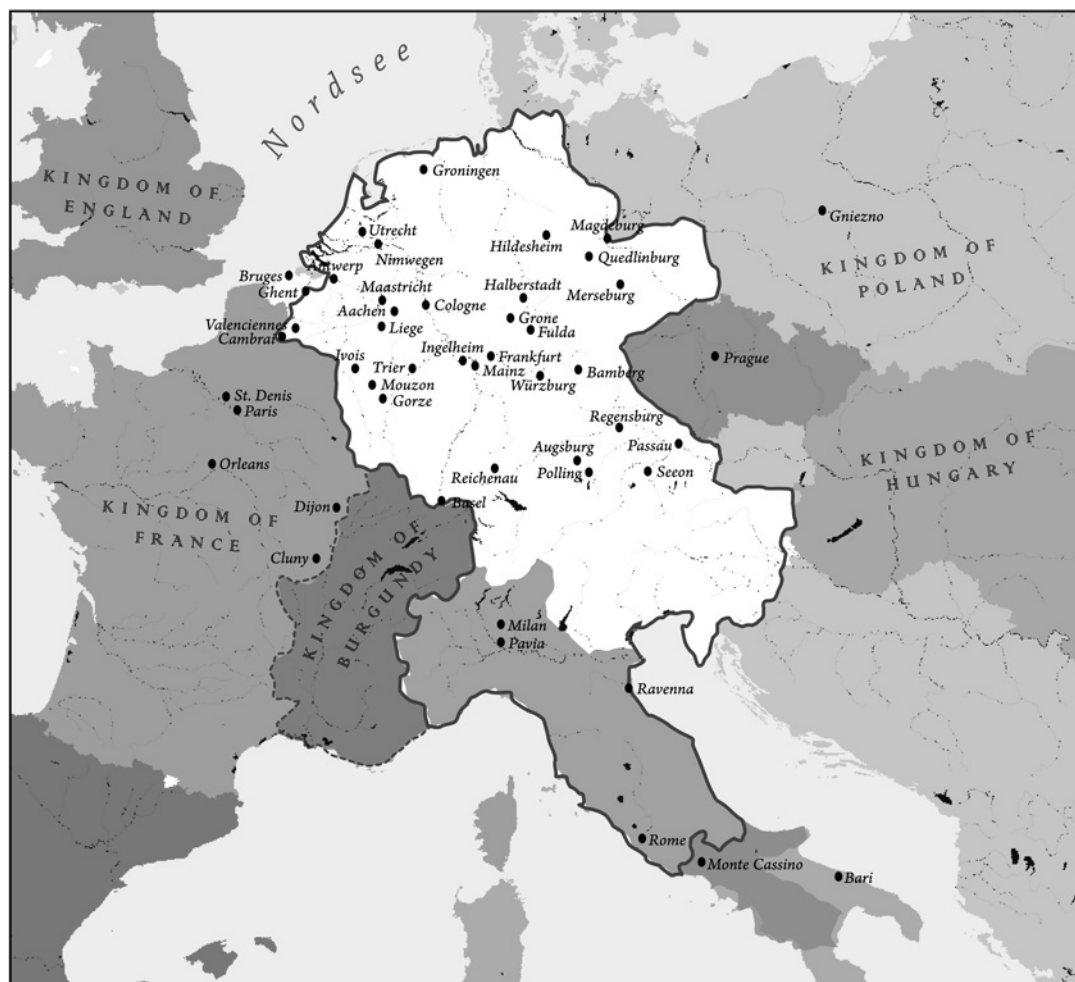


Art and politics at the imperial court: An introduction

At the turn of the second millennium in Europe, the two most powerful and influential patrons of the arts happened to be successive rulers of the Roman Empire as well as the last two rulers of a Saxon line of kings called the Liudolfings: Otto III (r. 983–1002) and Henry II (r. 1002–1024; Figs 1, 3). This book analyzes artworks created for these rulers, with the larger goal of addressing the ways in which, in the Ottonian period, individual art objects and the collections to which they belonged were perceived as elements of a material historical narrative and, not least, as portraits. The jewel-encrusted liturgical crosses, golden altar frontals, and richly illuminated luxury manuscripts that comprise much of these collections were amassed with the expectation that they could reproduce the ruler's presence in his physical absence, an especially important function in an era of itinerant kingship.¹ Even from far away, Ottonian emperors could rely on sumptuous stand-ins to replicate salient aspects of their imperial aura. In their ritualized use, Ottonian imperial artworks reified spiritual and political hierarchies in almost magical ways.

At the core of this system of art patronage thus lay the understanding that religious artworks performed political functions. That is, these objects were both addressed to the Christian God and to issues of authority and government. The transfer of power from Otto III to Henry II provides a clear case in point: nearly the first order of royal business for Henry II, who, though related to Otto III by blood, came to power by virtue of a coup d'état after Otto III's unexpected death, was to spoliage—to plunder—the collections of objects Otto had presented to various treasuries in the realm. Henry II's reorganization of his predecessor's treasure likewise accompanied real political change that included the centralization of power in the figure of the king. By commandeering Otto III's treasure, Henry II decentralized many of the existing structures that had previously assured Otto III's ritual commemoration at his favored sites. In my estimation, this was an antagonistic political gesture, for it changed the visual and material means by which Otto III's memorial presence was invoked. Thus, Henry II's plunder of artworks intended for the liturgical preservation of Otto III's memory meant that memorial patterns established



1 Map of the Ottonian Empire. Meaghan Brown

for Otto III would be filtered through Henry II's own legacy. As products of a highly developed memorial culture, artworks created in association with both of these rulers reveal the existence of an acute historical self-consciousness, in which one's relationship to the past, present, and future could be related through precious objects and images.

The transfer of power from Otto III to Henry II

On 23 or 24 January 1002, at the age of twenty-one, the emperor Otto III died of a malarial infection at his palace in Paterno, just outside of the walls of Rome. At the time of his death, Otto III was unmarried and childless, and there were no set laws governing royal succession. The emperor succumbed to his illness surrounded by a number of advisors and friends; Bishop Notker of Liège, Archbishop Heribert of Cologne, and likely Pope Sylvester II were at his side

when he died.² Sources relate that Otto III's palace, and in particular the area surrounding his deathbed, was filled with relics, including a piece of the True Cross.³ Despite his attachment to the Italian peninsula in general and to Rome specifically, Otto had informed his advisors that he wished to be buried at the Palace Chapel of Aachen, near Charlemagne's tomb. Compliance with this wish necessitated the immediate transportation of Otto's body from Rome to Aachen in the middle of winter. As it turned out, this journey north was the final stage in the promotion of Otto III's reign as a historical continuation of Charlemagne's imperial legacy.

Once the funeral procession reached the Bavarian town of Polling, Otto III's corpse and its cortège were taken hostage by the Bavarian Duke Henry IV (shortly to become Henry II) and his forces. Duke Henry demanded that the leader of the group, Archbishop Heribert of Cologne (r. 999–1021), relinquish the royal insignia—the Holy Lance, the Royal Orb, and the Royal Crown—the material symbols of royal power. Archbishop Heribert was forced to comply but had had the foresight to send a courier carrying the Holy Lance (the most powerful of these insignia) ahead to Aachen before the royal entourage had reached the Alps (Fig. 2). Duke Henry IV foiled the archbishop's plan, however, by holding hostage Archbishop Heribert's brother, Bishop Henry I of Würzburg (r. 995–1018), until the Holy Lance was intercepted and handed over to him. After disemboweling Otto III's body and burying his entrails at a chapel dedicated to St Ulrich in the Church of St Afra in Augsburg, Duke Henry IV accompanied Otto III's cortège to the town of Neuburg, a town on the Danube close to the territorial borders between Bavaria, Swabia, and Franconia, and there released his living and dead hostages.⁴ From this point onward, Otto III's body stood in for the body of Christ in public reenactments of Christ's Passion as Otto III's pallbearers made their way to Aachen in time for his burial on Easter Sunday.⁵

After releasing his prisoners, and before other claimants to the throne had a chance to organize their own bids, Duke Henry IV was hastily crowned and anointed King Henry II in Mainz by Archbishop Willigis in June of 1002, even though the new king had not yet succeeded in rallying political support for himself. In spite of the fact that his coronation took place before he



2 Holy Lance, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

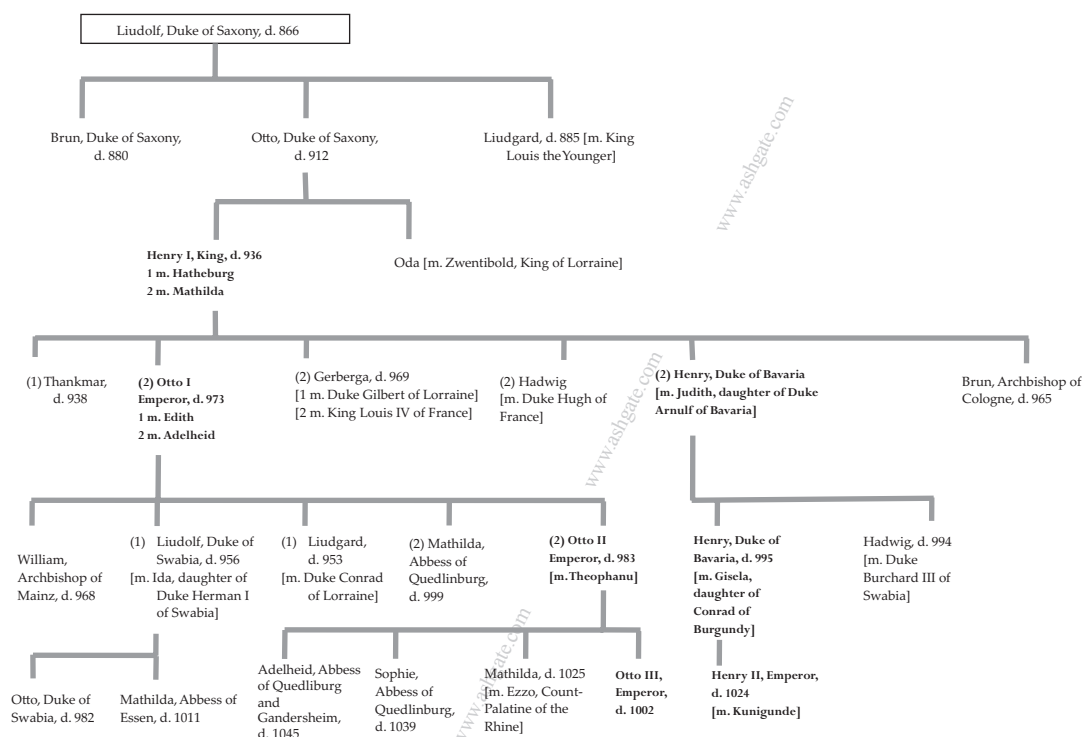
had received the official support of all of the royal nobility, Henry II made certain that the date of his coronation in Mainz was incorporated into the liturgical calendars at Hildesheim and Merseburg and celebrated as a Church feast.⁶ From Mainz, Henry II began a ritual perambulation of the borders of his territory, a so-called *Umritt*, in an attempt to garner political support and recognition as king.⁷ It was during this *Umritt* that he began collecting artworks for what became the cathedral treasury of Bamberg; some of these he removed from treasuries outright, while others may have been presented to him as tribute.⁸ Immediately from the beginning of his reign, therefore, precious objects and their performative display and use were decisive aspects of Henry II's rule.

Henry II's claims to the throne

The problems that Otto III's death unleashed were due in part to the absence of laws that specifically governed succession. From the time of the death of King Henry I (r. 919–936) in 936 until Otto III's death in 1002, the governance of the kingdom had always passed from father to son, even though these transitions were at times fraught with contention. Upon Otto III's death, seven other men besides Duke Henry IV raised claims to the throne, and the Bavarian duke overcame them by military force.⁹ Indeed, Henry had not been the preferred candidate of those closest to Otto III. As Thietmar of Merseburg noted cryptically, Otto III's advisors did not think the Bavarian duke to be suited to the crown "for a variety of reasons."¹⁰

Henry II's claims to succession were based on his descent from King Henry I through his paternal grandfather, Duke Henry I of Bavaria (ca. 920–955, r. 941–955), who was the younger brother of King Otto I (r. 936–973; Fig. 3). Otto III and Henry II were thus second cousins, and both were descended from King Henry I through the male line. Technically, therefore, although Henry II was descended directly from Henry I through his father and grandfather, he was not directly descended from either Otto I or Otto II and was—strictly speaking—not an Ottonian.¹¹

In 941, Henry, the third son of King Henry I (and his second son with Queen Mathilde), had been provided with the Bavarian duchy as a consequence of his efforts to dethrone his brother, King Otto I.¹² Duke Henry I's attempts to wrest the crown from his older brother were related to the fact that Duke Henry was the first son born to his father and mother while his father was king.¹³ Duke Henry I's receipt of Bavaria was intended to protect King Otto I from any further challenges to his authority, yet this arrangement ultimately set the stage for continued challenges to the throne on the part of the Bavarian dukes from that point onward. Duke Henry I's successor, his son Duke Henry II (r. 955–976 and r. 985–995), posthumously known as Henry the Quarrelsome or Henry the Wrangler, also sought to depose his cousin King Otto II soon after the latter's accession in 973.¹⁴ For this and other challenges to the crown, Henry the Quarrelsome was exiled first to Corvey and later to Utrecht.



Upon emperor Otto II's death in 983, and shortly after the three-year-old Otto III's coronation on Christmas Day at the Palace Chapel of Aachen in the same year, Henry the Quarrelsome took the young king hostage in Cologne in another attempt to seize political control over the kingdom.¹⁵ From Cologne, Henry the Quarrelsome proceeded to Magdeburg, where he was crowned in close proximity to Otto I's own grave, and inside the cathedral that Otto I had established. From Magdeburg, Henry the Quarrelsome continued to Quedlinburg, the site of King Henry I's memorial church and a location of power for the line of Saxon kings, where he celebrated the Easter feast in a kingly manner.¹⁶ Considered in relation to the unrelenting opposition that his father and grandfather had posed to the Ottonian line, Duke Henry IV's accession of the crown in 1002 was a continuation of and a resolution to the claims that his family had been making to the throne since King Henry I's death in 936.¹⁷

The Saxon bishop and chronicler Thietmar of Merseburg (975–1018) was the first to note that Henry II's eventual succession, as contested and fraught with violence as it was, marked the reversal of a curse that had long besmirched the line of the Henries.¹⁸ Thietmar reports that Duke Henry I had been conceived when King Henry I, after having had too much to drink on Maundy Thursday and possessed by none other than Satan himself, had shared Queen Mathilde's bed in spite of her vigorous protests.¹⁹ According to Thietmar, although Henry, the couple's second son, was both handsome and the queen's favorite, the impure and unholy circumstances of his conception haunted him and his offspring for many years.

3 Family tree of the Saxon line of kings and emperors. Eliza Garrison after David Warner in *Ottonian Germany: The Chronicle of Thietmar of Merseburg*, ed. and trans. D. Warner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), page xv

At the time that King Henry II, while still Duke Henry IV of Bavaria, was making his claims of succession, the Bavarian duchy's political organization was such that the duke's powers were absolute, and he could rely on the political support of both the Bavarian nobility and Bavarian bishops in his claims to the throne. Bavaria thus functioned much like a small kingdom, and the Bavarian duke's relative independence vis-à-vis the king was connected to the duke's repeated attempts to assume control of the crown. During the interregnum of 1002, Henry II could rely on the political support of his subjects in his own duchy, yet his position in the kingdom more generally was not as strong. Indeed, the majority of the nobility and the episcopate called for the king to be elected from within their own ranks, and this majority appears to have preferred the candidacy of Duke Hermann II of Swabia (d. 1003).²⁰ Even Thietmar makes note of Hermann's mild manner, which appears to have formed a contrast to the aggressiveness of the future King Henry II.²¹ The Saxon nobility seem to have been particularly opposed to Henry's claims, and by March of 1002 they had voiced their support of Margrave Ekkehard I of Meissen (r. 985–1002). Nevertheless, about a month after the March 1002 meeting, Margrave Ekkehard's enemies in Saxony pledged their support of Duke Henry IV in the Saxon town of Werla; Otto III's sisters, Sophie, Abbess of Gandersheim, and Adelheid, Abbess of Quedlinburg, were among this group. Duke Henry had sent along a representative to the Werla meeting, and, after having lectured the assembly on Duke Henry's strengths as a leader, this representative noted that their political support of the Bavarian duke would garner them gifts. This tactic worked, and most of the Saxon nobles assembled at Werla, with the exception of Ekkehard of Meissen and his supporters, assured Duke Henry IV that they would support his candidacy.²²

Although he had not managed to secure the political support of his counterparts in Lower Lotharingia, Thuringia, Saxony, and Swabia, Duke Henry IV of Bavaria was crowned and anointed King Henry II by Archbishop Willigis of Mainz on Sunday, 7 June 1002, in Mainz Cathedral. During this ceremony, Archbishop Willigis ceremonially presented the new king with the Holy Lance, which contained within its blade a nail believed to derive from the True Cross.²³ This object was of inestimable value, for it was believed to symbolize Christ's own blessing and protection of the king. Indeed, in many ways it stood for the ruler's connection to the divine. Otto I himself had carried the Holy Lance into the battle of the Lech in 955, and the spiritual protection that emanated from the object supposedly propelled the king to his decisive victory over the Hungarians. During his struggle for the crown, the Holy Lance had been the last of the three insignia that Henry II received, and the role the object played at his coronation ceremony could be considered as a sanctification of the means by which he had originally received it.

Ottoman memorial culture: its subjects, objects and sites

The permanence of the Saxon line of kings and emperors was tied to Henry I's establishment of the royal abbey of Quedlinburg in 936, the year of his

death and Otto I's succession; Queen Mathilde, Henry I's wife, had received the town in 929 as part of her dower.²⁴ Quedlinburg's royal abbey complex, constructed on a hill at the highest point in the town, gave a monumental shape to King Henry I's ambitions for his descendants and to his memorial concerns; it was also the first critical site of power for this line of kings. From the time of his accession of the crown in 936, King Henry I's son and successor Otto I affirmed that the abbey's canonesses would remain under the perpetual care of any king who should control the regions of Saxony and Franconia.²⁵ If, as at Quedlinburg and other sacred sites in the kingdom, a site's church and convent buildings gave architectural form to the depths of a patron's piety, the artworks in a church treasury could nuance a donor's memorial image, and provide it with a clearer shape. More than mere decoration, liturgical artworks made for political and ecclesiastical elites represented highly specific aspects of a subject's official persona.

In the Ottonian and Carolingian periods, artworks and texts used in the performance of the mass at religious houses with connections to the royal court had memorial functions; such works, it was believed, could assist in the commemoration of living or dead individuals, with the expectation that prayers uttered for their salvation would aid them on Judgment Day. Historians have attended assiduously to the role that memorial books of the living and the dead, legal charters, and cartularies played in the formation of a given community's history. Rosamond McKitterick has drawn attention to the liturgical functions performed in the Carolingian period by certain collections of legal texts—cartularies and lists of an abbey's benefactors, to name just two—and she has shown that such combinations allowed for the creation of human histories and community histories that were tied to biblical history.²⁶ In their use in memorial masses for the living and the dead, as McKitterick has shown, the liturgical functions of such texts allowed for history itself to become sacred.²⁷ A close consideration of artworks created with memorial functions in mind can reveal the extent to which such practices were connected to a conception of history that focused on its malleable, material aspects. In studies of *spolia* on Ottonian artworks in particular, scholars have emphasized how the reuse of precious objects is evidence of an understanding of history that was, in Ilene Forsyth's words, "cumulative," or testimony of cultural "bricolage," in the words of Thomas Head citing Claude Lévi-Strauss.²⁸ In general, the proliferation of *spolia* on Ottonian artworks and the creation of historicizing portrait types point to an examination of the past and a reflection on the meanings thereof. Indeed, these artistic practices indicate a consideration of one's own place in history and the shape of the future.

In memorial lists of the living and the dead as in artworks that commemorated a particular person or set of people, the viewer or reader was expected, in their mind's eye, to complete certain historical and spiritual connections that were associated with a commemorative subject or subjects. This process would seem to have much in common with Ernst Gombrich's famous characterization of the "Beholder's Share" that is so often called

upon when scrutinizing artworks.²⁹ The emergence of memorial lists of the living and the dead and that of luxury liturgical manuscripts containing ruler portraits in the Carolingian era are doubtlessly related phenomena, with the complexity of the memorial culture of this era giving rise to ever more luxurious portraits of rulers in liturgico-political settings.

By the last quarter of the tenth century, Ottonian artists had become particularly adept at depicting their subjects in a range of religious and political relationships, and they drew liberally and inventively from Byzantine, Carolingian, Anglo-Saxon, and Roman sources. Ottonian patrons—particularly Otto III and Henry II—supported the inclusion of their own portraits in the guises of earlier rulers. Images of ecclesiastical patrons, who themselves were often members of the royal family or otherwise involved at the imperial court, show their subjects, not surprisingly, as minor actors in often complex spiritual hierarchies and, at times, as faithful protectors of a given saint's legacy. Judging from the art-historical record, the creation of ruler portraiture was broadened and intensified during Otto III's long reign. In the face of the political upheavals that accompanied both Otto III's and Henry II's accessions to the crown, the establishment and maintenance of representational types could serve political and spiritual functions.

The creation of new representational types to suit the visual record of a ruler's reign was certainly an offshoot of the highly sophisticated memorial culture of this period. The commemoration of the ruler, both during his lifetime and long after his death, depended upon the regular prayers of monks and nuns at royal abbeys and cathedral chapters in all corners of the empire. Royal and imperial gifts to these foundations were part of a much larger network of prayer confraternities that attended to the memorial requirements of other members of the nobility. The foundation of churches and the establishment of treasuries at the site of one's future grave were also an important part of this tradition. At such sites, royal patrons were assured that their memories would live on in the prayers of those who stayed behind. Quedlinburg, Magdeburg, and Bamberg are among the richest examples of such tenth- and eleventh-century royal foundations. The spiritual and political strength with which these sites of power were imbued was augmented, of course, by prayers provided by the noble nuns at royal convents such as those at Essen, Gernrode, and Gandersheim, to name only a few.

Of course, the preservation of one's memory could theoretically have been assured in the simple inclusion of one's name in a memorial list. The elaborate nature of Otto III's and Henry II's artistic patronage went beyond memorial necessity and was also imbued with meanings and intentions that exceeded those of piety alone. So, too, did Henry II's construction of vast palace and cathedral complexes in Bamberg surpass the administrative need for those buildings in that corner of his realm. At sites such as Aachen and Bamberg, the ritual commemoration of imperial personages assumed a form that was commensurate with a ruler's social status during his lifetime. Precious treasury donations, used in a donor's physical absence, could conjure salient aspects of his or her presence and provide the donor with spiritual protection from afar. In part for this reason, it is beyond a doubt that the representation

of a royal or imperial subject on an altarpiece or in the pages of a gospel book served political purposes that were almost certainly as important as those of spiritual preservation.

Although there exists a large amount of scholarship dedicated to Ottonian imperial art that has attended to individual ruler portraits, studies of Ottonian liturgical artworks have generally not considered their representational functions and how medieval treasury objects were dialogically engaged with the past, present, and future.³⁰ Indeed, few studies contain discussions of how and by whom these artworks would have been made and by whom they would have been used and viewed. Much of this is related to the paucity of source material that could provide definitive answers to such questions. Studies of ruler portraits are often too quick to assume a direct line of influence on the part of imperial patrons. Ludger Körntgen has drawn attention to this problem and has gone so far as to propose that some of the most accomplished works of Ottonian book-painting were commissioned by ecclesiastical figures, rather than imperial patrons.³¹ Moreover, he asserts that rulers would have had nearly no influence on the appearance of their portraits inside sumptuously illuminated gospel books destined for presentation to their favored sites. In Körntgen's view, Otto III and Henry II were entirely passive participants in the process of donation, and the complex hierarchies and ideals visible in their imperial portraits are primarily religious; political concerns, according to Körntgen, had no effect on their artistic patronage.³² Indeed, Körntgen asks, is it not possible that ruler portraits in precious liturgical manuscripts look the way they do simply because of iconographic traditions that illuminators followed at different schools?³³

Körntgen is right to point out the problems involved in discussions of patronage. And, in the case of Ottonian ruler images, it is certainly difficult to know exactly how they would have been viewed and by whom. Yet Körntgen's study offers no hermeneutic alternatives. In fact, it would seem that the ideals visualized inside gospel books, for example, did not have to be viewed in order to be effective. Arguably, it was a book's or object's individual use that was of primary importance, and questions of a limited or extensive viewership were secondary. In a decadent court setting, limited viewership would have been precisely the fitting justification for an especially sumptuous cycle of illumination or a luxurious binding, for example. The rich illuminations found in the most famous manuscripts from the Ottonian period were created with more than just mortal eyes in mind: like the churches in which they were housed, they were meant to commemorate—in a permanent way—political and spiritual relationships that may or may not have ever existed. Other types of larger-scale liturgical artworks that were permanently installed inside church structures—such as pulpits, retables, and altar frontals—also did not have to be used in order for their commemorative functions to remain active. The memorial functions of still other types of liturgical objects—processional crosses and reliquaries, for example—were set in motion in their use and ritual display.

The question of the degree of influence brought to bear by either Otto III or Henry II on artworks made in their honor is a thorny one and, like the question of use, impossible to resolve with absolute certainty. Indeed, at times ruler portraits have been interpreted as straightforward representations of a sovereign's individual will. Percy Ernst Schramm, the most influential historian of Ottonian art and history, asserted that such Ottonian ruler portraits could complete impressions not available in source texts.³⁴ Other historical studies have more recently emphasized the religious hierarchies visible in such works, while rather unfortunately ignoring their inherent artifice.³⁵ Ludger Körntgen's work has proposed that these images, created as they were by monastic artists who may have had very little—if any—contact with their imperial patron, assured an artist's place in the ruler's good graces.³⁶ Such lines of argumentation make important isolated points, yet they fail to acknowledge the close connections that existed between the imperial court and the Church.

Like their Carolingian forbears, Ottonian kings and emperors enjoyed especially close relationships with the abbeys that were home to the most accomplished artistic ateliers in the *Reich*. Abbot Witigowo of Reichenau (r. 985–997), for example, was among Otto III's advisors at court, and his abbey was responsible for the perpetuation of a representational type first established at Trier that defined the ways in which the history of Otto III's reign was interpreted well into the twentieth century. Bishop Bernward of Hildesheim (r. 993–1022), after having served as a court notary and scribe, also became Otto III's personal tutor; Bernward himself, of course, was among the most important art patrons of this period and may even have been an artist, if his biographer Thangmar is to be believed.³⁷

Just as Otto III was a sometime resident at the abbey of Reichenau, Henry II maintained close connections to Hildesheim and Regensburg, where he had been educated. During Henry II's childhood and his own time as Bavarian duke, Regensburg was the administrative center of his duchy. Henry II's mother, Gisela, lay buried in the abbey of Niedermünster, the companion abbey to St Emmeram and possibly the location of a large textile workshop.³⁸ Thus, although neither Otto III nor Henry II could be said to have looked directly over the shoulder of the numerous artists and scribes who created the precious artworks that filled their treasuries, the close connections between the royal court and monastic workshops certainly would have allowed for a flow and exchange of ideas and influence.

The artistic centers of the Ottonian imperial court

Particularly in the period of approximately one hundred years that encompassed the reigns of the Saxon kings from Henry I (r. 916–936) to Henry II (r. 1002–1024), there existed a contrast between the itinerancy of the ruler and the fixed nature of sites of power and artistic creation. Much in the same way that specific locations were designated for the ritual commemoration of the