

Germania Sacra Online – The Research Portal of Clerics and Religious Institutions before 1810

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Abstract

The research project Germania Sacra provides a comprehensive prosopographical database, that makes structured and comparable data of the Church of the Holy Roman Empire available for further research. The database contains approximately 31,000 records of premodern persons, new data is continuously added. This digital index of persons is supplemented by the "Database of Monasteries, Convents and Collegiate Churches of the Old Empire". The access through ecclesiastical institutions offers a broad variety of visualization possibilities for the prosopographical data. Together with the digitized reference books of the Germania Sacra those databases constitute a research portal of clerics and religious institutions, which takes into consideration the enormous importance of the Church for the history of the Holy Roman Empire. In order to make as much information as possible accessible for scholarly use the next steps that will be undertaken are cross-institutional collaboration and integration of scientific data resources of other research projects.

Keywords: Prosopography, Church of the Holy Roman Empire, Linked Data, Authority files, Cross-database query, Monasteries

1. Introduction

Within Europe, the Germania Sacra is a unique research project that deals with the history of dioceses, monasteries, convents and collegiate churches in the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. The clerical institutions included date from late antiquity until the Reformation or, respectively, the secularization at the beginning of the 19th century. Geographically, research includes the present Federal Republic of Germany and the border regions of neighboring countries.

The aim of the project is to present the source material of the respective archives in a way that makes structured and comparable data of the Church of the Holy Roman Empire available for further research. A key component of this is the prosopography; specifically an inventory of clerical members of the Roman Empire, not just by name, but with all the essential information that can be collected from local archives and from Vatican sources. Contained within the reference books published by Germania Sacra are short biographies of the clerics in each of the studied institutions. Thus, Germania Sacra provides biographical lists of the bishops of a diocese, the canons or canonesses of individual collegiate churches, the monks and nuns of numerous monasteries etc.

According to current research which considers approximately a thousand years of church history – from the Roman Empire to the secularization – about 10,000 monasteries and convents existed. If we assume that an average institution over time had approximately 500 clerical staff members, this means we are discussing millions of individuals.

Given that the research project Germania Sacra was founded 100 years ago, one wonders if the founding fathers were aware of the sheer mass of material and the necessary human and financial resources needed to cope with such a project. We can assume they were.¹ As part of the scientific community during the late 19th and early 20th century, these scholars were influenced by the widespread optimism and positivism in regard to ambitious research projects in the field of the humanities. Seemingly, they believed that they could manage this enormous task.

Today, about four generations later, the assessment is much more sober. Germania Sacra has existed for almost 100 years, during this time 72 reference books have been published. This, of course, means that only a small amount of the archival material of the religious institutions and clerics has been reviewed. Consequently, the vision of the founding fathers appears to be an illusion. At present the Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities, which funds Germania Sacra since 2008, offers the most comprehensive humanities research programme in Germany and supports long-term basic research projects. Nonetheless resources are restricted. Like all other research projects Germania Sacra

¹ "Woher die erforderlichen Mittel nehmen und, wenn diese vorhanden gewesen wären, wo die unentbehrlichen zahlreichen Mitarbeiter und Hilfskräfte finden und in eine Organisation auf so weite Sicht, für zwei oder gar für drei Generationen, einordnen? ... So ist es gekommen, daß, sobald wir die ersten Grundlagen für Germania pontificia geschaffen hatten und sahen, daß allen Propheten zum Trotz dieser Versuch gelingen werde, wir daran gingen, die Vorbereitungen für die Germania sacra zu treffen." Preamble of the first volume of Germania Sacra by Paul Fridolin Kehr, in: Abb & Wentz, 1929, pp. VII–VIII.

