

The special exhibit

Money at the time of the *Golden Bull* and the coronation city of Frankfurt

The term “bull” comes from the Latin word *bullā*, a locket enclosing a medallion or amulet. Later, this name came to be applied, first, to the seal attached to a document contained in the locket, then to the seal itself and, finally, to the document. Normally, lead, wax and sealing-wax were employed as materials to make the impression of a seal. The use of gold points to the elevated status of the seal-bearer and, therefore, the importance of the document.

The “Golden Bull”, so named because of the gold seal it carried, was a decree issued by Emperor Charles IV 650 years ago in 1356, enshrining key aspects of the constitutional structure of the Holy Roman Empire. The term “Golden Bull” for this compendium of laws is first attested in 1400. Charles IV referred to it as “*unser keiserliches rechtebuch*” (Our imperial book of law). Among other things, it laid down the procedure for the election of the Roman-German King and future Holy Roman Emperor by the prince-electors (*Kurfürsten*) and was in force until the end of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation in 1806. The archbishops of Mayence (Mainz), Treves (Trier) and Cologne, the king of Bohemia, the count palatine of the Rhine, the duke of Saxony and the margrave of Brandenburg were explicitly named as “the true and lawful prince-electors of the holy empire”.

The “Golden Bull” gave the electoral princes the vested right to mint gold coins, which had originally been the privilege of the emperor.

“We decree, moreover, that our successor, the king ... of Bohemia, shall have the same right which our predecessors ... are known to have had ... the right, namely, in every place and part of their kingdom, and of the lands subject to them, and all of their dependencies ... of coining gold and silver money and of circulating it ...”



Florence, early 14th century



Speyer or Frankfurt, first half of
14th century



Mainz, second half of 14th century

In the second half of the 13th century, the city republics of Genoa, Florence and Venice issued their own gold coins for the first time, marking the start of a new phase in European monetary history. The *fiorino d'oro* or *florenus aureus*, issued by the city republic of Florence, became the model for many European gold coins. At first, it was merely imitated but, later, the traditional images on the florins changed. The coat of arms of the ruler who had commissioned the coin took the place of the lily. Saint John was initially retained as the reverse image but was later replaced by other images. These mintings which depart from the

prototype are called *gulden* (golden). The second important gold coin was the ducat, which was struck in Venice and had the same value as the florin. It went on to become one of the most popular gold coins of all time.

From 1562 onwards, Frankfurt was not only the city where the elections were held but also – with a few exceptions – where the emperors were crowned. In his biographical work *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (Poetry and Truth), Goethe gives an eyewitness account of the election and coronation of Joseph II in 1764:

“...That great political object, the election and coronation of a king of Rome, was pursued with more and more earnestness...Many vexations arise also from this, that the city is gradually overrun with people, both useful and needless. In vain are the courts reminded, on the part of the city, of prescriptions of the Golden Bull, now, indeed, obsolete. Not only the deputies with their attendants, but many persons of rank, and others who come from curiosity or for private objects, stand under protection; and the question as to who is to be billeted out, and who is to hire his own lodging... The concourse and rush were extraordinary...”



Double ducat marking the election and thaler commemorating the coronation of Charles VI in 1711

Special coins were struck in Frankfurt to mark the election and coronation of the emperor. Only a small number of people got to see such showpieces – small coinage in everyday use was quite different in appearance.



Frankfurt hellers of the 14th century

In the second half of the 14th century, 240 of these small coins were equivalent to one gold gulden. In 1371, one pound of beef cost four hellers in Frankfurt. A mason would have been able to buy ten pounds of beef with his daily wage. A loaf of bread could be bought for between one and two hellers.

Further references

Mittelalterliche Goldmünzen in der Münzensammlung der Deutschen Bundesbank. Frankfurt, 1982.

Wolfgang Fritz, *Die Goldene Bulle Kaiser Karls IV. vom Jahre 1356*. Weimar, 1972.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (Poetry and Truth), Part 1, Book 5.

Hans Otto Schembs, *Kaiserkrönungen im historischen Frankfurt*. Velbert-Nevigis, 1987.