

The Paralysed Prince
Albert II of Habsburg between corporal impairment and exercise of power
Georg Modestin
(Université de Fribourg)

Albert II of Habsburg (1298-1358), duke of Austria and Styria (from 1330), later also of Carinthia (from 1335), was a younger son of King Albert I of Germany († 1308). As such, he was destined for an ecclesiastical career. In 1313, he became the bishop-elect of Passau, but was unable to secure his see; therefore, he finally renounced his office. After the passing away of their elder brother, King Frederick the Fair of Germany in 1330 – the latter being sidelined from power by his Wittelsbach rival Louis of Bavaria –, Frederick's last surviving brothers Albert and Otto took over the Habsburg possessions in Austria and Styria. In 1335, they succeeded in enlarging the Habsburg dominions to include the duchy of Carinthia, thereby countering the claims of Henry of Luxemburg, King of Bohemia, with Otto focusing on the rule of Carinthia. Otto's untimely passing away in 1339 was followed by the deaths of his sons Frederick and Leopold in 1344, so that the burden of governing the Habsburg lands fell upon Albert.

Albert gained a reputation as a pragmatic politician who valued diplomatic settlements over open conflicts and war. As such, he was highly esteemed by his fellow rulers and regularly involved in negotiating truces and political arrangements, Vienna becoming in the mid-15th century a diplomatic hub thanks to Albert. This activity gained him the – possibly posthumous – nickname “the Wise.” His second nickname, “the Lame,” points to Albert's physical impairment that manifested itself in the early 1330s. The contemporaries attributed it to a failed attempt to poison the duke, whereas recent research suggests rather polyarthritis. As a result, the duke lost control of his arms and legs, so that he had to be fed and carried in a sedan chair, being unable to ride on horseback. In this condition, he did not correspond to the image of an ideal ruler, at least at first sight. Yet despite his impairments, he maintained a dense political agenda. Besides, he fathered, starting in 1339 after fifteen years of childless marriage, six surviving children, two daughters and four sons who assured the continuation of the Habsburg dynasty.

In this paper, I will examine how this seemingly incongruous phenomenon of a paralysed and yet very active and successful ruler was seen through the lens of contemporary historiography (Zwetl chronicles, John of Viktring, Henry of Diessenhofen).