DEATH OF AN EMPEROR

On the Friday preceding Palm Sunday, an annual memorial mass is still read today for Francis Stephen of Lorraine in the room where the Emperor died and which his widow Maria Theresa had converted into a chapel. Stop and listen, not to prayers, but to the “voices” of the eyewitnesses and of those who were responsible for the protocol that had to be followed on the death of an emperor: instructions for the lying in state in Innsbruck, embalming the body, shipping it down the Inn and Danube to Vienna, burial there. You will also hear excerpts from the correspondence of the Empress, which show how the widow managed her personal feelings in the interest of the Empire. Emotions become manifest in a legacy that continues to assert its presentness to this day.
Hand-written report by Maria Theresa on her husband's death and burial, undated:

"Emperor Franciscus the First, born on Saturday, 8 December 1708, at half past 2 in the morning, died suddenly of a stroke in Innsbruck on Sunday, 18 August 1765, at half past 9 in the evening.

On the 19th he was laid out on his bed, where Mass had already been said [...], shipped ineptitude from Hall [...], on the 26th, 27th, 26th, 25th, 26th and 27th, and at 10 o'clock in the evening of the 28th brought secretly to the Vienna Hofburg. On the 29th, 30th and 1st he was again laid out in the double coffin and at 9 o'clock in the evening of Sunday 31 August was conveyed in public view to the Imperial Crypt. The three-day exequies were held by the Augustinians on the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th.

I arrived inagno with the current Emperor and two daughters at 8 o'clock in the evening of 5th September."

Diary of Prince Johann Josef Khevenhüller-Metsch, 2 September 1765:

"On the 2nd, our Sunday preacher Pater Fritz held the first part of the funeral sermon, which was not the best standard because of the brief time available."

Maria Theresa in a letter to her daughter Maria Josepha after the death of Francis Stephen, undated:

"Alas my dear daughter, I cannot console you; too great is our unhappiness. You have lost an unforgettable father and I a husband, a friend, the sole object of my love. For 42 years our hearts, our feelings known only one and the same goal, we were brought up together. All my setbacks in the last 25 years could be borne because I had him as my support."

Diary of Prince Johann Josef Khevenhüller-Metsch, 31 August 1765:

"Vienna, 31 August 1765. Last Wednesday was the sad evening chosen by God on which the local populace, still possessed of a profound grief at the sorrowful news of the [...] sudden death of the Emperor, was gripped by more extraordinarily poignant feelings by the sad arrival of the lifeless Imperial body on the Danube. The silent reception of the most serene body of this most charming and most affable monarch took place [...] outside the city in the Rossau [...]."

The Imperial body was carried from the ship in the closed Imperial coffin [...], placed on the funeral bier drawn by two black-draped mules and covered with a thick black and gold cloth. The chamberlains fetched "from the ship the two closed vessels draped in black containing the heart and the entrails and placed them in a six-horse [...] court carriage."

The court carriage “with the heart and intestines” and “the bier with the Imperial body” arrived “at the Hofburg at half past 10."

The "supreme body" was then “carried into the Knight's Room and there, together with the goblet with the heart and the urn with the intestines, was placed on the four-steps high catafalque under a black velvet baldachin, with six black cushions” embroidered [...] in gold “to the left and the right for the two Imperial crowned and sceptre and orb as well as the other Hofburg crowns and insignia with sword, stick, hat and white gloves.”

Diary of Prince Johann Josef Khevenhüller-Metsch, 18 July 1765:

"Meanwhile I had taken charge of the keys and other items, like the erit, souvenirs, small sacred objects etc., which the Emperor had had on his person and then [...] presented the former to the King of the Romans, whereas the latter I had delivered to Maria Theresa. Maria Theresa's lady in waiting was given "the commission [...] to cut a few hairs from the head of the deceased, which the Empress, following the fashion of the time, wished to have set en bracelet to wear on her wrist in memoriam."

Maria Theresa in a letter to Countess Sophie Amalie Enzenberg, 29 December 1765:

"Dear Enzenberg While the company eats in the hall, I remain alone in my room, which is lined with grey cloth and lit only by two candles and is therefore somewhat gloomy. But that is as I like it. Anything that throws only a shadow of joy makes me sad and upsets me; only the most sombre things are right for me. [...] I had the good Ronchi come to my closet, where the whole family of my beloved dead are assembled and which they call the Closet of the Dead. He should tell you about my portrait of the Emperor, which is now my great source of joy, as large as life and in his Innspruck uniform, very good, somewhat too young, but good. He was so moved, the good man, that he could not really look for all his tears. [...] I am in health, [...] but am becoming sadder from day to day and as if benumbed. My inner state calls for your support. Rest assured that I remain your good friend, Maria Theresa"
I have to give. “You will doubtless hear that I am well, and I almost believe it myself since everyone says so. I spend years, months, weeks, days in the same simplicity, the same bitterness as on the first day. I often find consolation in the thought that the dead do not return and that I shall soon follow them, but I tremble at the terrible account I have to give.”

Letter from Maria Theresa to Countess Sophie Amalie Enzenberg, 20 February 1775:

“Today the exalted body of the late Emperor of most blessed memory will be brought here by boat. The exalted body will be displayed for three days under the baldachin on the four-steps high catafalque in the black-draped Knights’ Hall [...] and on the evening of 31 August will be laid, with all due pomp, in the crypt of the Hofburg. Work is proceeding day and night on the splendid Castro Doloris in the [...] Augustinian [...] Hofkirche in order to have it ready by next Sunday, the first of September, [...]”

Diary of Prince Johann Josef Khevenhüller-Metsch, 20 August 1765:

“After a few hours I recovered somewhat, thank the Lord, and although I was still very weak, I gathered all my strength to do him a final service and, together with the chamberlains and servants, placed his body, as is the custom, on the stage for public display. This sad act was performed just before 10 p.m.; and as the deceased, following the opening, had a very swollen head and indeed looked quite disfigured and unrecognisable, the young Emperor [...] permitted the face to be covered.”

Entry in Maria Theresa’s prayer book, undated:

“In matters of religion, the church and justice, bringing up the children and duties of rank I have not incurred much guilt. I charge myself, however, with all unknowing, unfamiliar and forgotten sins and all my shortcomings; I confess my blame before God for all the enmity shown in my life out of pride, envy, anger, sloth and weakness against my fellow human beings in speech and lack of charity.”

Diary of Prince Johann Josef Khevenhüller-Metsch, 28 August 1765:

“On the morning of the 20th I had to attend ex officio the court function of the opening of the body. As it lasted a very long time, however, I felt quite sick, partly from the heat and smell and partly and above all from an oppression of spirit, so that I could not remain there completely.”

“Whenever, in the further discharge of my duties, I went to the young Emperor to give [...] my report, I was again overcome by such a feeling of sickness that, had he not bid me be seated, I should have fallen to the ground at his feet.”

Diary of Prince Johann Josef Khevenhüller-Metsch, 21 August 1765:

“One of my colleagues was of the unanimous opinion that, in view of the heat, had to be placed in the coffin and could only remain on view on the stage in the closed coffin.”

Diary of Prince Johann Josef Khevenhüller-Metsch, 20 August 1765:

“[Rf. the transformation into a sacred space of the room in which the Emperor died], 8 December 1765:

“On the most painful passing away of our most gracious Emperor and Co-regent, our most blissful and great Monarch had a wonderful chapel built, blessed with great spiritual treasures by his Papal Holiness and – in the place where her sovereign, most serene husband united with the eternal Glory the great magnificence of a soul displaying the greatest virtues of a regent, as revealed to the eyes of the whole world – a splendid altar from the area of the princely residence, in which her sovereign, most serene husband received the Eternal Crown, on which altar the unbloody sacrifice was made to the Lord of Lords on [...] the name day of the beloved Monarch and is to be made twice a day until the end of the world.”
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2015
Sound installation 6-channel audio,
Length: approx. 18:00,
Voice: Markus Meyer
Courtesy of the artist