A Dutch minister of finance was once asked what he would do if he were the president of the German Federal Bank. ‘Never ask a Dutchman what he would do if he were a German’, was his reply. Such a sense of absolute separateness must be the result of a long historical development. During the eleventh and twelfth century, emperors still visited the Netherlands quite regularly. If in about 1200 a bishop of Utrecht had been asked whether he regarded his diocese as a part of the Regnum Teutonicorum his answer would have been affirmative as a matter of course. From the thirteenth century onwards the ties between the Netherlands and the Holy Roman Empire became less significant. Rulers of a number of Netherlandish territories became more and more involved with France and England and the emperors stopped their visits to this periphery of the Empire. During the fifteenth century the Netherlands were not even represented at the imperial diets nor did they pay imperial taxes.¹

In modern times the history of the relations between the Low Countries and the Holy Roman Empire has attracted the attention of a number of scholars. Historians of constitutional law, for instance, have tried to solve the question how and when the Netherlands reached their independence from the Empire.² During the Second World War the Netherlands were

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(re)incorporated into a German Reich once more, and this gave rise to a number of scholarly publications which, however, had a different emphasis. Between 1940 and 1945 German scholars tried to prove that the bonds between the Netherlands and the Empire had been natural, indissoluble and eternal.3

In what follows the ancient dispute whether and, if so, until when the Netherlands were part of the Holy Roman Empire will not be taken up again. It is enough to know that, although formally the emperors never gave up their claims, they did not assert their rights either.4 A glance at the history of the actual political relations between the Netherlands and the Empire during the sixteenth century seems to be more promising, because then the stage was set for developments in later times. From a practical-political point of view, legal matters or the fine points of political theory must be regarded as less important than political action and especially interaction between the two bodies. During the sixteenth century constitutional practice in the Empire presented the spectacle of a certain dynamism—fed by the Reformation and the ensuing political conflicts—whereas from the sixties onwards important political and constitutional changes were engendered by the Revolt in the Netherlands.5

As far as the relations between the Empire and the Netherlands are concerned the sixteenth century must be divided into two distinct periods: 1512–48 and 1548–1609. In 1512 Emperor Maximilian I organized the Empire into circles (Kreise), of which the Burgundian circle was one. Together with a part of the Westphalian circle it comprised the whole of the Netherlands. In 1548 the treaty of Augsburg (or Burgundian treaty) was concluded between Emperor Charles V and his brother King Ferdinand. The treaty should have controlled the constitutional relations between the Empire and the Netherlands for ever, but did so only until the outbreak of the Revolt of the Netherlands in the late sixties. Lastly, 1609 is the