



*Medieval Women, Material
Culture, and Power: Matilda
Plantagenet and her Sisters*

Jitske Jasperse

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Medieval Women, Material Culture, and Power: Matilda Plantagenet and her Sisters. By Jitske Jasperse. Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-641-89145-5. x + 134 pp. \$79.00.

In this impressively researched and well-written monograph, Jitske Jasperse shows once again how scholars can investigate people who have left relatively little trace in the written sources by studying the objects associated with them. Using a similar methodology to that developed by Anne Stanton and Marguerite Keene for the fourteenth-century queens of France, Jasperse examines the daughters of Eleanor of Aquitaine; most notably Matilda Plantagenet (d. 1189), wife of Henry the Lion, Duke of Saxony of Bavaria, and, as she often reminded those around her, eldest daughter of both England's Queen Eleanor and King Henry II. As context for Matilda, as well as to further demonstrate the usefulness of material culture in unveiling new knowledge about its owners and makers, Jasperse offers comparative and supplemental studies of Matilda's sisters and half-sisters. She argues, successfully, that Matilda and her siblings used material objects and artistic renditions both to claim authority and as gifts to create and solidify relationships.

The book begins with an investigation into the luxury items, such as gilded furniture, textiles, and household objects made of precious metals, that accompanied the twelve-year-old Matilda on seven ships when she left England for the German realms to become Henry's bride, as well as what we know her sisters Eleanor (Leonor) and Joanna brought to Spain and Sicily. Many of these items would have been exhibited at way stations as the girls traveled to their new homes, displaying their wealth and the power of their parents. Jasperse also analyzes the descriptions of the arrival of Matilda's paternal grandmother in Germany almost a century earlier, demonstrating that this family had long mastered the art of using sumptuous objects to promote their status while exchanging them to cement both political and economic bonds. By the end of her bridal journey, young Matilda would have absorbed the lesson that "appearance and wealth were of utmost importance for the performance of power" (35).

Jasperse then spends three chapters looking at "small items" like coins and seal impressions, manuscripts, and textiles that were often made into clothing or vestments. The text and image on coins communicated power and social identity to a wide audience, while the seal impressions did so to a smaller audience capable of interpreting their "sophisticated visual imagery" (37). She offers a persuasive interpretation of a bracteate of c.1172, four years after Matilda's wedding, which depicts both members of the royal couple wielding scepters. Henry left on crusade in January 1172, and according to Jasperse, this image communicates the "new power-sharing arrangement necessitated by Henry's crusading activity" (41). Henry and Matilda are also portrayed together three times in two surviving illuminated manuscripts: a Gospel Book and a Psalter. Jasperse points out that dual portraiture appears in books owned by the imperial couples Henry II and Cunigunde and Henry III and Agnes, and that both the miniatures and the dedicatory poem contained in Matilda's Gospel Book celebrate the couple's "piety, ancestry, and largesse" (86). No seal

impression or matrix for Matilda survives, a reflection of how noblewomen in Germany sealed much less often than those in England or France. Instead, Jasperse analyses the evidence for Matilda's mother, sisters, and half-sisters to demonstrate that they shared a common vocabulary of symbols like the fleur-de-lis, a dove, a carried sceptre, a cross, and an orb; that the daughters' seals are probably modeled on their mothers'; that they usually continued to style themselves as the daughters of kings after their marriage; and that their full-length frontal depictions indicated their status by portraying the women wearing crowns, fashionable dress, and fur. She relates the iconography of Eleanor of Aquitaine's seal to that of the kings of England but does not delve into the seals of her reginal predecessors in either France or England, even though Adelaide of Maurienne sealed during her widowhood, and Matilda of Scotland and Matilda of Boulogne used seals with markedly similar imagery to Eleanor's. That Henry the Lion and Matilda appeared together in several surviving visual representations in different media is for Jasperse an indication that "Matilda's involvement mattered" to Henry (3), despite the fact that she is mentioned in only three of his surviving charters. Her association with luxury textiles and manuscripts vividly communicates "wealth, prestige, and power." Material culture, says Jasperse, empowered women to "create, activate, manipulate, and promote their present ambitions and promote the future of their dynasties" (12).

This is a book that accomplishes its ambitions remarkably well. One of Jasperse's strengths is an ability to take fairly complex concepts and then explain and apply them clearly. She tackles what it means to be a "patron" and a "maker" in recent historiographical debates and discusses the issue in just enough detail for the reader to understand why the distinction matters, along with how she applies the terms in her own analysis of Matilda's exercise of power. She does similarly well with other issues, especially that of what "power" means in a medieval, gendered context. Jasperse is also fully immersed in the relevant secondary literature, including both textual and material sources. She handles historiography superbly and was clearly thorough in her research. Its relatively short length, clarity, and comparative framework would make it an ideal supplement in medieval history, art history, and women's studies courses. Its argument is straightforward enough for undergraduate use and would also lead to thought-provoking discussions in graduate courses.

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