united (1230) and was known as Castile.) As the reconquista pushed southward across the Iberian peninsula, Christian kings called for settlers to occupy the new frontiers. Enriched by plunder, fledgling villages soon burgeoned into major commercial centers. Like the cities of Italy, Spanish towns dominated the countryside. Their leaders—called caballeros villanos, or “city horsemen,” because they were rich enough to fight on horseback—monopolized municipal offices. In 1188, when King Alfonso IX (r.1188–1230) summoned townspeople to the cortes for the first time on record, the city caballeros served as their representatives, agreeing to Alfonso’s plea for military and financial support and for help in consolidating his rule. Once convened at court, these wealthy townspeople joined bishops and noblemen in formally counseling the king and assenting to royal decisions. Beginning with Alfonso X (r.1252–1284), Castilian monarchs regularly called on the cortes to participate in major political and military decisions and to assent to new taxes to finance them.

Local Solutions in the Empire

In 1356 the so-called Golden Bull freed imperial rule from the papacy but at the same time made it dependent on the German princes. The princes had always had a role in ratifying the king and emperor; now seven of them were given the role and title of “electors.” When a new emperor was to be chosen, each prince knew in which order his vote would be called, and a majority of votes was needed for election.

After the promulgation of the Golden Bull, the royal and imperial level of administration was less important than the local. Yet every local ruler had to deal with the same two classes on the rise: the townspeople (as in Castile and elsewhere) and a group particularly important in Germany, the ministerials. The ministerials were legally serfs whose services—collecting taxes, administering justice, and fighting wars—were so honorable as to garner them both high status and wealth. By 1300 they had become “nobles” in every way but one: marriage. In the 1270s at Salzburg, for example, the archbishop required his ministerials to swear that they would marry within his lordship or at least get his permission to marry a woman from elsewhere. Apart from this indignity (which itself was not always imposed), the ministerials, like other nobles,