



QUEENSHIP AND POWER

IMPERIAL LADIES OF THE OTTONIAN DYNASTY

Women and Rule in Tenth-Century Germany

Phyllis G. Jestice



Queenship and Power

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Imperial Ladies of the Ottonian Dynasty

Women and Rule in Tenth-Century Germany

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PREFACE

This book is a study, above all, of the Ottonian empresses Adelheid and Theophanu. These women played a surprisingly visible role in the tenth-century *reich* ruled by the Saxon Ottonian dynasty (which, besides much of the territory of the modern Federal Republic of Germany also included northern Italy and parts of what is now eastern France). I first encountered these ladies, as most medievalists do, because they ruled as successive regents for the young king Otto III (983–1002), who came to the throne at the age of three. I began this project years ago intending to write a history of these regencies, fascinated at the thought of not one but two successive women successfully holding power in a warlike Germanic state of the central Middle Ages. However, extant evidence simply isn't sufficient to uncover most of what Adelheid and Theophanu did during their time as regents. Thus, a conventional history of Theophanu's and Adelheid's regencies (I use the modern term "regent" for convenience) based on a traditional reading of the existing sources would be very short.

The difficulties I encountered in uncovering Theophanu's and Adelheid's activities during their regencies made me aware of what perhaps is a more important question than what Theophanu and Adelheid did in the name of Otto III during his minority. Why were they in such a strong position that they were able to become successive regents in the first place, especially in light of the opposition they faced from Henry the Quarrelsome, an adult male relative who was so eager to take the reins of government and who actually for a time controlled the child king? For that matter, how were the Ottonian royal women more generally, whom the Quedlinburg annalist designates as "imperial ladies," able to play such

a visible role in their society? In other words, the central question became how they were able to act, and apparently act with a high degree of success, in this context at all. I reframed my question in those terms, focusing on the preconditions to regency instead of the regency period itself. The result was that I began to identify the factors that created and maintained an environment that empowered these women. This book is my attempt to answer this question, considering tenth-century attitudes toward women in general and females who shared in rule in particular in an effort to understand the dynamics of female rulership in tenth-century Germany.

This book has been many years in the making, and like all scholarly works has incurred many debts. I owe thanks to my last teaching appointment, the University of Southern Mississippi, whose grants enabled my research travel, and the collegiality I found there—above all that of my dear friends Lee Follett and Deanne Nuwer—which made my years in the Deep South both pleasant and productive, despite serving as department chair. I also wish to thank my new academic home, the College of Charleston, for bringing me to a city full of music and beauty, for sponsoring the writers' retreats at which most of this book was written, and for providing congenial colleagues—most notably Jason Coy, my writing partner.

This book has been shaped by many circles of collegiality, and it is above all that environment that I wish to acknowledge and thank here. Whether in the medievalist circle of Charleston or at the Southeastern Medieval Association's annual meetings or among colleagues at the International Congresses for Medieval Studies held each year in Kalamazoo, I have always found encouragement and help. Three current and former colleagues—Jason Coy, Jen Welsh, and Lee Follett—read and critiqued the manuscript of this book; many others gave feedback at conferences, over wine and cookies in my living room, and so on. It is to the ideal of academic collegiality that I dedicate this volume.

Charleston, SC
31 January 2018

Phyllis G. Jestice

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ABBREVIATIONS

Adalbert	Adalbert of Magdeburg, continuation of <i>Reginonis abbatis Prumiensis Chronicon cum continuatione Treverensi</i> . Edited by Friedrich Kurze. MGH SS rer. Germ. in us. schol. 50 (1890)
<i>Annales Quedlinburgenses</i>	<i>Annales Quedlinburgenses</i> . Edited by Martina Giese. MGH SS rer. Germ. in us. schol. 72 (2004)
Briefe	<i>Briefe der deutschen Kaiserzeit</i>
Conc.	<i>Concilia</i>
DD	<i>Diplomata regum et imperatorum Germaniae</i> .
DHI	<i>Heinrici I. diploma</i>
DOI	<i>Ottonis I. diploma</i>
DOII	<i>Ottonis II. diploma</i>
DOIII	<i>Ottonis III. diploma</i>
<i>FMSt</i>	<i>Frühmittelalterliche Studien</i>
FS	Festschrift
Hrotsvit	<i>Gesta Ottonis</i> , in <i>Opera</i> . Edited by Paul von Winterfeld. MGH SS rer. Germ. in us. schol. 34 (1902)
MGH	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i>
SS	<i>Scriptores</i> (in folio)
SS rer. Germ. in us. schol.	<i>Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum</i>

- Thietmar Thietmar of Merseburg. *Chronicon*. Edited by Robert Holtzmann. MGH SS rer. Germ. nova series 9 (1935)
- Vita Mathildis antiquior* *Vita Mathildis reginae antiquior*. Edited by Bernd Schütte. MGH SS rer. Germ. in us. schol. 66 (1994)
- Vita Mathildis posterior* *Vita Mathildis reginae posterior*. Edited by Bernd Schütte. MGH SS rer. Germ. in us. schol. 66 (1994)
- Widukind Widukind of Corvey. *Rerum gestarum Saxoniarum libri tres*. Edited by Georg Waitz, et al. 5th ed. MGH SS rer. Germ. in us. schol. 60 (1935)

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Road to Regency

On Christmas Day of the year 983 Otto III was crowned king of the East Franks at Aachen.¹ He was three years old. The child's father, Emperor Otto II, while occupied with affairs in Italy had arranged for his son's election and coronation as co-ruler, just as *his* father Otto I had secured the Ottonian dynasty's claim to the throne by making the same arrangements for Otto II several decades before. To judge from Otto II's experiences as junior king, it was not necessary for the king-in-waiting to do much of anything during his father's lifetime; indeed, to judge by a report in the monastic chronicle *Casus sancti Galli*, as he grew to adulthood Otto II had chafed at his honored but powerless position.² At most, a junior king, especially one as young as Otto III in 983, served as a sort of figurehead, an Ottonian presence in Germany. Such a royal presence may have been regarded as necessary since Otto II was making an extended stay in Italy, attempting to recover from his devastating defeat at the hands of the Saracens in southern Italy in the Battle of Cotrone the previous year. Such a figurehead status was nothing new; as early as Charlemagne, the Carolingians had installed underage subkings to serve the same function.³ Certainly nobody expected a three-year-old to hold the reins of government.

But, unbeknownst to anyone in Aachen on that Christmas Day, they were anointing not a junior shadow king who could serve as his father's figurehead in Germany but rather the sole ruler of the extensive German *reich*, which in this period included northern Italy as well as much of the

territory that constitutes modern Germany. Otto II, king of Germany and emperor of that greater German state, had died on December 7 in Rome, aged only twenty-eight.

The existence of a consecrated king who was a minor led to a crisis that threatened to tear the German empire to pieces. Otto III was manifestly unable to rule—he could not lead troops, sit in judgment, give largesse, or indeed undertake any of the tasks expected of a tenth-century ruler. Yet, since Archbishops Willigis of Mainz and John of Ravenna had anointed the child as king in a ceremony of profound religious significance, and he had received the fealty of Germany's nobles, Otto could not be set aside. Obviously there would have to be an extended regency, with more than a decade to wait before Otto III could rule for himself.⁴ The situation was exacerbated by Otto II's recent defeat in southern Italy and the Slavic rebellion of 982, suggesting the need for a strong, adult ruler who could lead armies. Nonetheless, after a period of confusion in which Otto III's cousin Henry "the Quarrelsome" of Bavaria attempted to seize power for himself, the dust cleared to reveal Otto III's mother Theophanu firmly in charge as protector of the young king and helmswoman of the *reich*. When Theophanu died in 991, Otto III's grandmother, the empress Adelheid, assumed the same role, caring for Otto III and the state until her grandson attained his majority at age fourteen.

Historians have tended to treat the period of Otto III's minority lightly, then and now glossing over the distinct contribution of the regents. Part of the problem is that it can be difficult to discern how any ruler, male or female, actually ruled most of the time in this period.⁵ But the difficulties of reconstructing the activities of rulers are exacerbated in a period of regency by the nature of our sources. By the conventions of the late tenth and eleventh centuries, Otto III ruled from the moment of his coronation, presented in documents both official and unofficial as a legal adult even though biologically he was still a child. As a result, charters were issued in Otto's name, it was Otto who engaged in warfare, and so on. The very idea of a "minority" was an expression of private law, implying incapacity, and was a contradiction in terms for a ruler—there was no legal concept of a minor king.⁶ In other words, we *know* that adults must have acted for him in these affairs, but it is difficult to tease out the role of *de facto* regents in a society that did not even have a term for a regent or regency.⁷

In the tenth century both western and central Europe saw a high point in rulers' dependence on female members of their families as notions of proper rulership expanded but bureaucratic structures remained modest.

But this trend was emphasized to a particularly high degree in the German *reich*—the territories, whether German-, Slavic-, or Italian-speaking under Ottonian lordship. The tenth century was a pivotal era in European history, as institutions of government evolved that, for example, made it less necessary for a king to lead his troops in person. Certainly the Ottonians had some officials at their command and a chancery that almost certainly produced much written work besides the significant number of extant charters we have; still, the teams of clerks who created the English Domesday Book in the late eleventh century could scarcely be imagined yet.⁸ In Germany, where a tradition of strong regional duchies always provided a pronounced centrifugal pull against rulers, kings clearly needed lieutenants who could be trusted through thick and thin. As is well known, the rulers of the Ottonian dynasty (919–1024) increasingly looked to bishops to provide a counterweight to the ambitions of the secular nobility, finally relying so heavily on the clergy that some historians dubbed the phenomenon a full-scale “imperial church system” (*Reichskirchensystem*) and regarded the rulers’ empowerment of bishops (and to a lesser degree abbots) as a conscious tool of government.⁹

Less considered by historians is what a German historian might call a *Weibersystem*—a reliance on wives and other family members to help support the king/emperor in the work of rule. Yet, I argue in this book that in the tenth century the German rulers relied most heavily not on bishops but on their royal kinswomen, the “imperial ladies” whose loyalty was certain because their own lives were so fully intertwined with the success or failure of the dynasty. As Germany moved toward a system of primogeniture, kings often could not even trust their brothers—but they could trust their wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters. And, as I hope to show, the male rulers of the Ottonian dynasty carefully built up the status and resources of the *dominae imperiales* to the point that these women could, at need, wield extensive power and even wider-reaching authority in society at large.

The power of royal women was always contingent. First and foremost, a queen was expected to perform her biological duty and produce heirs for her husband. During exactly the period about which I am writing, in the 990s, King Robert of France repudiated his first wife, who had failed to bear a son. In 1003 he cast aside his second wife—in both cases citing the lack of a child to justify his action.¹⁰ The German royal women at the center of this study were fecund. Queen Mechtild bore three sons and two daughters to Henry I. Otto I’s first wife Edgitha had a son and a daughter

before her early death; Adelheid produced three sons and a daughter in rapid succession after his remarriage, although two of the sons soon died. Theophanu in her turn gave birth to five children in a five-year period, four of whom lived to adulthood (a daughter who was apparently the twin of Otto III died soon after birth).¹¹ The last Ottonian empress, Kunigunde, never produced a child, yet no effort was ever made to set her aside, suggesting that her political importance was so great that it trumped her reproductive role. For the others, however, pregnancy and childbirth played an important part in defining their role. One can also assume that they continued to play a role in the raising of their children, as we know Empress Gisela did with the education of the future Henry III, although contemporary writers paid little attention to this role.¹²

Some historians regard the period up to the late tenth century as a golden age for women, an epoch of potential equality, but I agree with their critics who argue that the “golden age” idea goes too far.¹³ I do not wish to suggest that tenth-century German queens and empresses were their husbands’ equals or that their relationships reached the “partnership marriage” ideal of modern times. This was a society in which men ruled, and women were expected to play a subsidiary role. But, as we will examine, contemporaries normally understood the gender difference enunciated in the extant primary sources as a difference of function rather than of capacity. In other words, people in the tenth century, at least those who wrote and whose works have survived to the present day, thought that women had the necessary intelligence and determination to take a leadership role if it were thrust upon them. Imperial women, *consortes imperii* as both narrative and diplomatic sources name them, were “sharers” in imperial rule. They were not equal partners, to be sure, but as junior partners they had a vital role to play. Perhaps sometimes they pushed too hard, leading their husbands to assert themselves in reminders as in a document detailing one of Henry II’s gifts in the year 1017 that states bluntly that men are made to rule and women to be ruled. The historian Ingrid Baumgärtner interprets this extraordinary passage as a sign that Henry was not very willing to make the gift for which Empress Kunigunde intervened and perhaps resented his wife’s advocacy for the recipient—although he made the requested grant.¹⁴ In contrast, Wipo, the biographer of Emperor Conrad II, went so far as to call his hero’s consort, Empress Gisela, his “necessary companion.”¹⁵ Certainly Gisela, like the empresses at the heart of this study, had the resources necessary for her to play a vital role in the government of the *reich*.

It was possible for Ottonian imperial women to play a role that was scarcely imaginable in earlier centuries. I do not mean to suggest that Germanic women in earlier centuries did not frequently attain and wield considerable power; examples of Merovingian queens like Brunnhild are numerous enough to show that women could be powerful. The root of their power did not change over time—it lay in the ability to exercise influence on their menfolk, most frequently their sons.¹⁶ But, I would argue, Merovingian ruling women’s power remained more contingent than that of their Ottonian counterparts, because they did not receive the means to exert independent influence, in strong contrast to the Ottonian royal women. While it remained true that no woman could really act as “ruler” apart from her husband or son,¹⁷ women wielding power did in fact exist and were able to exist without doing violence to notions of rule in Ottonian society. Therefore, the Ottonians charted a different path from their Carolingian predecessors, for whom, as Janet Nelson has noted, *femineum imperium* was a contradiction in terms.¹⁸ By the early decades of the eleventh century, the queen-empresses of Germany had more influence than they ever exercised either before or after that time.¹⁹

While this study focuses on Ottonian Germany, it is important to note that this openness to female rule also became more prominent in western and central Europe more generally in the tenth century, although not to such a high degree as in the German *reich*. Tenth-century England provides a particularly interesting example of the softening of attitudes. Pauline Stafford has examined the chronicler Goscelin’s curious report that in the troubled 970s the nobles of England offered the throne to Edgitha, sister of King Edward the Martyr, despite the fact that she was a consecrated nun. They even offered their daughters to be consecrated as nuns in exchange for the princess. As Stafford points out, the account is very unlikely to be true, but it shows that Goscelin could imagine female rule; in fact he argues in his account of the event that many countries had been ruled by women.²⁰

Pauline Stafford’s point about the ways to read Goscelin’s chronicle is a helpful reminder of the caution necessary when reading the primary sources for tenth-century Germany, but also highlights the usefulness even of ahistorical accounts. Most of our extant sources can be read from at least two vantage points. On the one hand, they tell of events and at that level need to be checked for veracity by every means available to the historian. On the other hand, however, they present to us a series of contemporary attitudes, views of women that the authors of the accounts considered at

least plausible, describing women acting in ways that were not alien to the thought world of the time. It is frequently the latter reading that gives us the greatest insight into women's lives in the tenth century, even when it is most difficult to piece together "how it really was" in the Rankian sense.

The most prosaic of the sources for this study are more than 1200 royal documents, the *diplomata* of the kings and emperors of Germany that have survived to the present day, products of the Ottonian chancery. These diplomas are overwhelmingly grants or confirmations of grants that the ruler made to recipients he wished to favor. At first sight they are very masculine documents; even during the minority of Otto III the royal diplomas were issued in his name, with only two exceptions. But on closer examination, women are woven throughout these rather dry documents. They are occasionally recipients, sometimes they are slaves being granted away along with their families, they endow religious houses, and frequently they have petitioned the ruler to make a grant.²¹ The empresses Adelheid and Theophanu figure particularly prominently in these *diplomata*.

Next to the royal diplomas, the most immediate source is a number of letter collections. The most vital for our purposes are the letters of Gerbert of Aurillac (d. 1003), employed as an agent for the Ottonian court during the throne struggle of 984 and its aftermath. Gerbert was the most famous scholar of the tenth century, who started collecting his own letters during the years he served as abbot of Bobbio in northern Italy. He was also familiar with Germany, having spent years at the Ottonian court, and with eastern France where for some years he was archbishop of Rheims before crowning his career as Pope Sylvester II. Gerbert's letters present considerable challenges, especially as only one letter was dated, and scholars have had to work out the chronology of the rest based on internal evidence. Gerbert's high flights of rhetoric also can obscure his meaning. Nonetheless, he was well acquainted with many of our principal players and well positioned to understand the politics of the age.²² Occasional use has also been made of the other letter collections of the age, most notably the letters of Rather of Verona (d. 974) and the Tegernsee letter collection (which includes the correspondence of several abbots of Tegernsee, starting in about 980).

Ottonian Germany produced several outstanding historians, both male and female, whose gendered perspectives help to give insight on our topic. The monk Widukind of Corvey wrote a "History of the Saxons" that encompasses the entire Ottonian *reich*; the work, completed in 967/968 but with additions in c. 973, was dedicated to Otto I's daughter Mechtild of Quedlinburg. Gerd Althoff has in fact argued that Widukind wrote

specifically to educate Mechtild, as the sole representative of the royal family in Germany for some years, in her duties as an Ottonian princess.²³ The rather later Bishop Thietmar of Merseburg did not start his chronicle until 1013 and relied heavily on Widukind as well as other sources. His work is nonetheless of unique importance especially since the garrulous bishop could never resist telling a good story. The pages of his extensive chronicle are full of impressions, tales that struck his fancy, and family history, in the course of which he provides a wonderful cross-section of information about women in the Ottonian world.²⁴ Other historians include Adalbert of Magdeburg, who penned a continuation of the chronicle of Regino of Prüm, the rather fanciful monk Ekkehard IV of St. Gall, whose *Casus s. Galli* is a highly entertaining read, and the Frenchmen Flodoard, Richer of Rheims, Raoul Glaber, and Adhémar of Chabannes. The Italian Liudprand of Cremona (d. c. 972), who traveled to Constantinople on an embassy for Otto I, also provided posterity with several historical works, including a sweeping indictment of the Italian rulers of northern Italy and Rome who fought the Ottonians, and whose women (if Liudprand can be believed) plumbed the depths of dissipation and malffeasance.²⁵

All of the primary sources named so far have a distinctly masculine perspective on events, so we are indeed fortunate in having works by several female authors of the Ottonian period. The one we know by name is Hrotsvit, the canoness of Gandersheim most famous for her classicizing plays. But she also composed several historic works, most notably the “Deeds of Otto I,” produced by 968. Historians have tended to be wary of Hrotsvit as historian; as Althoff has said, they have found the work “too panegyric, too little concrete, and too incorrect.”²⁶ Such an assessment seems too hasty, however. As a canoness at Gandersheim under the rule of Gerberga, Otto I’s niece, Hrotsvit would frequently have seen the royal court on their visits. Gandersheim, located in the heart of Saxony, was well situated to collect information. And, although the sole extant manuscript is incomplete, Hrotsvit provides us with much unique information about Queens Mechtild, Edgitha, and Adelheid.²⁷ Although we do not know her name, the author of the Quedlinburg annals was probably also a woman, a canoness at that greatest of Ottonian foundations. The *Annales Quedlinburgenses* is the work of a single author, started in c. 1000 and ended in 1030. The work provides especially extensive details about the two Mechtilds—the queen who founded the community and her granddaughter who served as its abbess—although there is also extensive treatment especially of Adelheid.²⁸

Women were also probably responsible for two hagiographic works that give insight on Ottonian royal women, the earlier and later *vitae* of Queen Mechtild. With hagiography we move into more problematic historical territory, since the *topoi* of holiness helped create very stylized and not very lifelike images of the saintly queen. The nuns of Nordhausen responsible for these saints' *lives* also had political agenda that led the later author, for example, to emphasize the importance of Mechtild's younger son Henry of Bavaria, the grandfather of her own contemporary ruler. Nonetheless, the *vitae* provide useful information about queens' daily behavior and interactions with the populace.²⁹ More problematic is Abbot Odilo of Cluny's *Epitaphium Adelheidae*, a panegyric to Empress Adelheid's Christlike virtue that is so abstract that it is hard to discern a real woman behind the symbolism.³⁰

Besides these major sources, a pastiche of references to women, both royal and common, appear in the annals of the tenth and early eleventh centuries. The presence of royal women often has to be inferred in the narrative sources but frequently becomes clear when adding in the charter evidence; for example, showing that the queen was in the king's company when he celebrated Christmas at Rome in 981. Like a number of the chronicles, the extensive Hildesheim annal only mentions Theophanu three times: her marriage to Otto II (although without naming her), her trip to Rome in 989, and her death. Such accounts, with their meager representation of women, help reinforce the sense that royal women were very frequently regarded as extensions of their spouses, rather than as players in their own right. It is only when the whole body of evidence is considered that their essential role becomes apparent.

The focus of this book is the two empresses who ruled for Otto III in the years between 984 and 995, Theophanu and Adelheid. But other women of the imperial house will also appear, including royal consorts both before and after the regency period, and I will also include comparisons to ruling women of other lands where appropriate. The structure of the book is not, however, strictly chronological, instead pulling in examples of royal women as appropriate to the subject at hand. Thus an introduction to our most important players seems in order, to avoid confusion.

The first queen of the Ottonian house was Mechtild (c. 894–968), daughter of an important and wealthy Saxon family who married Henry I shortly before his election to the kingship.³¹ Her daughters Hadwig and Gerberga, wives of Duke Hugh the Great and King Louis IV of France respectively, also have a place in this story.

A number of women joined in the work of government alongside Mechtild's son Otto I. His first wife, Edgitha (d. 946), was an Anglo-Saxon princess, a sister of King Aethelstan. Their daughter Liutgard became duchess of Lotharingia in 947, cementing her father's ties to Duke Conrad. Liutgard is not, however, as well known as Otto's daughter by his second marriage, Mechtild (d. 999), who as abbess of the major dynastic foundation of Quedlinburg was an important political player in her own right.

This younger Mechtild was the child of Adelheid,³² who was born in 931 to King Rudolf of Burgundy and his wife Bertha. Rudolf had a claim to the kingdom of Lombardy, and in a complex political deal Adelheid was married to Lothar, son of the other claimant to the title, while still a child. King Lothar died soon after inheriting the iron crown of the Lombards, however, leaving Adelheid a widow. As will be examined below, the question of whether Adelheid was regarded as Lothar's heiress is an important one, with direct bearing on what she brought to her second marriage. For Adelheid did indeed soon marry again. After a daring escape from her enemy Berengar, who seized the Lombard throne after Lothar's death and imprisoned the widowed queen, Adelheid found refuge with the German king Otto I (936–73). Otto, who had been a widower for some years, wed Adelheid on or about October 9, 951.³³ Adelheid already had a daughter (Emma) with Lothar; her vicissitudes as a widowed queen of France will be considered in the latter part of this book. Adelheid long outlived Otto, not dying until 999, and was later canonized as a saint.

Adelheid brings a number of distinctive features to our analysis. Already a mature woman of twenty at the time of her marriage into the Ottonian house, she brought with her at least some claim to the kingdom of the Lombards, a rich region that was also the gateway to Rome and southern Italy. She certainly retained (or Otto re-won for her) control of extensive dower lands in Lombardy, so she had her own resources going into the marriage. Adelheid also had a kinship network that stretched into the *reich*, most notably a brother who was king of Burgundy. Yet at the same time, Adelheid was a foreign bride, not connected to any noble faction within Germany. As a royal daughter, she had an inherited prestige comparable to Otto's own.

Theophanu³⁴ too was a foreign bride, but far more foreign than Adelheid. For years Otto I planned and plotted to gain a Byzantine princess as bride for his son Otto II. The importance of such an alliance in Otto's eyes is clear from the amount of effort he took to attain it, sending embassies and even engaging in a war with the Byzantines in southern Italy to pressure the

eastern emperor to agree to the alliance. The end result was that Theophanu, then about twelve years old, was sent in 972 to the West; she married Otto II and was crowned empress in Rome shortly after her arrival. Theophanu, as one chronicler points out, was not the *porphyrogenita*, the daughter of a ruling emperor, whom Otto I had wanted. Instead she was the niece of a usurper. Still, she came with an exotic and precious dowry, and most chroniclers and annalists seem unaware that she was not the “longed-for maiden.” She was only about twenty-four years old when Otto II died in December 983. Theophanu herself died young, at age thirty-one or thirty-two, before her son came of age. Her daughters Sophia, Adelheid, and Mechtild long survived both their mother and their brother.

The common thread uniting Theophanu and Adelheid is that both are examples of the foreign prestige marriages that were becoming more common in western European royal houses in the tenth century. Both would have had to learn their husbands’ language; while Adelheid may have known some German, at the time of her marriage she apparently normally spoke Romance.³⁵ Otherwise, though, they form many strong contrasts. Unlike Adelheid, Theophanu was a child bride. Adelheid was familiar with noble and royal customs in western Europe, a world that would have been very strange to a child raised in Constantinople. While Adelheid at least had kindred in nearby Burgundy, Theophanu had no relatives in the West at all, leaving her completely reliant on the family into which she married.

After these ladies’ arrival in Ottonian lands, however, the Ottonian rulers into whose family they married took decisive steps to establish both in similar ways. The means included a magnificent endowment with lands and other incomes, an endowment that, as we will see, far surpassed the resources of even the greatest nobles. They received coronations in a religious ceremony that emphasized the status of each as “consort” or “sharer” in rule, not just as queens of Germany but as empresses of the revived western empire. This position as “consort” received firm emphasis in a variety of documents that repeatedly invoke the language of *consors imperialis* to explain these ladies’ special position at the court and beyond (see Chap. 7). And their role as the most important advisors of their royal husbands was emphasized in document after document, in which the ruler made grants “at the intervention of” his beloved spouse. These steps made Adelheid and Theophanu not just the most powerful and influential women in the Ottonian *reich*, but the most important people overall after their husbands. Their wealth, their ability to advise and influence the king, their sacral position as anointed queens and empresses, all created an environment of respect around these women. Thus, although a woman

could not inherit the throne in tenth-century Germany, if conditions were right she could work as the lieutenant, viceroy, or regent for a king with surprisingly little question or opposition. And in 984, after Henry the Quarrelsome's threat to the stability of the kingdom had been suppressed, conditions were indeed right for women to rule in Germany.

This book will explore thematically the circumstances that made it possible for Theophanu and Adelheid to succeed in 984 and beyond. An important starting point is a consideration of women's value in tenth-century society more generally, demonstrating a lack of the misogyny that marred the later Middle Ages. The next section of the volume (Chaps. 3, 4, 5, and 6) examines key factors that gave the imperial ladies power and prestige, including the honor of royal foreign alliances, the wealth with which they were endowed, their unction as queens, and the careful construction of an image of the queen as particularly close to God. Chapters 7 and 8 will then examine how queen consorts could and did in fact exercise power during their husbands' lifetime. The events of the throne struggle of 984 are treated in their own Chap. 9, in which I argue that the special position of Theophanu and Adelheid made it possible to overcome enormous odds and claim control of the young Otto III and the regency. Finally, Chap. 10 details how Theophanu and then Adelheid undertook the tasks of holding the *reich* together until Otto III's majority.

The empresses did their self-appointed task well, as Otto III, chief beneficiary of their care, recognized. After Otto came of age he undertook his first expedition to Italy, and in 996 the pope crowned him emperor. Otto wrote to his grandmother, the venerable dowager empress Adelheid, on the occasion. The letter is a touching tribute from a ruler who had good cause to be grateful for the safe and secure kingdom that had been preserved for him:

To the ever-august empress, the lady Adelheid, Otto by God's grace emperor august [sends greetings]. Since, in accordance with your wishes, God has with happy result granted us imperial authority, we praise God and truly render thanks to you. For we know and recognize the maternal affection, zeal, and piety for which we cannot fail to esteem you. Just as your honor is raised when we advance, we fervently pray and desire that the common weal be advanced through you and, thus promoted, shall be ruled happily. Farewell.³⁶

The German empire had been passed on, intact and at peace. What greater tribute could a regent seek?

NOTES

1. The eve of the tenth century saw the final division of the Carolingian empire into West and East Frankish kingdoms. The East Frankish kingdom is the main subject of this book. This land was roughly equivalent to present-day Germany and indeed was first called the “German kingdom” in the tenth century. Its people for the most part spoke German. In this work, I follow the practice of important surveys like Timothy Reuter’s *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, 800–1056* (London: Longman, 1991) in unabashedly referring to the East Frankish kingdom as “Germany.”
2. An anecdote Ekkehard IV of Saint-Gall reports illustrates Otto II’s irritation at his secondary role during his father’s lifetime: Otto I went into the abbey church and purposely let his staff fall to test the discipline of the monks. When his son heard of the event, according to Ekkehard, he marveled that the elder Otto let his staff fall when he held *imperium* so firmly that he refused even to share a part of it with his son. Ekkehard IV, *Casus sancti Galli*, ed. Hans Haeferle (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980), (146) 282–84.
3. Thilo Offergeld, *Reges pueri. Das Königtum Minderjähriger im frühen Mittelalter* (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2001), 300ff.
4. Several tenth-century French kings also came to the throne at a young age, but since Louis IV was fifteen, Lothar thirteen, and Robert the Pious fourteen, the transition to personal rule was simpler and a placeholder was needed for only a short time. See Jean Verdon, “Les veuves des rois de France aux X^e et XI^e siècles,” in *Veuves et veuvage dans le haut Moyen Âge*, ed. Michel Parisse (Paris: Picard, 1993), 190.
5. Some scholars, most notably Gerd Althoff and Hagen Keller, have gone so far as to argue that the Ottonian *reich* lacked government organization. See Hagen Keller, “Zum Charakter der ‘Staatlichkeit’ zwischen karolingischer Reichsreform und hochmittelalterlichem Herrschaftsausbau,” *FMSt* 23 (1989): 248–64 and Gerd Althoff, *Die Ottonen: Königsherrschaft ohne Staat* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000). Recently, however, above all David Bachrach has argued cogently that the Ottonian rulers retained important elements of Carolingian administration, including central record-keeping, *missi*, and the *inquisitio*. See Bachrach, “The Written Word in Carolingian-Style Fiscal Administration under King Henry I, 919–936,” *German History* 28.4 (Dec. 2010): 399–423; “Exercise of Royal Power in Early Medieval Europe: The Case of Otto the Great, 936–73,” *Early Medieval Europe* 17.4 (2009): 389–419; and “*Inquisitio* as a Tool of Royal Governance under the Carolingian and Ottonian Kings,” *ZS der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte, Germ. Abteilung* 133 (2016): 1–80.
6. See Theo Kölzer, “Das Königtum Minderjähriger im fränkisch-deutschen Mittelalter: Eine Skizze,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 251 (1990): 293; Offergeld,

- Reges pueri*, 37; Franz-Reiner Erkens, "...more Grecorum conregnantem instituere vultis? Zur Legitimation der Regentschaft Heinrichs des Zänkers im Thronstreit von 984," *FMSt* 27 (1993): 273–74.
7. The term "regent" first appears in western Europe in France in 1316. See Kölzer, "Königtum Minderjähriger," 314.
 8. As Bachrach points out, rulers like Otto I did far too much not to have had an infrastructure supporting them. Bachrach, "Exercise," 393. Andreas Kränzle emphasizes that the Ottonian *reich* was far too large for a king to rule by personal presence. See Kränzle, "Der abwesende König. Überlegungen zur ottonischen Königsherrschaft," *FMSt* 31 (1997), esp. 124.
 9. More recent scholarship has emphasized bishops' connections to family and friend networks, which made them much more complex figures than simple tools of the monarchy, as well as pointing out the inconsistency of royal appointments. For a critique of this earlier understanding, see Rudolf Schieffer, "Der Geschichtliche Ort der ottonisch-salischen Reichskirchenpolitik" (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998), 8–9; Stefan Weinfurter, "Die Zentralisierung der Herrschaftsgewalt im Reich unter Kaiser Heinrich II," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 106 (1986): 241.
 10. In both cases, other factors were at work, but the failure to bear provided the necessary excuse. Penelope Adair, "Constance of Arles: A Study in Duty and Frustration," in *Capetian Women*, ed. Kathleen Nolan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 11.
 11. Daniela Müller-Wiegand, *Vermitteln—Beraten—Erinnern. Funktionen und Aufgabengebiete von Frauen in der ottonischen Herrscherfamilie (919–1024)* (Kassel: Kassel University Press, 2003), 178 on Theophanu's offspring.
 12. For Gisela's role in Henry III's education see Kurt-Ulrich Jäschke, *Notwendige Gefährtinnen. Königinnen der Salierzeit als Herrscherinnen und Ehefrauen im römisch-deutschen Reich des 11. und beginnenden 12. Jahrhunderts* (Saarbrücken: Verlag Rita Dadder, 1991), 49; on writers' neglect of queens' interaction with the royal children, see Matthäus Bernards, "Die Frau in der Welt und die Kirche während des 11. Jahrhunderts," *Sacris erudiri* 20 (1971): 55.
 13. For example, Cristina La Rocca, "Pouvoirs des femmes, pouvoir de la loi dans l'Italie lombarde," in *Femmes et pouvoirs des femmes à Byzance et en Occident (VI^e–XI^e siècles)*, ed. Stéphanie Lébecq, et al. (Villeneuve-d'Ascq: Centre de recherche sur l'Histoire de l'Europe du Nord-Ouest, 1999), 38.
 14. DHII 370 (July 10, 1017); Ingrid Baumgärtner, "Fürsprache, Rat und Tat, Erinnerung: Kunigundes Aufgaben als Herrscherin," in *Kunigunde—consors regni*, ed. Stefanie Dick, et al. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2004), 53.

15. Wipo, *Gesta Chuonradi II*, ed. Heinrich Bresslau, MGH SS rer. Germ. in us. schol. 61, (4) 25.
16. For a classic formulation, see Suzanne Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister 500 to 900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 63.
17. See for example Franz-Reiner Erkens, “*Consortium regni—consecratio—sanctitas*: Aspekte des Königinnentums im ottonisch-salischen Reich,” in *Kunigunde—consors regni*, ed. Dick, 79.
18. Janet L. Nelson, “Women at the Court of Charlemagne: A Case of Monstrous Regiment?” in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John C. Parsons (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 49.
19. As Jäschke cogently argues in *Notwendige Gefährtinnen*, 1.
20. Pauline Stafford, “The Portrayal of Royal Women in England, Mid-Tenth to Mid-Twelfth Centuries,” in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. Parsons, 155.
21. On issues related to royal diplomas, see especially Sean Gilsdorf, *The Favor of Friends: Intercession and Aristocratic Politics in Carolingian and Ottonian Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Geoffrey Koziol, *The Politics of Memory and Identity in Carolingian Royal Diplomas: The West Frankish Kingdom (840–987)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012).
22. Of the numerous studies of Gerbert, see especially H. Pratt Lattin, “The Letters of Gerbert,” in *Gerberto: Scienza, storia e mito*, ed. Michele Tosi (Bobbio: Ed. degli A.S.B., 1985), 311–29 and Pierre Riché, *Gerbert d’Aurillac, le pape de l’an mil* (Paris: Fayard, 1987), *passim*.
23. See Gerd Althoff, “Widukind von Corvey: Kronzeuge und Herausforderung,” *FMSt* 27 (1993): 253–72, esp. p. 267. Also useful are Johannes Laudage, “Widukind von Corvey und die deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft,” in *Von Fakten und Fiktionen*, ed. Johannes Laudage (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003), 193–224; Ernst Karpf, “Von Widukinds Sachsengeschichte bis zu Thietmars Chronicon: Zu den literarischen Folgen des politischen Aufschwungs im ottonischen Sachsen,” in *Angli e sassoni al di qua e al di là del mare* (Settimane di studio 32, 1984) (Spoleto: Presso la Sede del Centro, 1986), 547–80; Karl Leyser, “Three Historians,” in *Communications and Power in Medieval Europe: The Carolingian and Ottonian Centuries*, ed. Timothy Reuter (London: Hambledon Press, 1994), 19–28; Sverre Bagge, *Kings, Politics, and the Right Order of the World in German Historiography, c. 950–1150* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). For English-speaking readers, the introduction to the fine English translation of Widukind’s history is very useful: Widukind of Corvey, *Deeds of the Saxons*, trans. and intro. Bernard S. Bachrach and David S. Bachrach (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), xiii–xxxvii.
24. David Warner provides an excellent overview of Thietmar’s life and work in the introduction to his translation of the chronicle. Thietmar of Merseburg, *Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*,

- trans. and intro. David A. Warner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001). See also Leyser, "Three Historians," 19–28; Helmut Lippelt, *Thietmar von Merseburg: Reichsbischof und Chronist* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1973), *passim*.
25. For an overview study of Liudprand, see Jon N. Sutherland, *Liudprand of Cremona, Bishop, Diplomat, Historian: Studies of the Man and his Age* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di studi sull' alto medioevo, 1988). Two particularly insightful articles about the acerbic bishop are Gerd Althoff, "Geschichtsschreibung in einer oralen Gesellschaft. Das Beispiel des 10. Jahrhunderts," in *Ottonische Neuanfänge*, ed. Bernd Schneidmüller and Stefan Weinfurter (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2001), 151–69; Philippe Buc, "Italian Hussies and German Matrons: Liutprand of Cremona on Dynastic Legitimacy," *FMSt* 29 (1995): 207–25. The outstanding English translation by Paolo Squatriti includes a good introduction. Liudprand of Cremona, *The Complete Works of Liudprand of Cremona*, trans. Paolo Squatriti (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007).
 26. Althoff, "Geschichtsschreibung," 158.
 27. For Hrotsvit, see especially Stephen L. Wailes, *Spirituality and Politics in the Works of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim* (Selinsgrove, Penn.: Susquehanna University Press, 2006); Wolfgang Kirsch, "Hrotsvit von Gandersheim als Epikerin," *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 24/25 (1989/90): 215–24; Monique Goullet, "De Hrotsvita de Gandersheim à Odilon de Cluny: images d'Adélaïde autour de l'an Mille," in *Adélaïde de Bourgogne: Genèse et représentations d'une sainteté impériale*, ed. Patrick Corbet, et al. (Dijon: Ed. Universitaires de Dijon, 2002), 43–54. For a good overview of the issues of identifying women historians, see Elisabeth van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe, 900–1200* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).
 28. For the *Annales Quedlinburgenses*, see Gerd Althoff, "Gandersheim und Quedlinburg. Ottonische Frauenklöster als Herrschafts- und Überlieferungszentren," *FMSt* 25 (1991): 123–44; Käthe Sonnleitner, "Selbstbewußtsein und Selbstverständnis der ottonischen Frauen im Spiegel der Historiographie des 10. Jahrhunderts," in *Geschichte und ihre Quellen*, ed. Reinhard Härtel (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1987), 111–19.
 29. For the *vitae* of Mechtild, see the introduction to the English translation. Sean Gilsdorf, trans., *Queenship and Sanctity: The Lives of Mathilda and the Epitaph of Adelheid* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004). See also Bernd Schütte, *Untersuchungen zu den Lebensbeschreibungen der Königin Mathilde* (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1994); Gerd Althoff, "Causa scribendi und Darstellungsabsicht: Die Lebensbeschreibungen der Königin Mathilde und andere Beispiele," in

- Litterae Medii Aevi*, ed. Michael Borgolte and Herrad Spilling (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1988), 117–33.
30. For the *Epitaphium*, see Johannes Staub, “Odilos Adelheid-Epitaph und seine Verse auf Otto den Großen,” in *Latin Culture in the Eleventh Century*, ed. Michael W. Herren, et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 2: 400–409; Patrick Corbet, *Les saints ottoniens* (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1986), esp. 59–110.
 31. Often Anglified as Matilda or Mathilda, use of the German form of her name—Mechtild—serves as a useful reminder of this queen’s (and her granddaughter’s) essential Germanness, as well as making confusion with the daughter of Henry I of England or the famous countess of Tuscany less likely.
 32. Some scholars prefer the French form of her name, Adelaide, but I use the Germanic form under which she appears in German sources and German scholarship, since the most important parts of her career were spent in German lands.
 33. Gunther Wolf, “Königinnen-Krönungen des frühen Mittelalters bis zum Beginn des Investiturstreits,” *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte, Kan. Abt.* 76 (1990): 71.
 34. “Theophanu” is the typical western European spelling of this Greek name (although Liudprand of Cremona employs the form “Theophana”). Both “Theophano” and “Theophanu” are correct in Greek usage. See Günther Henrich, “Theophanu oder Theophano? Zur Geschichte eines ‘gespaltenen’ griechischen Frauennamensuffixes,” in *Kaiserin Theophanu*, ed. Anton von Euw (Cologne: Schnütgen-Museum, 1991), 2: 489.
 35. The *Casus sancti Galli* reports that Otto I, shortly after his marriage, surprised his court by wishing them *bôn mân* one morning. Ekkehard IV, *Casus sancti Galli*, (132) 254.
 36. Dominae A. imperatricis semper augustae O. gratia dei imperator augustus. Quia secundum vota et desideria vestra divinitas nobis iura imperii contulit felici successu, divinitatem quidem adoramus, vobis vero grates rependimus. Scimus enim et intelligimus maternum affectum studia pietatem quibus rebus obsequio vestro deesse non possumus. Proinde quia dum promovemur, vester honor attollitur, rem publicam per vos promoveri ac promotam feliciter in suo statu regi multum oramus et optamus. Valet. DDOIII 196.



CHAPTER 2

Women in Tenth-Century Germany

To understand the position the imperial women attained in the Ottonian *reich*, one must consider their society's attitude toward women more generally. The Ottonian wives Adelheid and Theophanu played significant roles in their society. So did the princesses Mechtild, Sophia, and the younger Adelheid, their daughters. But were they exceptional, granted some agency in a male world only because of their close relationship to the ruler? What were in fact typical gender relations? An examination of this question can help us understand the imperial ladies' relations with their husbands, sons, and the people around them. Much hinges on the question of how much women shared their lives with men, which can help us know such matters as when the imperial ladies were probably present. For example, if an annalist reports that Otto II spent Easter at a particular monastery, may we assume that his wife Theophanu was there as well? In short, when does the silence of the sources imply that a royal lady was present, and when does it imply her absence? Our assumptions depend very much on our understanding of societal norms regarding women's roles.

The central question of this chapter—whether the Ottonian queens were exceptional—can be summed up with an example that at first glance appears straightforward. In his chronicle, Bishop Thietmar of Merseburg is emphatic in his praise of Empress Theophanu. One passage in particular sums up his opinion of her:

Although of the fragile sex, her modesty, conviction, and manner of life were outstanding, which is rare in Greece. Preserving her son's rule with manly watchfulness, she was always benevolent to the just, but terrified and conquered rebels. From the fruit of her womb, she offered daughters to God as a tithe, the first, called Adelheid, at Quedlinburg, the second, called Sophia, at Gandersheim.¹

On the face of it, Thietmar appears to be making an argument for the empress' exceptionality. *Despite* the impediment of her sex, she was a strong ruler. Her watchfulness was *manly* (although at least he acknowledges that she had a womb). Was Thietmar, though, making a case that Theophanu was separate from and superior to the norms of Ottonian womanhood? Some modern scholars, such as Sabine Reiter, have interpreted the tenth-century historians' understanding of women as creatures able to overcome their "natural weakness," to transcend the state to which they were born to display manly virtues like courage.² But was Thietmar really expressing a belief in weakness transcended under extraordinary circumstances, or simply following a literary stereotype in his description of Theophanu? This chapter argues that the latter was the case and that Thietmar, his contemporary chroniclers, and Ottonian society in general did in fact accept that, although they did not typically play a major role in public affairs, women had agency and were gifted with all of the abilities of males except physical strength.

Bishop Thietmar's chronicle is our most important narrative source for Ottonian Germany. It is long, and its rambling nature makes it particularly valuable for understanding the societal norms of Thietmar's time. While in general the chronicle provides a political history of the German *reich* (with particular emphasis on Otto II's grievous sin in dissolving the author's diocese of Merseburg), the bishop constantly interrupts his master narrative with tales from his own life or those of his friends, or anything else he thinks might interest his readers. An astonishing number of women—over eighty—appear in his chronicle, often at the heart of events, thanks to his love of good stories and lack of adherence to any "approved" classical model for writing history. Looking at *all* of Thietmar's women instead of just the royal ones provides a very different picture, more complex and nuanced than a simple portrait of unique royalty shaded with episcopal contempt for womankind. His is a rich landscape filled with strong women, often with real agency in events, spiritually advanced, and capable of true friendship with men—a landscape in which the imperial ladies are powerful exemplars rather than unique.