

Letters in The Middle Ages

Letters to Attila, Charlemagne, Archduke Sigismund and Emperor Charles V

Introduction

The Middle Ages, so often referred to as the Dark Ages, extend from the days when the Germanic peoples began to migrate to the magnificent times and deeds of the Renaissance. It is an epoch in which much is, indeed, still in the dark from a historical point of view. But also a time which created in up-and-coming Franconia the cradle of our present-day Europe. An era full of ignorance, chaos and yet, in the end, of great energy, which brought forth new systems of values and economies or at least prepared the ground for them.

To sum up a whole millennium of (monetary) history on a few pages and to want to do a certain degree of justice to it is probably impossible. The following letters from a European living in the third millennium to outstanding personalities want at least to try to do the impossible.

Letter to Attila (396–453),

who, although he threw Europe into terrible confusion with his Huns, also created the scope for a completely new order.

Dear Attila,

Cross your heart, only few people have earned the salutation "dear" less than you. Your name to this day stands for destruction and barbarism. Even though it actually means doing you a slight injustice, if we deal with the matter seriously from the standpoint of history. At the Imperial Court in Ravenna, where you lived for some years as a well-treated hostage, you came to know what civilisation means.

Be that as it may: when all is said and done, Europe owes you a debt of gratitude. For you created the necessary prerequisites. From the ashes of that earth which your Hun people either burnt and left behind or which those expelled by you destroyed slowly but surely, the Europe that to this day has still not completely come to rest developed out of the ancient world of the Romans

In 375 your forefathers, coming from somewhere in the East, nobody knows quite where, invaded our continent on their horses. Twenty-two years later and thus exactly one year after Rome had split into West and East, you were born. You gave the Germanic tribes the last strong impetus for the second and important phase of their great migration. You thus shook Eastern Rome and brought about the downfall of Eastern Rome. The Visigoths moved from the Balkans to Italy and on to Spain, the Ostrogoths in the meantime became the masters of Rome, and the Vandals established themselves in Africa. Angles and Saxons set out for Britain. Alemannians, Burgundians, Merovingians, Langobards – all continued constantly fleeing and searching. Just as an oil tanker needs an extremely long distance to brake, so they all carried on for long after the storms of your Huns had faded away.

You yourself moved through what is Germany and France today, murdering and pillaging. It is not simple to establish a direct link between you and money or coinage. Although you certainly never missed a chance to steal the golden solidus, which at that time was rated highly in both Eastern and Western Rome, and the triens, worth one-third of its value, wherever you could get your hands on them. But you and your Huns triggered the migration of peoples, which kept the European political geography in motion for centuries. Although Byzantium under Emperor Justinian was supposed to reunite almost the whole of former Rome, he lacked one important part to do so: the Empire of the Franks. It was meant to become the power that would be the nucleus of the European Middle Ages.

After your looting campaigns through half of Europe you suffered your defeat on the Catalaunian Plains (France) in 451. Two years later you did not survive your own wedding night. Many a man will envy you for.

Rest in Peace, in spite of it all

A European male of the 3rd Millennium

My dear Attila

Attila – the King of the Huns! The Scourge of God! Most authors describe you as a bloodthirsty monster, a murdering and plundering barbarian. Actually one could consider leaving this stigma on you since you killed your own brother. But let me be fair: When it comes down to killing one's own brother you certainly do not stand alone in the history of the Occident. To tell you the truth, it is the hidden and lesser known aspects of your character that are more interesting to me than these well known scandals.

Attila – Etila – Etzil – Etzel: You gave your name to the mountain Etzel high over the lake of Zurich. When the Alamanni and Franks prayed to the Lord in their Old High German dialect they sounded like this: "Atta unsar, der Du bist in himilin." And when the children from the area of Berne in Switzerland call their fathers, they still yell "Aetti" – unknowingly calling for Attila. How does it come that in the German language your name has become the word for father, Atta?

It is said, that you have been a bold, strict, fair and modest man. You, the king of the Huns, ate your humble meal from a wooden plate, while your officers dined from exquisite silver plates. Your contemporaries described you as tough diplomat and a courageous warrior. It is also said that you often acted mercifully, not insisting on the strict jurisdiction. Even the Roman Emperor's daughter Honoria, whose mother, the famous Empress Galla Placidia had been married to a Germanic King in a first marriage, even Honoria has asked for your help and support, when being forced to marry against her will. You probably have not been the monster that people have made of you later. It is more likely that during this period of migrating peoples and tribes, you became the only remaining factor of stability, of "law and order."

Something along the line of strict, but reliable father figure. And this is why your name lives on forever in the German language!

I wish you "fare well," King Etzel

A European female of the 3rd Millennium

Letter to Charlemagne (747–814),

the first to unite Europe and the inventor of the Euro

Dear Charles,

There is good reason for your bearing the epithet "the Great." Following the turmoil of the migration of peoples it was you who united Europe, and included precisely that Germanic Europe as well that under Rome was once situated beyond the border fortifications. That is why you are regarded as the father of Europe. Clovis, who some three centuries before, in 486, had founded this, your Frankish empire, by defeating the Romans, may thus rightly be described as its grandfather. For through his christening and the conscious adoption of Roman traditions he established the cultural framework for the one and a half millennia of European history.

You achieved your objective with just as much skill as unscrupulousness. To increase your power and to expand your realm you disregarded successions and waged war from Saxony to Spain. In Italy you destroyed the Langobardian empire at the behest of the pope – for this he crowned you the new emperor at Christmas 800. The tradition of Western Rome continued. This Rome was once distinguished by its generally valid administrative and monetary system. You revived this. You reorganised the weights, measures and coinage. Although the Franks before you had struck their own silver coins along the lines of the triens (1/3 of a solidus), you united everything. Your Carolingian system had, however, a Roman exemplar: in accordance with the Codex Theodosianus there had already been the division into livres, sols and denarii since 418. In 793 you made out of these weight-based coins the Charles pound, worth 20 shillings and 240 pfennigs, that was named after you and weighed exactly 408.24 grams. It was fixed in its relation to the dinarius of the Arab world. That was important for the steadily growing trading relations in your days. Between your empire and Arabia, by the way, - this is just a brief digression – there were Norman Viking conditions in Sicily. Seen numismatically, this is actually only of significance because there gold coins were again – or, if you will, still – being minted under Byzantine and Arab influence. Your coins, on the other hand, were made of silver. The subjects from the conquered territories dug it out of the mines in great quantities. It may interest you that its relation to gold amounted to 12:1 not only for your generation, but also for centuries to come.

It was not the system itself, however, that was your really remarkable achievement, but the fact that you were able to establish it throughout the whole of your huge empire. You gave your money not only fixed values (example: 1 royal sheffel hafer = 1 pfennig). Largely your centrally controlled coins alone were in circulation. You had built your empire – now you gave it its first "euro." You see, today we are doing that in reverse – first Europe gives itself a universally valid currency, and is now trying to unite.

Through the way in which you held your empire together, however, you also, at the same time, sowed the seeds of its decline. Thanks to the introduction of the feudal system, which had a strong impact on the Middle Ages, it was possible to satisfy the very different desires of potential enemies. In the long run, however, it resulted in the loss of central power. You laid this cuckoo's egg into the nest for your sons. In doing so you wanted, like every father, only the best for your children. You had even disregarded the pope's will when you bequeathed your empire not to the latter, but to your offspring Pepin and Louis the Pious. The latter, under pressure from all sides,

had no choice but to bring into play the coinage law you had centralised as a political means of appeasement. In 833 Corvey Monastery was given a mint. It is quite conceivable that this made you turn over in your grave the first time. Well, it will not have been the last time, will it?

Rest in Peace and thank for trying to unite Europe

A European male of the 3rd Millennium

Letter to Archduke Sigismund the Rich of Tyrol (1427–1496),

who, although belonging to the selfish ruling class, with the taler unintentionally contributed a building-block to the beginning of modern times.

Dear Sigismund,

Actually you have only taken one historically relevant decision in your life: in 1486 you put the first taler into circulation. These coins, later struck with all kinds of impresses, was, however, first given this name after the Counts Schlick had minted their guilder groschens in Joachimsthal (Joachim's Valley) in Bohemia. This "Joachim taler" gave its name to its whole species. And this, in turn, was important for the efforts to unify the great coin systems in the late Middle Ages.

There is actually only one reason why you, my dear Archduke, are nevertheless receiving this letter from the future: you could even be someone else. What may sound absurd is certainly not. You lived in a period in which there were really no outstanding figures. This was not because there was any lack of prominent personalities. One only has to think of the great castle culture and the knights' sagas. But, rather, the absence of a 'big leader' was inherent in the system, as we would say today. This could be seen not only in the rulers, but also in the coinage system in an almost exemplary fashion.

Charlemagne's unification efforts were quickly forgotten. As a side effect of the feudal system more and more authorities were conceded the coinage right. It was especially after the Investiture Controversy (1075–1122) – the struggle between temporal and spiritual authorities about the right to appoint bishops and cardinals – the central power collapsed almost like an explosion. Some aristocrats like yourself, but also some of the clergy, partly claimed the coinage right for themselves. And towns, too, began to produce their own coins. In 1273 Leipzig, for example, and in 1340 Frankfurt and Lübeck were given the right to mint gold coins, and in 1420 Nuremberg had the sebaldu gold guilder confirmed as a currency for the city.

You also minted gold coins at first. Like other rulers, too, you then profited, however, from new techniques for mining silver and thus from deposits that could be newly exploited. For this reason you and others quickly switched over to silver coins. Bigger and bigger "talers" were produced up to the above-mentioned first one, which, in reference to the ten times lighter guilder was called guldiner. The growing size was justified by the demand: flourishing trade called for more valuable coins. Silver mostly remained the metal of choice, as it was far more easily available than gold.

Producing coins certainly encouraged narcissistic self-projection for you and your fellow aristocrats, on the one hand. But, on the other, you used it to finance your armies and your luxury. You often had, as mentioned before, almost too much silver and spread it among the people in the form of coins. That this metal existed in such large quantities would in the end also be important for efforts to achieve unification that soon set in. But that was probably a matter of indifference to you. You preferred to profit frequently enough from using less and less silver in coins, which did not change in value. Although through so-called revocations you sly dogs repeatedly withdrew your coins from circulation to issue cheaper ones containing less metal, it was your subjects who always had to foot the bill. You rulers of those days at any rate created a complicated diversity of local coins – others may prefer to describe this hotchpotch as chaos. Only few of them acquired

supra-regional importance. One of these was the pfennig of the Schwäbisch-Hall Imperial Mint – called haller or heller.

The epoch in which you lived was a stormy time of transition. In the change from the so-called Dark Ages to modern times many systems collapsed. The king lost his power. The church became secularised and abused its authority financially, as the sale of indulgences showed. Then the papacy was split by the Great Schism. From 1378 there was one pope in Rome and another in Avignon. It was no doubt difficult for you to know which of them had the final say? Everyone had to look after himself and build up power in his own house. Up into your times you had not managed to shrug off religious dogmas and individual petty jealousies and to create something common to all. Did the occidental unity, the unity of church and political power, have to collapse before something new could come about? It began in your days: Humanism, Renaissance, Reformation would recreate man's relation to nature, art and God.

In the financial sector your taler marks something like a break with the fundamental federal way of thinking of the late Middle Ages. Not presumably because that was what you intended. But you did set a trend. The great silver taler that could be supraregionally put into circulation then fits in marvellously with the endeavours for unification in the 16th century.

Thank you for all this and rest in Peace.

A European male of the 3rd Millennium

Letter to Emperor Charles V (1500–1558),

who with some successful manoeuvres laid the foundations of a new coinage system

Dear Charles V,

Can we say that you ended the Middle Ages? Present-day historians disagree anyway as to how far this epoch, which for you was the present, actually extends. Now, your first Imperial Coinage Law, proclaimed in Esslingen in 1524, is seen by many as the beginning of the European monetary history of modern times.

For sure, even in the dark days of the Middle Ages there had always been efforts to contain the very strong centrifugal forces and, also in the coinage, to come to uniform solutions. Paradoxically this partly took place from egoistical motives. So anyone who happened to have the coinage right naturally strove to keep it as exclusive as possible. In 1356 the elector princes had the complete minting prerogative guaranteed in the Golden Bull. But these efforts to create unity were always short-lived. Do not, however, let your conscience worry you excessively. Foreign countries did not supply you with any recipes as to how uniformity could have been achieved. In Italy, for example, the banking system began, not least as a relay and exchange station for all the many kinds of coins and currencies that existed. It was also in the prosperous Italian metropolises that new and valuable gold coins came into existence. Such as, for instance, the artistically extremely remarkable florin (gold guilder) in Florence. But these gold coins had two advantages over your northern silver pieces: they had, firstly, far more value per weight unit than your silver coins and were thus handier for making large commercial payments. Secondly, they were also compatible with Arab and Byzantine currency units.

All that is not likely to have caused you much concern. Your own money was certainly of more importance to you. And you did something for it: as a premiere, in the shape of your first Coinage Law. Now for the first time there were written regulations and prescriptions, which were generally accessible and comprehensible. They laid down, for example, the size and picture on the coin. It was your will that the obverse always had to show the imperial eagle, the value and the title of the emperor. The reverse, however, was reserved for the coinage overlords, who were, of course, still territorially powerful. You attached great importance to standardising and redefining the weight of the coin. Thus as a standard for the weight you exchanged old units still based on the Carolingian pound for the "Colnische marck." Up until the Treaty of Vienna of 1857 this Cologne mark would remain around 234 grams of silver, the basic weight in coinage. What a fantastic standardisation you introduced by that move! I raise my hat to you.

Two factors made it possible for you to introduce a certain order into the coinage at last. On the one hand, you, unlike many of your imperial predecessors, now finally again possessed considerable power. On the other, the new availability of silver facilitated the rise of the new guilder groschen in large quantities. In the end, your Essling Coinage Law failed after some time because the specifications made the coins too expensive to produce. Many in the empire, however, had now become aware of the advantages of a standardised coin system.

In 1551 you therefore tried again with a second Coinage Law, the so-called Augsburg Coinage Law. In the meantime, the kreuzer and its quarter value the batzen were widely disseminated in the

south of Germany, which is why the new law with the Imperial guldiner was based on this and not on the taler, which was common in northern Germany.

Nor did the third Coinage Law, which your successor Ferdinand I put into force in 1559, so three years after your death, do credit to the taler. It thus came about that the coinage system in the German-speaking countries always remained split. In the south the guilder was valid, in the north the taler. Ferdinand, by the way, declared the ducat to be the new imperial gold coin. Yes, that still existed.

In spite of three unsuccessful attempts and a partition into guilder and taler countries that lasted until 1873, the big agreement came in 1566 referred to as the Departure from the Imperial Coin. The taler became the imperial currency and in the end the most important coin of all countries and all times in the world. I expect you're glad to hear that, dear Charles, aren't you?

I would be delighted for you. Rest in Peace

A European of the 3rd Millennium