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Yazarlar/Authors: Banu Çetin ÜNAL

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**SOME EXAMPLES OF JEWELRY WORKS FROM THE
OTTONIAN DYNASTY PERIOD**

**OTTO HANEDANI DÖNEMİNDEKİ KUYUMCULUK
ÇALIŞMALARINA DAİR BAZI ÖRNEKLER**

Banu Çetin ÜNAL*

* Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Karadeniz Teknik Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Tarih Anabilim Dalı, banuunal@hotmail.com,
 : 0000-0003-2651-6286

Abstract

The Ottonian dynasty (919-1024) marked a significant period in the history of the Holy Roman Empire, producing notable works in art and craftsmanship, particularly in jewelry. The dynasty's leaders—Otto I, Otto II, Otto III, and Henry II—supported the arts and spearheaded a cultural revival known as the Ottonian Renaissance. During this period, gold, precious stones, and pearls were used as symbols of divine and earthly authority. One of the prominent jewelry works highlighted in our study is Otto the Great's octagonal Imperial Crown. This crown bears traces of both Western and Eastern traditions and is enriched with Christian symbolism. Other remarkable works produced during this period include Mathilde- Otto Cross, the Lothar Cross, the Golden Virgin Statue of Essen, the Uta Codex Book Cover, as well as gold rings and brooches that reflect the characteristic techniques of the era. As might be expected, numerous artifacts adorned with gold and precious stones were created during this period. However, this study aims to examine select masterpieces of jewelry craftsmanship that reached their pinnacle during the Ottonian dynasty, analyzing how these works of art contributed to the cultural identity, religious symbolism, and imperial authority of the period. The study focuses on the aesthetic, symbolic, and technical aspects of the examined artifacts, elucidating their religious, political, and social functions.

Key Words: Ottonian Dynasty, Jewellery works, Crown, Cross.

Özet

Otto Hanedanı (919-1024) Kutsal Roma İmparatorluğu tarihinde önemli bir döneme damgasını vurmuş, başta kuyumculuk olmak üzere, sanat ve zanaat alanında dikkate değer eserler ortaya koymuştur. Hanedanlığın liderleri olan I. Otto, II. Otto, III. Otto ve II. Henry sanatı desteklemişler ve Otto Rönesansı olarak bilinen kültürel canlanmaya öncülük etmişlerdir. Bu dönemde altın, değerli taşlar ve inciler ilahi ve dünyevi otoritenin sembolü olarak kullanılıyordu. Çalışmamızda öne çıkan kuyumculuk eserlerinden biri de Büyük Otto'nun sekizgen imparatorluk tacıdır. Hem Batı hem de Doğu geleneklerinden izler taşıyan bu tac, Hristiyan sembolizmiyle zenginleştirilmiştir. Bu dönemde üretilen diğer önemli eserler arasında Mathilde-Otto Haçı, Lothar Haçı, Essen Altın Bakire Heykeli, Uta Kodeksi Kitap Kapağı ve dönemin karakteristik tekniklerini yansıtan altın yüzükler ve broşlar yer alır. Tahmin edileceği üzere bu dönemde yapılmış çok fazla altın ve değerli taşlarla süslenmiş eser bulunmaktadır. Ancak bu çalışma, Otto Hanedanı döneminde kuyumculuk sanatının zirveye ulaşan bazı örneklerini inceleyerek, bu sanat eserlerinin dönemin kültürel kimliğine, dini sembolizmine ve imparatorluk otoritesine nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu analiz etmektedir. Çalışmada, ele alınan eserlerin estetik, sembolik ve teknik yönleri üzerinde durularak, eserlerin dini, politik ve sosyal işlevleri açıklanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Otto Hanedanı, Kuyumculuk Çalışmaları, Tac, Haç.

INTRODUCTION

Ottonian art is a term used to describe the art and architecture produced by a new and powerful dynasty that established itself in the eastern part of the Holy Roman Empire following the decline of the Carolingian dynasty's power. Three important rulers, Otto I, Otto II, and Otto III, reigned in the region known today as Germany from 919 to 1002.² The last ruler of the Ottonian dynasty was Henry II, who ruled until 1024.

Before discussing the period referred to as Ottonian art or the Ottonian Renaissance, it is necessary to touch upon the significance of the Ottonian dynasty in the medieval historical context. After the death of his father, Henry I, Otto I took over the rule of the German kingdom. Otto I implemented highly successful policies, and his efforts and achievements witnessed the rise of the dynasty. Thus, Otto emerged as one of the greatest and most remarkable figures of the Middle Ages. Like Charlemagne, Otto also supported education and the fine arts. Following in his father's footsteps, he centralized government activities as much as possible and revived the *Missi Dominici* system. The regions under Otto's rule were carefully managed, and a peace-oriented policy was followed by suppressing the rebellions of rebellious nobles. Additionally, he collaborated with the Church, forming alliances with prominent church leaders.³

Besides all of this, Otto's greatest achievement, and the event that actually initiated the rise of the Ottonian dynasty, was the victory over the Magyars in the Battle of Lechfeld in 955. This victory ended the Magyar threat that had been looming over Europe for half a century and solidified Otto I's leadership.⁴ In this battle, Otto defeated two important Magyar leaders, Lehel and Bulcsú. According to Lendvai "The success of Otto I, later given the sobriquet "the Great", was hailed by German historians as "a turning-point in world history", when Christian culture was delivered from the Asiatic barbarians."⁵

The rise of the dynasty continued with Otto I's successors, Otto II, Otto III, and Henry II. However, the most notable aspect of this period is that it led to an artistic era known as the Ottonian Renaissance. Ottonian art is best represented by surviving illuminations, frescoes, ivory, and metalwork from the reigns of Emperor Otto II (973-983), Otto III (983-1002), and Henry II (1002-1024).⁶ Among all these works, the jewelry pieces, which form the main subject of our study, stand out both artistically and are highly significant in demonstrating the wealth of the period.

Gold and precious stones were valuable materials symbolizing the divine. Following the traditions of Anglo-Saxon and Carolingian manuscript illumination, the art of jewelry-making reached its pinnacle under Ottonian rule, finding its expression in the production of

1 "Otto "the Great," King of Germany 939-973, King of Italy 951, Emperor of the West 962-973, was born on 23 Nov 912. He married Eadguth (see Anglo-Saxon Kings of England), and Adelaide of Burgundy. He died on 7 May 973." Virginia Hegseth, *Connections: The Ancestors of John West of Virginia and The West De La Warre Family 2000 BC to 1635*, (Pittsburg:Dorrance Publishing Co., 2023), 402.

2 Madelynn Dickerson, *The Handy Art History Answer Book*, (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 2013), 74.

3 Walther Kirchner, *Middle Ages 375-1492*, (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1968), 76-77.

4 Banu Çetin Ünal, *Orta Çağ'da Otto Rönesansı*, (İstanbul: Motto Yayınları, 2023), 41; Thomas Streissguth, *The Middle Ages*, (Farmington Hills: Greenhaven Press, 2003), 185; Carlos Ramirez-Faria, *Concise Encyclopaedia of World History*, (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2007), 318

5 Paul Lendvai, *The Hungarians: A Thousand Years of Victory in Defeat*, trans. Ann Major, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), 27-28.

6 Karen E. Loaiza, "Ottonian Art and Architecture: Introduction", *Medieval Germany: An Encyclopedia*, ed. John M. Jeep, (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001), 595.

valuable liturgical objects.⁷ The large monasteries spread across Europe became active workshops producing all kinds of objects made from gold, silver, and bronze, which were necessary for the use and adornment of the churches that were rising everywhere. For example, in the 11th century, a renowned school of jewelry-making was established in Hildesheim.⁸ Similarly, many master artisans in Aachen, Regensburg, and Reichenau contributed to the flourishing period of jewelry-making in Germany around the year 1000.⁹

IMPERIAL CROWN OF OTTO THE GREAT

The crown, which was part of the regalia, held a symbolic and representational function that may be difficult for us to imagine today. On the one hand, it naturally symbolized royal authority. One example of this is the Imperial Crown of Otto the Great. This golden artifact boasts a magnificent appearance, adorned with precious stones and pearls. Despite its grandeur, wearing this crown must have been quite difficult due to its inner circumference of 22 cm, which is rather large for an average human head. However, the symbolic significance the crown carried was, of course, far more important than its practical usability. For instance, its striking octagonal shape reflects the distinctive form of Aachen Cathedral, where many German kings and queens were crowned between 936 and 1531. This characteristic makes the imperial crown unique among all other crowns used during the Holy Roman Empire. There has been much debate about the age of the crown and for which king or emperor it was made. However, recent research suggests that it dates back to the second half of the 10th century and was likely crafted for Otto I, the Holy Roman Emperor.¹⁰

The shape and decoration of the Imperial Crown underscore the inseparable link between divine power and secular authority. It is composed of eight golden plates, four of which are adorned with precious stones and pearls, while the other four are decorated with images of biblical kings and prophets. The image plates depict the kings David, Solomon, and Hezekiah, as well as the prophet Isaiah, all prominent figures from the Old Testament. Accompanied by Latin inscriptions, they symbolize the qualities of a good king, such as wisdom, justice, and piety. Furthermore, the image plates also reference the Byzantine Empire, as their construction and imagery were common in the Eastern Roman Empire but not in the West. No other European crown brings together stylistic elements from both the West and East as effectively as the Imperial Crown does.¹¹

The German Imperial Crown, with its material and symbolic richness, is a magnificent example of early medieval German imperial art. The many gemstones and pearls arranged on the eight plates make explicit reference to the number and distribution of pearls and gems on the walls of the Heavenly Jerusalem as described in the biblical Book of Revelation.¹² The stone plates follow a strict numerical pattern, with the number of stones on both the front and back sections each amounting to twelve. In total, there are 120 precious stones and 240 pearls, both multiples of twelve. In Christian tradition, the number twelve is considered sacred as it represents the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. In conclusion, the number

⁷ Michael Altmann, "Der Ambo Heinrichs II – ein Höhepunkt mittelalterlicher Goldschmiedekunst und Ausdruck der kosmopolitischen Haltung ottonischer Herrschaft", J.W. Goethe-Universität Frankfurt/Main, Institut für Kunstgeschichte, 2015, 11. <https://www.academia.edu/31707251>

⁸ Henry B. Wheatley, Philip Henry Delamotte, *Handbooks of Practical Art; Art Work in Gold and Silver, Mediaeval*, (New York: Scribner and Welford, 1882), 36-37.

⁹ Çetin Ünal, *Orta Çağ'da Otto Rönesansı*, 241.

¹⁰ Dagmar Paulus, "From Charlemagne to Hitler: The Imperial Crown of the Holy Roman Empire and its Symbolism", *Online Journal of the Project Charlemagne, a European Icon*, University of Bristol 2017, 2-4.

¹¹ Paulus, "From Charlemagne to Hitler", 3.

¹² Kristen Mossler Figg and John Block Friedman (ed.), *Arts and Humanities Through the Eras: Medieval Europe (814–1450)*, (Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2005), 432.

twelve also symbolizes the spread of faith and represents the Christian Church itself. Therefore, the crown is clearly not just a secular object but also a sacred one.¹³

Given that the grand imperial crown, currently housed in Vienna, is considered the most significant object associated with Otto I, this perspective leads us to the conclusion that it is unlikely this masterpiece of jewelry was crafted north of the Alps. The stone decoration techniques and the large figurative enamel work found on four of the eight hinged panels of the crown have no precedent in Northern Europe. Only in Italy and within the Byzantine tradition could any artisan have acquired such skills. It is highly likely that this crown was prepared for Otto the Great's coronation in 962. On the front of the crown, there is a small cross oddly mounted, which was likely added in a different workshop after Otto II's succession in 973. Notably, Otto III was only three years old when his father died, and just 16 when he assumed the imperial title in 996. Given that the crown is unusually large, even for a fully grown man, it is clear that it has no direct association with the young Otto. Thus, it seems there is little doubt that the crown remains in its original form, designed for Otto I in 962. Although it does not provide a complete parallel to the overall form of the crown, it is accurate to say that large, figurative enamels with semicircular tops, like those on the crown, were only found on Byzantine crowns in the 11th century, such as the crown of Constantine Monomachus in the National Museum of Budapest. The growing interest in Byzantine fashion became increasingly evident at the court of Otto, particularly after the marriage of Otto I's son to the Byzantine princess Theophanu in 972.¹⁴



The German imperial crown made for Otto I's coronation features a front panel with a height of 15 cm.¹⁵

¹³ Paulus, "From Charlemagne to Hitler", 4.

¹⁴ Peter Lasko, "Ottonian Art", *The Encyclopedia of Visual Art*, Vol.3, (Danbury: Croler Educational Corporation, 1983), 554.

¹⁵ <https://www.habsburger.net/en/items/imperial-crown-crown-holy-roman-empire-ottonian-imperial-crown>
Access date: 02.12.2024; Lasko, "Ottonian Art", 545.

GOLDEN VIRGIN STATUE OF ESSEN

Many master craftsmen in Aachen, Regensburg, and Reichenau contributed to the flourishing period of goldsmithing in Germany around the year 1000. The figures of the Virgin and Christ are of exceptional quality. The goldsmith master covered the entire figure by hammering gilded silver foil over a wooden core. This is the oldest surviving German depiction of the Virgin Mary.¹⁶ The Golden Virgin Statue of Essen, believed to be the work of Cologne craftsmanship and dating from around the year 1000, marks a significant turning point in three-dimensional sculpture. This is because it is the work of a goldsmith rather than a sculptor.¹⁷



*The Golden Virgin Statue of Essen.*¹⁸

¹⁶ “Ottonian Metalwork”, *The Grove Encyclopedia of Medieval Art and Architecture: Laarne to Pépin de Huy*, ed. Colum P. Hourihane, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 510.

¹⁷ John Beckwith, *Early Medieval Art*, (New York: Preager Publishers, 1964), 142.

¹⁸ <https://www.liturgicalartsjournal.com/2020/01/the-golden-virgin-of-essen-queen-and.html> Access date: 01.11.2024.

MATHILDE-OTTO CROSS

Another jewelry work from the Ottonian dynasty period is the 44.5 cm cross known as the Cross of Abbess Mathilde and Duke Otto. In 973, Mathilde, one of the granddaughters of Otto the Great, became the abbess of Essen. Her brother Otto, Duke of Bavaria and Swabia, presented her with a magnificent golden cross as a gift for her church.¹⁹

This cross features two panels. The panel above Christ's head contains an inscription, while the rectangular panel near the base of the cross depicts Duke Otto of Bavaria and his sister, Abbess Mathilde, represented beneath Christ's feet. "The figure of Christ in embossed gold is surrounded by a frame of gems alternating with paired pearls."²⁰



*Mathilde-Otto Cross.*²¹

¹⁹ Peter Lasko, *Ars Sacra 800-1200*, (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1994), 100.

²⁰ Joan A. Holladay, "Metalworking", *Medieval Germany: An Encyclopedia*, ed. John M. Jeep, (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001), 520; Lasko, *Ars Sacra 800-1200*, 100.

²¹ https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Mathilda-Otto-Cross-Essen-Cathedral-Treasury-C-Essen-Cathedral-Treasury-photo_fig3_365909299 Access date: 01.11.2024.

LOTHAR CROSS

Perhaps one of the most magnificent works of the period is the Lothar Cross in the Aachen Treasury. This golden altar cross features a front adorned with gemstones, a large cameo of Emperor Augustus at its center, and a stunning figure of Christ on the reverse side. The main structure of the cross, especially at its arms, is identical to Mathilde's Cross. According to Peter Lasko's statement, "Although only a very small amount of enamel is used, on the mouldings at the ends of the cross, it is of outstanding quality and of a pattern that shows its immediate derivation from Byzantine sources."²²

The Lothar Cross, gifted to Charlemagne's foundation in Aachen (the Cathedral Treasury) by Theophanu or her son Otto III, features a Roman cameo representing Caesar Augustus at the intersection of the cross arms. This cameo connects the image of the emperor to that of Christ. This concept is reinforced by the carved depiction on the reverse side of the cross, where the crucified Christ's head aligns with the position of the cameo on the front. Above Christ's head, the hand of God holds a laurel wreath, a symbol of victory similar to that of Augustus.²³



*Lothar Cross front side*²⁴

*Lothar Cross back side*²⁵

UTA CODEX BOOK BOX

The magnificence and abundance of manuscripts during the Ottonian dynasty are particularly remarkable. These manuscripts display incredibly rich craftsmanship in terms of both the colors used and the figures depicted. Additionally, the ornate covers of the manuscripts produced during the Ottonian period are equally striking. These luxurious covers, referred to as *Prachteinbände* in German scholarship, served as central pieces in liturgical and imperial ceremonies at influential episcopal and monastic centers, from Aachen to Bamberg. These liturgical manuscript covers, typically made of gold plates applied to

²² Lasko, *Ars Sacra 800-1200*, 101.

²³ Holladay, "Metalworking", 520.

²⁴ <https://artofthemiddleages.com/s/main/item/1179?media=3>

²⁵ <https://artofthemiddleages.com/s/main/item/1179?media=4>

wooden cores, were further adorned with intricately carved ivory panels and precious stones gathered from across Europe.²⁶ One of them is a book box made for the Uta Codex.

The exquisite design of the Uta Codex, illuminated between 1002 and 1025 for Abbess Uta of Niedermünster near Regensburg on the Danube River in Germany, reflects the remarkable intellectualism of the city of Regensburg.²⁷ This manuscript is housed in a wooden book box, which is far from simple or unadorned. The box is covered in gold and embellished with precious stones. The front of the cover presents a three-dimensional representation of Christ in Majesty, facing the viewer. Christ, while blessing the worshiper with His right hand, holds a luxuriously adorned book in His left. Unlike the manuscript itself, which contains complex imagery and lengthy inscriptions discussing the nature of knowledge, the universe, or the divine, the cover of the book box offers a powerful and direct representation of Christ, embodying both the tangible and the eternal. Additionally, the tall, slender figure of Christ is stylistically similar to the figures within the manuscript. Due to these similarities, scholars have hypothesized that the book box and the manuscript were created simultaneously. When the box was extensively reworked in the 13th century, enamels of the four Evangelist symbols, Christ, and the Virgin Mary were added.²⁸ As can be seen, the detail and richness used in the decoration of book boxes from this period represent the pinnacle of the artistic and craftsmanship traditions of the time.



*The Uta Codex book box.*²⁹

²⁶ Susannah D. Fisher, *Materializing The Word: Ottonian Treasury Bindings and Viewer Reception*, Doctoral Dissertation, (New Jersey: The State University of New Jersey, 2012), 1.

²⁷ Frederick Hartt, *Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, Fourth Edition, Vol.1, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 407.

²⁸ Fisher, *Materializing The Word*, 15-16.

²⁹ <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb00107608?page=,1> Access date: 31.07.2024.

GOLD RING

When we examine Ottonian-era art, we encounter both large-scale and small-scale jewelry works. One of the small-scale pieces that has survived from the early Middle Ages to the present is a gold ring. This ring is one of the most ornate and technically sophisticated gold rings of its time. Little described this ring with the following statements: “Its form is essentially micro-architectural, revealing a multitude of goldsmith techniques in its construction: swaged and twisted wire, ribbons of bent wire, granulation, cast, punched and chased elements. The merging of different forms and techniques is one of the hallmarks of Ottonian goldsmith work in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Two opposing felines on the ring gripe the bezel from opposite sides holding a composite mount containing in the center an elliptical gold cloisonné enamel. The enamel shows what appears to be a flower, whose central element in white enamel is approximately cruciform in pattern and framed against a greenish field with four crescent-shaped petals on the axis colored in bluish glass. Supporting the enamel is a series of elliptical wires of different types over a double open arcade of twisted and swaged wire. The micro-architectural forms mounted elliptically on the bezel and the gripping felines are characteristic of aristocratic goldsmith work of the Ottonians during the later tenth and eleventh century.”³⁰



New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection.³¹

STAR-SHAPED BROOCH

“Jewels conceived as microarchitecture are one of the distinctive hall-marks of Ottonian goldsmiths’ work. This brooch is composed of a series of arcaded gold cells, linked together to form a star, but its definite horizontal and vertical axes, in fact, make it cross shaped. Because the brooch was buried some gems are missing. Although most of the spaces between the arms of the cross still contain pearls, the arms themselves probably would have been set with amethysts.” Despite a small crack on part of the face, the portrait resembles those of Emperor Constantine’s sons. The reason this piece was valued by the Ottonians can be explained by their view of themselves as the heirs to the Christian Roman Empire established by Constantine. “Therefore, such a portrait in a bejeweled cruciform setting not

³⁰ Charles T. Little, “New gold cloisonné enamel Ottonian rings”, *“Luft unter die Flügel” ...Beiträge zur mittelalterlichen Kunst: Festschrift für Hiltrud Westermann-Angerhausen*, hrsg. Andrea von Hülsen-Esch Dagmar Taube, (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2010), 48-51.

³¹ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/476384> Access date: 10.08.2024.

only evoked the concept of the renewal of the Christian Empire but also, in its position at the intersection of the arms of a cross, placed the ruler, symbolically, under its protection.”³²

It is believed that the original owner of this brooch might have been a member of the Ottonian family or someone from the court. The brooch’s other technical and stylistic features associate it with Ottonian jewelry craftsmanship. The structure of the transparent wire frames and the focus on an antique gemstone share similar characteristics with the Lothar Cross, created during the Ottonian dynasty.³³



*Star-shaped brooch.*³⁴

The gold artifacts from the Ottonian dynasty period are, as one might expect, not limited to these examples. Other works from this period include golden altar, other golden crosses, and a small-scale gold crown made for Otto III, among others. Considering the primary examples provided in our study and other works from this period, it is a well-founded fact that this era was remarkably rich in terms of jewelry craftsmanship.

³² William D. Wixom (ed.), *Mirror of the Medieval World*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), 58.

³³ Wixom (ed.), *Mirror of the Medieval World*, 58.

³⁴ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/469908> Access date: 30.09.2024.

CONCLUSION

The jewelry works produced during the Ottonian dynasty left a profound impact on the artistic, religious, and political contexts of medieval Europe. These pieces are of great significance not only for their use of rich materials and technical mastery but also for reflecting the spirit of the era, its belief systems, and power structures. Gold and precious stones symbolized the union of divine power and earthly authority, while the artworks presented an impressive synthesis of Western and Eastern aesthetic sensibilities.

Works such as Emperor Otto's Imperial Crown, and the Golden Virgin Statue of Essen reveal not only their visual opulence but also their symbolic meanings, shedding light on the religious and political contexts of the period. Manuscripts like the Uta Codex and book covers, on the other hand, stand as evidence of the intellectual and aesthetic achievements of the era.

The jewelry works of the Ottonian dynasty are among the most striking reflections of a period that viewed art not only as an aesthetic element but also as a tool of authority and faith. These pieces provide a unique window into understanding both the material wealth and the cultural and religious values of the era in Europe. For this reason, Ottonian jewelry holds an indispensable place in the history of early medieval art and occupies a significant position in Europe's cultural heritage.

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