Charles Patin, a French doctor and antiquary, opened his 1674 description of Vienna with an exuberant appraisal:

Vienne est la capitale d’Allemagne, ou plutôt d’Occident, on y voit aujourd’hui la Majesté de l’Empire, comme autrefois à Rome\(^1\)

Other travellers noticed the busy traffic of nobles around the emperor’s court, ranking it high among Europe’s courts, and indeed we find series of booklets describing all emperors from Roman to Habsburg times. Yet only rarely was Vienna presented as the ‘capital’ of Germany, and Patin’s description of the city as Europe’s leading metropolis stands as a singular exception.\(^2\) There was little ground for his assessment. Neither in population, nor in economic importance did early modern Vienna approach Paris or London. The political centrality of these cities in their realms,  

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moreover, was more conspicuous than Vienna’s role in the archetypically composite Habsburg monarchy, let alone in the Holy Roman Empire or in Europe as a whole. Vienna, however, indisputably had become the Kaiserstadt par excellence, and this was its defining characteristic for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travellers.

In 1530, following the failed first Ottoman siege, Ferdinand had moved his Hoflager to Vienna. From his accession to the imperial dignity in 1556–8 to the brief Wittelsbach interlude on the imperial throne in 1742–5, only Rudolf II’s prolonged stay in Prague had interrupted Vienna’s status as the main residence of the emperor. Kaiserstadt Vienna, however, did not necessarily serve as capital, and the Habsburg court in Vienna always had to reckon with alternative courtly centres. Ferdinand I’s division of his succession among his sons complicated the picture, strengthening the regional Habsburg capitals in Graz and Innsbruck each with its own court until 1619 and 1665 respectively.3 The royal crowns of Bohemia and Hungary, moreover, in the hands of the Habsburgs since 1526, retained their own rituals, regalia and centres notwithstanding either the 1620 defeat of the Bohemians or the long Ottoman presence in Hungary.4 At the level of the Holy Roman Empire, the status of Vienna and its court was even more complicated. Vienna, as the habitual residence of the emperor and as the increasingly prominent centre of one of the major dynastic complexes of the Empire, held an important position. Yet on the scale of the Empire it shared its position with a range of other urban and dynastic centres. Imperial free cities cherished their role in the living constitution of the Empire, safeguarding the imperial insignia, and serving as meeting points for the Reichsstände at recurring key events in the ceremonial-political calendar. The greater princes of the Empire, particularly the electors, had capitals, courts, and hunting lodges that matched the emperor’s relatively modest standards of magnificence. Each of these courts served as a focus of integration for its own immediate environment, and at the same time offered a starting point for the ongoing competition in the höfische Gesellschaft of the Empire.5 The process of Territorialisierung, the strengthening

3 Innsbruck played a role later on as well: see the recent useful overview ed. Heinz Nollatscher and Jan Paul Niederkorn, Der Innsbrucker Hof. Residenz und höfische Gesellschaft in Tirol vom 15. bis 19. Jahrhundert (Vienna, 2005).