

Oda:

An Extraordinary Example of a Medieval Woman's  
Religious Authority and Economic Power

Emily Thomas

Professor Jones

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Hrotsvit, an educated nun in 10<sup>th</sup> century Saxony, details and emphasizes the piety and religious devotion of Oda, a 9<sup>th</sup> century Saxon duchess, who used her religious affiliation and influence to gain economic and political advantages for her family. Oda and her husband Liudolf erected a monastery at Gandersheim, the establishment of which was written down by Hrotsvit around a century later.<sup>1</sup> Oda gained religious influence, even though the church restrained women's official power in Christianity. Despite religious restrictions and the subsequent limitation of many women's wealth and influence, some women were able to circumvent such obstacles and, in Oda's case, even adopt and exercise them as a means of authority. Neither Oda nor Hrotsvit is representative of all medieval women, but I will utilize Hrotsvit's record on Oda to argue that it was possible for some women to acquire power despite the restrictions affixed by religion and the social role of motherhood. As I consider these limitations and then analyze Oda's situation for comparison, I will conclude my argument with the claim that Oda's children acted as her greatest resource in her endeavor to gain religious authority and economic power.

Christianity posed as a shackle for many women in the early Middle Ages. Though sexism and female subordination were prevalent prior to the emergence of this monotheistic religion, Christianity established its own justifications for continuing in the male domination. The greatest excuse was the reason for the downfall of man and the source of Original Sin—Eve. Eve's transgression stained the view of all women and was often the reason cited for limiting females' power within the church. Though Mary was sometimes described as the redeemer of women, her image as the ideal—and women's inability to completely emulate her—caused tension and a view of female inferiority. Though the church denied women most titles and official offices, some were capable of acquiring spiritual authority and recognition for virtue and piety.

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<sup>1</sup> Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, "The Establishment of the Monastery of Gandersheim," in *Medieval Hagiography*, ed. Thomas Head (New York and London, 2000), pp 237.

In spite of the constraints often imposed by Christianity, Oda used the religion to accomplish her overall goal of developing a prosperous and thriving family. With the aid of her husband, Oda began the process of establishing a convent for girls dedicated to chastity and devoted to God. According to Hrotsvit, Liudolf listened to his wife Oda's opinion and followed her advice. It was Oda's proposal to build the monastery, and Liudolf sought "the approval of his beloved wife, Oda" before preparing the valley for the construction of the monastery.<sup>2</sup> Before beginning the plans for its establishment, Oda and Liudolf first sought permission of King Louis the German and then approval by Pope Sergius. Not only did they gain sovereign and papal approval, but they received the relics of two former popes.<sup>3</sup> Relics offered privilege, prestige, and power, and many Christians made pilgrimages to see them in order to pay homage and pray. Monasteries could become very wealthy institutions, and the prestige of the relics increased the prestige of the place that housed them. In this time period, it was normal to entwine authority afforded by piety and religious devotion with political and economic power. Oda and Liudolf invested a lot of money in the convent, but in return they gained a substantial amount of power. The monastery at Gandersheim belonged to Oda's family and to the pope, who granted it special rights and exemption from secular authority.<sup>4</sup> The monastery continued to thrive even after the death of its first male benefactor, Liudolf.

Liudolf died before the convent's completion, leaving Oda a widow, a quite vulnerable position for some women. Oda, however, continued to wield an ample amount of power. Hrotsvit speculates that God removed Liudolf from Oda's life so that she could concentrate on her religious work. According to Hrotsvit, God bestowed solace on Oda in the form of renewed wealth to be used towards the family monastery.<sup>5</sup> Despite living in the monastery upon widowhood, Oda still maintained authority. She oversaw the actions and lifestyles of the nuns at Gandersheim and taught them appropriate behavior by her own virtuous example. Hrotsvit refers to Oda as a matron who oscillates between compassionate and

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<sup>2</sup> Hrotsvit, "Gandersheim," p. 244-246

<sup>3</sup> Hrotsvit, "Gandersheim," p. 245

<sup>4</sup> Hrotsvit, "Gandersheim," p. 245

<sup>5</sup> Hrotsvit, "Gandersheim," p. 247

commanding. Though Hrotsvit claims Oda referred to other nuns as “her superiors,” it is hard to imagine Oda not garnering a large amount of reverence and authority, regardless of her position as a fellow nun.<sup>6</sup> Except for abbesses, women were not able to gain powerful titles within the church. They could, however, acquire power through marriage. Hrotsvit heavily emphasizes Oda’s devotion and holiness, even though Oda lived a secular life, only choosing to reside in the family monastery upon the death of her husband. Oda’s power originated as the result of her marriage to an influential duke, but she insured the continuance of this power with her behavior and actions. Despite the constraints on Christian women, Oda used the religion as a way of claiming authority that was initially withheld from her due to gender. Even when Liudolf died, Oda retained much of her power and control, most likely because her children were valuable assets.

A married woman’s main purpose in life was her ability to bear and rear children. Women were encouraged to marry young in order to take advantage of this limited time span and lengthen the number of years they could reproduce legitimate offspring. Since a married woman’s time was generally preoccupied with birthing and taking care of children, there was little time for women to contribute to other sectors of life, even if given the opportunity. Additionally, compared to today’s standards, pregnancy was incredibly dangerous, regardless of age, and mother and infant mortality rates were high. As Jacqueline Murray indicates in her compilation of medieval texts, *Love, Marriage, and Family in the Middle Ages*, quite a few things were liable to go awry. There was little midwives could do if complications arose during labor, and infection was a prominent contributor to the inflated death toll.<sup>7</sup>

One of the greatest dangers for women turned into Oda’s most valuable resource. Oda and Liudolf had many means of gaining power and prestige, but Oda used her children more than anything else to further her family’s power. To keep the monastery within the family, Oda and her husband assigned their eldest daughter, Hathumoda, as the first abbess of their convent. Obviously, they cared enough about this endeavor to give up their first daughter and sacrifice the possible advantages associated

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<sup>6</sup> Hrotsvit, “Gandersheim,” p. 249

<sup>7</sup> “A Medical Discussion of Childbirth,” in *Love, Marriage, and Family in the Middle Ages: A Reader*, ed. Jacqueline Murray (Peterborough, 2001), p. 401-406

with her marriage to a powerful man. Oda and Liudolf arranged for their twelve-year-old daughter to be under the tutelage of the abbess of Herford in order to learn how to be a proper superior to the girls soon to be residing within the monastery.<sup>8</sup>

Oda did not just utilize her children to gain religious authority. Though Oda was willing to sacrifice a potentially influential husband for Hathumoda, she expected her other daughters to contribute to the family by making advantageous marriages. Their second daughter, Liutgard, married King Louis of the Franks. As queen, Liutgard “granted great benefits to [the] monastery as a worthy service to her holy mother and with the consent of the king, her proper lord.”<sup>9</sup> Another daughter, Gerberga, was engaged to Bernard, a powerful man, but she was determined to live a life of chastity. She wanted to follow her sister Hathumoda into a life as a bride of Christ rather than her sister Liutgard into being a mediator between her kin and her husband. Surprisingly, Oda supported Bernard, insisting that her daughter honor the engagement.<sup>10</sup> The reason behind this decision is subject to speculation. Perhaps Oda had decided that, in this case, the marriage offered more benefits than another abbess daughter. Gerberga was able to fulfill her commitment to the monastic life, however, because Bernard died in battle before they were married. After Hathumoda died, Gerberga became abbess at Gandersheim, and their sister Christina followed them in this succession.<sup>11</sup>

Oda had a huge influence on her children and ensured their commitment to the family monastery: “In this fashion she persuaded her whole family to provide dutifully for the upkeep of the monastery.”<sup>12</sup> The monastery thrived with the gifts and support of the king—Oda’s son-in-law—and the popes. Though her eldest son, Bruno, died in battle against the Hungarians, her other son Otto became one of the major beneficiaries of the monastery.<sup>13</sup> With the help of his brother-in-law, King Louis, Otto became “leader of

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<sup>8</sup> Hrotsvit, “Gandersheim,” p. 244

<sup>9</sup> Hrotsvit, “Gandersheim,” p. 248

<sup>10</sup> Hrotsvit, “Gandersheim,” p. 248

<sup>11</sup> Hrotsvit, “Gandersheim,” p. 248, 250

<sup>12</sup> Hrotsvit, “Gandersheim,” p. 250

<sup>13</sup> Hrotsvit, “Gandersheim,” p. 248-249

the people.”<sup>14</sup> It was with his aid that the monastery was finally consecrated.<sup>15</sup> According to Hrotsvit, Otto did not refuse any request Oda made on behalf of the monastery. The nuns who inhabited the convent in which Otto invested so much of his wealth greatly lamented his death. Hrotsvit even adds that the nuns at Gandersheim continue to praise Otto’s generosity even a century later.<sup>16</sup>

Although Hrotsvit attributes the construction of the monastery to “the great and illustrious Liudolf as well as his son, Otto,” the work focuses primarily on Oda, who was a prominent proprietor of the convent from its planning to its completion.<sup>17</sup> Oda continued to build and strengthen the monastery after her husband’s and her son’s death; in fact, Oda outlived all but one of her children.<sup>18</sup> It might have been the men’s wealth to donate, but it was Oda’s influence that caused the bestowal. It was the mother, not the father, who acted as the force connecting the children together for the monastery and for the prosperity of their family.

Despite religious and social restrictions due to gender, Oda found power. Through an exemplary lifestyle of religious devotion—piety, establishment of a prestigious monastery, residence in the convent upon widowhood—Oda garnered respect and authority. Alternatively, Oda utilized her children in a practical manner within the boundaries of the holy endeavor of erecting a monastery. How does Oda’s situation apply to the condition of other women in the Middle Ages? Oda acts as a model for female power, but the prevalence of such power is unanswered. Unfortunately, because literacy was primarily a privilege of the upper-class, historians can only piece together the lives of women through accounts of noblewomen. Even in this classification, generally only the records and works of unusually exceptional women survive to be analyzed. Thus, it is difficult—perhaps even impossible, though a few historians attempt to generalize via the finite sources—to determine the lives of ordinary women in this time period and understand the extent of their lack of power, when extraordinary and upper-class women are the only paragons. Nevertheless, Hrotsvit’s account of Oda is an important source. Though it does not reveal the

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<sup>14</sup> Hrotsvit, “Gandersheim,” p. 249

<sup>15</sup> Hrotsvit, “Gandersheim,” p. 249

<sup>16</sup> Hrotsvit, “Gandersheim,” p. 251

<sup>17</sup> Hrotsvit, “Gandersheim,” p. 243

<sup>18</sup> Hrotsvit, “Gandersheim,” p. 252

number of women with authority or reflect the lives of female peasants, the document divulges a rough outline of women's possibilities and limitations. It was possible for women to employ religion in an effort to further authority, for mothers to control and influence their children, and for women to garner men's respect, attention, and willingness to listen and follow their advice. However, the record also implies that Oda's situation and lifestyle were extraordinary and unusual enough to be written down.