

EPILOGUE: MATERIALIZING POWER AND ITS AFTERLIFE

MATERIAL CULTURE OFFERS a fruitful pathway for exploring the performance of power by elite women like Matilda and her sisters, filling out what little we know of these women by bringing their objects to bear. The study of surviving coins, seals, and textiles, as well as objects mentioned in the Pipe Rolls, a variety of chronicles, and a testament allows a more nuanced argument concerning women's agency, connections among siblings, and the preservation of family power. Material culture offers a productive direction for rethinking how medieval power was performed by the noblewomen who rarely surface in the written documents medievalists usually associate with the exercise of power.

Growing up at the Anglo-Norman court, Matilda had learned that the exhibiting and gifting of material items were calculated acts designed to make an impact on both recipients and the viewing public. On her journey to Saxony she would have ample opportunity to experience how to set a stage on which power could be displayed and wielded. Surely her much older husband Henry made use of the princess's presence and prestige as she significantly boosted his social standing and enlarged his political network. But it would be too limited to interpret the representations of Matilda and Henry on coins and in manuscripts as the outcome of an active duke and a passive duchess. Rather, these artefacts should be read as reflections of a genuine cooperation between the spouses, as is highlighted by the dedication poem of their gospel book. To the duke this was nothing new; his first wife Clementia had acted as a regent during his absence. And as a child Henry had been tutored by his mother Gertrud and his grandmother Empress Richenza, both of whom acted as regents for the young boy after his father had passed away. The case of Leonor and Alfonso VIII offers another example of partnership between ruling husbands and wives. And although scholarship has preferred to focus on the estrangement between King Henry II and Queen Eleanor, in the first decade after their marriage the queen frequently ruled in her husband's stead. And Matilda turned out to be a true supporter of her husband's cause. There were at least two occasions on which the duchess seems to have initiated actions to the benefit of her spouse: acting as a peacemaker, she donated sumptuous vestments to the bishop of Halberstadt—perhaps the very dalmatic that is still kept there—and to the Hildesheim Cathedral in order to calm the troubles that Henry had stirred up by waging war on both towns.

But making objects, gifting them to people, and promoting dynastic interests are only the first, albeit important, steps in the performance of power. Ideally, the recipients and their actions are taken into account in order to assess whether the intended messages have been successfully received. We can assess this through the silver coins on which the ducal couple was represented; if they cannot be read as straightforward evidence of Matilda's regency, they do tell us that she was considered a suitable partner in rule. Understanding these silver impressions in this way means that Matilda as a co-ruler

would have had the chance to act. During her husband's absence in 1172/1173 she could have done so with the support of Henry's trusted followers, who also assisted the duke on numerous occasions. There is nothing in the records that suggests much turbulence in Saxony at this moment in time. Perhaps this is because of the peace that Emperor Frederick Barbarossa had enforced, but since non-aggression pacts were easily broken it is equally possible that Matilda and her team were capable peace managers. It is doubtful whether Matilda's textile gift to Bishop Ulrich of Halberstadt had much effect in terms of a speedy reconciliation between the duke and bishop, as the bishop was a fierce opponent of her husband. In the end it was Henry's brutal force that made Ulrich return the territories that Henry held around Halberstadt.¹ Things were different in Hildesheim, where Matilda's lavish donation of "very beautiful ornaments fittingly decorated with gold and gold embroidery" was recorded and remembered in the *Liber capitularis*. A connection between Bishop Adelog of Hildesheim and the ducal couple can also be established through the consecration of the altar of the Virgin in the Church of St. Blaise at the behest of Henry and Matilda. By means of the gift of liturgical items, Matilda had become a member of the ecclesiastical community and a participant in the rituals of the liturgy. Vested clergy would remember her and her family through words and rituals, perhaps even into the fifteenth century when texts were still being added to the *Liber capitularis*. Matilda's power materialized through strategically handled textiles. This materialization also occurred when the ducal couple donated a deluxe gospel book to their Burg church at Brunswick, where both would have their final resting place. Even though it is a common liturgical book type, the inclusion within of a dedication poem and two miniatures in which the ducal couple was represented makes the manuscript stand out. The emphasis on their impressive royal and imperial lineages in the coronation miniature can be read as a testimonial to their personal and social identities: these were crucial to the construction and communication of power, wealth, and prestige. The canons were expected to promote this image and there indeed they did.

The carefully chosen members who appear in the small family tree in the gospel book recall the equally deliberate selection of signifying elements in the seals discussed here. These objects were very personal impressions of authority, status, and dynastic affiliation. That both women and men attached them to the grants and agreements they made demonstrates that they were instrumental in the communication of power. In the gospel book, the explicit inclusion of parents and grandparents highlights the absence of children, who would be of paramount importance to the continuation of the dynasty. I hold that the making and gifting of this book may be seen as a successful appeal to the Virgin and saints for the birth of an heir.

Some of the objects connected with Matilda, like the coins, were manufactured in local workshops and were based on older traditions, while others, such as the textile gifts, may have been made from fabrics she had brought from England. Matilda apparently managed to become well integrated into Saxon culture and politics, but she never ceased treasuring the ties with her natal family. Representations of her father Henry

¹ Ehlers, *Heinrich der Löwe*, 334.

II and her grandmother Empress Matilda as well as St. Thomas Becket were included in the gospel book. And it was through Matilda's connections that her family ended up in the Anglo-Norman realm after Henry was exiled in 1182. Between 1182 and 1185 Matilda lived in close contact with her parents and her brothers Richard and John; she had the opportunity to be informed about recent political developments and to become part of her father's projects, such as the efforts Henry II made to find a suitable husband for Matilda's daughter Richenza (renamed Matilda in England).² Matilda's sisters Leonor and Joanna also fostered familial bonds, and these were expressed and strengthened through artefacts. Leonor is the first Iberian queen for whom a wax seal survives, and as I have shown, it was modelled after that of her mother. Joanna expressly styled herself as her father's daughter, something that Leonor also did when she had the stole and maniple made. Such examples confirm that it is through the visual rather than written sources that women emerge as important participants within a social, political, and religious network.

Did Matilda continue to exercise power from beyond the grave? Here a textual source would seem to indicate that she managed to do so. A charter issued in 1223 by Henry and Matilda's eldest son, Henry, confirms that Matilda was the actual instigator of the donation of the altar of the Virgin in the Church of St. Blaise. It states that:

We want to make known to all faithful, both living and future, that our very beloved mother Matilda of blessed memory, daughter of the king of England, duchess of Saxony, guided by her devout spirit and out of the wish to serve God, founded the altar of Holy Mary, which is located in the middle of the choir of [the Church of] St. Blaise, in devout commemoration of her soul and that of her loved ones.³

In the charter the prominent location of the altar is underscored so that there would be no doubt which of the altars had been founded by Matilda and at which the priest was expected to serve Mass. This charter is also of interest because it shows that, thirty-five years after the dedication of the altar in 1188, and its pyx with the inscription testifying to its dedication by the ducal couple safely stored within, the ducal couple's son publicly commemorated the event and the agreements made upon it. Further, Henry credited only his mother with the foundation of this altar and emphasized her lineage through King Henry II. Beyond the obvious prestige inherent in the association with his royal grandfather, perhaps the incentive to include Henry II was personal, as the younger Henry had spent time at the English court during his parents' exile from the Holy Roman

² Bowie, *Daughters of Henry*, 105.

³ "Notum esse volumus universis fidelibus, tam presentibus quam futuris, quod karissima mater nostra Mehthildis felicitis memorie Anglorum regis filia ducissa Saxonie pie devotionis spiritu inducta obsequium deo prestare volens altare sancte Marie, quod est in medio choro beati Blasii, ob salutarem et piam anime eius et carorum suorum memoriam instituit." UU DD HL, 178–79, no. 121. The charter deals with the confirmation of earlier established agreements about the use of the altar by a priest.

Empire. This charter testifies to the importance attached to Matilda's patronage and her place in the making of dynastic identity and memory.

The appropriation of Matilda's prestige by her son fits the pattern through which medieval elite sons and daughters sought to define themselves socially and politically. In 1229 Joanna's son Raymond VII of Toulouse confirmed his mother's gift of 1,000 Angevin sous to the nuns of Fontevraud, the abbey where Joanna's father Henry II and her brother Richard had been buried and which Joanna had designated as her final resting place. In 1204 Eleanor of Aquitaine joined them in death, and when King Henry III visited the abbey in the thirteenth century, he found his relatives grouped together in the nuns' part of the choir, which was located west of the transept.⁴ In Raymond's charter, Joanna is styled *regina* and "once his mother," emphasizing mother-son connection as well as highlighting that his mother was dead, which fits with the Fontevrist burial context.⁵ Joanna's son knew how to make use of his royal pedigree; in thirty-three of the 107 acts connected to him, he ties himself to his mother as "Johane regine filius."⁶ Seventeen of these thirty-three documents were issued after the death of his father Raymond VI in 1222, the moment from which Raymond disappears from the filiation clauses and only Joanna is mentioned. Clearly, "Joanna's symbolic capital shed dazzling light upon the Raymondine dynasty."⁷ The former queen and finally nun evidently still held influence in the genealogical self-definition of her son, who also did homage to his mother by naming his eldest daughter and only child Joanna. Of course, this action was equally meant to tie him to the powerful Plantagenets. Raymond sought to strengthen this bond further when he himself was entombed against the north-east pillar of the transept in Fontevraud's church in 1250.

Sons and daughters were not the only ones making an effort to connect themselves to prestigious figures in their dynastic pasts. For Leonor we have an illuminated charter that was posthumously copied by the Order of Santiago in which her act of giving was recollected. Leonor and Alfonso VIII are represented in the cartulary of Uclés from the mid-thirteenth century, also known as the *Tumbo Menor de Castilla*.⁸ The incipit on the opening page of the first book presents them as "the lord King Alfonso and the lady Queen Leonor" (Figure 28).⁹ Below the rubricated incipit text, the nimbed royal couple

⁴ For the Fontevraud burials, see Charles T. Wood, "Fontevraud, Dynasticism and Eleanor of Aquitaine," in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 407–22 at 414.

⁵ Macé, *Catalogues raimondins*, no. 557.

⁶ This count is based on Macé, *Catalogues raimondins*.

⁷ Macé, "Raymond VII of Toulouse," 141–42.

⁸ *Tumbo Menor de Castilla*, mid-thirteenth century, 235 fols., 22 × 14.5 cm. Madrid, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Códices L.1046 B, fol. 15r. For this manuscript, see María del Pilar Calzado Sobrino, *Tumbo Menor de Castilla (siglo XIII): Estudio Histórico, Codicológico, Diplomático y Edición* (Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2016); and Wearing, "Holy Donors, Mighty Queens," 82–85.

⁹ Pilar Calzado Sobrino, *Tumbo Menor de Castilla*, 15–17; and González, *El reino de Castilla*, 2: no. 195 (January 9, 1174); and Wearing, "Holy Donors, Mighty Queens," 82–85.



Figure 28. Tumbo Menor de Castilla, mid-thirteenth century. Madrid, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Códices L.1046, fol. 15r. Photo: Archivo Histórico Nacional.

is shown seated together on a double throne, each holding the cord of the seal that guarantees their donation. Next to Alfonso stands Pedro Fernández, the master of the Order, who clutches the seal with his right hand. Precisely because the donor iconography was meant to serve the monastery's purposes, certain realistic elements were included in the imagery, including the donated castle, from which flies the flag of Santiago, and the centrally placed seal. This representation of Alfonso's seal appears to be modelled after his double-sided seal and his *signum rodado* (drawn round seal).¹⁰ The inclusion of Leonor as Alfonso's partner fits the pattern found in the opening clauses of the charters issued by the royal chancellery.¹¹ The sense of reality employed in the Tumbo Menor was meant to affirm that the properties held by the Order of Santiago had come into their possession through close cooperation with the crown of Castile, and so the miniature shows Leonor acting as a co-ruler. This was deemed important some three decades after she and Alfonso had passed away.

Matilda and her sisters—and plenty of other elite women could be added to the list—were remembered both visually and textually not only during their lifetime but also long after their deaths. In medieval social structures, women and their objects remained crucial players when it came to the creation and survival of dynasties and religious institutions. Material culture has proven to be a valuable avenue for approaching the relationship between power and elite women in the twelfth century. Through the visual record of material culture women's activities surface that are not recorded in textual sources. Their performance of power through objects brings to light that women were capable of impacting their own lives as well as that of others, even if charters and chronicles fail to mention so. This forces us to redefine assumptions about power for sparsely documented noblewomen. From an early age these women were instructed that the acts of making, giving, and displaying artefacts explicitly served to show off their status, promote their positions within the dynasty, cement ties with allies, and appease opponents as well as to forge relationships with religious institutions that were crucial to liturgical commemoration. Exactly this empowering impact of material culture has been at the heart of this study.

10 See also González, *El reino de Castilla*, 2: no. 195 in which "I Alfonso, by the grace of God King of Hispania with my wife Queen Leonor ... donate and concede ... Uclés with the castle and town, with lands, vineyards, meadows, pastures, streams, wind-mills." The closing statement mentions Alfonso only: "Et ego rex Ildefonsus, regnans in Castella et Toletu, hanc cartam propria manu roboru et confirm."

11 "una cum uxore mea Alienor regina" is first found in a charter dated September 17, 1170. See González, *El reino de Castilla*, 2: no. 148.