HISTORICAL WRITING AND GERMAN IDENTITY: JACOB WIMPHELING AND SEBASTIAN FRANCK

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By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the German humanists began composing works that expressed a collective identity for the many peoples of the German lands. This identity was far from fully developed, but it promoted, for the first time, the Germans’ idea of a German people. This identity reflected the Germans’ acknowledgement of a distinguished and continuous history traceable to an ancient past, shared values, a respectable intellectual heritage, and a common language and culture. In many respects, the German humanists conceptualized a German people and nation, but their conception thereof was a prototype for, not a clearly-defined expression of a German national identity.

During the first half of the sixteenth century, the German humanists began to address the many problems plaguing the German lands that detracted from their idealized visions of Germany’s past. Their studies of Graeco-Roman antiquity, particularly Tacitus’ *Germania*, informed them, however idealized, of a noble and distinguished German past and exposed them to the works of both the ancient authors and the Germans’ contemporaries, particularly the Italian and Byzantine humanists. Because the German humanists recognized the Germans were a people who possessed a land, culture, and achievements worthy of respect, like the Byzantine and Italian humanists had promoted about their respective societies, they set forth to distinguish the German peoples. They legitimized the Germans’ right to the Roman imperial tradition and appropriated it to set the Germans on par with

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the Byzantines and Italians. Using this highly-regarded past and their knowledge of historical writings, both ancient and contemporary, the German humanists conceptualized a German people that expanded the ideas these works had already identified—continuity, German values, regional and ethnic variety, a glorious past under important rulers—but cast them in a new, positive light.

By 1500, the European lands of the former Roman Empire, whose administration and traditions had unified them politically and conceptually under the banner of Christendom for over a millennium, began to acquire new identities. The lack of an imperial military power together with territorial consolidation, the rise of de facto, semi-autonomous governments, economic revival, and the founding of Europe’s first seaborne empires all contributed to redefining the lands once unified by the authority and power of the Roman Empire. Pitted against the political reality was the timeless ideal of a universal, Christian Roman Empire that provided the German rulers and intellectuals with a means to secure ideas of unity and Roman imperial hegemony. Appropriating aspects of ancient Rome’s cultural inheritance and Christianity, they promoted, when it served their purposes, a common Christian Roman identity. This identity transcended contemporary differences and time, establishing a historical memory traceable from mythic times through the historic Roman Empire to contemporary times.

The traumatic series of events—the schism of 1054, the crusading efforts promoted by the papacy in the late-eleventh century, the defeat of the Hohenstaufen dynasty in the 1260s, the growing presence of French and Angevin rule, the papacy’s departure from Rome and its relocation to Avignon (1309–77), the ensuing schism (1378–1417), the last and unsuccessful attempt at the Council of Ferrara-Florence to restore unity to the Christian Church (1438–39), and the Ottomans’ sack of Constantinople (1453)—challenged every aspect of the medieval conception of a universal Christendom. Thus, Europe, in the mid-fifteenth century, was filled with peoples who may have descended from a common tradition but who had long been anything but a unified people. These events may not have been of particular concern for individuals, but they captured the intellectuals’ attention, particularly

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2 See also Kloft, “Die Idee einer deutschen Nation,” p. 206.