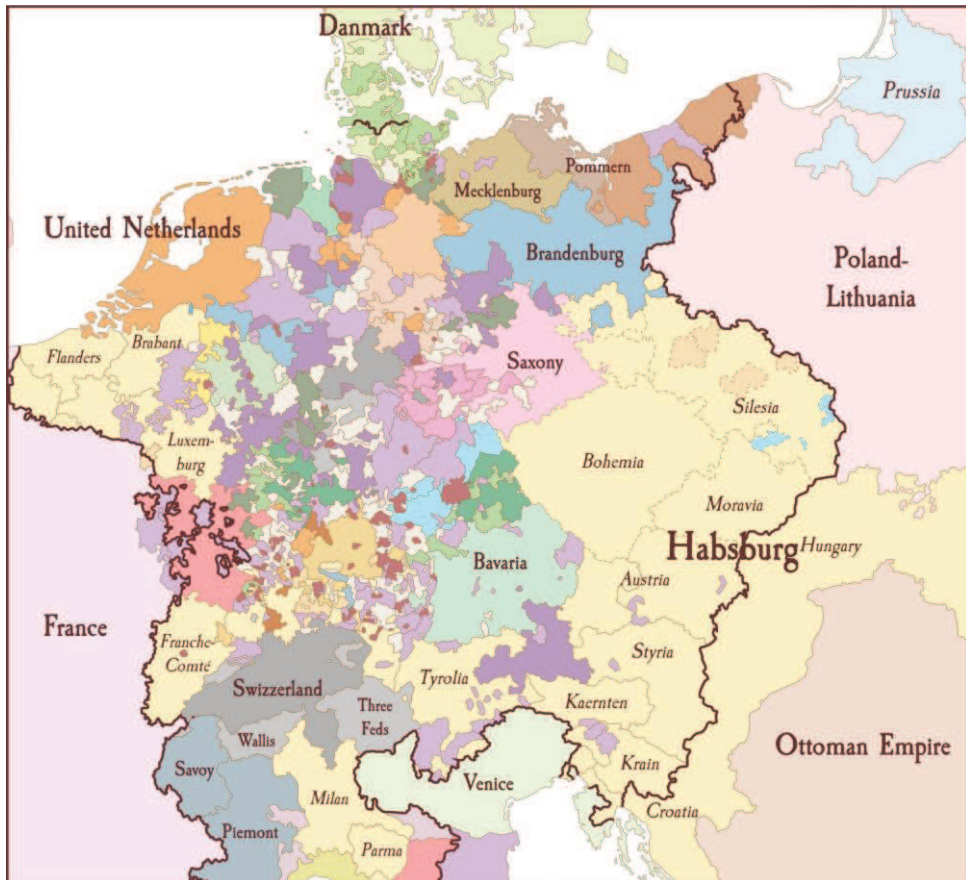


Figure 1

Map of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation around 1618. This map is a gross simplification, in reality the territorial relations were much more complicated. The territories in which a Habsburg ruled are coloured light yellow. Ecclesiastical territories are coloured purple of various shading. Territories of similar colouring within the dark, thickly marked imperial border were held by different members of related ruling families, for example those of the Wittelsbach in shades of green, Hohenzollern in blue, Saxony in pink.

there was a dung heap under the window, the Habsburg magistrates got off lightly. That the insurgents were serious, however, was shown by the fact that they still shot at the fugitives, albeit in vain.

However, this blatant attack on imperial authority sealed the break with the Habsburgs. The Bohemian Estates formed a thirty-member Directory as an interim government, declared the Habsburg regent deposed and began to build an army. At the same time, they sought the support of other protestant forces in Europe, such as the Netherlands, England and the pro-Protestant Union, an association of Protestant imperial princes and Scandinavian kings.

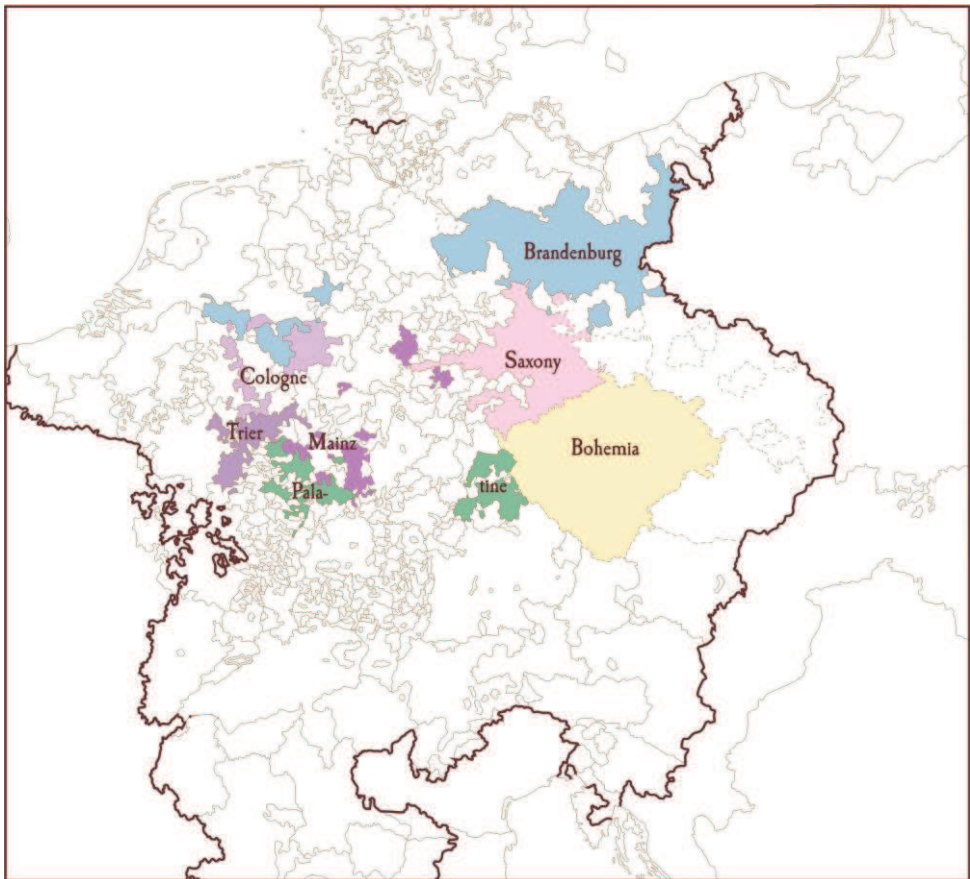


Figure 2

The territories of the seven electors. The Archbishops of Trier, Cologne and Mainz were of course Catholic. After the Reformation, the Duke of Saxony, the Margrave of Brandenburg and the Count Palatine of the Rhine were protestant. The decisive vote regarding the denomination of the future emperor thus came from the Bohemian king.

To finance their plans, they began confiscating property from the Catholic clergy; seizing each other's church property was a popular form of fundraising among all parties. At first, the insurgents also had some military successes, including the army of the war entrepreneur Ernst from Mansfeld, who was financed by the Duke of Savoy and will be discussed in detail later. The Viennese Court initially reacted in a haphazard and confused manner to these developments, which culminated in the Bohemians refusing to recognise Ferdinand, who initially succeeded him as King of Bohemia after the death of Emperor Matthias in March 1619. In the summer of 1619, the Estates adopted a new constitution for Bohemia that provided for an elective kingship. Whether they were allowed to do so under the imperial constitution was



Figure 3

Print of a leaflet on the coronation of Ferdinand II in 1619. The roasted ox and the red and white wine donating Justitia fountain in front of the city hall, called "Römer" certainly did not harm the popularity of the event among the population. Such leaflets were the first mass media through which large parts of the population were informed about important events.

disputed; in any case, Ferdinand fumed. Shortly afterwards, the Estates elected Frederick Elector Palatine, still very young at 26, as king.

This was a momentous decision for several reasons. It is true that the Electoral Palatinate was one of the politically most important secular dominions of the empire and, since the Reformation, one of the leading Protestant powers. However, in view of the fragmented, multiply divided territory, the economic and military potential of the Electoral Palatinate clearly lagged behind other dominions such as Saxony or Bavaria. The Bohemian Directory nevertheless expected this election to bring them the support of Protestant England in particular, because Frederick was married to Elizabeth Stuart, the only daughter of King Jacob I, who was English, Scottish and Irish king at the same time. But the support of the Calvinist governor of the Netherlands, Moritz of Orange, and the King of Denmark was also counted on. Nevertheless, Frederick was only second choice, because the powerful Lutheran Elector John George I of Saxony had previously declined the Bohemian offer with thanks, which in retrospect turned out to be a wise decision. In addition, Frederick was a convinced Calvinist and thus belonged to a more radical form of Protestantism, which most Lutherans in the empire and even his own subjects met with scepticism and rejection.

What was most serious, however, was that this election seriously threatened the Habsburg dominance of the empire. At the beginning of the 17th century, this Holy Roman Empire comprised several dozen principalities, duchies and even kingdoms that were practically independent but recognised the emperor as head of the empire. It stretched from Holstein to northern Italy and from Flanders to present-day Slovakia. In addition to most of the German-speaking area, it also included French, Italian, Czech, Polish speaking population and several other languages. The empire was a federation of dominions which recognised the imperial laws, the imperial jurisdiction and the decisions of the imperial diet, in which they were partly involved through the election of kings, the imperial diet and other estates' representations at the same time. Since the empire also provided for a certain unification of currencies, it was not unlike the EU in some respects. In this constitution, the College of Electors had the task of electing the king of the empire, who thus also automatically claimed the title of emperor from 1508 on. It consisted of seven members, so there could be no stalemate. Since 1592, the election and coronation took place in Frankfurt am Main. Three of the electors were the Catholic archbishops of the bishoprics of Mainz, Cologne and Trier. Three other electors were secular and Protestant since the Reformation: the Count Palatine of the Rhine, the Duke of Saxony

and the Margrave of Brandenburg. The decisive vote thus fell to the last elector, the King of Bohemia.

Since the strictly Catholic Habsburgs had held the Bohemian throne for the last hundred years, it was clear that they also provided the emperor of the empire, for the Catholic side of the Electoral College was thus assured of the majority of votes. However, with the election of Frederick, Count Palatine of the Rhine, as King of Bohemia, the majority of the electors would have become Protestant. On top of that, the unification of two votes in one person would have led to a dangerous concentration of power. The Habsburgs could not accept this under any circumstances.

The first thing Ferdinand did at the imperial election on 28 August 1619 in Frankfurt am Main was therefore simply to ignore Frederick's election as Bohemian king in Prague the day before and vote for himself as Elector King of Bohemia. Interestingly, the Electoral Palatine delegation also voted for Ferdinand in the second ballot, after Maximilian of Bavaria had renounced in favour of Ferdinand, who was thus unanimously elected King and Emperor. Among the Protestant princes of the empire there were many who were critical of the superiority and Catholic zeal of the Habsburgs, but who, in case of



Figure 4

Siege of Vienna by the Bohemian rebels in 1619. The direct threat to the capital of the Austrian Habsburgs certainly did not contribute to Ferdinand II's leniency after the suppression of the uprising.

doubt, preferred a stable empire and therefore, like the Saxon elector, pledged their neutrality.

Start of the Bohemian War

Ferdinand immediately sent troops under the Count of Bucquoy to Bohemia. In order to secure his offensive diplomatically and financially, he turned to Spain, where Philip III, also a Habsburg, sat on the throne. For several decades, the Spanish Habsburgs had been trying to prevent the final secession of seven protestant reformed provinces of the Netherlands in a bloody war that was fought extremely cruelly by both sides. These provinces could afford an extraordinarily high standard of living and one of the best armies in the world due to an economic boom fuelled by the emerging East Asian trade, but also an industrial revolution driven by peat, wind and water power. Because of the increasingly difficult war, which threatened them with the loss of the economically strongest part of their empire, the Spaniards had no need of a Calvinist emperor in the empire who was positively disposed towards the secession of the Netherlands. They therefore generously supported the



Figure 5

Emperor Ferdinand II and Duke Maximilian I of Bavaria. The picture on the left shows Ferdinand around 1624, on the right is Maximilian, painted around the same time.

notoriously poor Ferdinand II with money and troops. In addition, Emperor Ferdinand II turned to the Pope and an association of Catholic imperial princes, the League. Ferdinand made a special deal with the founder of the League, Duke Maximilian I of Bavaria, who had been established in 1609, in October 1619. Maximilian raised an army of 30,000 men under the League's supreme commander, Jean T'serclaes de Tilly, to support the Emperor. It remained, however, under the control of the League and thus himself. The troops for the League were mainly recruited in Bavaria, which is why they were sometimes referred to as Bavarian, sometimes as League troops. Maximilian was guaranteed reimbursement of the war costs for their recruitment and deployment. And on top of that, he was promised the fulfilment of a long-cherished wish in the event of victory: the transfer of the Palatine territories to Bavaria, including the Palatine electoral dignity tied to them. In the event of victory, Maximilian would thus be promoted to the premier league of imperial princes for all to see, which in any case corresponded to his self-image (an early example of the Bavarian "*mia san mia*" – we are what we are). These alliances resulted in imperial, Spanish and League troops fighting on the Catholic side, not always under a unified



Figure 6

The Battle of White Mountain (Czech: Bitva na Bílé hoře) near Prague on 8 November 1620. The Protestant troops of the Winter King had the more favourable position on the hill in the background, but were nevertheless crushed.

supreme command. One can imagine that this often led to problems because the acting parties had similar but not identical interests.

After the Bohemian insurgents initially still achieved successes and even threatened Vienna itself, the Emperor's diplomatic offensive gradually led to their extensive isolation. At the same time, the military build-up on the imperial side began to have an effect. In August 1620, the League army finally marched into Bohemia. From the west, Tilly and the imperial army advanced on Budweis, while Christian from Anhalt, as commander of the Bohemian troops, advanced via Moravia towards Prague. The decisive battle finally took place at White Mountain near Prague on 8 November 1620. The heavily outnumbered Bohemian Estates army and the hired mercenaries occupied the strategically better positions, but they were poorly paid, exhausted and undisciplined. They were crushed within two hours.

The insurgents lost about 5,000 men, while the butchers bill on the imperial side counted about 700 dead. However, the imperial victory was not only due to their military superiority; the mercenary leader of the Elector Palatine army,



Figure 7

Execution of the leaders of the Bohemian Uprising on 21 June 1621 in Prague. On the Old Town Ring, 27 men were executed between 5 and 9 am. Twenty-four of them were beheaded according to their noble status. The three traitors of common rank were hanged. The executioner, Jan Mydlář, and his assistants were paid the equivalent of a burgher's house.

Count Ernst from Mansfeld, was paid 100,000 guilders by the emperor to stay away from the battlefield with his troops.

Immediately after receiving the news of his defeat, King Frederick fled Prague and Bohemia with some representatives of the Directory and his court. He had ruled in Bohemia for little more than a year, which earned him the derisive name "*Winter King*". Frederick reached The Hague in the Dutch States General via Silesia and Brandenburg. On the way, he and his wife tried to find allies in northern Germany, which they succeeded in doing, at least with Christian of Brunswick.

With this complete victory and the expulsion of Friederich from the Bohemian throne, the matter could have been largely settled. The Habsburgs had regained the Bohemian throne, Ferdinand had been elected emperor, the Catholic powers of the empire were more united than ever and had demonstrated their military might - actually ideal conditions for winning the Bohemian subjects back to Habsburg rule through well-measured concessions and for expanding their own power in the empire through a wise and measured policy.

But Ferdinand was personally offended. While the execution of 27 leaders of the uprising for *lèse majesté* was still understandable, the expulsion of several tens of thousands of families and the confiscation of the estates of 650 noble families to pay off the war debts testified to a certain will to destroy his opponents. But even this would probably have remained an internal Bohemian affair without major repercussions for the entire empire.

Extension to the Palatinate

But Ferdinand went one step further and imposed an Imperial ban on Frederick. In it, he declared that Frederick would lose all his offices, fiefdoms and titles in the empire, that no one was allowed support him in any way whatsoever and that anyone could seize him to bring him to punishment. The proclamation of a ban, i.e. the complete expulsion from society, on criminals who could not be apprehended, was a very old punishment that was not often applied. Even in the text of the Imperial Execution on Frederick, which represents indictment, plea and sentence in one, Ferdinand's personal indignation at the perceived insolence of Frederick's accession to the Bohemian throne can still be felt.

For Frederick, everything was now at stake. He would even have to fight for his Electoral Palatinate hereditary lands. But other Protestant rulers of the Empire and all of Europe were also worried by this outrageous measure. In January 1621, the Danish King Christian IV invited various Protestant dukes, as well as the envoys of England, the Dutch States General, Sweden, Brandenburg and Pomerania, and the Winter King to a meeting of the Protestant Union in Holstein. Although this meeting lasted until March, the parties could not agree on any common measures and finally dissolved the Union. Although this meeting remained unsuccessful, the Palatine side was not willing to simply surrender to its fate. The Palatines brought up the idea of involving Christian IV in the war by promising to give him the bishoprics of Münster and Paderborn, in which he had long been interested, in the event of victory. Someone suggested using these ecclesiastical territories in the meantime as a recruiting and deployment area for support troops for the Lower Palatinate, since they were easy to reach from the Netherlands. The ecclesiastical territories of Münster and Paderborn were, according to the imperial constitution of the time and the Augsburg Religious Peace, completely legal and undisputed property of the Catholic Church, guaranteed by the Emperor. These territories also had nothing to do with the war in Bohemia and the Palatinate; they did not even contribute financial contributions to the League's war effort. And the subjects and citizens living there, whose property and lives were at stake, played no role at all in these considerations.

After the dissolution of the Union, Frederick was alone again when he set off for the United Netherlands to implement this plan and asked the States General for financial support in his struggle. However, he was accompanied by a young nobleman, Duke Christian of Brunswick. The latter had probably fallen madly in love with Frederick's wife, the only slightly older Elizabeth Stuart, and vowed to regain the Bohemian crown for her. Perhaps to get rid of the rival, perhaps because he no longer had much to lose, Friederich granted the militarily completely inexperienced Christian a patent to recruit troops in his name and lead them to the Lower Palatinate. In May 1621, Christian set out to recruit mercenaries near Hamburg. This was all completely illegal, but apparently such trivialities did not matter to either of them.

Meanwhile, the battle for the Electoral Palatinate was already in full swing. The Palatinate's hereditary lands essentially consisted of two spatially separate areas: the rural Upper Palatinate on the border with Bohemia in the east, characterised by early industrial iron production, and the Lower Palatinate on the Upper Rhine with its capitals Mannheim and Heidelberg, consisting of many enclaves and exclaves. As early as August 1620, troops from the Spanish Netherlands under General Ambrosio di Spinola had attacked the Lower Palatinate. Besides Spaniards, Walloons and Germans also fought in these units. With an army of about 23,000 men, they succeeded in bringing the areas of the Lower Palatinate on the left bank of the Rhine largely under control, with the exception of the fortress of Frankenthal, and established a stronghold near Oppenheim. As the Dutch War of Independence against Spain broke out again at the beginning of 1621 after a twelve-year truce, Spinola was called away to Brussels in the Spanish Netherlands. He handed over command of the troops in the Lower Palatinate to Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, who continued the siege of Frankenthal.



Figure 8

Frederick V of the Palatinate, the Winter King and his wife Elizabeth Stuart. Both were portrayed by Michiel van Mierevelt in 1623. As they were in exile, they had enough time to sit for the painter at length.

In Bohemia, Mansfeld, now fighting for Frederick again, tried in vain to hold western Bohemia and Pilsen against Tilly's troops until March. In the Upper Palatinate, Mansfeld gathered the remaining Electoral Palatinate troops at Waidhaus and held the border to Bohemia against the advancing Tilly until September 1621. During this time, Mansfeld negotiated on his own initiative with imperial envoys to change sides and enter imperial service. This would have been the end of the war. However, when the supply of his troops was no longer guaranteed, he broke off the almost completed negotiations and withdrew with his army to the Lower Palatinate. During this time, Frederick was in exile in the United Netherlands, where he tried to obtain support. The negotiations and their breakdown by Mansfeld, however, showed that the decisions on whether and how to continue the war for the Electoral Palatinate were no longer made by the outlawed Elector, but only by his mercenary leader. By now, at the latest, Frederick had become a puppet.

Once in the Lower Palatinate, Mansfeld and his army forced the Spanish to end the siege of the fortress of Frankenthal in October. The Spaniards, however, remained in the Palatinate on the left bank of the Rhine. Tilly



Figure 9

Peter Ernst II von Mansfeld. As a war entrepreneur, he had no interest in a peaceful solution to the conflict. On the contrary, he tried everything to prolong the war whenever possible.

followed Mansfeld with the League army and chose the Odenwald as his base of operations and winter quarters. Although the League troops were more disciplined and better paid, quartering soldiers was always a great burden on the civilian population, as they had to pay for their upkeep.

Mansfeld led his army to winter quarters in Lower Alsace. The various lords and even more so the population there had nothing to do with the whole war, but that was of no concern to the war entrepreneur. On the contrary, the loot from the plundering enabled him to strengthen his army. But he could not advance further south, into Upper Alsace, because troops of the Habsburg bailiff of Upper Austria, Archduke Leopold, were employed there.

Christian of Brunswick Begins his War

Meanwhile, Christian of Brunswick tried to keep his promise and come to Mansfeld's aid in defending the Palatinate. Over the summer he had recruited infantry and cavalry in northern Germany with rather poor success. In particular, he failed to recruit officers in sufficient numbers.

At the beginning of the 17th century, there were practically no standing armies. Those who wanted to wage war were therefore dependent on recruited mercenaries. Normally, the future warlord entrusted these



Figure 10

Recruiting of troops. On the left, a clerk sits in front of an advertising drum and enrolls interested recruits. If they pass the examination, they receive a handout equivalent to several months' wages for a journeyman craftsman.

recruitments to a private person. This person advanced the money for recruitment and equipment in order to be paid later by the warlord or to be promised a corresponding share of the booty, territories or titles. The actual recruitment of recruits was carried out by officers who had also been recruited in the territories assigned to them. Once this had been agreed with the territorial lord, the proverbial advertising drum was beaten, the flute blown and flags waved to draw the attention of potential recruits to the recruiters. If the territorial lord's approval was lacking, advertising was done quietly in pubs and at markets. As an incentive to enlist, there was an hand out money that could amount to several months' wages for a craftsman. However, the recruits were later charged for their equipment. Uniforms, especially in the Protestant armies, did not exist at first; the soldiers wore their civilian clothes. Those who took the recruiting money and registered on the recruiting roll had to go immediately to a prescribed muster ground under threat of death. There the recruits were tested for their physical and mental fitness. Men between the ages of twenty and forty were to be recruited. However, since the recruiting officers were paid per man, children and veterans over fifty were often recruited as well. The most sought-after were "tried servants", i.e. men who had already served in an army. Those who were deemed fit had to swear an oath to the flag and were thus bound to loyalty and obedience for an indefinite period. The warlords, for their part, could dismiss the troops at any time at will or at the state of their coffers. The duties of the soldiers were laid down in so-called letters of articles. Everything was regulated in them: Pay, oath, obligations, abdication, care of weapons, conduct in camp, entrenchment work, when looting and plunder were permitted and much more. The soldiers were subject to strict military jurisdiction upon successful muster. According to most of these articles, theft, arson, robbery and mistreatment of the population were strictly forbidden and in some cases punishable by death. Insubordination or disrespect of superiors, as well as rape and scuffles between comrades, were punishable by corporal punishment. Treason, mutiny and desertion were punishable by death everywhere. To ensure that the article letter was not forgotten, it was read out publicly in the camp every week.¹

In the case of Christian of Brunswick, the handout money and weapons came from Holland and England, but also from his own revenues. Since there was no provision for continuous payment, the Brunswick troops were recruited on

¹ See supplements for an account on structure and organisation of a regiment.

booty rather than on regular pay. This also explains the fact that professional mercenary applications were far fewer than those of soldiers of fortune and men from social fringe groups. Accordingly, it was difficult, or even not intended, for the officers to maintain the discipline of the men in territories on whose resources they were dependent. However, this problem affected most armies of the time to varying degrees.

Towards the end of September 1621, a march column recruited by Christian on behalf of Frederick, consisting mainly of infantry, set off in the direction of the Lower Palatinate. The enterprise ended in complete disaster. The poorly armed, undisciplined infantry was repeatedly hindered and stopped by troops of the respective sovereigns, who were understandably less than enthusiastic about the march of an irregular army through their territory. Therefore, Christian's infantry had to take long detours, which did not help their motivation.

When a mercenary band had reached a certain size, it was difficult for the authorities through whose territories it passed to take action against it. For territorial defence and certain police tasks (such as the coordinated hunt for criminals), the sovereigns only had militias at their disposal, for which the towns and municipalities had to provide a certain number of men fit for military service and who were called together by specially tasked boards as needed. Due to the often militarily limited quality of these peasants and



Figure 11

Christian von Braunschweig's enemy-of-the-priesthood coin. With this he staged himself as God's revenge.