



Ottonian Queenship

Simon MacLean

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Review by: Penelope Nash

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Simon MacLean's important book derives much inspiration from his prior scholarship on Carolingian rulership. In his new study he has selected six queens to analyse: five from the tenth century, and one from the early eleventh century. Five of the author's designated Queens were close family of the second Ottonian king and emperor, Otto. They were Otto I's mother Mathilda, his first wife Edith, his sister Gerberga, his second wife Adelheid, and his daughter-in-law Theophanu. Cunigunde, wife of Emperor Henry II (d. 1024), is the last queen examined. MacLean's approach is twofold: to use a combination of "group-biographical analysis" and individual history without being comprehensively biographical, but with extensive use of contemporary sources (19).

MacLean proposes that the tenth century has been less well understood than the earlier Carolingian century and the later eleventh century (the latter of interest because of the conflict between the papacy and the empire, often called the Investiture Conflict), and consequently not studied very much until fairly recently. He writes that Ottonian queenship differed from the earlier Carolingian queenship in that the Ottonian queens wielded more power: "but its causes, its contours, and the conditions in which it flourished" are not self-evident and he aims to examine this (5). Later, his aim is to examine each of the queens for their influence on "contemporary descriptions of queenship and vice versa" (181). The author is eager to examine queenship as an office: that is, as an institution. He presents a detailed and valuable analysis of the contemporary sources. I am not sure, however, that he discovers all the causes, contours, and conditions.

The first of my reservations is MacLean's use of the term "post-Carolingian." I am uneasy when it carries with it geographical and cultural implications. Although the author mostly uses the phrase "post-Carolingian" as an indicator of a time period, he may himself be falling into the mistake that he himself criticises of placing the Ottonians in a comparative era, not post-Roman nor the beginning of a classical Middle Ages, but in some theoretical "post-Carolingian" cultural world that applies uniformly across kingdoms (4).

Not enough distinction is made between the East Frankish and the West Frankish kingdoms. When the East Frankish Henry I (d. 936) and the West Frankish Charles the Simple met on a ship in the middle of the Rhine in 921, the treaty that they signed acknowledged the independence of both kingdoms. It designated Henry as *rex Francorum orientalium* and Charles as *rex Francorum occidentalium*. The distinctive titles indicate a consciousness of the differences between the two kingdoms. Consequently the term "post Carolingian world"

is a phrase that does not take into sufficient account the independent development of the East Frankish kingdom. Ties of blood, and the connections made by marriages, undoubtedly were strong bonds among the noble families of the European Continent. Nevertheless, the Ottonians considered themselves, and were indeed, more powerful than their West Frankish cousins. Although the West Frankish King Lothar seriously threatened Otto II and Theophanu near Aachen in 978, West Francia was in a sorry state for most of the tenth century. MacLean acknowledges that “the dynastic dynamics that shaped Ottonian queenship were different from those that defined the world of the archbishop of Rheims” (16). The author casts light upon many of the West Frankish concerns and motives through his extensive examination of the work of the West Frankish annalist Flodoard of Rheims. Those of the East Franks at times remain more shadowy.

The inclusion of Gerberga as one of the Ottonian queens could be queried. Otto I’s sister was an Ottonian by birth. However, the marriage to her second husband, the West Frankish king Louis IV (d. 954), made her a West Frankish, not an East Frankish, queen. Although the author writes in a number of places that the queens were powerful (for example, on pages 2, 3, and 48), we are given only selected information about how they exercised governance. How were Queens powerful? Theophanu was with Otto II at Aachen when the West Frankish King Lothar attacked and won the battle in 978. Theophanu was in charge of the treasure, and was nearby at Rossano when Otto II lost the battle at Cotrone in 982. Theophanu and Adelheid controlled the great Slav revolts of the early 980s, surely a significant part of their rulership. Cunigunde’s efforts on behalf of the empire were compelling. The queens/empresses indeed had influence, provided counsel to their imperial husbands, ruled with them, and ruled in their absences. I would have liked more discussion and analysis about the whole way of governing in the Ottonian period.

The author notes correctly that many of the accounts of Adelheid’s importance in the 950s were written about the time of her imperial coronation in the 960s. That is, her wondrous status was backwardly projected (106–109). There is no doubt that the imperial crowning of Otto I and Adelheid added considerably to Adelheid’s status, and that chroniclers responded to that event when they wrote in the 960s. Berengar (d. 966), powerful margrave of Ivrea and for a time king of Italy, imprisoned her to consolidate his claim to that kingship, and Otto sought her and married her. Those events, including her escape from imprisonment, were recorded in the early 950s, confirming the relevance of the events to contemporaries at that time. Certainly later sources, written close to the time of the imperial coronation, confirmed and enhanced Adelheid’s reputation. MacLean’s exploration of the sources in their immediate context is a worthwhile point to raise and debate. Nevertheless,

analysis has lost out somewhat to context and the autor swings the pendulum a little too far in underestimating Adelheid's consequence in the earlier years. Some parts are too long, and others too short. Fourteen pages are allocated to establish a date for the first use of *Ordo III* and its relationship to Cunigunde's queenship. Forty-five pages (two chapters of the nine) in a total of 217 pages of text are devoted to Gerberga and her entourage. Some omissions or items lightly touched on are the following: the management of the handing down of the dynasty, the importance of the Italian kingdom to the Ottonians, and the significance of the absence of attacks on Adelheid's and Theophanu's chastity by contemporary chroniclers. Emma, Adelheid's daughter from her first marriage, was twice accused of infidelity with Bishop Adalbero of Laon (164). Those differing outcomes emphasise the differing power structures of the West Frankish and East Frankish kingdoms.

Four matters of detail and consistency concern me. More women could have been included in the charts. The names used in the text and those used in the charts are inconsistent. The book would have benefited from a chronological table. The "holy virgins" (65) are probably nuns not monks as MacLean indeed seems to later confirm (71n128). To make a real difference to queenship studies means including the women, and including them and the men accurately and consistently.

Some statements in the final chapter seem to have been written in a rush. I have not been persuaded by two assertions. First, "The fact that queens like Edith, Eadgifu, Gerberga, Emma II, Adelheid, and Theophanu were outsiders was essential to their political identities: they stood at the interstices of, and helped articulate, a peculiarly and self-consciously post-Carolingian politics in which the former Frankish kingdoms remained separate but connected" (216). Second, although the author notes on the first page of Chapter 2 that Karl Leyser "remains the starting point" (23n1), it is remiss to include the following sentence—"Whether or not we subscribe to the view that changing attitudes to family structure and inheritance disadvantaged women at all levels of the social hierarchy" (215)—with Little context and without referring to Leyser (see the excellent section on women in his *Rule and Conflict*).

The author has dealt with most of the contemporary sources admirably, supporting many conclusions, discoveries, or tentative suggestions with astute juxtaposition and analysis of events and relationships. He is most successful when dealing with the minutiae of the records and linking apparently unrelated events by plausible causes and pressures. His final paragraph sums up the journey well. By the later eleventh-century, women still had influence, but were described more often by their roles as wives and mothers. Political frontiers and categories were becoming more rigid. Queenship was not after

all “institutionalised”; the careers of those later women show “early medieval queenship as a moving target” (217)—as indeed it was.

This very significant study will be of great value to scholars and students, who should not be deterred by my reservations discussed above.

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