

# Aufstand oder Fehde

*Franz von Sickingen and the Implications of the Feud Against Trier (1481-1525)*

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## Abstract

This article focuses on dismantling the narrative of rebellion surrounding Franz von Sickingen's feud with Trier in 1522-1523. Through an examination of Sickingen's material circumstances, the reactions of both the princes and the lower nobility to the feud, this article demonstrates that the narrative of the "Knight's Rebellion" lacks historical credibility and is best examined as a private feud. This article utilizes the *Flerscheimer Chronik*, letters, and contemporary accounts as well as various secondary sources in both English and German to demonstrate that the feud against Trier is not evidence of a declining nobility in the early modern period, but rather it is dramatic example of the "feud culture" prevalent throughout the later middle ages and early modern period.

## Article

### Introduction

"All Germany is a gang of bandits and, among the nobles, the more grasping the more glorious."<sup>1</sup> So remarked a Roman cardinal concerning the state of affairs in Germany during the later middle ages. Who better typifies this notion than Franz von Sickingen? Supported by his contemporary Ulrich von Hutten, Sickingen led a knightly revolt against the princes of the Holy Roman Empire in 1523. When combined with anti-clerical sentiment, it is hardly surprising to find that the chosen target of this rebellion was a center of ecclesiastical power: the Electorate of Trier. Futilely, these noble rebels fought the powerful princes until their eventual defeat at the hands of the dreaded cannon, with the walls of the knights' castles, symbols of their crumbling power, crashing down around them.

According to the nineteenth-century scholar Belfort Bax, after the death of their leader and last hope, Franz von Sickingen, at Landstuhl in 1523, "the knighthood as a distinct factor in the polity of Europe henceforth existed no more."<sup>2</sup> However, more recent scholarship has called into question the old paradigm of noble decline during the late medieval and early modern periods. These shifts in the narrative bring along new questions, particularly about

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<sup>1</sup> Hillyar Zmora, *State and Nobility in Early Modern Germany: The Knightly Feud in Franconia, 1440-1567* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Belfort Bax, *German Society at the Close of the Middle Ages* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1894), 184.

Franz von Sickingen's daring uprising. Hillay Zmora, writing in 1997, claims that, "[i]t was not—as it is commonly labelled—a Knights' Revolt."<sup>3</sup> Did Sickingen have the support of the Knighthood to such an extent that it could be characterized as a rebellion? Does the so-called rebellion hold any characteristics of rebellion: evidence of economic destitution among the nobility and Franz von Sickingen in particular, a reaction to rapid, radical changes in governance, or widespread acceptance by the target audience of the rebellion? By examining the material and sociopolitical circumstances of Franz von Sickingen and the reactions of not only his peers in the lower nobility but also the princes to Sickingen's "rebellion," it becomes clear that the Knights' Revolt of 1522-1523 is better characterized as a feud between Franz von Sickingen and the Elector of Trier, Richard von Griefenklau. Thus, Franz von Sickingen's attack on Trier is better contextualized within the confines of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century "feud culture."

### Feud Culture

Feud culture is best described as the tendency amongst the German nobility during the mid to late fifteenth century and into the sixteenth century to engage in extra-legal confrontations against one another, usually involving small skirmishes, burning, looting, and abductions.<sup>4</sup> A feud may break out for any number of seemingly insignificant reasons: small debts, minor land disputes, or slights against another's reputation might all be cause of a feud.<sup>5</sup> In one striking example, a feud broke out between Christoph Fuchs von Bimbach and the prince-bishop of Bamberg over grazing rights worth no more than 3 gulden.<sup>6</sup> Often, these feuds occurred between parties intimately familiar with one another and many were preceded by lengthy peaceful mediation that would often continue throughout. Many successful feuders wielded rhetoric against their antagonists as well as their swords. Killing, especially in large numbers, was an infrequent occurrence during a feud. Feuders were expected to conform to a generally accepted set of rules involving how, where, and what sort of violence might be utilized.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, the letter of feud (*fehdebrief*) detailed the list of offenses for which the perpetrator of the feud engaged in his endeavor and signaled to all the beginning of hostilities. The importance of reputation in late medieval and early modern noble circles cannot be overstated. Many nobles both lent and borrowed funds and strove to impress their peers; thus, the feud served to demonstrate to both creditors and debtors their seriousness while simultaneously improving their social capital.<sup>8</sup>

The feud has been the subject of much historiographic debate and interpretation. Previous understandings of the feud revolved around the so-called "robber-knight" narrative, that is, the notion of widespread economic destitution among the nobility that had ostensibly cropped up during the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Werner Rösener claimed

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<sup>3</sup> Zmora, *State and Nobility*, 120.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that feuding was explicitly outlawed after the Imperial Diet of Worms in 1495.

<sup>5</sup> Hillay Zmora, *The Feud in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1-45, 47-77.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45, 63.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-61.

that the Knight, having had his existence threatened, operated “in the grey area between a just feud and flagrant robbery.”<sup>9</sup> However, Hilla Zmora’s more recent research suggests a different conclusion. He argues that the feud resulted from an interplay between two distinct processes: princely-state building and the social stratification of the nobility.<sup>10</sup> Through careful examination of the Franconian nobility between 1440 and 1567, Zmora arrives at a most penetrating finding. The nobility was not in the midst of a general crisis at this time and the feud is therefore not emblematic of decline.<sup>11</sup> A key aspect of the robber-knight (*raubritter*) thesis relies on the notion that the primary source of income for the nobility was agrarian in nature and that only those in the nobility who were in financially tenuous situations would engage in the feud. Zmora contests both of these statements vigorously.<sup>12</sup> Instead, he argues that the feud was carried out by successful and unsuccessful members of the nobility alike. Through a study of feuding noblemen Zmora arrives at the conclusion that the majority of principal feuders were, in fact, high-status noblemen, and that these noblemen carried out the majority of the feuds.<sup>13</sup> Thus detailed, Zmora demonstrates that the core pillar of Rösener’s thesis, the connection between poor nobles and feuding, stands on shaky ground.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, he zeros in on the most salient issue of the feud: lordship.<sup>15</sup> Put simply, “being a lord was an ongoing process. Lordship had to be created, maintained, and reproduced.”<sup>16</sup> Feuding served to separate the chaff from the wheat among the nobility. By creating a problem (violence, abductions, burning, and pillaging), the nobility offered a shield against this same problem and thereby justified their role as lords.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Franz von Sickingen’s feud with Trier—viewed from this lens of creating, reproducing, and maintaining lordship—cannot be viewed simply as a means of extracting wealth. Instead it must be seen as an effort to obtain the highest form of lordship: a principality.<sup>18</sup>

### **Franz von Sickingen: Material Circumstances**

Yet, it remains prudent to examine in more detail the events that led up to the feud with Trier and historically locate its principle perpetrator, Franz von Sickingen. Understanding that Franz von Sickingen’s experience exists as the pinnacle of noble success does not place him as a likely candidate to lead a class revolt against the princes. Born into a well-established line on March 2, 1481, little is known of Sickingen’s life as a young man. His father, Schweikard VIII, brought the family to a position of power in the Palatinate of the Rhine. After a fortuitous marriage to the heir of the house of Hohenburg, Margarethe Puller

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<sup>9</sup> Werner Rösener, “Zur Problematik des spätmittelalterlichen Raubritter,” *Festschrift für Bernet Schweineköper zu seinem siebzigsten Geburtstag*, eds. Helmut and Hans Patze (Sigmaringen: J. Thorbecke, 1982), 487-488.

<sup>10</sup> Zmora, *State and Nobility*, 88.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 78, 85. It is important to note that Zmora used the following parameters to differentiate high and low status noblemen: (1) the holding of high office in a princely administration, (2) financial transactions with princes, and (3) the quality of individual marriage alliances.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 85, 109.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

von Hohenburg, the Sickingen line found itself in a strong economic position. Between 1466 and 1485, Schweikard von Sickingen invested heavily in their seat of power, the Castle of Ebernburg. Already by 1482, he was in the position to lend the Count Palatine of the Rhine, Philip, the massive amount of 24,300 gulden.<sup>19</sup> His father continued to vigorously expand the Sickingen assets. For example, in 1488 he became embroiled in a feud with the city of Cologne, which solidified the family as an economic powerhouse on the Rhine. Perhaps more importantly, it landed Schweikard a high office in the Palatinate Court as the master of the household.<sup>20</sup> This high office and more importantly the economic basis would benefit the young Sickingen greatly in the years to come. With the death of his father in 1505, Franz von Sickingen became the sole inheritor of the familial holdings. An adroit administrator, Franz von Sickingen wasted no time in exploiting his privileged upbringing.

Between 1507 and 1515, Sickingen engaged in a series of undertakings aimed at continuing to build himself up not only as an economic powerhouse but also as a political figure of great import. For example, in 1508, acting as a court officer (*amtman*) for the Count Palatine, he mediated a dispute between the parish of Pfaffensschwabenheim and the local cloister.<sup>21</sup> By 1509, Sickingen had secured several fiefs for himself from the bishop of Straßburg. Between 1510 and 1514, he made several purchases from the local citizenry (*bürgerschaft*), buying both farms and a quarry. With such economic standing, Franz von Sickingen found himself in the position to lend large amounts to the Count Palatine of the Rhine, which resulted in favorable trading deals through his princely benefactor. His ore mines in Rheingrafenstein, for example, became duty free in 1511.<sup>22</sup> In sum, Franz von Sickingen's formative years were relatively peaceful, and they afforded him an opportunity to greatly expand upon the advantage his father had provided for him. Despite his rather meager office in the Count Palatine's court, Franz von Sickingen's financial successes would prove pivotal in his next great undertaking: his feud with the City of Worms.<sup>23</sup>

Balthasar Schlör, a citizen of Worms, had previously sold his debt to Sickingen, which provided the impetus for Sickingen to declare the feud: he wanted to collect.<sup>24</sup> On November 1, 1514, Franz von Sickingen sent the city of Worms a letter which stated that a particular citizen, Nicolas Knobellach, should pay a debt that he owed to Balthasar Schlör. Sickingen was prepared to settle the matter in the Imperial Chamber Court, however, due

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<sup>19</sup> Reinhard Scholzen, *Franz von Sickingen: Ein adeliges Leben im Spannungsfeld zwischen Städten und Territorien* (Kaiserslautern: Institut für pfälzische Geschichte und Volkskunde, 1996), 33.

<sup>20</sup> Zmora, *State and Nobility*, 119.

<sup>21</sup> Scholzen, *Franz von Sickingen*, 33. "In sein jungen tage ist er der Rheingraven obrister amptman worden, darnach der Pfaltz amptman zu Creutzennach." Otto Waltz, ed., *Die Flerscheimer Chronik: Zur Geschichte d. 15. u. 16. Jh. Zum ersten Mal nach vollst. Handschr.* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1874), 52.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 55. In 1513, the people of Worms were incited against the city council. The rebellion was eventually suppressed by local princes and guild-masters. The rebels were punished, assets seized, and so on. In particular, Schlör had his assets seized and therefore turned to Sickingen to protect his rights.

to extenuating circumstances, he was unable to pursue this action.<sup>25</sup> When the peaceful avenue ground to a halt on March 22, 1515, Franz von Sickingen began his feud against Worms in earnest, seizing a merchant vessel on the way to Frankfurt and further harassing merchants along the road, despite these merchants carrying “Safe Conduct Letters” from the Count Palatine.<sup>26</sup> These merchants were taken to Ebernburg and held at ransom. The citizens of Worms complained that all of this had been done before the proper proclamation of the feud. The letter of feud (*fehdebrief*) did not arrive until March 25. His actions were noticed by the Emperor Maximilian I and on April 16, Sickingen was named a Breaker of the General Peace (*Landsfriedenbrecher*).<sup>27</sup> By May 15, the Emperor had placed Sickingen under the Imperial Ban (*Reichsacht*), and assisting Sickingen was made illegal under the punishment of a heavy fine. The conflict continued to escalate, culminating in Sickingen securing the support of many of his peers (*standgenossen*) and laying siege to the city in late June.<sup>28</sup> Despite heavy bombardment and an attempt to cut off the city’s water supply, Sickingen was unable to force a capitulation. Thus, after disbanding a large portion of his force, Sickingen simply set what remained of his army loose on the countryside, capturing citizens and disrupting commerce severely. This lasted through 1515 and 1516.

The feud ground to a standstill and ended without Schlör being recompensed. However, due to the disruption of trade fairs and the seizure of merchant assets, the city suffered grave economic damage and had lost over 86,000 gulden.<sup>29</sup> Despite the failure to achieve the original goal of the feud, Sickingen arose out of it as a “feared and famed warlord” and quite wealthy from the ransoms and seized goods to boot.<sup>30</sup> Sickingen was released from the Imperial Ban on July 17, having also repaired his relationship with the Emperor. One critical reason for the Habsburg rulers to set aside their differences with Sickingen became apparent when they realized that Franz von Sickingen had entered into a contract with Francis I, the King of France and the House of Habsburg’s primary rival in their constant wars in Italy.<sup>31</sup> While little came out of this contract, fears of Sickingen transferring his allegiances and considerable wealth and military might to the French monarch was certainly a concern. It is perhaps for this reason that Maximilian choose to loosen his sanctions against Sickingen. This relationship (and later lack thereof) would prove vital in other feuds.<sup>32</sup> After a meeting in Innsbruck, Maximilian extended his forgiveness towards the transgressions of Sickingen, and offered him a place in the service of the House of Habsburg saying, “No, Franz, what happen, has happened: it has been a misunderstanding. I wish to be to you a merciful Emperor.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 57. Scholzen notes that the extenuating circumstance in this case was the sudden death of his wife. Scholzen additionally notes that it is unlikely that Sickingen would have taken the ruling of the Imperial Chamber Court seriously.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>30</sup> Zmora, *State and Nobility*, 119-120.

<sup>31</sup> Scholzen, *Franz von Sickingen*, 66.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>33</sup> “Nu, nu Franntz, was geschehen, ist geschehen; es ist ein missverstandt gewesen. Ich will dir ein gnedigster kaiser sein.” Waltz, ed., *Die Flerscheimer Chronik*, 62-64.

His success against Worms kicked off a rapid series of feuds that continued to build upon his ever-increasing financial and socio-political standing. Sickingen feuded against the city of Metz in response to the death of one of his peers at the hands of a citizen. This feud was quickly resolved and the city was forced to pay 25,000 gulden to Sickingen on the September 7, 1518.<sup>34</sup> Shortly after his confrontation with Metz, Sickingen entered into a new feud with the Landgraf von Hessen, Philip. His reasons in this case were twofold: he supported Conrad von Hattein's claim to the castle of Reifenberg, which von Hessen had previously annexed, and von Hessen had laid claim to holdings that belonged to Sickingen as well. He campaigned against the Landgraf, extorting his citizens in the area. It proved to be quite lucrative, as Sickingen walked away from the feud with 14,842 florins in plunder and an additional 35,000 gulden at the conclusion.<sup>35</sup>

However, it was the death of Emperor Maximilian I in 1519 that changed the dynamic for Franz von Sickingen. Despite receiving a hefty bribe from the Habsburgs to support Charles I of Spain, some still commented that, "It would not be good to lose him since he is planning an attack on the hereditary lands."<sup>36</sup> This hinted at a possible alliance between the erstwhile knight at the French monarch. These fears proved to be unfounded as Franz von Sickingen endeavored to make himself indispensable to the Habsburg cause, yet many remained skeptical, as Margareta von Habsburg notes in a letter: "One negotiates with him too frivolously, no Prince is able to supply to him great service."<sup>37</sup> Even so, these doubts did not stop the Habsburgs from using his services to attempt to resolve a conflict between the Swabian League and Duke Ulrich von Württemberg. On February 17, 1519, Sickingen was ordered to collect 1,000 horsemen and assist the Swabian League in the defeat of the wayward Duke. With the added assistance of Sickingen, victory was all but assured for the Swabian League.<sup>38</sup> The campaign ended by April 28 of that same year when the city and castle of Tübingen was handed over. Despite the short campaign, Franz von Sickingen again made out quite well. Through a combination of extortion, plunder, and wages, Sickingen continued to profit off the endemic violence of the time.<sup>39</sup>

Yet the good times were not to last for Sickingen. Three years after the campaign against the Duke of Württemberg, Emperor Charles V called upon Sickingen's services once more. On July 4, 1521, Sickingen was ordered to assemble an army of 2,000 horsemen and 15,000 foot soldiers for a campaign against France.<sup>40</sup> The Emperor promised to reimburse the cost of the campaign at a later date. Sickingen completed his task by the end of July and set off

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 111-112.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 125, 129.

<sup>36</sup> "Es wäre nicht gut, ihn zu verlieren, da man, wie er (Zevenbergen) hört, Anschläge gegen die Erblande plant." *Deutsche Reichstagsakten* 1, no. 20 (1893): 182. Scholzen, *Franz von Sickingen*, 140.

<sup>37</sup> "Man verhandelt mit ihm etwas zu leichtfertig: der kein Fürst vermag ihm größere Dienste zu lesiten." Armerstroffs to Margareta, 8th of March, 1519. *Deutsche Reichstagsakten* 1, no. 134 (1893): 374. Scholzen, *Franz von Sickingen*, 142.

<sup>38</sup> Scholzen, *Franz von Sickingen*, 151-152.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 153-159.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 192.

for Straßburg, where he arrived on August 5, 1521. There he combined his forces with another commander, Count Heinrich von Nassaeu, and laid siege to the Fortress of Mezières. Despite a heavy bombardment, they were unable to capture the fortress. Powder shortages, a lack of funds, and nearby French support troops forced the Imperial commanders to withdraw. By the end of September, Sickingen sent the Emperor a list of the expenses from the failed campaign. He received partial reimbursement on December 5, 1521 in the amount of 76,500 gulden.<sup>41</sup>

What is most interesting about the events leading up to the feud with Trier is that they demonstrate, quite clearly, that Franz von Sickingen's financial situation did not, for the most part, exemplify that of a poor nobleman. That Sickingen was able to withstand the costs of a campaign against France at all is a testament to just how wealthy he had become. However, the unpaid portion of his reimbursement, combined with a need to collect on a loan from Emperor Charles V forced him to travel to Brussels to meet with Charles in person to discuss repayment for the loan and to discuss his full reimbursement.<sup>42</sup> The Emperor was not forthcoming with his payment.

It seems prudent to also mention the Knightly Brotherhood in Landau, a union of 600 of his peers brought together in 1522 primarily to discuss conduct during a feud. At the outset, one might assume this constitutes some evidence of revolutionary intent—that the knighthood sought to band together to better deal with threats external to their social class. Franz von Sickingen's election as "Captain of the Union" in the summer of 1522, weeks before his feud with Trier, certainly seems to give credence to this view. However, the articles of the Brotherhood, which focused primarily on the conduct between its members during the feud, could hardly be considered aggressive or revolutionary.<sup>43</sup> What the articles did provide were guidelines for a proper knightly lifestyle and how the knighthood might live together without fighting.<sup>44</sup> Even as the "Captain of the Union," Sickingen's position was tightly regulated and centered around resolving internal disputes between members. It was not a war confederation.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, this union was not founded on the principle of resisting territorial, that is princely, authority.<sup>46</sup>

Franz von Sickingen's experience as a noble does not simply conform to the notion that the nobility of the sixteenth century were in some sort of economic slump. Privileged from birth, Sickingen capitalized on the successes of his father with successes of his own. He

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Waltz, ed., *Die Flerscheimer Chronik*, 70-71. "Unnd ist er, Franntz zu key. Mat. Gehn Prüssel geritten, daselbst viel zeit vergeblich gelegen, zuletzt; und bezalung halben ein abschiedt nemmen muessen unnd kein gelt empfanngen; unnd ist ime damals biss uber die 96000 fl., Darfur Frantz versprochen, schludig blieben, das ime nach gelegenheit unnd beschehener seiner treuen dienst nit wenig beschwerlich gewesen."

<sup>43</sup> Scholzen, *Franz von Sickingen*, 203. "Die Inhalte der Vereinigung sind weder direkt noch indirekt als aggressives Programm einer revolutionsbereiten Ritterschaft zu werten."

<sup>44</sup> Reinhard Scholzen, "Franz von Sickingen (1481-1523). Fehde als Geschäftsmodell," *Reformation in der Region: Personen und Erinnerungsorte* 21 (2018): 68-69.

<sup>45</sup> Scholzen, *Franz von Sickingen*, 202.

<sup>46</sup> "Franz von Sickingen: Wortführer des Adels, Vorkämpfer der Reformation und Freund Huttens," *Adel Im Alten Reich* (Tübingen: Volker Press, 1998), 326.

utilized the feud to build up his fortune and his prestige until he rivaled even some princes.<sup>47</sup> While the time leading directly up to the feud with Trier displays some level of short-term economic difficulty, the general trend for most of Sickingen's life does not suggest that he was in particularly dire economic straits. Quite the contrary, he seems to have made out quite well for himself up until the campaign against France. It would be foolish to suggest that there were no economic motivations or considerations for the feud with Trier; Sickingen had incurred a significant pecuniary loss. Yet this loss was not so significant that it prevented him from engaging in his preferred method of acquiring funds, namely feuding. His position in society as one of the most influential nobles makes him an unlikely candidate to lead a "revolt" against the princes of the Empire generally. As things stood, he had done very well with the system as it was. Yet how exactly did the feud play out and how was the feud reacted to by both the princes and Sickingen's contemporaries?

### **The Feud against Trier**

On August 27, 1522, Franz von Sickingen sent his letter of feud to his rival, Richard von Griefenklau, the Elector of Trier. In the letter, Sickingen claimed that two men, citizens of Trier, Jacob von Kröv and Richard zu Seenheim, had failed to repay him for an outstanding debt that they owed to Sickingen. Kröv and Seenheim had been previously captured by two other knights, Johann Hilchen von Lorch and Heinrich von der Tann, who had set their ransom at 5,150 gulden, which Sickingen paid.<sup>48</sup> This debt was quickly forgotten by the two citizens, but not by Sickingen. Further, Sickingen claimed that the Elector had acted against God, Emperor, Imperial Mandates, and Equity.<sup>49</sup> In 1519 the Elector of Trier received bribes from the French crown, which had swung his vote in favor the French contender in the imperial election, Francis I, King of France, in opposition to Charles V, which Sickingen drew upon for his accusations against the Elector.<sup>50</sup> Sickingen's letter of feud arrived on August 29. By September 3, 1522, Sickingen had already captured two towns in the archbishop's territory. A mandate from the *Reichregiment* forbade anyone from assisting Sickingen and demanded that the Imperial Estates assist the Electorate. Unfortunately for Griefenklau, help was not forthcoming. Despite this, the archbishop mustered what troops he could and after the seizure of nearby St. Wendels, the city of Trier redoubled their preparations for war. By September 8, Sickingen and his army had reached the city of Trier.

After a failed negotiation attempt by Trier, Sickingen moved his army with his cannons closer to the city and, on September 10, began his bombardment.<sup>51</sup> The bombardment, however, accomplished very little. The defenders were quite successful, having been able to remove several of Sickingen's cannons from play and forcing Sickingen to reposition. Bombardment began in earnest once more on September 10. The city chronicler, Johann Falder, suspected that Sickingen's army did not have the firepower to make a breach in the

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<sup>47</sup> Zmora, *State and Nobility*, 120.

<sup>48</sup> Scholzen, *Franz von Sickingen*, 205-206. "die beiden treulosen vnnnd meyneydigen Jacoben von Croff zu Zell im Hammen vnd Richardem zu Syenheym schultheißen."

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 204. "wider gott, kayserliche Mayestat, des heligen Reichs ordenung vnd billicheytt gehandelt." This quotation from is from the letter of feud.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 217. "der bischoff von Tryer hab der Kronen vill empfangen wider dye Kl. M."

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 221.



wall, which suggested that Sickingen's army did not have much in the way of artillery.<sup>52</sup> The bombardment continued until September 12. The city chronicler sums up the damages: "but by the will of the Almighty and the protection of the Saints, no men were shot with heavy shot, rather alone, a magpie, a mouse, and two chickens were killed."<sup>53</sup> As the bombardment of the city proved to be a complete failure, Sickingen sent a letter to the people of Trier, where he claimed that his feud was not against the citizens of the city, but rather with von Grieffenklau himself. He claimed that he would do them no harm and grant them freedom, should they choose to surrender the city to him the following day. He additionally claimed that he would seize the property of the clergy and the archbishop, to whatever extent his assertions in were sincere, the citizens of Trier did not surrender the city. After a brief repositioning of his artillery, the bombardment of the city resumed on September 13. That very day, a mediation attempt by the Council of Cologne, Count Johann von Wied, and Count Bartholomew von der Leyen failed; their request for 200,000 gulden on behalf of Sickingen was rejected.

In response, the archbishop requested 200,000 gulden from Sickingen in compensation for the damages that Sickingen had wrought.<sup>54</sup> On September 14, 1522, Sickingen withdrew from Trier. In a letter addressed to Balthasar Schlör, Sickingen detailed his reasons for withdrawal: (1) The commander of his reinforcements, Nickel von Minkwitz, had been captured and imprisoned by the Landgrave of Hessen, an old enemy of Sickingen and a man with whom Sickingen had previously feuded; (2) Hessen and the Count Palatine of the Rhine had thrown their support in for Trier and sent the archbishop a large number of support troops; (3) Further support troops had been sent by the Duke of Kleve to the aid of the archbishop; (4) The ruling of the *Reichsregiment* had created a number of logistical problems for Sickingen and his followers.<sup>55</sup> Following his abrupt withdrawal from Trier, Sickingen's financial situation continued to deteriorate, despite help from one of his peers, Hartmut von Kronberg. Trier, Hessen, and the Count Palatine of the Rhine met that winter to discuss further action against Sickingen.<sup>56</sup> As they targeted and systemically removed all of Sickingen's allies, they closed in for the kill. As the coalition of princes drew near, Sickingen grew increasingly desperate and asked the Franconian nobility for aid in 1522. He claimed that "the princes were aiming at nothing less 'than to violently force all of us of the Knighthood into obedience in their own terms.'"<sup>57</sup> For all his prestige as a warlord, a feuder, and a knight, Sickingen was unable to rally the Franconian nobility to his side. Retreating to his fortress at Ebernburg, Sickingen planned to carry on the fight. Yet, while in his castle in Landstuhl, Sickingen found himself besieged, and within a week, the walls of

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. "Flade vermutet, die Heer Sickingens Büchsenmeister hätte die Folgen des Trierischen überfalls noch nicht beheben können, wodurch nur wenige Geschütze einsatzfähig gewesen seien."

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 222. "doch uß willen des Allmechtigen und vurbitt der heiligen keinen menschen mit allem hefftigen schiessen, sunder allein ein atzel, ein mus, und zwei hoener (als man sagen will) am leben geletzet." This quotation is from the *Flerscheimer Chronik*.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>57</sup> Zmora, *State and Nobility*, 138. Quoted: Robert Fellner, *Die fränkische Ritterschaft von 1495-1524 : mit einer Einleitung : hauptsächlich nach Quellen aus dem Hochstift Würzburg* (Vaduz: Kraus Reprint, 1965), 235.

his castle were destroyed and he was mortally wounded by a cannonball. He died May 7, 1523 shortly after surrendering.<sup>58</sup>

### **Reactions to the Feud: The Princes and the Lower Nobility**

In response to Sickingen's letter of the declaration of feud, Richard von Greiffenklau worked quickly to try and form a coalition of his peers against Sickingen and his army. On August 28, just a day after Sickingen had dispatched his letter, the archbishop had already sent further letters requesting assistance from the Prince-Bishop of Mainz, Albrecht von Brandenburg. This appeal to a colleague, it seems, fell on deaf ears, despite claims that Greiffenklau would aid Brandenburg had their positions been reversed.<sup>59</sup> The Prince-Bishop of Mainz claimed that he could not help for fear of being attacked himself and that, moreover, he had already sent military aid to the Swabian League and was not in a position to assist. Further requests "in his need" were ignored.<sup>60</sup>

In sharp contrast to the inaction of Mainz, the *Reichregiment* responded quickly. On September 1, they called for the Imperial Estates to assist the electorate of Trier and forbade any from assisting Sickingen in any meaningful way.<sup>61</sup> These demands, however, proved to likewise fall on deaf ears. By September 10, the *Reichregiment* repeated its demands that Sickingen not be supported under heavy penalty. It is likely that Emperor Charles V's absence in Spain had a great deal to do with the ineffectiveness of the *Reichregiment* to rally effective support against Sickingen. Without the monarch on hand to lend his weight to the demands of the *Reichregiment*, their ordinances resulted in few gains for Trier's position.<sup>62</sup>

The factor that in the end proved to be the undoing of Sickingen's chances of victory was the union of Trier with the Count Palatine and Hessen. The Count Palatine had, since 1518, grown increasingly wary of Sickingen and, since September of that year, had entered into a loose association with the archbishop of Trier. Moreover, Hessen and Trier signed a treaty in 1521, assuring one another that they would assist each other in case of attack. The former, the association of Trier and the Count Palatine, was done in the interest of keeping the peace, whereas the latter was done against the "increasingly threatening armaments of Sickingen."<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the alliance between Hessen and Trier proved to be immediately useful; Hessen promised to send 200 cavalymen and 1,000 infantry to the aid of Trier on August 30, just one day after the declaration of the feud.<sup>64</sup>

What is also noteworthy is the lack of interest that Sickingen's own peers had in his plight. Balthasar Schlör had indicated as much in a letter to Sickingen, warning him against a feud

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<sup>58</sup> "Franz von Sickingen: Wortführer des Adels, Vorkämpfer der Reformation und Freund Huttens," 330.

<sup>59</sup> Scholzen, *Franz von Sickingen*, 212. "Der Brief endete mit der Zusicherung Richards, dass er den Mainzer Erzbischof in einer vegleichbaren Situation ebenfalls bereitwillig unsterstützen würde."

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. "vnß in vnseren Nötten nit uerlassen."

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 213-214.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 230. "gegen die immer bedrohlicher werdenden Rüstungen Sickingens..."

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 233.

with Trier.<sup>65</sup> Notable by his absence is Götz von Berlichingen, a notorious feuder, who was imprisoned in Heilbronn at this time. Indeed, when the Bishop of Würzburg issued a call for 240 knights, no small portion of the knights dwelling in that area, 200 of the 240, were ready to proceed against Sickingen in support of Trier.<sup>66</sup> While Sickingen's actions may have inflamed the nobility in Franconia, who met in Schweinfurt in late November, the purpose of their meeting was not to discuss support for Sickingen. Rather they met to discuss and justify the use the feud as a means for self-defense.<sup>67</sup> That is not to say that Sickingen had none of his peers take his side for his undertaking; Hans Rosenhoffer, a messenger for Trier, noted that, among others, two counts of Fürstenburg, the count of Ewerstein, the count of Löwenstein, Schweikard von Sickingen, Franz's son, and Ulrich von Hutten had all thrown their lot in with the wayward knight.<sup>68</sup>

It is hardly surprising that the Franconian nobility displayed caution throughout Sickingen's rhetorical attempts to stir them to action. On January 29, 1523, the nobles of Franconia gathered in Schweinfurt to discuss, among other things, the offensive of the Rhinish princes against Sickingen.<sup>69</sup> The knights of Franconia formed an alliance; a self-defense pact that stipulated that should any member of the alliance be attacked, the rest would support the beleaguered member.<sup>70</sup> Critically, all members of this alliance were to suspend their feudal obligations in favor of providing assistance and solidarity to their peers who were in need when unlawfully attacked.<sup>71</sup> This union contrasts starkly with the stipulations found in Sickingen's Knightly Brotherhood in Landau the year before. In the case of disputes under Sickingen's union, members who owed oaths were exempt from the stipulations of the union in order to fulfill their oaths.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, the Franconian League of Schweinfurt excluded those guilty of any crime, which specifically precluded Sickingen's ability to influence the knightly union or even gain access to it after being placed under the imperial ban.<sup>73</sup> Ironically, Sickingen's claims that the princes of the Empire would come to Franconia and destroy their power bases turned out to be true; the Franconian War (*Fränkischer Krieg*), in which the Swabian League invaded Franconia and destroyed nearly 500 castles and seized a great deal of land, was caused in no small part by the League of Schweinfurt.<sup>74</sup> While significant, this Swabian retaliation has very little to do with Sickingen's feud, save for the fact that his name and rhetoric held enough sway to cause some 400 Franconian knights to meet. Simply put, they were not interested at all in Sickingen's plight. With no significant support from the nobility, it becomes increasingly difficult to see Franz von Sickingen as some sort of knightly revolutionary leader.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 208-209.

<sup>66</sup> W. R. Hitchcock, *The Background of the Knights' Revolt. 1522-1523*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958), 33.

<sup>67</sup> Zmora, *State and Nobility*, 138-139.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>70</sup> Scholzen, *Franz von Sickingen*, 139. "da die hilff not ist, ermandt werden, alsz bald zuziegen und also jrs vermögens treulich helffen."

<sup>71</sup> Zmora, *State and Nobility*, 139.

<sup>72</sup> Scholzen, *Franz von Sickingen*, 201-202.

<sup>73</sup> Hitchcock, *The Background of the Knights' Revolt*, 33-34.

<sup>74</sup> Zmora, *State and Nobility*, 139.

The princes—Hessen and the Count Palatine aside—provided relatively little help to Richard von Grieffenklaus. In the end, the mandate of the *Reichregiment* did prove to have enough of an effect on the logistical situation of Sickingen's camp to force his withdrawal, and as the feud drew on and it became increasingly likely that Sickingen would fail. Increasingly, the princes jumped to Trier's aid, such as with the Duke of Cleve and the archbishop of Köln. Yet it must be said that Sickingen's army, while formidable, did not constitute an army of his peers. His conflict, fought on his own behalf, did not inspire the "flagging" nobility to rise and fight against a symbol of princely power. The feud was understood by his peers as just that: a feud, a personal matter in which most had no special obligation to take part and certainly very little to gain should Sickingen have succeeded.

### **Conclusion**

To paint Sickingen as a reformer or a rebel requires that Sickingen's motivations for his feud with Trier go beyond merely recouping losses and implies that Sickingen sought to redefine and reassert the status of the knighthood in Germany. However, Sickingen was neither a reformer nor a rebel, and certainly after his death, the knighthood as polity in Europe continued to exist. His feud with Trier was nothing more than that, a private conflict, an attempt on Sickingen's end to recoup losses incurred previously, which backfired spectacularly. Lacking significant support from his peers, his feud did not achieve widespread appeal among the nobility. His own socio-economic standing was also not indicative of decline, and while he stood to gain from a successful feud, the overarching trend of his financial position throughout his life was anything but precarious. Quite the contrary, while hurt by his unsuccessful campaign against France and the failure of Charles V to repay a substantial loan, Sickingen retained enough wherewithal to mount a major offensive against a powerful prince. While Sickingen began his feud having incurred significant financial losses, he did so as a powerful noble, certainly not one in decline. Sickingen was hardly reacting to a rapid change in governance but rather a trend of increasing territorialization among the princes that had been an ongoing affair for the better part of a century. In sum, then, Sickingen's "revolt" is better classified not as a revolt, but as a feud.