



*Kingship and Justice in the
Ottonian Empire*

Laura E. Wangerin

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“**T**he world of the tenth century is, or ought to be, strange to us”: thus Karl Leyser begins *Rule and Conflict in an Early Medieval Society* (1979), his great analysis of the Ottonians. The Ottonian dynasty began with Henry I in AD 919, and continued under the next four emperors—the three Ottos and Henry II (d. 1024). They and their wives ruled the territory covered by present-day Germany as well as parts of the Netherlands, France, Italy, and Switzerland. Although lasting only just over one hundred years, the dynasty shaped medieval Europe. Like Leyser, Laura E. Wangerin challenges the reader to perceive that period as of its time, not of ours.

The author queries much of early modern, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century German scholarship, which “set Germany on a special path toward its own modern state idiom” (4). While largely true, the author, however, may have forgotten Geoffrey Barraclough’s *Origins of Modern Germany* (1946), which argued that in its early centuries Germany was an ordinary medieval kingdom. The *Sonderweg* (“special path”) “is inherently teleological and assumes that the medieval mind appreciated modern governmental apparatuses as superior to their own state,” a proposition that Wangerin questions (4). She is more enthusiastic about Ottonian studies of the 1970s and 1980s, whose authors address ritual behaviour and the relationship between kings and their nobles. Wangerin asserts that, contrary to common parlance, the Ottonians were shrewd rulers and administrators who used various, but not always traditional, tools to govern their vast empire.

Ottonian governance contained both analogous and unique characteristics as compared with other dynasties. The *iter* was similar to some governing processes of the Merovingian, Carolingian, and Anglo-Saxon courts. The Ottonian court, however, was the most consistently and deliberately itinerant. Its rulers considered the “distributed” court its strength. The *iter* brought the Ottonian court to the important towns in the duchies and therefore to the leading men—the bishops, archbishops, margraves, counts and other nobles. The *Königsnähe* (the proximity to the king) won prestige, privileges, and offices.

Ottonian rulership structures are often considered to be poorly documented and lacking in organized legal processes. Although the Ottonians did not write their laws in capitularies (decrees of the Carolingian rulers of West Francia), Wangerin argues convincingly that orders, decisions, and legal changes for feuding activities, trading, and dispute resolution of all the

Ottonian rulers were clearly recorded with signatures of the rulers and witnesses in their many *diplomata* (charters). Disruptive disputes were settled formally by feud, duelling, or by negotiation. The rituals of repentance were recorded in contemporary annals, chronicles, and histories. The presence and activities of the *missi* (royal/imperial agents), highly visible and organized in Charlemagne's day, appear in certain Ottonian *diplomata*. Consequently, the author argues for strong and conscious governing structures for the Ottonian dynasty, although not normally formalized in written legislature.

Wangerin also deals with the relationship between ecclesiastical and royal power. She examines the episcopal and abbatial elections and the key roles of the bishops in managing their territories and undertaking judicial duties, before the Investiture Contest in the eleventh century severely weakened the link between the church and lay rulers. Ottonian bishops operated in dual roles as bishop and lord. One example is Brun, Otto I's youngest brother, who held concurrently the two positions of Archbishop of Cologne and Duke of Lotharingia. Bishops, as well as lay people, were important too in providing arms and men in battle in support of the king/emperor. Wangerin emphasises the frequent use of immunities, especially for ecclesiastical centres, as a strong distributed tool of government, rather than a weakness. Therefore many *placita*, specifying laws, were not needed in Germanic lands. In contrast, the Anglo-Saxons sought to centralize kingship and created a large number of law codes because of their violent and endemic feuding culture. The Byzantines too had a strong legislative tradition. Nevertheless, the Ottonians wrote *placita* to govern Italy, because of a long history of corruption and a disputing culture there.

The visual depiction of kingship in contemporary manuscripts of the Ottonian kings/emperors, their use of *adventus* and *laudes*, and other public gestures made important statements about kingship and law. Wangerin proposes that the Ottonians eschewed Old Testament images and presented an ideal of sacral kingship; they saw themselves as direct mediators between Christ and their subjects and as dispensers of justice. The reader, however, should recall the images of the Old Testament kings on the Ottonian Imperial crown.

The Ottonians had two sources of income: the silver mines in the Harz Mountains, and tribute from a number of conquered tribes. Such wealth gave them the ability to finance their lifestyles and military campaigns for the next 200 years into the next dynasty; it also enhanced their power. For all these reasons the author proposes that the Ottonians did not need an extensive separate written legislation to control their kingdoms, except in Italy.

Throughout her book, Wangerin contrasts the Ottonians with their predecessors and other contemporaries. The Ottonians were well aware of the

operations of their neighbours, and chose “decentralized, extralegal, and sacralized structures”—a complex system that was neither exceptional nor regressive—which worked within their tenth-century world (193).

Wangerin has argued well for the Ottonians’ conscious use of networked social relationships and decentralized/distributed scattered networks as a plausible explanation for their lack of certain written legislation. Her English and German references are wide-ranging. She has included a detailed and thorough index and well-laid out arguments. She clarifies and puts in context terms such as Holy Roman Empire, East and West Francia, and reminds us that the period is pre-state, in contrast with our understanding of the state today. Her comparisons with other kingdoms is another reminder that each operated differently, but not necessarily with less effectiveness. The Middle Ages is not one amorphous undifferentiated lump.

Wangerin titled her book *Kingship and Justice*, and she has a right to concentrate on the kings and their activities and concerns. Undoubtedly, the Ottonians employed bishops to resolve disputes, as the author persuasively argues. Nevertheless, I have a concern. In introducing the monasteries and their leaders and the roles that they played in carrying out the ruler’s wishes she includes the abbots but omits the names and roles of abbesses. Especially in Germany, the abbesses and the canonesses provided key connections to, and acted as intercessors with, the king/emperor. The powerful Ottonian empresses and queens were also critical to the successful operation of the empire in Germany and Italy, not only during their respective husbands’ lives, but also during the twelve years between the death of Otto II and the coming-of-age of Otto III. Arguably, their contribution to Ottonian kingship and justice could have been emphasised more and used in more examples.

The author successfully places her actors in context and argues cogently that the Ottonians consciously created a more structured governing apparatus than is commonly attributed to them. I particularly liked how she compared the ruling methods of the Ottonians with those of the Merovingians, Carolingians, Anglo-Saxons, and Byzantines throughout the book, an analysis that is seen all too rarely.

Wangerin has written a detailed, well-researched, thoughtful, and interesting book, well-placed in context, suitable for students and researchers of the Ottonians and for readers who wish to step outside the more frequently studied worlds of the earlier and later medieval periods.

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