

Political Rituals and Symbolism in Early Ottonian History

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Oftentimes in medieval texts, leaders took certain actions that seem arbitrary to the modern reader. Authors describe gestures that may appear to be devoid of meaning. However, these rituals and symbolic actions have always been a major part of leadership and unity within nations. In this essay, I will explore the following question about *Deeds of the Saxons*, a chronicle written by Widukind of Corvey: How did Widukind characterize the Ottonian Empire¹ through his use of political symbols and rituals in *Deeds of the Saxons*?

The Saxons were an ethnic group² based in Old Saxony, a region in modern-day northern Germany.³ Charlemagne integrated this region into the Carolingian Empire domain towards the end of the eighth century as emperor.⁴ Approximately one hundred years later, Henry I⁵ became Duke of Saxony, a region in modern-day Eastern Germany. He was crowned king in 919 to rule all five duchies within the remains of the Carolingian Empire, creating the groundwork⁶ for Saxon dominance of the region.⁷ *Deeds of the Saxons* briefly explains these Saxon origins, but detailed descriptions begin with Henry's reign.

In *Deeds*, Widukind mainly focused on two Saxon leaders and their accomplishments: Henry I, the first king of the Ottonian dynasty, and his son Otto I, the next king and emperor. It was divided into three books, each filled with short chapters. Book One of *Deeds* focuses on Henry's rise to power, and ends with Henry's death. It also describes the ethnic and political

¹ A brief note on terminology: although Otto I was the first Saxon crowned emperor, I will refer to the domain of the Saxons as "empire" or "kingdom" interchangeably throughout this paper. This is because, although Henry was not officially emperor, the rulers retained imperial qualities from the Carolingian Empire. Additionally, the words Saxon and Ottonian will be used interchangeably.

² The Saxons were likely descendants of Danes, Norsemen, or Greeks who migrated to this region.

³ Widukind of Corvey, *Deeds of the Saxons*, trans. Bernard S. Bachrach and David S. Bachrach (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 5-6.

⁴ Bernard S. Bachrach, David S. Bachrach, introduction to *Deeds of the Saxons* by Widukind of Corvey, xv.

⁵ From here, "Henry" will refer to Henry I, unless stated otherwise.

⁶ Widukind does not describe the exact course of events that resulted in Saxon hegemony. This may have been an intentional omission of actions that would not show the Saxons in a favorable light.

⁷ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 28.

origins of the Saxons. Book Two begins with the coronation of Otto I⁸ as king, after Henry declared him heir to the throne; it focuses on the kingdom's politics and major events. Book Three continues to describe major events within the kingdom. I will explore rituals found throughout all three books of *Deeds*.

Widukind of Corvey was a Saxon historian and monk, commissioned to write these books about Ottonian history. He wrote *Res gestae Saxonicae*, or *Deeds of the Saxons* at the monastery of Corvey. The purpose of the ninth and tenth-century chronicle was to “summarily and selectively... write a little bit about the origin and status of the” Saxons.⁹ Chronicles are theoretically supposed to be accurate, comprehensive histories; however, no written history can ever be fully accurate, as every author comes in with their own biases. Inaccuracy comes in various degrees for various reasons, and given Widukind's motivations and selection of stories, his account seems to contain non-factual, even mythological, information.

One factor that contributed to Widukind's bias and inaccuracy was the source of funding. The chronicle was requested by royalty, resulting in a somewhat inaccurate story. For example, the introduction to Book Two is addressed to Mathilda and Widukind writes “I hope that whatever shall be found in this work that is less desirable shall be removed... this work shall remain dedicated with the same devotion with which it was begun.”¹⁰ Widukind was not a historian removed from the subject he was writing about — he actively received edits from royalty. Since the chronicle was finished in 973, the stories he told were personal and recent to Ottonian leadership; after all, he wrote this history for Otto's daughter, Mathilda. He was commissioned by an empire that wanted to make itself look glorious, and he had to portray them

⁸ From here, “Otto” will refer to Otto I, unless stated otherwise.

⁹ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 4.

¹⁰ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 28.

in a positive light. Other embellishments to Ottonian history in this chronicle were likely for monetary reasons; the monastery at Corvey may have received additional funding from the crown, and Widukind had to cast the empire in a favorable light to retain that funding.¹¹ Due to these external factors, it is clear that Widukind may not be the most reliable source of factual information. However, his chronicle has value, as it reveals Ottonian attitudes and understandings towards their own political situation. Widukind used strong political symbolism to legitimize their history and empire, communicating their power through the chronicle.

There is limited information outside of *Deeds* about the Saxons, so the veracity of many stories is unclear. Widukind was “the only author who [provided] a continuous narrative for the entire reigns of the first two kings of the Saxon dynasty.”¹² Some of his more historically accurate sources included annals, confirmed by the translators of *Deeds*.¹³ Even if verifiable, there is no doubt that factual stories may have been embellished. However, no historical account, then or now, is untouched by the author’s bias. Although some of his sources were unverifiable, in some instances, he was aware of the importance of historical accuracy. In the Saxon origin story, he explicitly acknowledged that he was “relying solely on tradition because the passage of so much time has clouded any certainty.”¹⁴ Disclosing that the source was simply oral tradition, he allows the reader to draw their own conclusions about the story’s validity. It is also unclear which stories were removed from his historical record. As mentioned above, Widukind does not describe how Henry consolidated power over the five duchies. He also left out Otto I’s coronation as emperor in 962, although medieval historian Steven Robbie says this was likely

¹¹ Bachrach, *Deeds of the Saxons*, xiv.

¹² Bachrach, introduction to *Deeds*, xvi.

¹³ For example, the *Annales* of Flodoard and the *Annales Hildesheimenses*. Bachrach, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 91n147, 93n163.

¹⁴ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 5.

“an accidental feature of the text,” arguing that the last section of Book Three was hastily written.¹⁵ Additionally, Widukind’s focus on the Ottonian Empire allowed him to remain “easily... silent about the other kings and their claims.”¹⁶ While historical accuracy is important for context and analysis of this source, my argument lies in how Widukind’s descriptions of rituals and symbols characterize the empire. These rituals and symbols were more performative and story-like than truthful.

Political rituals and symbols were invaluable to medieval leadership, both within a kingdom and with foreign states. Historian Karl Leyser said rituals exist “to give voice and authority to attitudes and values.”¹⁷ Leyser said that rituals had many purposes, including conveying social status, adding a symbolic element to regular proceedings, and communicating abstractions and societal values. One common medieval ritual that conveyed status was homage, in which a subject accepted and acknowledged his inferiority by giving his hands to a leader. Simply putting forth one’s hands had no practical meaning, rather it was a symbolic gesture of submission. According to Gerd Althoff, a German historian, rituals “had an air theatre about them... actors played a role.”¹⁸ In the example of homage, both actors understood their roles in the performance and the acknowledgment of a power imbalance. Leaders were able to rehearse their interactions, giving them more control over political situations. I argue that Widukind of Corvey characterizes the Ottonian Empire as highly stable and unified through his use of political rituals and symbols. These rituals and symbols reinforced the power and control of the

¹⁵Steven Robbie, “Can silence speak volumes? Widukind’s *Res Gestae Saxonicae* and the coronation of Otto I reconsidered,” *Early Medieval Europe* 20, no. 3 (2012): 333, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0254.2012.00346.x>.

¹⁶ Antoni Grabowski, “Otto I at Aachen 936: A Successor - Continuator,” in *The Construction of Ottonian Kingship: Narratives and Myth in Tenth-Century Germany*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 89.

¹⁷Karl Leyser, “Ritual, Ceremony, and Gesture: Ottonian Germany,” in *Communications and Power in Medieval Europe: The Carolingian and Ottonian Centuries*, (London: The Hambledon Press, 1994), 213.

¹⁸Gerd Althoff, “Symbolic Communication and Medieval Order: Strengths and Weaknesses of Ambiguous Signs,” in *Rituals, Performatives, and Political Order in Northern Europe*, (Turnhout: Brepols Publisher, 2015), 67.

Ottonian Empire, in both tangible and abstract manners. The rituals and symbols I will examine include references to past empires, the ritual of friendship, and rituals performed during coronations.

This argument will build upon Althoff's idea of "symbolic communication,"¹⁹ as it applies to Widukind's *Deeds*. Althoff believes that "symbolic communication," occurred through rituals, or political actions that carried an ideological meaning. These rituals communicated messages to the audience through actions and behaviors. Althoff uses the term "*pars pro toto*-action," to refer to "condensed complex meanings [in] one gesture or a short series of gestures."²⁰ Rituals consisted of these symbolic gestures that communicated abstractions between leaders — these abstractions were understood by the contemporaries who participated in the rituals. These abstractions were an important part of the political process. While many rituals did not include formally written agreements, participants knew the duties and the consequences they contained. The symbolic meaning of these gestures created a promise that no party could, in good faith, break. I will discuss such actions later in the paper, including coronation rites and sharing meals.

Widukind used imperial symbols and references in many forms: phrases, locations, and clothing. Widukind mainly referenced the Roman Empire and the Carolingian Empire, two strong historical powers that the Ottonians wanted to emulate. He repeatedly likens the Ottonian Empire to these great empires, symbolically communicating that the Ottonians were heirs to greatness. He relates the Ottonians to the Romans and the Carolingians, creating a sort of allyship to the past. Widukind's use of Latin terms symbolically communicates the ties between the Saxons and Romans, politically and historically. His references to Roman and Carolingian

¹⁹ Symbolische Kommunikation, in German.

²⁰ Althoff, "Symbolic Communication and Medieval Order," 65.

locations tie them to the great empires in proximity. All of these references and symbols created an allyship to the past. Widukind's consistent usage of imperial symbols characterized the Ottonian Empire as stable and strong, an heir to the greatest historical actors.

Throughout *Deeds*, Widukind included Latin terms that politically linked the Ottonian Empire with the Roman Empire. In Book Two, Widukind said "the king always stood by Gero for the common good of the state," using the term *res publica* to describe the state.²¹ This specific Latin term that directly related to statehood politically linked them with the Romans. Speaking of the "common good of the state" also gave them a higher purpose — Widukind was not speaking of only one general or one leader, but of a line of leaders. Widukind portrayed these leaders as political and military descendants of the Roman Empire. As a state, they had a higher purpose than any singular military engagement, and that purpose was to strive for a unified nation.

Widukind used Latin descriptors to compliment Ottonian leaders. While describing King Conrad's death, Widukind said that he "was a brave and powerful man, effective both in managing the kingdom and in prosecuting war," using the phrase *domi militiaque*, meaning "in peace and in war."²² In this case, he mentioned the Roman-like strength of an individual leader. This was a specific reinforcement of the idea that these leaders were heirs to the Roman Empire. Additionally, this term was commonly used by Sallust, a Roman historian.²³ This may have been an attempt by Widukind to indirectly liken himself to the great Roman intellectuals. Widukind also described a story about Gunther and Siegfried, two Ottonian military commanders who

²¹ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 89.

²² Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 39.

²³ Bernard S. Bachrach, David S. Bachrach, *Deeds of the Saxons* by Widukind of Corvey. Translated and edited by Bernard S. Bachrach and David S. Bachrach. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 39n176.

sought vengeance on Greek enemies. He said they were “illustrious through their victory,” or in Latin, “*vir inluster*.”²⁴ The term *vir inluster* was frequently used in the Roman Empire to describe powerful senators. Bestowing a title of Roman power to these commanders was an honor, and likened them to the military greats. Once again, through the use of Latin phrases that depicted strength, he characterized Ottonian leaders as heirs to the Roman Empire.

Another important Latin term Widukind frequently used explains the dynamics of the Ottonian allyships. Widukind wrote about “the term *amicus* in the sense of a subordinate ally,” *amicus* meaning friendship.²⁵ Again, the political use of a Latin term positions the Ottonian Empire as a contemporary incarnation of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, using Latin a term that explicitly acknowledged their military superiority represented the Roman Empire’s legacy and hegemony. The intentional use of Roman terms that posited political authority signaled to the audience that the Ottonian Empire was not only powerful, but historically part of something larger than itself.

Widukind plays upon Roman symbolism in an early Saxon victory. Right before an early Saxon fight against subjugation, one of their leaders, Hathagath, gave a speech. During this talk, Hathagath raised “a banner... bearing an image of a lion and a dragon above whom was flying an eagle.”²⁶ To the educated Ottonian person, the symbolism of the lion and dragon would be obvious — it was a common symbol that Romans used to show valor and strength.²⁷ This adoption of this symbol signaled to the audience, once again, that the Ottonians were ideological and political descendants of the Roman Empire. Since this story was about Saxon origins, it was especially relevant, as it showed the Saxons had Roman-like strength from the beginning.

²⁴ Bachrach, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 148n235.

²⁵ Bachrach, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 40n185.

²⁶ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 21.

²⁷ Bachrach, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 21n88.

Following Hathagath's speech, they fought and took a Frankish city, laying down "an eagle before the eastern gate, and... an altar of victory."²⁸ A continual usage of Roman symbols of strength showed that they were militarily similar to the Roman Empire. Widukind's use of traditionally Roman imagery symbolically communicated the strength and power of emerging Saxon leaders.

Widukind also made a reference to the Roman Empire in his description of Otto's coronation. He said that the basilica in which he was crowned was "nearby Jülich, which was named after its founder Julius Caesar."²⁹ Although this reference may seem small, it was likely an intentional addition to the story. Mentioning Julius Caesar invoked a connection between the Roman Empire and the coronation of Otto. Otto's coronation did not take place in Rome, but Widukind still wanted to emphasize that the Ottonians were heirs to the Roman Empire; the proximity to a town with a Roman origin helped show this.

Widukind also attempted to symbolically liken the Ottonian Empire to the Carolingian Empire. According to Antoni Grabowski, a historian, leaders of the Ottonian Empire had a "Carolingian fascination."³⁰ The Carolingian Empire, specifically Charlemagne, was a strong imperial power to emulate, and it was a power that was not too historically distant — references to the Carolingian Empire would not be lost on educated Ottonians. One example of a reference to the Carolingian Empire was "the universal election... held at the palace of Aachen," referring to Otto's coronation.³¹ The translator of *Deeds* said that Widukind avoided directly referencing Charlemagne, as there was another leader who was closer in lineage to the emperor, and

²⁸ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 22.

²⁹ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 62.

³⁰ Grabowski, "Otto I at Aachen 936," 89.

³¹ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 61-2.

Widukind did not want to cause controversy.³² However, Charlemagne mainly resided in Aachen, and an educated Ottonian reader would understand the importance of this imperial reference. Similar to the Roman examples of Jülich and the dragon symbolism, this indirect reference was a clear parallel between Otto and Charlemagne. Later on, Widukind does not hesitate to explicitly reference Charlemagne, saying the leaders who attended the coronation “had gathered in a courtyard of the basilica that is associated with Charlemagne,” to solidify Otto’s kingship.³³ This reference was especially relevant since it was during Otto’s coronation, showing the similarities between Otto and Charlemagne’s rise to power. These references to Charlemagne make Otto’s rule seem like a rebirth of Charlemagne’s power — Otto is simply a continuation of and an heir to this powerful ruler.

Another political symbol that connected Otto to Charlemagne was his clothing. Grabowski said that Widukind wrote about the coronation “with the aim of connecting the Ottonian dynasty with Charlemagne,” through his dress.³⁴ Widukind said that Otto wore “a tight tunic in the Frankish style,” which Charlemagne almost always donned.³⁵ Again, this is not an explicit reference to Charlemagne, but the audience of this text would understand the clothing’s significance. Widukind made it clear that Otto emulated Charlemagne, and the Frankish tunic added a personal, visual element to this. With this small detail, Widukind again likened Otto to Charlemagne. Through these references in language, location, and clothing, Widukind made the Ottonian Empire a symbolic heir to the Roman and Carolingian Empires.

The alliance of friendship, or *amicus*, as mentioned earlier, was a symbolic alliance that solidified an unequal political relationship. Friendships symbolically communicated an unequal

³² Bachrach, *Deeds*, 62n5.

³³ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 62.

³⁴ Grabowski, “Otto I at Aachen 936,” 88.

³⁵ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 63.

allyship between two leaders. In Leyser's opinion, the purpose of some rituals was "communicating and affirming status differences," which friendship did.³⁶ Friendship was a mutually beneficial relationship, in which there was an inferior party and a superior party.³⁷ The inferior party received protection and military resources in exchange for loyalty and service to the superior party, although "what this meant in detail was never fixed in writing."³⁸ Both parties were aware of the general conditions of this ritualized alliance, and understood their roles, even if not every detail was made explicit. Widukind's repeated references to Ottonian friendships portrayed the empire as universally supported and superior to all others.

Because the Ottonians were militarily strong, many leaders wanted their friendship. Henry expanded Saxon hegemony throughout his reign as king, displaying his political and military might to other kings, counts, and dukes. Towards the end of Book One, Widukind said that "rulers of other kingdoms came to [Henry] and sought his favor, desiring the proven friendship of such a great man."³⁹ Henry was popular and had choices in his alliances. This was because less powerful leaders wanted the help of a powerful leader, making friendship was a self-sustaining cycle of growth for the empire; the Saxons were strong, so others wanted their friendship, giving them more support and making them even stronger. Additionally, after providing support to their friends, the Saxons could ask for favors in return. This continued throughout *Deeds*, which gave the Saxons a solid, loyal base. Examples of rulers that asked for Henry's support include Count Heribert II and Hugh the Great, a duke. Heribert needed military support against an attacking king, and Henry "did not deny the requests of his friends."⁴⁰ In this

³⁶ Leyser, "Ritual, Ceremony, and Gesture: Ottonian Germany," 212.

³⁷ The superior party in this paper always refers to the Saxons/Ottonians.

³⁸ Althoff, "Symbolic Communication and Medieval Order," 70.

³⁹ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 57.

⁴⁰ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 57.

case, and many others, lesser powers received military support against invaders. Henry's openness to starting new friendships gave the empire more allies, and more allies created a stronger empire.

One particular ritual that solidified friendships was a meal. According to Leyser, "meals could be immensely potent rituals... to manifest friendship"⁴¹ A meal was a highly symbolic gesture in political actions, one of Althoff's *pars pro toto*-actions that created an unwritten, but mutually understood, agreement between powers. Widukind describes a fight for hegemony over the kingdom between families, the Conradines and the Babenbergers.⁴² Hatto, Archbishop of Mainz, went to mediate this conflict. While meeting on Adalbert's territory, Adalbert "asked that Hatto deign to have something to eat as a demonstration of his grace and friendship."⁴³ This meal, if accepted by Hatto, would be a sign of submission to Adalbert — this was a symbolic gesture understood by most political and religious figures of the time. At first, Hatto rejected the meal, therefore rejecting the friendship, but he reconsidered and returned to Adalbert's fortress. However, Hatto later betrayed Adalbert, which was considered a "vile... act of treachery."⁴⁴ Althoff said that "the disturbance of rituals and symbolic communication was the last means for avoiding the consequences of a performance."⁴⁵ The execution instigated by Hatto was considered heinous because it appeared that Hatto and Adalbert came to an agreement; leaders who shared a meal and became friends were allies. By breaking this symbolic alliance, Hatto disturbed the ritual and freed himself of responsibility to his friend. For Hatto to turn his back on a friendship that was already ritually sealed with a meal was shocking and disgraceful to

⁴¹ Leyser, "Ritual, Ceremony, and Gesture: Ottonian Germany," 201.

⁴² Bachrach, *Deeds*, 32n143.

⁴³ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 33.

⁴⁴ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 33.

⁴⁵ Althoff, "Symbolic Communication and Medieval Order," 68.

contemporary readers. This disturbance of the ritual did not work out in his favor, as Widukind stated that Hatto died, possibly by a strike of lightning, which could be seen as divine retribution for a culturally unacceptable act. Meals were a ritual that symbolized friendship, a ritual that most individuals understood as binding.

In an early display of friendship, Widukind described a relationship between the Britons and the Saxons. The Britons needed military support to fight off enemy invaders. The Britons begged for friendship, asking that the Saxons “not withhold [their] aid,” and that they sought “refuge beneath the wings of [Saxon] military strength.”⁴⁶ In return, the Britons offered unflinching loyalty and support. In this agreement, the inferior ally gained something — resources and military support. The superior ally also gained something — another leader’s support and willingness to do favors. Later, the Ottonians decided to make “good use of their feigned friendship with the Britons,” and betrayed them for a more useful ally and material benefit.⁴⁷ As shown in the case of Hatto and Adalbert, breaking a friendship was seen as treachery. However, Widukind did not describe the Saxons with the same disdain with which he described Hatto, partially because of his bias in favor of the Saxons. In addition to this bias, however, the Saxons could turn on the Britons without shame regardless, as the superior ally. They had the military might to fight off Britons that challenged this dissent from friendship. The Britons, however, being the inferior ally, could not break the friendship without risk of being crushed by the Saxons. Although the friendships were mutually beneficial, one party was stronger, and could exercise this, whereas the other party was bound in the alliance without an opportunity to escape. Since the Saxons had numerous friendships, they had many inferiors they could exploit for service and material gain. They could also betray allies if it immediately

⁴⁶ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 11.

⁴⁷ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 12.

benefited them. This story demonstrated the skewed power imbalance at the center of the ritualized alliance, which gave the Saxons greater stability and strength.

There were other tangible benefits for the Saxons as the superior party of a friendship. For example, Eberhard, Duke of Franconia, sought Henry's friendship. In this encounter, the duke "placed himself and the entire royal treasury at [Henry's] disposal."⁴⁸ To form this alliance, Eberhard had to sacrifice money and power while Henry did nothing but rule a powerful kingdom. This demonstrated that the inferior ally had to prove itself, which materially benefited the superior ally. The Saxons already had a reputation of military strength — it is obvious why Eberhard wanted their friendship — but Eberhard had to show his usefulness to Henry for this alliance. In another case of friendship, Henry went to Bavaria to take control of Regensburg, a city. Arnulf, Duke of Bavaria, attempted to defend the city, but soon "submitted himself and his entire duchy to Henry," which resulted in a friendship between the rulers.⁴⁹ Arnulf recognized his military inferiority with a tangible submission: his duchy. In this case, Henry gained more territory and opportunities for wealth. Henry was especially merciful to Arnulf since he peacefully surrendered, forming a friendship started from the duke's complete deference. This friendship ended up providing benefits to Henry and Arnulf, although Henry gained much more. Both of these cases spoke to the major power imbalance of friendships, characterizing the Saxons as all-powerful.

In addition to material benefits, friendships allowed the allies to take more risks in expansion. Liudolf and Conrad the Red made plans to ambush Otto, angering him. Otto asked Frederick of Mainz to resolve this issue, so he brought the men to confess, and Otto forgave them. However, Otto did not have the option to safely reject them, given his location. Once he

⁴⁸ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 39.

⁴⁹ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 40.

returned home, Otto, “comforted by the presence of his friends... declared void the agreement, which he claimed was forced upon him.”⁵⁰ Alone, Otto was unable to make bold choices that benefited him. When he was around friends, who would support him in the case of a military clash, he was able to comfortably take risks that increased the power of the empire. Even though his friends were militarily inferior, they created a sort of “safety net” when making politically and militarily risky choices. This description of friendship by Widukind made the Ottonian Empire seem more powerful, as they could safely expand their hegemony.

Although the Saxons, as the superior ally, received greater tangible advantages from the ritual of friendship, the inferior allies gained protection. As seen in the case with the Britons’ friendship, before the Saxons betrayed them, Saxon military support was greatly appreciated. Another example of the benefit to inferior allies was during a war between Wichmann and Miesco I. Miesco was the ruler of Poland, and faced attacks from Wichmann’s Slavic army. Since Miesco was a “friend of the emperor... [he] received two units of mounted troops,” from King Boleslav.⁵¹ As in any normal allyship, the friends supported each other, so Boleslav of Bohemia⁵² sent resources to defend Miesco. Even if resources were not directly received from Otto, the emperor would still find a way to support his friends in a time of need. This military support strengthened the Poles — friendship gave Miesco access to resources he otherwise would not have. As a result of this dependence on Otto in a time of war, Miesco supported his friend. This support strengthened the Ottonian Empire, as it created loyal subordinates who were dependent and could not safely break this ritualized alliance. In another case, Abbot Hadamar and Archbishop Frederick of Mainz quarreled over affairs of the church, leading Hadamar to

⁵⁰ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 107.

⁵¹ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 143.

⁵² Boleslav of Bohemia was subordinate to Otto, and thus had to follow his orders. He became subordinate after instigating a war with a neighbor. Said neighbor called upon Otto for help, leading Boleslav to surrender.

imprison Frederick for conspiracy. After he was released, Frederick sought vengeance on the abbot. However, “his many plots were in vain... the abbot retained the grace and friendship of the king,” protecting Hadamar from revenge.⁵³ Although Widukind did not explicitly describe Frederick’s plans, he emphasized that friendship protected Hadamar and his monastery from harm. Although they had to give unconditional support and loyalty to the Ottonians, Miesco and Hadamar greatly benefited from their friendships with Otto, as it provided them with protection they would otherwise not have. These friendships were mutually beneficial, providing resources to the inferior party and loyalty to the superior party. This loyalty to the Ottonians, again, showed their strength as an influential empire.

Although friendship appeared to be nothing more than a highly ritualized alliance, it did provide clear and tangible benefits to both parties. They did not always need to negotiate specific terms of agreement, as the act of creating a friendship symbolically communicated their roles and responsibilities. In turn, it communicated the benefits to each party: military support for the inferior, and loyalty for the superior. Because the Ottonians had many friendships, they had a substantial, loyal base, which characterized them as universally supported.

Lastly, coronation rituals existed to solidify a leader’s promises and duties to his nation. Otto was crowned king in 936, and Widukind describes this process in detail. According to Althoff, a German historian, during coronations, “participants of the performance trusted the binding force of such promises... [and] rituals communicated existing relations in a binding fashion.”⁵⁴ Although any given ritual might seem odd or unnecessary to a modern reader, the audience at a coronation would understand the weight of each action. An example of this was when the dukes and military leaders “offered [Otto] their hands [and] swore loyalty to him,” at

⁵³ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 96.

⁵⁴ Althoff, “Symbolic Communication and Medieval Order,” 65.

Otto's coronation.⁵⁵ They did explicitly swear loyalty to him in this instance, but the ritual of extending their hands enhanced this oath. This ritual promised complete unity for and deference to Otto. Another display of complete unity during the coronation was when "the entire people raised their arms to heaven and cried out with a great shout," in the crowd, wishing good fortune upon Otto.⁵⁶ This ritual had a religious element, as the crowd members pointed their arms toward heaven, symbolically blessing Otto's rule. Additionally, since they all did the same action at the same time, they acknowledged the unified subservience to Otto. These actions had symbolic significance, solidifying the emperor in his powers to the empire, and characterizing the Ottonian Empire as fully supported by its subjects.

Coronation rites also served to set in stone the king's duties. Althoff said that these "crowning rituals, when the candidate had to perform symbolic actions... anticipated his conduct as a king."⁵⁷ The rituals represented the expectations placed upon Otto as king. The high priest handed Otto a sword and said to use it to "defeat all the enemies of Christ, barbarians, and evil Christians."⁵⁸ The sword in this ritual was purely symbolic — Otto was not going to begin his expansion immediately after the coronation, but it represented an overarching goal of his reign. Political and military leaders who observed the coronation understood that the offering of this sword ensured that Otto would do his best to expand the Christian kingdom. Essentially, the seemingly arbitrary rituals symbolically sealed Otto into his responsibilities to the state.

Widukind's description of rituals and symbols — imperial references, friendships, and coronation rites — portrays the Ottonian Empire as a unified, solid power. Widukind's descriptions represent Althoff's idea of "symbolic communication," which shared abstract ideas

⁵⁵ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 62.

⁵⁶ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 63.

⁵⁷ Althoff, "Symbolic Communication and Medieval Order," 65.

⁵⁸ Widukind, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 63.

with readers. The rituals and symbols sent clear symbolic messages to the audience of *Deeds*, as they understood their portrayal of domestic and foreign support for Ottonian rulers. Imperial references made the Ottonians appear strong, as heirs to the Roman and Carolingian Empires. Alliances of friendship demonstrated Ottonian superiority to all other groups. Coronation rites solidified the king's role and responsibilities to his people. Widukind describes all of these rituals to convey a sense of power and order within the empire. This paper fits into relevant scholarship by exploring in-depth Ottonian symbolism in one specific work. This exploration of symbols and rituals of the past is relevant today because it can shed light on our own values in modern politics. Although not always obvious, political rituals and symbols are relevant to most nations in the world, although they differ from state to state.

Rituals and symbols are often employed in times of crisis. According to Leyser, Ottonian rituals were important because of the “critical cultural situation of late Carolingian and early Ottonian central and western Europe... expressing ideas and abstractions by acting them out in public.”⁵⁹ Rituals acted as a sort of security to the members of a group — they sent clear signals of peace or war, instead of leaving the members with a never-ending sense of uncertainty. This observation appears to be relevant today, as displays of political symbolism tend to increase during tense global situations.⁶⁰ In the modern day, this symbolism is enshrined in displays of patriotism or nationalism.

Understanding Widukind's motivations for creating an entirely positive attitude towards the Ottonians can shed a light on materials commissioned by various nations today. A frequent

⁵⁹ Leyser, “Ritual, Ceremony, and Gesture: Ottonian Germany,” 193-4

⁶⁰ Gerald R. Webster, an American historian, argued that “a general outpouring of patriotism or nationalism followed,” the 9/11 attacks. This was a result of the uncertainty Americans faced.

Gerald R. Webster, “American Nationalism, the Flag, and the Invasion of Iraq,” *Geographical Review* 101 (1), (January 2011): 2.

example of American symbolism is a reference to the Founding Fathers and early American leaders in general, who have been glorified and mythologized in American propaganda and the education system. Today, the Founding Fathers are often depicted as great, shining, nearly flawless leaders of the past, comparable to Charlemagne for the Ottonians. An example of this symbolism is in *The 1776 Report*, a “historical”⁶¹ document commissioned by the Trump administration about the origins and history of the United States. It is similar to Widukind’s *Deeds*, in its recollection of “the aspirations and actions of the men and women who sought to build America as... an exemplary nation.”⁶² The document depicts the founders as motivated solely by an ideology of freedom and equality. The document also said the founding fathers’ “principles are both true and eternal,” again praising and glorifying the founders as nearly god-like figures.⁶³ The document looks positively upon the entirety of the nation’s history, skirting around the United States’ role in upholding slavery and fully omitting any mention of Native Americans. This parallels *Deeds*, which left out the events that led to Saxon hegemony over all the duchies of the region. This document resembles *Deeds* in many ways, and deconstructing and understanding the symbolism of the Saxon chronicle can help us better recognize the symbolism in modern documents. Overall, studying political rituals and symbols of the past can help us understand the political rituals and symbols of the present. Symbolic descriptions often influence our attitudes towards the world, and it is necessary that we examine them further.

⁶¹ The word historical is written in quotes because this document has faced criticism by historians for its extreme bias and cherry-picking of information.

⁶² The President’s Advisory 1776 Commission, “The 1776 Report,” *1776 Commission*, (January 2021): 1.

⁶³ The President’s Advisory, “The 1776 Report,” 6.

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