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Empresses and abbesses: Ottonian *dominae imperiales* (tenth and eleventh centuries)

Justine AUDEBRAND

Translated by Marian Rothstein

The historiography of Ottonian Germany (919-1024) has long taken note of the importance of women and their power, especially in Saxony.¹ These studies have concentrated on sovereigns,² especially on Adelaide [of Burgundy],³ the second wife of Holy Roman Emperor Otto I (936-973), and Theophanu,⁴ the Byzantine wife of Otto II (973-983). However, by the end of the tenth century, the exercise of female power within the imperial family was not limited to these two women. Power was shared by other women, in particular by Matilda of Quedlinburg, the sister of Otto II, and later by Sophia of Ganderheim and Adelaide [Adelheid] of Quedlinburg, sisters of Otto III. Along with Adelaide of Burgundy and Theophanu, they were referred to as *dominae imperiales* [imperial ladies]. During the period 983-1002, there was no imperial consort, as Otto III came to the throne at the age of three and died young without ever marrying. This exceptional situation is part of the reason other women were included in the imperial entourage. As a consequence, the court took on a new shape.⁵

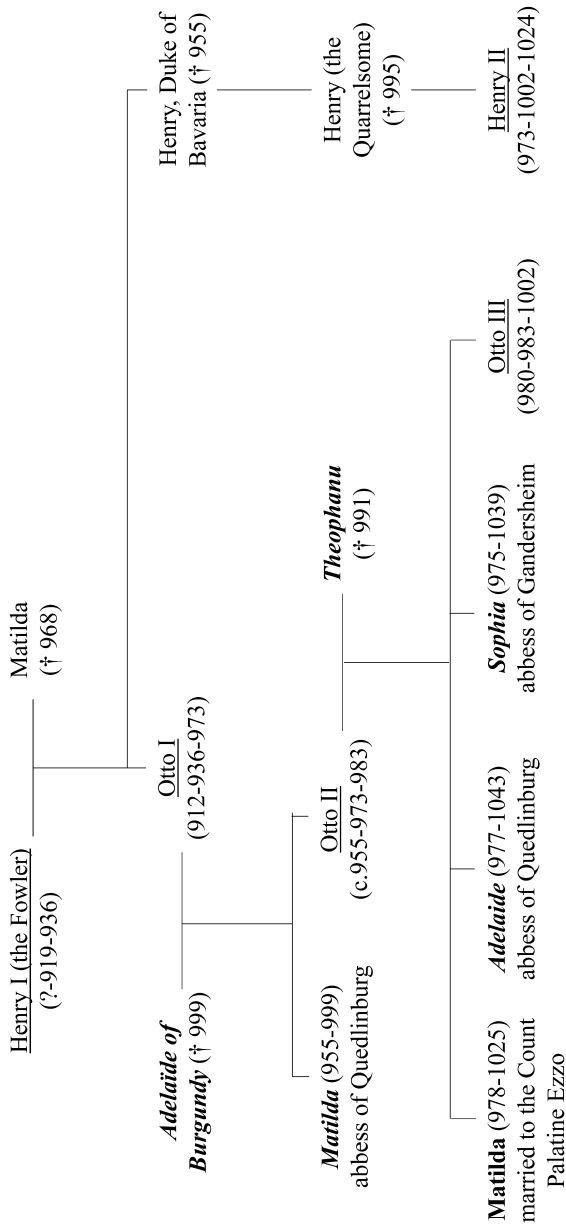
¹ Leyser 1979.

² Corbet 1986; Föfel 2000; MacLean 2017; Bühler-Thierry 2018; Jestic 2018.

³ Corbet, Goulet & Iogna-Prat 2002.

⁴ Ew & Schreiner 1991; Davids 1995.

⁵ This article is a revised and expanded version of a paper given in May 2019 during the meeting of the Paris Laboratory of Eastern Medieval Studies (LaMOP). I thank the participants and Didier Lett for the suggestions that allowed me to sharpen parts of my argument.



Simplified genealogical tree of the Ottonians

Key: Otto I (975-999) = kings and emperors with their dates of birth, start of reign and end of reign/death

Matilda (955-999) = *dominae imperiales* with their dates of birth and death

The focus on Adelaide and Theophanu is the result of queenship studies, devoted specifically to the status, function, and honors of the queen, and especially developed for the Early Middle Ages since the 1980s, following the work of Pauline Stafford.⁶ One reason for the success of these studies is the nature of available documentation. It is easier to trace the lives and power of queens than those of other groups of women. Still, these works leave the specific power of other women in reigning dynasties unexplored.⁷ This blind spot in queenship studies is particularly important where Ottonian women are concerned.

The *Annals of Quedlinburg* are crucial to understanding the power of these women. They were compiled by a nun under Abbess Adelaide [Adelheid] (999-1043) starting in 1008, a time when the Abbey at Quedlinburg was losing prestige in favor of that in Gandersheim.⁸ The annals continue until the 1020s. Although they are biased in favor of Quedlinburg and are missing the years between 961-983, they allow us to see the power of these Ottonian women through a female prism,⁹ as well as to understand how these women saw themselves and their place in the Imperial government. What is original about these annals, which have been relatively underexplored by historians, is the fact that they were written by a woman,¹⁰ with a propagandist aim and destined to be read by the ruling power. This is the only document in which the expression *dominae imperiales* occurs, designating five women in turn who were deemed to be particularly powerful during the Ottonian dynasty (see the genealogical tree). And yet, we might ask whether it is possible to speak of these annals as *woman's writing*, in the sense that they convey the point of view of the women of the dynasty and represent their power as women. This question has not yet been asked of the *Annals of Quedlinburg*, as it has been for other women's writings of the period.¹¹ Before going

⁶ Stafford 1983.

⁷ With the exception of studies of Charlemagne's daughters, for example, Nelson 1998.

⁸ Leleu 2021. [Quedlinburg Abbey was a house (convent, *Frauenstift*, *monasterium*) for secular canonesses, founded in 936 by Matilda, widow of Henry the Fowler.] (Tr.)

⁹ Sonnleitner 1987: 111.

¹⁰ This is the opinion of the most recent editor of the *Annals of Quedlinburg* who argues that they were most likely written by a nun in Quedlinburg and not by a male cleric.

¹¹ Nelson 1990.

further it is worth noting that the expression *dominae imperiales* refers not only to empresses but also, indeed especially to abbesses, and in particular to Matilda and Adelaide, abbesses of Quedlinburg. The *Annals* are not so much women's writing as writing emanating from the seat of the abbesses' power, although the female author is especially well informed about all the princesses of the Ottonian dynasty.

Our aim will therefore be to explore the power of Ottonian women beyond the narrow circle of queens, and to focus on what characterized it at a time when relations within the dynasty were being reconfigured.

Genesis: empresses and abbesses in the 960s and 970s

Institutionalizing women's exercise of power

The power of Ottonian empresses grew considerably, starting in the 960s. The Ottonians developed dynastic strategies that depended on a systematic inclusion of women. Queens came to intervene more and more in royal statutes. Adelaide and Theophanu appear in more than a third of their husbands' decrees. These new models of power produced a genuine institutionalization of queenship intended to consolidate the whole of Ottonian power. The growth of the power of queens was such that, by the end of the 960s, the role of queen was sufficiently well-defined that at times when the sovereign was widowed or unmarried, it could be filled by a woman other than his wife.¹²

The queens' close association to power was accompanied by a wider collective definition of the royal family and its authority.¹³ The sovereign's brothers as well as his children were increasingly implicated in the Ottonian power-base. This understanding of family is especially seen in 965: all contemporary Ottonian sources speak of a great "family gathering", when Otto I returned from Italy. The emperor was accompanied by his mother, his wife, his children (especially the future Otto II and Matilda), his brother Bruno, and even his sister Gerberga, queen of the Western Franks, and her sons. The entire family, not the emperor alone, participated in the triumph of the Empire.

The concept that the sacred quality of the family was not limited to the sovereign may have a Greek origin, as Otto I was influenced by

¹² MacLean 2017: 148.

¹³ MacLean 2017: 147.

Byzantine models.¹⁴ In Constantinople, the supreme title of empress extended beyond the wife to the daughters of emperors.¹⁵ Furthermore, in the first half of the tenth century, princesses of the Macedonian dynasty, like Agatha, daughter of Constantine VII (913-959), were educated to assist their father in the empire's governance.¹⁶ Without going so far as claiming a direct inheritance, there is a striking parallel with Matilda of Quedlinburg, the daughter of Otto I, who was destined for power from a very young age.

The youth of Matilda of Quedlinburg

Matilda, the only daughter of Otto I and Adelaide, was born in 955. By 966 she was abbess of Quedlinburg Abbey, founded by her grandmother Matilda in 936. As the successor designated by her grandmother, Matilda was consecrated in the presence of the whole imperial family by all the bishops of Germany – an unusual ceremony since in theory she needed only to be consecrated by her metropolitan bishop. So grandiose a ceremony bespeaks a conscious desire to promote the status and the role of the young girl,¹⁷ all the more as she became the guardian of family memory: Quedlinburg was the resting place of Henry the Fowler, founder of the Ottonian dynasty.

The following year, in April 967, Pope John XIII granted Quedlinburg Abbey papal protection, at the request of Otto I and his mother Matilda. In this document, the young Princess Matilda is referred to as *augusta*,¹⁸ an epithet also used for her mother.¹⁹ This

¹⁴ Sonnleitner 1987: 119.

¹⁵ Herrin 2000: 22.

¹⁶ Herrin 2014: 57.

¹⁷ Althoff 1991: 131.

¹⁸ *Papsturkunden n°178: Johannes episcopus, servus servorum Dei, corporis et mentis generositate prefulgide utpote augustae liberalitatis Mabetilde, incomparabiliter laudabili abbatissae venerabilis monasterii dicti Quitiliggaburg, et per te omnibus posteris tuis et sanctae congregationi ancillarum Christi ibi degentium superne gratiae plenitudinem apostolicamque benedictionem.*

Bishop Johannes, servant of the servants of God, wishes to Matilda, shining in body and spirit by her birth, as is natural for her august status, abbess of the venerable monastery of Quedlinburg, incomparably worthy of praise, and through you to your successors and to the holy congregation of the servants of Christ who reside within it, the plenitude of heavenly grace and apostolic benediction.

¹⁹ *Papsturkunden n°178: Ideoque universitas Christi fidelium cupimus, ut cognoscat, qualiter nos per interventum karissimi et spiritualis filii nostri, domni Ottonis, semper augusti, genitoris tui, et sanctissimae matris eius Mabetildae, augustae serenissimae,*

charter, of which a copy was kept in Quedlinburg, is proof of the emperor's efforts to associate the women in his family, especially his daughter, with his power: Otto's imperial status extended to his mother and, even more, to his daughter.

Matilda's status was not merely symbolic, as can be seen in the three prefaces of the *Res gestae saxonicae* [Deeds of the Saxons] by Widukind of Corvey. This work, for the most part completed in 968, is dedicated to the young abbess, who was at that moment the only member of the Ottonian family's inner circle north of the Alps. Her father and brother were in Italy, where they would remain until 972. While the emperors were away, Matilda was in charge of some form of government. Widukind declares simply that she was "the mistress of all Europe".²⁰ She owed this authority to her imperial birth, which gave her an innate aptitude for power. Matilda "shone with imperial majesty" and was "exalted by the extraordinary achievements of her father";²¹ imperial honor redounded directly to her.²² The dedication speaks of the political role Otto I attributed to his daughter and directs the reading of Widukind's work. The *Res gestae* were intended to allow Matilda to find models of government among her ancestors.²³ Taken in this sense, it was a real *mirror for the princess* with no equivalent during the Early Middle Ages, as this sort of text was generally aimed at men.

The association of Matilda with imperial power can be seen as her father's intent from the mid-960s. It became clearer in the reign

aviae tuae, prefatum Quitilngaburg locum situm in territorio Saxonico, cui p̄esse videris, suscepimus sub iurę et continua tuitione sanctę Romanę matris, cui presideamus, ecclesię...

That is why we wish to make known to all the faithful in Christ that, following the intervention of our very dear spiritual son, your father Lord Otto, noble in all ways, and his most holy mother Matilda, the most serene noble, your grandmother, we take under the laws and perpetual protection of the mother holy Church in Rome, the afore named monastery in Quedlinburg in Saxony that you head ...

²⁰ Widukind of Corvey, II, preface: *quae domina esse dinosceris iure totius Europae.*

²¹ Widukind of Corvey, I, preface: *Flore virginali cum maiestate imperiali ac sapientia singulari fulgenti dominae Mahthildae, Quamvis te paternae potentiae gloria singularis magnificet...*

²² Widukind of Corvey, III, preface: *imperiale decus, quod te ut serenissimum splendorem gemmamque lucidissimam mundo effudit.*

²³ Morrison 1998: 50.

of Otto II. As had never before been the case for a woman, Matilda appears in her brother's statutes from the start of his reign, between 974 and 978.²⁴ She controlled her brother's holdings and was an intermediary for dealing with the church of Saint Johannes of Magdeburg. But these early actions were still modest and few.

Matilda also was part of the display of power, as the emperor regularly came to the monastery of Quedlinburg, especially at Easter.²⁵ After the revolt of his cousin Henry the Quarrelsome (aka Henry the Wrangler) in 974, Otto II used his wife Theophanu and his sister Matilda to reaffirm his power. In that year, Matilda received a gift from her brother, doubtless to strengthen her role and her position in support of the emperor.²⁶ And yet, in 978, she seemed to suffer from the discord between Otto II and their mother Adelaide, since she followed the latter to Italy.²⁷ But in the early 980s, Matilda accompanied Otto II as he went to Rome, together with Adelaide and Theophanu. In 981, Otto celebrated Easter in Rome along with his mother, his wife, and his sister. They remained at his side in Italy until 983. Like the empresses, Matilda participated fully in the ceremonial aspects of imperial power, a power spread among the whole family, and especially its female members.

The empresses' increase in power in the 960s was thus based on an empress's daughter, Matilda. This was repeated two decades later with Sophia. Starting with the reign of Otto I, Matilda had played a genuine political role, alongside her mother Adelaide and her sister-in-law Theophanu. The trio took center stage when Otto II died unexpectedly.

Adelaide, Theophanu, Matilda: Ottonian women in power (983-999)

The crisis of the years 983-985, an opening for women

Otto II died in Italy in December 983. Matilda was included in his will: she was to get a quarter of his treasure,²⁸ in order to secure the

²⁴ *Diplomata regum et imperatorum Germanie* (henceforth DD OII) 77, 78, 115, 116, 170).

²⁵ DD OII 72 signed in Quedlinburg at Easter 974.

²⁶ MacLean 2017: 162.

²⁷ Magdeburg *Annals*, a passage copied from a lost section of the Quedlinburg *Annals*. See Quedlinburg: 341.

²⁸ Thietmar of Merseburg, III, 25; Quedlinburg *Annals*, 983 (reconstitution based on the Magdeburg *Annals*.)

salvation of his soul, in keeping with the traditional role of an Ottonian princess. The next year, she returned to Germany with Adelaide and Theophanu. The three women fought to ensure that the throne would devolve to the three-year-old Otto III, son of Otto II and Theophanu, who had been kidnapped by Henry the Quarrelsome. Henry finally submitted to the power of the three women in Frankfurt, in June 985.

It is in this context that the *Annals of Quedlinburg* speak of them as *dominae imperiales*.

984 [...]. The *dominae imperiales* came to Saxony.²⁹

985 [...] The infant king Otto III came to Frankfurt. Henry came too and was submissive, as was appropriate. In this way he escaped punishment for his overweening pride. And in the presence of the *dominae imperiales*, the grandmother, mother, and aunt of the infant king, who were charged with the administration of the kingdom, humble in his appearance as in his actions, before all the people, his hands clasped together, he did not blush to put himself in the power of the infant king whom he had kidnapped and whose kingdom he had seized like a tyrant. [...] The *dominae* who controlled the administration of the young king's kingdom, as we have said, pleased by the submission of such a man – in keeping with the custom of the pious not merely to avoid giving evil for good, but more to give good for evil – showed him their affection and love.³⁰

The expression *dominae imperiales* should be understood cautiously, since its function in this context is to undermine the legitimacy of Henry the Quarrelsome. Nevertheless it is striking. It

²⁹ *Annals of Quedlinburg*, 984: 473, *praedictae imperiales dominae Saxoniam adierunt*. In the preceding paragraph the text refers to negotiations between Adelaide, Theophanu and Matilda for their return to Germany.

³⁰ *Annals of Quedlinburg*, 985: 474, *Veniente in Frankanafurd rege infante tertio Othone ibidem et ipse [Heinricus] adveniens humiliavit se iuste, quo poenam evaderet elationis iniustae, regique puerulo, quem orbatum captivaverat, cuius regnum tyrannice invaserat, praesentibus dominis imperialibus, quas regni cura penes erat, avia, matre et amita regis eiusdem infantis, humilis habitu, humilis et actu, totius in aspectu populi ambabus in unum complicatis manibus militem se et vera ulterius fide militaturum tradere non erubuit (...). At dominae, quarum, ut diximus, cura regnum regisque regebatur infantia, tanti viri summissa deditioe admodum gratulabundae – quia piorum moris est, non solum mala pro bonis non reddere, sed etiam pro malis bona rependere – (...) debito dilectionis venerantur affectu.*

designates Adelaide, Theophanu and Matilda as a sort of collective regency over the kingdom and Otto III. The expression is the mark of the success of the political project that began under Otto I: the women in the family see themselves as full-fledged members of the dynasty with access to power.³¹ The term *domina* alone in the *Annals of Quedlinburg* has a strong connotation: before 1020, and therefore in the first, strongly politicized version of 1008, it is used only for women of the Ottonian family. With the exception of *domina* Oda,³² a kind of founding mother of the dynasty,³³ and of Ida, *regalis domina*³⁴, the wife of Liudolf, son of Otto I's first marriage, *domina* is used exclusively for Adelaide of Burgundy, Theophanu, and Matilda, or Matilda alone, then later for Sophia, and Adelaide (of Quedlinburg). Additionally, the *Annals* regularly attach the adjective *imperialis* or *regalis* to Matilda, then later to Sophia and Adelaide, as well as to other women of the dynasty.³⁵ The woman writing the *Annals* can therefore be seen to use the expression with deliberate intention, making no distinction between the power of emperors' wives, and that of their daughters and sisters, and indeed laying special emphasis on this last category.

Although the same words do not appear in the work of other Ottonian authors, the concept can be seen in an exact contemporary, Gerbert of Aurillac. In a letter dated 985, Gerbert speaks of a *colloquium dominarum*, a gathering of ladies.³⁶ Often explained by historians who imagine the term designates a meeting of all queens, duchesses and abbesses of Western Europe, it is probable that the term refers to nothing other than the June 985 assembly in Frankfurt,³⁷ which corroborates the notion of sovereignty attributed to Adelaide, Theophanu and Matilda.

³¹ Sonnleitner 1987: 119.

³² *Annals of Quedlinburg*, 913 : 454, *Domina Oda, mater scilicet ipsius, obiit anno CVII. vitae suae.*

³³ Sonnleitner 1987: 113.

³⁴ *Annals of Quedlinburg*, 986: 476, *Ida quoque regalis domina, conrectalis Ludolfi filii magni Ottonis imperatoris, obiit.*

³⁵ For example, *Annals of Quedlinburg*, 986: 476, *a Mechtilde, imperiali gemma et filia*; 999: 507, *domina regali Sophia*; see previous note for Ida.

³⁶ Gerbert d'Aurillac, letter 62: 156-158.

³⁷ MacLean 2017: 166 ff.

At the death of Otto II, his mother, his widow and his sister were thus exercising a kind of collective queenship, based on the respective positions of these women in the Ottonian family at one moment in its history. The crisis indeed occurred at a point of greater openness to power-sharing among the members of the dynasty. As we have said, since the end of the reign of Otto I, the emperor had been advancing a family-based conception of power. Together the members of the family participated in representing power and in governing the empire. Things had reached a particular pass in 983 when, with the exception of Henry the Quarrelsome, the close relatives of the emperor were all women. This unprecedented situation, even more than the gender of the protagonists, explains the access to power of Adelaide, Theophanu, and Matilda. But once they had it, they used it following female codes, with the possible exception of Theophanu.

This situation may be compared, on a smaller scale, to the end of the reign of Charlemagne. The old emperor did not remarry after the death of his wife Liutgarde in 800. Until his death in 814, his elder daughters exercised a kind of collective queenship by his side.³⁸ Still, there is a fundamental distinction in that Charlemagne's daughters' power was broadly informal, whereas the power of the *dominae imperiales* was for the most part institutionalized – in keeping with the evolution of queenship in the period.

Collective female power?

If, during the crisis of 984-985, the *dominae imperiales* worked together in the interests of Otto III, that unity was short-lived. Adelaide was in the background from 985-991, the date of the death of Theophanu. Matilda seems to have retired to Quedlinburg, where she worked on her deceased brother's memorials. She had a new church built in his honor in 986.³⁹ So, between 985 and 991 the distribution of power was more traditional: the abbess in her convent took care of the liturgical memory of the family, while the empress-mother, Theophanu, was a regent of sorts for her son. Theophanu seems to have attempted to take over the collective authority of the

³⁸ Nelson 1998.

³⁹ *Annals of Quedlinburg*, 986: 476.

dominae imperiales in 990. In Ravenna, she is referred to in a document as “august emperor Theophane”,⁴⁰ in the masculine, doubtless a form of competition with Adelaide.⁴¹

Theophanu’s death disrupted this scenario. Adelaide and Matilda reappear at the same time in edicts, placing them again in the circle of Otto III in 991,⁴² where they had not appeared since 987. Between 991 and 997, Matilda regularly appears in the decrees of her nephew, and not merely in those that concerned her. From that time on, she was therefore an intermediary between the king and his nobles. Beyond this, when Otto III went to Italy between 997 and 999, it was Matilda who took the reins of power in Germany. The *Annals of Quedlinburg*, always ready to praise Matilda, now speak of her as “vice-empress”,⁴³ and draw attention to her royal virtues, especially her skill at keeping the peace so as to consolidate the foundations of the Empire.⁴⁴ Although they are partial to Matilda, the *Annals* are supported by a fragment of the *Annals of Hildesheim*,⁴⁵ as well as by Matilda’s own epitaph which affirms that “her nephew, the Emperor Otto, placed her at the head of the Saxons as *matricia* when he went to Italy”.⁴⁶ The extremely rare expression *matricia* is the only trace of an official title given to Matilda. It must be the feminine equivalent of *patricius*, a Roman term designating a representative of the emperor in his absence, that came back into fashion under Otto III.⁴⁷ Until this time, only dukes or archbishops had been called upon to fulfill this function.⁴⁸ The existence of the title

⁴⁰ DD Theophanu 2.

⁴¹ MacLean 2017: 175-176.

⁴² DD OIII, 77: joint action of Adelaide et Matilda at the end of 991.

⁴³ *Annals of Quedlinburg*, 999: 500, *Haec fratruel suo, largo scilicet Ottone, Romam proficiscente imperatoria vice commissa sibi regna...*

⁴⁴ *Annals of Quedlinburg*, 999: 500-501.

⁴⁵ *Annals of Hildesheim*, 997: 27, *Imperator quoque, ut Romanorum sentinam purgaret, Italiam perexit, summa rerum dominae Matildae, amite suae, Quidilingaburgensi abbatissae, delegata; in qua ultra sexum mira prudentia enituit.* [The emperor, cleaning the dregs of the Romans, arrived in Italy having put ongoing business into the hands of his aunt, Matilda, abbess of Quedlinburg. She had astounding wisdom far beyond her sex.]

⁴⁶ Stengel 1939.

⁴⁷ Stengel 1939.

⁴⁸ Althoff 1991: 137.

matricia is significant in that official titles show the participation of individuals, in this case of women, in power.⁴⁹ There is no equivalent in the actual decrees of Otto III. There, Matilda is always addressed as “dear aunt” (*caraldilecta amita*). That is a traditional view of female power based on her position in the family. The same is true for Adelaide or Theophanu. If the decrees seem like a sort of conservatory of norms of gender, Matilda’s epitaph is, on the other hand, a form of posthumous recognition, perhaps by Otto III himself, of the essential role the abbess played in the government of the empire from the 960s until her death.

In this way, by their position and thanks to their victory against Henry the Quarrelsome, the grandmother, mother, and aunt of Otto III exercised power, together or separately, between 983 and the 990s. This context and these models were present for Otto III’s sisters as they were growing up.

The sisters of Otto III (990-1002)

Otto III⁵⁰ was the youngest child of Otto II and Theophanu, being born in 980. He had three older sisters, although the order of their birth is uncertain.⁵¹ According to the *Annals of Quedlinburg*, which is a highly respected source on this matter, Adelaide was born in 977, and Sophia was the oldest, doubtless born in 975. A final daughter, Matilda, was born in 978. She would become the wife of the Count Palatine Ezzo;⁵² Ottonian sources seldom mention her.

Sophia of Gandersheim, another princess trained in the exercise of power

The bibliography concerning Sophia is considerable and often biased. She is best known from the writings of her enemies in the Gandersheim dispute, which saw the bishop of Mainz and the abbess of Gandersheim opposed to the bishop of Hildesheim.⁵³ The negative portrait in the Hildesheim sources is however contradicted by most other Ottonian documents.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Bühner-Thierry 2018: 111.

⁵⁰ Pert 1958; Wolf 1995.

⁵¹ *Annals of Quedlinburg*, 999: 507, *domina regale Sophia, sorrel sua maiore...*

⁵² Leleu 2015.

⁵³ For a summary of the dispute, see Perst 1957.

⁵⁴ Sonnleitner 1990: 376.

Like Matilda in the 860s, Sophia was consciously encouraged by her parents, particularly her mother. By 979, she was placed in Gandersheim Abbey with Theophanu's consent.⁵⁵ In 987,⁵⁶ she was to receive the nun's veil at Gandersheim, but refused to accept it from the hand of Bishop Bernward of Hildesheim, her metropolitan bishop, and insisted on being consecrated by Bishop Willigis of Mainz, who bore the prestigious *pallium*. The issue here was doubtless to preserve Gandersheim's independence,⁵⁷ but perhaps as well to follow the important precedent of Matilda of Quedlinburg who had been consecrated with much pomp in 966.⁵⁸ Although the Hildesheim sources describe this episode as the caprice of an arrogant princess, it would be better to see here a conscious desire to assure the young woman's status. Theophanu, at that moment the most powerful of the *dominae imperiales*, must have been at the root of that decision.

Theophanu in fact actively promoted her daughter. Sophia's first appearance in documents is at her mother's side in 990.⁵⁹ A year later, on her deathbed, Theophanu demanded that her lands in Eschwege pass to Sophia. The donation took place in 994.⁶⁰ Eschwege was part of the dowry Otto II had given Theophanu, marking it as land associated with the status of the queen and female power.⁶¹ Several documents associated with Theophanu, including her marriage contract, are preserved in Gandersheim. Sophia seems also to have inherited the empress's archives in 991.⁶² Finally, it should be apparent that Sophia had been given a Byzantine name, the name of Theophanu's mother, in defiance of Ottonian onomastic traditions, which avoided giving children names associated with other lineages.

This insistence on Sophia's status bore fruit, since she was the person closest to her brother Otto III between 993 and 997. During this period, she appears as intercessor or beneficiary in more than

⁵⁵ DD OII, 201.

⁵⁶ For the date, see Perst 1957: 9-10.

⁵⁷ Perst 1957: 12.

⁵⁸ Leyser 1979: 50; Althoff 1991: 131.

⁵⁹ DD OIII, 66 et 67.

⁶⁰ DD OIII, 146.

⁶¹ Föbel 2011: 97; Bühner-Thierry 2018: 115-116.

⁶² Goetting 1953: 42-43.

ten per cent of the emperor's decrees, usually directed at bishops, high nobles, and empresses.⁶³ Sophia rarely appears as *sanctimonialia* [nun] in decrees (as was the case in her earliest actions),⁶⁴ but rather as the *soror dilectissima* [beloved sister] of Otto. This is also the period of the progressive retreat from political affairs of Adelaide, the grandmother of Otto and Sophia.⁶⁵ Sophia went so far as to accompany her brother to Rome where he was crowned as emperor in 996. She was the only woman of the family to go to Italy on that occasion and is referred to as *domina* in a decree signed in Cremona.⁶⁶ In the absence of an empress, Sophia seems to have fulfilled the role at the emperor's side traditionally taken by the empress. At the start of the thirteenth century, the chronicler Eberhard, while investigating the origins of the Gandersheim Abbey from about the year 1000 for its current abbess, affirms as much.⁶⁷ He says that Otto chose Sophia to govern the Empire at his side and that she was like a queen.⁶⁸ This statement was long treated as an exaggeration or even pure invention. However, Eberhard's account is based on Latin sources that were surely contemporary with the period when Sophia was abbess of Gandersheim,⁶⁹ so his comments can be taken as a distant echo of the way Sophia represented her own power, or how she had it represented in a source like the Quedlinburg *Annals*. In Italy, by inserting herself into a dispute between the bishop of Cremona and the townsfolk, she followed the model provided by her mother and grandmother,⁷⁰ participating fully along the lines of female imperial power.

Although Sophia's influence came primarily from her position in the Ottonian family, she was not simply dependent on her brother, but also created an independent network mostly around Willigis of Mainz.⁷¹ This caused a certain amount of friction with the other

⁶³ Föbel 2011: 95.

⁶⁴ Föbel: 103.

⁶⁵ Föbel: 99.

⁶⁶ DD OIII, 191: 599, *petitione dominae Sophiae dilectissimae sororis nostrae*.

⁶⁷ For the history of the rhymed chronicle of Gandersheim, see Riviello 2000.

⁶⁸ Eberhard 1877, *Reimchronik*, ca 1840 (*dat se mit eme des rikes eine wile plege*) and circa 1845 (*mit eme vor se einer königinnen gelike*).

⁶⁹ Riviello 2000: 256.

⁷⁰ Föbel 2011: 104.

⁷¹ Föbel 2011: 98; Greer 2018.

important element of the court, represented by Matilda of Quedlinburg and the bishop of Hildesheim (hostile to Sophia and Willigis since the affair of the consecration of Sophia). Therefore, in 996, when there was a vacancy to be filled in the bishopric of Cambrai, Matilda and Sophia each, as a mark of her own political influence, tried to have her own candidate placed on the bishop's throne.⁷² This can be read as a sign of conflict between generations, but also between Gandersheim and Quedlinburg for imperial favor.⁷³ At the same time, this conflict should not be over-interpreted: in 995, Sophia and Matilda both came to Otto's side.⁷⁴

From 997 on, however, for reasons that remain unknown, Sophia disappears from imperial sources; Otto chose Matilda of Quedlinburg as *matricia*.

A new generation of dominae imperiales

The end of the 990s also saw the rise of another of Otto III's sisters, Adelaide. In 984, Henry the Quarrelsome had taken her prisoner, no doubt to suppress the demands of the *dominae imperiales*.⁷⁵ Adelaide seems not to have been intended for the religious life: she did not become a nun until 995, at the relatively advanced age of eighteen. This might be explained by the fact that her consecration followed a period of general disorder and that she was a sort of propitiatory offering,⁷⁶ another sign that the Ottonians, especially those in religious orders, were included in royal sanctity. This is reinforced by the fact that Adelaide appears in her brother's decrees only from 995 on, exactly the time of her entry into the convent.⁷⁷

The notion that she had not been raised to be an abbess is supported by a note in a Terence manuscript copied in Gandersheim. At folio 112v, in a late tenth-century hand, we read: "Adelaide, Hadwige, Matilda, young ladies of the court united in friendship".⁷⁸

⁷² *Gesta episcoporum Cameracensium*, I, 100.

⁷³ Althoff 1991: 126-127.

⁷⁴ DD OIII, 179.

⁷⁵ Thietmar of Merseburg, IV, 3; Jestic 2018: 222.

⁷⁶ Leyser 1979: 89. For a later treatment of this idea and of the importance the *Annals of Quedlinburg* ascribed to this consecration at the start of the eleventh century, see Leleu 2020.

⁷⁷ DD OIII, 175 and 177.

⁷⁸ Villa 1984: 101-104.

Hadwige can be identified as the duchess of Swabia, sister of Henry the Quarrelsome and of Gerberga, abbess of Gandersheim. The Adelaide and Matilda referred to are probably the sisters of Otto III. They were apparently raised together in the second half of the 980s, but not together with Sophia, although she was also at Gandersheim. Sophia's younger sisters seem therefore to have been destined for a different career. Perhaps Theophanu hoped to marry Adelaide into a foreign royal family.⁷⁹

Matilda of Quedlinburg and the old Empress Adelaide both died in 999. Starting in the following year, the *Annals of Quedlinburg* speak of both Sophia and Adelaide (who became her aunt's successor as abbess of Quedlinburg) as *dominae imperiales*, an expression not used since 985:

Once he [Otto III] crossed the obstacle of the Alps, all Gaul, Francia, Swabia, horsemen and foot soldiers, rushed to meet him as soon as he set foot in those regions. So too the *dominae imperiales*, his sisters Sophia and Adelaide, came to him along with the nobles of both sexes from Saxony and Thuringia. As they loved him with a special love and well-earned affection, they greeted him, as I report, laughing and with unanimous expressions of joy and stayed with him with appropriate affection.⁸⁰

It is likely that the sisters, as had their aunt previously, exercised power in Otto III's absence. The passage quoted above takes place when the emperor returned from Italy. The *Annals of Quedlinburg* make an explicit connection, by the use of this expression, between the powerful *dominae* of 984-985, since deceased, and Otto III's sisters.

Still, around the year 1000, it was no longer Sophia but Adelaide who was closest to Otto. She received two gifts from her brother in

⁷⁹ Leleu 2015: 75.

⁸⁰ *Annals of Quedlinburg*, 1000: 510, *Transcensa vero Alpium difficultate, ut primo hisce partibus pedem inferre potuit, tota ei Gallia, Francia, Suevia, equestri et pedestri agmine turmatim obviam ruit. Dominae etyma imperiales, germanae suae sorores, Sophia et Adelheida, cum Saxoniae et Thuringiae utriusque sexus primis occurrendo, velut unicum unice dilectum ac merito diligendum, ipso, ut ita dicam, corridente mundo unanimi gratulatione suscipiunt ac cum eo pariter (...) debita caritate morantur.*

999.⁸¹ Otto celebrated Easter in Quedlinburg in 1000, and Adelaide followed him as far as Aachen, where she was no doubt at his side at the opening of Charlemagne's tomb.⁸² This new equilibrium seems to correspond to developments among the forces present at the imperial court. Starting in 997, the group led by Sophia and Willigis of Mainz lost influence. Willigis ceases to be mentioned in imperial decrees at the same time as Sophia,⁸³ being replaced, as it were, by their enemy Bernward of Hildesheim and the abbess of Quedlinburg. We may perhaps also imagine the *Annals of Quedlinburg* to be biased towards Adelaide, to the detriment of Sophia and the rival institution, Gandersheim.

However, Adelaide did not have time to enjoy the role her elder sister had played at Otto's side, since he died young and without an heir in 1002. In this critical situation, Sophia and Adelaide, once again termed *dominae imperiales* in the language of the *Annals of Quedlinburg*, had an essential role to play in the transmission of power:

The daughters, *dominae imperiales*, Sophia and Adelaide, accepted this new title [given by Henry II, the chosen king] with due deference, showing as much affection as they could. They celebrated with their cousin the king – it was not possible to call him their brother. Taking them along with all due honor, he returned to his wife Cunegond and went to the city of Paderborn. [...] On the feast of Saint Laurence the Martyr, Cunegond was crowned queen and Sophia, as imperial daughter, was given the Abbey of Gandersheim.⁸⁴

The two sisters brought with them the consent of the nobles and recognized Henry II, who in exchange granted Sophia the Abbey of Gandersheim, Gerberga, its elderly abbess, having died a few weeks

⁸¹ DD OIII, 321 et 322.

⁸² *Annals of Quedlinburg*, 1000; Perst 1957: 23.

⁸³ Eckhardt 1957: 71.

⁸⁴ *Annals of Quedlinburg*, 1002: 519, *Dominae quee imperiales filiae, Sophia et Adelbeida, honorifice tanti nominis novitatem excipientes quanta potuerunt caritate occurrerunt. Congaudent regi nepoti, quia non licuit fratri. Quas secum digno honore ducens, Cunigunda contectali sua una secum comitante Patherbrunensem ventum est civitatem. (...) In natali autem sancti martyris Laurentii imponitur corona benedictionis Cunigundae reginae, datur etiam Sophiae, imperatoris filiae, abbatiae benedictio Gandeshemensis.*

earlier. In this setting, Sophia and Adelaide appear as representatives of the imperial family, and Sophia's consecration was no doubt one of the conditions for the two sisters' support of Henry. She was consecrated at the same time as Cunegond was crowned, a sign of royal approval.⁸⁵ That did not last long though. Henry had a wife and developed a new ideology of feminine power centered on a marital view of queenship.⁸⁶ Although they were kept far from the effective exercise of power, the two abbesses nonetheless remained among the most important people in the Holy Roman Empire. They were present in 1012 at the consecration of Bamberg cathedral, one of Henry II's principal projects. When they appear in the new sovereign's decrees, he speaks of them systematically as sisters (*sorores*)⁸⁷ no doubt to affirm his connection to the previous emperor via the latter's sisters. The legitimacy of the two abbesses continued to be recognized even when they were no longer at the heart of power. They seem to have been reluctant to accept this relegation: the *Annals of Quedlinburg* were written at just this time, at the start of the reign of Henry II, to remind the sovereign of the abbey's place in the Empire and in the dynasty's history. Even more, by its focus on the role of the *dominae* in the transmission of power to the younger branch, its female author reminds the sovereign that he is in a certain sense less legitimate than his predecessor. This is no doubt how we are to understand the expression "it was not possible to say that he was their brother" in the passage quoted above. Moreover, the *Annals of Magdeburg*, in a passage very likely copied from a lost section of the Quedlinburg *Annals*, affirm that Otto III was the last of his line.⁸⁸ At the start of the eleventh century, facing the loss of her power, Abbess Adelaide therefore tried to remind Henry that the *dominae imperiales* were a part of the consecrated nature of royalty by dint of their Ottonian inheritance.

The final eviction of Otto's sisters implicated them in a dynastic crisis that was reminiscent of the events at the end of the 970s in

⁸⁵ Greer 2018: 15.

⁸⁶ MacLean 2017: 205.

⁸⁷ DD HII, 205, 206 (in 1009, Sophia), 279 (in 1012, Adelaide et Sophia), 323 (in 1014, Sophia), 444 (in 1021, Sophia).

⁸⁸ *Annals of Quedlinburg*, 980: 346-347, *Otto, tercius nominis ac culminis clausula imperatorii...*

England: Edith, a nun at Wilton and the sister of kings Edward and Ethelred, intervened directly, along with her allies, in the disputes regarding the royal succession in 975 and 978.⁸⁹ She demanded to be addressed as *regalis adelpha*, “royal sister” on her seal. The staging of her status prefigures in a sense that of the Ottonian sisters. The end of the tenth century seems then to have been a particularly propitious period for the power of nuns belonging to the ruling family, but these tendencies were most strongly expressed in Germany, where they resulted in the greatest actual participation of women.

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In this light it is appropriate to reevaluate the role and the career of the Ottonian abbesses, in particular Matilda of Quedlinburg and Sophia of Gandersheim. From their earliest years, they were trained to support the power of the men of their family, something until then unheard of, although it was perhaps inspired by Byzantium. Their power came from their position as nuns and abbesses, their exclusion from matrimonial strategies, and their explicit inclusion in a familial form of government. Adelaide of Quedlinburg was also part of this system, but only when she was somewhat older. Between 983 and 1002, in the absence of an imperial consort, various *dominae imperiales* found a place beside the emperor. First the trio made up of Adelaide of Burgundy, Theophanu and Matilda. Then, until her death in 991, Theophanu alone represented female power. She prepared her daughter Sophia, who became the essential figure of power between 994 and 997. Matilda returned to the leading role once more between 997 and 999, and Adelaide was her successor. The coming of Henry II changed this fundamentally, as the *dominae* no longer benefited from their proximity to the king⁹⁰ and were replaced by an empress. These two decades were therefore a special period in Ottonian history which the female author of the *Annals of Quedlinburg* viewed with nostalgia. We should also stress that this

⁸⁹ Yorke 1998.

⁹⁰ Althoff 1991: 134-135.

configuration was a feature of Ottonian Germany. The association of the women to the dynasty was not as strong either in the Carolingian Empire, nor in Saxon kingdoms, even though there were similar situations.

In the eleventh century, several of the daughters of Ezzo of Lothringia and his wife Matilda, the last sister of Otto III, became powerful abbesses. Did they benefit from the model left by the aunts who had raised them? One might also wonder about the role of other Ottonian women in this system. Even if Matilda of Essen (granddaughter of Otto I) and Gerberga of Gandersheim (sister of Henry the Quarrelsome) were never referred to as *dominae imperiales*, they were abbesses who regularly had a place in the imperial entourage starting in the 960s, contemporary with Matilda of Quedlinburg.

Sources

MGH: Monumenta Germaniae Historica

Sub-sections:

SSRG: Scriptorum rerum Germanicarum

SSRG N.S.: Scriptorum rerum Germanicarum, Nova series

Dt. Chron.: Deutsche Chroniken

SS: Scriptorum (in folio format)

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