

The Habsburg Netherlands and the Holy Roman Empire. Historiographical debates across centuries.

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The aim of this paper is to study the evolving perception of the links between the Habsburg Netherlands and the Holy Roman Empire (HRE) by focusing on the notions of “belonging” or “being similar” and “not belonging” or “being apart”.

As a member of the Burgundian Circle created in 1512 and reinforced in 1548, the Low Countries maintained a special position between the two Habsburg branches and within the HRE. This complex relationship has been reinterpreted through a variety of political, cultural, and historiographical approaches. We analyze the most significant ones to identify and explain the constants and changes throughout the centuries.

Early Modern legal and intellectual debates centered on the Netherlands’ dual role as both a historic part of the HRE and a territorial possession of the Habsburg dynasty. No modern state has fully integrated the fragmented legacy of the Burgundian territories into its historical identity. But, in the 19th and 20th centuries, national and nationalist historiographies reshaped the narrative and developed competing versions. German scholars celebrated the HRE as a unifying force, while Dutch and Belgian historians framed the Burgundian provinces as largely autonomous and resistant to imperial authority. During the interwar period, *Westforschung* ideologists mobilized the past to justify expansionist agendas, portraying the Low Countries, or at least parts of them, as intrinsically Germanic. Contemporary historiography has moved beyond the more polarized visions of the past. It reads the Low Countries and their relations with the HRE through the lenses of decentralization, borderlands studies, and imperial governance.

Our paper highlights how evolving interpretations of the Habsburg Netherlands and their status within the HRE reflect broader debates. It contributes to a more general discussion about the supposed characteristics and projected limits of the Holy Roman Empire, a key question of the Basel conference.