



***The Foundations of Royal Power in
Early Medieval Germany: Material
Resources and Governmental
Administration in a Carolingian
Successor State***

By David S. Bachrach

Woodbridge: Boydell, 2022

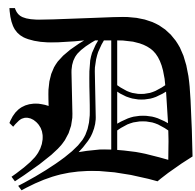
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The Foundations of Royal Power in Early Medieval Germany: Material Resources and Governmental Administration in a Carolingian Successor State. By David S. Bachrach. Woodbridge: Boydell, 2022. ISBN 978-1-783-728-5 (hb). xix + 364 pp. £75 ISBN 978-1-800-10633-8 (ePDF). xix + 364 pp. £24.99



David S. Bachrach and his father Bernard S. Bachrach have contributed extensively over the years to our understanding of the Ottonians, with special focus on their military activities and their exercise of royal power. Their translation of *Widukind of Corvey: Deeds of the Saxons* (2014) and Bernard's of *Deeds of the Bishops of Cambrai* (2018) add to our knowledge of the contemporary sources. David's "Toward an Appraisal of the Wealth of the Ottonian Kings of Germany, 919–1024" (*Viator*, 44:2, 2013), and other articles, flagged his interest in the origins and extent of the material resources of the Ottonians and their concomitant wealth.

The *Foundations* is a fine development of the issues David raised therein. His extensive knowledge of the subject area from primary and secondary sources is on display in this detailed (and somewhat driven) book that seeks to understand the origins and the full extent of the capital of the Ottonians and how they spent it. Contrary to some doyens in the field, the Ottonians' royal government was not primitive, the fiscal resources were extensive, well-managed and tightly controlled, and therefore the king-emperors were very organised and very wealthy. Consequently, they exercised enormous power. The author argues for a wealth far beyond funding the requirements of the *iter regis* (rulership by the perambulation of the travelling court). He posits that some historians have over emphasised this feature to the detriment of other fields of exploration.

The author sets the scene with an overview of the economy of the Carolingians in East Francia, on whom the Ottonians based many of their ways of administration, their institutions, and indeed their ideology. Under the Ottonians the economy expanded: iron and silver were mined, coins minted, forests made arable, production increased, and more free labourers served in new industries as well as farming new arable land. A network of highways and secondary routes connected population centres of not only towns, such as Hildesheim, Paderborn, and Magdeburg, but also monasteries and bishoprics. These centres became "drivers of economic development and markets" (42), enabling trade and specialised production—a "rising tide lifting all boats" (66).

Three chapters follow, listing the assets available to the Ottonians. The Royal Fisc (the assets of the royal government, distinct from the personal assets of the ruler), consisting of a broad range of landed assets and other material assets, was much bigger than historians have generally concluded. Bachrach estimates that Otto I possessed at least 900 fiscal units (ranging in size from a single *villa* to dozens of *villae*) north of the Alps. In all, Ottonian rulers possessed at least 1,850 unique fiscal units. (The author provides two extensive Appendices containing lists of Fiscal Properties and of Fortifications.) From these the produce can be estimated as “tons of silver, thousands of cart loads of wine, tens of thousands of tons of grain, hundreds of thousands of pigs, and millions of man-days of labor” (119).

The second source of wealth were the rights and authority held exclusively and personally by the king. The imposition of taxes and tolls, and other regalian rights differentiated the king’s power from those under him. These revenues were different in kind from and far beyond the incomes of any magnate. In detail the Ottonians held the rights to build fortresses, set up markets and mints, collect taxes and tolls, manage the woodlands and forests, and organise the population to build fortifications, roads, and bridges, as well as to serve in the army. The king might delegate specific rights to a subordinate official, but this was revocable at the king’s pleasure.

The third source of wealth was obtained from resources of the church, whose wealth was enhanced by lay and clerical donors. Bachrach attributes the Ottonians’ extensive patronage of the church, at least in part, to their ability to access the church’s wealth. The Ottonians did not give more to churches than they received, as has commonly been declared. Gifts once given were not secure. He refutes the idea that the magnates operated independently of the realm. Power was delegated to them by the king alone.

Bachrach draws on a number of innovative sources to present his arguments. As well as the expected diplomata and other texts, he adds archaeological discoveries, which confirm the building and maintenance of many fortifications. In one example of several, he examines the cost of supplying the necessary sustenance to the garrisoned men and animals. Classical Greece and the Hohenstaufen and Byzantine courts contribute information about provisioning while on campaign. Each soldier required between 2,500 and 5,000 calories a day. The author concludes that the expenditures on just this one aspect of the military budget of the Ottonian kings were of greater importance than those devoted to the *iter*. Indeed, he argues that research about the *iter* has skewed historical analysis out of proportion to the detriment of analysis of other sources of income. The cost of the *iter*

has been over-emphasised and that of defence expenditure under-estimated. The extent of all the resources must indicate a wealth, and royal power, far beyond what has been contemplated in former analyses.

Bachrach states up front that the analysis of the Ottonians in Italy would reveal quite a different set of “legal, institutional, and historical differences” (13) and was beyond the extent and scope of this book. Nevertheless, I would have liked to see more about the notable financial contributions that Adelheid (former queen of Italy) and Theophanu (Byzantine princess) added to the Ottonian coffers in their marriages to Otto I and Otto II. The contemporary Bishop Thietmar of Merseburg, among others, frequently notes the responsibilities of the empresses in guarding, transporting and distributing the royal treasure in the Germanic lands. Moreover, the pervading influence of the women, including Abbess Mathilda of Quedlinburg, is touched on very lightly.

This book queries prior historical analysis. Its claims are open to discussion, especially about the strength of the control of the kings over their assets and subjects. Future studies of the contribution of the Italians would be revealing. I look forward to the author’s proposed analysis of the Ottonian dynasty’s practice of royal government through keeping the peace, providing justice, and expanding Christianity beyond the borders.

PENELOPE NASH

The University of Sydney