

Imperial Ladies of the Ottonian Dynasty: Women and Rule in Tenth-Century Germany, by Phyllis G. Jestice. Queenship and Power. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. Pp. xi, 300. ISBN 9783319773056; E-ISBN 9783319773063.

In *Imperial Ladies of the Ottonian Dynasty*, Phyllis G. Jestice argues that Ottonian women acquired positions of great authority in the Holy Roman Empire, both because kinship ensured their loyalty and because their male relatives deliberately gave them the public status and personal wealth to become powerful figures in the *Reich*. Although the book focuses on two women—Adelheid of Burgundy, the wife of Otto I, and Theophanu, wife of Otto II—the sisters and daughters of the Ottonian emperors occasionally come into focus as well. Drawing from diplomas, letters, narratives, and hagiography, Jestice seeks to explain how Adelheid and Theophanu acquired power—specifically, the power to fend off an adult male challenger, Henry the Quarrelsome, in his bid to become regent for the child-king Otto III.

The first chapter is an overview of the book's structure and arguments. The second lays out the status of women generally, and of elite women in particular, in tenth-century Germany. In the third, Jestice argues that one of the central factors in Adelheid's and Theophanu's success was that they were foreign brides, brought into the Ottonian dynasty in "prestige marriages" that bolstered the dynasty's status both within and outside the empire. Chapter 4 makes the case for one of Jestice's fundamental arguments: that Ottonian women's extensive wealth was conferred upon them in order to enhance their authority. To make this case, she reads royal diplomas carefully to demonstrate that empresses and other imperial women could, for example, alienate property, including property received as dowry.

The fifth chapter explores the anointing of empresses and the sacral status it conferred. Importantly, Jestice argues that although anointing itself depended on marriage (women not married to emperors were not anointed), it created a relationship between God and the empress that was independent of her status as wife. Jestice also notes that membership in the imperial dynasty itself conferred an elevated status, so that the emperor's sisters and daughters could be considered "imperial ladies" just as his wife was.

Chapter 6 addresses piety as a source of power. Noting the Ottonian dynasty's emphasis on founding and endowing houses of canoneses—rather than nunneries, or even male monasteries or cathedral chapters—Jestice argues for a link between imperial female piety and the preservation of dynastic memory.

Chapter 7 argues that imperial women used both their own resources and their closeness to the reigning monarch to assist not only their relatives, but also their friends and supporters. These patronage networks can also be traced through interventions, a diplomatic formulation in which the king or emperor made a grant “by the intervention of” a female relative. Jestice rightly relates this to the familiar queenly trope of intercession.

In chapter 8, Jestice argues that *consortium regni*—the queen or empress’s “sharing” in her husband’s or son’s rule—is not an empty formulation but an accurate depiction of Ottonian women’s role. Chapter 9 focuses on the contest over the regency of the boy-king Otto III, a contest in which his mother and grandmother ultimately emerged victorious over a male rival, Henry the Quarrelsome. Finally, the tenth chapter addresses the regencies themselves, assessing what kind of authority Adelheid and Theophanu wielded and how their contemporaries viewed that authority.

The book makes thoughtful use of documentary evidence and offers an important contribution to the history of the Ottonian Empire by foregrounding, and analyzing, the roles of imperial women. It comes at a time of significant advances in the study of early medieval queens—most relevantly, Penelope Nash’s *Empress Adelheid and Countess Matilda* (Palgrave, 2017) and Simon MacLean’s *Ottonian Queenship* (Oxford, 2017). Jestice cites these books, but only in passing, as might be expected given that they were published so shortly before hers. It is harder to explain why she does not cite Nash’s or MacLean’s earlier work. In general, there is little suggestion of familiarity with the historiography on queenship over the last ten years, though this has been an extraordinarily productive period in the field. As a result, even secondary sources that could have bolstered Jestice’s arguments (on co-rule, for example, or on whether rights and titles accorded to women in diplomas indicate genuine authority) are neglected. Meanwhile, the book repeats old tropes that have been undermined by recent scholarship, such as the idea that women experienced a precipitous decline in status during the twelfth century. Theresa Earenfight’s 2013 overview of the field, *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (Macmillan), could have served to correct such deficiencies, but it is cited only in passing.

Readers of *MFF* may be surprised, as I was, that in the epilogue Jestice disavows any intention to write “conventional women’s history” and rejects the label of women’s history entirely except inasmuch as “[the book’s] main characters are women.” Rather, she writes, this is a study of “the nature of Ottonian rule itself” (269), which happened to include substantial roles for women. These distinctions are difficult to parse. Jestice’s effort to distance her work from

“conventional women’s history” seems to speak to an enduring anxiety among historians that studies of women will be dismissed as something other than “real” history. But it is precisely such antiquated and artificial distinctions that books like this one help to remove.

Janna Bianchini
University of Maryland, College Park