

# COURT AND COMMUNICATION:

## INTEGRATING THE NOBILITY AT THE IMPERIAL COURT (1620–65)\*

by Mark Hengerer

IN 1665, the lower Austrian nobles complained to the emperor about no longer being appointed to higher noble court offices, especially to the rank of chamberlain. They described themselves as being 'totally excluded'. The emperor informed the lord chamberlain about the situation and explained that he would appreciate the appointment of nobles to this and other important offices of the court.<sup>1</sup>

This complaint seems to have had very little effect.<sup>2</sup> It may serve, however, as a clear indication of the changing structure of nobility: a very close connection to the court was perceived as essential for inclusion in the social elite. Especially from the 1620s, the court produced a high nobility through ennoblement as well as by the transfer of goods, rights, money and rank. This nobility remained in close contact with the court, and its members regularly occupied the highest offices at court as well as in the country.

The significance of the court in changing the nobility has often been noted,<sup>3</sup> but rarely thoroughly investigated.<sup>4</sup> This article will begin by analysing noble integration at the court, drawing on the insights of communication theory.<sup>5</sup> Such an approach will broaden the spectrum of classical structural analysis by considering the interdependence of various aspects that hitherto have been treated separately, such as court structure, bureaucracy, prosopography and financial

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- 1 Linz, Oherösterreichisches Landesarchiv (ÖÖ LA), Herrschaft Steyr, Schachtel 1238, fasz. 28, n. 577.
- 2 In fact, the nobles in the hereditary lands did not play an important role in the court offices, but were very important in some other offices such as the 'Hofkammer' (finance chamber).
- 3 Compare Robert I. W. Evans, *Das Werden der Habsburgermonarchie 1550–1700. Gesellschaft, Kultur, Institutionen (Forschungen zur Geschichte des Donaauraumes 6)*, (Wien-Köln-Graz, 1986); Thomas Winkelbauer, 'Krise der Aristokratie? Zum Strukturwandel des Adels in den böhmischen und niederösterreichischen Ländern im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert', *MIÖG* 100 (1992), pp. 328–53; and Hubert Christian Ehalt, *Ausdrucksformen absolutistischer Herrschaft. Der Wiener Hof im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert [Sozial- und Wirtschaftshistorische Studien, Band 14]*, (München, 1980).
- 4 Compare Grete Klingenstein, 'Der Wiener Hof in der Frühen Neuzeit. Ein Forschungsdesiderat', *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung*, XXII (1995), pp. 237–45. Recently Ieroen Duindam has also dealt with the subject: *Myths of Power. Norbert Elias and the Early Modern European Court*, (Amsterdam, 1994); Norbert Elias und der frühneuzeitliche Hof. Versuch einer Kritik und Weiterführung', *Historische Anthropologie VI* (1998), pp. 370–87; and 'The Court of the Austrian Habsburgs: locus of a composite heritage', *Mitteilungen der Residenzen-Kommission der Akademie der Wissenschaften Göttingen VIII* (1998), pp. 24–58.
- 5 Compare Olaf Märke, *Stadtholder oder Staetholder? Die Funktion des Hauses Oranien und seines Hofes in der politischen Kultur der Republik der Vereinigten Niederlande im 17. Jahrhundert*, (München, 1997) with reference to the theory of social systems formulated by Niklas Luhmann.

transactions.<sup>6</sup> I will begin by outlining the methods of analysis and some results of the most recent studies of this topic.<sup>7</sup> Then I will discuss in some detail several key aspects of social integration: functional integration, moral integration and expressive community.

### Functional integration

As a result of the development of the state and the confiscation of land from Protestant nobles in the 1620s, the court became extremely attractive to nobles. The emperor could bestow status, rank, money, rights etc. and convert one into the other. For example, noble creditors were often raised to higher rank or received special privileges. Such a transformation was legitimate only as an imperial favour. This does not mean that status and rights could be bought and sold—the court did not function as a market. On the contrary, it was evidence of the emperor's power that he was free to give or not to give. However, the regularity of these practices created mutual expectations. The court was able to stabilize these actions and expectations.

The main mechanism for this creation and conversion of privilege was the court system. For our topic we should mention some of the most important offices held by nobles, they included those of the *Obersthofmeister* (lord steward), *Oberstkämmerer* (lord chamberlain), *Hofmarschall* (marshal)<sup>8</sup> and *Oberstallmeister* (master of the horse), and the offices of the council of war, the *Hofkammer* (finance chamber), the Austrian court chancellery, the imperial vice-chancellery and the imperial aulic court. The most important institution was the imperial privy council, which comprised presidents of the above mentioned institutions and other nobles. Members of the different offices were linked to certain family groupings and thereby highly integrated through informal relations. These relations were the most efficient way to gain access to high office-holders and to influence imperial decision-making.

Personal access to the emperor was subtly mediated through a sequence of ante-chambers. Before the imperial private rooms lay several ante-chambers, access to which depended on status and office.<sup>9</sup> Under Ferdinand III, this worked as follows: cardinals, princes and privy councillors could reach the most prestigious ante-chamber, while the second room was open to members of the imperial aulic court, some noble officers, generals, chamberlains of the last emperor and the emperor's

6 See especially Nicholas Henshall, *The Myth of Absolutism. Change and Continuity in Early Modern European Monarchy*, (London, 1992) and *Der Absolutismus – ein Mythos? Strukturwandel monarchischer Herrschaft in West- und Mitteleuropa*, published by Ronald G. Asch und Heinz Durchhardt [Münstersche Historische Forschungen, IX], (Köln Weimar Wien, 1996) and Sharon Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France*, (Oxford, 1986).

7 Compare Mark Hengerer, 'Adelsintegration am Kaiserhof (1618–1665). Zeremoniell, Personal, Finanzen, Netzwerke', *Frühneuzeitinfo IX* (1998), pp. 274–9.

8 This office declined in significance. In 1675 attempts were even made to take away its responsibility for the court quartering system (OÖ LA, Herrschaft Steyr, Schachtel 1242, fac. 32, n. 712).

9 This highly important topic saw many reformations under most emperors. For Leopold I, see OÖ LA, Herrschaft Steyr, box 1224, fac. 13, n. 231; for Ferdinand II' OÖ LA, Archiv Starhemberg (Bestand Riedegg), box 44, Nr. 49 Heinrich Wilhelm von Starhemberg to his brother Caspar, 26 March 1637.

brother. The third room was open to lower civil and military officers.<sup>10</sup> The closer the room to the private chambers, the higher the probability of personal contact and the greater the possibility of submitting a petition—which from the outer rooms might take several weeks of waiting. The most privileged office was that of chamberlain. Holders of this office had frequent access to the private rooms and made so much use of this that the lord chamberlain complained in the 1660s that up to fifty or sixty chamberlains occupied those rooms, forcing the emperor to push through them.<sup>11</sup>

The 1620s saw far-reaching changes in the structure of the court. The privy council, as well as the number of chamberlains, was enlarged. The privy council was extended from approximately six members to thirty in the 1650s and even more in later years.<sup>12</sup> The number of chamberlains increased from a handful to several hundred,<sup>13</sup> most of the appointees coming from the hereditary lands. In the process the court was transformed from a 'point of contact' (Elton) into a very large noble institution with formal criteria of membership. This had a significant impact on nobles' communication rights and access to goods, regardless of whether the noble members of the court actually attended the court or not.<sup>14</sup> Once part of the game, they knew how to play by the rules.

Let us give some examples. Courtiers regularly received grants of money. For his success during the peace negotiations of Münster, Maximilian Count Trauttmansdorff was granted 100,000fl and his colleague, the count of Lamberg, 50,000fl. The same applied to lower ranks. In 1655, for example, the *Hofzahlamt* (court treasury) paid out as a gift (*Gnadengeld*) 12,000fl to the privy councillor Franz Count Khevenhüller, 6,000fl to the privy councillor Ottavio Prince Piccolomini, 3,000fl to the privy councillor John Franz Count Trautson and 1,000fl to Diana Countess Czernin, a lady of the court. These sums were usually only a small portion of what had initially been promised to the beneficiaries. In that year, more than 80,000fl were paid out, mainly to noble members of the court on that count. Especially in the crucially important field of loans, the volume of financial transactions seems to have correlated with rank at court.<sup>15</sup>

Especially because of the inefficiency (in a modern sense) of the financial and other offices, the granting and realising of promises and rights was

10 OÖ LA, Herrschaft Steyr, box 1224, fac. 13, n. 231.

11 OÖ LA, Herrschaft Steyr, box 1224, fac. 13, n. 231. Hitherto the importance of the office of chamberlain had been under-estimated, but the evidence mentioned above, such as the many letters of request from even the most senior noblemen for their family members, show that it was much more than a representational office. Compare the correspondence of the lord chamberlain with the archbishop of Salzburg, Guidobald von Thun (OÖ LA, Herrschaft Steyr, box 1237, fac. 26, n. 476 and box 1242, fac. 33, n. 726), Rudolf Count Colloredo to Maximilian Prince Dietrichstein, 22 July 1654 (Brno, Moravské Zemské Archiv, G 140, 447/1911/48) and many others.

12 For Ferdinand III, Vienna, HHStA, OMeA 186 and 187 and many other sources.

13 Under Ferdinand II there were several hundred chamberlains, under Ferdinand III less, about 200. Under Leopold I the number rose again to several hundreds (compare the different lists in HHStA, OMeA 186 und 187 as well as Vienna, HHStA, OKäA C/F2 and many other sources).

14 Around 1650 only eight or nine from around 30 privy councillors regularly attended the sessions (modal average/median of an analysis of records of more than 140 sessions of the privy council from Vienna, AVA, FA Harrach, Hs. 102).

15 The dissertation will give an analysis of the *Hofzahlamtsbücher* (court treasury accounts) in Vienna, HKA, HZAB in the years 1620–65.

usually dependent on personal presence or representation at court—as count Starhemberg had remarked: ‘My business is running in the Viennese style: that means slowly.’<sup>16</sup> Correspondence intended to speed up business filled first the emperor’s desk and later official and private archives. A noble’s chances of realising options corresponded to his personal position at court or to that of his family. The 100,000fl for Maximilian Count Trauttmansdorff, for example, whose son held an important office, were paid out within a few years, whereas others had to wait, sometimes in vain, for almost a century.

Families, in particular, served as a bridge between court and estates. For example, the marshal of the court advised his brother to keep a receipt (and with the receipt the claim for the money which had in fact already been paid) which he should send to the court, under the pretence that the last emperor had ordered him to do so. The marshal himself would push for its acceptance by the president of the *Hofkammer*, if his brother, in return, would raise some money for him with the help of the deputies of the estates. The estates could later profit from his position at court.<sup>17</sup> And, in fact, they did, when the marshal helped to make the estates’ case in their dealings with the prince or gave valuable information for planning communication with the court.<sup>18</sup> Such links to the outside could also be used by the emperor. The *obersthofmarschall*, relying on the influence of his family, often helped to convince the estates to accept the emperor’s demands.<sup>19</sup> In countless letters the emperor requested support in the diet and in regional administrative affairs from members of the estates who were also members of the court or had relations there.

The intensity of contact between crown and provinces grew with the expansion of the court. Every courtier served as a connection between his family and clients and the court. The higher his position in the hierarchy of the court, the more contacts he had outside, and the more people used him to get access to the centre.<sup>20</sup> This was a two-way relationship beneficial to all participants, including the crown. Franz Count Harrach, for example, who as a member of the court had established strong links to northern Italy, helped his brother become bishop in Trent, which was very much in the interest of the emperor as well. In particular, the emperor used the links to the local nobility to obtain information about local problems and to ensure his orders were obeyed. This intensification of imperial influence happened in tandem with the increase of bureaucratisation. As this form of integration depended on personal presence and personal links, its social and geographical boundaries were closely circumscribed, including chiefly the

16 OÖ LA, Archiv Starhemberg (Bestand Riedegg), box 45, n. 51; Caspar von Starhemberg to his wife from Vienna, 8 November 1643.

17 OÖ LA, Archiv Starhemberg (Bestand Riedegg), box 44, n. 49; Heinrich Wilhelm von Starhemberg to his brother from Laxenburg, 12 May 1637.

18 OÖ LA, Archiv Starhemberg (Bestand Riedegg), box 44, n. 49; Heinrich Wilhelm von Starhemberg to his brother Caspar from Vienna, 30 April 1637.

19 OÖ LA, Archiv Starhemberg (Bestand Riedegg), box 44, n. 49; Heinrich Wilhelm von Starhemberg to his brother Caspar from Vienna, 17 May 1637.

20 Compare the analysis of more than 1,700 letters to Franz Albrecht Count Harrach from Vienna, AVA, FA Harrach.

upper nobility and the hereditary lands. Moreover, the system tended to close itself, because success at court generated further success, which made access for new entrants difficult.

### Moral integration: court and noble honour

In the early modern period, interaction was moralized and regulated in terms of honour. There were two ways in which the court came to influence the elements of noble honour: both ennoblement and the hierarchy of court offices in the court implemented a subtle hierarchy in the nobility as a whole. Even in peripheral regions a privy councillor was more highly regarded than a chamberlain and, of course, a prince more than a count. Let us consider both the formalized signs of respect in interaction and the conflict about ceremonial rights, whether at court or outside. Hierarchy was so essential for interaction at court, that personal honour and power came to be almost synonymous. When Maximilian Count Lamberg was appointed to the office of lord steward, some privy councillors denied his right of precedence.<sup>21</sup> In defending his precedence, he was also defending his honour and his power. The same situation had occurred when, while imperial ambassador in Spain, he had been appointed to the office of privy councillor. Exceptionally, he was immediately seated according to his new rank instead of having to wait until he could return and take his oath.<sup>22</sup> The importance of *ancienneté* becomes more evident when we consider the struggle for precedence between the presidents and vice-presidents of the Austrian court chancellery and the Hofkammer. One of the main arguments used in these despatches was that one of the rivals had previously been appointed earlier to the post of imperial chamberlain. The dignity of this office would be decisive. Even though this argument might be rejected, it shows that the distinction between the dignity of an office and that of a person had not yet become widely accepted.<sup>23</sup> Establishing and defending the 'right' hierarchy thus became more and more difficult with the growth of the court. Recent evidence suggests that this significantly increased the sensitivity of courtiers to signs of respect.

Sensitivity and subtlety become evident, for example, in the ceremonial concerning ambassadors. An ambassador's demonstrations of respect clearly corresponded to the noble status and position at court of those to whom he was introduced. The minutiae of such formal meetings was crucial: whether they shook hands or not, whether they met visitors at their coach (and if so, whether at the bottom of the stairs, half-way or at the top) or at the end of the audience-room, or whether they rang a bell as an additional mark of respect. The court started systematically to record ceremonial precedents in the mid-1650s as did the papal nuncios, while the secretaries of noblemen began to collect their master's titles. Even the content of such apparently standardized letters as death announcements

21 Compare OÖ LA, Herrschaft Steyr, box 1242, fac. 32, n.711. One of his predecessors, Prince Auersperg, informed him in a letter of 20 June 1675 about the former regulations and pointed out that this would be a struggle for power.

22 OÖ LA, Herrschaft Steyr, box 1227, fac. 16, n. 250.

23 Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. 14192, fols. 1–9.

depended on the status of the writer and reader. The higher the rank of the reader, the more detailed the record would be. A further example of respect within the court and among the nobility were the letters of congratulations sent at Christmas, Easter etc. which also reflected their position in the hierarchy.

The respect nobles enjoyed at court had an impact on their position at the periphery of the court as well. For example, the emperor had to decide in the 1680s whether or not the wives of privy councillors should shake hands with the wives of princes.<sup>24</sup> Residing in Bohemia, Adam Matthias Count Trauttmansdorff, who was trying to obtain the Order of the Golden Fleece, argued that without this order, his family's merits would not be adequately acknowledged.<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Frederick Count Trauttmansdorff, despite being *Landeshauptmann* in Styria, applied to be appointed to the additional office of privy councillor due to his concerns about precedence in Graz.<sup>26</sup>

This made it difficult for the nobility to preserve, and for the court to tolerate, relatively autonomous mechanisms for the definition of honour such as the duel.<sup>27</sup> Noble birth, knightly lifestyle, administration of the family lands and membership of the estates were no longer sufficient criteria for belonging to the social elite. Even when country life and court life could be combined, they were no longer socially equivalent. The signs of respect previously guaranteed by noble birth itself, now became increasingly dependent on transformation by the court into imperially bestowed status. Therefore noble families in the 1660s considered the rejection of an application for the office of a chamberlain as a sign of indignity, while some decades earlier, such an appointment would have been an extraordinary honour.<sup>28</sup> The families, it may be argued, were complaining about the fact that their claim resulting from noble birth was not being transformed into the now prevailing language of the court. The process of establishing a hierarchy in the nobility by ennoblement and numerous appointments to court offices gave the court the power to create distinctions which translated into differences of noble honour. The significance of holding a court office for nobles in the hereditary lands is highlighted by the following quotation from about 1700, when the court had not yet ceased to grow. The quote concerns a key (to the emperor's apartments), which was the symbol for the office of the chamberlain: 'It is not an honour to have it, but it is a shame not to have it!'<sup>29</sup>

24 OÖ LA, Herrschaft Steyr, box 1242, fac. 32, n. 716.

25 See the many letters of demand to John Maximilian Count Lamberg in OÖ LA, Herrschaft Steyr, box 1237, fac. 27, n. 496 from the 1660s, especially that from Tainitz, 22 May 1663.

26 See the letters to John Maximilian Count Lamberg in OÖ LA, Herrschaft Steyr, box 1238, fac. 27, n. 521 from the 1660s.

27 There is little evidence for duels at court and it is interesting that this evidence starts to emerge only in the late 1650s. See the records of duels in the letters of Paul Sixtus Count Trautson to Franz Count Harrach from Vienna, 27 April 1658 (Vienna, AVA, FA Harrach K 448, Konv. Paul Sixt Trautson); in a letter from Count Windischgrätz to the above from 25 December 1664 (FA Harrach K 449, Konv. Windischgrätz) or letters from John Maximilian Count Lamberg to Maximilian Prince Dietrichstein of 29 November 1663 and 26 November 1664 in Brno, Moravské Zemské Archiv, G 140, inv. c. 86/494, K. 26).

28 OÖ LA, Herrschaft Steyr, box 1224, fac. 13, n. 231.

29 Anonymous: *Relation von dem kayszerlichen Hofe zu Wien* [ ... ], (Köln 1705), 153.

## Court and expressive community

The frequent interaction of noblemen at court led to the phenomenon which Karl Weick describes thus:

When the same people show up day after day at the same time and place, their activities are likely to become more and more mutually defined, more mutually dependent, more mutually predictable, and more subject to a common understanding encoded into common language.<sup>30</sup>

Using specific symbols, the court constantly expressed and reproduced itself as such a community. Expressive community could not suppress internal rivalries and tensions, but it emphasized the binding nature of the court's rules. The courtiers recognized themselves as part of a community. This was of utmost importance because the hierarchy of the court integrated the nobility by conferring on it a privileged part in the symbolic reproduction of the common foundations of court and society. Discourses about legitimization were thus unnecessary.

Sacred, political and profane events saw the courtiers enacting and representing the whole or major parts of the system. Countless holy masses in the presence of the dynasty and the court, the dynasty's baptisms, weddings, funerals and especially the Corpus Christi procession played an important role for the community's integration. Feasts, such as court tournaments, shooting, hunting, the carnival with its balls and masquerades, concerts, ballets and comedies and also opera performances, made the courtiers act within in, and maintain, a both common and hierarchical structure. The same applied to coronations, formal acts of homage, and the meetings of the various diets. Even weddings of noble families of the court, which might have served as a forum for autonomous noble groupings, frequently involved the court, by inviting the emperor to send a representative. Over time, emperor and courtiers thus established a common history which linked them together and excluded those who were not connected to the court. The nobles' self-image became increasingly court-orientated.

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<sup>30</sup> Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (part of the Foundations for Organizational Science series), (London: Thousand Oak 1995), p. 74.