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WOMEN AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE GREEK LANGUAGE IN TENTH-CENTURY GERMANY: COMMENTS ON A RECENT ARTICLE

Maxine U. Pretzel

A number of tenth-century German sources contain references to the Greek language and to contacts with the Byzantine East. On the basis of these allusions, scholars from time to time are tempted to assert broad claims concerning knowledge of the Greek language and Greek literature present in Ottonian Germany. In a recent study, for example, Professor A. Daniel Frankforter suggested that the source of Hroswitha of Gandersheim's suspected acquaintance with Christian Greek Literature was Theophano, the Byzantine wife of Otto II.¹ The putative connection between Hroswitha and Theophano offers an attractive hypothesis, but is clearly insupportable. Theophano did not arrive in Germany until after her marriage to Otto II in April, 972, long after the bulk of Hroswitha's writing had been completed. Hroswitha lived until 1001 or 1002, but there is no solid evidence that she authored anything after 972. At that time she had finished the historical epic conceded to be her last known work, a description of the founding of the abbey at Gandersheim. Hroswitha's dramas, the focus of Professor Frankforter's article, had been written in the previous decade.²

The issue of the purported knowledge of the Greek language and Greek literature among the women of tenth-century Germany is clouded by a lack of consistent and precise evidence. While it is tempting to view the data we do possess as conclusive proof of such literacy, an exhaustive study must be undertaken before such an inference can be made. Using Professor Frankforter's observations as a starting point, this essay will reexamine the evidence suggesting that religious women in tenth-century Germany may have enjoyed command of the Greek language as well as a knowledge of the literary heritage of the Byzantine East.

Prior to surveying this data, however, it is essential to distinguish among the several ways in which the Greek language and a knowledge of things Byzantine may have been present in the West. Debates concerning such familiarity are frequently marred by a confusion about the varieties and depth

of acquaintance with the Greek language in the earlier Middle Ages. Artifacts of Byzantine provenance and fragmentary references to Greek-speakers have thus become the basis for fairly fanciful conclusions about Graecophile intellectual movements in the Latin half of Europe.

In at least four crucial areas, knowledge of the Greek language was important to individuals residing in the western Empire. First, diplomatic exigencies demanded the skills of Greek-speaking agents. The need for western diplomats who were well-versed in the Greek language became clearly acute in the second half of the tenth century. After an absence of forty-six years from the East-Frankish kingdom, Byzantine embassies once more arrived at Otto the Great's court in 945.³ From that time on, governmental representatives of the eastern Empire were continuously in evidence. The two-way exchange of diplomatic personnel frequently involved western merchants, such as the businessman from Mainz sent as ambassador to Constantinople by Otto I in 949.⁴ More often, Venetians, who enjoyed unusual economic privileges at Constantinople,⁵ acted as intermediaries in matters of inter-governmental communication between the two empires.⁶

Second, the needs of businessmen, whether from Venice, or such centers as Amalfi, Gaeta and Naples in southern Italy, could not be met without converse with the Greek language.⁷ Third, ecclesiastical relations and disputations between the two branches of Christianity required some knowledge of the notions and phraseology of the eastern Church. That vestiges of the Greek liturgy enriched the rites of the western Church has been well-documented.⁸ Fourth, and most crucial for this study, there is some indication of a continuing interest in the Greek intellectual heritage in the West. It is this last aspect which demands a more thorough investigation in order to determine the full extent of such cultural activity among literate women residing in the religious centers of tenth-century Germany.

Random allusions in the sources to diplomatic, commercial and liturgical familiarity with things Byzantine cannot be adduced as convincing evidence for the presence of islands of Greek learning in the West. Confirmation of the existence of female centers of Greek literary culture in tenth-century Germany is even more difficult to prove. The stray information relating to Byzantine contacts with Ottonian Germany is striking by its lack of precise relevance to Greek learning and literacy.

A discussion of Greek learning in tenth-century Germany must begin with Theophano, the eastern princess who wed the son of the reigning King of Germany and Emperor, Otto I, in 972. The sources imply that her years as empress involved numerous visits to the religious establishments of Germany, including Gandersheim. Theophano, together with a sizable Greek retinue,

may have provided the momentum from which a growing commitment to Greek learning in Ottonian Germany evolved.

War with Byzantine forces in southern Italy provided the immediate impulse for the projected marriage of Theophano with the future Otto II. With Otto I victorious in 970, and the new Byzantine emperor, John Tzimisces, preoccupied with internal revolts, the time was advantageous for renewed nuptial negotiations between the two protagonists.⁹ The policy Otto pursued was not new. The German king, reverent to the memory of his Carolingian heritage, followed the strategy of Charlemagne in seeking parity with the Byzantine emperor through a royal marriage.¹⁰ Although Charlemagne's Greek policy was unavailing, the numerous attempts at politically-inspired marriage alliances, initiated by both the East and the West during the early Middle Ages, attest to the desirability of such connections.¹¹ Conscious of the political benefits of an East-West marital connection relatively early in his reign, Otto I in 949 secured the betrothal of his niece, Hadwig, with Romanus II. The intended marriage, desired by both emperors as a show of strength and unity against the Muslims, did not come about, but Otto remained interested in such alliances.

Otto I renewed his plan for a marriage in 968 and sent envoys to Constantinople to arrange for an imperial princess for his son, Otto II. This time his reasons were not altogether altruistic: the elder Otto, now crowned emperor, desired recognition from his eastern counterpart. After years of negotiations, armed hostilities between the two empires, and a changing of the guard at Constantinople, Otto in 972 received that rarest of prizes, a Byzantine princess. Whether Theophano was the *porphyrogenita* he so eagerly sought, or merely a niece of the reigning emperor, John Tzimisces,¹² it is believed she did not disappoint her father-in-law. Through her, the Byzantine empire acknowledged Otto as a force. Further, Theophano can be seen as the instrument by which peace was reached between the two adversaries.¹³

When representatives of the eastern empire journeyed west in their missions involving royal marriages, an entourage of tutors and court functionaries (including artisans) usually accompanied them for the purpose of instructing the future bride in the Greek language and the customs of the Byzantine court.¹⁴ In preparation for her projected marriage to Romanus, Otto's niece Hadwig had acquired a knowledge of Greek in this manner, a skill which served her well when, several years later, she was asked to instruct a scholar from the monastery of St. Gall in that language.¹⁵ This incident would indicate that Hadwig's knowledge of Greek may have been fairly extensive, certainly preferable to learning the language in the monastery school merely from books. To be sure, St. Gall possessed such books, as will be shown later.

An intriguing aspect of Byzantine princesses marrying into the royal Saxon line is the enhancement thus accorded to the role and position of noble women in Germany. Women in elite families throughout the German duchies enjoyed unusual prestige and enlarged opportunities for advanced learning and political prowess. Otto I, for example, recognized his second wife's power by issuing diplomas with their joint signatures, as well as minting coins containing her portrait.¹⁶ Although primarily interested in religious matters throughout her life, the Empress Adelaide exercised significant political influence on her grandson, Otto III, when she ruled as co-regent with the boy's mother, Theophano. After Theophano's death in 991, Adelaide became Otto's sole administrator until the boy reached the age of majority.¹⁷ Otto the Great's mother, Mathilda, received the recognition previously reserved only for Byzantine empresses, when, in the marriage document of Otto II for Theophano, she is accorded the title *semper semperque augusta*.¹⁸ Theophano, too, was acclaimed *augusta* by Pope John XIII immediately after her marriage to Otto II and in conjunction with her crowning as empress.¹⁹ Another powerful woman of the age, the sister of Otto II, Abbess Mathilda of Quedlinburg, had the title *augusta* conferred on her by Pope John XIII in a privilege dated 967.²⁰ The additional designation of *metropolitana* which Abbess Mathilda received reflects the unique religious status of this woman who ruled Germany in the name of her absent brother.²¹ Theophano's arrival in the West amplified the German queen's status through use of the Byzantine court title, *consort*.

Certainly, there were affectionate and strong bonds between Theophano and the abbey at Gandersheim. Her third daughter, Mathilda, was born at the abbey in 978.²² Her first daughter, Sophia, entered the abbey in 979 at the age of four and would be linked with Gandersheim for the rest of her life, first as a canoness and then, upon the death of Gerberga II in 1002, as abbess. In gratitude for Sophia's upbringing and education there, Theophano and Otto II issued a joint decree in 979 giving Gandersheim rich endowments.²³ For 800 years, in fact, Gandersheim would serve as the repository of the royal marriage diploma (of April 14, 972) in which Otto granted Theophano dotal lands in Italy as well as north of the Alps.²⁴

Theophano undoubtedly exercised an influence on Gandersheim. The intelligent and strong-willed empress would have found the atmosphere at Gandersheim stimulating. Because Hroswitha personified the intellectual climate present at the abbey, it is quite conceivable that the two women met. That Theophano influenced Hroswitha's writings, however, is without foundation. Hroswitha, in fact, informed her readers about the intellectual background of her works. In the introduction to her *Legends*, Hroswitha tells us that she found her materials in her abbey's library²⁵ — naturally enough, since Gandersheim

then enjoyed some renown as an intellectual center. More to the point, Hroswitha graciously credited Gerberga with instructing her in the literature and authors that the abbess had perused under her teachers at St. Emmeran. If Hroswitha possessed familiarity with the Greek language and its literature, her mentor must have been Gerberga.

Theophano's nineteen years in Germany were filled with remarkable political accomplishments: not only did she influence her husband, she acted as an able regent for her son for seven years, and wielded considerable authority on various matters. During her regency, she issued two diplomas in her own name, using *imperatrix augusta*, and strikingly, *Theophanius . . . imperator augustus*,²⁶ testifying to her power at the German court.²⁷ Along with the Greek, John Philagathos, Theophano is thought to have assisted in her son's education,²⁸ and her influence proved to be the dominating force in the emperor's conception of himself as a Byzantine ruler.²⁹

The influence of Byzantium was not only apparent at the Ottonian court, but spilled over into the liturgy in German religious houses. Although Greek had been the universal language of the Christian Church until the third century, Latin proved more amenable to the western form of worship. Encouraged by pro-Latin popes who augmented the liturgy up until the seventh century,³⁰ Byzantine forms of worship gradually disappeared.³¹ Because of the particularly festive nature of the eastern liturgy, however, churches throughout the West had celebrated certain high holy days with the Greek liturgy. One notable illustration of such Greek influence in tenth-century Germany involved the employment of Greek Pentecostal liturgy at Gandersheim. Indeed, Gandersheim continued to utilize this eastern ritual continuously until the sixteenth century.³²

We come closer to the heart of our topic in turning now to libraries where women had access to Greek materials. Throughout the earlier Middle Ages monks and nuns evinced an interest in things Greek in order to pursue theological and philosophical investigations.³³ When the Iconoclastic controversy of the eighth century forced many dissident monks to flee the East, it was the monasteries and churches of the West that became their refuge, as well as the repositories of numerous Greek manuscripts. Through these documents, great religious and educational centers such as Corvey, Reichenau and St. Gall became hubs of Greek studies. It is known that the library at St. Gall, as mentioned above, possessed Greek grammar books which became invaluable tools in the translation of the Greek materials.³⁴

Unlike later centuries, when education was to become the responsibility of cathedral schools and universities, advanced learning in the tenth century centered around abbeys and convents, and among the chief transmitters of such

learning in the early Middle Ages were the convents of canonesses in western Europe.³⁵ Because they ministered chiefly to women of the governing class, the influence of such foundations spread far beyond the religious functions associated with convents. Reigning monarchs often spent religious holidays in these foundations, which frequently housed their sisters or daughters; thus, such convents served as centers of political activity and intrigue, as well as the source of much information for chroniclers.³⁶ Socially and intellectually, the best of these convents rivaled the renowned abbeys and monasteries of their male counterparts.³⁷

Although the Saxons were the last of the Germans to embrace Christianity, the monastic life found strong adherents in their territory, with twenty religious houses (eleven of them containing women) founded by the year 900.³⁸ The impediment Charlemagne placed in the path of boys for an education in convents³⁹ proved advantageous to noble girls, who often received exemplary tutelage from their female instructors, while young men destined to become rulers were trained primarily in the art of warfare. One celebrated example of sexual discrimination in education and training involved the illiterate Henry I of Germany whose wife, Mathilda, was a highly enlightened woman who founded one of the most renowned centers of education in the West, Quedlinburg. Henry's own sons were to follow the established pattern: Otto's limited education did not allow for a knowledge of Latin or Greek, but his brother, Bruno, destined for a life in the Church, did receive the classical education reserved for the religious. Bruno, the future Archbishop of Cologne, was a learned man fluent in both Latin and Greek.⁴⁰

One of the greatest centers of learning for women in tenth-century Saxony is acknowledged to be Gandersheim, an imperial abbey known for its intellectual as well as religious pursuits. Gandersheim reached the height of its fame under the niece of Otto I, Abbess Gerberga II (959-1002), who infused an enthusiasm for learning into her eager charges. Her dedication bore fruit when the canoness, Hroswitha, became Germany's first dramatist, poetess, and female historian. Because the library of Gandersheim perished in the sixteenth century,⁴¹ we cannot be certain that it had contained Greek texts, although the two women acknowledged by Hroswitha to have been her teachers at the abbey, Riccardis and Gerberga, probably knew Greek. A document dated January 1, 968, granting apostolic protection to Gandersheim by Pope John XIII, records the Abbess Gerberga's name in Greek letters, although the remainder of the document is written in Latin.⁴²

This review of the leading evidence concerning the presence of Greek learning in tenth-century Germany, especially among literate females, is fragmentary and fails to furnish any solidity of proof. Improved relations between

the East and the West, the arrival of a Byzantine princess as wife to the son of the German emperor, and a social climate conducive to the education of women are enticing aspects of the evidence pointing to a revived interest in the Greek language and culture. But there must be no exaggeration. This knowledge cannot be considered to be either widespread or profound: it fell almost exclusively within a restricted circle of religious males and noble and religious women. Only further research can hope to yield more satisfying conclusions to this intriguing question.

A native of Germany, **Maxine U. Pretzel** received her B.A. degree from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (1985), where she is presently enrolled in the Graduate History Program. Her major fields of interest include learning and education in tenth- and eleventh-century Germany.

NOTES

1. A. Daniel Frankforter, "Sexism and the Search for the Thematic Structure of the Plays of Hroswitha of Gandersheim," *International Journal of Women's Studies*, 2, 3(1979), 221-232.

2. Eleanor Duckett, *Death and Life in the Tenth Century*. (Ann Arbor: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 255 ff.

3. K.J. Leyser, "The Tenth Century in Byzantine-Western Relationships," in his *Medieval Germany and Its Neighbors 900-1250* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1982), p. 114.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

5. James Westfall Thompson, *An Economic and Social History of the Middle Ages 300-1300* (New York: Century, 1928), p. 320.

6. Leyser, p. 131. "It is difficult to mark the boundary between long-distance trade and diplomatic missions in the first half of the tenth century. The immediate successors of the Carolingians in Italy and Germany could not afford their expensive eastern embassies."

7. Armand O. Citarella, "The Relations of Amalfi with the Arab World before the Crusades," *Speculum*, 42 (1967), 299 ff.

8. Werner Ohnsorge, *Abendland und Byzanz* (Darmstadt: Herman Gentner, 1958), p. 12. The festive Greek liturgy was utilized on high holy days in Essen, St. Denis, Würzburg, and Gandersheim.

9. Gustave Schlumberger, *L'Epopée Byzantine, à la fin du dixième siècle* (Paris: Hachette & Cie, 1896), p. 201.

10. Charlemagne negotiated at least two potential marriage alliances with members of the royal family in Constantinople. Neither the proposed nuptials of Charlemagne's daughter, Rotrud, with Constantine VI, nor one involving the widowed emperor himself and the Empress Irene were ever concluded.

11. Harriet Pratt Lattin, trans., *The Letters of Gerbert* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1961), p. 152. Lattin records at least seven prior attempts at East-West marriages between 765 and 958. To this list should be added the proposed marriage between Charlemagne and Irene and the successful bid by Otto I on behalf of his son.

12. Schlumberger, p. 188 ff. Schlumberger suggests that it was Pandulf, Otto's ally and vassal, who brought back the news of the availability of Princess Theophano in 970. Liudprand of Cremona, however, claims Otto sent him to the East to plead for the hand of the daughter of the deceased Emperor Romanos II as early as 968. This demonstrates the ambiguity that has clouded the studies regarding Theophano's origin ever since. Because Liudprand never mentions the princess' name in his chronicles, we cannot be certain whether the sought-after bride was Theophano, and whether she was, indeed, the daughter of an emperor.

13. Schlumberger, pp. 188-203. Although the text of the peace treaty does not survive, Otto agreed to evacuate Apulia and the other Byzantine possessions in Italy. The dowry of Italian lands that Otto expected Theophano to bring to the West did not materialize. On the contrary, Theophano received extensive dotal property from the Germans. In return, Theophano brought gifts, relics and a sizable Greek entourage.

14. B. Bischoff, "Das griechische Element in der abendländischen Bildung des Mittelalters," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 44 (1951), 27. This task often fell to eunuchs. The eunuch Elissaios came to the Carolingian court in 781 to instruct Rotrud in Greek. It is believed the Greeks stayed at Charlemagne's court until 788.

15. Paul Pendzig, "Die griechischen Studien im deutschen Mittelalter," *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum*, 21 (1918), 222.

16. JoAnn McNamara and Suzanne F. Wemple, "Sanctity and Power: The Dual Pursuit of Medieval Women," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, eds., Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton, 1977), p. 108.

17. Boyd H. Hill, Jr. *Medieval Monarchy in Action* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1972), p. 50.

18. Ohnsorge p. 268.

19. Schlumberger, p. 201.

20. Ohnsorge, p. 268.

21. McNamara and Wemple, p. 108.

22. Hans Goetting, ed., *Die Bistümer der Kirchenprovinz Mainz. Das Bistum Hildesheim, 1: Das reichsunmittelbare Kanonissenstift Gandersheim (Germania Sacra: Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte, Neue Folge VII; Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1973), p. 88.*

23. *Die Heiratsurkunde der Kaiserin Theophanu 972 April 14, Rom*, Niedersächsisches Staatsarchiv (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), pp. 20-21.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 34 ff.

25. Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, ed. Helene Homeyer (München: Schöningh, 1970), p. 37-38. "Unde clam cunctis et quasi furtim, nunc in componendis sola desudando, nunc male composita destruendo, satagebam iuxta meum posse, licet minime necessarium, aliquem tamen conficere textum ex sententiis scripturarum, quas intra aream nostri Gandeshemensis collegeram coenobii . . ."

26. Hill, p. 50. The use of the masculine form may have been necessary because the West lacked a precedent for a woman ruler.

27. Ferdinand Gregorovius, *History of the City of Rome*, trans. Annie Hamilton (7 vols.; London: Bell, 1895), III, p. 401.

28. James Westfall Thompson, *The Literacy of the Laity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1963), p. 83.

29. Romilly Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries, A.D. 610-1071* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), p. 294. ". . . Otto III was, to all intents and purposes, a Byzantine (or Roman) emperor."

30. Theodor Klauser, *A Short History of the Western Liturgy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), p. 45.

31. Gustav Soyter, "Die byzantinischen Einflüsse auf die Kultur des mittelalterlichen Deutschland," *Leipziger Vierteljahrsschrift für Südosteuropa*, 5, ¾ (1941), 166. The *Gloria*, *Credo*, and *Pater Noster*, for example, were sung in Greek at St. Gall until the eleventh century.

32. Ohnsorge, p. 9.

33. Soyter, p. 162.

34. Pendzig, 222.

35. Anne Lyon Haight, *Hroswitha of Gandersheim* (New York: The Hroswitha Club, 1965), p. 11. In their convents, the canonesses did not live under a rule, although they did take a vow of chastity and obedience. They enjoyed unique freedoms which undoubtedly influenced their outlook and creative viewpoints. The canonesses could elect their abbesses, receive visitors, own property, travel, and even leave the abbey to marry.

36. Lina Eckenstein, *Woman Under Monasticism* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), p. 145. "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."

37. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

38. Haight, p. 4.

39. McNamara and Wemple, pp. 100-101.

40. Ruotger, *Lebensbeschreibung des heiligen Erzbischofs Bruno von Köln*, trans. Irene Schmale-Ott (Münster/Köln: Böhlau, 1954) I, 4 (pp. 19-21).

41. *Heiratsurkunde*, p. 15.

42. *Heiratsurkunde*, pp. 18-19. A photograph clearly showing Gerberga's name in Greek letters is reproduced here. This papal diploma predates the marriage of Theophano and Otto III by four years.