

Eschatology and the Medieval Western Empire

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The medieval western (or ‘Holy Roman’) Empire is distinctive among medieval European polities in the extent to which both its defenders and its critics ascribed to the Empire and its rulers a special role in the final events of Christian history. To a remarkable degree, imperial political thought, and thinking about the Empire by others, has recourse to concepts and images of supernatural good and evil, located – implicitly or explicitly – within sacral-historical schemes linking past and future. This paper will take a broad view of the Empire’s medieval history, between the tenth and the early sixteenth centuries, in order to attempt to understand the evolution and the importance of its eschatological dimensions for contemporaries. It will seek to judge the *importance* of eschatology as an element in medieval western imperial (and anti-imperial) doctrine and polemic. How *serious* were contemporaries in identifying particular rulers as an (or ‘the’) Antichrist or as a salvific Last Emperor? How far did such ascriptions reflect mere political polemic, how far deeper expectations? Was eschatology a *constant* matter of importance in thinking about the Empire’s rulers, or was it largely situationally-dependent? How did its importance *change* over the long period considered, and in response to what stimuli? (The Investiture Contest in the eleventh century? The conflicts of the Hohenstaufen emperors of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with the papacy? Social and economic crises in the later Middle Ages?) Although the paper will not attempt to develop comparative perspectives (except, very briefly, with Byzantium, the source of key models for western imperial eschatology), it is hoped that its material will offer a fruitful basis for exploring, within the workshop, both comparisons and contrasts with other empires.