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Review of Phyllis G. Jestice, *Imperial Ladies of the Ottonian Dynasty:
Women and Rule in Tenth-Century Germany*

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PHYLLIS G. JESTICE, *Imperial Ladies of the Ottonian Dynasty: Women and Rule in Tenth-Century Germany, Queenship and Power* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), xi + 300 pp. ISBN 978 3 319 77305 6. €103.99 (hardcover)

The Ottonian empresses Adelaide of Burgundy and Theophanu have always been the focus of scholarly attention, but the long-standing default view of them as exceptional figures is a key reason why the study of female rulers has been far narrower in scope than is strictly necessary, given the available sources.¹ As shown by publications such as Claudia Zey's 2015 edited volume of papers from a conference organized by the Konstanzer Arbeitskreis für mittelalterliche Geschichte on 'powerful women', the debate on this subject has been gathering pace for some time now across Europe.² This means that Phyllis G. Jestice's study takes its place in what is now a broad field of research. Furthermore, in asking how the two empresses were able to wield power so effectively, it achieves a deeper understanding of this supposedly traditional and timeworn topic.

The book's clever structure plays a large part in this. Instead of a chronological narrative, Jestice opts to begin by examining the conditions underpinning Adelaide and Theophanu's hugely successful regency on behalf of the young Otto III between 984 and 994. It should be noted that some of Jestice's positions are not firmly grounded in comparative analysis. This is particularly true of her somewhat sweeping assertions that kings and emperors put more trust in their kinswomen than in bishops (p. 3), and that queens were the key advisors to their royal husbands (p. 10). Nonetheless, her basic argument – that the Ottonian rulers assiduously cultivated the status of their wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters and put both material and immaterial resources at their disposal because they could fundamentally count

Trans. by Jozef van der Voort (GHIL)

¹ Standard English names have been used for the historical figures mentioned in this review, but it should be noted that Jestice's study tends to favour the original German names – e.g. 'Adelheid' for 'Adelaide'.

² Claudia Zey (ed.), *Mächtige Frauen? Königinnen und Fürstinnen im europäischen Mittelalter (11.–14. Jahrhundert)* (Ostfildern, 2015).

on their loyalty, given how interwoven these women's lives were with the success or failure of the ruling dynasty—is convincing. So is her judgement that the writings of Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim represent a valuable source on certain aspects of the historical events through which Adelaide lived, on her freedom to make decisions and take action, and on contemporary views of female participation in the exercise of power.

By expanding the scope of her study to include typical features of monarchical rule in the context of an open constitution, as well as by showing an interest in the perception of women in contemporary sources that moves beyond an exclusive focus on statements about Theophanu and Adelaide, Jestic definitively reveals the inadequacy of older, psychologizing assumptions about the two empresses' personal characters as factors in the success of their regency. Instead, Jestic argues, it was the respect, prestige, and trust that these rulers acquired as a result of their wealth, their influence on the king, and their sacred status as anointed queens that laid the foundations for them to take on a leadership role and acquit themselves in it when called upon to do so—for instance, after the premature death of Otto II in 983.

The introduction thus focuses on Otto's demise and the coronation of his 3-year-old son Otto III in Aachen as the immediate cause and starting point of the empresses' regency. The following seven chapters then examine the conditions that enabled Adelaide and Theophanu to fend off Henry the Quarrelsome's designs on the throne in June 984 and to rule successfully until Otto III came of age in 994 and assumed power in his own right.

Chapter two presents a broad overview of contemporary perceptions and assessments of women, painting a nuanced picture. Thietmar of Merseburg's chronicle mentions more than eighty women and often places them at the centre of events—a finding that decisively relativizes the Ottonian empresses' supposed special status as 'strong women'. Likewise, the other sources Jestic examines reveal nothing in the way of general misogyny and instead pass judgement on specific individuals. Physical strength aside, women possessed the same positive attributes as men and thus occupied a recognized and valued position in Ottonian society.

Chapter three shows that their wives being of equal or possibly even higher rank lent the Ottonian emperors additional prestige and was to an extent a crucial factor in their recognition by the nobility. The growing status of their royal consorts – from Hatheburg of Merseburg, Matilda of Ringelheim, and Eadgyth of England to Adelaide and Theophanu – reflects the rise of the Ottonian dynasty through increasingly prestigious marriages. Adelaide's Burgundian relatives and her claim to the throne of the *Regnum Italiae* enhanced Otto I's standing within the Empire. Unlike Adelaide, the Anglo-Saxon Eadgyth and the Byzantine Theophanu did not initially have any kinship networks within their husbands' dominions – but that also meant they had no 'natural' enemies either.

In chapter four, we learn that the wealth these queens brought to their marriages and the rich endowments they obtained through their *Morgengaben* – the marital gifts they received from their husbands – also allowed the two empresses to take a prominent role in the exercise of power during the minority of Otto III. Their resources vastly outstripped not only the wealth of other women in the royal family, but also that of many other magnates. Jestic shows how the empresses were evidently able to exploit their titles independently as well as jointly with their husbands (and later their sons). They also had courts of their own and demonstrated their power by making generous gifts, much as male rulers did. They were thus in a position to act not only as partners to their husbands, but also as imperial regents when required to do so after the premature death of Otto II.

In chapter five, Jestic reveals how the rite of unction during the coronation ceremony, which is documented for Adelaide and Theophanu and which Eadgyth is also likely to have undergone, gave these women an elevated status in Ottonian society that was respected even after the deaths of their husbands. Various references scattered throughout the historical record show the extent to which ritualized honours publicly reinforced the queens' special status, while visual depictions portray them as equal in rank to their husbands.

Chapter six presents piety as 'the one instrument of successful rule where the women had a distinct advantage over the male members of their family' (p. 132). In particular, the numerous Ottonian convents

and the privileges associated with the office of canoness—namely, the rights to own property, keep servants, travel freely, and not take perpetual vows—allowed these women to make piety a facet of their royal status, as in the cases of Matilda of Ringelheim and Cunigunde of Luxembourg. That their rank was acknowledged even inside convent walls was a matter of course; objections to this practice would only be raised in the eleventh century as a result of ecclesiastical and monastic reforms. While Thietmar of Merseburg depicts women in general as a kind of pious moral conscience for their husbands, for royal women it was a binding obligation to ensure the ritual memorialization of their family.

Starting from the observation that the queens played a particularly prominent role in bestowing royal favours, chapter seven asks how they interacted with kinship and patronage networks in order to secure their loyalty. Friendship and kinship often smoothed the path to power—a path that the Ottonian women walked alongside their husbands, but also independently of them. That queens would intervene on behalf of relatives, friends, and supporters appears to have been virtually institutionalized, and as such offered a foundation for them to build their own networks and cultivate loyalty in a mechanism of mutual obligation that was even used by the ‘foreign’ queens Eadgyth and Theophanu.

Chapter eight shows that the queens’ roles on the political stage depended partly on their husbands and partly on their ability to bear children, as they could continue to exert political influence through their offspring even after their husbands had died. The title of *consors imperii*, which became a standard designation in Italy during the late Carolingian period and was introduced to the Ottonian Empire by Adelaide, says as little about the actual involvement of women in the wielding of power as it does about the idea of the consort as a special partner to her husband. Yet a comparison with the male holders of the title reveals that its real substance consisted in the authority it granted to depute for the monarch—for instance by presiding over assemblies (as Adelaide, the Abbess Matilda, and various West Frankish queens are documented to have done), or by commanding troops (as in the case of Cunigunde). It also bestowed the right to conduct peace negotiations and to advise the king.

Chapter nine deals with Henry the Quarrelsome's defeat in the dispute over Otto III's regency in 984, which Jestice rightly sees as the clearest evidence for Theophanu's authority. Theophanu's ability to hold her own here reflects the significance of the factors underpinning the Ottonian queens' power and prestige that Jestice examined in earlier chapters, which proved sufficient to overcome even the reservations people might have held towards this 'Greek' empress. Jestice is equally justified in departing from previous research to emphasize that Adelaide was Theophanu's key ally, and she convincingly relativizes the importance of passages in Odilo of Cluny's *Epitaphium Adelaideae* that have often been cited as evidence of a rivalry between Theophanu and her mother-in-law. Likewise, she argues just as persuasively that the empresses did not leave Pavia only on receiving word of Henry the Quarrelsome's Easter festivities in Quedlinburg, but in fact did so on their own initiative.

In chapter ten we see that Theophanu's and Adelaide's ability to operate successfully as regents – without being described as such in contemporary sources, incidentally – was a logical consequence of their earlier standing during the reigns of Otto I and Otto II. During the peaceful decade of their regency, the two empresses exercised power just as men did: they established and renewed personal ties and friendships, negotiated peace treaties, bestowed favours, and exploited their symbolic capital. They had evidently conducted themselves in much the same way while their husbands were still alive, and in that sense they were fully equipped to assume all duties of government – with the sole difference that they did not lead their armies personally into battle as the emperors did.

Jestice is reluctant to comment on whether this constituted a specifically 'female' style of government (p. 269); however, the empresses' focus on memorialization, their personal learning, and not least the expectations and competencies attached to their roles as spouses and mothers were all distinct features of their rule. In relation to Jestice's frequent references to circumstances in the Carolingian period as a means of circumscribing the Ottonian era, it should be noted that her study overlooks relevant scholarship by Martina Hartmann, while her use of the term 'German reich' for the Ottonian Empire is somewhat confounding, at least to German readers. Likewise, her rather

pessimistic closing assessment of the situation of Ottonian women in the face of the (supposedly) diminishing importance of female rulers in the eleventh century is not necessarily justified, as the prominent position assumed by the Ottonian empresses was in part a product of the exceptional circumstances ensuing from the minority of Otto III, and from his and Henry II's deaths without issue. It was precisely these disjunctures in the line of succession that made the royal women so visible, and also resulted in both Cunigunde and Gisela of Swabia gaining new roles within their existing personal networks. However, these comments should not detract from the importance of this book. Not all of its conclusions are groundbreaking, of course, but its strength lies not in its painstaking examination of minutiae, but in the fact that it brings together many disparate findings about queenship, drawing comparisons with circumstances during the Carolingian period and across Western Europe. In this way, Jestic succeeds in producing not just a penetrating, persuasive, and in certain respects innovative interpretation of the Ottonian crisis of 984, but also an impressive survey of female rule.

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