

GENIUS LOCI

LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by
Dóra Mérai
and

Ágnes Drosztmér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



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The Imperial Abbey of Corvey in the Ninth and Tenth Century: At the Crossroads of Power

DANIEL ZIEMANN*

The abbey of Corvey was one of the most important monastic sites in the Frankish and Roman Empire.¹ Especially during the tenth century, the Ottonian emperors visited Corvey quite frequently. The abbot had significant political influence. Many bishops came from Corvey, which was home to one of the leading libraries and an outstanding school. The most famous work among the many written by monks from there is the Saxon history by the monk Widukind of Corvey, one of the most valuable historiographic sources for the political history of Germany under the reign of King Henry I and King (and later Emperor) Otto I.² In the eleventh century, the abbey lost some of its importance but remained one of the most significant monastic places in the region. This article briefly traces the abbey's importance for royal and imperial rulership under the Carolingians and Ottonians.

The early period

Place and space played a crucial role in the early days of the abbey of Corvey. The abbey was founded twice. After a first attempt to found a monastery at a place called Hethis failed, the monastery was moved to another place, the present-day town of Höxter. This time the abbey remained. The place is significant since it is situated at the famous *Hellweg*, the road that linked two important regions, the Rhineland and Saxony. The abbey was sited near a bridge across the Weser River, probably built subsequent to the abbey.³

Corvey is a daughter abbey of the prominent West Frankish abbey of Corbie in Picardie, which played a dominant role during the reigns of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious. At the time of its

foundation, Corvey provided an opportunity for the Carolingian emperors to intensify the ecclesiastical structures in Saxony, a region that had been subdued and forcefully converted to Christianity just a few years earlier. Adalhard, the abbot of Corbie, was also the head of the first monks who were sent to Saxony.⁴ While the abbey stayed under the tutorship of Corbie for a time, it soon became independent. Abbot Warin (826/833-856), son of a Saxon count, Ekbert, was probably the first independent abbot of Corvey.⁵ Ekbert was a member of the family called the Ekbertines/Cobbones, who were closely connected to the abbey in the ninth and tenth centuries. In the ninth century the abbey had strong ties with Emperor Louis the Pious and his wife Judith, and received many donations and benefits.⁶ In 836 the relics of Saint Vitus were transferred from St. Denis to Corvey.⁷ From that time on, Saint Vitus remained the most important saint for Corvey.⁸

The ninth century: the consolidation of a network

The abbey benefitted from generous donations throughout the ninth century. In 826, it received the churches in Eresburg/Obermarsberg, in 834 Meppen, and in 855 Visbeck in the "Emsland."⁹ Between 822 and 875, the abbey received about 400 donations of property located in three hundred different places. These estates were scattered across the large area roughly circumscribed by the North Sea and the Mosel, Lahn and Elbe rivers.¹⁰ In 833, Corvey received minting rights.¹¹

Besides the landed property, Corvey established a political network maintained by its connections with influential families and by monks who were promoted to serve as bishops all over the empire.¹² The main duties of the abbey included missionary activities, especially in the

* Department of Medieval Studies, Central European University, Budapest

north; Ansgar, one of the Corvey monks involved in these activities, was sent to preach the Christian faith in 826 before becoming the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen in 831.¹³ Pope Stephen VI made the abbey directly subordinate to the papacy on May 30, 887, with the mediation of Bishop Wigbert of Hildesheim (880-908), a former monk of the abbey and an influential personality of the time.¹⁴ Corvey's sphere of influence also extended to regions far from its core area. One example is the active role that Corvey played in the process of Christianizing Bohemia, as the patrocinium of Saint Vitus in Prague demonstrates.¹⁵

The late ninth and early tenth century: the changing role of Corvey

The abbey continued to enjoy the benevolence of the Carolingian rulers even after the division of the Frankish Empire and the decline of central power. In 887, Charles III granted the abbey an exemption from the military service. This, however, due to the difficult situation at the time, was limited to thirty companions of the abbot, while the rest remained subject to military duty.¹⁶ While Corvey clearly profited from benefices during the ninth century and accumulated property and privileges, the kings and emperors of the Carolingian dynasty never visited the abbey. It was far from the power centers in Aachen or the region between the Rhine and Loire preferred by Charlemagne and Louis the Pious. After the empire was divided under the rule of Louis the German, and later under his successors, the situation did not change; most of the time the kings stayed in Bavaria and the region around the Main River. Corvey was clearly regarded as a means for controlling a region where the kings were not able to interfere directly. The first ruler who visited Corvey was Arnulf of Carinthia in 889.¹⁷ This visit was quite unusual as he, like his predecessors, normally stayed far from Saxony in the main Bavarian and Frankish lands.

The close connection with the noble family of the Ekbertines/Cobbones remained crucial for the abbey. Cobbo the Younger, a son of Count Ekbert, perhaps gave the abbey some of the property he had received from Arnulf of Carinthia.

Members of the family occupied the post of the abbot for quite a long time. The abbots Bovo I (879-890), Bovo II (900-916), and Bovo III (942-948) were all members of this influential family.¹⁸ The dynastic change in 911, when Conrad I from the Conradinian family was crowned king, did not change the situation. Conrad's father had intervened in favor of the abbey in 900.¹⁹ His son, the new King Conrad I, visited Corvey in 913 and confirmed the freedom of elections, immunity, and the income from the tithe from its own courts. The latter could be based on a forgery claiming that this right had been granted by one of Conrad's predecessors. It meant a significant loss for the bishoprics of Paderborn and Osnabrück, something that may have caused problems if it were discovered.²⁰ Apart from his visit, Conrad mainly ruled from his core area around Hesse and the Main region. Like his Carolingian predecessors, he might have considered the monastery as a means for controlling an area where he was not able to be present in person.²¹

Corvey under the Ottonians

The situation changed significantly under the Ottonians. In 919, when Henry I became king, Saxony immediately became the central region from which the new dynasty ruled the kingdom.²² Under Henry I, Corvey seems to have maintained its close relationships to the throne. For example, Henry may have contributed to the embellishment of the altar on the initiative of his wife Mathilda,²³ who was certainly a supporter of the abbey as she plays a prominent role in Widukind's *Saxon History*. The relationship with Otto I, who ruled from 936, was cooler and less close. The diplomas issued by Ottonian rulers are predominantly recognitions of previous privileges. For instance, on April 22, 922, Henry I renewed former diplomas at request of his wife Mathilda and his son Henry.²⁴ The Ottonian family as a whole, however, continued to present themselves as supporters of the abbey. Members of the Ottonian family are presented as interveners in favor of Corvey, for example, in 936 when Otto on request of the abbot Folcmar supported by his son Liudolf and Queen Edgitha, renewed privileges.²⁵ Similar confirmations were supported by Edgitha again in 940;²⁶

by Brun, chancellor and brother of Otto I, in 942;²⁷ by Henry, brother of Otto I, in 945;²⁸ and by Brun, again, in 946,²⁹ and 965.³⁰ The last charter was issued for the salvation of the Ottonian family: Otto's parents Mathilda and Henry, his wife Adelheid, and his son Otto.

Even though no large-scale acquisitions took place in the Ottonian period, the abbey enjoyed some important donations, for example, the royal ban or the right of enforcement over the castlework (*Burgbann*) of people living in the region of the Au, Nethe, and Wethi.³¹ Abbot Bovo III (942-948) received the right of minting and tolls for the town of Meppen in 945.³² The situation continued under Otto II, who confirmed Conrad I's privileges on request of abbot Liudolf supported by his mother, Adelheid.³³ On April 3, 981, Pope Benedict VII granted Corvey the exemption privileges of direct subordination to the Holy See, together with the right to freely elect the abbot.³⁴ Other donations followed at the end of the tenth century.³⁵

It seems that the distance that characterized the relationship during the reign of Otto I slightly changed under his successors. It is, however, apparent that Corvey received almost all its estates during the Carolingian period, while the Ottonians mainly confirmed established privileges and donations, only adding new ones occasionally.³⁶ Other monasteries, for instance, the abbey dedicated to Saint Maurice in Magdeburg, enjoyed more privileges and donations in this period.³⁷ This is in sharp contrast to the spatial importance of Corvey in Ottonian times. While the early Carolingians never visited the abbey, Ottonians frequently stayed there on their constant travels across their kingdom and empire. Until the beginning of the Staufer dynasty's rule in the twelfth century, the abbey was visited approximately a hundred times by kings and emperors.³⁸ Its geographical importance went from being a stronghold in a region far from the power center to becoming a key location near the core area of imperial governance. Interestingly, this new geographical importance did not result in further donations because Corvey remained politically connected with families who were not always close to the royal and imperial court, at least under Otto I. The *Saxon History* by Widuk-

ind of Corvey is certainly an attempt to resolve this issue and to bring the abbey closer to the court. The importance of the abbey was, nevertheless, recognized and respected. It only lost some of its importance when the whole region turned into a periphery again in 1024.

Concluding remarks

The abbey of Corvey was a remarkable place, a powerful abbey that played a crucial role in Carolingian politics in Saxony in the ninth century and Ottonian politics in the tenth. A closer look at the diplomas and privileges granted by kings and emperors shows a more complex picture. It seems that the abbey acquired many of its estates when the region where it lay was on the periphery of the realm. Although it suddenly became a central place under the Ottonians from 919 onward, it seems that Otto I, especially, had a cool and distant relationship with Corvey, which is evident in Widukind of Corvey's famous *Saxon History*. While some members of the Ottonian family remained strong supporters of the abbey, most of the diplomas issued during the Ottonian rule, especially by Otto I, were recognitions of privileges granted by former kings and emperors. Otto I paid more attention to other ecclesiastical institutions in the region. This may have changed slightly under the rule of his successors, Otto II and Otto III. This brief overview demonstrates that spatial analysis must take various different factors into account. Changing political patterns have significant implications for institutions mostly due to changing geographical orientation. Formerly remote regions become centers and vice versa, although the exact impact on the various existing institutions can differ from case to case. Due to the importance of Widukind of Corvey's *Saxon History* one might be tempted to assume that Corvey reached its peak at the time of its writing. Further research is necessary to shed more light on this question; despite the perceived importance suggested by his colossal work, it is more likely that the abbey reached the zenith of its prestige, economic, and political power a century before Widukind's time.

Notes

- ¹ An extensive bibliography can be found in Michael Koch and Andreas König, eds., *Bibliographie Höxter, Corvey und Corveyer Land: 3. erweiterte Ausgabe; Stand: Januar 2017* (Münster: Historische Kommission für Westfalen, Landschaftsverband Westfalen-Lippe, 2017); for a comprehensive study on Corvey, see Hans-Georg Stephan, *Studien zur Siedlungsentwicklung und -struktur von Stadt und Reichskloster Corvey (800-1670): Eine Gesamtdarstellung auf der Grundlage archäologischer und historischer Quellen*, 1-3 (Neumünster: Wachholtz, 2000); general overviews can be found in Andreas König, Holger Rabe, and Gerhard Streich, eds., *Höxter: Geschichte einer westfälischen Stadt*, vol. 1, *Höxter und Corvey im Früh- und Hochmittelalter* (Hannover: Hahn, 2003), 80-120 (the chapter by Hans-Georg Stephan, "Die Reichsabtei Corvey: Geschichte und Archäologie"), and 121-153. The famous Carolingian mural paintings are the topic of Anna Skriver and Hilde Claussen, *Wandmalerei und Stuck aus karolingischer Zeit* (Mainz: Von Zabern, 2007); for further overviews on Corvey's history see Wilhelm Stüwer, "Corvey," in *Die Benediktinerklöster in Nordrhein-Westfalen*, vol. 8, ed. Hrabanus Haacke (St. Ottilien: EOS, 1980), 236-293; Hans H. Kaminsky, *Studien zur Reichsabtei Corvey in der Salierzeit* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1972); for a short overview in English see John W. Bernhardt, *Itinerant Kingship and Royal Monasteries in Early Medieval Germany, c. 936-1075* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 195-203.
- ² Hans-Eberhard Lohmann and Paul Hirsch, eds., *Die Sagensgeschichte des Widukind von Korvei / Widukindi Monachi Corbeiensis rerum gestarum Saxoniarum libri tres: Fünfte Auflage*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica [henceforth MGH], SS. rer. Germ. 60 (Hannover: Hahn, 1935); Matthias Springer, "Widukind von Corvey," in *Hoops Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, vol. 33, *Waagen und Gewichte – Wielandlied: 2. vollständig neubearbeitete und stark erweiterte Auflage*, ed. Heinrich Beck, Dieter Geuenich, and Heiko Steuer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), 586-592; Johannes Laudage, "Widukind von Corvey," in *Von Fakten und Fiktionen: Mittelalterliche Geschichtsdarstellungen und ihre kritische Aufarbeitung*, ed. Johannes Laudage (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003), 193-224; Sverre Bagge, *Kings, Politics, and the Right Order of the World in German Historiography c. 950-1150* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 23-94; Ludger Körntgen, *Königsherrschaft und Gottes Gnade: Zu Kontext und Funktion sakraler Vorstellungen in Historiographie und Bildzeugnissen der ottonisch-frühsalischen Zeit* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001), 74-101; Klaus Naß, "Widukind von Corvey," in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters: Verfasserlexikon*, vol. 10, ed. Burghart Wachinger et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), 1000-1006; K. F. Morrison, "Widukind's Mirror for a Princess: An Exercise in Self-Knowledge," in *Forschungen zur Reichs-, Papst- und Landesgeschichte: Peter Herde zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Karl Borchardt and Enno Bünz (Stuttgart: A. Hiersemann, 1998), 49-71; Hagen Keller, "Widukinds Bericht über die Aachener Wahl und Krönung Ottos I.," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 29 (1995): 390-453; Johannes Fried, "Die Königserhebung Heinrichs I. Erinnerung, Mündlichkeit und Traditionsbildung im 10. Jahrhundert," in *Mittelalterforschung nach der Wende: 1989*, ed. Michael Borgolte (München: Oldenbourg, 1995), 267-318; Gerd Althoff, "Widukind von Corvey: Kronzeuge und Herausforderung," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 27 (1993): 253-272; Helmut Beumann, *Widukind von Korvei: Untersuchungen zur Geschichtsschreibung und Ideengeschichte des 10. Jahrhunderts* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1950); Wilhelm Wattenbach and Robert Holtzmann, *Deutschlands Geschichtsquellen im Mittelalter: Deutsche Kaiserzeit*, vol. 1, pt. 1 (Berlin: Verlagsbuchhandlung Dr. Emil Ebering, 1938), 25-33.
- ³ On the foundation see Helmut Wiesemeyer, "Die Gründung der Abtei Corvey im Lichte der *Translatio Sancti Viti*: Interpretation einer mittelalterlichen Quelle aus dem 9. Jahrhundert," *Westfälische Zeitschrift: Zeitschrift für vaterländische Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 112 (1962), 245-274; Kaminsky, *Studien zur Reichsabtei Corvey*, 17-19; Stephan, "Die Reichsabtei Corvey," 80; Karl H. Krüger, *Studien zur Corveyer Gründungsüberlieferung* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2001); Klemens Honselmann, "Initia Corbeiae: Der Erlebnisbericht der Gründung Corveys eines aus dem Sollingkloster Hetha gekommenen Mönches von 822," *Archiv für Diplomatik* 36 (1990): 1-9; concerning the "Hellweg," see Bernhardt, *Itinerant Kingship*, 177-181, also Paul Leidinger, "Der Westfälische Hellweg als frühmittelalterliche Etappenstraße zwischen Rhein und Weser," *Westfälische Zeitschrift* 149 (1999): 9-33.
- ⁴ Brigitte Kasten, *Adalhard von Corbie: Die Biographie eines karolingischen Politikers und Klostervorstehers* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1986); Henri Peltier, *Adalhard, abbé de Corbie* (Amiens: Société des antiquaires de Picardie, 1969); Fabrice Foucher, "Adalhard et les deux Corbie, fondation et architecture raisonnée d'un monastère carolingien," *Hor-tus Artium Medievalium* 13, *Elites and Architecture in the Middle Ages*, vol. 1 (2007): 75-85.
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