

**Stephan Freund, Matthias Puhle, Otto der Große 912–973. Kaiser der Römer, König der Völker, Regensburg (Schnell & Steiner) 2023, 256 S., ISBN 978-3-7954-3823-4, EUR 30,00.**

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This nicely designed volume seeks to fulfill several purposes at once. The authors state at the outset that it was intended both for »interested laypeople« as well as the *Fachpublikum* of professional research historians (who are apparently intellectual clergy). A second purpose is to both celebrate Otto I's life on the 1050<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death and also to describe the 10<sup>th</sup>-century cultural world of the Saxon ruler. And thirdly, the volume was also intended to function as an introduction to the surviving Saxon cultural sites which the authors hoped would encourage readers to come and visit for a bit of historical tourism.

On the one hand, specialist historians are assured that the older scholarship of event-based narrative historiography, of hero-worship *Personengeschichte*, and of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century structural history have been replaced here by a new biography of Otto based on the latest published scholarship. And yet footnotes are rejected in favor of short bibliographies at the end of each chapter, with an open recognition of incompleteness<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, lay readers are assured that the book has direct civic significance for a democratic society, since the Otto of this biography is one who was not so much an imperialist as a diplomatic ruler whose consensus politics allowed for peaceful coexistence with his neighbors equally to the east and to the west. Given that this civic interpretation of Otto the Great was foregrounded in the introduction dated April 2023, one may surmise that the authors were offering a cautionary warning to the right-wing authoritarianism of the AfD party in Saxony<sup>2</sup>.

Neither of these opening declarations are likely to persuade either professional historians or the reading public that this volume's Otto the Great is any less entangled in presentist concerns than previous biographies. Despite claims to dispensing with event-based narrative historiography, readers will in fact encounter a basically familiar narrative of Otto's political career, punctuated

<sup>1</sup> The same set of authors are cited in each of the chapter mini-bibliographies: the two authors themselves, Rudolf Schieffer, Gerd Althoff, Hagen Keller, Johannes Fried, Caspar Ehlers, Matthias Becher, Bernd Schneidmüller, Joachim Ehlers, Johannes Laudage.

<sup>2</sup> In July 2023 thousands of civic-minded citizens of Saxony marched in protest against the AfD's two-day party conference in Magdeburg, with signage declaring »stand together against right-wing hate« and »Nazis out«.



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by signposts where older ideas apparently still found in public discourse have been abandoned<sup>3</sup>. Though a charter or two are mentioned as well, the vast majority of the biography is taken from the standard chronicles of the day, which are often cited at length (Widukind of Corvey, Liutprand of Cremona, Hrotsvita of Gandersheim, Regino of Prüm with Adalbert's continuation, Thietmar of Merseburg, and the anonymous »Vita Mathildis antiquior«).

The new scholarship of recent vintage appears, therefore, in a number of add-on chapters on topics like peripatetic kingship, the role of Adelheid as empress in Italy, the role of women at the Ottonian court, though this new historiography is often merely described as »umstritten«. These topical chapters are then joined by traditional chapters on ecclesiastical historiography and *Herrschaftszeichen*. The authors make use of ethnogenesis to explain the polycentric nature of the German kingdom of gentes, though the anachronism of medieval »state« formation remains in use.

It is difficult to shake the sense that the employment of scholarship lacks depth of expertise. Statements like »Neben Karl [dem Großen] ist Otto damit der einzige Herrscher des Mittelalters, dem dieses Attribut [i.e. *magnus*] verliehen wurde« (p. 8) do not elicit confidence<sup>4</sup>. And the last two add-on chapters for good reason read more like exhibition catalogs than a biography of Otto's life and political career. They reproduce chapters in other publications by the same authors celebrating Otto's anniversary<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, chapter 15 quickly evolves into a celebration of the Kulturhistorisches Museum Magdeburg's collected works. Hence

<sup>3</sup> For example, the authors highlight the dismissal of the old thesis of an Ottonian *Reichskirchensystem*, which does seem odd since it was dismissed over forty years ago: Timothy Reuter, *The Imperial Church System of the Ottonian and Salian Rulers. A Reconsideration*, in: *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 33 (1982), p. 347–374. There is also a lengthy historiographical excursus through 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Kulturkampf* historiography as no longer appropriate.

<sup>4</sup> This reader can think of at least twenty medieval European rulers who received the sobriquet »the Great«, from Hugo Magnus (*le Grand*) to Valdemar I of Denmark (*den Store*) to Cnut of England, Denmark, and Norway (*den Store*) among them. Indeed, even Queen Berengaria of Castile and Toledo was given the title »*la Grande*«.

<sup>5</sup> Chapter 14 »Zurück in der Heimat – Glanzvolle Feiern und eine letzte Reise« by Stephan Freund and Chapter 15 »Epilog: Otto's Weiterreise – Vom Mittelalter bis in die Moderne: Otto forever!« by Matthias Puhle appear elsewhere as »Otto der Große im 19. Jahrhundert«, in: Stephan Freund, Gabriele Köster, Matthias Puhle (Hg.), *Des Kaisers letzte Reise. Höhepunkt und Ende der Herrschaft Ottos des Großen und sein (Weiter) Leben vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, Halle, Saale 2023 (Schriftenreihe des Zentrums für Mittelalterausstellungen Magdeburg, 8) and are closely related to Claus-Peter Hasse, Gabriele Köster (Hg.), *Welche Taten werden Bilder? Otto der Große in der Erinnerung späterer Zeiten. Katalog zur Sonderausstellung im Kulturhistorischen Museum Magdeburg vom 30. April bis 8. Oktober 2023*, Regensburg 2023.



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the add-on chapters feel added on to a familiar biography of Otto the Great. Finally, the narrow insularity of the scholarship selected is reflected in the absence of fundamental scholarship on Otto the Great which happens to be in English. Timothy Reuter has already been mentioned, and how ethnogenesis can be discussed without reference to Patrick Geary, or Ottonian itinerant kingship without reference to John Bernhardt is unimaginable<sup>6</sup>. If Jinty Nelson's brief article on rites of queen-making could be used in this volume, surely these other seminal works are worthy of inclusion among the newer scholarship of the past quarter century<sup>7</sup>.

Thus professional historians will not likely be citing this book. But such a result does not diminish the authors' avowed intent to reach a wider reading public. They have both published widely with Schnell und Steiner, a publishing house long-known for its Small Art Guides. Schnell und Steiner's tradition of art guidebooks and exhibition catalogs filled in abundance with beautiful, professional photographs is solidly maintained in this volume. And so its intended purposes of introducing the wider reading public to Otto's kingship as well as to the surviving cultural objects available for visiting in Magdeburg have been achieved. Though no *Fachbuch*, this volume is an effective *Sachbuch* with a clear reading audience in mind. The book concludes with these words, »Fassen wir ganz am Ende unseres Buches zusammen: Das 1050. Jubiläum des Todes des großen Kaisers ist lediglich ein weiterer Zwischenstopp. Die Reise Ottos durch die Zeiten geht auch danach weiter. Ihr Motto lautet: Otto Forever!«

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<sup>6</sup> Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*, Princeton 2003; John W. Bernhardt, *Itinerant Kingship and Royal Monasteries in Early Medieval Germany, c. 936–1075*, Cambridge 2002 (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, Fourth Series, 21).

<sup>7</sup> Janet L. Nelson, *Early Medieval Rites of Queen-Making and the Shaping of Medieval Queenship*, in: Anne J. Duggan (ed.), *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe*, Woodbridge 1997, p. 301–317, cited in chapter 13's literature list on page 215.



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