

The **Free Imperial knights** (German: *Reichsritter* Latin: *Eques imperii*) were free nobles of the **Holy Roman Empire**, whose direct overlord was the **Emperor**. They were the remnants of the medieval free nobility (*edelfrei*) and the **ministeriales**. What distinguished them from other knights, who were vassals of a higher lord, was the fact that they had been granted **Imperial immediacy**, and as such were the equals in most respects to the other individuals or entities, such as the secular and ecclesiastical territorial rulers of the Empire (margraves, dukes, princes, counts, archbishops, bishops, abbots, etc.) and the **Free Imperial cities**, that also enjoyed Imperial immediacy. However, unlike all of those, the Imperial knights did not possess the status of **Estates** (*Stände*) of the Empire, and therefore were not represented, individually or collectively, in the **Imperial Diet**.^[1]

To protect their rights and avoid vassalage to more powerful nobles, they organized themselves into three unions (Partheien) in the late 15th century and into a single body in 1577, and fought to win recognition. This status, beholden only to the Emperor himself rather than through a more powerful noble, meant the Imperial Knights were "immediate subjects" (their fealty was unmediated by another lord). As such, the Imperial Knights exercised a limited form of sovereignty within their territories.

*****This means that Imperial Knights were free agents, not owing fealty to Lords – they were free men who could campaign as they saw fit.**

Their immediate status was recognized at the **Peace of Westphalia**. They never gained access to the **Imperial Diet**, the parliament of lords, and were not considered Hochadel, the high nobility, belonging to the **Lower Nobility**.

In the **Peace of Westphalia**, the privileges of the Imperial Knights were confirmed. The knights paid their own tax (voluntary) to the Emperor, possessed limited **sovereignty** (rights of legislation, taxation, civil jurisdiction, police, coin, tariff, hunt; certain forms of justice), and the *ius reformandi* (the right to establish an official Christian denomination in their territories). The knightly families had the right of house legislation, subject to the Emperor's

approval, and so could control such things as the marriage of members and set the terms of the inheritance of family property

*****Unlike many European knights, the Imperial Knights were their own men**

The Imperial Knights were called very often to war by the Kaiser and therefore won significant influence in the Military and the Administration of the Empire and also over the more powerful nobles. Every Canton had its own *Ritterhauptmann* or Captain and kept detailed records of noble families and properties. The Imperial Knights were exempt from imperial taxes and were not required to quarter troops.