



*Empress Adelheid and Countess
Matilda: Medieval Female
Rulership and the Foundations of
European Society*

Penelope Nash

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Empress Adelheid and Countess Matilda: Medieval Female Rulership and the Foundations of European Society. By Penelope Nash. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. ISBN 978-1-137-59088-6. xxii + 291 pp., 5 maps \$109.

In her first chapter, Penelope Nash sets the stage for the two protagonists of her book: Empress Adelheid (r. 951-999) and Countess Matilda of Tuscany (r. 1072-1115). The first ruled over territories in Germany (through her second husband, the Holy Roman Emperor Otto I) and in Italy (inherited through her first husband, Lothar, king of Italy); the second was most active in her lands in middle and upper Italy (inherited through her father). Living a century apart, but operating in worlds organized after Carolingian models, these elite women were related: Matilda was “a direct descendant of Adelheid’s Ottonian mother-in-law, Queen Mathilda of Ringelheim, and father-in-law, King Henry I,” a telling example of the importance of family connections (in the widest sense) that are emphasized throughout this book (34). Nash analyses “how and why Empress Adelheid, in a relatively benign environment, and Countess Matilda of Tuscany, against the grain, seized opportunities and overcame obstacles to retain and to increase their wealth and to exercise power” (6). By focusing on two women in different times, Nash tests the accepted paradigm—which has been contested by other scholars as well—that before the eleventh century, women had more opportunities to express rulership than in the latter half of that century, when Western society became more and more centralized and organized.

The second chapter is dedicated to Adelheid’s and Matilda’s kin and kith—concepts that are explained and problematized—in order to demonstrate the variety of ties both women held with blood relatives, other family members, and friends, with churchmen figuring prominently amongst them. To this end, Nash makes extensive use of diplomata, as well as letters, poems, *vitae*, and manuscript illuminations (unfortunately, the instructive full-page miniature from the thirteenth-century *Relatio translationis corporis sancti Geminiani* discussed on pages 63-64 and 192-193 is not depicted). Medievalists who are acquainted with Adelheid, but who have no detailed knowledge of her life and actions, can benefit from Nash’s observation that even though Adelheid and her daughter-in-law Theophanu quarrelled, “their significant alliances far outweighed their disagreements” (32). Also, scrutinizing the charters connected to the Countess highlights that her mediation in lifting Henry IV’s excommunication was only one of Matilda’s many political and religious achievements. As such, Nash has debunked two of the more traditional views regarding these women.

Chapter three centres around three case studies of landholding (illuminated by several maps); in particular, the contrasting techniques that Adelheid and Matilda employed to manage their territories—and with it, their wealth and power—while making use of the peculiarities of property law (Lombard and Salic). While the empress could manage some Italian and Alsace properties in her own right, at other times her own property (*dotem*) in Germany was not freely at her disposal. The Countess, on the other hand, was not faced with such restrictions because she was the sole heir living under the less-restrictive Lombard law. Apart from gaining an insight into the circumstances that provided women with opportunities for land management, I was struck most by Nash's observation that Adelheid's interference with Erstein and Selz in the Alsace resulted in a new imperial travel route to and from Italy through Alsace and the Burgundian gate. This observation provides a fine illustration of women's contributions to changes of the physical landscape.

How both rulers positioned themselves—and were promoted by their supporters—in the political and religious landscape through models of rulership and the exercise of justice is related in the subsequent and lengthiest chapter, which contains five maps. While Adelheid functioned in tandem with her husband, took on roles that supported him, and legitimized his position in Italy (without ever taking on masculine forms of rule), Matilda “fashioned herself into a great lord” (162). Rightly, Nash points to the relevance of material culture for understanding the women's self-representation, but unfortunately, none of the objects discussed are depicted. Adelheid's presence was, for example, felt through the coinage she issued together with her husband and/or grandson (155), but the reader is left wondering about the Empress's active involvement in the creation of these coins, and how widely they were dispersed. For instance, the dispersal of Adelheid's coinage is discussed by Bernd Kluge in *Otto der Große, Magdeburg und Europa* (2001), which Nash included in her bibliography, but did not consult on the matter of coinage. Matilda issued no coins, but made use of two seal types, which Nash describes as being “very unusual for lay rulers in Italy at the time” (193). However, her mother, Beatrice of Lorraine (d. 1076), held a seal, as did her father Boniface, and her stepfather Godfrey of Lorraine, as has been pointed out by Elke Goetz and Werner Goetz in *Die Urkunden und Briefe der Markgräfin von Tuszien* (1998). Delving further into the Lorraine connection, especially in connection to the women, might have shed more light on Matilda's self-fashioning, and would have offered the opportunity to re-think the rise and fall of women's lordship. After all, despite the similarities between Empress Adelheid and Countess Matilda, the difference in rank, land holding, and

motherhood make it difficult to assess whether the tested paradigm holds true.

All in all, the comparison between Adelheid and Matilda lays bare the different ways in which women were able to govern, fashion their rules, and the circumstances that permitted them to do so. This makes the book an insightful read, albeit one with the somewhat unsurprising conclusion that the model of the decline in women's power cannot be simply refuted or accepted, because the relative ability of women to exercise authority depended on many different circumstances.

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