Primordia Coenobii Gandeshemensis: Hrotsvit of Gandersheim as a Political Actor and Secular and Religious Power in Ottonian Saxony

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Primordia Coenobii Gandeshemensis: Hrotsvit of Gandersheim as a Political Actor and Secular and Religious Power in Ottonian Saxony

Michael Janeček

FIYS 134: Women in Medieval Christianity

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Primordia: Hrotsvit as a Political Actor and Secular and Religious Power in Ottonian Saxony

The Ottonian dynasty (9th to early 11th century), also known as Liudolfings or the Saxon dynasty, though seemingly counterintuitively, invested much of their wealth into the construction and maintenance of monasteries:

The era known as the Saxon period in the history of canonical institutions in Germany extended from the middle of the ninth until the eleventh century. Religious foundations multiplied with marvelous rapidity in the Saxon territories, for the Saxons were quick in realizing the advantages of a close union between religion and the state, and the most powerful and progressive families of the land vied with each other in founding and endowing religious settlements.

Among the most prominent convents founded by the Ottonians were Gandersheim (founded in the 840s and 50s), and Quedlinburg (est. 936). Other abbeys, such as the Carolingian Reichenau (est. 724) or even the Roman St Maximin at Trier (founded in the 4th century), were further buttressed by the dynasty as a part of the prestigious canonical network within East Francia. Such monasteries comprised a vital part of the Ottonian identity and their foothold (viz. Appendix A) within Saxony:

Quedlinburg, Gandersheim, Nordhausen, or Gernrode . . . mingled piety and abstinence with power and wealth, and served a variety of roles in Saxon society. . . . they were economic and educational centers as well as places of prayer. As key stopping points for the itinerant royal retinue, they possessed substantial political as well as ritual importance . . . the ‘familial’ character of these convents also contributed to their importance as centers for the ongoing commemoration of the founder's ancestors, kinfolk, and descendants, often referred to simply as memoria (memory).

One of the engineers of such memoria was the nun Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (ca. 935-ca. 1001/1003), who, among her other works, poetically recorded the Primordia Coenobii Gandeshemensis

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8 Gilsdorf, Queenship and Sanctity, 27.
9 See Bergman, iff. As noted in her dissertation, since the number and variety of spellings of the name are still a "moot question,” this essay will, for the sake of convenience, adopt the spelling that all cited historians adhere to.
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(or Establishment of the Monastery of Gandersheim)\(^{11}\) and Gesta Ottonis (or Deeds of the Emperor Otto I).\(^{12}\) Her poems, along with her “letters,” or prefaces to her works, portray her not only as a fervent Ottonian supporter, but also as a nuanced political observer,\(^ {13}\) and arguably, even a silent actor.

Both *Primordia* and *Gesta* were commissioned\(^ {14}\) by Abbess Gerberga II (in office from late 950s to 1001)\(^ {15}\) and at least the latter was reviewed by her and the Archbishop Wilhelm of Mainz, Otto I’s illegitimate son,\(^ {16}\) suggesting a cautiously crafted agenda. Historian Jay T. Lees, discussing both of Hrotsvit's historical poems, argues that they represent consciously joined attempts to bring Gandersheim to Otto I’s closer – and hopefully, generous – attention, serving him his ancestors as role-models and in turn reminding him that his power stems from the God, or symbolically, from Gandersheim. Lees in his main thrust invokes Gerd Althoff, who points out that Gandersheim was facing a serious loss of royal favor in comparison to the much more recently founded convent of Quedlinburg,\(^ {17}\) suggesting a rivalry between the two convents. Therefore, the *dulcis cura*, or the “dear care” that was given to Gandersheim by its founders, was, Lees claims, discontinued during Otto I’s reign.\(^ {18}\) Analyzing primarily Hrotsvit’s *Primordia*, I will firstly elaborate on the historicalness of canonical institutions to Ottonians, using the example of Gandersheim. In the second part of this essay, I shall explore Lees’ and Althoff’s argument that Hrotsvit’s epic poetry symbolized a strategic move to reclaim the monarch’s *dulcis cura* for Gandersheim.

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\(^{10}\) Head, *Medieval Hagiography*, 237.
\(^{11}\) Ibid.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., 238.
\(^{13}\) Gilsdorf, *Queenship and Sanctity*, 20.
\(^{14}\) See Lees, “*David rex fidelis?*,” 203-6, 209; and McMillin, “The Audiences of Hrotsvit,” 317-19. It is not clear as to what extent was Hrotsvit “asked” or “ordered” to write *Gesta* and *Primordia*.
\(^{18}\) Lees, “*David rex fidelis?*,” 207.
To reiterate the notion that Gandersheim was central to the Ottonian identity, I will now provide some context to the convent and Hrotsvit’s *Primordia*, subsequently summarizing and discussing how Hrotsvit re-imagined its foundation in her poem. To note, her text was foundational not only on a literal level. In weaving up the story of how the monastery came to be, “she also implicitly told the story of the rise of the Liudolfings first to the position of dukes in Saxony and then to the rank of king and emperor over Germany [sic],”¹⁹ not only demonstrating how intertwined the Liudolfing clan and the community of Gandersheim were – but also consolidating the Ottonian right to rule. Because her poems “were certain to be read outside of Gandersheim,”²⁰ as the multiple prefaces of *Gesta* sent to Otto I²¹ and Otto II²² suggest, the image of Ottonians as rulers was disseminated in part thanks to Hrotsvit’s writing. Perhaps that would also explain why *Gesta*, and likely *Primordia* as well, had to be edited by Archbishop Wilhelm of Mainz,²³ who had obvious ties to Otto I, and Gerberga II, who was in fact Otto I’s niece. The entire matter of Liudolfings’ portrayal was even more intricate and essential – not only because they emerged as a brand new power – but also because of the “missionary”²⁴ nature of the lands they now claimed:

Saxony had only been Christian since the start of the 9ᵗʰ century, and it is probable that this conversion, achieved by military conquest, did not reach deeply into the population or widely in Saxon territory until many years had passed.²⁵

In addition, in the 9ᵗʰ century, royal courts no longer functioned as centers of culture and learning as, for example, Charlemagne’s court did.²⁶ Thence, without the tradition of such a function of royal

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¹⁹ Head, *Medieval Hagiography*, 239.
²⁵ Wailes and Brown, “Hrotsvit and Her World,” 16.
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courts, monasteries took over as viable alternatives in spreading “Ottonian” Christianity, that is, their beliefs and their influence. With few exceptions, Rosamond McKitterick points out that:

The last piece of literature actually associated with the Carolingian court appeared in the reigns of Louis the Stammerer [d. 879] and Carloman [d. 884] and these are of a purely practical nature. . . . The fate of the royal library of the Carolingians . . . is unknown.27

Therefore, daily interactions with monastic communities were the next best thing in the “predominantly rural and illiterate”28 heathen landscape. Indeed, Hrotsvit’s writings could only have insofar as much impact as there were people to read it. Conveniently enough, the numinous presence of monasteries like Gandersheim served as a key attraction for heathens and nominal Christians, particularly in conjunction with the monasteries’ wealth and educational opportunities.29 These institutions were formidable advertisements for the ruling dynasty, propagating the sovereignty of Ottonians, which was certainly not set in stone in the first decades of their rule.30

It is thus no wonder that Hrotsvit starts off her epic Primordia with a claim that it was Saxons, specifically “the great and illustrious Liudolf” and his son Otto, who founded the convent.31 Stressing the words “blessed,” “leading” and “lawful potentates,” she plants the seed of their authority while emphasizing their names that later evolved into the very dynasty’s brand-labels, i.e. Liudolfings and Ottonians.32 It is after Hrotsvit establishes their primacy that she delves into the origins of the prophecy of Gandersheim, in fact associated with the Frankish Oda and Aeda.33 Admittedly, Aeda and Oda, the two non-Saxon wives, were the most instrumental in the founding of Gandersheim – and Hrotsvit does give them credit for that – creating a case for their sanctity,
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perhaps also pouring a few drops of Carolingian legacy into the Ottonian lineage (viz., Appendix B).

Still, it is not them that she opens her Primordia with, making a statement in favor of the Ottonians, even though it was Aeda who witnessed John the Baptist communicate to her that “[her] famous descendants will establish a cloister for holy virgins and a triumphant peace for his realm, provided his piety remains duly steadfast.” If I may, it is difficult not to subject oneself to the following trivialization. In the order of importance, the “triumphant peace” appears to be the most promising as well as the hardest to attain. The prerequisite for which, “steadfast piety,” could be, on the other hand, handily reached through building a “cloister for holy virgins.” Either way, the point is, Gandersheim is in this passage clearly associated with the preservation of peace in the realm, which is, undoubtedly, a no small deal that should be overlooked.

Hrotsvit then asserts Gandersheim’s holiness by incorporating three miraculous incidents that precipitated its establishment, the first of which I will illustrate. Along with Liudolf and Oda’s ultramontanist adventure to Pope Sergius II in order to retrieve holy relics and a grant of papal immunity for Gandersheim, Hrotsvit describes that they temporarily designated Gandersheim’s location “across the banks of the Ganda River on a mountain.” However, the site of the actual monastery, which was in the vicinity of the temporary location, proved to be much more calculated than it might initially appear from Hrotsvit’s writing. As it turns out, “this supposed wilderness was close to major trade roads. Where the east-west route crossed the Gande River, a commercial settlement, and presumably a military outpost with a small church, had been established long before

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35 Ibid., 244.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 See Head, 245. A “grant of immunity” was a statement that placed the convent away from the monarch’s (Louis the German) or bishop’s influence. It had to be approved by the king and it demonstrates how closely interconnected the Carolingians and Ottonians were despite their previous conflicts. It possibly also made an impression on Pope Sergius II as Hrotsvit doesn’t fail to mention: “he realized that a leader of the highest honors was coming.”
39 Head, *Medieval Hagiography*, 244.
40 Ibid.

Liudolf built the monastery.” Not surprisingly, the manner in which Hrotsvit depicts the process of founding the monastery contains a sense of adventure and drama. More notably, a miracle serving as an elaborate metaphor is used to verify Gandersheim’s holy purpose:

Here, on one occasion when the holy feast of All Saints was to be celebrated . . . swineherds saw in the forest many lights gleaming brightly in the darkness of the night. All were astounded by what they saw and wondered what was signified by this strange spectacle of the resplendent light, piercing the darkness of night with amazing brilliance. . . . [on the following day the swineherds] again saw the glowing lights—which even surpassed in number the earlier ones—in the very same place...[Liudolf heard of this and] watched with many companions the very same forest during the whole night. Nor did he have to wait, for . . . [soon] within the circuit of the forested valley in which the renowned church was to be established, numerous lights were seen in orderly array...Thereupon at once, all those who were present gave thanks to the Lord and asserted that the place must be dedicated to the service of Him who had filled it with light.

Thus, in the eyes of many, the location of Gandersheim was henceforth imbued with godly presence. As it happens, however, the valley has long been a home to godly presence even before this spectacle took place, albeit that of a different stripe. As Hrotsvit mentions in perhaps a less phenomenal imagery, the valley was “entirely cleared, and its trees...cut down and its underbrush removed.” This instance is significant because, as she continues, “[Liudolf] cleansed the wooded spot, filled with Faunus and monsters, so that it was appropriate for the divine praises.” While Hrotsvit adds some drama to the wood-cutting, she also manages to give it a divine purpose by having Liudolf cleanse a pagan worship place, implied by the unusual presence of Faunus and other monsters. In actuality, it was a common practice to cleanse but re-use, and in doing so, assimilate such sites to demonstrate Christian dominion while still attracting old-time pagan worshippers.

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41 Wailes and Brown, “Hrotsvit and Her World,” 13.
42 Ibid., 246.
43 Notice that, as Hrotsvit persuasively writes, God was already aware that this was the supposed location, “in which the renowned church was to be established,” and was merely putting up a show, so to say, likely impressing non-Christians and convincing them of the Liudolfings’ claim to power, which evidently came straight from the God.
44 Head, Medieval Hagiography, 246.
45 Ibid.
46 Perhaps a metaphor for uprooting the pagan tradition and eliminating the forest that symbolized barbarism.
47 Head, Medieval Hagiography, 253 n. 16.
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As Hrotsvit’s text proves, monasteries were much like the building blocks of Ottonian power, and as one spread, the other soon followed. Therefore, one may ask, what would make Lees and Althoff believe that her text(s) mark Gandersheim’s loss of prominence? On the contrary; within the greater Ottonian context, historians agree that East Francia witnessed a so-called “Ottonian Renaissance,” specific by major advances in architecture, manuscript making, and political theology – all likely connected to the upsurge of monasteries. There is, however, a noteworthy although isolated passage in Primordia that implies a shift in the status of the convent.

Hrotsvit, by including Gerberga II’s encouragement to “enrich abundantly with your gifts our mistresses...by whose merits and holy prayers the success of our own aspirations to prosperity, as well as the dignity of the royal glory, have been increased,” encourages her audience to give to the monastery. This theme of reciprocity and donating to the convent saturates one of the last pages:

[Gerberga II] persuaded her whole family to provide dutifully for the upkeep of the monastery. The lands which she received by gift from...King Louis...[she] handed over to the church of Gandersheim. And the king himself...donated as gifts to it many farms...King Arnulf...added some vineyards as a gift on his own behalf. The monastery continued to prosper... Hrotsvit is meticulous in her recording of events throughout Primordia so what is perhaps more striking than the shopping list of gifts above per se is that it is rapidly followed by her listing of deaths of the “main support[ers] of the monastery.” Peculiarly, she focuses on tangible losses associated with their deaths to emphasize their connection with, and importance for, Gandersheim:

King Louis died [882], who was first of the kings to hand over to us for our use many lands... A few years after his demise, Queen Liutgard...who had been the cause of countless grants to us, departed (for shame!) from this world to our great fiscal detriment [885]. To this

49 Lees, “David rex fidelis,” 201-234.
50 Althoff, “Gandersheim und Quedlinburg,” 123-44.
53 Head, Medieval Hagiography, 250.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
bereavement a similar cause for grief soon followed. Abbess Gerberga [II]... [who] embellished her community with splendid gifts and had added ample substance for our use...returned to her Maker the spirit she had received from heaven [896].

What stands out in Hrotsvit’s litany of deaths is the “fiscal detriment” that Gandersheim indeed faced between the end of the 9th and early 10th century. In addition, two abbesses of Gandersheim in power between 923-ca. 949, during the reign of Duke Henry I (d. 936) and his son, king Otto I, were non-Ottonian, exposing a possible disinterest of the monarchy to continue their tradition of designating own daughters as abbesses. Moreover, Gandersheim functioned as the Ottonian royal family’s burial place until the very death of Henry I in 936, who had been buried at Quedlinburg instead. Hearing out urges of his widowed mother, Mathilda, Otto I established the women’s cloister of Quedlinburg in the same year. Althoff describes that from that point onwards, “the gifts to Gandersheim, the older family cloister, notably diminished during the entire rule of Otto [I].” Instead, it was now Quedlinburg that was “dedicated to praying for family members and memorializing the dead.”

In truth, Otto I’s imperial ambitions were directed in many ways. He, for example, fought hard to establish an archbishop’s see in Magdeburg, a convent ca. 120km east of Gandersheim. Since he had a “special attachment” for it, it is also where he was later buried. His, or more importantly, his mother’s dedication to Quedlinburg, was quite clear, however. Both his daughter

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56 Head, Medieval Hagiography, 250.
57 See Scott Wells, “The Politics of Gender and Ethnicity in East Francia: The Case of Gandersheim, ca. 850-950,” in Negotiating Community and Difference in Medieval Europe: Gender, Power, Patronage and the Authority of Religion in Latin Christendom, ed. K. W. Smith and S. Wells (Boston: Leiden, 2009), 120. There were three abbesses between 919 and 949, Liudgard I (919–23), and the non-Ottonian Hrotsuit (923–33), and Wendelgard (933–49).
58 Head, Medieval Hagiography, 237.
59 Ibid., 239.
60 See “Appendix I,” in Queenship and Sanctity, ed. Gilsdorf, 145; and “The ‘Older Life’ of Queen Mathilda” in Gilsdorf, 76. Henry I and St. Matilda had three sons and two daughters, Hedwig (910-965), and Gerberga (913-984).
63 Lees, “David rex fidelis,” 207.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 19.
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Mathilda and granddaughter Adelaide ruled as abbesses in Quedlinburg. Additionally, he flooded the convent with gifts. In 936, he oddly provided a 170km distant “farm on the salt river,” or Soltau, to the convent. Overall though, he donated impressive 49 estates to Quedlinburg between 936 and 961. Therefore, it is apparent that Quedlinburg was winning the race for the royal attention; the matter is even more complex, however. Gerberga II’s designation as the abbess of Gandersheim in 959 would seem to even out the stakes between the two competing convents, since she reinstated the original Ottonian line of abbesses. Caspar Ehler, nonetheless, believes that it only made matters worse, further splitting the royal family. Gerberga II, being the daughter of Duke Henry, came from the Bavarian side of the family, affiliating the convent more closely with her side of the family.

It would thus look as if Gandersheim was in a steep decline, making Althoff’s argument very convincing. On the other hand, Head claims that “the presence of Gerberga II as abbess suggests…the imperial family retained strong ties to Gandersheim in the time of Hrotsvit and long thereafter.” And Head is not alone; Scott Wells also agrees, going even further – he claims Gandersheim witnessed a “dramatic return to prominence,” acknowledging a period of decline, but not necessarily during Gerberga II’s time. In fact, between 947 and 949, Otto I confirmed Gandersheim’s properties and privileges and Gerberga II became the abbess; furthermore, in 956 Otto confirmed the grants to Gandersheim and emphasized its free selection of its abbess and immunity from local control. In addition to that, in 968, Otto I and his son, Otto II, “were instrumental” in obtaining a declaration of protection for Gandersheim from Pope John XIII – all

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68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
73 Wells, “Politics,” 114-16, 128-29, 131.
74 Wailes and Brown, “Hrotsvit and Her World,” 19.
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of this likely taking place before Hrotsvit wrote her Primordia. It has also been suggested by Wells that Gandersheim functioned as a “frequent residence for the itinerant court,” which, as some scholars asserted, was probably how Hrotsvit learned of Pelagius, the subject of her sole contemporary play. Linda McMillin agrees with Wells and puts more meat on her claim:

The retinue of a king or emperor literally ate its way through house and home on an ongoing basis…Otto’s retinue was no exception…That Gandersheim was on the circuit is clear…Hrotsvit’s writing contains several explicit references to contact with people beyond her sister canonesses. She states that she heard the story of Pelagius’ martyrdom from an eyewitness—likely someone connected to Otto I’s diplomatic mission to Cordoba.

It is true, however, that Otto I did prefer to celebrate Easter at Quedlinburg. On a more serious note, it should also be acknowledged that, as it is known from Hrotsvit’s mentions, her circle of readers was probably fairly broad, showing that Gandersheim’s reputation was not quite fully diminished, though it had suffered greatly in the early 900s. Withal, what emerges is a strong image of Gandersheim that is independent of e.g. Quedlinburg’s success that Althoff so unilaterally portrays. In spite of their initially imbalanced rivalry, Gandersheim had a lot to offer to Otto I.

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76 See Walter Berschin, “Hrotsvit and her Works,” 23ff. As expected, the views on when Hrotsvit wrote her works vary, as does the date of her Primordia. It is assumed that she was most prolific in the 960s and 970s, as Head claims in his Medieval Hagiography, 237. We do know that Hrotsvit must have commenced her Gesta by 965 because of her mentioning of Brun, the archbishop of Cologne, who died on 11 October 965. In it, she also alludes to Otto II’s imperial coronation in 967 and we know that she finished her Gesta before 968, in which year Wilhelm, the archbishop of Mainz, died. Lees and other historians agree that Primordia must have been written after the Gesta, since in Primordia she alludes to it. It is not clear whether it was written after or before Otto I’s death in 974, however.

77 Wells, “Politics,” 113.


79 Ibid.


83 Wailes and Brown, “Hrotsvit and Her World,” 21.

84 See Stephen Wailes, “The Sacred Stories in Verse,” 92-3. Not counting her fellow canonesses and visiting nobility, even Brun, the archbishop of Cologne, read Hrotsvit’s texts since he is explicitly mentioned in her Gesta. Plus, some of her other works were “richly transmitted” in the Middle Ages.

85 Wells, “Politics,” 120.
As a result, I agree with Lees and Althoff in that Gandersheim’s status deteriorated, particularly at the end of the 9th century – when most of its greatest supporters died out – and, during the reign of the two non-Ottonian abbesses, Hrotsuit and Wendelgard, between the years 923 and 949. I would argue, however, that its situation was not quite as dire as portrayed in Lees’ “David rex fidelis?” As I’ve attempted to demonstrate, Gandersheim retained its role as a center of prayer, culture, and memoria. Gerberga II’s appointment and the evidence of Otto I’s ties to the convent prove that it was still high on the royal list of priorities. Furthermore, Wells argues that it witnessed an apex during the reigns of Otto I and his descendants – in part thanks to its monumental cultural heritage that helped Otto I instill a mix of Roman and Saxon values into his imperial agenda, using Gandersheim’s papal connections. Jane Stevenson glosses that “Gandersheim was wealthy and magnificent…and after 947 it became a frequent stopping point,” receiving a different sort of dulcis cura. At the same time, it should be obvious that the imperial family channeled their wealth into a myriad of institutions, but not necessarily ignored Gandersheim. It almost seems as if the game for favor was a matter of personal preference – since, despite his generous donations to Quedlinburg, Otto I himself preferred Magdeburg, while Otto II, as Lees acknowledges, valued Gandersheim. To conclude, Hrotstvit’s appeal to reciprocity is certainly a reflection of Gandersheim’s continuous and ardent support for the dynasty. Other convents, too, had their own writers, e.g. Quedlinburg, alluding to a literary rivalry. Thus, Primordia was a call for attention, albeit not out of desperation. Hrotstvit wished to capture a portrait of Gandersheim in its best light and with its nuanced meaning. In doing so, she offers us her re-imagining of the convent as a symbol of religious and secular power, so pivotal to the Liudolfings and Otto I himself.

86 Head, *Medieval Hagiography*, 250.
87 Wells, “Politics,” 120.
88 Ibid.
Appendix A

Figure 1. Ottonian Saxony and the Spread of Canonical Institutions

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**Appendix B**

Table 1. The Liudolfings

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Spouse</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Christina of Gandersheim</td>
<td>Gerberga of Gandersheim</td>
<td>Oda</td>
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<td>Liudolf († ante 912)</td>
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<td>K Henry I († 936)</td>
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<td>K Otto I († 972)</td>
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<td>K Louis IV of W Francia</td>
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<td>Edith († 946)</td>
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<td>K Stephen of Hungary</td>
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