

## Royal estates, confiscation and the politics of land in the kingdom of Otto I

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### The Monk and the Caliph

In the year 956, an unlikely conversation took place in a palace in Cordoba between a black-robed Christian monk and the great caliph of Al-Andalus, Abd al-Rahman III, in a scene later celebrated – in classic nineteenth-century orientalist style – by the Catalan painter Dionís Baixeras i Verdaguer.<sup>1</sup> The monk, John of Gorze, had been sent to Spain as an envoy by King Otto I, but had faced considerable difficulties and delays in obtaining an interview. When after three years the opportunity finally arose, John seized the moment to demonstrate a crashing lack of tact, boasting to his host of King Otto I's power and wisdom, the strength of his army, his fame and his riches. The caliph responded to the provocation with wonderful diplomacy. What John had said was all very well, he remarked: but why did John's king share out his power, giving it away to his followers, and relying on their questionable loyalty?<sup>2</sup>

The caliph then began to elaborate his point, discussing recent rebellions in Ottonian Germany ; but it is here that the text breaks off in the only surviving manuscript of the source, an account of John of Gorze's life written a couple of decades later, so we shall never know what the caliph went on to say, nor how John responded. Nor can we be sure whether our record reflects the view of the text's author, or John's own reminiscences – or even, however mediated, the genuine opinion of Abd al-Rahman himself.<sup>3</sup> Yet whoever is really speaking here, the analysis is sound. For although this meeting

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I am grateful to Ryan Lavelle, Edward Roberts and Chris Wickham for advice on this paper, and to the editors for their forbearance. The research was enabled by a Humboldt Foundation grant, held at the Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen in 2016.

<sup>1</sup> Dionís Baixeras Verdaguer, « La civilització del califat de Còrdova en temps d'Abd-al-Rahman III » (1885). The large-scale painting (3.4 x 6.2 metres) was commissioned for the University of Barcelona, and still hangs there today in the university's ceremonial hall. There remains some debate over who the painter meant the black-robed Christian monk to be – one possibility is Gerbert of Reims – but John of Gorze is the most likely candidate.

<sup>2</sup> *Quod potestatem virtutis suae non sibi soli retinet, sed passus libere quemque suorum propria uti potestate, ita ut partes regni sui inter eos dividat, quasi eos sibi inde fideliores habeat et subiectiores. Quod longe est... : Die Geschichte vom Leben des Johannes, Abt des Klosters Gorze*, éd. P. Jacobsen, Wiesbaden, 2016 (MGH SRG 81), p. 464 (this new edition includes a German translation, and provides a significantly revised Latin text). A partial English translation of John's embassy can be found in R. Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, Berkeley, 2006, p. 67-8 ; a fuller translation in C. Smith, *Christians and Moors in Spain, I : 711-1150*, Warminster, 1988, p. 62-75. Unfortunately Smith (who consistently calls Gorze "Görz") considered the last few lines, the focus here, to be « mere schoolboy boasting » and left them out of his translation. A French translation of the entire text with extensive notes is provided by *Jean de Saint-Arnoul : La vie de Jean, abbé de Gorze*, tr. M. Parisse, Paris, 1999, here at p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> The sole manuscript is Paris, BnF MS lat. 13766, which becomes increasingly illegible towards the end of the text. Up to date discussion of the manuscript, and further references to recent discussion of John's embassy to

between a Christian monk and a Muslim caliph was obviously a religious encounter, it was also a fiscal one. While the caliphate of Al-Andalus relied on a functioning bureaucratic apparatus to operate an efficient taxation system, the kingdom of Otto I was fundamentally a land-based state, with exactly the consequences for the dispersal of power and resources that the perceptive caliph identified.<sup>4</sup>

Yet despite the acknowledged centrality of the “politics of land” to Otto I’s kingdom and kingship, the nature, extent and function of the Ottonian fisc – that is to say the aggregate of royal rights over land – is still not fully understood, at least in its relation to the wider political economy. This in part reflects the familiar difficulties posed by the evidence for the period, relative to the better-documented Carolingian and Staufien ages: but it is also a matter of historiographical tradition.<sup>5</sup> Having enjoyed a period of sustained attention in the mid twentieth century, bearing fruit in a set of weighty studies, royal property as such has since fallen somewhat out of favour in German historiography.<sup>6</sup> Historians have instead focused their attention on palaces, and on how the itinerant kings drew on ecclesiastical resources – the former best represented by the remarkable *Deutsches Königspfalzen* series published in a number of volumes over several decades, the latter by Carl-Richard Brühl’s magisterial study of *Königsgastung*, that is to say where kings stayed as they travelled around their kingdom.<sup>7</sup> Behind this scholarly turn can perhaps be discerned the influence of the distinctive concept of *Herrschaft* (lordship, rulership) so important in German historiography (indeed, the investigations into palaces

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Cordoba, in *Die Geschichte*, ed. Jacobson, cit., p. 39-72 (visit to Cordoba), p. 105-115 (detailed manuscript description) and p. 466, n. 711 (discussion of the caliph’s speech).

<sup>4</sup> For this terms of this contrast see C. Wickham, *Framing the early Middle Ages : Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800*, Oxford, 2005, p. 56-150, esp. p. 58-62. On taxation in the Caliphate, see P. Chalmeta, « An approximate picture of the economy of Al-Andalus », in *The legacy of Muslim Spain*, éd. S. Jayyusi, Leiden, 2004, describing it as « a fiscally based society » (p. 743), and estimating that the state took between half and a third of the product of taxpayers’ work. See now also C. Wickham, « The economy of Italy and Spain in the early Middle Ages », in *New Directions in Early Medieval European Archaeology*, éd. S. Gelichi and R. Hodges, Turnhout, 2015 (Haut Moyen Age 24), p. 335-345, with further references to recent work.

<sup>5</sup> On the difficulties posed by the (lack of) evidence between the Carolingian age and the thirteenth century, see Th. Zotz, « Zur Grundherrschaft des Königs im deutschen Reich vom 10. bis zum frühen 13. Jahrhundert », in *Grundherrschaft und bauerliche Gesellschaft im Hochmittelalter*, éd. W. Rösener, Göttingen, 1995 (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 115), p. 76-115. For a general discussion of the historiography, see V. Loré’s introduction to this collection, 000.

<sup>6</sup> These studies are too numerous to enumerate here, but major sites to have been examined include Aachen, Bodman, Boppard, and Frankfurt, while regional approaches include surveys of Hesse, Lower Lotharingia and the middle Rhineland. Most were published in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s ; for the suggestion that historiographical interest peaked in the 1960s, see E. Kupfer, *Königsgut im mittelalterliche Niederösterreich vom 9. bis zum 12. Jahrhundert*, St Pölten, 2000, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> An excellent summary of the *Deutsches Königspfalzen* project is provided by C. Ehlers, « Pfalzenforschung Heute : Eine Einführung in das Repertorium der deutschen Königspfalzen », in *Orte der Herrschaft. Mittelalterliche Königspfalzen*, ed. C. Ehlers, Göttingen, 2002, p. 25-53 (two further volumes have been published subsequently). On *Königsgastung*, see C.-R. Brühl, Fodrum, Gistum, Servitium regis. *Studien zu den wirtschaftlichen Grundlagen des Königtums im Frankenreich und in den fränkischen Nachfolgestaaten Deutschland, Frankreich und Italien vom 6. bis zur Mitte des 14. Jahrhunderts*, Cologne, 1968 (Kölner historische Abhandlungen 14).

have effectively considered them as gigantic *Herrschaftszeichen*, or symbols of rulership) on the one hand, and of regional studies or *Landesgeschichte* on the other.<sup>8</sup>

Such studies have together greatly improved our understanding of their respective subjects, but this chapter has a different goal in mind. It seeks to explore the connection between royal lands and royal power, that is to say between the material and the ideological underpinnings of kingship, across the whole kingdom and in a precise chronological period: the reign of Otto I, king from 936, and emperor from 962, until his death in 972.<sup>9</sup>

### Measuring Otto I's fisc

The obvious first step might seem to be to assess just how much land King Otto I had at his disposal. In the absence of any contemporary or near-contemporary list – there is no Ottonian or Salian equivalent to the Domesday Book that has so durably shaped the English historiography – this is difficult, but historians in the twentieth century nevertheless rose ably to the challenge. In a path-breaking and subsequently much-cited short book published in 1909, Adolf Eggers drew on the then recently published MGH editions of the Ottonian royal charters to list all known royal properties of the tenth and eleventh centuries, arranged geographically, and with the explicit assumption that these lands represented the « foremost source of finance for the crown and the court ».<sup>10</sup> Eggers's book was not accompanied with a map, but a similar methodology was used in 1956 in the *Westermann Grosser Atlas zur Weltgeschichte*, subsequently regularly reissued into the 1990s as a standard study companion for schools as well as universities, to represent the Carolingian and the Ottonian *Reichsgut*. Here, the fisc appears as a rash of red dots spread across the Ottonian empire north of the

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<sup>8</sup> The *Deutsches Königspfalzen* series began with strong connections to *Neuverfassungsgeschichte* perspectives, relying heavily on the concept of *Herrschaft*: the first volume of the series, belatedly published in 1963, is dedicated to P.E. Schramm, « dem Erforscher der Herrschaftszeichen », who also received the volume in typescript. An influential article for the *Landesgeschichte* turn in fiscal studies was K. Bosl, « Probleme der Reichsgutforschung im Mittel und Süddeutschland », *Jahrbuch für fränkische Landesforschung*, 20, 1960, p. 305-325, arguing that « die fränkische Herrschaft ihrem Wesen nach eine in die Lande hinaus verlängerte Hof- und Pfalzverwaltung und -herrschaft war ». For a heavyweight critique however of methodologies used to reconstruct early fiscal resources in Hesse, see K. Kroeschell, « Die Zentgerichte in Hessen und die fränkische Centene », *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte : Germanistische Abteilung*, 73, 1956, p. 300-360.

<sup>9</sup> For comparable approaches to royal land, see M. Innes, « Property, politics and the problem of the Carolingian state », in *Der frühmittelalterliche Staat - europäische Perspektiven*, ed. W. Pohl and V. Wieser, Vienna, 2009 (Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 16) p. 299-314; in a rather different vein, E. Wadle, *Reichsgut und Königsherrschaft unter Lothar III. (1125-1137). Ein Beitrag zur Verfassungsgeschichte des 12. Jahrhunderts* (Schriften zur Verfassungsgeschichte 12), Berlin, 1969.

<sup>10</sup> A. Eggers, *Der königliche Grundbesitz des 10 und beginnenden 11. Jahrhunderts*, Weimar, 1909 (Quellen und Studien zur Verfassungsgeschichte des Deutschen Reiches in Mittelalter und Neuzeit 3/2): « die vornehmste Finanzquelle der Krone und des Hofes ». For Domesday's impact on the study of English royal lands, see R. Lavelle, this volume, 000.

Alps, though with a particular concentration in Saxony, reflecting its status as the Ottonian heartland, and in marked contrast to the lack of blue dots (for the Carolingians) in the region.<sup>11</sup>

As already mentioned, in spite of the stimulus of the research programme into German palaces, interest in the fisc seems to have peaked in the 1960s, and even historians working on the “material foundations of kingship” have shied away from making kingdom-wide assessments.<sup>12</sup> In the last few years, however, a series of closely-linked articles written by David Bachrach has brought the Ottonian fisc as a whole back into focus.<sup>13</sup> In one especially stimulating piece, Bachrach has provided an updated survey of the fisc, not just for Otto I but for all rulers of the Ottonian *Reich*. What is more, this survey proposes perhaps for the first time an attempt at an overall quantitative assessment of royal resources. Sifting through the royal charters, and building on earlier regional studies, Bachrach concluded that Otto I disposed of approximately 45,000 *mansi* or peasant tenures spread across 900 fiscal units north of the Alps, including 620 *villae*. Bachrach further estimated that this fisc produced altogether enough agricultural surplus to feed 200,000 adults – or perhaps rather more, as he suggested that these numbers are « almost certainly a significant underestimate ».<sup>14</sup> In short, Otto controlled vast quantities of land.

The overall argument of Bachrach’s article, that the Ottonian kings were not dependent on plunder and tribute, is well taken, and the attempt at quantification is bold and welcome. Yet Bachrach also acknowledges the challenges involved in such measurements, and understandably so.<sup>15</sup> In the first place, the information provided by the royal charters on which all such assessments necessarily rest is hardly ideal for the purpose. These documents list resources at the point of their alienation, they seldom give details of how much land was at stake, and often they note that this land had previously been held in benefice by someone else anyway. Bachrach’s figures for the extent of Otto’s fisc might be an underestimate as he suggests ; but on a different reading of the same evidence, they could also be (much) too generous. For instance, Bachrach’s estimates assume that if Otto issued a charter at a palace, he can be presumed to have owned at that time the maximum numbers of fiscal properties

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<sup>11</sup> *Westermann Grosser Atlas zur Weltgeschichte*, Braunschweig, 1956, p. 62. The atlas provides no further details for how the map was put together.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Brühl, Fodrum, cit., who explains at p. 118, n. 9 that « “Auf die Geschichte des Reichsguts kann im Rahmen dieser Untersuchung nicht im einzelnen eingegangen werden ».

<sup>13</sup> For instance, B. Bachrach and D. Bachrach, « Continuity of written administration in the late Carolingian East c. 887 - 911: The royal fisc », *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 42, 2008, p. 109-146; D. Bachrach, « Exercise of royal power in early medieval Europe: the case of Otto the Great 936-73 », *Early medieval Europe* 17 (2009), p. 389-419 ; D. Bachrach, « Inquisitio as a Tool of Royal Governance under the Carolingian and Ottonian Kings », *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte : Germanistische Abteilung*, 133, 2016, p. 1-80. I am grateful to Professor Bachrach for generously sharing his work with me ahead of its publication.

<sup>14</sup> D. Bachrach, « Toward an Appraisal of the Wealth of the Ottonian Kings of Germany, 919-1024 », *Viator* 44, 2, 2013, p. 1-27, quotation at p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> Compare the caution on the prospects of *Quantifizierung* of Zotz, « Zur Grundherrschaft », cit., p. 79.

associated by other historians with that palace, an assumption that seems likely to inflate the figures. The calculations also include grants of land already held in benefice – so not in practice generating income for the king – as well as grants of confiscated land which passed through the king’s hands (with more or less delay, as discussed further below).<sup>16</sup> They further presume that if a *villa* is mentioned in a grant, the king owned all of it, which may not always have been the case.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, such measurements assume that Otto’s various fiscal assets were in some way equivalent. In reality, however, royal estates were embedded in social and environmental circumstances that varied widely across the empire.<sup>18</sup> Take, for example, Otto I’s assets at the fortification or *Burgward* of Rothenburg, now some sixty kilometres north-west of Leipzig, which the king granted to the monastery of Magdeburg in the summer of 961 along with all its dependent lands and properties. Bachrach’s article assesses this grant as transferring five “fiscal properties”, though the charter itself merely talks in generic terms of the fortification « with its dependant properties ». <sup>19</sup> Of what did these properties consist, what did they produce, and how did they produce it? The charter does not say, but to judge from the archaeological evidence, the countryside in this part of Otto’s kingdom was neither heavily cerealised nor densely populated. Its inhabitants instead lived in a mixed economy of small gardens, hunting and gathering, with little evidence for social disparity amongst the settlements before the twelfth century.<sup>20</sup> Dues from these regions could be seen as tribute payments to those who controlled the fortifications as much as rent for use of the land. These tribute payments were often

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<sup>16</sup> The figures are presented in Bachrach, « Toward an Appraisal of the Wealth », p. 19-20. Charters featured in Bachrach’s list that record land granted in benefice include *Die Urkunden Konrad I, Heinrich I und Otto I*, ed. Th. Sickel, Hanover, 1879-84 (MGH Diplomatum regum et imperatorum Germaniae I, henceforth abbreviated as D. OI), D. OI 57, 61, 87, 96, 109, 164 and 428. For charters documenting confiscation, see below, p. 000. It may be noted in passing that a couple of errors have crept into Bachrach’s list : for instance D. OI 5 is cited instead of D. OI 4.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, private charters were demonstrably made concerning lands in villages listed in the royal Lorsch *Reichsurbar*, as noted by M. Schalles-Fischer, *Pfalz und Fiskus Frankfurt. Eine Untersuchung zur Verfassungsgeschichte des fränkisch-deutschen Königtums*, Göttingen, 1969, p. 291-96; D. Claude, *Geschichte des Erzbistums Magdeburg bis in das 12. Jahrhundert*, Cologne, 1975, p. 45, makes a similar point about Magdeburg.

<sup>18</sup> Cf V. Loré, « Curtis regia », on important differences between southern and northern Italy, this volume.

<sup>19</sup> D. OI 230 : *cum omnibus appendiciis ad eandem urbem pertinentibus, mancipiis utriusque sexus edificiiis campis pratis pascuis silvis aquis aquarumque decursibus...*

<sup>20</sup> On the archaeology, see J. Henning, « Der slawische Siedlungsraum und die ottonische Expansion östlich der Elbe: Ereignisgeschichte, Archäologie, Dendrochronologie », in *Europa im 10. Jahrhundert. Archäologie einer Aufbruchzeit*, éd. J. Henning, Mainz, 2002, p. 131-146 ; S. Brather, *Archäologie der westlichen Slawen : Siedlung, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft im früh- und hochmittelalterlichen Ostmitteleuropa*, Berlin, 2001 (Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde 30) ; and most recently, F. Biermann, « Land, elite and exploitation in early medieval western Slavic Territory », *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’histoire*, 90, 2012, p. 413-428. On the *Burgwarden*, see G. Billig, *Die Burgwardorganisation im obersächsisch-meißnischen Raum. Archäologisch-archivalisch vergleichende Untersuchungen*, Berlin, 1989.

paid in this region collectively, by ethnic groups, and in kind – for instance in honey, which seems to have been an economically significant form of revenue.<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere in the *Reich*, things were rather different. There is no Ottonian equivalent of the Lorsch *Reichsurbar*, a document apparently listing the ninth-century revenues due from royal estates in the Rhineland ; but a charter survives from a Lotharingian monastery – as it happens Gorze, the monastery of John, the tactless ambassador to Cordoba – that sheds some light on the workings of an estate at *Brouch*, a now vanished village some 50km south of Metz in the west of Otto's kingdom.<sup>22</sup> In August 984, the residents of this estate demanded of the abbot a return to the lighter obligations that they claimed to have previously enjoyed. These obligations the charter describes in detail, dividing them into personal and tenurial categories. Each *mundialis* owed six pence on St Remi's day, attended three courts a year, threshed measures of grain, assisted with mowing, and owed two days of regular labour a week. Each of the tenures owed transport services, eight pence after Christmas, deliveries of wood, token gifts of eggs and chickens, and some further labour services, in exchange for which they were given rations of bread and beer. Crucially for our purposes, the charter also explains that the estate had previously been part of the royal fisc prior to its donation to Gorze by a count named Regimbald, probably in the 950s.<sup>23</sup>

To the extent that we trust the residents' statement of what their service had been – the abbot himself worried that they might be deliberately lying, and perhaps they were – the *Brouch* charter therefore

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<sup>21</sup> On the honey dues, see the useful (though at times polemically-toned) study of J. Brankack, *Studien zur Wirtschafts- und Sozialstruktur der Westslawen zwischen Elbe, Saale und Oder aus der Zeit vom 9. bis zum 12. Jahrhundert*, Bautzen, 1967; a more recent study by E. Bünz, « Der Meißner Bischof Bruno von Porstendorf (1209/10 - 1228): Herkunft, Aufstieg, Rücktritt, Pensionierung », *Neues Archiv für Sächsische Geschichte*, 77, 2006, p. 1-35.

<sup>22</sup> The settlement disappeared perhaps as early as the thirteenth century ; it is sometimes spelled as *Bruoch* or *Bruock*. The charter, preserved in the (now lost) cartulary of Gorze, is edited in *Cartulaire de Gorze*, ed. A. d'Herbomez, Paris, 1898 (Mettensia 2), no. 116, p. 211-13, and translated into German by Sabine Teubner-Schoebel in *Grundherrschaft im früheren Mittelalter*, ed. L. Kuchenbuch, Idstein, 1991, p. 194-96. Discussion in L. Kuchenbuch, « Abschied von der "Grundherrschaft" - Ein Prüfgang durch das ostfränkisch-deutsche Reich 950-1050 », *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte : Germanistische Abteilung*, 121, 2004, p. 1-99, at p. 89-90, interpreting the estate as divided between *mundiales* and tenure-holding *sortiales*, and suggesting that further services were not mentioned because they were not disputed; and in J.-P. Devroey, « Confronter la coutume domaniale entre seigneurs et paysans en Lorraine au Xe siècle », in *Faire lien. Aristocratie, réseaux et échanges compétitifs : Mélanges en l'honneur de Régine Le Jan*, ed. L. Jégou, S. Joye, T. Lienhard, and J. Schneider, Paris, 2015, p. 155-78, arguing for a donation date in the 940s, suggesting the charter may have been lightly interpolated, listing the dues, and providing a French translation at p. 176-77.

<sup>23</sup> According to the charter, whose text is difficult to construe and may be corrupt, the *homines* requested a privilege *secundum legem qua ipsi regi, donec eius fiscus erat a predicto Raimbaldo, predecessoresque ipsius servierunt* (*Cartulaire*, ed. Herbomez, cit., p. 211). The German translation for this phrase in *Grundherrschaft*, ed. Kuchenbuch, cit., p. 195, is « entsprechend dem Recht, durch das sie dem König selbst und dessen Vorgängern dienten, während der vorgenannte Raimbald dessen fiscus innehatte », supplying a missing word ; Devroey, « Confronter », cit., p. 176, offers « en suivant la *lex* d'après laquelle ces derniers et leurs prédécesseurs ont servi le roi lui-même (tant qu'il s'agissait de son fisc) et le susdit Rambaud », which is more elegant but requires emending « ipsius » to « ipsorum » and « a » to « ac ».

preserves the obligations of a medium-sized Lotharingian royal estate under the rule of Otto I.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, we could not extrapolate the “average” returns of Ottonian royal estates from this charter, even if we knew the extent of the demesne land that the labour services were for, or precisely how many people worked on an estate of some twenty-one tenures, some of which (but not necessarily all) were evidently divided into quarters.<sup>25</sup> Just as the structures of settlement and production varied across Otto’s vast kingdom, so too did the processes by which surplus production was extracted from those carrying out the labour, as well as the nature and quantity of that surplus. Put plainly, it is difficult to measure on the same scale the estates of *Brouch* and *Rothenburg*, located some 550km apart and with quite different economic, environmental and social structures, even without bringing into consideration the networks based around major sites like Frankfurt or Bodman, or the royal forests in the Vosges and elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> The exploitation of these properties varied in nature as well as in intensity.

Moreover, Thomas Zotz has argued powerfully that the exploitation of fiscal estates was more episodic and irregular than that of the ecclesiastical estates on which our picture of early medieval landholding is in general based, because of the relatively greater mobility of the kings compared with abbots and even bishops.<sup>27</sup> And as if all this were not enough, it is important to remember that efforts to map or measure the fisc based on collating the surviving documentation are inevitably dependent on the surviving ecclesiastical archives: indeed, the Westermann Atlas mentioned above could profitably be seen as a map of shifting patterns of Carolingian and Ottonian documentation as much as the location of royal property. As a result, efforts to measure or map the Ottonian fisc as a whole are perhaps both admirable and commendable, but they depend on some heroic assumptions ; they

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<sup>24</sup> Fear of lying: *ea lege atque conditione ut, si quis forte eos aliquid mentitos fore ac quicquam debiti servitiique celasse convinceret, predicta eorum postulatio funditus cassaretur* (*Cartulaire*, ed. Herbomez, cit., p. 212).

<sup>25</sup> The calculations of total fiscal yield – i.e. how much surplus the fisc produced – provided in Bachrach, « Toward an Appraisal of the Wealth », cit., are of course only an approximation. They are calibrated on a decidedly peculiar charter from the ninth century, relating to Hornau, issued by Louis the German in 874 : *Die Urkunden Ludwigs des Deutschen, Karlmanns und Ludwigs des Jüngeren*, ed. P. Kehr, Berlin, 1934 (MGH, *Die Urkunden der deutschen Karolinger*, 1), no. 155. This charter confirmed a grant of eight *mansi* made by a woman named Rotlind to the royal chapel of St Mary in Frankfurt, in return for annual payments during her lifetime, listed in terms of various grain, livestock and timber. Given that the grant was permanent, these payments are likely to have been considerably in excess of the estate’s actual annual yields.

<sup>26</sup> This point was already made by Eggers, *Der königliche Grundbesitz*, cit., p. 13-14. On forests, see the classic C. Wickham, « European forests in the early Middle Ages: landscape and land clearance », in *L’ambiente vegetale nell’alto medioevo*, Spoleto 1990 (Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull’alto medioevo 37), p. 479-548. See also N. Schroeder, *High Lands in a ‘Dark Age’ – Thinking and Rethinking Early Medieval Societies and Environments of North-West Europe*, forthcoming, on changing patterns of use of “marginal” land.

<sup>27</sup> Zotz, « Zur Grundherrschaft », cit., p. 113-14. For the mobility of Otto I (complete with a useful map), see E. Müller-Mertens, « Verfassung des Reiches, Reichsstruktur und Herrschaftspraxis unter Otto dem Großen » in *Otto der Grosse, Magdeburg und Europa*, ed. M. Puhl, Mainz, 2001, p. 189-98 ; another map of Otto’s itinerary is available in Brühl, Fodrum, cit.

represent very clearly what we do know, but in their controlled speculation, they also inevitably obscure considerable uncertainties.

### Assessing fiscal dynamics

Such efforts also tend to rely on certain preconceptions about how property worked in the early Middle Ages, and about how royal government worked too. A subjacent idea, and one that has been particularly influential in much recent research on modern fiscal regimes, is the notion of the “domain state”, in which rulers like Otto I governed with the revenues from their own property, as opposed to the “tax state”, in which the ruler developed techniques for accessing subjects’ private property.<sup>28</sup> Conventional modern concepts of property, however, do not always do justice to the processes through which human communities interact with those who claim to own them, processes that were shaped by social, economic and indeed political conditions at the most local level, as well as by the dry certainties of legal title. Fiscal estates were not simply a given: they were in flux, the product of evolving negotiations. The *Brouch* charter is remarkable because « here we see a flash of the ‘strength’ of the people on the ground, otherwise so hard to grasp », the negotiations between producers and managers and the trials of strength at which our sources tend normally only to hint, for instance when we glimpse Otto’s fiscal managers exceeding their authority to bring more land and people under their control.<sup>29</sup>

And if that was true at the micro-level, it was true too – and more readily apparent – at the macro-level. It would be a mistake to imagine Otto’s fisc as a fixed or static portfolio of defined assets bequeathed to him by his predecessors, still less as some almost timeless element embedded in a post-Roman hyper-continuity. The landed resources at the disposal of Ottonian kings varied according to political circumstances.<sup>30</sup> They might shrink if the king felt obliged to grant estates to reward or to

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<sup>28</sup> For a recent evaluation, see *Fiscal regimes and the political economy of premodern states*, ed. A. Monson and W. Scheidel, Cambridge, 2015, defining domain states as societies where rulers « had to rely on their own patrimony, just like the others » (p. 7).

<sup>29</sup> Quotation from Kuchenbuch, « Abschied », cit., p. 90, « Hier blitzt einmal die sonst so schwer fassbare 'Stärke' der Leute vor Ort auf ». Bachrach, « Inquisitio », provides two examples in which Otto I investigated complaints about fiscal managers abusing their authority and seizing assets of others, p. 44-7 : D. OI 30, issued in 940 (though the charter actually refers to the seizure of *mancipia*, not a monastery), and D. OI 163, issued in 953 (though the charter does not explicitly state that the king’s agents had seized the land). For further exploration, see also Th. Zotz, « Beobachtungen zur königlichen Grundherrschaft entlang und östlich des Rheins vornehmlich im 9. Jahrhundert », in *Strukturen der Grundherrschaft im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. W. Rösener, Göttingen, 1993 (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 92), p. 74-125, and Zotz, « Zur Grundherrschaft », cit..

<sup>30</sup> A point already stressed in the scholarship: see Wadle, *Reichsgut*: « Das Reichsgut ist der dingliche Niederschlag der Königsgewalt, die Widerspiegelung königlicher Herrschaft in der Sachspäre. Inhalt und Tragweite dieser Herrschaft bestimmen also Umfang und Funktion des Reichsgutes ». Cf M. Herberger, « Krongut » in *Handwörterbuch z. deutschen Rechtsgeschichte*, 2, Berlin, 1978, col. 1217-1229.



encourage loyalty. But they might also grow, for example through the military conquests that had brought both *Brouch* and *Rothenburg* under Ottonian control. Otto was moreover also able to draw on the lands of the church, both indirectly by demanding provisions, hospitality and other public services, and occasionally directly, for instance granting to his follower's lands that were owned by the monasteries of *Lorsch* and of *Fulda*, presumably as a result of negotiations that are now no longer decipherable.<sup>31</sup>

In view of this variability, it is no wonder that in 1027, Konrad II, the Salian successor to the Ottonian dynasty, admitted that he simply did not know exactly what lands he owned in Bavaria, and had to arrange a sworn inquest of prominent people from the region to find out. Such inquiries, also common in earlier periods including Otto's own reign, can be seen as evidence for royal determination to preserve royal resources ; but they can equally be read as opportunities for those involved to present a socially-embedded reckoning of royal assets that reflected political relations as much as strict historical or legal claims.<sup>32</sup> A number of Otto I's own charters suggest a degree of uncertainty, or – better – the sense that the fisc was defined by social and political conditions as much as by established, well-known and unchanging land boundaries.<sup>33</sup> The parchment records of the fisc that survive are therefore only one representation – though an important one – of a shifting set of fundamentally political relationships whose aggregate could be described as much as counted.<sup>34</sup> The Ottonian fisc was, in other words, dynamic.

One good way of approaching this dynamism is by looking at the confiscation of land, a practice to which it seems Otto I had particularly vigorous recourse. Setting aside the narrative sources, and

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<sup>31</sup> *Lorsch* : D. OI 95, issued in 948 ; *Fulda* : D. OI 160, issued in 953. Both charters are discussed in Bachrach, « Exercise », p. 413-5. On public services, see now S. Esders, « 'Öffentliche' Abgaben und Leistungen im Übergang von der Spätantike zum Frühmittelalter: Konzeptionen und Befunde », in *Von der Spätantike zum frühen Mittelalter. Kontinuitäten und Brüche, Konzeptionen und Befunde*, ed. Th. Kölzer and R. Schieffer, Ostfildern, 2009 (Vorträge und Forschungen 70), p. 189-244. The classic English discussion of royal claims to hospitality is J. Bernhardt, *Itinerant kingship and royal monasteries in early medieval Germany, c. 936 – 1075*, Cambridge, 2006; the classic German discussion is Brühl, *Fodrum*, cit.. Compare here the discussion of English kings' use of church lands by R. Lavelle, this volume, 000.

<sup>32</sup> *Die Traditionen des Hochstifts Freising*, ed. Th. Bitterauf, Munich, 1905-8 (Quellen und Erörterungen zur bayerischen und deutschen Geschichte / NF 4-5), vol. II, no. 1422: *ut possessiones et predia infra eandem provintiam sita que novissent ad solium sui imperii iure pertinere eodem sacramento publice interrogati manifeste pronuntiarent*. For an illustration of how these *inquisitiones* might have been choreographed, see also the dispute recorded in *Formulae Sangallenses*, in *Formulae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi*, ed. K. Zeumer, Hanover, 1882 (MGH Leges), no. 10, p. 384 (from a single tenth-century manuscript).

<sup>33</sup> For Otto's donation – it seems by mistake – of land claimed by Halberstadt to the new see of Magdeburg, see C. Ehlers, *Vom karolingische Grenzposten zum Zentralort des Ottonenreiches. Neuere Forschungen zu den frühmittelalterlichen Anfängen Magdeburgs*, Magdeburg, 2012, p. 31-37. See further D. OI 54, where Otto's possessions in Thingau were confirmed *in publico mallo cum iuramento eorundem populorum* ; D. OI 419, in which a certain Arnald argued that an imperial estate was his, although a panel of witnesses subsequently judged against him ; and D. OI 125, in which the king was not sure how much land there was to grant.

<sup>34</sup> For an emphasis on the written word, Bachrach and Bachrach, « Continuity », cit., including the intriguing suggestion at p. 145 that Ottonian kings carried round a mobile archive of 800 files, arranged in wooden boxes, in two wagons.

taking into account the difficulties of working with this kind of record, in total thirty of Otto's charters document the confiscation of land, and its subsequent regranting.<sup>35</sup> In some cases a single act of royal confiscation was reflected in multiple charters, but there is still explicit documentary evidence for twenty-four separate confiscations and regrants. That is more than for any other Ottonian or indeed Carolingian king.<sup>36</sup> It is striking that confiscations are documented from across Otto's long reign (figure 2), without any statistically significant concentration (except for a peak in 966, inflated by three charters made for Magdeburg, each concerning different properties confiscated from Conrad and Eberhard).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> D. OI 52, 59, 60, 80, 107, 115, 135, 155, 164, 166, 171, 189, 194, 195, 200, 201, 204, 207, 217, 219, 226, 236, 316, 320, 321, 330, 331, 332, 333 and the charter edited by E. von Ottenthal, « Ein Ineditum Ottos I für den Grafen von Bergamo von 970 », *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, 17, 1896, p. 35-47. This list, which includes only charters explicitly referring to confiscation, differs slightly from the four previously published: Eggers, *Der königliche Grundbesitz*, cit., p. 44 (includes D. OI 96 and D. OI 422, neither explicitly mentioning confiscation ; omits D. OI 135 and D. OI 201) ; H.C. Faussner, « Die Verfügungsgewalt des deutschen Königs über weltliches Reichsgut im Hochmittelalter », *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 29, 1973, p. 345-449, at pp. 412-6 (includes D. OI 54, not explicitly a charter about confiscation ; omits D. OI 52, D. OI 60 and D. OI 164) ; K. Leyser, *Rule and conflict in an early medieval society. Ottonian Saxony*, Oxford, 1989, p. 36, at note 33 (includes D. OI 61 and 197, neither explicitly mentioning confiscation ; omits D. OI 52, 80, 164 and 330); and Bachrach, « Exercise », cit., p. 409, n. 63 (includes OI 30, 32, 78 and 383, none of which is explicitly about confiscation).

<sup>36</sup> For comparison, and for concise discussion, see A. Krahn, *Absetzungsverfahren als Spiegelbild von Königsmacht. Untersuchungen zum Kräfteverhältnis zwischen Königtum und Adel im Karolingerreich und seinen Nachfolgerstaaten*, Aalen, 1985 (Untersuchungen zur deutschen Staats- und Rechtsgeschichte NF / 26), p. 258-305, and p. 393-6. A general overview of confiscation is provided by F. Dorn, *Landschenkungen der fränkischen Könige. Rechtsinhalt und Geltungsdauer*, Paderborn, 1991, including a brief discussion of Ottonian cases, p. 347. A list of pre-Ottonian confiscations is provided in R. Deutinger, *Königsherrschaft im Ostfränkischen Reich : eine pragmatische Verfassungsgeschichte der späten Karolingerzeit*, Ostfildern, 2006 (Beiträge zur Geschichte und Quellenkunde des Mittelalters 20), pp. 258-9. Of course many confiscations may not have been labelled as such in the charters: see E. Roberts, « Hegemony, rebellion and history : Flodoard's *Historia Remensis ecclesiae* in Ottonian perspective », *Journal of Medieval History*, 42 :2, 2016, p. 155-76, for a case in point.

<sup>37</sup> Compare Th. Zotz, « König Otto I, Graf Guntram und Breisach », *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 137 / NF 98, 1989, p. 64-77, at p. 67, who suggests a concentration in 944-953 and 959-961.

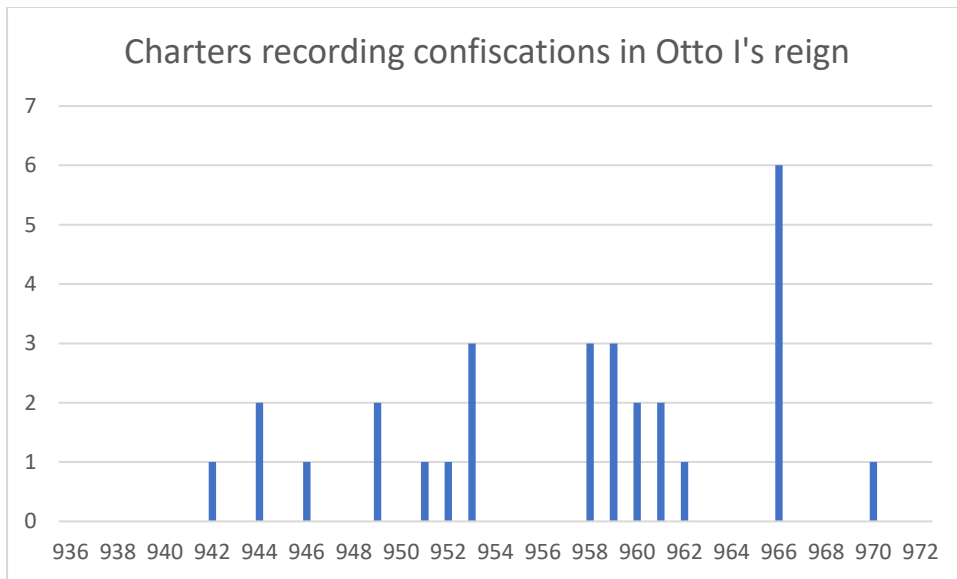


Figure 1. Charters recording confiscations in the reign of Otto I.

What is more, every single region of the kingdom is represented in a map of Otto's documented confiscations, from north to south and from east to west, including south of the Alps (figure 2). Without doubt Otto had core regions of his rule – and the relative absence of confiscations in Saxony presumably tells us something about how secure royal control of this area was – but he could make his presence felt everywhere, in stark contrast to his West Frankish royal contemporaries, battling to exercise their authority even in their heartlands.<sup>38</sup>



Figure 2. Location of property confiscated by Otto I.

<sup>38</sup> See on these R. Le Jan in this volume, 000.

These confiscations were not however all of the same kind. They varied in scale, but they also varied in purpose. Otto I sometimes confiscated as a means of bringing rebellious aristocrats to heel, as a move in a set of complex negotiations, part of what we now see as the normal functioning of the Ottonian state.<sup>39</sup> The king might even go and stay on the confiscated land to show his authority ; but once a new consensus had been brokered, the former rebel's lands could be returned.<sup>40</sup> This is documented in a number of charters that restore lands to their former owners, but the most famous case is that of Liuthar of Walbeck, recorded by the chronicler Bishop Thietmar of Merseburg, Liuthar's own grandson.<sup>41</sup> Thietmar tells us that Liuthar was involved in a plot to assassinate Otto I in 941, the most serious of the various Saxon conspiracies against the king. Once the plot was discovered, Otto executed some of those involved, but on the intervention of his counsellors decided to spare Liuthar's life, instead exiling him to Bavaria and confiscating his property.<sup>42</sup> Just a year later, however, the king restored Liuthar to his land, in return for a cash gift and a present of some estates.

Liuthar's punishment, then, was temporary, and was probably always intended as such. No wonder that few ecclesiastical recipients of confiscated land seem to have held onto it for very long. St-Florin of Koblenz, for instance, did not keep the confiscated land at Beeck and Ewyck that Otto I granted to it in 949, as far as can be established from its surviving archives ; nor did Magdeburg hold onto the estates at Kesselheim and Hagenmünster that Otto took from Conrad and Eberhard in 966; nor did the church of St-Mary in Aachen retain Otto's grant of Gelmen, noted in a charter of 966; and nor did St-Maximin of Trier keep land at Kirn, though it did keep the charter suggesting that it had briefly acquired this property.<sup>43</sup>

On other occasions, however, churches did hold onto land that Otto I had confiscated and then granted to them – for instance the property at Schlins acquired by Einsiedeln (now in Switzerland) in 949 and,

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<sup>39</sup> As classically set out by G. Althoff, for instance in *Die Ottonen : Königsherrschaft ohne Staat*, Stuttgart, 2005. On the conflicts, see also H. Kamp, « Konflikte und Konfliktführung in den Anfängen der Regierung Ottos I. » in *Otto der Grosse*, ed. Puhl, cit., p. 168-178, as well as Leyser, *Rule*, cit., p. 9-47.

<sup>40</sup> As he did at Vilich: H. Giersiepen, *Das Kanonissenstift Vilich von seiner Gründung bis zum Ende des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Bonn, 1993 (Veröffentlichungen des Stadtarchivs Bonn 53).

<sup>41</sup> Thietmar, *Chronicon*, ed. R. Holtzman, *Die Chronik des Bischofs Thietmar von Merseburg*, 1935 (MGH SRG 9) II, 21, p. 56 ; *Ottonian Germany : the Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*, tr. D. Warner, Manchester, 2001, p. 107. For the charters, see Krahn, *Absetzungsverfahren*, cit., p. 268-70.

<sup>42</sup> Thietmar, *Chronicon*, cit., p. 56: *hunc misit tunc Bawariam... comprehensis sibi omnibus suimet rebus ac late distributis, usque in annum integrum....* See Leyser, *Rule*, cit., p. 33-42 for a full analysis.

<sup>43</sup> St Florin at Koblenz D. OI 115 (land at Beeck and Ewyck): see A. Diederich, *Das Stift Sankt Florin zu Koblenz*, Göttingen, 1967, p. 37. Magdeburg: D. OI 333 and 335; see Claude, *Geschichte*, cit., p. 53. Aachen : D. OI 316: see R. Nolden, « Besitzungen und Einkünfte des Aachener Marienstifts », *Zeitschrift des Aachener Geschichtsvereins*, 86/87 1979/80, p. 1-455, at p. 146. St-Maximin: D. OI 226 ; see B. Resmini, *Die Benediktinerabtei St. Maximin vor Trier*, Berlin, 2016, whose extensive study of St-Maximin's lands records no trace of these estates.

perhaps, St-Remi of Reims's lands at Kusel.<sup>44</sup> Otto's aim seems to have been fully irrevocable confiscation with regard to his treatment of Count Guntramn too, the shadowy figure whose despoilment at an assembly in Augsburg in 952 is recorded only in charters.<sup>45</sup> These charters record how Guntramn's lands around Alsace and the Black Forest, taken from him for an unknown political offence, were regranted over time not to one or two but to four known separate recipients: to the monasteries of Einsiedeln in 952 (and again in 958) and Lorsch in 953, to an aristocrat named Rudolf in 959 (the land was later given to Peterlingen), and to the see of Konstanz in 962.<sup>46</sup> Whatever Otto's motivations in choosing these particular beneficiaries, and whatever the reasons for the staggered nature of the regrating over more than a decade – maybe Otto wanted to enjoy the revenues for a while – the intention must have been to make it difficult or impossible for Guntramn or his relations ever to reclaim this land in its entirety. Just as the foundation of the bishopric at Magdeburg was supposed to reshape the political landscape in Saxony, so the redistribution of Guntramn's lands was intended as a permanent adjustment to the political and social order of the Breisgau, perhaps – as Thomas Zotz has argued – in order to facilitate the king's journeys over the Alps as Italy loomed larger in his priorities.

### **The King and the Horse Thief**

Confiscation was, then, clearly a tool of government for Otto I, reminding us – if we needed to be reminded – that the fisc served political as well as economic ends, and was not only about putting food on the royal table (a requirement which could be organised in part through the church), and probably not at all about paying salaries. Royal land was a vehicle for public authority in local society, whether it was of long-standing or whether it had been recently established by royal judicial action. Yet though the map of confiscations does reflect the reach of Otto's government, not all the individual confiscations recorded upon it necessarily reflect Otto's strategic or even tactical decisions. Almost all of Otto's charters that record confiscation mention some kind of legal procedure, but some of them add the detail that the matter was adjudged not by the royal court, but by *scabini*, that is local judicial officials.<sup>47</sup> In these cases, the implication is that although Otto had a hand in redistributing the land, he had not necessarily directly orchestrated the confiscation in the first place.

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<sup>44</sup> Einsiedeln: D. OI 107; see H. Keller, *Kloster Einsiedeln im ottonischen Schwaben*, Freiburg, 1964 (Forschungen zur oberrheinischen Landesgeschichte 13), p. 40 and 98. For the possibility that St-Remi's property at Kusel had been confiscated from Duke Conrad, see Roberts, « Hegemony », cit..

<sup>45</sup> Th. Zotz, « König Otto I, Graf Guntram und Breisach », *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 137 / NF 98, 1989, p. 64-77. See also Bachrach, « Exercise », cit., p. 398-403.

<sup>46</sup> Einsiedeln: D. OI 155 and D. OI 189; Lorsch D. OI 166; Rudolf D. OI 201; Konstanz D. OI 236.

<sup>47</sup> D. OI 52, D. OI 80, D. OI 107, D. OI 207, D. OI 219 and D. OI 226.

One might not of course want to put too much faith in the details of charter diplomatic. But closer examination of one particular example hardens this suspicion. In 942, a man named Folcuin received from Otto some land at Mangonville, now in Lorraine some 30km south of Nancy, that had been confiscated from a certain Nordbalt by the judgement of the *scabini*.<sup>48</sup> King Otto's charter says little more about what had been at stake, but the intervention in the charter of Duke Otto, the shortlived duke of Lotharingia in the 940s, suggests Folcuin was in the duke's circle, rather than someone directly connected to the king, which makes sense too in view of what we know of Folcuin's kin.<sup>49</sup> More light on the event is shed by a charter composed some time later, perhaps around 978.<sup>50</sup> The charter records a grant by Alda, Folcuin's widow, to the recently founded female monastic community of Bouxières (near the city of Toul) of land that her husband had given to her as a dowry. What Folcuin had given Alda, and what she in turn passed on to the nuns of Bouxières, was the land previously owned by the unfortunate Nordbalt, along with King Otto's charter by which it had been granted. It is remarkable that Alda and Folcuin had apparently carefully stored this charter for decades.<sup>51</sup> But even more remarkable is that Alda mentions in passing what Nordbalt's offence and punishment had been: he had been convicted of stealing horses, for which he had been hanged.<sup>52</sup>

No other source mentions unlucky Nordbalt. He seems to have been a figure of only local significance, and it seems unlikely that the king had been directly involved in his trial or conviction, especially since the charter explicitly states that this had been carried out by the *scabini*. Not all Ottonian confiscations, in other words, were matters of high politics: behind this and doubtless other instances lie local disputes that we cannot now fully perceive. Yet what the case of Nordbalt shows – and as has parallels in England around the same time, for instance in the case of the cattle-stealing Helmstan – is the importance for the fisc of the enduring link between royal authority and local politics, both of which determined the shape and nature of the fisc not only on their own but in

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<sup>48</sup> *judicio scabineorum fiscatum erat* : D. OI 52. The charter survives as an original in the departmental archive in Nancy, and is available online courtesy of the Artem database managed by the Université de Lorraine: <http://www.cn-telma.fr/originaux/charte209/>

<sup>49</sup> For discussion of Folcuin and his kin-group, see J. Nightingale, *Monasteries and patrons in the Gorze reform : Lotharingia c.850 - 1000*, Oxford, 2001, p. 160-2. On Duke Otto “of Verdun”, the son of Ricuin, see R.E. Barth, *Der Herzog in Lotharingen im 10. Jahrhundert*, Sigmaringen, 1990, p. 83-104, and W. Mohr, *Geschichte des Herzogtums Lothringen, I, Geschichte des Herzogtums Groß-Lothringen (900-1048)*, Trier, 1974, p. 32-3.

<sup>50</sup> This charter also survives as an original, also in Nancy: <http://www.cn-telma.fr/originaux/charte214/>. The charter is undated ; the dating of the charter to 978 – on the basis that this date best fits the charter's apparent uncertainty about who the king was – in *Les origines de l'abbaye de Bouxières-aux-Dames au diocèse de Toul. Reconstitution du chartrier et édition critique des chartes antérieures à 1200*, ed. R.-H. Bautier, Nancy, 1987, p. 44-5, is plausible but not definitive.

<sup>51</sup> For a thorough study of lay archives in the early medieval west, see *Documentary culture and the laity in the early Middle Ages*, ed. W. Brown, M. Costambeys, M. Innes, and A. Kosto, Cambridge, 2013.

<sup>52</sup> *Bouxières*, ed. Bautier, cit., p. 119 : *pro ejus exigentibus culpis quibus pro furto equorum scabineorum iudicio fuit fiscatum, et ipse suspensus.*

combination.<sup>53</sup> Although it was a key manifestation of royal authority, Otto's fisc was not a legal arrangement that was simply imposed on local communities. Rather – and much like royal authority as a whole – it emerged from a continuous interaction between different kinds of structures, as kings provided public legitimacy for the social order, and in turn benefited from the workings of that social order which kept them on top.

As a consequence, the young King Otto I did not need to dip into his own pocket to show favour to Duke Otto, greasing the wheels of regional politics at an unstable moment in Lotharingian history ; he did not even have to decide whom else to dispossess. He merely had to take advantage of the workings of tenth-century local justice, which renewed royal resources without requiring the king's immediate or personal intervention, simply because he was king. As long as the royal court acted as a clearing house in this way, royal authority was unchallenged.

## **Conclusion**

Let us return to the caliph and the monk as they chatted one afternoon in the summer of 956. As we have seen, Abd al-Rahman's diagnosis of Otto's kingdom was penetrating. The levers of power at Otto's disposal meant that his rule worked in part through the delegation of resources, above all land. That carried political risks, as shown by the fairly regular rebellions that Otto faced, and it brought with it the obligation to achieve a rough consensus amongst his supporters. Rulers like Abd al-Rahman could operate in a different way, making use of their regular revenues to pay for salaried agents and other officials without losing control of the tax-base itself. The political parameters of their rule were therefore quite different.

Nevertheless, the relationship between royal authority and royal property in the Latin west was complex in the early Middle Ages, more complex than the literature on "domain states" as a precursor to modern "tax states" tends to suppose. It would be a mistake to view a king like Otto I as merely an unusually wealthy landowner living off inherited estates, or to imagine we can accurately measure Otto's power and resources in acres and hectares. Royal estates were embedded in local conditions, as cultivators negotiated with managers in the *Reich's* varying agrarian environments and regimes. Their extent waxed and waned according to a now obscure political calculus, as kings granted them out as gifts and benefices, and replenished them through confiscations and conquest. And Otto's fisc in aggregate was the outcome of the interaction between these different levels, as royal power confirmed and was in turn underpinned by local social and political arrangements. Otto ruled a "domain state" in the sense that he could not rely on the revenues from wide-ranging taxation: but that did not mean that

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<sup>53</sup> For a recent discussion of the celebrated Fonthill letter, see L. Roach, *Kingship and Consent in Anglo-Saxon England, 871–978: Assemblies and the State in the Early Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 2013, p. 125-127.

his access to material resources, let alone his power in general, was simply a matter of inventories or property titles that we could tot up if only the written records had survived.

This distinctive interplay between the material and the ideological contributed to the decentralisation of power in the Ottonian kingdom that the caliph saw as a problem. Yet in the hands of a capable ruler like Otto I, the “politics of land” could be made to work in the king’s favour, maintaining royal centrality. It might even seem well adapted to the greatly varying social and economic conditions of Otto’s huge kingdom, in which large-scale regular taxation outside the church was not just impractical but unthinkable, and in fact unnecessary in view of Otto’s needs. Admittedly, a political system constructed in this way faced challenges from the increasing complexities of an urbanising and polycentric society (especially in northern Italy), from threats to the ruler’s ideological legitimacy on which the constant renegotiation of access to land depended, and above all from changes at the local level which increasingly cut kings out of the circulation of land. In Otto I’s time, however, these were challenges that lay largely in the future.