

About the history and origin of the German imperial eagle

For me, the imperial eagle of the German Empire is one of the most beautiful coats of arms. With this article, I would like to write about the history and origin of the German heraldic animal.

The imperial eagle of the German Empire is black with a red beak and red fangs. On his chest he wears the Prussian coat of arms, whose eagle is topped with the shield of Hohenzollern. Around the neck of the imperial eagle is the chain of the Prussian "High Order of the Black Eagle" and the German imperial crown with two golden, ornamented ribbons floats above the head. However, the ribbons were omitted as soon as the crown was depicted without the imperial eagle.

The history of the eagle as a German heraldic animal

Animals have always been used as national insignia. For example, the Athenians carried the owl, the Corinthians the Pegasus and the Goths the bear. The eagle's high flight, its power, courage and sharp eyes made it the king of the skies, which is why majesties liked to adorn themselves with it.

The German eagle has its origin with the Romans, where it was carried on the standards of the victorious legions and gradually became the symbol of the Roman Empire. Plinius writes that the Romans initially carried the wolf, the horse, the boar, the Minotaur and the eagle on their standards. Marius, however, used the eagle alone and abolished the other insignia. Since then, the eagle's prestige among the Roman people grew steadily. It became the insignia of the Roman army, the Roman rule, even the Roman Empire. The emperors liked to adorn themselves with it, also because this animal was the companion of Jupiter, the king of the heavens, and thus at the same time the symbol of royal majesty. Thus, the eagle gradually became more and more sacred. According to Josephus, the Romans brought their emblems to the temples of Jerusalem and offered them sacrifices; and Tertullian, in his Apologeticus, reproaches them for having honored their standards more than all the gods.

So it is not surprising that the use of the eagle as a symbol of power is attributed to the times of Charlemagne, who laid the foundation for the founding of the "Holy Roman Empire of German Nations". Charlemagne is said to have claimed the eagle as a sign of the Roman Empire as early as 800, the year of his imperial coronation.

However, heraldic evidence for the use of the eagle as an imperial heraldic animal in German lands can be traced only as far back as the 12th century. Probably the oldest known German imperial seal with an eagle is from 1157 AD and belonged to Duke Berthold IV of Zähringen, one of the most influential dukes in Swabia (Figure 1). The use of the eagle in the seal was intended to reflect the duke's high position in the empire.



Figure 1: Back of the Zähringer seal with the illustrated imperial eagle. This belonged to Berthold V. von Zähringen and dates from 1219. He was the son of Berthold IV of Zähringen (Source: <https://diezaehringer.eu>)

The imperial eagle of the German Empire

On January 18, 1871, the festive proclamation of the German Empire and the acceptance of the imperial throne took place in the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles. As hastily as the planning for this took place and the act proceeded, as hastily an interim coat of arms was put together over several nights, which is to be regarded as the first coat of arms of the German Empire and was officially used until August 3. It showed a golden shield, pointed at the bottom, with a single-headed, red-armed, black eagle, with the shield of Hohenzollern on its breast. Above the golden shield floated the crown of the „Holy Roman Empire of German Nations“. Figure 2 shows the original coat of arms, which was kept in the Hohenzollern Museum in Berlin (today SPSPG - Stiftung Preussischer Schlösser und Gärten) since 1881.

The idea for this heraldic composition came from the then Crown Prince and later Emperor Frederick III. Count Ferdinand von Harrach made the drawing, while a merchant Carl Louis Magnus from Berlin took care of the realization. The shield, a piece of cardboard, was covered with gold brocade and the eagle made of black velvet was glued on. To decorate the imperial crown, pearls, fish scales and pieces of colored cloth were used to represent the large gems. Ironically, the coat of arms wouldn't have been finished in time without the help of a French woman. In fact, the materials that were supposed to mark as gems on the crown were missing. But Merchant Magnus reached the heart of a French maid, who provided him with the missing materials.

For his services to the production of the interim coat of arms, the merchant Magnus was gifted gold cufflinks decorated with the imperial eagle, sapphires and with diamonds by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1896 (Figure 3).

There were also considerations to use the mitre-shaped crown of Emperor Ludwig the Bavarian, as it was designed on his 15th century monument in the Frauenkirche in Munich, and the double-headed eagle as the imperial eagle. But in the end the ideas were dropped for two reasons; first, because they didn't have the crown in the physical form (the original was in Vienna and was held by Austria-Hungary) and second, because the crown and the double-headed eagle had no relation to the new empire. The new emperor represented, so to speak, the head of Protestantism in Germany and the crown had a

distinctly Catholic character. The same concerned the double-headed eagle of the "Holy Roman Empire of German Nations", whose 2 heads should probably symbolize the "German lands" and "Rome".



B. C. Kab.
S. Maj. d. R. K. Berlin, 12. Januar 1896.
Seine Majestät der Kaiser und König haben in Erfahrung gebracht, daß der bei der Kaiserproklamation im Versailler Schloß benutzte Reichsadler daselbst von Ew. Wohlgeboren mit Hilfe eines Versailler Schneiders oder dessen Tochter angefertigt worden ist.
Allerhöchstem Auftrage zufolge übersende ich Ew. Wohlgeboren beifolgendes Paar goldene mit dem Reichsadler versehene Manschettenknöpfe, welche Seine Majestät Ihnen zur Erinnerung an jenes Ereigniß zu verleihen die Gnade gehabt haben.
Der Geheime Kabinetts-Rath.
Wirklich, Geheime Rath
gez. v. Lucanus.
An
den Kaufmann Herrn Carl Louis Magnus.
Abtheilungs - Vorstand im Deutschen Offizier-
Berein

B. C. Kab.
S. Maj. d. R. K. Berlin, 12. Januar 1896.
His Majesty the Emperor and King have learned that the Imperial Eagle used at the Imperial Proclamation in the Palace of Versailles was made there by Your Worship with the help of a Versailles tailor or his daughter.
According to the highest order, I am sending Your Worshipfulness the following pair of gold cufflinks bearing the Imperial Eagle, which His Majesty has had the grace to bestow upon you in commemoration of that event.
The Privy Council.
Really, Privy Council
signed by Lucanus.
To
The merchant Mr. Carl Louis Magnus.
Section Board in the German Officers' Association

Figure 2: First coat of arms of the German Empire (Collection Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg, Inventar-No. SPSG, IX 7696)

Figure 3: Transcript of the award text for the gifted cufflinks from Kaiser Wilhelm II to merchant Magnus

For these reasons, it was finally decided to use a single-headed eagle, as it was used by the German emperors before Sigismund (1434) and by the later German kings before their imperial coronation in Rome, and as it is shown in the great Heidelberg Song Manuscript from the 14th century (Figure 4).

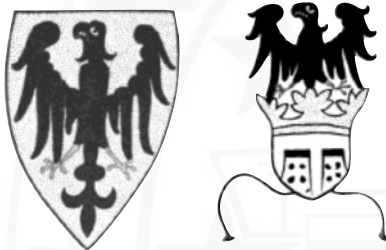


Figure 4: Coat of Arms Emperor Henry V, son of Babarossa (1190-1197 - Great Heidelberg Song Manuscript)

(Nr. 681.) Allerhöchster Erlass vom 3. August 1871, betreffend die Bezeichnung der Behörden und Beamten des Deutschen Reiches, sowie die Feststellung des Kaiserlichen Wappens und der Kaiserlichen Standarte,

Auf Ihren Bericht vom 27. Juni d. J. genehmige Ich:

1. daß die nach Maßgabe der Verfassung und der Gesetze des Deutschen Reiches vom Kaiser ernannten Behörden und Beamten als Kaiserliche zu bezeichnen sind.
2. daß als Kaiserliches Wappen der schwarze, einköpfige, rechtssehende Adler mit rothem Schnabel, Zunge und Klauen, ohne Scepter und Reichsapfel, auf dem Brustschilde den mit dem Hohenzollern-Schild belegten Preussischen Adler, über demselben die Krone in der Form der Krone Karls des Großen, jedoch mit zwei sich kreuzenden Bügeln, in Anwendung gebracht werde.
3. daß die Kaiserliche Standarte in gelben Grunde das eiserne Kreuz, belegt mit dem Kaiserlichen, von der Kette des Schwarzen Adler-Ordens umgebenen Wappen im gelben Felde, und in den vier Eckfeldern des Fahmentuchs abwechselnd den Kaiserlichen Adler und die Kaiserliche Krone enthalten soll.

Coblenz, den 3. August 1871.

Wilhelm.
Fürst v. Bismarck

(No. 681.) Supreme Decree of August 3, 1871, concerning the designation of the authorities and officials of the German Empire, as well as the establishment of the Imperial Coat of Arms and the Imperial Standard,

In response to your report of June 27 of this year, I hereby authorize:

1. that the authorities and officials appointed by the Emperor in accordance with the Constitution and the laws of the German Empire are to be designated as Imperial.
2. that the imperial coat of arms shall be the black, single-headed, right-sighted eagle with red beak, tongue and talons, without scepter and orb, on the breast shield the Prussian eagle with the Hohenzollern shield, above it the crown in the form of the crown of Charlemagne, but with two intersecting bows.
3. that the Imperial Standard in yellow background shall contain the iron cross, covered with the Imperial coat of arms surrounded by the chain of the Order of the Black Eagle in yellow field, and in the four corner fields of the banner alternately the Imperial eagle and the Imperial crown.

Coblenz, August 3, 1871.

Wilhelm.
Prince v. Bismarck

Figure 5: Transcript of the AKO on the appearance of the German Imperial Eagle on the Imperial Coat of Arms of 3.8.1871 (Reichsgesetzblatt 1871, incl. correction from page 458)

- With the highest decree of 27.4.1871, the single-headed eagle with the shield of the Prussian eagle on the chest was ordered as the emblem for the seal stamps until further notice.
- In addition, it was defined by a decree from Koblenz of 3.8.1871 for the imperial coat of arms and the standard, whereby the Prussian eagle was intended here to carry also the shield of the Hohenzollern.

- On 15.10.1871 the coat of arms of the empress, the crown prince and in general all still missing imperial escutcheons were established.

The imperial eagle, approved by the Office in 1871, remained unchanged for the reigns of Emperor Wilhelm I and Emperor Friedrich III.

- The eagle was slender and spread its somewhat bulging wings high up. The shield on the chest was quite large, giving the imperial eagle a somewhat compact appearance overall (Figure 6).
- The imperial crown of 1871-1889 was higher than the later one and the crown plates were at an angle, so that the crown diameter was smaller at the bottom than at the top (Figure 7).
- The empress's crown of 1871, which was used by Empress Augusta and Empress Friedrich, was also higher than the crown of 1889 (Figure 8).
- The crown of the imperial crown prince was the only rank crown that remained unchanged from 1871 to 1918 (Figure 9).



Figure 6: Imperial eagle from 1871-1889



Figure 7: Crown of the Emperor from 1871-1889



Figure 8: Crown of the Empress from 1871-1901 (Empress Augusta & Empress Friedrich until death)



Figure 9: Crown of the Crown Prince from 1871-1918

It was not until 1889, shortly after Emperor Wilhelm II began his reign, that the imperial arms were changed.

- The imperial eagle, commissioned and approved by the very highest authorities in 1889, was designed by Professor Carl Emil Döpler of Berlin and was finer in design and the proportions were more pleasing (Figure 10).

In the spirit of the taste of the time, the crown of the emperor and empress were also changed:

- The crown plates of the 1889 imperial crown were now vertical and the crown was slightly lower than the previous one. The bands of the imperial crown now fell from the rear edge of the crown rather than from the center of it (Figure 11).
- Also, the empress's crown became lower and appeared altogether more graceful in my eyes (Figure 12).



Figure 10: Imperial eagle from 1889-1918



Figure 11: Crown of the Emperor from 1889-1918



Figure 12: Crown of the Empress from 1889-1918 (Empress Auguste-Victoria until the end of the monarchy)

Sources:

1. Der deutsche Adler und die deutschen Farben geschichtlich erörtert, 1848
2. Der deutsche Adler nach Siegeln geschichtlich erläutert, 1858
3. Deutsche Wappenrolle, enthaltend alle Wappen, Standarten, Flaggen, Landesfarben und Kokarden des deutschen Reiches, seiner Bundesstaaten und regierenden Dynastien, 1897
4. Reichsgesetzblatt, 1871
5. Die Attribute des neuen deutschen Reiches, 1872
6. Das Wappen Ihrer Majestät der deutschen Kaiserin und Königin von Preussen Auguste Victoria Prinzessin zu Schleswig-Holstein, 1890
7. Der Deutsche Herold, Band 27 (1896)