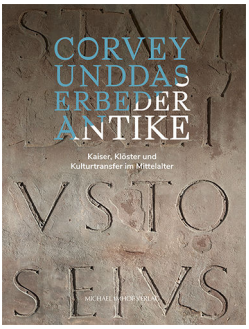
HOLGER KEMPKENS & CHRISTIANE RUHMANN (EDS.), *CORVEY UND DAS ERBE DER ANTIKE. KAISER, KLÖSTER UND KULTURTRANSFER IM MITTELALTER*

Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag 2024, 656 pages with 621 color and 23 b/w ill., ISBN 978-3-7319-1425-9 (Hardback).



Reviewed by
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Corvey und das Erbe der Antike ("Corvey and the Classical Heritage") is the catalogue to the most recent large-scale exhibition of medieval art held at the Diocesan Museum in Paderborn; it was on view for four months beginning in September 2024.[1] The Paderborn museum has, rather surprisingly, become the successor to the Schnütgen Museum in Cologne as the major German venue for temporary displays of medieval art and culture. If Cologne set the tone in the 1970s and 1980s with exhibitions such as *Rhein und Maas* (1972) and *Ornamenta Ecclesiae* (1985), in this century Paderborn has assumed Cologne's mantle with *799: Kunst der Karolinger* (1999), *Canossa 1077* (2006), *Credo* (2013), and others. (It is surely no coincidence that both cities are heavily Catholic.) In the wake of *799*, which was a totally unexpected success, drawing 328,000 viewers,

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I did not see the exhibition; photographs of the installation are available on the exhibition's website (May 27, 2025).

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6/2, 2025, 251–256

https://doi.org/10.11588/xxi.2025.2.111788

the smallish museum in Paderborn has followed a consistent exhibition formula which combines the serious scholarly presentation of relatively small numbers of often very important medieval objects (there were 120 in the Corvey exhibition) with display techniques featuring staging, reconstructions, and the like (English currently lacks a handy equivalent for the useful German term *Inszenierungen*). All of these Paderborn exhibitions were the brainchild of Christoph Stiegemann; *Corvey und das Erbe der Antike* was the first to be organized by his successor as director, Holger Kempkens, and by Christiane Ruhmann, a curator at the museum.

The immediate history of these Paderborn displays takes us back to the very tail end of the twentieth century, but the Corvey exhibition also has a longer intellectual pedigree. The catalogue opens with an introduction by Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the president of the Federal Republic of Germany and the exhibition's patron. According to Steinmeier, "the spiritual and cultural foundation for the Europe that arose was laid in the monastic libraries and scriptoria" (p. 7; all translation the author's). That sentence could easily have appeared in the catalogue to the first blockbuster display of medieval art in post-World War II Germany, *Werdendes Abendland am Rhein und Ruhr* ("The West in Gestation in the Rhine and Ruhr Valleys") held in Essen in 1956. That exhibition's name makes clear that its politics were rooted in the Cold War and the reemergence of *West* Germany as a European power. The year 2024 is a very different one from 1956, but in many ways the message of *Corvey und das Erbe der Antike* was not entirely different from that of *Werdendes Abendland*. In twenty-first-century Paderborn, as in mid-twentieth-century Essen, Christianity was crucial; Cornel Dora's catalogue introduction flatly asserted that the Middle Ages was the "era of heaven" (p. 9). This Christian emphasis was very much business as usual at Paderborn; as one observer of the exhibitions at the Diocesan Museum has noted: "For Christoph Stiegemann, it was always clear that European culture and history were inconceivable without Christianity."[2] It was not only in terms of ideology that *Corvey und das Erbe der Antike* harkened back to an earlier era of exhibitions. The show's catalogue weighs a hefty three kilos; it is a book to be studied in a library, not consulted in an exhibition (in the wake of the massive catalogues from the Schnütgen Museum and elsewhere, the citation of a catalogue's weight became a trope of exhibition reviews). The format of the volume under review was also traditional (in this instance, a welcome conservatism), as it featured long object entries, many extending a page or more, with

[2] Richard Böger, Vom Mehrwert der Kunst. Kulturförderung der Bank für Kirche und Caritas e.G. Paderborn am Beispiel der großen Sonderausstellungen des Diözesanmuseums seit 1999, in: Christiane Ruhmann and Petra Westhues (eds.), *Museum als Resonanzraum. Festschrift für Christoph Stiegemann*, Petersberg 2020, 478–487, here 484. The Christian emphasis of the Paderborn exhibitions is apparent if they are contrasted to those shown at the other major German center for medieval exhibitions, the Kulturhistorisches Museum in Magdeburg; these have had an almost unrelenting focus on emperors: e.g. *Otto der Grosse, Magdeburg und Europa* (2001) or *Heiliges Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation* (2006).

full bibliographies; these were joined by thirty-four serious and substantial scholarly essays on a diverse array of topics.

The subject of *Corvey und das Erbe der Antike*, a Carolingian-era monastery and its relationship to classical antiquity, might also seem very traditional. What hoarier subject could there be than the "Carolingian renaissance"? But, as Ingo Herklotz shows in an enlightening and characteristically thoroughly researched historiographical essay ("Die *Karolingische Renaissance*: Ein schwieriges Erbe der deutschen Kunstwissenschaft"), the art-historical prominence of the Carolingian revival of antiquity goes back only to Richard Krautheimer's 1942 essay "The Carolingian Revival of Early Christian Architecture".[3] Before Krautheimer, the Carolingians had been difficult to locate in a German art history that prized nationalism and progress. If Charlemagne's artistic patronage, notably his palace chapel at Aachen, was indebted to late antique Mediterranean models, it was neither German nor innovative. Krautheimer challenged those ways of thinking so successfully that it is now hard for us to imagine things otherwise. But *Corvey und das Erbe der Antike* consistently shows that the classical legacy was disputed in the Middle Ages, treasured and despised in more or less equal measure.[4] This tension enriched the catalogue and the display and made clear that, Steinmeier's banal words to the contrary, this was *not* an exhibition intended simply to demonstrate the hoary formula that Western culture is the result of combining the ancient pagan and medieval Christian heritages.

Why Corvey? As with many exhibitions, historical anniversaries were crucial, although this was a rare medieval/modern anniversary combination (tenth anniversary of Corvey becoming a UNESCO World Heritage site; more or less the 1200th of the monastery's founding, since a cornerstone was laid in 822). Displaying Corvey in Paderborn, some sixty kilometers distant, posed logistical and conceptual challenges. For example, Corvey is home to two remarkable ninth-century witnesses to the classical heritage: the extraordinary wall painting depicting Odysseus and the Scylla (II.27) and the beautiful inscription in *capitalis quadrata* (II.9). The latter was sufficiently portable to travel to Paderborn, the former not, although an image of it was projected onto the gallery wall, one of the exhibition's many uses of multimedia (Paderborn's tradition of *Inszenierungen* has also survived Stiegemann's departure).

Exhibition and catalogue begin not with Corvey, but with the Carolingian era more generally. The thickly documented essays make clear this was a well-studied subject and the objects in this part of the exhibition were also familiar: manuscripts of ancient Christian authors and works of art, especially ivories, with ties to

[3] *Art Bulletin* 24, 1942, 1–38.

[4] See in particular Aaron Joachim's catalogue essay: Vergiftetes Erbe. Antikes Wissen bei Bovo und Widukind von Corvey, 305–311.

classical themes and forms. *Corvey und das Erbe der Antike* singled out a small subset of objects to which it gave particular attention; these were treated from the technical perspective as well as the more familiar cultural-historical one. In this first part of the exhibition, the work that drew such a focus was the Roman statue of a she-bear from Aachen (I.14). The statue was very nicely contextualized in terms both of form, as it was juxtaposed to a Roman statue of a dog from the Vatican Museums, and its physical context; Aachen was represented by an ancient or Carolingian bronze column base from Charlemagne's chapel and the Byzantine quadriga textile from the Aachen treasury (I.16–17). These kinds of telling juxtapositions make an exhibition succeed and they characterized *Corvey und das Erbe der Antike*, which was extremely carefully curated, a welcome change from the sometimes almost random accumulation of objects that can characterize high-profile exhibitions.

The next sections of catalogue and exhibition turned to Corvey itself. One was devoted to material remains from the abbey, including colored glass, stucco, and wall painting. Most of these objects are known to specialists, but it is very useful to have detailed scholarly accounts and color images of them gathered in one place. This section was paired to one that considered the monastery's library and scriptorium. For the organizers, these were Corvey's head and beating heart and this section functioned as a microcosm of the exhibition, since it showed how the classical heritage was both preserved (library) and transformed (scriptorium). The part on the library contained a rich collection of manuscripts, both late antique and medieval, containing classical texts and their medieval reworkings. More impressive for the art historian and likely the average viewer was the subdivision devoted to the scriptorium; here were assembled a number of the quite spectacular and distinctive manuscripts produced at Corvey in the tenth century. In another example of careful curation, the late ninth-century Franco-Saxon gospel book from Prague was displayed (III.26). This book is rarely exhibited, but it was a key hinge object for *Corvey und das Erbe der Antike*, so the museum did well to obtain it as a loan. Its ivory cover, a reused consular diptych of the fifth century, looked backwards to the classical heritage. The manuscript itself, however, pointed forward. It was written and decorated in northern France, but its three scribes were trained at Corvey and the manuscript was at the monastery by the tenth century, where it provided inspiration for Corvey's highly particular school of book production.

Corvey und das Erbe der Antike then turned from the title subject to something like its opposite: the Saxon inhabitants of the region around Corvey and their conquest by the Carolingians. This section was given literal short shrift (twenty-nine catalogue pages and six objects compared to just over a hundred pages and twenty-seven objects in the previous part). Shrift here is an apposite word; because this was an exhibition that focused so intently on reading, writing, and textual evidence, the Saxons, a generally non-literate culture, were difficult for it to present. The curators did not force

the issue and are to be commended for not padding the exhibition here. The object in this section that received by far the most attention was little known but fascinating (even if not especially impressive to look at): a fragment of the exhaust opening from an eighth-century bell foundry at Dülmen (IV.5). Bell casting is a clear mark of Christianization and the Dülmen foundry's exceptionally early, carbon-14-based date is unexpected evidence of organized Christianization well in advance of the Carolingian conquest. This was a nice example of the ways in which material culture can be used as a historical source, one entirely appropriate to a display that otherwise put such weight on the written word.

The nominal theme of the fifth section of the exhibition was important and innovative: Westphalian monasteries as sites of "Technologie-Transfer".[5] Here, the focus shifted from Corvey to Enger and especially the purse reliquary from that monastery now in the Kunstgwerbemuseum in Berlin (V.1). This major object was surrounded by an array of important loans, including other pieces from the Enger treasure and the Theudericus shrine from Saint-Maurice d'Agaune (perhaps one of the few slightly gratuitous loans in the exhibition). The Enger purse was also the subject of five historical and scientific scholarly essays filling forty pages, so *Corvey und das Erbe der Antike* unexpectedly contains between its covers what amounts to a short monograph on the Enger purse. This was not the only surprise in this part of the catalogue, which ended with a presentation of female monasteries and their interest in antiquity. This is a welcome subject and one that allowed the display of the spectacular Roman cameo from Nottuln, now in Berlin (V.21) and some important objects from Essen, including a quadripartite psalter and the crown associated with the Golden Madonna (V.25, 27).

In an unexpected but excellent curatorial move, the final section of the exhibition jumped from Carolingian-Ottonian Corvey to the mid-twelfth century and the abbacy of Wibald. Although he is more usually connected with Stavelot, the "Christian Cicero" was also, near the end of his life, abbot of Corvey. An essay by Holger Kempkens outlined Wibald's spectacular artistic patronage, including the portable altar in Brussels and the triptych in the Morgan Library and Museum in New York. These were not present in Paderborn, but the Diocesan Museum was able to obtain such high-profile (and relevant) loans as Wibald's crozier (VI.13), the two remaining enamel medallions from the Remaclus retable (VI.14), and the Corvey *Liber vitae* (VI.4).

The exhibition ended with a "calligraphic intervention" by the contemporary artist Brody Neuenschwander, who also contributed to several earlier shows at the Paderborn museum. From the catalogue entry and installation photographs it was hard to discern how trenchant Neuenschwander's installation was. Given

[5] The tendency of *Corvey und das Erbe der Antike* to infuse itself with an English-inflected vocabulary of management consulting was not one of its most attractive features. According to the exhibition's website, Corvey was a "Think-Tank des Mittelalters".

the exhibition's clear and coherent theme and exceptionally tight curation, it is unclear whether any intervention was necessary. Also questionable were some of the *Inszenierungen*. The so-called Arch of Einhard, a small, now-lost Carolingian object known from seventeenth-century drawings, is a prime example of the medieval *Erbe der Antike*; probably a cross base, it remarkably takes the form of a Roman triumphal arch. But the Arch was not one of the objects included in the catalogue, although it appeared in the exhibition in the form of a three-dimensional, meter-tall vitrine. To my mind, both the immensely magnified scale and the use as exhibition furniture were inappropriate.

But these last are really quibbles about a fine exhibition and a book that will be used with pleasure and profit for many years to come, taking its deserved place alongside what is by now a very impressive shelf of Paderborn exhibition catalogues.