



*Imperial Ladies of the Ottonian
Dynasty: Women and Rule in
Tenth-Century Germany*

Phyllis G. Jestice

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Imperial Ladies of the Ottonian Dynasty: Women and Rule in Tenth-Century Germany.
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ne of the questions Phyllis Jestice confronts in her new book on the Ottonian rulers Adelaide and Theophanu is whether or not the tenth century was a 'golden age' for women. Certainly, we are at the moment living through a golden age in the study of tenth-century women, and particularly of Ottonian queenship. *Imperial Ladies of the Ottonian Dynasty* is the third major English-language monograph on Ottonian queens to be released in the last two years. This interest is very welcome: as Jestice notes, these are not works of 'women's history,' but studies of political history that focus on some of the most important European figures of their times. Given how many mysteries remain about theories and practices of tenth-century government, this is self-evidently worthwhile.

Jestic concentrates on Empresses Adelaide and Theophanu. After the unexpected death of Otto II, these empresses were able to beat out the young emperor Otto III's cousin Henry of Bavaria and successfully act as regents during the 980s and 990s, despite Henry's seemingly overwhelming initial advantages in competing for the position. The book examines their acquisition and exercise of power, but also looks outwards to ask what the preconditions were that allowed Adelaide and Theophanu to wield authority in this way. The author argues that the Ottonians "consciously built up both the power and the authority of their wives [and other female relatives]" (179). This does not always come through in the text, however, and this reader at least found the book's fundamental argument to be that aristocratic women in Ottonian Germany were powerful, high-status figures at the very forefront of contemporary society. This is a respectable conclusion and one which few historians would dispute, but it is not particularly novel. Noticeably in this regard, the author's grasp of German-language historiography of the latter part of the twentieth century is very good, and she engages forcefully and critically with it, particularly with the work of Gerd Althoff. Althoff's work, though, vitally important as it is for the study of Ottonian Germany, is by now several decades old in a field that has seen fast-moving change. More recent work, such as that of Régine le Jan and Simon MacLean, is largely absent from the bibliography and even more from the chapter endnotes. Given this, the work's potential as a contribution to the cutting-edge of tenth-century politics is substantially blunted.

There are also problems with the book's argumentation. Any attempt to demonstrate that the Ottonians increased their female relatives' power over time is undermined by the fact that there is little consideration in the text of

when the sources were produced relative to the time they describe. To take one example, Jestice refers to sources that show Matilda (c. 909-968), wife of Henry I (r. 919-936), exercising influence over her husband (196). All of these are late tenth- or early eleventh-century works. The reader, however, is not informed of this in the text, which means we are dealing with either a narrow focus on the *mentalités* of the later Ottonian period, or with a projection of later material backwards. Either way, any development over time in queenship slips quickly from view.

In general, the treatment of the sources could have been more considered. Jestice is careful to avoid any claims that the tenth-century was a 'golden age' for women (4). Nonetheless, every source is interpreted in such a way as to give the maximum possible agency to female protagonists and the maximum possible status to women within Ottonian society, even when this creates some forced readings of the texts. For example, in the discussion of Thietmar of Merseburg in Chapter Two, Thietmar's polemics against female promiscuity are described as "literary convention" (36) but his references to wise and pious women—such as the recluse Bia (35)—are taken as cutting straight to the heart of his views of women. This is not to say that Thietmar was in fact a terrible misogynist, but the different aspects of his works would have been better acknowledged than flattened out. Some evidence is simply dismissed: we are told Odilo of Cluny's *Epitaphium Adelheide* is useless as a historical source not only for Adelaide's life, but also for wider views about women, partly because Odilo fit Adelaide's life into a straight-jacketed typology of Christ-like endurance, but mostly it seems because, as Jestice states repeatedly, it is "hard to find a living, breathing empress" in there (221; the same sentiment is repeated in similar terms on 8 and 139). Other authors considered in this book, though, such as Hrotswitha of Gandersheim or Adhemar of Chabannes, similarly constructed their pictures of women for distinct literary, theological, and/or political ends, but are used with rather less scrupulous source criticism. The reader leaves with the impression that the major difference between the *Epitaphium* and these other sources is that the image of a woman therein is not the one Jestice wants to find. Certainly, the author establishes successfully and at length that tenth-century authors believed that women, both individually and in general, had positive qualities and a valued role in society. However, in establishing this, she loses a great degree of nuance. Rather than dealing with the shades of grey and even the inconsistencies within and between the sources' views of women, Jestice often overstates the positive and understates the negative, turning the tenth century into precisely the golden age in which the author claims not to believe.

The book also contains moderate-to-minor errors of fact and proofreading. For instance, the Count Arnulf for whom Queen Gerberga of

the West Frankish kingdom—here anachronistically called France throughout—gave property in 966 was not a member of her entourage, but a powerful count of Flanders whose county was being claimed by royal power at the time (88). The reader will be surprised to find that the word *Reich* is given throughout in italics but with a small r, and at one point an archbishop of Mainz shows up in the same paragraph as both William and Wilhelm (153). These errors are a shame, as the volume is gorgeously produced, and sumptuously illustrated with many well-rendered colour images of Ottonian artwork. The work as a physical book is a delight to behold.

Nevertheless, despite its positive aspects, the book's usefulness is diminished by a range of issues, which extend from trivial details such as the spelling errors, up to more significant issues such as the limited engagement with recent work on the subject and the uneven source criticism. Jestic's conclusions are mostly solid, and historians of tenth-century politics and of queenship will find little to actively disagree with here, but they will also find little new. In a market with several other new and exciting offerings, scholars of the Ottonian world will have little reason to prioritise *Imperial Ladies of the Ottonian Dynasty*.

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