Charles V 'Universal Soldier'

To mark the quincentenary of the birth in 1500 of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Glenn Richardson examines the emperor's ambitions and achievements.

The warrior bursts out from under cover, throwing himself with all his strength against the forces of evil. Equipped with the latest military technology, he storms into battle like an automaton. His face shows only a grim determination to destroy his terrified enemies – the last action hero in action. No, not Arnie Schwarzenegger or Jean Claude van Damme, but Karl von Habsburg, or Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor at the Battle of Mühlberg in 1547.

This epic scene was produced not by Hollywood but by the Venetian painter Titian. It is the iconic portrait of Charles *par excellence*, the most famous of several which the Italian master produced. As the *Carolus* exhibition which toured Europe during 2000 showed, in the five centuries since his birth Charles has been portrayed by contemporaries, artists and by historians as a far-sighted visionary, as a megalomaniac and as a quixotic, even tragic, figure. Yet it remains Titian who came closest to portraying the emperor as he saw himself – as a nobleman and a soldier.

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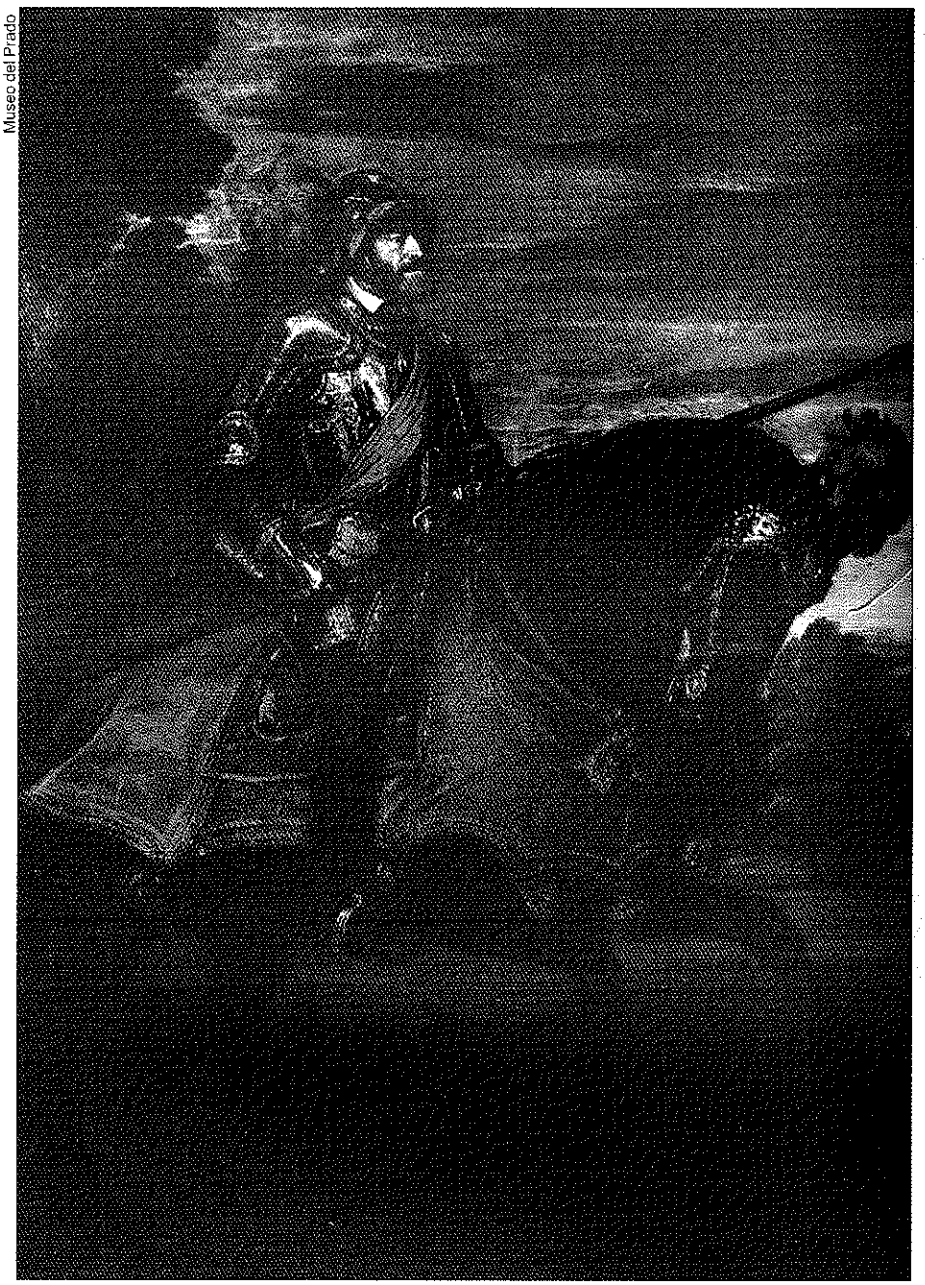
Dynastic inheritance and ambitions

Charles was born in Ghent on 24 February 1500, the son of Archduke Philip of Burgundy, overlord of the Netherlands, and Juana of Castile. Following his father's death in 1506 and his mother's consequent insanity, he was raised by his paternal aunt, Margaret of Austria, in her household at Mechelen. His education to the age of 15 was supervised by Guillaume de Croy, lord of Chièvres, who became Charles's first political advisor. His principal tutor, Adrian of Utrecht, was the future pope Adrian VI. With him Charles gained a grounding at least in the fashionable humanist curriculum. He also absorbed the chivalric traditions of the Valois dukes of Burgundy, the former rulers of the Netherlands. He became a knight of the Burgundian order of the Golden Fleece in his first year of life and its sovereign in 1516. Passionately committed to crusading ideals, Charles excelled in horsemanship and in the para-military sports of the tournament and hunting.

In 1515, the year his majority was declared by the States-General of the Netherlands, Charles began assembling an extraordinary inheritance. From Philip he inherited overlordship of the Netherlands and a claim to the duchy of Burgundy, then held by France. In 1516 he inherited from his maternal grandfather, Ferdinand of Trastámara, the kingdom of Aragon together with its Italian dependencies. He also ruled Castile, initially as regent for his mother and then in his own right. From his paternal grandfather, Maximilian of Habsburg, he inherited the family's Austrian lands. In June 1519, he was also elected to succeed Maximilian as Holy Roman Emperor after paying 835,000 florins in bribes to the seven electors. This inheritance gave Charles an authority over large parts of Europe and the Americas never equalled by one man before or since.

Charles immediately determined to make a name for himself through great deeds as a knight of the Golden Fleece. His personal motto, *Plus Ultra* or 'Further Still', used in conjunction with his emblem, the twin pillars of Hercules set at the end of the world, eloquently expressed his ambition. His Grand Chancellor Mercurino Gattinara waxed lyrical on this theme, urging upon his master a God-given duty to establish a 'monarchia' of Christendom under his leadership. Much historians' ink has been spilled over what this 'monarchia' or 'empire' meant. There is no evidence that Charles aspired to rule the whole of Europe as its personal sovereign. On the contrary, his correspondence with his regents indicates his respect for the authority of local elites and his preference for governing his dominions individually, each according to its own laws and customs. Yet he did expect other princes to co-operate with him in making Europe in reality the Christian commonwealth it was theoretically supposed to be. Ultimately Charles hoped to do this, and to secure his own immortal fame, through a crusade to liberate Jerusalem



Museo del Prado

Titian's famous portrait of Charles V at the battle of Mühlberg in 1547.

from Islam. This was the founding aim of the order of the Golden Fleece and Christendom's most cherished fantasy since the eleventh century. More immediately, he had two specific aims. The first was to repulse the advances into Africa and Eastern Europe made by the Ottoman Turks under their great leader Süleyman I. The second was to ensure that his authority was respected in those territories that he had inherited personally and asserted effectively over those lands to which he laid dynastic claim.

Valois rivalry and the Italian wars

In reality these aims often proved incompatible because Charles faced sustained competition from Francis I of France. His kingdom was more unified and powerful than at any previous time in its history. He too was determined to make a name for himself and refused to acknowledge Charles's leadership in anything. The conflict between them was about a series of lands, titles and claims which neither man could concede without risking injury to the patrimony each had inherited from his predecessor – something no sixteenth-century monarch contemplated easily. It first centred on Francis's denial of Charles's claim to the duchy of Burgundy and to certain territories along the ill-defined border between the Netherlands and France. Moreover, Francis's control of the duchy of Milan from September 1515 challenged Charles's inherited claim to be the suzerain over it. His military power in northern Italy posed a threat to the kingdom of Naples in the south which Charles held but which Francis also claimed by right as king of France. Initial attempts at peace-making quietened, but did not resolve, these questions. For the next 30 years Charles was involved in a series of wars against France in which his immense wealth allowed him to participate but never conclusively to win.

This conflict was driven by huge investment in armies and weapons and by the developments in military technology and tactics which that investment made possible. In the early sixteenth century the appearance of higher calibre, more accurate, artillery made it more difficult to defend towns and castles from a siege. Attackers could now blast and mine their way into fortifications more easily. At the same time, rulers were recruiting increased numbers of mercenaries, who readily deserted if they became unsatisfied with their pay or conditions. It therefore often made sense to try to settle an issue quickly by open battle. However, this form of warfare was risky because, when artillery was used against infantry and cavalry, there were terrible casualties on the losing sides. The first war between Charles and Francis began in 1521 and saw a number of such battles. It ended with the victory of Charles's armies at the battle of Pavia on the emperor's 25th birthday. Francis lost Milan and was himself captured amidst the greatest slaughter of the French nobility since Agincourt.

The second Italian war was fought as Francis tried unsuccessfully to regain

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Charles V's great rival Francis I, King of France (1515-47), is here seen receiving emissaries. He and Charles fought three wars over a period of 30 years.

Milan and to take Naples between 1526 and 1529. This too saw a number of very bloody defeats for the French and military tactics began to change again. Bigger, angle-bastioned, fortifications first developed by the Italians were built by Charles and Francis around the major towns and cities of their dominions. Defenders could now better withstand the heavier calibre siege guns and could also place their own artillery within range of the attackers' forward positions. The result was that besieging armies routinely succumbed to disease or simply deserted for lack of sufficient pay during the long months now required to force a garrison or town into surrender.

In the third Habsburg-Valois war which broke out in 1536 defensive strategies played a greater part. Charles invaded Provence in retaliation against Francis's unprovoked attack on his ally, the duke of Savoy. He was unable to bring the French commander Montmorency to open battle and had finally to withdraw without doing much damage. He had more success in the fourth war which began in July 1542 and which centred on northern France. Charles besieged Saint-Dizier successfully in the summer of 1544 and his armies briefly threatened Paris itself but, when his ally Henry VIII failed to rendezvous with him on time, he instead made peace with Francis. Charles fought his final war against Francis's heir, Henry II, in 1552. He lost the cities of Metz, Toul and Verdun. Charles was unable to retake Metz in the autumn of 1552 after it had been captured and heavily fortified by the French under the duke of Guise.

The Turkish threat

These wars against France consumed the major proportion of Charles's considerable wealth and much of the time which he might have otherwise devoted to fighting the Turks. In 1521 they captured Belgrade and in 1526 they invaded Hungary, killing king Louis II at the battle of Mohácz. In 1529 they advanced on Austria and besieged Vienna before withdrawing. In 1532 Charles and his brother Ferdinand led an army against the Turks, who were again within a hundred miles of Vienna, but they once more withdrew before Charles could engage them in action.

Charles's first personal experience of battle came not in Europe but in North Africa. In 1535 he led a massive expedition to Tunis and expelled the admiral of the Turkish fleet, Khayr-al-Din, or Barbarossa, from the city, which he had recently captured. A second expedition against Algiers in 1541 was wrecked by a huge storm off the African coast and Charles was never again to launch himself against the forces of Islam.

Compromise and conflict in the Empire

Charles's efforts to champion a Christendom triumphant against the Turks were hampered not only by 'the most Christian king' of France but by those who had given him his imperial title in the first place, namely the German princes and people. As emperor Charles was the supreme legal authority over the German commonwealth or *Reich*. It was in this capacity that Martin Luther appeared before him at the Diet of Worms in April 1521. The apocryphal statement of Luther's defence: 'Here I stand; I can do no other; God help me; Amen', might as

easily have been said by Charles. He had little time for Luther's tortured introspection or its possible implications because he saw personal faith and public religion in terms of dynastic tradition and authority. His view was that as the pope had pronounced Luther a heretic and that as he had heard nothing to dissuade him from this judgement, he should support it. His forbears had all upheld the Catholic faith and do otherwise himself would dishonour his ancestors and undermine his own authority in Germany. So the Edict of Worms was issued in May 1521 which banned Martin Luther from preaching or publishing his beliefs in the empire.

Despite this, Luther's ideas gained significant minority support among princes, cities and towns in the 1520s and, where they did, the Edict of Worms was largely ignored. This disobedience outraged Charles but in the absence of an effective constitution, implementing his edict became a matter of negotiation with individual princes or imperial free cities. This, together with his obligations in Spain, the continuing conflict with Francis and the lack of any imperial army, prevented him from bringing Luther's supporters to heel. Instead he called a series of further Diets between 1526 and 1546 at which religion was the central issue. Charles had the difficult task of preventing any split from the papacy by Luther's supporters, while not alienating loyal adherents to Rome who expected him to enforce his will in its defence.

A crisis came in 1529 when a majority of delegates to the second Diet of Speyer demanded the enforcement of the Edict of Worms. The minority issued a 'protestation' and within twelve months had established a formal alliance against Charles, the Protestant League of Schmalkalden. Faced with this, Charles pressed popes and fellow princes to agree to a General Council at which, he reasoned, the whole European church would show the Protestants their error and arrive at a form of reconciliation. Lacking troops and any real support in Germany he could do little else.

It took another 16 years and the failure of successive Diets and the opening session of the Council of Trent in 1545 before Charles seriously contemplated war against the Schmalkaldic League. His reluctance to go to war yielded to his anxiety that the continuing spread of Protestant sympathies would totally undermine his authority and security in the empire. The end of the war with Francis I in 1544 gave him the opportunity he needed. Pursuing the Elector John Frederick of Saxony, the leader of the League, Charles invaded southern Electoral Saxony in April 1547 with a huge army composed of Spanish and Italian troops. On Sunday 24 April 1547 near Mühlberg on the river Elbe, Charles caught up with the Protestants and turned what had been an orderly retreat before his larger force into a rout. In one morning he crushed the League's army and came closest to his own ideal of the Christian knight triumphing over the enemies of the faith. It was of course this moment that Titian evoked in his equestrian portrait of the emperor.

Charles's victory at Mühlberg was his most glorious but also his most illusory. By 1552 the League had recovered, allied itself with Henry II of France and three major towns in Lorraine had been taken by the French. In the aftermath of his defeat at the siege of Metz, Charles was compelled to accept that he could not impose a religious settlement militarily. This was formalised in the Peace of Augsburg, which gave legal recognition to the Lutheran church in 1555. Charles refused in conscience to attend the meetings of the Diet which formulated the Peace. It was probably his failure to keep the Empire unified religiously which contributed most to the emperor's disillusionment, his mental distress and to his abdication.

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Surprising success in Spain

In January 1556 Charles completed the process of divesting himself of all his imperial and princely titles. He abdicated in favour of his son Philip and retired to Spain. His wish to go there rather than remain in his native Flanders reflects his successful government of his Hispanic kingdoms. Charles had not begun well in Spain in his youth. When he first arrived in Castile in 1517 he could not speak Castilian. He immediately packed his popular and Castilian-born brother, Ferdinand, off to Germany. He then ignored the request of the Cortes of Castile that he remain in Spain and was scarcely less conciliatory when he met the Cortes of Aragon in May 1518. Charles left Spain in May 1520 to claim the imperial crown in Germany. His departure was immediately followed by the revolt of the *Comuneros* centred on the towns. It was over taxes, the appointment of corrupt crown officials and the crown's demands for money from the Cortes, which fell heaviest on urban communities. It almost brought down the monarchy in Charles's absence. He was fortunate that after several aristocrats were given positions of command, the Castilian nobility sided with the king and suppressed the revolt.

Charles returned to Spain in 1522 and remained there for seven years. During this time he learned Spanish and showed more respect for Castilian and Aragonese political institutions. He now worked with the Castilian Cortes, summoning it regularly, allowing it to air grievances and giving it a greater role in determining how and when subsidies would be paid to the crown. He also extended the number of royal councils which advised him on policy and implemented royal decisions. He brought into these councils not the high aristocracy, who represented only landed interests, but members of the lower nobility and professionally trained lawyers. At the same time he did not trespass on the traditional rights of the

high nobles and made no attempt to unify or centralise his Iberian kingdoms. His marriage to Isabella of Portugal in 1526 and the birth of prince Philip in May the following year created dynastic security.

These developments greatly improved Charles's standing among his Spanish subjects. Over time the political classes identified themselves more fully with the monarchy and its ambitions. Charles drew a significant proportion of his income from Spanish sources. Through parliamentary subsidies and customs he taxed its pastoral wealth and that generated by imports of silver from the Americas. Nevertheless, ever-rising military expenditure together with Charles's wish to reward his deserving nobles and to augment the splendour of his Spanish court meant that his expenditure nearly always exceeded his income. He took out large cash loans with bankers, especially the Fuggers. The interest payments on these loans were secured by assigning income from his Spanish lands. It may not have been entirely true, as Charles once claimed, that Spain alone sustained him, but after 1522 his co-operative relations with his Spanish subjects certainly gave him a surer platform from which to work towards his wider goals.

Charles was conscious of his failures, of the unfulfilled potential of his extraordinary inheritance. Yet he had at least secured his dynasty's hold on Austria and the Empire. He had bequeathed to his son a slightly enhanced and more secure patrimony than he had inherited.

The family firm

In his other European dominions Charles applied the lessons learnt in Spain, being careful to rule according to local customs as advised by his principal representatives. These were always trusted generals or members of his family. After 1529 the Italian peninsular remained firmly in his grasp, ruled through viceroys in Naples, governors in Milan and puppet regimes such as the Gonzaga in Mantua and the Medici in Florence. Charles's regent in the Netherlands until her death in 1530 was his aunt Margaret. She was succeeded by his sister Mary, queen of Hungary. While Italy raised only enough income for its own defence, it has been estimated that the Netherlands may have contributed roughly as much as Spain itself to the imperial treasury.

In the Netherlands Charles matched requests for taxation with recognition of the authority of the provincial States and the States-General, consulting them on matters of policy. Although he appreciated the importance of governing through local institutions, Charles nevertheless liked to retain control over major policy decisions and appointments and to consider them with his own imperial council. But he was also notoriously reluctant to take swift decisions in these matters. This often frustrated his representatives in the Netherlands because it limited their capacity to reward promptly the service of noble families and local officials. It also gave some nobles opportunities to challenge the authority of the regent. In 1538 the perception that Charles was 'out of touch' was one element in a major revolt in Ghent against the regent's government. The revolt was so serious that Charles, doubtless remembering the *Comuneros*, came in person to put it down, arriving in his native city early in 1540.

In the end, however, even the reliable 'family firm' was split up. In 1555-6 Philip became king of Spain and overlord of the Netherlands. By then he was married to Mary Tudor and seemed to have brought England back within the Habsburg fold. Following protracted and sometimes bitter negotiations within the family, Philip renounced the imperial title in favour of his uncle Ferdinand, who in turn passed it on to his own son, Maximilian. Thus the Habsburg family was forever divided into its Austrian and Spanish branches.

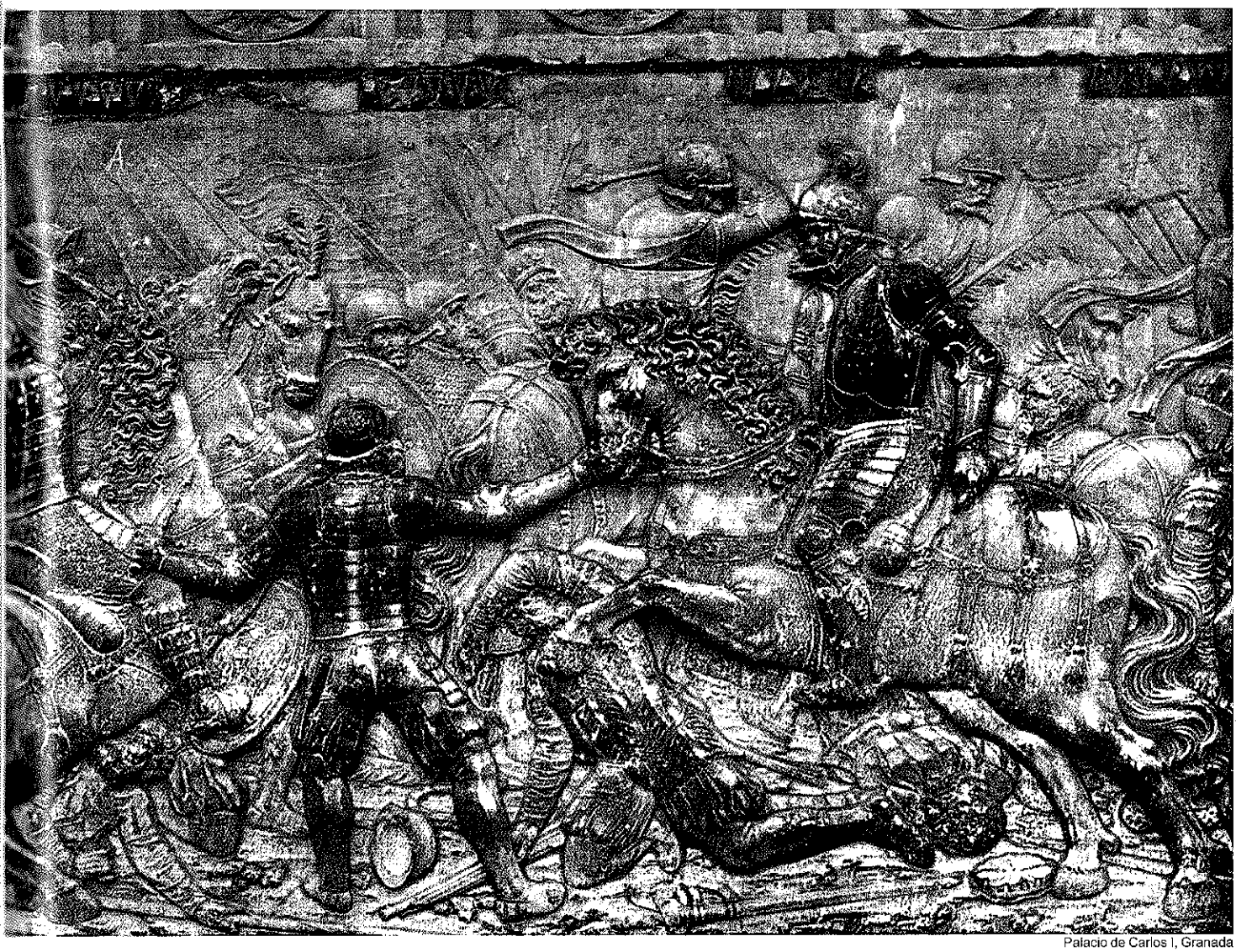
Conclusion

After a retirement of only two years spent at the monastery of San Jeronimo at Yuste in Estramadura, Charles V died on 21 September 1558. As a ruler he was conscientious and deeply committed to the ideal of forging Christian unity in the face of a perceived Islamic threat. Yet the sheer size and diversity of his inheritance hindered as much as encouraged great endeavours of this kind.

His rule over the Netherlands succeeded because, for the most part, he let his Flemish and Dutch subjects govern themselves and make money, which was just what they wanted. He certainly failed in Germany. It is doubtful that he could ever have imposed a Catholic settlement there militarily, but it was certainly too late to do so by the 1550s. Perhaps he might have done more to assist Ferdinand in the 1520s but, had he spent that

timeLINE

1500	24 February	Charles born in Ghent
1516		becomes King of Spain
1519		elected Holy Roman Emperor
1520		Revolt of the *Comuneros* in Spain
1521	April	Diet of Worms
1525		battle of Pavia (Charles defeats Francis I)
1526		marriage to Isabella of Portugal
1529		Diet of Speyer
1530		Protestant League of Schmalkalden formed
1535		Charles defeats Turks at Tunis
1547		Charles victorious at Muhlberg
1555		Peace of Augsburg
1555-6		Charles's abdication
1558	21 September	Charles's death



Palacio de Carlos I, Granada

In this bas-relief from the royal palace at Granada, Charles V, mounted and in full armour, is depicted trampling a foot solider in battle.

decade settling the religious issue in Germany, would he have established the measure of effective government in Spain that he achieved by his presence there in the same years? Without firm control over Spain, how would he have sustained the wars against Francis I in the next 20 years or had any success against the Turks in Africa?

These are the frustrating paradoxes which were the daily stuff of Charles's 'monarchia.' Charles was conscious of his failures, of the unfulfilled potential of his extraordinary inheritance. Yet he had at least secured his dynasty's hold on Austria and the Empire. He had bequeathed to his son a slightly enhanced and more secure patrimony than he had inherited. Modest though that achievement may seem, it required 40 years of effort amidst the turbulence of European politics. It was a source of some satisfaction for Charles who, whatever else he might have been, remained at heart as Titian portrayed him, a determined but deeply conventional Flemish nobleman and knight.

Glenn Richardson is Lecturer in History at St Mary's Strawberry Hill, University of Surrey. His book, *Renaissance Monarchy*, comparing the reigns of Henry VIII, Francis I and Charles V, will be published by Edward Arnold in 2001.

Further Reading

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C. Mackay, *Charles V: Imperator and Defender of the Christian Faith* (Cambridge, 2000)

Monarchy, Church and State during the Reign of Charles V (Leuven, 1995)

R. Tracy, *The Emperor Charles V, Impresario of War* (Cambridge, 2000)