1. Introduction

In general summit conferences are regarded as very expensive and are often criticized as rather useless events, a pure extravagance of the statesmen. In the passed years, however, summits have even been increasingly institutionalized like in the German-French relations, the European Council or the G8-summits and we have seen a growing number of summits with a slight turn from bilateral to multilateral meetings connected with the idea that the personal gathering of the highest representatives could bring a result by direct negotiations. Last time such hopes were pronounced and also deceived at the climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009.

Some summits are profoundly anchored in our memory as lieux de mémoire, such as the meetings of the allies during and after World War II at different conferences or the French president Mitterrand and the German chancellor Kohl hand in hand on the cemetery in Verdun in 1984. This already gives us an indication that summits can be—as in the given examples— one way of political and symbolic communication of transferring images and messages, even if the meetings are not always crowned with political success as in Potsdam in 1945.

Researchers of the history of summit meetings have asserted an end or at least a strong reduction of summit conferences after the 15th century, only revived by the very personal way of politics by Napoleon. However, there has never been such a break: Summits have been an instrument of politics and communication for sovereign rulers in all centuries, including the early modern era. We have found until now at least 56 summit meetings between 1496 and 1784 only for the western and central European sphere. None the less, it is true that some rulers have used this instrument more intensively than others and it seems that there was indeed a strong reduction of sovereign meetings, though not from the end of the 15th but one century later due to the confessional polarization on the continent. With this article, we attempt not to close yet to reduce the gap in the research of historical summits at least for the first half of the 16th century by focusing on the meetings of Charles V and Francis I, who used summit meetings frequently as a form of personal politics.

2. Summits in the first half of the 16th Century

Despite the assumptions of many historians, the first half of the 16th century was a time of frequent meetings. Three young sovereigns in England, France and Spain came to power more or less the same time and age but with very different characters. The later Charles V or Carlos Primero was born in 1500 in Ghent. He became King of Spain in 1516 and was elected Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1519. After resigning from his dignities and retiring to the monastery of Yuste, he died there in 1558.
3.1. Saints and holy days

In the Middle Ages important events were scheduled on holy days. In addition to the 52 Sundays of a year these were basically the official feasts of the (catholic) church. The choice of the date created a sacral sphere and blessed the planned act, like a coronation or an oath taking. If we take a closer look on the dates of the summits in the early 16th century, we can see that they follow this medieval tradition. Especially the beginning and the ending of a summit constitute precarious moments which could be framed by the choice of two holy days and find divine protection through particular rituals. The meeting of Field of the Cloth of Gold started June, 7th 1520, on the Feast of Corpus Christi and ended on the day of St. John the Baptist. The meeting between Charles and Francis, where the contract ending the captivity of Francis in Spain was concluded, started on Ash Wednesday and lasted until Cathedra Petri. The choice of this last day can be understood symbolically for Francis’ restitutio in integrum in his rights as king. The official date for the signing of the treaty between Francis and Charles is the 14th of January 1526, a day dedicated to the less known saint Felix of Nola11, who was believed to bring back lost things and was regarded as revenger of perjury. The contract settled the restitution of Burgundy to Charles, who had great doubts—which later revealed to be well justified—about the sincerity of Francis’ oath to the treaty. The ten years truce agreement was signed in Nice on June, 18th, 1538. It is certainly not by chance that this day was the day of the patrons of Milan, Gervasius and Protasius12, while the duchy of Milan was one of the enduring points of contention between Charles and Francis. By the blessing of the local saints, they hoped to find their help and a lasting solution to the conflict.

3.2. Madrid, Nice and Aigues-Mortes

The first meeting between Charles and Francis took place in Madrid. The place was due to the extraordinary circumstances that Francis was made prisoner in the battle of Pavia and transported to Spain, where he was welcomed everywhere—like the entry in Barcelona in 1525—like the emperor himself13. Madrid as place for his captivity was probably chosen for being the only town with a sufficient infrastructure close to Toledo, the Spanish capital at the time12.

In general, a neutral space was chosen for the summits or the space was turned ritually into a neutral one13. Additionally, the space and the gestures had to reflect the relationship between the protagonists and to demonstrate their rank in the world’s order. The summit with the Pope in Nice in 1538 shows a typical choice of place. Originally, Charles and Francis had planned a personal meeting, but as the peace negotiations took longer and only a prolongation of the truce could be achieved, the offer of mediation by the Pope could no longer be rejected. The previous war had been caused by the intrusion of French troops into the duchy of Savoy, which was regarded by Charles as part of the holy Roman empire. Nice was the last unoccupied town of the duchy and just in the middle between the territories of Francis and Charles. As the Duke of Savoy rejected the wish of the Pope to reside directly in Nice the later took residence in a Franciscan monastery nearby. With the Pope mediating, there was no need for Charles and Francis to meet each other. For the negotiations, the Pope and emperor met in a small cabin in the vineyards exactly half the way between the Franciscan monastery and Villafranca, where Charles stayed, so both had the same distance to transgress. The equality of rank of those two sovereigns was expressed by the symmetry...
of distances and gestures, as we will see also in the following examples. It is the fundamental rule for the mise en scène in summit meetings of sovereign rulers.

Finally, peace could not be achieved in the negotiations of Nice, only a ten years armistice. After having accompanied the Pope to Genoa, Charles returned on his ships to Aigues-Mortes for a meeting with Francis. Interestingly, the topic of these negotiations was again the idea of achieving an enduring and general peace, now without the intervention of the Pope and after this, of a conjoint crusade against the Muslims. That is, by the way, the reason for choosing Aigues-Mortes as location for the gathering: The town and its port were built on the order of the French King Louis IX in the middle of the 13th century as preparation for his planned crusade. By choosing this place, Francis and Charles could emphasize and publicly communicate their intentions and place themselves in a line of historical references.

3.3. Establishing friendship & crossing borders

To enable a meeting in French territory, it was up to Francis to come first on board of the imperial ship to invite Charles to Aigues-Mortes. Only the next day, Charles went ashore. The crossing of a real or imaginary border as well as the first contact was a sensible point. So Francis greeted Charles when arriving on his ship by saying that he was now his captive, only for Charles to reply assuring him of his friendship. One could assume that here we may find an allusion to the real captivity of Francis in 1525, but also on other occasions the descriptions of sovereign meetings use almost exactly the same words like in the Camp du Drap d’Or where both kings offered themselves mutually as prisoner on their first visit in camp of the other. When entering a foreign territory, a ruler exposed himself to some dangers and to the complete confidence of the good and honest intentions of his host as it would have been very easy to captivate or even murder the guest. There were some well preserved memories of some bad precedents in the late Middle Ages, like the murder the guest. There were some well preserved memories of some bad precedents in the late Middle Ages, like the murder of John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy, in 1419.

As we can see in the examples given above, the establishment of good and peaceful relations was a precondition to every meeting accomplished in Aigues-Mortes by the foregoing conclusion of the 10 years truce. The borders had to be marked and transgressed by ceremonials and rituals. In Aigues-Mortes, it is noted that the ships of the emperor anchored exactly half a mile away from the shore and he was received and accompanied to the city by the French king himself. For the departure, Francis escorted Charles with several ships some way out on the sea. Obviously, also the seashore already in the 16th century was part of the conception of territorial sovereign rights. The same procedure of receiving and accompanying can also be observed with all entries in towns. The ritual of the receiving a foreign host was a copy of those entries due to the sovereign by the citizens on the outset of his reign, also called entrada royale in France or entrada joyeuse or blijde inkomst (engl. Joyous Entry) in Brabant and Flanders. The effective length of the covered distance and the composition of the welcome delegation reflected the rank of the visitor and the hole procedure of the entry marked the difference between a sovereign guest and an arriving vassal.

A special ritual had to be designed for the crossing of the borders of a realm as we have seen in the example of the meeting in Aigues-Mortes. The crossing of the border could be regarded as intrusion and thereby as potential aggression and had to be turned from a gesture of menace to an act of friendship. This needed a ritual to pass the liminal phase. At the same time, the ritual could be used to mark borders and confirm their status in times without border controls where the modern idea of a nation-state territory fixed by borders did not exist. We find a lot of examples in history of summit conferences taking place on the exact border often marked by a river where the sovereigns met on an island or a ship or some kind of construction anchored in the middle of the border river. Charles and Francis did not use this way of meeting which expresses some kind of distance. They preferred for the demonstration of their friendship mutual visits allowing them to «play» the roles of guest and host.

3.4. Castle and forest, civilisation and wilderness

Finally, let us take a look on castles as places of setting for sovereign meetings. In fact, there has been no single meeting exclusively in a castle by Francis and Charles, but especially on his journey through France, Charles resided in some of the newly built or reconstructed castles of Francis. The years of their reign mark the epochal turn from medieval fortresses to the art of building modern palaces in Renaissance-style. The new type of château was developed in Italy and France. With the change of warfare, castles lost their protective functions and were turned into open space with numerous windows on the front-side demonstrating the wealth of its possessor.

Especially the visit to the completely rebuilt château of Fontainebleau, which was Francis’ favourite and the best example of Francis’ patronage of arts and architecture, excels by the long stay of the two monarchs there on Charles’ journey through France. They even celebrated Christmas together in Fontainebleau. Additionally, the palace is not on the regular way to Paris. Francis explicitly wanted to show the emperor the palace and the beauty of the place. Fontainebleau was an object of prestige for the French king and one of the first Renaissance palaces north of the Alps where the defensive architecture of a king’s castle was completely withdrawn to make way for exclusively representative functions.

Contrary to the open public of the town entries, a visit to a palace was restricted to the sphere of the court, the representative public of the pre-modern age. The participating groups were identified in their rank and status for the contemporaries in all reports by naming only the noblest member(s). According to the motto of the time «The World is a stage», it was also the place of a staging or mise en scène. Châteaux like the one in Fontainebleau were often hunting domains of the king. The palace was a secure island
of civilisation and culture in the middle of the dark, wild and dangerous forest surrounding it. The sculptured gardens —nature tamed by man—, formed a maximal contrast to the wildness of the woods. This dichotomy was used for a piece of theatre to entertain the kings who were just about to arrive in Fontainebleau: On the entry to the Forest of Fontainebleau some riders lead by the Dauphin, the oldest son of the French king, joined the procession. They said they had heard that the forest was not safe and they wanted to offer their protection. One mile at the first gate before the palace another horde of riders appeared and attacked the travellers. The simulated fight brought the groups just in front of the palace where at a second gate the Duke of Orléans showed up with a third group of knights, dressed the same way as assailants. After seven or eight riders had fallen off their horses, the theatrical fight was ended by shots of artillery —the new weapon of the time. Francis seemed a little bit disappointed having expected more action with more men on the ground before the end. All groups went to a prepared fighting ring where the Duke of Orléans announced that the ladies couldn’t pass the night in the château before some of their accompanying cavaliers wouldn’t have fought in the ring. This sort of «show» was very popular in the Renaissance. Just at the time when the change of warfare ended the time of the knights, they resurrected in such plays. These stagings also marked the liminal passage of leaving the dangerous woods and arriving at the safe place of the castle. It was certainly not by coincidence that the duke had placed his attacking men on the two gates, thresholds to the entry of the château.

4. Reasons & functions

Contemporary writers give us only one publicly announced reason as motivation for these summit meetings: the hope to achieve a general peace by direct negotiations and a good understanding between the sovereigns.

In his captivity, Francis was really looking forward to come to Spain hoping to meet Charles there with the intention to reach an end of the war and his release as soon as possible. These meetings in Spain were relatively short, one account tells us that they didn’t last for more than half an hour. This brevity distinguishes them from the other meetings in this period. The first meeting between the Spanish and the French king only took place because Francis was said to be critically ill, so that Charles hurried to him. The French king recovered slowly after having met Charles who by forehand had ignored the demand of the French king for a meeting.

The reason can be found in the fact that these were controversial gatherings while, in general, a good understanding needed to be arranged in advance. Previously to the Nice negotiations with the pope, Charles had proposed a direct meeting to Francis. His proposition was rejected by the French arguing that a meeting of two sovereigns was not customary until the end of the negotiations. Summits could demonstrate the results of negotiations, but this public demonstration was not less binding than the contract itself.

The officially declaimed reason, the search for peace, determined the perceived image and the valuation of the summits by the contemporaries. The public opinion was and is as often negative as the hope for peace is deceived. Besides the official reason, summits can have very important functions for the sovereigns. We can see this again in Charles’ offer to meet the French king in 1538. While his closest counsellors, Granvelle and Los Cobos, were negotiating with the French side, he tried to contact Francis via secret contacts to achieve his consent to a meeting. Charles’ personal style of government is reflected by the fact that he left the post of the head of administration vacant after 1530. Summits played an important role for him because they made it possible to talk directly to the other sovereign, by-passing the influence of his counsellors and the court. Especially in the difficult relations between Charles, Francis and Henry, the approach of two of them always meant the isolation of the third.

Initiative and invitation posed a problem for the preparation of summits. To pronounce an invitation preconditioned a mutual agreement and an amicable arrangement by forehand, as since the middle ages taking the first step was seen as sign of weakness and lower rank. On the other hand not accepting a publicly announced invitation meant to break the friendship. This also explains why Charles negotiated secretly about the private meeting in Nice. Vice versa the public announcement of inviting someone bound the host to the rules of hospitality. From there on he was held responsible for the health and happiness of his guest.

Another motivation for a summit meeting was the demonstration of rank and power. This goes especially for the famous Camp du Drap d’Or: After having lost the imperial elections, Francis met the King of England and both showed by the splendour of the summit that, although without the title, he could display an imperial pomp, and, by this, demonstrated equal-ranking. The political effect justified the immense expenses. One should not think about the gorgeous display as pre-modern or irrational behaviour, in fact, it was part of well calculated politics in a public sphere based on presence and prestige.

5. Friendship & memory

When Charles set the first step on French soil in 1538, he was invited to a banquet in the evening. Here Francis took a diamond ring from his finger and gave it as symbol for their friendship to the emperor with the words that he would be his friend and brother from now on and friend of his friends as well as enemy of his enemies. All this he promised by his faith as gentleman.

Francis used an old, early medieval formula, the promise of amicitia originally expressing mutual, legally binding obligations. Even if family ties were judged more important, friendship created ties close to those of kinship.
with the same obligations. The old oath of friendship had almost disappeared at the time of Charles and Francis because written contracts offered far more possibilities of refinement. In the early modern era, the term friendship shifted slowly to the modern meaning of sympathy and common interests. It was only under international law that the older concept survived. In fact, Francis gave a special weight to his initiative by referring to this old formula, strongly needed as his sincerity was more than doubtful after his perjury subsequently to the aforementioned treaty of Madrid. Friendship and good understanding were — as seen before — the precondition for peace treaties and personal meetings. Summit conferences provided the possibility to meet and talk tête-à-tête and to tighten the agreed ties of personal and political friendship. Two sides of a medal we distinguish today but which were one at the time. With the upcoming concept of the raison d’état the older concept of personalized friendship grew increasingly contradictory.

Nevertheless, the concept and promise of friendship was not for nothing. In his commentaries for his son, Philip, in 1552, Charles emphasized in his dry enumeration style that in Aigues-Mortes he had met the French king for the second time but that it had been the first time he entered the kingdom of France as a friend. For Charles, even in 1552, the result of Aigues-Mortes was a long lasting friendship and a deepened confidence between him and Francis. This gives us already a hint to the answer of the question if summit conferences were only an ephemeral event or not. For Charles V the meeting of Aigues-Mortes and its results were important enough to be mentioned in his commentaries for his heir and son. 14 years and another war (between 1542 and 1544) with Francis later, the emperor still gave a very positive view on the summit meeting of Aigues-Mortes.

Personal memories are one thing but what about medial representations to keep a lasting memory and official view of the enactments of friendship? Obviously, as the friendship sometimes ended as quickly as the meeting there was no need and of course no political will to remember the staging. In the meeting of the Field of Cloth of Gold, the kings decided to build a chapel and a palace in the place to remember the summit and to facilitate further meetings. The buildings were never erected. Sometimes, though rarely, we find paintings recalling the event. For the meetings of Charles V and Francis, there are — as far as I know — two pictorial representations: one showing the entry of the emperor accompanied by the French princes in Valenciennes in 1540 and the other, in the Villa Farnese in Caprola, the entry in Paris. Some of these «souvenirs» were ordered by participants or the municipality to remember their place and role in the event and thereby their importance and rank. Monuments and coins are also said to be very rare, but further research is needed here. The after-life of summit conferences is still a rather unknown dimension to history. A good point to start such research could be the accounts of the entries. The ephemeral art of decorating streets and monuments in the towns as well as poetry is handed down. The Renaissance started to collect and describe the art of these short-lived events in extraordinary festival and ceremonial books. In addition, we shouldn’t forget the huge number of reports over these summits in printed works of memory literature and event descriptions. With the relatively new technique of letterpress printing, these works could obtain an impressive reach.

Summits meetings as a thing to remember? In conclusion, we can say summit conferences were and still are an important political instrument, though rarely entering the collective memory. Summits are only remembered if they are connected to the conclusion of an agreement or a treaty, an important event like a coronation or a marriage or if they succeed to transport symbolically a profound and important message. The staging enables the creation of powerful images but until the last years also historians tended to neglect these symbolic parts of politics as well as the importance granted to them by their contemporaries.

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1 English translation: «A thing worth remembering to see two such great princes […] friends of honour, and so mighty», Taken from Prudencio de Sandoval, Historia de la vida y de los hechos del emperador Carlos V. Maximo, Fortíssim, Rey Católico de España, y de las Indias, Islas, y Tierra Firme del Mar Oceano, etc., Antwerp, 1681, p. 544.


6. The forms were quite fixed since the 11th century. Cf. Voss, op. cit., p. 170.


12. Madrid only became capital of the Spanish empire in 1561 under the Philip II, the son of Charles.


31. Lönig, op. cit., p. 147.


34. Ibid., pp. 433-435.

35. Kolb, op. cit., p. 77.


37. Rodríguez Villa, op. cit., p. 871.

38. So Elsemore, the sister of Charles, was promised to Francis already in the treaty of Madrid and later married to him. As well as after the death of the empress in 1539 the French diplomacy was trying in vain to remarry Charles. Marriage as an peace-keeping instrument had the advantage to include also the next generation.


40. Reinhard Schneider, op. cit., p. 381.


42. Anglo, op. cit., p. 127.


47. Cf. The title and FN 1.