

GERMANY'S KINGS



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INTRODUCTION

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This book, one of a series of history's most fascinating kings and queens, focuses on five rulers of the independent German states during the many centuries before the disparate provinces finally joined together in the late nineteenth century to become the nation of Germany. These chapters are not meant to be chronologies of the monarchs' reigns, but character sketches that reveal their personalities and peculiarities – disclosing lives both rich and colorful.

The diversity of these rulers reflects a millennium during which Germany was a patchwork of dozens of independent kingdoms, duchies, principalities, counties, and free cities with alliances that were ever shifting. Most were members of what was called the Holy Roman Empire, but the real power of that fluid confederation ebbed after the tenth century as the individual states regained autonomy. Most of these states shared a common language and religion - they individually embraced Christianity - but each had its own character, customs, laws, and traditions. And each of the monarchs, free to rule as he saw fit, did so in his own inimitable fashion.

I
OTTO THE GREAT
“VICTORY AND
SALVATION”

He was the strong man of Europe. As the elected king of all the independent dukes and margraves of Germany, Otto I had successfully asserted his power over them and stifled three of their rebellious attempts to reclaim their independence. He decisively defeated the pagan Slavs and Magyars who had plagued Germany for a century, and allied with powers in France, Bohemia, Burgundy, and Italy, annexing land and gradually piecing back together the empire that Charlemagne's heirs had allowed to crumble in the century after his death. Now, in the autumn of CE 960, Otto saw a chance to claim Charlemagne's title, *Imperator Romanus*, and make himself heir to the glory and power of ancient Rome.

It was a prize Otto had long coveted, but it would come at a steep price. The king of Italy, Berengar II – a man Otto had already defeated once and who had sworn allegiance to him as a vassal – was claiming to be king again and marauding through Italy, attacking even Pope John XII in Rome. The pope had sent Otto a letter, pleading with him to march south with his army to save him and his city.

Militarily, that would be no problem; Otto had the best army in Europe. But as a devout Christian, Otto must have had second thoughts about rescuing this particular pope. The first half of the tenth century has been called "the nadir of the papacy" and "the rule of the harlots." During these years the infamous Roman patrician Theodora and her daughter Marozia led aristocrats and prelates alike down sinful paths into corruption and depravity. Marozia became the mistress of Pope Sergius III and was said to be the lover of Pope John X as well; after taking over the government of Rome, she installed two more pontiffs, Leo VI and Stephen VII, as her puppets, and is claimed to have killed them both to make her son pope when he turned twenty-one.

Now Marozia was dead, driven from the throne and imprisoned by another of her sons. But the "pornocracy," the government of filth, still held sway. The pope asking to be rescued, John XII, was Marozia's grandson, who, according to Italian historian Claudio Rendina, "continued to gratify his unbridled pleasures," turning the Lateran Palace into a brothel, "with the pope surrounded by beautiful women and handsome boys in a depraved lifestyle completely at variance with his ecclesiastical duties."

How much of this information Otto knew when he left his court in Saxony and marched his army over the Alps in August of 961 isn't certain. But his friends in the church surely grasped what was happening in Rome and recognized that Otto was well informed and had rarely been caught off guard by incidents far or near. They were also aware that before he agreed to help the pope, he had made the pontiff promise to crown him emperor in exchange for his services.

And events proceeded exactly as planned. The Italian nobility welcomed Otto, and he received their deference as king of Italy, stripping the title from the turncoat Berengar. Berengar and his army wisely and quietly dispersed as Otto's troops approached Rome, and on February 2, 962, in Old St. Peter's Basilica, Pope John XII placed the jeweled octagonal crown of the Roman Empire, specially made for the occasion, on Otto's head. With that, the kingdoms of Germany and Italy were united, establishing what would later be called the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.

The newly crowned emperor and the freshly rescued pope signed a formal treaty outlining the details of their mutual covenant. Included in the fine print were clauses specifying that future emperors were to be crowned by popes and were to act as the popes' protectors; in return, future popes would swear loyalty to emperors, and papal elections would be ratified by said emperors.

Once the treaty had been finalized, Otto and his army marched off to track down and arrest Berengar. Otto had not gone far when he received word – unpleasant, but not altogether unexpected – that the pope was already having misgivings about the newly crowned emperor's growing power and was plotting against him. John XII fled Rome before Otto had time to get there, but Otto promptly convened a council and put the pope on trial: "Know therefore that not a few but all laymen and clerics have accused you of murder, of perjury, of sacrilege, of incest . . . with your relatives and two of your sisters . . . that you have made a toast to the devil and while throwing the dice, you called upon Zeus, Venus and other demons"

John was convicted and deposed, and as his replacement, Otto selected a friendly layman, who was installed as Pope Leo VIII.