

OTTO'S NAN

Empress Adelaide and the Otto-Adelaide Penny

by Peter E. Lewis



Figure 10 – View of Orbe, where Adelaide was born. (Wikimedia Commons)

THE city of Adelaide was named after the wife of William IV (1830 – 1837), and she in turn would have been named after the wife of Otto I, the Holy Roman Emperor (962 – 973). How many citizens of Adelaide know that the Empress Adelaide was a saint canonized by Pope Urban II in 1097? How many remember her on her feast day, which is the 16th December?

In the collection of St John's Cathedral in Brisbane there is a small silver coin that bears Adelaide's name and evokes the time when she ruled a large part of Europe as the regent for her young grandson, Otto III. (Figures 1 and 2) On the obverse of the coin the letters ODDO appear in the quadrants of a cross. The words ODDO and OTTO sound very similar, especially if spoken quickly, and his name might actually have been pronounced, ODDO, in his native Germanic language. The cross, of course, indicated that he and his grandmother were Christ-



Figure 1 – Otto-Adelaide Penny. Obverse and reverse. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)

ians. The surrounding inscription (not apparent on this coin) is in Latin: D'IGRA + REX, which stands for DEI GRATIA REX (king, by the grace of God). These words first appeared on the coins of Charles the Bald (840 – 977), the grand-

son of Charlemagne. (Figure 3) The idea of the divine right of kings had been promoted by Saint Paul (Romans 13: 1-7), and DEI GRATIA or D.G. appeared with the monarch's image on Australian coins until decimalization in 1966. (Figure 4)

On the reverse of the coin there is a *holzkirche* (wooden church). The wood planks in the door are clearly shown. This design was based on coins of Louis the Pious (813 – 840), the son of Charlemagne. On his coins there is a church with four columns in its façade and the inscription CHRISTIANA RELIGIO, the Christian religion. (Figure 5) In the part of Louis' empire that is now known as France, many of the churches were converted Roman temples, hence the columns. But the Romans never conquered Germany, which was the main part of Otto's empire, and there the churches were newly built of wood. There is an irony in this because before these

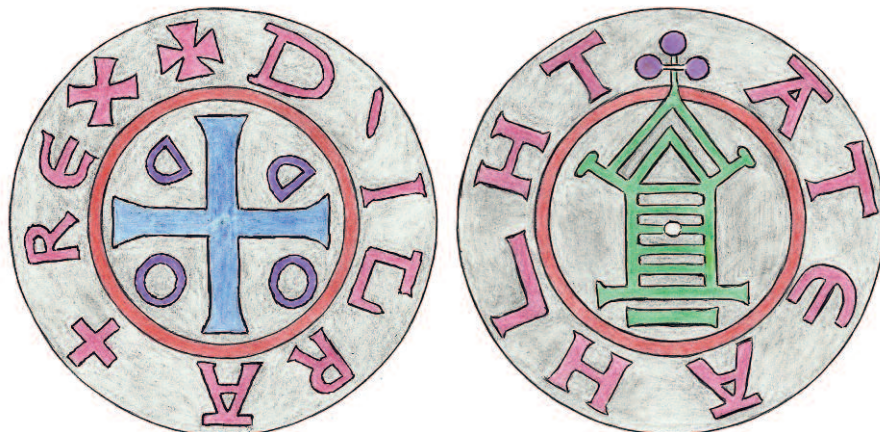


Figure 2a – Drawing showing all the letters in Figure 1.



Figure 3a – Obverse of a silver denier of Charles the Bald. In the centre there is a monogram of KRLS for Karolus (Charles). The phrase GRATIA DEI REX occurs for the first time on this coin. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)



Figure 3b – Reverse of a silver denier of Charles the Bald. The name of the mint QVVENTOVVICI (Quentovic) is on the reverse. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)

Germanic people were converted to Christianity they worshiped Woden and other gods at special trees in the forest, and now their Christian places of worship were built of wood.

A rare variant has an Alpha to the left of the *holzkirche* and an Omega to the right. (Figure 6) These Greek letters make it quite clear that it is a Christian church that is depicted because in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 1: 8) Jesus says that he



Figure 5 – Obverse and reverse of a silver denier of Louis the Pious. The obverse Latin legend, HLVDVVICVS IMP, means 'Emperor Louis'. The H at the beginning indicates a breath (aspirate) before pronouncing the L. 'Ludovicus' becomes 'Ludwig' in German, 'Louis' in French, and 'Lewis' in Welsh. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)



Figure 4 – An Australian florin before decimalization with DEI GRATIA (by the grace of God) in the legend.

is the Alpha and the Omega. The Alpha and Omega on this coin were probably copied from coins issued in about 353 AD by Magnentius and Constantius II. (Figure 7)

The inscription surrounding the *holzkirche* is ATEAHLHT (German: Adelheid, English: Adelaide). It looks like awful spelling, but the spelling of Germanic words in Latin was not standardized in the 10th century, and variant spellings of Adelaide's name are frequent on these coins. To make matters worse the coins are nearly always poorly struck, with parts of the design and the inscription failing to appear.

These coins are known as Otto-Adelaide pennies, and they were previously thought to have been issued by Otto I. Identification of Ottonian coins is not easy because the number of the Otto, whether I, II or III, does not appear on the coin, and Adelaide was the wife of I, the mother of II, and the grandmother and regent of III. In his book, *Coins of Medieval Europe* (Seaby, 1991), Philip Grierson states that these Otto-Adelaide pennies are now dated from 991 onwards, when Adelaide was the regent of Otto III. Those coins not bearing a specific mint name were probably minted at Goslar in Saxony since silver had been



Figure 6a – Obverse and reverse of a variant of the Otto-Adelaide penny. This coin is different because there is an Alpha to the left of the *holzkirche*, and an Omega to the right. There are no examples of this coin in the Strandby Hoard. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)

discovered earlier in the 10th century at nearby Rammelsberg in the Harz mountains.

On 9th September 2012, a sixteen year-old lad, Michael Stokbro Larsen (Figure 8), with his brother, Peter (Figure 9), was using a metal detector in a field at Strandby, a town on the coast of Denmark, just east of its northern tip. The detector started making beeps, and the rest is history. So far 365 items, including 200 coins, have been found, and more are being found. It was a Viking hoard that had been buried in about 995 AD. A lot of the coins are Otto-Adelaide pennies, and a number are coins of Harald Bluetooth who is very important in the history of Denmark. He united the Danes, converted them to Christianity and conquered much of Scandinavia. It is amazing to think that these Danish lads have discovered coins and other objects from that exciting time. On your computer go to www.strandbyskatten.dk and you will see images of the coins as well as photos and videos of Michael and Peter working at the site with Danish archaeologists. In an email Peter told me that he and Michael were "so proud", and so they should be. Well done, lads!

Adelaide's life was full of adventures. She was born in about 931 in the picturesque town of Orbe (Figure 10) in what is



Figure 7 – A double cententionalis of Mag-nentius (350 - 353 AD). It shows the Chi-Rho monogram of Christ between Alpha and Omega. Sear 4017. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)

now the western part of Switzerland. Her father, Rudolf II, was king of Burgundy. In 947, when she was 15, she married Lothair, who succeeded his father as king of Italy in the same year. They had a daughter, Emma, who married the king of Western Francia (France). In 950 Lothair died having allegedly been poisoned by his rival in Italy, Berengar, who then tried to marry Adelaide to his son, Adalbert. Berengar was a tyrant and his people turned against him and appealed to Adelaide. Berengar imprisoned Adelaide in one of his castles on an island in Lake Garda. A priest, named Warinus, saved Adelaide by digging a hole through the castle wall, and she fled to the castle of Count Azzo in Canossa, near Reggio in Italy. Berengar chased her and laid siege to the castle, but Warinus was able to slip through the siege and make his way to Otto I in Germany. Otto was the Holy Roman Emperor and Warinus gave him a letter in which Adelaide begged him to rescue her. She offered to marry him and join her lands to his empire. Like a story from the legend of King Arthur, Otto rode with his knights to save this damsel in distress. Berengar fled.



Figure 8 – Michael Stokbro Larsen.



Figure 9 – Peter Stokbro Larsen.

Otto married Adelaide, and in 962 they were crowned emperor and empress in Rome by the pope. Their son, Otto II, married a Byzantine princess, Theophano, in 971. She was 16, and he 17.

When his father died in 973 Otto succeeded him as Holy Roman Emperor, but Adelaide continued to exert considerable influence over him. In making decisions he stated that he did so “with



Figure 11 – Picture of Otto III crowned. This is a miniature in a book (Codex Monacensis Graecus 4453) in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich. It was made by the Reichenau School in about 998 AD. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 12 – View of the abbey church at Cluny. It was built in about 1100 AD. Most of the monastery was demolished during the French Revolution.

the advice of my pious and dearest mother.” After a few years Otto began to take more notice of Theophano, who was a clever girl knowledgeable about the political life of the Byzantine court at Constantinople, and Adelaide grew apart from her son and daughter-in-law. In 978 she left them to live in Burgundy with her brother, King Conrad.

Otto II died unexpectedly in 983 leaving Theophano with their three year-old son, Otto III. Soon after his coronation at Aachen in the same year, he was seized by Henry the Quarrelsome, the deposed duke of Bavaria, in an attempt to claim the regency for himself, but the Imperial Diet forced him to return the child to his mother. Theophano ruled the empire as regent until her early death in 991. Adelaide, the dowager empress and Otto’s grandmother, then assumed the regency.

The coin in Figure 1 was issued at this time. When Otto was 14 he declared that he could rule on his own, and two years later he became the Holy Roman Emperor. (Figure 11) He was a devout Christian and he saw himself as the leader of Christianity in the world. There is a touching story of how he came across an old man called Nilus, a well-known Christian ascetic who lived as a hermit, and how Otto knelt down before him and offered him his crown. Nilus blessed him and returned the crown. Unfortunately Otto died in 1002 when he was only 22 years old.

Adelaide retired from court life when Otto III became Holy Roman Emperor and devoted herself to religious causes, founding churches, monasteries and convents. She was attracted to the great monastery at Cluny, which had been founded in 910 by the pious duke of Aquitaine. It was a centre of church reform and it must have been a very spiritual place. (Figure 12) She was friendly with the abbot, Odilo, who wrote a memoir of her in which he stated that she was “a marvel of beauty and goodness.”

The great concern of Christians at the end of the tenth century was whether the millennium that is mentioned in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 20:2) would begin in the year 1000. The millennium was a thousand-year period of peace, and many expected the Second Coming of Christ in that year. Adelaide would have been caught up in this religious excitement, but she died on the 16th December 999, only two weeks before the expected event. Anyway, in 1097 she was canonized by Pope Urban II, who had been a prior at Cluny. According to *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints*, she was a “conscientious and generous-hearted woman.” She described herself as “God’s maidservant”.

☆☆☆

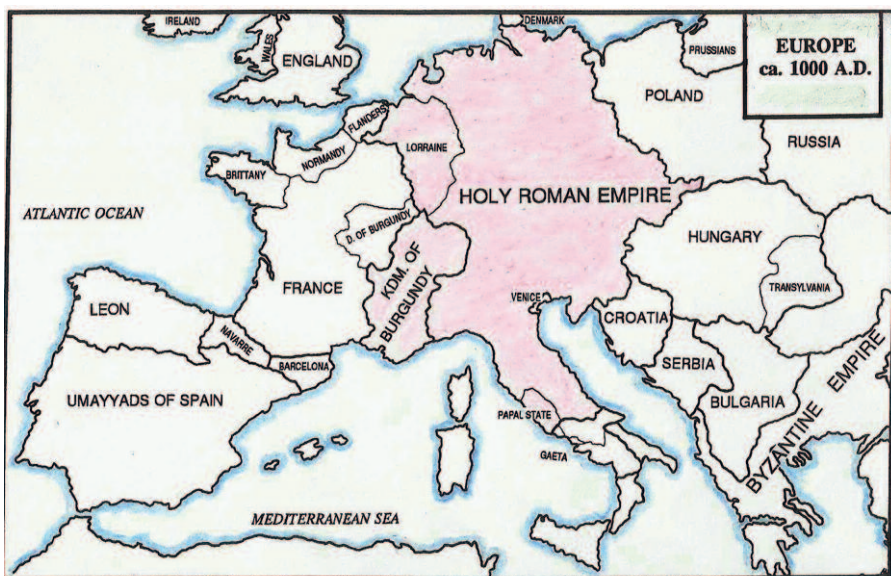


Figure 14 – Map of the Holy Roman Empire in about 1000 AD. The empire is in pink.

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