

Ottonian Queenship

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This is an important and timely book. Engaging intelligently with a range of sources and historiographical traditions, Simon MacLean tells the story of tenth-century queenship through the prism of the Ottonian royal family. The Ottonians ruled East Francia (roughly speaking, Germany) from 919 to 1024, and from 961 northern Italy too. They also provided two queens of West Francia (France) in these years. His aim is not to be exhaustive, but to analyse the nature and qualities of queenship at key moments in the tenth century. The result is not serial biography, but a set of loosely related case studies in the problems and possibilities of female power and influence at the highest political levels.

MacLean opens with an anecdote from Richer of Reims (writing in the early 990s), who records that one of the objections to the candidacy of Charles of Lorraine for king of West Francia was that Charles had married a low-born woman. As MacLean notes, such a criticism would have been inconceivable a century earlier: the Carolingian rulers of the eighth and ninth centuries had consistently married their social inferiors – *mésalliance* was not only tolerated, but actively sought out. Evidently something fundamental had changed in the intervening years. MacLean sets out to chart this. He suggests that this shift is best framed in terms of a (largely unconscious) move away from Carolingian models of queenship, which had focused on the royal household, circumscribing the queen's role quite strictly. In the more flexible inter-dynastic world of the post-Carolingian age, new opportunities opened up for royal women to step outside these traditional roles. Queenly power and agency were thus not so much a product of institutionalization, as has often been supposed, as the reverse.

The next six chapters sketch how and why this should be so. The first (chapter two) examines the 920s and 930s, demonstrating how a network of alliances forged by the West Saxon royal family served to knit together western European politics. The key players were three sisters, the half-siblings of King Æthelstan (r. 924–39): Eadgifu, the wife of Charles the Simple (r. 898–922); Eadhild, the first wife of Hugh the Great (d. 956), the leading magnate of West Francia; and Edith, the first wife of Otto I of East Francia (r. 936–72). This familial grouping linked together the East and West Frankish courts; it also served to bind these to the nascent English realm. In West Francia, the importance of these contacts lay in shoring up support for the embattled Carolingian dynasty, which had faced considerable challenges in recent years, not least from the Robertian family of Hugh the Great. In East Francia, on the other hand, they helped establish the fledgling

Ottonian (or Liudolfing) dynasty, which had come to power some ten years earlier. MacLean does some impressive footwork here, unpicking the implications of these unions and demonstrating how they provided opportunities for royal women to assert power and influence.

As we move into the 940s and 950s, this first generation of prominent queens begins to die off and is replaced by a new set of marriage alliances, this time focused on the Ottonian court. These are the subject of the third and fourth chapters. The key figures here are Otto I's sisters, Gerberga and Hadwig. Gerberga, the elder, was first married Duke Gisibert, a leading figure in the strategic border region of Lotharingia, which had recently been retaken from the West Frankish ruler Raoul (r. 923–36). Upon Gisibert's death in 939, she went on to marry Louis IV, Raoul's own successor (r. 936–54). This has often been seen in terms of Otto I's strategic interests, but MacLean makes a strong case for seeing Gerberga's own hand at work. Certainly it is not hard to see the benefits of such a union from her perspective: it offered not only queenly status, but also an opportunity to consolidate her growing political clout. From Louis' standpoint, Gerberga brought not only connections to the Ottonian court, but also (more immediately) contacts with leading aristocrats within a contested border region. But Gerberga was not the only link between East and West. Shortly before her marriage to Louis, Hugh the Great had married Gerberga's younger sister Hadwig; Louis was thus also keeping up with the Joneses. Once again, the Carolingians, Robertians and Liudolfings were related through a set of sisters. It is within this context that East Frankish involvement in West Frankish politics is to be understood. This is visible at a number of junctures in the 940s and 950s, perhaps most famously at the Synod of Ingelheim (948), at which a longstanding conflict over the archbishopric of Reims was settled on East Frankish territory. Though generally interpreted in terms of Ottonian hegemony, MacLean sensibly urges caution: rather than being a Liudolfing fifth columnist, Gerberga was a powerful figure in her own right, capable of calling strategically on her East Frankish connections to achieve her (and her husband's) own ends. What emerges is a much more rounded picture of the queen's activities, building on MacLean's earlier contributions on the subject.⁽¹⁾

The focus thereafter shifts to East Francia and Italy, where further developments can be discerned in the 960s (the subject of the fifth and sixth chapters). The focus here is on Adelheid, the second wife of Otto I, who was to set the parameters for much future queenly action. Adelheid was the daughter Rudolf II of Burgundy (r. 912–37) and had initially been married to Lothar (r. 946–50), the son, co-ruler and successor of Hugh I of Italy (r. 926–46). When the former died childless in late 950, Adelheid went on to marry Otto I (himself a widower), who had invaded Italy in late summer 951. It is likely that this match was made with an eye to securing Otto's position within the Italian realm; nevertheless, it was only later (so MacLean) that a detailed justification of his intervention was constructed along these lines. For the time being, Otto was happy to assert the right of conquest, as had many before him (including Hugh I). When the invasion faltered, however, Otto retreated north, making peace with Berengar, his local competitor for the crown. An important shift in justificatory strategies can then be detected in the 960s, when Otto returned to the peninsula in force. This time, success was swift: he drove Berengar from Pavia in late 961 and achieved imperial coronation in Rome at Candlemas 962. It was in this context that Berengar started to be presented as a usurper, and Otto's own claims constructed on the basis of Adelheid's queenly status and lineage. Berengar's name is studiously avoided in Otto's charters (even those confirming grants by Berengar), underlining the illegitimacy of his regime; and great emphasis is placed on the position of Adelheid as queen and consort (and, after 962, empress). Of particular importance here is the adoption of the style *consors regni*, 'sharer in the realm'. This had hitherto been a primarily 'Italian' title, its use indicating elevated status. Otto is thus presented as rightful heir to Lothar through his wife, the sometime queen, and Berengar cast as an upstart. There are similarities with William the Conqueror's later claims to England, as MacLean is well aware ⁽²⁾, and he argues that elements of this perspective are reflected in Liudprand's writings, which position Rudolf and Lothar as 'legitimate' and 'rightful' (if not always ideal) rulers, whilst doing the reverse for Berengar and his family. Another effect of these developments is that Adelheid's activity as petitioner of diplomas becomes more prominent and notable; queenship was taking on more formal contours.

It was in this context that a more coherent image of queenly office started to emerge, one which Adelheid's daughter-in-law Theophanu – the subject of the seventh chapter – was to inherit. Here MacLean notes that

one of our most detailed contemporary expositions of queenship, the 'older' *Life of Mathilda*, was written in the early years of Theophanu's reign (c. 973), apparently with an eye to recent political developments. He agrees with Gerd Althoff that disputes over the queen's dower lands (*dos*), and in particular the convent of Nordhausen – which had been granted to Theophanu in her marriage charter – occasioned the *Life's* composition.⁽³⁾ MacLean takes Althoff's arguments a step further, however, suggesting that the *Life's* depiction of inter-generational conflict – it famously describes how Otto I and his mother fell out over the control of her dower lands – was written with these disputes in mind (there is evidence of cooling relations between Otto II and Adelheid at this point). Here was a template not only for how to treat Nordhausen, but also for how to treat a queen mother. Certainly it is striking that Theophanu went on to construct her position as queen in remarkably similar manners to Adelheid: at key moments she is accorded the *consors* title, which is now found frequently north of the Alps, whilst she also takes on a prominent role as petitioner of privileges. The clearest sign of her power and influence, however, came upon the unexpected death of her husband in late 983. Despite opposition, she was able to secure the realm for her infant son, Otto III, and went on to lead a *de facto* regency in his name. Following her death in 991, this role was taken over by the dowager queen Adelheid.

Between Adelheid's retirement from court in 994 and Henry II's accession in 1002, there was a lull in the succession of Ottonian queens: the young Otto III was in no hurry to marry; and when he died in early 1002, his intended bride was still *en route* to Italy from Constantinople. Whereas Theophanu had stepped into a well-established role, the situation was now up for grabs. The fact that Otto III had died without direct male heir further complicated matters. Although Duke Henry IV of Bavaria (the future Henry II) was able to make good his claim as a side branch of the ruling Liudolfing dynasty, this was by no means a foregone conclusion. One of the difficulties was that Henry had been raised the son of a duke, without expectation of succession; his wife Cunigunde was thus not a foreign princess, but a member of the local East Frankish aristocracy. Both Henry and Cunigunde thus had to construct their royal status more actively than their predecessors. Early signs of this can be seen in the decision to have Cunigunde crowned queen at Paderborn on the feast day of St Lawrence (10 August) 1002 (Lawrence being one of the patron saints of the Ottonian dynasty). Though previous royal consorts had been crowned empress, this is the first recorded queenly coronation, probably undertaken with a new liturgical *Ordo*. Other signs that Cunigunde's queenship was being consciously constructed can be seen in an early flurry of references to her as *consors regni*. An active interest in queenship is also reflected in Odilo of Cluny's *Epitaph of Adelheid* and the 'later' *Life of Mathilda*, both written in these years. However, if this formalization of Cunigunde's role served to secure her position, it was to prove something of a double-edged sword (so MacLean). He argues that in later years her role as consort comes more to the fore, bearing witness to something of a re-domestication of queenly office. If Cunigunde's reign was in a sense the high point of Ottonian queenship, it was thus also its swan song.

As MacLean observes in the concluding (eighth) chapter, this domestic discourse, which cast queens as wives and mothers, becomes more prominent as we move into the Salian period, serving to delimit ever more firmly the sphere of queenly activity. Symptomatic of these changes is the fate of Agnes of Poitou, the wife of Henry III (r. 1039–56) and mother of Henry IV (r. 1056–1106). When, upon the sudden death of her husband, she came to lead to a regency regime on behalf of her son, Agnes faced considerable opposition. Eventually she fell prey to rumours that she was having an illicit affair with Bishop Henry of Augsburg, her leading adviser, and was shut out of the regency at the famed 'Coup of Kaiserswerth' (1062). Such suspicion of female agency is reminiscent of the Carolingian period, when Judith, the second wife of Louis the Pious, faced similar accusations. It would seem that the golden age of royal women had come to a close. It was, therefore, not as a well-defined office, but rather as a series of flexible and variable practices that tenth-century queenship was so influential; and as it came to be defined, so it started to wane. In this respect, the situation in East Francia differs notably from that in England, where institutionalization actively favoured royal consorts, as Pauline Stafford argues.⁽⁴⁾

There is much to praise in this volume. MacLean has an impressively wide purview, covering not only the classically 'German' regions of East Francia, but also Italy and West Francia (and, where appropriate, England). The result is a much more nuanced and textured view of the post-Carolingian world than is to be

found in most literature on the subject. He does a good job of making the most of disparate sources, particularly in the earlier chapters, showing a masterful command of the complex web of familial alliance which underpinned politics. He also shows an admirable willingness to engage with different source types, ranging from the narrative accounts of Flodoard, Widukind and Liudprand, to the liturgical *ordines* of the so-called Romano-German Pontifical.

Inevitably, there are points on which opinions will divide. MacLean is keen to emphasize the provisional and improvisational nature of tenth-century queenship, but the queens for whom our evidence is richest – Adelheid, Theophanu and Cunigunde – remain those for whom trends towards institutionalization are clearest (as MacLean admits), and one wonders if an ‘adjusted Stafford model’ might not apply after all. Along similar lines, more might have been made of the significance of marriage for queenly status. While MacLean is doubtless right that developments in marriage practices are too discontinuous to explain the prominence of queens in the tenth century alone (pp. 6–7), it is worth noting that the Ottonians took ecclesiastical regulations on marriage unusually seriously: the only Liudolfing to dissolve a union was Henry I, and this was done as a ducal heir (not consecrated monarch); and they also avoided marrying within prohibited degrees of relation.⁽⁵⁾ Indeed, it may be that the marital imagery invoked by Henry II and Cunigunde from 1017 on was intended less to domesticate and circumscribe the queen’s role, than to insulate her from challenge in a world in which childless unions were frequently a subject of suspicion (it should be noted that Henry’s French counterpart, Robert the Pious, dismissed his first two wives – and tried to dismiss his third). Finally, though MacLean’s sensitive readings of narrative sources impress throughout, his treatment of the charter evidence is not always as assured. He nods to recent readings of charters as performative texts (p. 7), but his own analysis sometimes feels rather old fashioned: rarely are individual charters subject to detailed examination, and more often than not a transaction (or the presence of a *consors regni/imperii* formula) is simply mentioned in passing.⁽⁶⁾ Yet if charters are to be understood as performatives in Geoffrey Koziol’s sense (and I would agree with MacLean that they are), then their appearance is an essential part of their message: they are not printed texts to be read off the browning pages of an MGH edition, but physical artefacts whose effect was as much (if not more) visual than textual. Along similar lines, charter draftsmanship receives surprisingly little consideration, save to note that certain titles or formulae are employed ‘by more than one scribe’ (p. 193, cf. pp. 118–19), and thus individual charters often feel rather disembodied; are we seeing breaks with convention; and if so, who introduced them and in which context? Just as we would not discuss a narrative text without considering its authorship, so too charters must be treated as products of an individual and a moment.⁽⁷⁾

Still, it is a poor historian who blames his colleagues for pursuing their research interests rather than his own; and none of these caveats do anything to take away from the overall achievement of this volume. MacLean has offered us a thoughtful and original work, a bold and erudite contribution in a field in which conservatism often predominates. If his treatment is not exhaustive in every respect, it is to be all the more welcomed for this: this is not a book which shuts down discussion, but one which opens it up. I look forward to revisiting and re-reading *Ottonian Queenship* for many years to come.

Notes

1. Reform, queenship and the end of the world in tenth-century France: Adso’s ‘Letter on the Origin and Time of the Antichrist’ reconsidered’, *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire*, 86 (2008), 645–75; ‘Monastic reform and royal ideology in the late tenth century: Ælfthryth and Edgar in continental perspective’, in *England and the Continent in the Tenth Century: Studies in Honour of Wilhelm Levison (1876–1947)*, ed. D. Rollason, C. Leyser and H. Williams (Turnhout, 2010), pp. 255–74.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. G. Garnett, *Conquered England: Kingship, Succession, and Tenure, 1066–1166* (Oxford, 2007). Cf. the review by N. Vincent in *History*, 95 (2010), 106–8, questioning some of Garnett’s premises.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. G. Althoff, ‘*Causa scribendi* und Darstellungsabsicht. Die Lebensbeschreibungen der Königin

- Mathilde und andere Beispiele' (1988), repr. in and cited from his *Inszenierte Herrschaft. Geschichtsschreibung und politisches Handeln im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt, 2003), pp. 52–77.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. P. Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (Oxford, 1997).[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. K. Ubl, 'Der kinderlose König. Ein Testfall für die Ausdifferenzierung des Politischen im 11. Jahrhundert', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 292 (2011), 323–63, at 344. On marriage practices, see now S. MacDougall, *Royal Bastards: The Birth of Illegitimacy, 800–1230* (Oxford, 2016).[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. The treatment of Theophanu's marriage charter (pp. 156–7) is the exception; but even here most observations are drawn at second hand from Cutler and North.[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. The author was apparently also not acquainted with M. Parisse, 'Les faux diplômes ottoniens pour la Lorraine: essai de critique horizontale', in *Vielfalt und Aktualität des Mittelalters. Festschrift für Wolfgang Petke zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. S. Arend and D. Berger (Bielefeld, 2006), pp. 575–89 (a rather obscure publication, it must be said), which may have influenced his handling of charters cited (and treated as authentic) at p. 80 n. 33, p. 91 n. 102, p. 108 n. 63, p. 169 n. 109 and p. 170 n. 113.
[Back to \(7\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to respond.

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