



Penelope Nash, *The Spirituality of Countess Matilda of Tuscany*;
Quaderini di Matildica 1 (Bologna: Pàtron Editore, 2021)
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Review

Dr. Penelope Nash's *The Spirituality of Countess Matilda of Tuscany* officially launches a new publication series, Quaderini di Matildica/Notebooks of Matilda, sponsored by the Matilda of Canossa and Tuscany International Association. In this inaugural issue of Notebooks, Nash sets an ambitious goal for herself: the identification of what she terms the 'wellspring' of the religious convictions, which she believes 'formed the basis' of Countess Matilda's actions and the extent of her commitment to these convictions throughout her lifetime. While recent studies have analyzed Matilda as a military leader, territorial ruler, and ecclesiastical benefactress, Nash wishes to better understand the origins of the religious zeal which animated all individual aspects of the countess' career. More specifically, Nash attempts to understand Matilda's 'inner being.' She tries to identify those deeply held beliefs to which Matilda clung despite what they cost her politically and personally. Drawing upon the work of David Bell, Nash takes as her working definition of spirituality: 'The quest to do the will of God by holding to what is good and making progress therein' (p. 11). While not stated in so many words, the author seems to take aim at the notion that more cynical, terrestrial considerations often dictated the Countess' decision-making.

Nash divides her examination into four principal sections. The initial section concerns the public spiritual movements of Matilda's time and how their advocates interacted with her family and herself. This section also focuses on Matilda's support for saints' cults and pilgrimage sites. The following section examines the contents of Matilda's library, books sponsored by her, the testimonies of others about her, especially the witness of her spiritual advisors and her vociferous detractors, and instances when her decision-making show her acting for 'primarily religious reasons' rather than for 'personal gain' (p. 65). The third section investigates her endowments to monasteries and other religious institutions and the contents of her will. The final section attempts to explore what Nash terms Matilda's inner life. In order to provide what she deems the 'Social Context' of the countess' spiritual development, Nash prefaces the main body of her study with a well-informed thumb-nail sketch of the evolution of reform ideology from the founding of Cluny in 910 to the showdown between Henry IV of Germany (r. 1056–1105) and Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073–1085) and his immediate papal successors. As the author duly notes, Matilda's convictions were not formed in isolation (p. 13).

Indeed, Nash's central thesis is that Countess Matilda sincerely adopted as her own personal spiritual guideposts the principles of the reform agenda, the core of which the author identifies as opposition to simony, a search for purity, and papal authority over the Church. For the countess, the will of God most clearly manifested itself in these ideals. In addition, Nash observes that a profound reverence for the memory of her parents, Boniface and Beatrice, also held a special place in Matilda's

devotional life: particularly in the form of making restitution to ecclesiastical institutions, which had suffered sundry depredations under her father's predatory lordship. Throughout her own reign, she exhibited an abiding concern for her parents' and all of her ancestors' eternal welfare.

Probing the inner life of any medieval figure, especially one like Matilda, who left behind no personal literary corpus, is a tricky matter. Still, Nash judiciously speculates about the possible course of the countess' spiritual development. She posits that far more than the countess' father, Boniface, who was an impious rogue until his final years, Matilda's mother, Beatrice, imbued the countess with a high regard for the principles of religious reform. A family relative of the reform popes, Leo IX (r. 1049–1053) and Stephen IX (r. 1057–1058), Beatrice was also personally associated with Peter Damian (1007–1072) and in her later years initiated her daughter into the friendship network of Gregory VII. Nash opines that as evidenced by her attempt in conjunction with her mother and Empress Agnes (c.1025–1077) to convince Henry IV to dismiss several notorious counselors, Matilda was initially a 'moderate' in the reform camp, who desired collaboration between the empire and the papacy. She was later radicalized, according to Nash, by Henry's mendacity at the impromptu papal-imperial summit at Canossa in 1077 (p. 21).

While Nash produces an abundance of evidence throughout her study that confirms Matilda's personal and enduring commitment to the reform agenda, her strongest evidence appears in the first and third chapters. As the author explains in her opening chapter, the countess was bound by ties of blood and marriage both to

the German imperial family and to Henry IV's anti-pope, Wibert/Guibert of Ravenna. Nevertheless, Matilda resolutely stood by Gregory VII and his immediate successors during the so-called Investiture Contest and thereby in the author's words: 'showed ultimately her commitment to a cause over family' (p. 23). In an age in which familial bonds enjoyed quasi sacred status, the countess' choice speaks volumes about the profundity of her attachment to the papal reform program and the sincerity of her spiritual convictions. Nash, moreover, reminds her readers that Matilda's choice of ideological commitment over familial ties resulted in almost fifteen years of continuously desperate warfare with her powerful relations. The countess, on multiple occasions, faced total ruin. This decision speaks powerfully to Matilda's determination to pursue the will of God as she understood it.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence for Nash's portrait of Matilda appears in a section of the second chapter dealing with the countess' judgments and life decisions (pp. 65–70). As Nash rightly observes, 'judgements and actions' best reveal an individual's 'true mettle' (p. 65). The analysis of Matilda's most decisive 'judgements and actions' is divided into five sub-categories: her willingness to fight on the papacy's behalf, provide the popes with significant financial aid, her firm allegiance to the papacy, her submission to papal decisions, and, finally, her determination to make restitution to her father's ecclesiastical victims.

From within this body of material, two instances of Matilda's submission to papal directives especially reveal the depth and sincerity of her religious convictions. The first instance concerns the countess' evidently heart-felt desire,

gleaned from her correspondence with Gregory VII, to retire from worldly affairs and enter the cloister. Nonetheless, at the Pope's insistence, she forswore her personal preference for the cloister to remain in harm's way as a temporal ruler. The second episode involves an equally personal issue. Matilda, at Pope Urban II's (r. 1088–1099) request, re-married solely for the sake of the papacy's strategic advantage. In 1089, the forty-three-year-old widowed Countess (her first husband Godfrey the Hunchback having had died in 1069) married the seventeen-year-old heir of the duchy of Bavaria, Welf V (c.1073–1120). The marriage temporarily placed both sides of the main Alpine passes between Germany into Italy in papal-friendly hands. The unhappy union, however, ended quite acrimoniously after barely six years. Regardless, Matilda had been willing to alter radically her personal life purely, as Bernold of Constance recalled, 'because of obedience towards the Roman pontiff' (p. 68).

Nash, in short, has composed a brief but compelling portrait of Countess Matilda as a ruler of firm religious conviction. This new publication series is off to an auspicious start.

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