

# *The Habsburg Most Illustrious Order of the Golden Fleece: Its potential relevance on modern culture in the European Union*

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## ABSTRACT

Misperceptions about the medieval Habsburg Order of the Golden Fleece distort what it is and undermine its contemporary relevance. Based on interview findings with some Knights of the Order and others, this paper presents a case for the Order's potential relevance on European cultural identity development in the 21st century.

## KEY WORDS

Values, identity, culture, Knights, Orders

## IZVLEČEK

Napačne predstave o srednjeveškem habsburškem Redu zlatega runa pogosto izkrivljajo, kaj Red je, in spodkopavajo njegov pomen v današnjem času. Pričujoča študija, ki je bila izdelana zlasti na podlagi ugotovitev iz intervjujev z nekaterimi vitezi Reda in drugimi, razpravlja o možnem pomenu Reda za razvoj evropske kulturne identitete v 21. stoletju.

## KLJUČNE BESEDE

Vrednote, identiteta, kultura, vitezi, redovi

A new era began on 30 November 2000 for the medieval Habsburg Order of the Golden Fleece. Its aging and long-time Sovereign, Archduke Otto of Austria, gave Sovereignty of the Order to his son and heir Archduke Karl. Effectively, Archduke Karl is leading the ancient Catholic Order of Knighthood into the 21st century. More specifically, he seems to be positioning the Order as a player in the cultural identity of the European Union.

Appearing on the front page of the *International Herald Tribune* on 28 March 2007, there was an article, *The Europe of 2007: Surprising expectations*,<sup>1</sup> the result of the newspaper's poll timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome. Toward the end of the article, a few paragraphs are dedicated to an aspect of European integration

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<sup>1</sup> Bortin, *The Europe of 2007*, *International Herald Tribune*, pp. 1 and 3.

that is gaining ground in policymaking: traditional or cultural value sets. Apparently, even though many Europeans do see Turkey and perhaps even Russia joining the European Union, many think that Christianity will continue to be the dominant religion. What does this projection mean? Certainly, in comparison to other religious cultural value sets, Christian cultural value sets are seen as remaining dominant in the EU. However, does this mean that Christian cultural value sets will continue to be relevant in regulating or guiding society, i.e. individual behavior and outlook on the world? Even if Christian cultural value sets remain dominant in Europe, do they even stand a chance against modern forms of cultural value sets, based on law, which are the foundation of European Union, the newest dominating and very influential force in Europe? This is a question among many that I have asked some of the current Golden Fleece Knights in my attempt to glean out what the medieval Order of the Golden Fleece's purpose is today, in the 21st century.

This (modern) question and the medieval Order relate to each other because the Order is charged by its Statutes to represent the ideals of Christian, specifically Catholic cultural value sets. Founded in 1430 by Duke Philippe the Good of Burgundy, it is the oldest and longest continuously existing monarchical Order of Knighthood on the European continent, an organization founded to promote and defend Christianity. Since its foundation, the Knights of the Golden Fleece were supposed to have been and supposed to be seen as character role models for all in the Christian world, as representatives of a code of ideals that the Golden Fleece insignia symbolized. However, back in the 15th century, the Knights actually had more responsibility than being character role models, such as being a high security council. But the world has changed somewhat since 1430 including that the Sovereign of the Order of the Golden Fleece is not a reigning monarch: Archduke Karl of Austria. As he is not a reigning monarch and no longer has a security council, have he and the Golden Fleece Knights also lost their roles as the representatives of a high Catholic ideal, as the role models for European Catholics within the context of the law-based European Union?

This contextualization of the world's most prestigious Order of Knighthood has only recently begun to be considered among historians of the House of Habsburg and of Orders of Knighthood. Until now, the vast majority of literature dealing with the Order is concerned with its ancient medieval roots up until around the year 1950 or carefully examine the symbolism of the Order's Treasure. Consequently, however, those works could be considered as studies on what one could call the *glitter* of the Order, all too often a distraction from the real object in question. Indeed, behind the Order's glitter are humans, the Knights, without whom the Order would fall into dormancy or extinction. Nevertheless, only briefly in *Der österreichische Orden vom Goldenen Vlies. Geschichte und Probleme* (1971) did Annemarie Weber characterize its nature as an entity with an Austria-

recognized international legal personality, its existence dependent upon its recognition in international politics.<sup>2</sup> Ronald E. Prosser offered a different perspective, portraying it in *The Order of the Golden Fleece* (1981) as being a historical society or order of knighthood that is almost wholly now relegated to being museum pieces.<sup>3</sup> Only Prosser's section dedicated to the armorial bearings of the Knights of that time (1981) gave the Order a sense of contemporary existence. Earlier scholars such as Günther Probszt and Hermann Fillitz considered the Order in a similar fashion as Prosser, their studies however concentrating exclusively on its rich medieval cultural heritage, now located in the Schatzkammer in Vienna.<sup>4</sup> In *Der Orden vom Goldenen Vlies* (1970), Charles de Terlinden examined the Order's history.<sup>5</sup>

Yet another consideration of the Order, what it is today, was the topic of a short documentary called *Das blieb vom Doppeladler: Der Orden vom Goldenen Vlies* (1983) by Austrian television station ORF.<sup>6</sup> Although it was rather superficial in nature, in addition to the history and cultural heritage of the Order, the documentary did include interviews with four Knights of the Order. Their responses provided a new dimension to the Order's current existence and relevance for us to consider, which scholars had until then seemingly always taken for granted, as is evident from the absence of explicit treatment of that dimension: the purpose of the current Knights of the Order.

Coming twenty years later (beginning in about the year 2000) is the above-mentioned most recent wave of academic interest of a different nature, which suggests either that there is much more to the Golden Fleece than its medieval roots and Treasure or that some historians are nostalgic about a relic of Austria's monarchical past to investigate its current existence to create an importance for it. While the second option could be valid, only a simple investigation into that existence would show that even a nostalgic drive would be quickly transformed into a serious research project. In other words, the recent interest is nothing short of a serious inquiry into an organization that is indeed much more than its medieval roots and Treasure and that any nostalgic initial incentive would be based on three misperceptions of the Order: that it is an empty register composed merely of names of illustrious personalities, that it is hereditary, and that it is a secret society. None of these misperceptions is accurate or remotely true.

Developing on the documentary and avoiding becoming lost in the *glit-*

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<sup>2</sup> Weber, *Der österreichische Orden vom Goldenen Vlies*.

<sup>3</sup> Prosser, *The Order of the Golden Fleece*.

<sup>4</sup> Probszt, *Der Schatz des Ordens vom Goldenen Vliese*; Fillitz, *Der Schatz des Ordens vom Goldenen Vlies*.

<sup>5</sup> Terlinden, *Der Orden vom Goldenen Vlies*.

<sup>6</sup> Trost and Goëss, *Das blieb vom Doppeladler*.

*ter*, this paper<sup>7</sup> presents my initial findings into what the Order is today, based on two sets of interview questions, one for the Knights and one for informed non-Knights.<sup>8</sup> To accommodate for the different roles that the Sovereign and the Knights have, I did tailor the set for the Knights to each, not wholly changing, but instead revising the questions to reflect that difference in role. Included among my many questions were 1) what does it mean to be a Knight of the Golden Fleece, 2) do the knights fulfill specific roles, duties or functions, 3) what is the role of this very ancient Order of Chivalry now and in the 21st century, 4) under what circumstances is the neck decoration (the bijou Collar) or the miniature worn, and 5) what would be the effect on the Order, if it were to receive more publicity? Due to limited space, only a discussion about the responses to these five questions will be included in this paper.

I developed these questions in order to understand the potential socio-cultural nature of the contemporary Order, recognizing that its decorations are important extensions of itself, especially since the Knights continue to wear the decorations at official and social functions. Admittedly, the decorations are relics of the bygone Habsburg monarchy, thereby potentially reducing the importance of the decoration, and with it, any real role of the Sovereign and his Knights. However, the interview results so far show that the Order is very much still active today and suggest that the Sovereign and the Knights could have a contemporary relevance for Catholics. Moreover, the results show that the Order is adapting itself to the modern era, working to reestablish their role in European society, to assert their ancient importance in the newly created European Union, a modern law-based society. Yet, true to its most basic, original purpose, the Knights continue in their same role as representatives of a medieval Catholic code of chivalry and as such may occupy a position in EU society as example setters of traditional Catholic values.

### **Nostalgia over the Order of the Golden Fleece: What it is not**

Nostalgia is not the driving force behind the most recent wave of academic interest and publications about the contemporary Order, meaning that the three misperceptions of it are not affecting the academic judgment of those in the most recent wave. This was confirmed by the content of the Order's Feast Day celebrations in 2006 at Stift Heiligenkreuz, near Vienna.

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<sup>7</sup> This paper is part of an ongoing project, which investigates the Habsburg Order of the Golden Fleece's influence on traditional cultural value sets in the European Union. As such, it will present the findings of my interview results.

<sup>8</sup> I must express my gratitude to the Knights and the Order for their cooperation in my study. The interviews as well as this paper and the lecture required the permission of the Order. I am therefore deeply indebted to the Order's current Sovereign Archduke Karl of Austria and Chancellor Count Alexander von Pacht-Reyhofen.

Along with the annual rituals, a symposium was held featuring a select group of historian lecturers and attended by many of the Knights, other historians including myself, and other interested.<sup>9</sup>

The lecturers included Professor Dr. Lothar Höbelt, Dr. Leopold Auer, Dr. Peter Wiesflecker, Professor Dr. Elisabeth Kovács, and Dr. Bernhard Sterchi. Although of them only Dr. Sterchi presented at the symposium elements of the Order that could be immediately related to its current role and Knights, the final discussion opened up the forum to themes about the Order today, its concerns about today's society, and in what ways it can be an actor today. Placing this against potential nostalgia of the historians who are part of the new wave of interest, the themes and content of the discussion were very academic in nature and not at all focused on glorifying the Order or its Knights. In fact, the contributions of the symposium became a serious publication, *Das Haus Österreich und der Orden vom Goldenen Vlies* (2007), published by the distinguished Leopold Stocker Verlag.<sup>10</sup>



Plate 1: procession of the Knights of the Order of the Golden Fleece (photo courtesy of the Order of the Golden Fleece)

Relating to the first misperception, having been in attendance at the celebration and the symposium, I can attest that the Order is not merely

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<sup>9</sup> The significance of an outside audience witnessing the rituals of the Feast Day of the Order of the Golden Fleece will be discussed below.

<sup>10</sup> *Das Haus Österreich und der Orden vom Goldenen Vlies*.

an empty register of illustrious names. (A sampling of who can be and is a Knight will be discussed below.) Many (about half) of the approximately 48 Knights partook in the celebration (Plate 1), some also attending the symposium. For those not present, the reasons have been explained to me by the current Sovereign as due to old age, illness, work responsibilities, and distance to travel.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, many of the Knights are advanced in age, are working, or live very far from Heiligenkreuz, and illness can strike at any time, especially for those more advanced in age.

Regarding the second misperception: that the Order is hereditary. Aside from its Sovereignty, which is reserved for the Head of the House of Habsburg-Lorraine, Knighthood is not hereditary. Only about thirteen of the Knights are Habsburgs, and there are hundreds of members of the House of Habsburg living today.<sup>12</sup> Some Knights with non-hereditary Golden Fleece backgrounds include the Duke of Bragança and Prince Kubrat of Bulgaria. Individuals who are not, not yet anyway, Knights but with long family traditions with the Order include Prince Michel de Ligne and Prince Albert II von Thurn und Taxis.<sup>13</sup> Nothing against these individuals, it is only significant to recognize, since it directly relates to the Order's ability to be relevant today.

But is it a secret society – like the Freemasons? The Sovereign and the Knights contend that the Order is not such an entity. One point that substantiates their claim is that membership is not secretive. On the contrary, who the Knights are has been published on many occasions and is easily found.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the Order's rituals are not entirely secretive, excepting for during the last nine decades ending in 2006. And this second point leads us to the key aspect of the Order: its theory.

It is important to correct these three key misperceptions because they potentially conflict if not absolutely undermine the theory and consequently the potential current relevance of the Golden Fleece, which seems to be a matter of the preservation of cultural heritage continuity and therewith the importance we place on traditional (primary) over legal (secondary) cultural

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with the Sovereign of the Order of the Golden Fleece.

<sup>12</sup> For a thorough list of the current members of the House of Habsburg-Lorraine, please see Franke and Strachwitz, *Genealogisches Handbuch des Adels Fürstliche Häuser*, pp. 86–125; or Enache's *La descendance de Marie-Thérèse de Habsburg*.

<sup>13</sup> For a thorough list of all the previous Knights and therefore the Houses connected to the Golden Fleece, please see the recent work *Das Haus Österreich und der Orden vom Goldenen Vlies* and the website of the unofficial Society of the Golden Fleece, <<http://www.antiquesatoz.com/sgfleece>>.

<sup>14</sup> For academic and other dependable sources, the recent work *Das Haus Österreich und der Orden vom Goldenen Vlies* has a complete list of the past and current Knights (up to 2006). Also, the volumes of the Franke and Strachwitz's *Genealogisches Handbuch des Adels* notate who was awarded the Order. Another accurate source is the list found on the website of the unofficial Society of the Golden Fleece. Yet another, though less accurate source is the webpage dedicated to the Order of the Golden Fleece at <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Order\\_of\\_the\\_golden\\_fleece](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Order_of_the_golden_fleece)>.

value sets. In this way the objectives of the Order and the European Union are linked, even if partly challenging each other. It is also a matter of what value we place on the continuing practice of distinguishing from among the masses an elite, whose purpose, at least theoretically, if not specifically historically, is to be the example setters of a particular mentality and demeanor. The elite's exemplary model is supposed to affect at the level of the individual, social groups, and in our case, perhaps even to influence the decisions of the European Council. This all operates according to the theory, or Statutes, on which the Order was founded, as the Knights themselves have explained to me, not merely the *glitter* that some historians focus their attention on instead.

### **The Theory of the Order of the Golden Fleece**

To those not closely associated with the Order, it is not immediately obvious that the theory of the Golden Fleece is encoded in a booklet of Statutes. Proof of this was in the Sovereign's opening speech in November 2007, when he addressed an audience at the Schatzkammer at the Hofburg in Vienna at the beginning of the book presentation for *Haus Österreich und der Orden vom Goldenen Vlies*. He explained first that the Order has Statutes, that they are the source of the Order, and that the Order has survived the passage of time largely thanks to the relative shortness and vagueness of its Statutes. I myself uncovered this important piece of information about the Order through my interview questions, and specifically two: what does it mean to be a Knight of the Golden Fleece, and do the Knights fulfill specific roles, duties or functions? In response, referring to the Statutes, some called it "the rules", "obligations" or "principles" of the Order.<sup>15</sup> Only one did not name the Statutes, but referred instead to the expected relationship that he is supposed to have with the Sovereign and his fellow Knights, a relationship that is based on "loyalty" and "honor".<sup>16</sup> To fully understand the Knights' responses to these questions, a brief history of the foundation of the Order is required.

Since the Order's beginning, with the proclamation of its foundation on 10 January 1430, its theory was made public. It was on the occasion of Philippe the Good's marriage to Infanta Isabella of Portugal, thereby setting up the announcement to have its "greatest possible effect" at his Court. The intent: to revive the "exaltation of virtues and good habits" in his duchy of Burgundy.<sup>17</sup> It is very explicit about the mission of the Order and how it is

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<sup>15</sup> Interviews with the Sovereign, Prince Lorenz of Belgium, Duke Georg von Hohenberg, and questionnaires from Archduke Andreas Salvator and Prince Hugo Windisch-Graetz.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Prince Albrecht Hohenberg.

<sup>17</sup> Prosser, *The Order of the Golden Fleece*, p. 3.

supposed to function as a societal influencer, and as such, it is worth quoting at length:

Princes and princesses, lords, ladies, and damsels, knights and squires, [...] the Duke of Burgundy [...] makes known to all that for the reverence of God and the maintenance of our Christian Faith, and to honour and exalt the noble order of knighthood, [he establishes a new order of knighthood] for the following three reasons: first, to do honour to old knights, who for their high and noble deeds are worthy of being recommended; second, so that those who are at present still capable and strong of body and do each day the deeds pertaining to chivalry shall have cause to continue from good to better; and third, so that those knights and gentlemen who shall see worn the order which shall be mentioned below should honour those who wear it, and be encouraged to employ themselves in noble deeds, and to nourish themselves on such customs, that by their valiance they may acquire good renown, and deserve in their time to be chosen to bear the said order [...]<sup>18</sup>

The idea of the Order is clear and is threefold: rewards for good deeds done, encourages chivalric knights to continue performing such deeds, and is to be a symbol of those deeds, acts for others to emulate. The symbol is the Order's insignia (of a fleece of gold).

This is not all that the announcement conveys to us, however. It was a very public announcement, albeit to a very select group of individuals, who however happened to comprise a ducal court, which actually rivaled the importance and influence of the French royal court at the time. That is, in no way was the Order ever conceived as being remotely a secret society. Rather, it came into existence as an organization that would promote the continuation of good, chivalric deeds, albeit necessarily Christian in nature.

Announced in January, founded the following 30 November, the Feast Day of St. Andrew, Patron Saint of the Order, and its first Chapter meeting taking place in 1431, the Order was Philippe the Good's reaction to an alarming wane in popularity of knighthood and its high standard of virtues, the code of chivalry. Setting the Golden Fleece in the larger picture, medieval historian D'Arcy Jonathan Dacre Boulton explained,

By the end of the fourteenth century many ordinary knights must have been reduced to despair for the future of their estate and calling, under attack from every side, but chivalry was too deeply embedded in aristocratic culture to die as suddenly as this, and in the first decade of the fifteenth century certain princes set in motion a major chivalric revival by trying once again to recreate in their courts the pristine chivalry which

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<sup>18</sup> Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown*, pp. 360–361.

had existed (according to the romances that still made up a large part of their libraries) in various past ages.<sup>19</sup>

His speculation on this is based on a string of related disappointments between 1390 and the 1420s to the knightly class and chivalry that slowly chinked away at their perceived value to society. Instead of being revered and looked up upon for protection and for their example of virtue, honor, and valor, knights and chivalry became the object of attacks because of failure and humiliation on the battlefield, defeated by untrained burghers, yeoman, and others. In order to revive the public's trust and faith in the knight and to inject some enthusiasm in his knights, Philippe decided to found a new Order.<sup>20</sup> Although definitely autocratic in nature, his decision was apparently in line with the public sentiment. The Estate of Flanders, one of Philippe's other feudal territories, offered a subsidy of 100,000 florins to assist in the foundation of the Order.<sup>21</sup>

Philippe was not alone with such a venture. As Habsburg historian Andrew Wheatcroft contextualized, "The Golden Fleece was created at a time when [...] there was not a prince or great noble who did not desire to have his own order." More importantly for our purpose, Wheatcroft continued, "Philip as the sovereign Grand Master of an order of chivalry now ranked with the kings of Europe."<sup>22</sup> In this light, an argument could be made that the Golden Fleece was at its foundation nothing else than simply a challenge against France and England. It was an organization to reclaim an elite status. Burgundy had after all been many centuries earlier a kingdom with territory extending from the Mediterranean to the Alps, only to be absorbed in the 11th century into the Holy Roman Empire, and consequently losing its historical status. This link to Burgundy's historical heyday was certainly a motivation for the creation of the Golden Fleece; it is in fact a major part of what is called the Golden Fleece's Burgundian inheritance, which has been covered extensively by others.

When not alone, Philippe's project was unique from the other rival orders, which makes the Golden Fleece far more important than being perhaps an obviously prestigious, but also nostalgic organization. The fundamental difference is in its Statutes, which Boulton explains "were more elaborate than those of any previous order save the abortive Sicilian order of the Ship, and that the new order was quickly provided with support staff and

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 356–357.

<sup>21</sup> Prosser, *The Order of the Golden Fleece*, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Wheatcroft, *The Habsburgs: Embodying Empire*, p. 108. At the time of the foundation of the Order of the Golden Fleece, the Houses of Orléans, Bourbon, and Savoy had created orders of knighthood. The most prestige of all though was the English Order of the Garter, which was the oldest, founded in the mid-14th century by King Edward III.

facilities comparable to those of the [English Order of the] Garter.” He continues, “At least partly as a result of these early [above-mentioned] endowments, the Order of the Golden Fleece, though founded by a mere duke, was to become by the end of our period (1520) the sole order of more than half the kingdoms of Europe, and was to survive as the principle order of at least one such kingdom up to the present day.”<sup>23</sup>

Returning to the interview questions, when asked what it means to be a Knight of the Golden Fleece and if the knights fulfill specific roles, duties or functions, the Sovereign, Prince Lorenz of Belgium, Archduke Andreas Salvator, Duke Georg von Hohenberg, Prince Albrecht von Hohenberg, and Prince Hugo zu Windisch-Graetz have so far explained that the Order continues as it was intended. Each separately confirmed that their roles are purely to be a Knight, no more, no less. The Sovereign explained, “Either you are a Knight or you are not a Knight. That does not mean you have a particular role. For the specific roles, we have the specific Officers of the Order.”<sup>24</sup>

However, it seems as if the Knights may actually define the role for themselves. Prince Lorenz qualified his understanding of their role, framing it not as “representing the Order outside”, but rather being “symbolic representations” of the Order. He added, “being a Knight of the Golden Fleece, you start to become a member of the Order and you learn to make acquaintance with the other Knights and you become a bit like a team, belong to a kind of team. And the aim of the Order is to help each other lead the Christian values and defend the Faith at that time. I mean, now everything has to be put into our century. But the human part of being a Knight still remains.”<sup>25</sup> Separately, the Duke von Hohenberg is mostly in agreement.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Knights of the Order of the Golden Fleece: Example setters of a moral standard**

Prince Lorenz’s statement that “the human part of being a Knight still remains” begs then the question, which zeros in on the Order’s current existence: who are the Knights today and do they live up to the high calling expected of them by the proclamation and Statutes? To answer the first question, the painless task of analyzing the register of the Order is required. No simple answer is available for the second, the Knights of the Order themselves not being certain.

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<sup>23</sup> Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown*, p. 358. An account of this development to becoming the primary order of knighthood in Europe is given in Boulton, op. cit., pp. 358–360, itself being a brief treatment of the topic, which has been extensively written on (see *ibid.*, p. 358 f. 2).

<sup>24</sup> Interview with the Sovereign.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Prince Lorenz of Belgium.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Duke Georg von Hohenberg.

To be certain, they all at least meet the criteria that regulate Knight nominations and appointments. In Article 1 of the Statutes, Philippe the Good stipulated that the Knights were all to be “gentlemen of name and arms” without “reproach”.<sup>27</sup> Today, the Knights do continue to be individuals at least “of name and arms”, whose genealogies are well documented. They are in fact members of Europe’s elite social classes, specifically and exclusively royalty and nobility, and some of them are likely already well known because of their non-Order related high profiles: Dr. Otto von Habsburg, King Albert II of the Belgians, Grand Dukes Jean and Henri of Luxemburg, and Prince Hans-Adam II of Liechtenstein, to name just a few. But aside from their hereditary statuses, do they continue to represent the ideals of the Order? After all, they do wear the insignia of the Order; depending on the function, they either wear the miniature (Plate 2), the Fleece neck decoration (Plate 3), or the chain (Plate 4).



Plate 2: the miniature of the Order of the Golden Fleece (on the lapels)

This brings in another very important question. When the Knights wear the decorations, do they consciously represent the ideals of the Order, thereby fulfilling the ancient objective of the Order – for those present to have at least a heightened sense of chivalric duty – or are they wearing the insignia for other reasons such as for labeling themselves as elites of some kind?

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<sup>27</sup> Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown*, p. 374.



Plate 3: the neck decoration (Frackvlies) of the Order of the Golden Fleece



Plate 4: the chain of the Order of the Golden Fleece

In potential operation here are two social theories: elite theory and status theory.

Elite theory postulates that the power structure of society is dominated by a certain minority group or class that rules despite electoral results and other democratic tools and can be characterized as monopolizing political, economic, or social influence. Eva Etzioni-Halevy noted that Bourdieu introduced the concept of “cultural capital” to the equation, that is, a cultural elite. Meant by this, according to Etzioni-Halevy, is that “[m]embers of this class can thus use their cultural capital to perpetuate and reproduce their dominant class position: they appear distinguished (that is, of dominant class affiliation) simply by being themselves (that is, by giving outward indication of their cultural capital). And they produce their position in large part by transmitting this cultural capital to their children, through education.”<sup>28</sup> All of the Knights I have interviewed have acknowledged that they do talk about the Order with their children.

For the Habsburg empires, the greatest symbol of elite cultural capital were the insignia of the Order of the Golden Fleece, thereby meaning that wearing the insignia was the presentation of distinction of the dominant class: the Catholic royal and aristocratic houses. Therefore, related to elite theory is status theory, which for us translates into symbols of status. As Peter Lauster explained, “Status symbols should show who one is; they should document the actual or desired social position. That is wanted not only by elites, as it is held as a common human phenomenon that goes through all social levels.”<sup>29</sup>

These theories do not always hold true in reality. For example, the idea of status theory can be at odds with socially accepted behavior or affiliations, especially in modern society. As Prince Lorenz noted, “If I would be a king, I would never go to the thing [Feast Day celebration], if I know that the television would be there. Because I know I would have a lot of critic in my country, that I belong to a little thing, which is out of time, [that] I’m old fashion, I’m conservative, and so forth.”<sup>30</sup> Could such judgment by critics be wrong? Perhaps they could be, along the lines of the misperceptions mentioned above.

Not all the Knights hold this position, however. In contrast to Prince Lorenz, Duke Georg von Hohenberg explained what he “found is the right thing. The occasion, which is the Holy See, or the Sovereign, you carry it with the “Frack” (white tie), or a family “Fest” (festival/party) or whatever.”<sup>31</sup> Prince Hugo Windisch-Graetz seemed to have the same opinion.<sup>32</sup> These opinions are put into practice at least as far as the wearing of the miniature

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<sup>28</sup> Etzioni-Halevy, *The Elite Connection*, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Lauster, *Statussymbole*, p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Prince Lorenz of Belgium.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Duke Georg von Hohenberg.

<sup>32</sup> Questionnaire from Prince Hugo Windisch-Graetz.

is concerned. While Prince Windisch-Graetz wore the neck decoration at the Beatification Ceremony of Emperor Karl at the Vatican, the Duke von Hohenberg only wore the miniature, as did many of the other Knights including the Sovereign's brother Archduke Georg and others including Archduke Joseph-Arpád and Duke Friedrich von Württemberg.

Based on the practices of many of the Knights, it seems as if the insignia should only be worn under certain, very special occasions. But we need to recognize that this is not written in stone. The Sovereign “doesn't see any reason why [he] should regulate that in whatever way.”<sup>33</sup> The only thing certain is that the Knights must have the Golden Fleece on their person in a “respectable place” at all times. It does not have to be visible, however. The “respectable place” is encoded in the Statutes, and Archduke Lorenz and Prince Hohenberg have shown me their golden-chained necklaces with the suspended Golden Fleece that they wear under their shirts. In other words, just because the Knights may not be wearing the Golden Fleece in a visible place does not mean they are not continuously living representations of the Order. They are – always.

This adds an interesting dimension to the Order that must be considered, which seems to be suggested in a response from Archduke Andreas Salvator. He did not actually answer my questionnaire question about when he wears the Order. Instead, he wrote, “The Golden Fleece should be worn as single Order. The richness of the decoration is not linked to rank or of importance.”<sup>34</sup> There is a lot that can be read into this, even though he seems to be contradicting the status theory, that the Order is not connected to “rank” or “importance”. That the Order should be worn with no other decoration however suggests it actually does have precedence, and certainly connotes therefore an elite status.

The Sovereign and the five Knights I have interviewed say the Order represents high ideals and Duke Georg von Hohenberg said the Order's purpose is “to form or to present a certain elite ... a moral elite”. Yet, they are critical of their roles and did admit that not all of the Knights may actually live up to the high ideals. As the Duke von Hohenberg put it, “the members of the Order could be to a certain degree [elite], and only some of them, could be an elite within the European context.”<sup>35</sup> The Knights' admissions are due to the fact that they can only speculate about what the character requirements are for becoming a Knight, the power of appointing a Knight resting wholly with the Sovereign.

The Knights have offered some speculative insights into this, however, listing certain character qualities as contingencies, namely: loyalty, honesty,

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with the Sovereign.

<sup>34</sup> Questionnaire from Archduke Andreas Salvator.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Duke Georg von Hohenberg.

trustworthiness, camaraderie, fulfillment of obligations, conduct, behavior, manner, adaptation to rules, traditions, up-keeping of morals, respect, beneficence, and self-reverence. Prince Lorenz added that the Order could be also considered “a reward for having done really good things for society, for the cultural heritage of the Monarchy, for the society generally speaking.”<sup>36</sup> These may be the character quality criteria for becoming a Knight. We will never know. The Sovereign would not divulge how he makes his decisions.

Nevertheless, do the Knights actually fit the mold? Are the Knights actually “a moral elite”, and if so, for whom? Prince Lorenz separately expanded on the Duke von Hohenberg’s critical analysis. He says,

Does the Order take in people who reproduce these values, that’s a little bit the question. And maybe one of the points of the Order is [to] have Knights who have through their example [shown] how it should be. You can imagine of course that it doesn’t work like that always because you can have a Knight, who is divorced or separated or something like that. So human things, so the central nature of humans comes into the Order like in every human enterprise. So, only there should be a certain way of helping each other, only in a good way. I think that is the culture heritage of the Order.<sup>37</sup>

The only thing that seems conclusive about the Order is that the Sovereign and the other Knights tend to view it more as a reward of the Habsburg family for people with good character – of course, reserved still for those who meet the medieval criteria encoded in the Statutes. Yet, very important concerning its relevance today and the preservation of cultural heritage values, Archduke Andreas Salvator stressed that those above mentioned character qualities that would make up good character are all “human values [that] do not change!”<sup>38</sup>

But what has changed and continues to change is the Order, adapting to the times as discussed above. The Sovereign pointed out however that the Statutes have “never changed” content-wise. For him as well as for many of the Knights, the state of being unaltered is very symbolic because as Archduke Karl explained,

The founder of the Order had such an incredible view of the world. He had such an incredible possibility to see how systems would work, how they could be applied. He, for people in our view, he had a very, very modern concept as well as head of state, by being in a very modern form, as well as being head of the Order of the Golden Fleece. And he wanted to implement those things also in the Order. So, it is rather old. I mean, it is a medieval Order, but it is still very modern in its concept. That [is apparent

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Prince Lorenz of Belgium.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Questionnaire from Archduke Andreas Salvator.

with] the rules, with the values within the Order. [...] It really gives for me, the Order, for me, one of the most incredible symbols for continuity. And continuity in the best sense that you can possibly find anywhere.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Order of the Golden Fleece: A Catholic Cultural Organization in the 21st Century**

Perhaps Philippe the Good had a very modern concept, but meeting modernity is where the Order is experiencing some difficulties, specifically the Knights with the Sovereign's planned and implemented policies. It is a matter of maintaining the Order's privacy versus opening it up to the public eye and perhaps ensuing scrutiny. Yet, ultimately the Sovereign views the Order as "very much an emotional respect, much more than a practical respect. [...] To be a part of the Order of the Golden Fleece definitely also means the fact that you have a concept of what happened in history, as we are trying to apply this for the future, something, which I think is very important."<sup>40</sup> Of course, the question is what one means by "apply this for the future." I say this because while Archduke Karl said that being a Knight is more an emotional than a practical experience, his policies suggest something different. Furthermore, it seems as if his plans are at odds with what some of his Knights prefer. As such, the relevance of the Golden Fleece seems to be at a critical point of redefinition, as it coincidentally happens to enter the 21st century. Its cultural continuity remains intact. But the way the Order approaches its place in society is actually undergoing significant re-evaluation and real reform.

One of the Sovereign's policies meeting resistance is his decision to open up the Feast Day celebration to outsiders. For him, it had nothing to do with showing or proving the Order is not a secret society, but was rather a way of "showing the values, the traditions, the continuity" to those interested. "That is something, which I would like to do because I think that is a very positive aspect, a very positive approach to the organization."<sup>41</sup> Prince Windisch-Graetz is not in full agreement. While he does agree that the Order is an emotional affair of the Knight, he also believes the Order needs no outside audience, the experience of the Knight being a personal matter "to practice in my daily life the principals of the Order."<sup>42</sup> Prince Lorenz is in a similar mindset, as I noted earlier, separating private life from public view. On the other hand, Archduke Andreas Salvator is wholly skeptical of any intrusion by outsiders, arguing that such publicity runs the risk of "staining the participants as "out of date"

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with the Sovereign.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Questionnaire from Prince Hugo Windisch-Graetz.

personalities.” To describe the “staining”, he compares the “propaganda” for dictatorship to “the so called “free press” to democracy.”<sup>43</sup>

In a way, Prince Lorenz holds the same fear, although his views about publicity for the Order are very different, perhaps making him a relatively modernized person, in comparison with his peers and the Sovereign. He supports positive publicity devoid of inaccuracies and misinformation.

I think the only way that it can be done is communication, communication, speak, speak, speak. It takes a lot of time and a lot of energy, but you have to put yourself behind and try to, ok, can we do that, can we do this. I think also through exhibitions, through presentation, television, using the media. I mean, but if it's what we want, that's the second question. I think there should be a balance between privacy and, and, and because the people inside, they wouldn't like to be manipulated.<sup>44</sup>

However, he would avoid any such publicity himself, afraid of the consequences of such publicity, being labeled as “conservative” and “out-of-date”.<sup>45</sup>

While the Sovereign and the Knights are in conflict about their strategy to affect society, they do separately concur with each other that the Order continues to be very relevant today, a vehicle for the promotion of certain core Christian human values. “The Order must remain a spiritual society, an example,”<sup>46</sup> says Prince Albrecht Hohenberg. The Order is hardly outdated in Prince Windisch-Graetz's mind, placing the European Union within the context of the Statutes of the Order: “The Order's inspirations couldn't be more appropriate in the time we are living. For example, Europe is trying to achieve something that the Order mostly succeeded [in doing] 600 years ago. Unfortunately, up to now, the European Union hasn't [yet succeeded].”<sup>47</sup>

### **The External Impact of the Order of the Golden Fleece: Some outsider perspectives**

After nearly 600 years, that the Order had to adapt itself to the times should not be taken as self-evident. It is in fact the very reason the Golden Fleece remains extant. Not adhering strictly to the Statutes has been the key, which has allowed it to survive and pursue its mission of reviving the public's faith in the chivalric works of an Order of Knighthood.

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<sup>43</sup> Questionnaire from Archduke Andreas Salvator.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Prince Lorenz of Belgium.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Prince Albrecht Hohenberg.

<sup>47</sup> Questionnaire from Prince Hugo Windisch-Graetz.

Is this the best thing for European society, the Order being involved in anyway in affecting or even regulating, even partially, moral behavior? Should its not-so-modern composition make it less relevant if not completely irrelevant in the modern and democratizing European Union? Some non-Knights have offered their views on this.

An authority on Orders of Knighthood, Guy Stair Saintry firmly believes the Order has no place in modern society. It should be at most merely a dynastic Order.<sup>48</sup> Andrea Serles, a doctoral student at the Institute of History at the University of Vienna, is wary about the Order today, yet believes it could have relevance and a place today, but only if it were to modernize in many ways including its medieval restrictions for membership.<sup>49</sup> Those restrictions are however not a concern of Kinga Edle von Poschinger, a great-granddaughter of Emperor Karl I. Although admitting her daily life is not influenced by the Order, she does emphasize the Order has a very significant relevance for cultural identity in the European Union, whose “cultural values” she says “should in any case be based on Christianity, as in a historical perspective, it formed the foundation of Europe.”<sup>50</sup> Ambassador Dr. Emil Brix, Director General of Austrian Foreign Cultural Policy, also believes the Order has a place in 21st century society, even if it is very hard to define.

I think within the group, they remain relevant. Or else the group wouldn't exist anymore. For the overall society, it is more complicated because you would hardly find anyone in Austrian society saying that this is of real relevance for public life in Austria, not even for the moral sense, which is used here. It's, it's a bit like the Bible, I would say. When you look into it, you would find that a lot of things mentioned there, an agreement by majorities agreeing to the code of the Catholic Church or any other religious group. And I think it's the same with the Statutes of such an Order.<sup>51</sup>

Many other average Austrians have never heard of the Order.

What all of this means for the Order today can unfortunately not be discussed in this paper, due to limited space.

## **Conclusion**

These are just a few perspectives on the Order's current relevance and role in society today. And since there are forty more Knights to interview, it

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<sup>48</sup> Questionnaire from Guy Stair Saintry.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Andrea Serles.

<sup>50</sup> Questionnaire from Kinga Edle von Poschinger.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Ambassador Emil Brix.

is quite possible that the Order is even more dynamic than appears already, having perhaps a greater or lesser potential relevance today than can be presented here. I have not yet been able to contact all of the Knights. Some have passed away in the meantime since I started this project. Some others prefer not to comment or say that the Statutes forbid them from commenting. Letters expressing no ability to comment due to their public offices come from various Members of the European Council, royal and non-royal, other European heads-of-state, and Members of the European Commission. I contacted these individuals because some of them are either Habsburg or Spanish Knights of the Golden Fleece, and as Members of the European Council, have the position to affect EU cultural policy.

The Order has begun re-introducing itself to European society, first with the Feast Day celebration at Heiligenkreuz, then with the presentation of *Das Haus Österreich und der Orden vom Goldenen Vlies*.<sup>52</sup> Both of these events can be considered proof that the Sovereign is moving ahead with his goal to bring the public, albeit in a limited way, closer to the Order, that is, to inform the public about its values and traditions. In this way, both of these events can be signals to us that the Order is very much working to have a greater presence or role in society today, firmly believing that it continues to have a relevance today, a relevance based on Statutes, which they argue is a timeless set of morals to regulate society.

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- with His Highness Duke Georg von Hohenberg, Vienna, Austria, 16 May 2007.

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<sup>52</sup> *Das Haus Österreich und der Orden vom Goldenen Vlies*.

<sup>53</sup> All transcripts and questionnaires are in possession of author. All are in the English language, except for the interview with the Prince von Hohenberg, which was primarily conducted in German, and for the questionnaire responses received from Kinga Edle von Poschinger. The English excerpts of that interview and questionnaire appearing in this paper were translated by the author.

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## **Habsburški Red zlatega runa in njegov vpliv na moderno kulturo Evropske unije**

### **Povzetek**

Razprava poskuša popraviti tri napačne predstave o habsburškem Redu zlatega runa: da je to prazen spisek slavnih imen, da je članstvo v njem dedno in da je tajna združba. S tem predstavlja, kako bi lahko bil ta srednjeveški viteški red, ki je najbolj prestižen red svoje vrste na svetu, pomemben danes, v 21. stoletju. Ta katoliški red sedaj doživlja obdobje tranzicije ter se prilagaja izzivom moderne in vse bolj sekularizirane evropske družbe.

30. novembra 2000 je najvišja oblast Reda prešla od nadvojvode Otta Avstrijskega na njegovega sina nadvojvodo Karla, ki je starodavni red popejljal v 21. stoletje. Zdi se, da želi Redu ponovno dati aktivno vlogo v oblikovanju kulturne identitete Evropske unije, podobno kot jo je imel še pred devetdesetimi leti, dokler ga niso v ozadje potisnili dogodki po prvi svetovni vojni: odpoved prestolu (1919) in prezgodnja smrt (1922) avstrijskega cesarja Karla I. Toda, ali je Red zlatega runa danes sploh pomemben za kulturno identiteto Evrope in kakšno vlogo naj bi v njej sploh imel? Nadalje, če se Red spreminja, kakšen je ta Red danes?

Razprava predstavlja ta in še nekatera druga vprašanja ter analizira nekaj začetnih odgovorov nanje. Kot delo v teku je zasnovana na prvih ugotovitvah, zbranih na podlagi intervjujev in vprašalnikov, ki so jih izpolnili člani vodstva Reda, petih njegovih vitezov in nekaterih nevitezov, ki Red

poznajo. Njihovi odgovori jasno opredeljujejo Red kot organizacijo članov iz posebnih skupin (vsaj nekdanjih) elit ter njihovo vlogo, ki jo statuti Reda definirajo z *biti vitez*. Toda statuti natančno opredeljujejo tudi namen vitezov kot elitne skupine, katere člani naj bi predstavljali model katoliških kulturnih vrednot. Članek ponuja odgovor na vprašanje, kaj bi to lahko pomenilo za evropsko kulturno politiko in nazadnje tudi na to, kakšna bi lahko bila vloga Reda pri oblikovanju evropske kulturne identitete.