The Christian Commonwealth of Otto III

Walker

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/masters_theses

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/masters_theses/2695

This Masters Thesis-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In writing this thesis, I have benefited from the encouragement and constructive criticism of Professor John Sommerfeldt of the Medieval Institute at Western Michigan University. His patience and scholarly advice greatly facilitated the writing of this paper under difficult circumstances. I would also like to mention Professor Leon Linderoth of Lake Superior State College, whose periodic queries into the status of the paper hastened its completion. I also wish to acknowledge the fine work of my typist and proof-reader, Cathy Maurer, of the Medieval Institute. These people along with my many friends in the Department of History at Western Michigan University have been most generous with their time and interest and I am very grateful. Their suggestions and criticisms have made this a better paper than it might otherwise have been and certainly they are not responsible for its shortcomings.

James E. Walker
INFORMATION TO USERS

This material was produced from a microfilm copy of the original document. While the most advanced technological means to photograph and reproduce this document have been used, the quality is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original submitted.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help you understand markings or patterns which may appear on this reproduction.

1. The sign or “target” for pages apparently lacking from the document photographed is “Missing Page(s)”. If it was possible to obtain the missing page(s) or section, they are spliced into the film along with adjacent pages. This may have necessitated cutting thru an image and duplicating adjacent pages to insure you complete continuity.

2. When an image on the film is obliterated with a large round black mark, it is an indication that the photographer suspected that the copy may have moved during exposure and thus cause a blurred image. You will find a good image of the page in the adjacent frame.

3. When a map, drawing or chart, etc., was part of the material being photographed the photographer followed a definite method in “sectioning” the material. It is customary to begin photoing at the upper left hand corner of a large sheet and to continue photoing from left to right in equal sections with a small overlap. If necessary, sectioning is continued again — beginning below the first row and continuing on until complete.

4. The majority of users indicate that the textual content is of greatest value, however, a somewhat higher quality reproduction could be made from “photographs” if essential to the understanding of the dissertation. Silver prints of “photographs” may be ordered at additional charge by writing the Order Department, giving the catalog number, title, author and specific pages you wish reproduced.

5. PLEASE NOTE: Some pages may have indistinct print. Filmed as received.

Xerox University Microfilms
300 North Zeeb Road
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>THE IDEAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>THE ENTRY OF POLAND 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>THE ENTRY OF HUNGARY 36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
INTRODUCTION

The problem of a strong united German nation has for centuries dominated the politics of central Europe. In times of weakness Germany has afforded an easy target for the ambitions of neighboring countries, and in times of strength Germany has threatened the very order of Europe. Historically, Germany originated out of a collection of tribal units which were united in the tenth century in a revived Roman Empire. The fledgling empire of Otto I was born in troubled times, and was formed from a Europe that lived in constant fear of invasion from the Magyars, Saracens, and Vikings. It is a tribute to the personal strength of Otto I and the institutions he created that this western empire could have survived as the major power in Europe well into the eleventh century.

Germany's defensive posture was based upon a tenuous unity that existed between the stem duchies which had come to represent tribal and regional interests. It was not uncommon for one of the dukes to defy the emperor, threatening a breakdown in the defensive position which invaders could quickly exploit. It is not surprising to note, therefore, that the reigns of Otto I and his successor Otto II were troubled constantly with invasions that sorely tested the German people. In 980, the Muslims invaded southern Italy threatening the Papal States and the Byzantine provinces in that area. With the Byzantine emperor engaged in defending his eastern borders, Otto II took up the defense of Christianity in the West. It was during an
expedition in Southern Italy that Otto II and his forces were surprised and completely destroyed by the Muslim invaders. Otto managed to escape, but died soon after returning to Germany.

The death of Otto II left a political vacuum within the empire. Without a male heir of age to assume the throne, the dynamic military progress that the empire had achieved in the previous thirty years halted. In fact, a series of retrenchments were necessary on the eastern borders due to the activity of Polish and Prussian tribes in that area.

A strong ruler was obviously needed to return the empire to its former position. Backed by powerful religious leaders within the country, the Empress Theophano moved to fill the void left by the death of Otto II. Her rule, which lasted for ten years (981-991), was to bring many changes to the empire. Theophano's concept of empire was Byzantine as she had been the niece of a Greek emperor before her betrothal to Otto II. Barely disguising her scorn for the style of the German court, Theophano initiated many changes into what she called "barbarian Germany."

Scandalizing the German nobles and their wives with her Eastern customs, such as bathing daily, Theophano also insisted upon retaining the rich silken garments of the Byzantine court. Considering the climate of northern Germany, the historian is compelled to admire her perseverance while at the same time speculating as to the price she paid in personal discomfort. One outspoken German nun went so far as to say that she had had a dream in which Theophano appeared in hell as
punishment for her many transgressions. Despite those that distrusted Theophano and her entourage, Eastern culture gradually permeated the German court. Under the influence of Theophano and such outstanding religious figures as Gerbert of Reims, Archbishop Willigis of Mainz, and Bishop Deitrich of Metz, the Empire's stance matured from one of calculated expansionism to one of champion of Christianity in the West. Intensifying the missionary effort begun earlier in eastern Europe, Theophano and her religious advisors took up the cross in an attempt to bring Christianity to the Poles, Magyars, and Bohemians, a policy not universally popular in Germany. This policy was well in motion when Theophano died in 991. She was followed in the regency by the grandmother of Otto III, the Dowager Empress Adelhaide. Adelhaide was an ineffective ruler dominated by the powerful Saxon noblemen who wished to eliminate Greek influence at the German court. Their efforts proved fruitless however, for the die had been cast and Germany would never again return to the era of Otto I.

The face of Europe had changed dramatically between 962, the date of the imperial coronation of Otto I, and 996 when Otto III was crowned as emperor and sole ruler of his peoples. During that time the Magyars had settled in the Danube basin and had united under

---

Prince Geza, the father of Stephen the Great. Under the influence of Byzantine culture\(^2\) and the German missionaries, the Magyar tribes took on a veneer of civilization that nevertheless did not detract from their skill on the battlefield. To the east lay the powerful and united country of Poland. In the years following Otto II's defeat in Italy, the Poles had been brought together by Boeslav the Brave, a leader fashioned in the same mold as Otto I. Boeslav desired papal recognition of his rule in Poland and for this reason was attempting to establish a diplomatic rapport with Rome and Otto III.

Far to the east lay the rapidly developing city-state of Kiev. United under Prince Svyatoslav in 967, Kiev posed an ever present threat to the Byzantine trade in southern Russia and the Balkans. Indeed, the power of Svyatoslav was such that in 971 the Greeks were forced to pay tribute in order to forestall an invasion. To the north King Olaf Trygveson was gradually solidifying his hold on Norway and his nation presented an inviting target for German missionary activity.

The Byzantine empire, suspicious of German intentions in eastern Europe, also intensified their missionary program in order to maintain their influence in that area. At the time of Otto III's coronation, the Greeks were also attempting to improve their colonial position in Southern Italy.

\(^2\)Byzantine missionaries had been present in the East European kingdoms for some time. For more information see, Francis Dvornik, Byzantine Missions Among the Slavs (New Brunswick, 1970).
Thus Otto III and his unique approach to the concept of empire was born into a political climate that was vastly different from the one faced by his grandfather. As we have noted before, young Otto had come under the influence of ideas that were foreign to the lifestyle of the German court. Steeped in Greek tradition by his mother Theophano, aroused to the past greatness of Rome and the Carolingian empire by the French scholar Gerbert, Otto was also imbued with a deep religious asceticism that was to give a peculiar religious mission to his politics. Armed with an idealism that carried with it a good understanding of the political realities of his time, Otto III ventured to create a policy unique in the feudal age in Europe.

Otto III envisioned an empire based upon international cooperation that would have as a binding force the Christian religion. This Christian commonwealth would transcend the boundaries of individual nations and would be governed by the supreme temporal authority of the emperor in close association with the supreme spiritual authority of the pope. This concept, made so fascinating by its presence in the turbulence of the tenth century, is the subject of this paper. In this study I will explore the methods by which Otto III and his brilliant contemporary Pope Sylvester II planned to deal with each nation in order to bring them under the influence of a Christian commonwealth.

Emphasis will be placed upon Poland and Hungary as the two nations that most actively participated in the Commonwealth. Secondary consideration will be given to other countries that appeared to be negotiating with the empire concerning future ties with the commonwealth.
There are many questions that must be dealt with in researching a concept as broad as a medieval Christian commonwealth. Was it really possible to weld the hostile nations of eastern Europe into a cohesive unit that could stand the test of time? What was the position of the Byzantine emperor regarding Otto III and his claim to hegemony in the Christian world? What was to be the pope's position in the commonwealth? There is much left to be researched and written on the reign of Otto III; it is hoped that this study will be useful in shedding some light on this neglected portion of German history.
CHAPTER I
THE IDEAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH

The desire for a return to the stability and peace of the Roman Empire forms a continuous thread throughout the middle ages. Medieval rulers constantly hearkened back to Rome for their authority in order to secure the legitimacy of their claim to the emperorship in the West. Pepin the Short, Charlemagne, and Otto I all attempted to resurrect the Roman imperial ideal that had been destroyed by the barbarian invasions.

While many medieval kings desired the title of emperor, their methods of obtaining it took different forms. In tracing the imperial concept of Otto III, we must first examine its antecedents in the early middle ages, for Otto's imperial concept was the result of a slow evolutionary process in which related ideas came together to form the concept of a Christian commonwealth.

The origins of the medieval imperial concept are rooted in the pre-Carolingian age, but the first intimations that the Saxon dynasty would be heir to the Roman tradition are found in the writings of Widukind of Corvey (925-?). Widukind refers in the Res gestae Saxonicae (Exploits of the Saxons) to three prerequisites for assuming the imperial office. The first of these is that an emperor must be a ruler who has authority over other kings. That Widukind considered

this qualification essential for an emperor is evident in the *Exploits of the Saxons* in which he makes use of such phrases as "a king who rules over other kings," and "Lord king and Emperor of many nations." The second requirement deemed necessary by Widukind was acclamation by the army. Obviously, this was a tradition rooted in the last years of the Roman Empire and Germanic kingship. This qualification took a distinct form in Ottonian Germany, for the emperor was in complete control only of those forces within his own duchy. Since the army of each duchy was under the direct control of a duke, it can be easily seen that control of these local rulers was necessary if the emperor was to obtain and maintain his position.

A third prerequisite to the title of emperor was papal coronation. As we will see, this was to become of paramount importance during the Saxon dynasty. Widukind and other scholars of the period accepted the tradition of papal coronation, as it had a precedent in the reigns of Pepin the Short, Charlemagne, and subsequent Carolingian rulers. However, the imperial concept of Widukind bears only a slight resemblance to the well developed ideal of Otto III. Otto III's imperial design placed him in direct line with the ancient Roman emperors. Widukind, however, referred to Otto I as a German emperor. As we have seen, Widukind's qualifications for imperial office, with the exception of the third, do not require any identity with the city of

4*ibid.*

5*ibid.*

Rome, and his concept of *imperium* is essentially "non-Roman."\(^7\)

Widukind's narrow concept of *imperium* was generally representative of German political thought in the early years of the reign of Otto I.\(^8\) But, as Otto's power increased and territory was added to the kingdom, it was natural that an expanded concept of German imperial power should also evolve.

The first writer who attempted to establish a relationship between the Saxon kings and the ancient Roman emperors was a nun, Hroswitha of Gandersheim (935-1001). Hroswitha wrote several plays, among them a biography of Otto I. In this biography, Hroswitha departed from a limited concept of a "King of the Saxons and Romans," and referred to Otto I in her dedication as "Ruler of the Empire of the Ceasars."\(^9\) It was her view that Otto's dignity as Roman emperor was greater than that of a German king and that the royal dignity was absorbed by the imperial dignity. It is in the writings of Hroswitha of Gandersheim that a direct relationship between Otto I and the Roman *imperium* is firmly proclaimed. In reading the biography, one is struck by the use of Roman titles to enhance the prestige of the empire. References are made to the *regnum Romanum*, *imperium Romanum*,

---

\(^7\)Brundage, "Widukind of Corvey," p. 15.

\(^8\)This view has been supported by Percy Schramm in *Kaiser, Rom und Renovatio* (Darmstadt, 1962), pp. 68-87.

imperium Ceasarianium, and Octavianum. By conferring upon Otto the Ceasarian and Augustan imperium, Hroswitha placed Otto I and his successors in direct line with the ancient Roman emperors.

Let us now examine a second element in Otto III's imperial design, that of a universal church under the leadership of the emperor. The roots of this concept are in the Roman past, but Otto III's desire to control the church had more immediate precedents. The traditional role of the emperor in dealing with the western church had been that of protector, and the church formally recognized this role by referring to the emperor as patricius. In the last years of the Roman empire when the provincial governors gained greater freedom from Rome, the title patricius became obscure and broadened to include those governors who ruled over a significant Christian population.

With the breakup of the western Roman empire the Church of Rome was left defenseless. The Roman church, left without protection for its vast holdings in Italy, appealed in A.D. 739 to Charles Martel, the power behind the throne in the declining kingdom of the Merovingians. In A.D. 754, Pepin the Short answered the renewed appeal of the pope by arranging a meeting between himself and the bishop of Rome, Stephen I. This meeting was to have a tremendous influence upon the destiny of the medieval empire. According to a chronicle of the Roman empire, Roman power, power of the Ceasars, and the empire of Octavian.

11James Bryce, The Holy Roman Empire, p. 40.
time Pepin

...agreed by taking an oath, satisfied the most blessed Pope that he would make every effort to obey all his commands and admonitions and, in accordance with the Pope's wishes, to restore the Exarchate of Ravenna and the rights or territories of the church by every means possible.\(^{13}\)

Thus the pope and Pepin had reached a fateful decision that would legitimize Pepin's rule of the Franks in exchange for rescuing the papal territories from the depredations of the Lombards. In A.D. 756, Pepin defeated the Lombards, was crowned king by the pope, and was formally recognized as the protector of the Church of Rome. The revival of the title of patricius was to be very important in subsequent dealings between the church and state in medieval Europe. Many ambitious emperors--Charlemagne being the most obvious example--were to interpret it's meaning in such a way as to justify their interference in church affairs.

In the early years of Otto I's (936-945) reign as king of the Germans, the papacy was controlled by powerful Roman families who turned the papal court into a center for intrigue. The chronicler Liudprand of Cremona wrote:

Berenger and Adalbert were reigning, or rather raging, in Italy, where, to speak the truth, they exercised the worst of tyrannies, when John, the supreme pontiff and universal pope, whose church had suffered from the savage cruelty of the aforesaid Berenger and Adalbert, sent envoys from the holy church of Rome, in the persons of the cardinal deacon John and the secretary Azo, to Otto, at that time the most supreme and pious king and now our august emperor, kindly begging him, for the love of God, to rescue him and the holy Roman church from their jaws, and

restore it to its former prosperity and freedom.14

Thus a Germanic king was called upon again to rescue the papacy. Otto I marched to Rome and after some difficulty wrested the papacy from the hands of Berenger and Adalbert. By rescuing the holy see and adding Italian territory to his realm, Otto's prestige was greatly enhanced and the pope took the opportunity to crown Otto I as emperor.15

Upon returning to Germany, Otto was confronted with emissaries informing him that Pope John and Berenger were conspiring to overthrow imperial rule in Italy. This shift in the pope's loyalties caused Otto to return to Rome where he presided over a synod in his new role as protector of the Church of Rome. Pope John was found guilty of acts unbecoming to his office and the synod unanimously deposed him. The delegates then invited Otto I to choose a new pope. After some deliberation Otto replied:

I agree with what you say; nothing will please me more than to find such a man and to give him control of the holy universal see.16

With this decision by a Roman synod, a precedent of tremendous importance was established. By capitalizing on the weakness of the


15ibid., pp. 216-17. While Liudprand did not specifically mention Otto I being appointed patricius in this section, he referred to him as "the guardian of the affairs of the church." Elsewhere he referred to both Otto I and Otto II a patricius, therefore it seems likely that the pope conferred the title upon Otto I in the original ceremony.

16ibid., p. 229.
papacy, Otto was able to control the Roman church. Otto now used the church in strengthening his hold on the empire by appointing his own men to church offices. Thus he could rely heavily on appointees whose offices were not hereditary and who acted as watchdogs on the dukes. By making the church an instrument of the empire, Otto began a tradition in church-state relations that would culminate in the Investiture Controversy a century later.

Many sources of this period point to a significant rise in the power of the emperor over the Roman church. "In one manuscript illumination in the Gospel Book of Aachen, (973), Otto II is enthroned in mid-air with the hand of God reaching down to touch or bless the diadem on the emperor's head. The divine aureola framing the Hand of God intersects with the imperial aureola, thus allowing the emperors head to be placed in the spandrel which is formed by the intersecting halos." A good description of the emperor's power is offered by the chronicler, the Norman Anonymous. Although written a century later, it gives a good indication of the tremendous prestige of the imperial office.

Therefore the emperor, by the Lord Jesus Christ, is said

17 Of the twenty-five popes who reigned during the Ottonian era (935-1002), the emperor appointed twelve and deposed five. Friedrich Heer, The Holy Roman Empire (New York, 1968), p. 38.

18 Otto II (973-985) was crowned co-emperor during his father's lifetime in order that the process of succession could proceed smoothly. Geoffrey Barraclough, The Origins of Modern Germany (New York, 1963), p. 73.

PLATE I. Manuscript illumination of Otto II Christomimetes (Cathedral Treasury, Aachen-Art Reference Bureau).
PLATE II. The emperor Otto III receiving the homage of the four parts of the empire.
to be elevated even unto heaven. Even unto heaven, I say not unto the corporeal sky which is seen, but unto the incorporeal heaven which is unseen, that is, unto the invisible God. Truly, unto God he has been elevated, since so much is he cojoined to him in power that no other power is more nigh unto God or more sublime than that of the emperor; yea, all other power is inferior to his.²⁰

Thus Otto III, upon assuming power in 983, was heir to several traditions. By being crowned Emperor of the Romans, Otto III's imperial right to rule as the direct descendant of the ancient emperors was firmly established. The control of the duchies was in the hands of loyal followers, and Germany was reasonably secure from outside invasion.²¹ The most important heritage handed down to Otto III, however, was control of the church. The appointment of bishops in Germany was now solely the property of the emperor and his influence on the church of Rome was extensive.

That Otto III's rule promised a renewal of the grandeur of ancient Rome is seen in this letter to Otto from his associate and long time advisor, Gerbert of Aurillac.

Ours is the Roman Empire; Italy, fertile in fruits, Lorraine and Germany, fertile in men, offer their resources, and even the strong kingdoms of the Slavs are not lacking to us.²²

That Gerbert should refer to the Slavs is very significant, for this was to be the area most sought after by Otto III in his planned commonwealth of nations.

²⁰Ibid., p. 122.

²¹Barraclough, The Origins of Modern Germany, p. 61.

In A.D. 998, with the selection of Gerbert as bishop of Rome, Otto III's concept of a Christian empire began to take form. Capitalizing on a popular legend of the time, Gerbert chose the name Sylvester II. It was widely held at that time that Sylvester I had worked diligently with Emperor Constantine in expanding and christianizing the Roman Empire. By choosing this title Gerbert affirmed his position at the side of the emperor and symbolically committed himself to Otto III's design for a revival of the Christian empire in the West.

It is difficult to pinpoint when final plans were laid for the restoration, but they seem to have been formulated soon after Gerbert took office. In the summer of A.D. 999, we find Otto III traveling about Italy conferring with his advisors and top officials in Rome. It seems to have been during this interval that the final decision was made, "...for in one of his diplomas, Otto himself declares that, leaving Rome, he had a conference with Hugh, marquis of Tuscany, on the question of 'restoring the republic', and had held council with the venerable Sylvester II and with various of the great men of the State regarding the empire." With this final decision, Otto now moved quickly to fulfill his ambitions. His seals proclaimed that the empire of the Romans was renewed. "Renovatio Imperii Romanorum" was the legend they bore.

---


24 Rerum Italicarum Scriptores, II, 493; cited by Mann, Lives of the Popes, V, 66.

Otto signed his edicts "Emperor of the Romans, Augustus, Consul of the Senate and People of Rome." Relocating his capital in Rome on the Aventine, Otto III surrounded himself with officials bearing titles similar to those employed at the Byzantine court. He had a chamberlain, a Count of the Sacred Palace, and a Perfect of the Fleet, although he had no navy. This attempt to create an artificial grandeur at the Roman court has received much criticism from modern historians. On closer examination, the supposed superficiality of Otto's actions disappears and definite purposes can be detected. By conferring grandiose titles upon the citizens of Rome, Otto insured their loyalty without sacrificing any authority. A second, equally important result of this policy was to give the imperial court an appearance of opulence and power. The Greeks had used this tactic in their relations with other countries, and Otto well understood the effect of a magnificent court ceremonial upon an impressionable barbarian envoy. In many of Otto's official documents and letters of this period, Rome is referred to as the urbs regia or city of the emperor. By establishing his position in Rome, Otto combined the supreme temporal office with the supreme spiritual authority, thus setting the stage for his diplomatic movements in eastern Europe.

Otto's imperial design lies like a transparency over his diplomatic maneuvers in the East. Through this transparency all movements which seem contrary to the interests of the empire can be seen as

26 ibid.

27 A good example of this was the visit of Liudprand of Cremona to Constantinople in 949. See above footnote 15.
logical steps in the formation of a Christian commonwealth. The historian, however, must exercise care not to see Otto's imperial concept as a static entity, for it was constantly evolving as circumstances dictated. The young emperor was influenced by many forces which found their logical conclusion in his policy promoting a commonwealth of Christian nations. The Saxon *rusticitas*, which Otto wished to exchange for the Greek *subtitlas*, rooted him deep in ancient tradition. His desire for a more universal understanding of the world can be seen in this letter sent to Gerbert in A.D. 997, inviting him to be his instructor.

We desire you to show your aversion to Saxon ignorance by not refusing this suggestion of our wishes, but even more we desire you to stimulate Our Greek Sublety to zeal for study, because if there is anyone who will arouse it, he will find some shred of the diligence of the Greeks in it. Thanks to this, we humbly ask that the flame of your knowledge may sufficiently fan our spirit until, with God's aid, you cause the lively genius of the Greeks to shine forth.28

Gerbert, with the possible exception of Otto's mother, Theophano, was the single most important influence in the life of the young emperor. It was these two figures who shaped Otto's imperial concept and were to advise the emperor to fashion a theocratic government patterned after the Byzantine state.

But Otto III was not oriented entirely toward the East. He recognized the past greatness of Rome and Charlemagne and his devotion to this heritage was increased under the instruction of Gerbert. It

---

28"The Sin of this king," said his contemporary Bruno of Querfurt, "was that he would not look upon the land of his nativity, delectable Germany...so great was his love of inhabiting Italy, where savage destruction runs armed with...a thousand deaths." *Annals of Hildershein*, MGH, SS, XV, 722, 3; quoted in Horace K. Mann, *The Lives of the Popes in the Middle Ages*, V, 92.
is not surprising then that Otto would wish to establish contact with the forerunners of the imperial tradition in western Europe. His famous pilgrimage to the tomb of Charlemagne in A.D. 1000, thus becomes less a historical curiosity and more a sign of the deep sense of mission felt by Otto at this time. A chronicler of the time wrote:

And when we entered into it /the tomb/ we perceived a vehement savour. So we did worship forthwith to him /Charlemagne/ with bended thighs and knees, and straightaway Otto the Emperor clad him with white rainment and made good all that was lacking about him.²⁹

All of the chroniclers who reported this event were not sympathetic to Otto's idea of a revived Roman Empire based in Italy, however. Thietmar of Meresburg wrote:

Otto, wishing in his own time to restore ancient custom which had now largely died out, did many things to which many people reacted differently.³⁰

This comment would seem to indicate that many of Otto's advisors felt that his plans were not in the best interests of the German kingdom, and it is probable that they would have preferred a more national policy.

If Otto III was aware of this sentiment, he was not deterred as is shown in this imperial proclamation:

We have proclaimed this in order that the church of God being freely and firmly established, Our Empire may be advanced and the crown of our knighthood triumph; that the power of the Roman people may be extended and


³⁰Chronicon Theitmari, IV, chapter 47, cited by Brian Pullan (ed.), Sources of the History of Medieval Europe, p. 120.
the commonwealth be restored; so that we be found worthy after living righteously in the tabernacle of this world, to fly away from the prison of this life and reign most righteously with the Lord. 31

The last part of this statement is particularly important in understanding the complex personal makeup of Otto III. The many forces at play that would determine his imperial policy included a profound religious asceticism that caused him to resolutely pursue the ideal of universal Christianity. It would be this consummate desire that in the end would blind him to the treachery of Roman politics and cause his destruction.

In the year 1000, however, the future of Otto III and his commonwealth looked promising. Before visiting the tomb of Charlemagne, Otto journeyed to Poland to pay tribute to his martyred friend Adalbert. 32 Otto's embassy was received with rejoicing, and the Polish Prince Boeslav was invited into the commonwealth. That Otto wished to emphasize the peaceful nature of his diplomacy was illustrated during his journey to Poland. Upon reaching the city of Gnesen, Otto dismounted and walked barefoot in the fashion of a pious monk; hardly the style of a conquering lord. 33 This meeting will be discussed


32 Adalbert was beheaded while on missionary work among the Prussians. His death was a great blow to the emperor, and many chapels and churches were erected in his honor.

in the next chapter, but suffice it to say that Boeslav's enthusiasm was an important asset to the commonwealth. Had the meeting with Boeslav proved unsuccessful, Otto's hope of a unified Christian empire consisting of Germans and Slavs would have been stillborn.

Upon returning to Rome, Otto took the final major step in the formulation of his imperial concept. Laying claim to apostolic authority, Otto moved to establish himself as the sole representative of the church in Western Europe. The purpose of this was to put Otto on equal footing with the Eastern emperor who also claimed apostolic authority. By becoming an emperor-priest Otto sought to play down his Saxon origin and to become recognized as the ruler of all peoples in a commonwealth of Christian nations. Otto's proclamation was not a movement against the papacy, but a reorganization within the church itself. The church and the state were thus welded, the goal a universal Christianity within a revitalized Roman Empire. This move seems to have had the concurrence of Sylvester II, who felt that reform within the church was its only alternative to stagnation.

Otto's assumption of apostolic powers was announced in a diploma issued in A.D. 1001. The intulation begins by proclaiming: "Otto, Servant of the Apostles and following the will of God the Savior,

---

34 Percy Schramm, Kaiser, Rom und Renovatio, p. 176.

35 The Eastern emperor was referred to as isapostolos which translates as "the equal of the Apostles."

36 Sylvester's reforming zeal was evident in his activities as abbot of Bobbio and as archbishop of Ravenna. In both of these positions Sylvester undertook to reorganize his jurisdiction into a more pious and efficient organ of the church. Harriet Pratt Lattin, The Letters of Gerbert. See letters 238, 248, 252.
Emperor Augustus of the Romans. The title "Servant of the Apostles" may have been intended to recall the missionary work done by St. Paul and St. Peter among the ancient Romans. At any rate, the title surely provided Otto with a theoretical basis for his new policy toward the nations of Eastern Europe.

In retrospect, it can be seen that Otto's grasp of Eastern politics was excellent. By assuming the powers of Christ's disciple on earth, Otto approached the Slavs through the unifying force of Christianity. The recuperative powers of the Slavs and Magyars were well known to Otto. In a period of thirty years the conquered Magyar tribes had rebuilt their nation, following their defeat at the Lechfeld, and had assumed a position of importance in the politics of eastern Europe. By accentuating Christianization rather than Germanization, Otto avoided arousing suspicion concerning the nature of his activities in eastern Europe.

The Christian commonwealth of Otto III was built upon the maxim of cooperation between church and state. Thus Otto sought to safeguard the future of the commonwealth by delimiting the powers of the papacy so no pope would be able to disrupt the organization of the

---


38 Despite the efforts of Greek and German missionaries many areas of Poland, Hungary, Moravia, and Bulgaria were totally pagan and hostile to missionary activity.

Christian empire. In the same diploma of A.D. 1001 discussed above, Otto sought to define the powers of the papacy within the framework of the empire. This reformation would bring the church completely under the administration of the state. By placing the papacy in this position, Otto hoped to create a "super-state" that would be free of internal difficulty caused by an uncooperative pope. Otto began his reform of the church by attacking those popes who had abused the powers of the office.

We acknowledge Rome as head of the world, we testify that the Roman church is the mother of all, but the negligence and stupidity of the popes have for long obscured the titles of its fame. For not only have they sold and traded to the rabble from the treasury of St. Peter those things which seem to be outside the city, but (we do not say these things without pain) whatever they had in this our holy city, they scattered with greater license and gave up both St. Peter and St. Paul to the common use, money deciding in all cases; they even despoiled the altars and always introduced disorder in place of reparation.

Sylvester II was one influence on Otto III's reform of the church. Gerbert had long been an opponent of papal abuses and while pontiff he exercised his power vigorously in repressing potential heresy within the church.

---

40 Otto III feared an independent pope such as John who had defied the imperial power in Italy during the reign of Otto I. See above p.

41 This sentence was probably included to deny any claims of equality put forth by the patriarch of Constantinople.


The power of the papacy, however, was largely dependent on its territorial base. Otto hoped to remove a portion of this power by confiscating certain church property. This would not only reduce the influence of the papacy, but also it would force the church to rely more heavily upon the empire for revenue and protection. The confiscation of church property was effected by declaring the Donation of Constantine a forgery.44

...Indeed, the papal laws being confused and the Roman Church being cast down, certain of the popes became so aggressive that they joined the greatest part of our empire to their Apostolic See, not caring how much they squandered by wilful vanity, but since they had dismissed those areas despoiled by themselves, they turned to the property of others, that is, to ours, as if casting back their guilt into our empire. And these are fabrications invented by themselves, in which John the Deacon, nicknamed "the one with the mangled fingers," wrote a deed in golden letters and fixed the circumstances of the longstanding lie, under the title of Constantine the Great.45

That this was meant as an action of reform within the church can be seen in the disposition; Otto wrote:

Therefore, having disdained these forged deeds and false writings, we give to St. Peter out of our largesse what is ours, not what is his, just as if we are conferring our own property. So for the love of St. Peter we have elected Lord Sylvester our teacher as our pope and God willing we have ordained and created him most serene. Thus for the love of that same Lord Pope Sylvester we confer gifts from our property on St. Peter, so that the teacher may offer on the part of his pupil something to our prince Peter.46

44 A document supposedly issued by Constantine in which the popes were given temporal jurisdiction over the western Empire.


46 Ibid.
The deed goes on to name eight counties in Italy that are to be governed by the papacy. Upon close examination, however, it can be seen that Otto actually granted the counties to St. Peter. Since by a previous statement in the document, Otto was already named as the servant of the Apostles, he actually gave nothing away.

In A.D. 1001, Otto's position at the head of the commonwealth of Christian nations was unquestioned. Hungary had joined within the new empire and the elusive ideal of universal Christianity seemed on the verge of becoming a reality. Otto's victory had been the result of a persistent diplomacy that had as its guidelines a flexible concept that constantly evolved as circumstances dictated it must.

Otto's optimism was shattered late in A.D. 1001 by a revolt in Tivoli, a city near Rome. The insurgents were quickly captured, but in his generosity Otto pardoned them before they were put to death. This action angered the fickle citizens of Rome, who rioted and besieged Otto in his palace on the Aventine. The emperor, exhausted from his efforts in forming the commonwealth, went into the crowd to address the rebels. His remarks were recorded by the chronicler Thangmar.

Hearken to your father's words and keep them carefully in your hearts. Are you not my Romans? For you indeed I left my fatherland and also forsook my kin. For love of you I rejected my Saxons and all the Germans, my blood. I led you into remote parts of my empire in which your fathers,

---

47The position of Hungary within the commonwealth will be discussed in a later chapter.

48Thangmar was a clerk in the cathedral of Hildesheim. His chronicle gives us most of our information about the last days of Otto III.
when they ruled the world, never set foot, that I might spread your name and glory to the ends of the earth. I adopted you as my sons. I preferred you to all. For your sake, because I put you before all, I brought on myself the envy and hatred of all. And now, for all this, you have rejected your father. You have cruelly put my friends to death. You have excluded me even though you could not shut me out because I embrace you with a father's love and will never suffer you to be banished from my affection. I know, indeed, who are the instigators of this sedition and I fix my eyes upon them. Although the eyes of all are publicly upon them, they are not abashed. Perish the thought that those most true to me, in whose innocence I glory, should be contaminated by association with these wretches and not be distinguished from them.

The rebellion was ultimately quelled, but the emperor, broken in spirit and health, was to die early in the next year. In A.D. 1003, Sylvester II also died. Thus the two major architects of the Christian commonwealth were silenced on the eve of their greatest triumph. For just a few days after the death of Otto III a Byzantine princess arrived by ship in completion of an agreement apparently negotiated earlier. The nature of this agreement is lost to history, but historical speculation exists concerning a marriage alliance.

The institutions of Otto's Christian commonwealth were not completely abandoned after his death. Henry II, who followed Otto III,
retained the strict control of the church that was to lead to the Investiture Controversy a century later. But soon after his coronation Henry II invaded Poland and destroyed the relationship so carefully nurtured by Otto. Thus war returned to the eastern boarders of the Empire, and the brief period of peace was ended. The ghost of Otto's eastern policy was to haunt the German government throughout the twelfth century.

The impact of the reign of Otto III cannot be minimized in German medieval history. Although it is true his dream of a Christian commonwealth failed to materialize completely, his reformation of the church and modernization of certain German institutions marked a watershed in German history. From this time on the Empire would be locked in a life and death struggle with the church and powerful nobles that would eventually cause the empire to degenerate into a land of feuding principalities.
The first contact that the German empire had with Poland was sometime after the Hungarians had been defeated at Lechfeld. Otto I, in an attempt to expand his eastern borders, ordered a certain count Gero to subjugate all Slavic tribes west of the Oder river. Gero took to his task with vigor and after several campaigns was able to extend the German march to the aforementioned area. Gero's methods were often excessively brutal, for on one occasion he is reported to have invited thirty Slavic chieftains to a friendly banquet and after a sumptuous meal, slaughtered every one of them.  

As the German forces approached the Oder, they came in contact with a large tribe that was also bent upon conquering certain Slavic tribes in the region. Closer examination revealed that this tribe was Slavic and seemed to be more civilized than the neighboring peoples. One source of the period refers to the Polish lands as "overflowing with honey, wheat, fish, and meat," and described the Polish army as being of "three thousand well armed men who received their pay in minted money." The leader of this large tribe was a Duke Mieszko who seems to have ruled the tribe by virtue of being the strongest warrior.


Count Gero apparently viewed this tribe as a menace to his eastward march and made preparations for battle. Rallying local tribes, Gero attacked Mieszko's army and after a long struggle defeated the Poles, killing the Duke's brother in the process. The best source we have for this period, Theitmar of Merseberg (973-1018), reports that in 972 Mieszko made his submission to Gero and began paying tribute to the Emperor for the lands he held in his possession. From this point on, German-Polish relations seem to have been peaceful, and Poland assumed her place as a tributary of the empire. Indeed, Mieszko's legions were often called upon to aid Otto's armies in quelling uprisings of Slavs along the Oder. Theitmar refers to Mieszko as the "Emperor's faithful liege and tributary for territory extending as far as the Warta river."55

Relations between the two nations were solid, and became more so, as German missionaries began to convert the Polish peasants. Mieszko had accepted Christianity soon after his subjugation and had put his lands under the protection of the papacy in 972.56 Mieszko was very vigorous in aiding the German missionaries, and the natural consequence of this was the church in Poland came to rely heavily on German administration.

Sensing the dangers in this, Mieszko sought a way in which to free the Polish church from total German domination. Indeed, Mieszko's


56This was probably done to counteract the complete claim on Polish territory by the empire.
fears were well founded, for Otto I was planning to put Poland completely under the control of the archbishopric of Magdeburg located in eastern Germany. Mieszko was aided in his attempt to free the Polish church by a combination of circumstances that began in Rome. In 965, Pope John III was elected to the papal see by Roman citizens, and, although he was nominally under the control of the emperor, was very independent in his actions. Thus, probably in an attempt to assert his independence, the pope refused to sanction Magdeburg's hegemony over the Slavic east. Therefore, Posen, the chief bishopric of Poland, was left free of any archiepiscopal jurisdiction, although its administration was in the hands of German churchmen.

This was the situation, then, when Boleslav the son of Mieszko assumed the leadership of his people on his father's death in 992. Boleslav was somewhat more nationalistic than his father had been, although he never sought to sever completely the ties that bound him to the empire. Boleslav's succession to the head of the Polish tribes was followed four years later by the crowning of Emperor Otto III.

Prior to Otto's coronation, there was an uprising among the Oder slavs, and Boleslav was summoned to the battle. The rebellion was ultimately quelled, but Boleslav marched deep into pagan territory subjugating many new tribes, ostensibly in the name of the empire. This new territory which bordered the lands of the pagan Prussians greatly

---

increased the size of the Polish duchy. Also increased was Boeslav's reputation as a warrior and his prestige, due to these campaigns, was greatly enhanced.

But to absorb these peoples under his rule was more difficult. Boeslav was well acquainted with the elusiveness of these Slavic peoples, who could be defeated innumerable times only to return to fight soon after the occupying forces had withdrawn. Boeslav realized that the most effective means to pacify the conquered tribes was through their conversion to Christianity. The Polish church, however, although established, was not yet strong enough to organize missionary activity on that grand a scale.

In 996, a former bishop of Prague, Adalbert, unexpectedly arrived in Poland. Adalbert had been prominent in missionary activity in Bohemia and Hungary, and Boeslav commissioned him to head the missionary work among the recently conquered Slavs. Adalbert was one of the most influential missionaries of the middle ages. The conversion of many Hungarians, Poles, and Bohemians can be traced to this saintly man, and, in the opinion of this writer, he deserves a place in history on the same level as the Byzantine missionaries, Saints Cyril and Methodius.

Adalbert's position as bishop of Prague had been disrupted by feuding between powerful families. Adalbert had resigned his post and for a time dwelled in a monastery in Rome. It was here that he met

58 James Westfall Thompson, Feudal Germany (Chicago, 1928), p. 642.
59 Source for this period in Thompson, Feudal Germany, pp. 640-52.
Otto III and a strong bond of friendship grew up between the two. Adalbert was present at Otto's coronation and was on at least three different occasions in the company of the emperor for considerable periods of time.\textsuperscript{60} Late in 996, Adalbert was ordered to return to Prague with the stipulation that if the trouble surrounding the bishopric increased, Adalbert was to go as a missionary to pagan lands.\textsuperscript{61} Thus, when the citizens of Prague refused to return the bishopric to Adalbert, he journeyed to Poland to begin his missionary task. Thus by a complicated set of circumstances, Adalbert came on the scene at a time when Boeslav was searching for an experienced missionary to travel to his conquered lands.

Agreeing to Boeslav's request, Adalbert decided upon Prussia for his missionary efforts. Accompanied by his brother Gaudentius and another disciple, Adalbert crossed into Prussian territory. The mission met with immediate disaster as a Prussian chief, whose brother had been killed by Boeslav, captured the three men. Adalbert, who was no politician, did not help his cause by addressing the Prussian as follows:

\begin{quote}
I come from Poland, which is governed by the Christian prince Boeslav for the Lord our God, to bring you salvation.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
This statement infuriated the Prussian leader, who immediately ordered Adalbert beheaded. He allowed Gaudentius and the other disciple to return to Poland, however, to arrange for the purchase of the martyr's body. 63

Boeslav, much grieved, purchased the body and Adalbert was buried at Gnesen. From that moment the bishop-martyr became the first Polish saint and the contemporary world mourned the passing of this great man. Perhaps most affected by Adalbert's death was Otto III. Almost immediately upon hearing the news, Otto began erecting chapels to his friend's memory. 64

Boeslav however, was quick to see the advantages that could be accrued by exploiting the strong sentiment following Adalbert's death. Recognizing that the place of Adalbert's burial would certainly have great significance, Boeslav commissioned Gaudentius to journey to Rome in order that Gnesen (Gniezno) could be raised to an archbishopric. This archbishopric would be independent of German control and the Polish church would thereby receive autonomy. Gaudentius was successful in presenting his case, and the hierarchy of the Polish church was established. Gaudentius was raised to the office of archbishop, and in the same bull Adalbert was canonized. 65


64 ibid., p. 345.

65 ibid., p. 346.
As Gaudentius along with a papal legate prepared to return to Poland, Otto III expressed the wish to accompany them. Otto undoubtedly wished to visit the tomb of his fallen friend, but he also had other matters in mind. He had determined before leaving Rome that Poland was to be invited into the Roman Christian commonwealth along with Germany and Italy. Indeed, by the year 1000, Boeslav was assuming the status of a powerful ruler. Poland was consolidated under his rule and his position was enhanced by ties which bound him to other countries. His sister was married to King Sven of Denmark and was the mother of King Canute of England. His father's sister was the mother of Stephen I of Hungary, a nation that would join the commonwealth in a year. Thus Poland was a respectable member of the family of nations in eastern Europe and would be an excellent addition to the commonwealth as envisioned by Otto III and Sylvester II. Otto obviously wished to emphasize the importance of his mission, for a huge celebration took place upon his departure from Rome, and Theitmar remarks, "that no emperor had ever gone out of Rome with greater glory."

On reaching Poland, Otto was greeted by Boeslav who was obviously pleased about his diplomatic successes and received the emperor royally. So lavish was the welcome that Theitmar was moved to write:

66ibid.


69Chronicon Theitmar, III, chapter 29, 780. Quoted by Anthony Czajkowski, loc. cit., p. 347.
"How Boeslav received the emperor at the frontier and how he conducted him throughout his country as far as Gniezno cannot be narrated and is frankly beyond belief."  

Following the ceremonies, a synod was convoked to decide matters pertaining to the organization of the Polish church. Otto presided over this synod in his position as the supreme representative of the Christian church. His assumption of the title "Servant of Jesus Christ" discussed in the previous chapter proclaimed the duality of his function. He was at once the emperor and servant of Christ and with the accord of Pope Sylvester II would act accordingly. Three bishoprics were established along with Gniezno, but the bishopric of Posen was left independent due to the objection of its bishop. This see had been established during the reign of Otto I, and did not become part of the administration of Gnesen before the early twelfth century.

Thus Boeslav realized his father's dream of an independent Polish church. During the ceremonies, Otto conferred upon Boeslav all of the religious powers which the emperor himself possessed, including the right to appoint bishops. Also, and this is very important, Otto granted Boeslav jurisdiction over all Slavs brought under his control in the future. Obviously, something was in the wind.

---

70 Ibid., quoted by Anthony Czajkowski, "The Congress of Gniezno in the Year 1000," p. 349.


72 Ibid.
After the ceremonies in the church, Boeslav entertained Otto at a magnificent banquet and made every attempt to impress the young emperor. Chroniclers tell us that only the most expensive fabrics were in evidence, while all the utensils were made of gold. As a Polish writer notes: "Gold at that time was commonly used by all instead of silver, for silver was accounted as something like straw."73

So impressed was Otto III by this display that he rose and announced to those at the banquet that:

It is not worthy that such a great man should be called merely a duke or a count like one of the leading men, rather should he be elevated to the royal throne and be crowned with a diadem.74

Otto accentuated this statement by removing his crown and placing it upon the head of the Polish ruler.75 Thus by a solemn act Otto had elevated Boeslav within the empire by styling him "brother and co-worker of the empire," "friend and ally of the Roman people," and patricius.76 Also, Boeslav was to be exempted from the tributary obligations imposed upon his father by Otto I. The banquet was climaxed by Boeslav's presentation to Otto of the arm of Saint Adalbert to be returned to Germany as a relic.77

74 ibid.
75 ibid.
76 ibid.
77 ibid.
As Otto prepared to leave Poland, Boeslav decided to join him and they rode together to Magdeburg. There they parted, each assured of the others support in extending the commonwealth.

It is interesting to note the conflict that this meeting at Gnesen causes among historians of the period. Two schools of thought have gradually developed. One interpretation implies that this ceremony was meaningless and that only a vague agreement was reached by Otto III and Boeslav over the future Christianization of conquered tribes.  

Perhaps a more penetrating view of the ceremonies is offered by Francis Dvornik, who states that Otto was actually grooming Boeslav to head the commonwealth upon his death or abdication. Broadly interpreted, the titles conferred upon Boeslav at Gnesen can be seen as a revival of the co-regency that was instituted under the reign of Diocletian.

But several serious questions challenge this hypothesis. Was Otto III really planning to abdicate so early in his rule? Is it possible that Otto would have chosen a ruler outside his native Germany? Could Otto have possibly thought that Italy and Germany would have accepted a Slavic duke as their ruler? These questions, like many others concerning Otto's reign will, of course, remain unanswered.

78 See, for example, Oscar Halecki, The Millenium of Europe (South Bend, Indiana, 1963), p. 118.

79 There is some evidence to suggest that Otto III desired the simple life of a monk to his life as emperor. See Francis Dvornik, The Making of Central and Eastern Europe, p. 62.

80 Under the rule of the Roman Emperor Diocletian (284-305), a system of "junior" emperors was established to facilitate the process of succession.
But, because of the vital nature of the controversy in regards to this paper, I would like to present my theory about the meeting.

It seems to me that Otto's gesture toward the Polish duke was purely political and should be viewed as such. Otto's journey to Poland was not designed to change the royal status of Boeslav, but rather to construct a commonwealth of nations in which Boeslav would share administration. Thus Otto was attempting to create an institution in which Boeslav's succession to the imperial title played little or no part.

Thus, Boeslav would be Otto's representative in the Eastern world and would govern all new territories added within the empire. His position becomes even more important if one considers Otto's active diplomacy with Kievian Russia at this time. 81 In the year 1000, envoys from the pope along with Christian representatives from Hungary and Bohemia visited Prince Vladimir at Kiev. The Russian Chronicle also reports that Vladimir sent answering embassies a year later. If Russia was to be invited into the commonwealth, Boeslav's position as an intermediary would certainly be important.

In fact, it would seem that there was diplomatic activity on many fronts concerning the commonwealth in the year 1000. Otto III seems to have been negotiating with Doge Peter Orseolo of Venice 82 in concert with Gerbert, who was attempting a reform of the Venetian

82 Halecki, The Millenium of Europe, p. 123.
church. What role Venice was to play in the commonwealth is a moot point, but it is worthwhile to note that Otto did not have a navy and the prowess of the Venetian fleet was already an accepted fact.

Also difficult to interpret is the legation sent to Constantinople in 998 by Otto. Apparently an agreement was reached, after three years of negotiation with Basil II, the Byzantine emperor, to have the emperor's niece, Zoe, sent to Germany in a marriage alliance. Before the marriage could be concluded however, Otto III had died and this golden opportunity was destroyed.

In the midst of this negotiation, Boleslav sent an embassy to Rome to secure the absolute legitimacy of his rule which he viewed as the logical consequence of the congress of Gnesen. It appears from two sources of the period that Otto and Sylvester did intend to present Boleslav with a crown, for the nationalistic Theitmar writes:

"God forgive the emperor for making a lord of a tributary and raising him to such heights...." The view that Boleslav would receive a crown is further substantiated by a letter sent to Stephen of Hungary by Sylvester II. The letter states that the Hungarians were presented

a crown "that we had prepared for the Polish duke...."\textsuperscript{87}

But, then, why was Boeslav not sent a crown at a later date? Were the nationalistic forces in Germany powerful enough to discourage this act? The sources of the period do not give us a hint of why, and again many questions go unanswered.

The death of Otto III in A.D. 1002 left Boeslav in a difficult position. He still did not have a crown and the new emperor, Henry II, was not friendly toward the Polish. Within six months of Henry's accession, war broke out and a new era of Polish-German relations began. Boeslav continued to petition Rome for a crown\textsuperscript{88} but all of his efforts failed. Finally, in A.D. 1024 all obstacles were removed. On June 11, Pope Benedict VIII died and Henry II followed him a month later. Boeslav took advantage of this confused situation by having himself crowned king by the primate of Poland. This coronation finally wrenched Poland free of German ties and her independence was grudgingly accepted by the German court.

The effects of Otto's policy were felt well into the twelfth century. What had originally been planned as a commonwealth of nations was actually the catalyst that set in motion the events that led to Polish independence. The idea of a commonwealth of German-Slavic nations perished, however, leaving Eastern Europe with hopes unfulfilled and chances forever lost.

\textsuperscript{87}John R. Sommerfeldt (ed.) \textit{Readings for History} 352 (Kalamazoo, 1970), p. 84.

CHAPTER THREE
THE ENTRY OF HUNGARY

In the beginning of the tenth century a group of warlike tribes of Asian origin migrated out of central Russia and settled in the Danube basin. These tribes gradually came under the unified rule of a single chieftain and became known as the Magyars. Using the easily defensible Danube area as a springboard, the Magyars began raiding expeditions against Byzantine and Western European lands. From their base the Hungarians could sweep down upon the provincial border towns of Greeks and Germans.

In the middle decades of the tenth century these raids intensified and the border regions of the two empires suffered terribly. The Magyars were adept horsemen, familiar with the stirrup and small bow. Their raids were carried out with tremendous speed and discipline, often in the early morning hours when the villagers were asleep. The Magyars preferred to travel in small groups, using hit and run tactics, seldom allowing themselves to be drawn into a full-scale battle. Their strengths were speed and surprise and they used them so effectively that they became the most feared warrior society in Europe.90

The successes of the Magyar tribes on the eastern borders of Germany severely hampered colonization and the German missionary effort. Heeding the pleas of his eastern subjects, Henry the Fowler, the father

---

89The Danube basin was naturally protected by vast forest and high mountains to the north and east, and by broad rivers to the south.

of Otto I, ordered that a series of forts be erected along the border and that every ninth man from a neighboring district must take garrison duty. Soon a chain of fortified towns sprang up, among them, Hamburg, Magdeburg, Merseburg, and others.

These towns proved the undoing of the Magyars. When the villagers feared an attack, all moveable property was quickly brought inside the walls. The Magyars, lacking siege techniques, tried storming the walls in large numbers. This failed however, as Henry's armies easily routed the light Magyar cavalry whenever large engagements occurred. Thus, over a period of time, the German borders were strengthened and the Magyars began to suffer heavy casualties on the battlefield.

The Magyars were also having difficulties on their southern border. In 958, the imperial Byzantine army defeated the Hungarians and temporarily secured their borders. A truce was signed and friendly relations existed between the two peoples for a short time. By this time, the Hungarians had desperately desired peace in order to rebuild their nation after the disastrous defeat they had suffered at the hands of Otto I in 955. In that year, the armies of Germany and Hungary had clashed on the plains of the Lech near Augsburg. This battle was to have far-reaching consequences and was one of the most decisive engagements in European history.

Otto's well organized forces turned the flanks of the invaders

---


and the German victory was total. The Magyars, their power broken, were forced to abandon their raiding tactics and to settle down to an agrarian lifestyle in the Danube basin. The Chronicler, Widukind of Corvey, (925-?) records the battle:

At first the bolder of the enemy resisted, but then they saw their companions being routed, and stunned at being surrounded by us, they were ultimately killed. Some of those remaining whose horses were tired out entered nearby villages and being surrounded by soldiers were burned up along with the buildings. Others swam the nearby river, and when they could not get a foothold on the farther bank, they were swallowed up by the river and perished. On that day the Hungarians' camp was invaded and all the captives were set free. On the second and third day the remaining Hungarians from the neighboring cities were virtually annihilated so that hardly any of them got away....

The historian who pursues the study of German-Hungarian relations in the tenth century cannot but be aware of the deep fear and enmity that existed between the two peoples. Widukind refers to the Hungarians as "enemies of God and man" and "enemies of Christ." The Germans regarded the conflict as a religious war and the crusading nature of the conflict can be seen in this oration by Otto I before the battle of the Lech:

We are surpassed, I know, by numbers, but not by courage or arms. For we know that for the most part they are devoid of armour, and what is greater solace to us, they are deprived of the help of their God. Their audacity is like

---


94 Ibid.
a wall of defense, but we have the hope of divine protection.95

In reality, this war was not strictly a conflict between pagan and Christian cultures. It is known, for instance, that two prominent Magyar chieftains, Gyula and Bulcu, were Christians at the time of the battle of the Lech. Gyula had imported Greek priests and monks to convert his people, and Bulcu, like Gyula, had been baptized in Constantinople and had been awarded the exalted and honorific title of patricius of the Greeks.96

Indeed, after 958, the Byzantines made every attempt to establish friendly relations with the Magyars, probably in order to bring them into the Byzantine economic and religious orbit. Several prominent Hungarians embraced Christianity during their visits to the Byzantine court; yet attempts to bring large numbers of Magyars within the Byzantine church failed.97 Thus, the religious issue in the German-Hungarian wars was overplayed, and we can see more fundamental reasons behind the conflict. Prior to their settlement in the Danube basin, the Magyars were basically a nomadic, warrior people. Their entry into Europe coincided with the development of a strong monarchy in Germany. Thus the conflict was between a settled society struggling to set up a strong new order and a society that recognized only tribal order and viewed the empire as easy prey for its raiding tactics.

95Ibid., p. 17.

96Heer, The Holy Roman Empire, p. 30.

With the defeat of the Magyars, eastern Europe became a safer place to build cities and, eventually, to extend Germanic culture. Unlike the Byzantines, who desired diplomatic relations with the Magyars, Otto I was content with his victory and allowed the Hungarians to return to their homes.

The German church, however, was not content to leave the Hungarians alone. Recognizing the Danube region as fertile ground for missionary activity, German churchmen swarmed into the country in hopes of extending Latin Christian influence. The German missionary effort was based in those border towns that had been erected by Henry the Fowler. Close to the pagan tribes, the towns provided a convenient starting point for missionary activity. Here the missionary effort was organized so that many regions were visited, and the church administration was always close to provide help in organizing churches.\(^98\)

The German church was aided in this effort by a series of liberal Magyar rulers. Stephen the Great, the first truly Christian king of Hungary, realized the importance of bringing foreign learning and methods into Hungary.

> Hold the "guests" /hospites/ in honor, for they bring foreign learning and arms into the country. They are an ornament and a protection to the throne. For a kingdom of one language and manner of life is weak and easily destroyed.\(^99\)

The German church had to compete with the Byzantines for the religious affections of the Hungarians. The Byzantines, because of the

---


\(^99\) Thompson, *Feudal Germany*, p. 595.
missionary efforts of Saints Cyril and Methodius, had previously established themselves in the Danube region. Byzantine monasteries were not uncommon, and during the reign of Stephen four more were added and placed under royal protection.

Despite the apparent dominance of the Greek church in Hungary, the German missionaries made important inroads. Saint Adalbert, whose missionary work was discussed in relation to the Polish church, also strove to bring Hungary under the Latin Christian umbrella.

Prince Geza, the father of Stephen, was the first ruler to officially opt for the West. His religious fervor was something less than complete, however, as he is supposed to have stated that "he was rich enough to afford sacrifices to all gods Christian as well as pagan." But it appears that the real moving spirit of Geza's zeal was his wife, and as a chronicler of the time, Bruno, asserts, she was responsible for the introduction of Latin Christianity into Hungary.

The Hungarian leadership, influenced by the German church, moved closer to the Western way of life as well. Stephen I modeled his administrative system after that of contemporary Germany and,

---

100 Saints Cyril and Methodius were commissioned by the Byzantine emperor in the ninth century to do missionary work among the pagans of eastern Europe. Their efforts included the formulation of an alphabet that allowed the natives to read and understand the Scriptures. For more information on their work see Francis Dvornik, Byzantine Missions Among the Slavs (New Brunswick, 1970), pp. 73-230.

101 Urbansky, Byzantium and the Danube Frontier, p. 20.


in spite of the hostility that had existed between the two peoples, promoted the settlement of German colonists not only on crown lands, but also on the lands of the nobles and clergy. 104

Let us take stock for a moment of the rapid change in the attitude of Hungary toward the German empire. What prompted this sudden change, and how was a tribal society able, in a few short years, to present an appearance of unity? The answer can only be found by examining the critical position Hungary was in after the Battle of the Lech. Deprived of her means of existence, faced on either side with expanding empires, her population decimated by war, Hungary was forced by necessity to change her lifestyle. It became necessary to live off of the land and to develop agricultural techniques that were unknown to the Magyars. Lack of basic agricultural knowledge may explain why so many German farmers were encouraged to colonize Hungary at this time. 105

Thus, barely ten years after the disaster at the Lechfeld, Hungary attempted to take her place beside the other Christian nations of Europe. The attempt by the Hungarian leadership to convert their people did not succeed immediately of course—a pagan warrior society could not be tamed in a decade. Despite the diligence of Saint Adalbert and others, the chronicler Bruno could report only that a "shadow of the Christian symbol" had been raised over the Magyars.

104 Thompson, Feudal Germany, p. 155.

105 ibid., p. 595.

By the reign of Stephen, however, the efforts of the German missionaries began to bear fruit. A Hungarian chronicler writing during Stephen's rule wrote that: "The light that shines on every man thus began to shed its luster upon Hungary."^107

Thus it was the German church that represented the empire's interests in Hungary, and Stephen frequently used German church officials as emissaries to Otto III and Sylvester II. This is important to remember, for when Stephen applied for entry into the commonwealth it was through the German church which was, by the year 1000, united under the combined direction of the emperor and pope. Since this reformation in church leadership occurred well before Stephen's application, it is unlikely that he was ignorant of Otto III's planned commonwealth. This should not be interpreted then simply as the reception of Hungary into the Latin church, but rather as the reception of Hungary into the alliance of Christian states as envisioned by the German emperor. This view is substantiated by the sources of the period, and is for the most part, supported by recent scholarship on this topic.108

Hungary's contacts with the Latin world during the early years of Stephen's reign did not remain entirely religious. Soon after the death of Prince Geza in 997, Stephen married Gizella, sister of the duke of Bavaria. At the same time, one of Stephen's sisters wed the doge of Venice.109 Thus, Hungary became intertwined politically as


108This view is supported by Percy Schramm, Kaiser, Rom und Renovatio, and by Giorgio Falco, The Holy Roman Republic (New York, 1964).

well as religiously with the Latin world.

When Otto III was crowned in 996, the atmosphere of cooperation between the two nations was at its height. As we have seen, in 1000 Otto visited Poland and granted the Polish ruler a place in his commonwealth. Among other benefits, the Polish ruler derived from this union a separate national church, a diadem and the title of patrius, and certain monetary concessions. The duchy of Poland was thereby elevated to an important position beside the empire without endangering its sovereignty.

Soon after Otto III returned to Germany, Stephen applied, by letter to Sylvester II, for entry into the commonwealth. It must again be emphasized that Stephen wished to join a Christian confederation and thus his application was sent to Rome, the center of the commonwealth. There were benefits to all if Hungary could be added to the commonwealth. The elevation of Hungary to the status of a Christian kingdom would have placed the country on an equal footing with other European states, conferring the same dignity and authority on her anointed and crowned monarch as the other crowned rulers of Christian Europe enjoyed. Stephen's position as king would also clearly place him above other Magyar chieftains, a few of whom recognized him as merely the strongest among equals. The empire also considered Hungary a prize to be sought after. Besides extending the universality of the empire, the acquisition would ensure Hungary's

---


place in Latin Christendom, eliminating the fears of a Byzantine missionary revival.

It was with great rejoicing then, that Sylvester II and Otto III granted Stephen's request and sent papal legates to Hungary bearing a crown and a letter of confirmation. This letter is extant and from it we can understand more clearly the nature of the commonwealth. Declaring Stephen king of the Hungarians, Sylvester related how he had been divinely forewarned of Stephen's embassy:

Your ambassadors, especially our dear brother Astricus, bishop of Colocza, were received by us with the greater joy and accomplished their mission with the greater ease, because we had been divinely forewarned to expect an embassy from a nation still unknown to us.

That Sylvester II should refer to Hungary as "a nation still unknown to us" seems somewhat odd. Certainly the memory of the Lechfeld had not been erased from his mind. It is my opinion that this was Sylvester's way of removing Hungary from the limbo of a tribal society, controlling a certain area by force of arms, to a sovereign nation ready to assume its place among the states of Europe. This view is supported, I believe, by the nature of the letter in which Sylvester praises the Hungarian ruler as a "Christian king" worthy of acceptance into the Christian commonwealth:

...Finally, we commend the liberality you have shown in offering to Saint Peter yourself and your people and your kingdom and possessions by the same ambassadors and letters. For by this deed you have clearly demonstrated that you already are what you have asked us to declare you a king. But enough of this: it is not necessary to commend

him whom God himself has commended and whose deeds openly proclaim to be worthy of all commendations. Now, therefore, glorious son, by the authority of omnipotent God and of Saint Peter the prince of apostles, we freely grant, consecrated, and bequeath with our apostolic benediction all that you have sought from us and from the apostolic see; namely, the royal crown and name, the creation of the metropolitanate of Gran, and of the other bishoprics. Moreover, we receive under the protection of the holy church the kingdom which you have surrendered to Saint Peter, together with yourself and your people, the Hungarian nation; and we now give it back to you and to your heirs and successors to be held, possessed, ruled, and governed. And your heirs and successors, who shall have been legally elected by the nobles, shall duly offer obedience and reverence to us and to our successors in their own persons or by ambassadors, and shall confess themselves the subject of the Roman church, who does not hold her subjects as slaves, but receives them all as children.¹¹³

Stephen's position in the commonwealth was somewhat different than that of the Polish duke. In Stephen's case, a crown was sent denoting a separate kingdom while Boeslav of Poland had been presented with a diadem which, while making him independent within his realm, did not entirely sever the ties that had existed since the time of Otto I. The difference here obviously lies in the fact that Germany had actually conquered large sections of Poland while Hungary had never been occupied by forces of the empire. Sylvester, in his letter, mentioned that he was sending "the crown that had been prepared for the duke of Poland."¹¹⁴ It is still not clear why Boeslav was not granted a crown, but it is possible that Otto III wished to maintain nominal control over the Polish church and state.

This might be explained by the tone of the chronicle of Theitmar of Merseburg. In this chronicle Theitmar deplored the severing of

¹¹³Ibid.
¹¹⁴Ibid.
ties with Poland. Otto III may have wished to placate nationalistic interests in Germany by only a partial remission of the obligations owed by Poland. Hungary, however, had never been attached to the empire and thus the negotiations proceeded on a different level.

The events of Stephen's coronation are not clear, but the chronicle of the contemporary Theitmar tersely states that "by the grace and favor of the above-mentioned Emperor Otto III, Waic [the Magyar name for Stephen], brother-in-law of Henry, duke of Bavaria, received the crown and the blessing and erected Episcopal cathedrals in his realm." It is significant that Theitmar referred to Stephen as a relative of an important German duke, showing the place Stephen had earned by a politically advantageous marriage.

It is interesting to note, that Stephen styled himself "King by the Grace of God" to emphasize the fact that his royal power was independent of the will of any of his chieftains. Despite this however, Stephen was to be troubled by rebellious tribes in the last years of his rule. After his coronation, Stephen proceeded to strengthen the church of Hungary within the commonwealth. With the agreement of Otto III (who was acting in conjunction with the pope) the Hungarian king founded an archbishopric in his capital city of Gran and provided it with a number of suffragan sees. The first metropolitan was Anastasius, a German missionary who had worked in Hungary. Stephen also caused a church to be built in Rome for the use of

\[115\]


\[116\]

visiting Hungarians. Besides this, Stephen is also said to have established a residential center for his people who might visit Rome. \(^{117}\) It was restored in the fifteenth century, and an inscription proclaims that it was constructed by means of donations from pilgrims. \(^{118}\) The construction of these various facilities shows the policy of a far-sighted ruler who wanted his interests well represented in Rome. Stephen thus committed himself to the Christian commonwealth. Stephen's rule, which lasted long after the death of Otto III, was dedicated to nation building, and by the middle of the eleventh century Hungary was a respected Christian nation.

A curious footnote to Stephen's entry into the commonwealth occurred forty years after his death. Pope Gregory VIII in a letter to Solomon, a successor of the holy king, stated that: "as you can learn from the elders of your country, the kingdom of Hungary belongs in a special way to the Holy Roman Church inasmuch as it was piously offered by King Stephen to Blessed Peter with all its rights and jurisdictions." \(^{119}\) Although the popes may have had some suzerenity over Hungary, the country remained solidly in the hands of Stephen's successors.

In summary, it can be seen, that Hungary's improved relations with the empire were largely the result of the missionary work of the German church. This powerful influence pervaded Hungarian life and

\(^{117}\) Mann, The Lives of the Popes in the Middle Ages, V, 84.

\(^{118}\) Ibid.

\(^{119}\) Ibid., p. 80.
brought the country closer to the Latin West. The church was aided by the far-sighted policies of Stephen I who saw in the commonwealth an opportunity for recognition, as well as the benefits that could be accrued by belonging to an alliance of Christian states.

Hungary had much to offer the commonwealth as well. Her strategic geographical position between Byzantium and Germany might have opened the way for closer relations between the two empires. Had this happened, East and West would have been no more than a geographical distinction, their cultural differences would have dwindled to insignificance and the traffic of ideas could once again have been opened between Byzantine and the western European countries.
The concept of a Christian commonwealth evolved slowly in medieval Europe. We have seen how Charlemagne and Otto pursued a similar course of military expansionism in order to increase their territories and spread the influence of the Latin church. This conversion, by force of arms, was the basis of the commonwealth as viewed by the Carolingians and the early Saxon emperors. As their power increased, both Charlemagne and Otto I attempted to establish their unchallenged hegemony in the west by being crowned emperor. The ceremony of papal coronation firmly established their positions as the rulers of the Christian empire in Europe.

The coronation of Otto III in 996 saw a new concept of commonwealth evolve. This evolution found its genesis in the writings of Hroswitha of Gandersheim, a German nun, who placed the young emperor in direct line with the caesars of the Roman past. Her writings claimed that Otto III was not only emperor of the Germans, but was actually destined to reign over many peoples, a concept that gave a universality to his rule.

Otto III was crowned at a time when tribes of common background were being united by strong rulers. In Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary, a unified front was presented under the leadership of such men as Boeslav the Brave and Stephen I, king of Hungary. This unification presented a problem if the young emperor wished to establish an empire that would extend into eastern Europe. Obviously, the empire could not attempt to conquer all of eastern Europe by force of arms.
as had Charlemagne, simply because this portion of Europe was now united and too powerful to subjugate by military means.

Thus the policy of military expansion that had been the trade-mark of the commonwealth since early in the ninth century had to be changed in favor of a new policy. Otto III, after much counsel with his advisors, advanced the concept of a commonwealth based upon an alliance of Christian states under the direction of the emperor. This alliance would in no way endanger the sovereignty of the new nations, but rather would enhance their positions as members of a powerful new order in medieval Europe.

In 999, Otto III began to put his plan into motion. Journeying to Poland in order to pay tribute to his friend Adalbert, a missionary who had suffered death at the hands of the Prussians, Otto began serious negotiations with the duke of Poland concerning Polish entry into the commonwealth. The union was successfully accomplished, and Otto crowned the duke with a diadem indicating his hegemony in Poland and his place at the side of the emperor.

Upon returning to Rome, Otto initiated another change in the character of the new empire. Declaring himself "Servant of the Apostles," Otto layed claim to much of the authority of the pope. Thus Otto elevated himself to a position of emperor-priest in order to strengthen his position in dealing with the nations of eastern Europe. By assuming the powers of Christ's disciple on earth, Otto approached the Slavic tribes through the unifying force of Christianity and not as a powerful emperor bent upon increasing his territories by political means.

This stratagem possibly convinced Stephen of Hungary of the
desireability of entering the commonwealth. Soon after the assumption of the apostolic authority by Otto III, Stephen applied by letter, through a German bishop, for entry into the new order. His correspondence was received with great joy by Otto III and Pope Sylvester II and they immediately dispatched a letter recognizing Stephen as king of Hungary and a member of the Christian commonwealth.

Thus in the year 1000, the future of the empire seemed unlimited. Otto III was the leader of a commonwealth that stretched from Germany to the borders of Russia in the east, to the Baltic in the north, and to Italy in the south. This great empire which was based upon internal cooperation seemed to promise Europe a stability unknown since the time of Charlemagne.

Such was not to be the case, however, as a revolt in Rome in the year 1001 threatened the life of the emperor and forced him to seek refuge in his castle. The insurrection was eventually put down, but the young emperor was obviously deeply effected by the infidelity of his subject Romans. In January of 1002, Otto died after contracting smallpox. A year later, his advisor, Pope Sylvester II, also died and control of the empire passed into the hands of Henry the Wrangler, duke of Bavaria, who abandoned the commonwealth and declared war on Poland in order to establish his hegemony over the Polish duke.

The commonwealth perished then, not because of the unfeasibility of its ideals or programs, but rather because Otto and Sylvester found no common successors in their task. The emperors that were to follow Otto III exploited the church for their own ends, a policy which was to culminate in the Investiture Controversy in the eleventh century.
The result of this was that the central authority of the emperor was destroyed, and Germany became a patchwork of petty kingdoms, a condition that would retard German unification for centuries.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. PRIMARY SOURCES


II. PRIMARY SOURCE COLLECTIONS


### III. SECONDARY SOURCES


