



Book reviews

The Spirituality of Countess Matilda of Tuscany. By Penelope Nash. Bologna: Pàtron editore. 2021. 109 pp. €16. ISBN 9788855535298, 8855535293.

Until recently, Matilda of Tuscany (1046–1115), one of the most significant female figures of the European Middle Ages, was mostly neglected by English scholars. Even in feminist and gender studies, Matilda has been overlooked. Penelope Nash's book emerges as a crucial addition to the scholarly discourse, addressing a noticeable lacuna in the existing literature. Penelope Nash's outstanding book sets out to explore the spiritual motivations that inspired Matilda of Tuscany's actions. Despite the remarkable abundance of documents on Matilda, the author explains that deciphering the enigma of the countess's piety remains a formidable challenge.

Matilda ruled in her own right as the countess and duchess of a vast domain that stretched from Lombardy to the region of Latium. A vassal of the German emperors and bound to them by familial ties, she nevertheless wielded significant influence in shaping the course of the Investiture Controversy and, ultimately, the destiny of all Christendom, through her extensive service to seven popes. Entering into the ongoing struggle of the Investiture Controversy, she at first played a major role as peacemaker between the German Empire and the pope. Later, with the outbreak of open war, Matilda would take the difficult decision – one marked by substantial challenges and a departure from her family strategy – to turn from her initial role as mediator and instead defend the cause of the reform party on the side of Gregory VII. She employed all available resources in the service of the reform cause, resisting Emperor Henry IV and his anti-pope Wibert through the strategic use of military strength, financial resources, and astute political diplomacy. In the end, Matilda successfully defended the reform party and defeated the powerful army of Emperor Henry IV.

Matilda's choices and motivations have been the subject of extensive debates among historians. A major interpretation stresses Matilda's religious and spiritual motivations and argues that the countess's decision was entirely dominated by her piety and friendship with the papacy. This interpretation, established by Giampaolo Ropa, Luigi

Simeoni, and Pier Andrea Maccarini, rests on the writings of the Gregorian polemicists and has stressed the lack of political consideration and, ultimately, agency on the part of Matilda. Other historians, such as Giovanni Tabacco and Ovidio Capitani, have challenged this argument, explaining that Matilda was driven by a mere political interest, dictated by the countess's need to deal with her heterogeneous and precarious domains. However, this political approach, while very efficient in the description of the transformation of the structure of power, can result in simplistic and misleading conclusions in its overall explanation of Matilda's motivations. Recently, Paolo Golinelli and other scholars have recognized the valuable arguments of both interpretations, suggesting that Matilda's choices were driven by both spiritual and temporal considerations.

Penelope Nash brings an important contribution to this debate and aims to prove that Matilda's 'actions and words reveal genuine piety, which was in line with the religious practices and beliefs of the Christian faith under the Reform Agenda' (p. 85). To support her argument, Nash investigates the countess's life by analysing evidence from various contemporary chronicles and a rich selection of archival documents primarily associated with charters for establishing and funding monasteries. The precise and meticulous use of sources is juxtaposed with a deep exploration of human behaviour through a wide range of literary and artistic sources.

In the first part of the book, the author aims to examine Matilda's family background and the influence of her relatives, kinship, and family ideology on her upbringing and on the development of her ideas and beliefs. Her education was shaped by the teachings of her ancestors and close associates, such as influential figures from the pre-Gregorian and Gregorian reform movements. Indeed, Pope Gregory VII and Bishop Anselm II of Lucca, Matilda's most important advisers, encouraged Matilda's well-known devotion to the Virgin Mary. The countess's extensive building programme, which includes numerous cathedrals, churches, monasteries, and other structures dedicated to Mary, is evidence of her unwavering devotion, as Nash explains.

Another compelling indication of Matilda's sincere piety towards the Virgin Mary is found in the renowned *Gospels of Matilda of Tuscany*. This manuscript, written and illuminated in northern Italy at the end of the eleventh century, was presented by the countess to the Benedictine monastery of Polirone near Mantua and is currently preserved in the Morgan Library in New York. Nash observes that the manuscript contains eleven illuminations, with seven of them prominently featuring the Virgin Mary, often depicted in multiple episodes within the same miniature (p. 37). The prevalence of Mary's figure is notable not only

in terms of the number of images but also in the remarkable new iconography that emphasizes Mary's crucial role in the history of salvation. Nash's new re-evaluation of the evidence supports the well-known argument that Matilda identified and associated herself with the Virgin Mary, as a protector of persecuted Christians, just as her key advisers had envisioned.

In the second section, Nash delves deeper into the wide network of intellectuals and polemicists who, on behalf of the countess, actively promoted the Gregorian cause and weakened political opposition through the dissemination of canon law, biblical commentary, pamphlets, treatises, historical chronicles, and manuscript illuminations. Through these means, this privileged group of individuals became a central force in advancing the ideals of Gregory and his successors. As mentioned, Matilda's network included Anselm II of Lucca, his successor Rangerius of Lucca, John of Mantua, Bishop Bonizo of Sutri, Donizo of Canossa, Bernard of Vallombrosa, Anselm of Canterbury, and others. The presence of such esteemed devotees and friends surrounding the countess serves as a significant testament to Matilda's authority and influence. At Matilda's request, they composed laudatory accounts of her life, praising her unwavering loyalty to the pope and the reform cause.

According to Nash's analysis, these relationships played a crucial role during the critical war between Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII. After this event, Matilda abandoned her role as a mediator and fully aligned herself with the reform faction. This departure from her family's political tradition had severe implications for Matilda's power and authority. Nash argues that the specific set of decisions, which she refers to as 'judgments' and 'actions' (pp. 65–70), provide evidence that Matilda primarily operated based on religious motivations.

Nash effectively substantiates her argument regarding Matilda's commitment to God's will; according to the author, Matilda 'applied Christian influence of her family and associates, sought a spiritual guide, and followed his advice, defended Church Reform under Pope Gregory VII, and later popes, placed the papacy at the center of the Church, and fought for Saint Peter' (p. 11). However, while the statement holds validity, it appears to overlook the countess's ability to exercise her own agency when confronted with challenging decisions. A significant example of Matilda's strong will is her determination to separate from her first husband, Godfrey. This decision challenged her family's strategy, political alliances, and the prescribed role of women at the time, which aimed to ensure the survival of the dynasty. Therefore, it demonstrates Matilda's independent agency.

Indeed, evidence suggests that Matilda acted according to her own political and personal convictions. She influenced and guided

the actions of the popes and contributed to the reorganization of the traditional church structure. Through the alliances with her major advisers and popes, Matilda gained influence and consolidated her power over the territories under her authority and beyond. At the same time, for these churchmen she was not only a major confidante and adviser in moments of crisis but also an intimate friend. These relationships appear as a real and close experience, based on consistent dialogue, communion of ideals, and opportunities to spend time together.

In conclusion, Nash's book provides a meticulous and captivating exploration of Matilda's spirituality. The author's analysis of diverse sources and her exploration of human behaviour contributes significantly to the study of Matilda of Tuscany. While the author effectively substantiates her argument regarding Matilda's piety, it would have been an added strength to have acknowledged the countess's agency and to have considered the intricacies of her decisions. In addition, it would have been valuable to have examined the final phase of Matilda's life, particularly her role in the relationship between Pope Paschal II and Emperor Henry V. Further investigation into her motivations for aligning with the new emperor would have offered a more comprehensive understanding of Matilda's challenging choices. However, overall this work is a valuable contribution to understanding Matilda's multifaceted character and the factors that influenced her actions.

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