

# MATILDA OF CANOSSA

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*Matilda of Canossa, Countess of Tuscany, was born in 1046 to a noble family in northern Italy. She could have ended like so many other noble women during her time, as a simple tool with which to form marriage alliances between leading houses. However, with the support and mentorship of her mother, Matilda became a ruler in her own right.*

*Matilda was not only in full control of her own estate, she also commanded her own army and kept additional territory in Italy. In addition, she had close ties to the pope himself, Gregory VII. Matilda managed her monetary, military, and political assets in such a cunning way that she rose to be one of the most influential women of her time. The two most important rulers of the time, the Holy Roman Emperor and the pope, fully recognised Matilda's value as an asset, and found themselves with either a powerful ally or a powerful enemy in her.*

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Matilda of Canossa, Countess of Tuscany, daughter of Margrave Boniface III of Tuscany and Beatrice of Lorraine, was an 11<sup>th</sup>-century Italian noblewoman related through her mother to the Salian Dynasty, the reigning line of Holy Roman Emperors at the time. Through unfortunate events, her father and her remaining siblings all died, making Matilda the only heir to her father's vast economic and material resources. Matilda ascended to her position during a time when the church and the Holy Roman Empire were in a state of upheaval. A conflict for supremacy had arisen between the aforementioned parties, in which each side claimed to be the highest authority in earthly and heavenly matters. Matilda played a decisive role in the way that she provided the church, and more precisely Pope Gregory VII, with military, monetary, and political support against the Holy Roman Emperors Henry III, Henry IV, and Henry V. Thanks to the support of her mother Beatrice, an alliance with Pope Gregory VII and the church, and her own ambitions and aspirations, Matilda ascended to be one of the most powerful women of her time.

In medieval times, the ideal for women was one of marriage, family, and obedience. This was an ideal that Beatrice of Lorraine, a strong woman herself, did not wish for her daughter. After the death of her first husband, and two of her three children, she married her cousin Godfrey III of Lorraine, a disgraced feudal ruler who had lost his estate due to a conflict with Henry III.<sup>1</sup> She defied the emperor and married without the consultation, or consent, of Henry III, a move that only few would dare, even less a woman. Beatrice appears to have chosen Godfrey III strategically, as their reign was chronicled as one of equal status shared by both parties, meaning that Beatrice's choice of husband helped her both to avoid control by an overambitious spouse, and to ensure the security of her estate from the emperor, as both appeared to have entered this political marriage by mutual agreement.<sup>2</sup> Beatrice realized that to secure Matilda's future independence from imperial control, Matilda would have to marry, a political move that Beatrice probably did not wish for her daughter, even less so when it required Matilda to be betrothed at the early age of 8 years old.<sup>3</sup> Matilda managed to evade her stepbrother, Godfrey IV, until she was about 23 years old, and severed ties when it became clear that Godfrey IV wanted to control her.<sup>4</sup> Beatrice knew she had to find a different way to secure Matilda's position as sole ruler over her estate, and knew she would not find it with the emperor. Instead, she turned to Pope Gregory VII. Beatrice, together with Godfrey III, were staunch supporters of the church, and had forged contacts with high-ranking clergy from early on.<sup>5</sup> Matilda had been present at important religious meetings, had accompanied her mother on travels to Rome, and was even related to one of the previous popes, Stephen IX, through her stepfather Godfrey III.<sup>6</sup> After Godfrey III's death, Beatrice was sole regent, and in preparation for Matilda's future succession trained her in the administration of her estate.<sup>7</sup> They reigned as mother and daughter, and Beatrice made sure to prove her and Matilda's indispensability to Gregory VII.

Pope Gregory VII realized early into his papacy that Emperor Henry IV would not be his ally, as the latter was opposed to Gregory VII's ideas of papal reform; Gregory's proposed reforms would effectively rob Henry IV of his control over several relevant issues, such as the election of the pope by the emperor, and even his own throne, if Gregory VII's claim that the pope could depose of the emperor if needed was accepted.<sup>8</sup> After the failed attempt by Gregory VII to mold Henry IV to his own vision through his influence on the emperor's mother, Agnes, the pope

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<sup>1</sup>Cowdrey, *Pope Gregory VII*, 296.

<sup>2</sup>Skinner, *Women in Medieval Italian Society*, 137.

<sup>3</sup>Smith, "Art of Inventing," 6.

<sup>4</sup>Smith, 6; Cowdrey, 130.

<sup>5</sup>Robinson, *Papal Reform*, 10.

<sup>6</sup>Skinner, 137; Robinson, 10.

<sup>7</sup>Cowdrey, 297.

<sup>8</sup>Smith, 9.

realized that he needed someone else to be his hand in worldly matters.<sup>9</sup> Through Beatrice's clerical contacts, Gregory VII knew of the former and the vast economic, political, and military resources that would sooner or later pass into Matilda's hands. Seeing Matilda's precarious situation as a lone female feudal ruler in patriarchal medieval Italy, Gregory VII knew that they could be of use to each other.<sup>10</sup> While it may appear as if each acted mainly out of a concern for the well-being of the other party, it becomes clear that both used each other to their own advantage. Matilda willingly lent her support and material resources to the papacy, in return for protection from any unwanted male and/or imperial interference. That Matilda always managed to keep the upper hand in her dealings with Pope Gregory VII becomes clear when one considers the following example: Matilda's estranged husband, Godfrey IV, had asked for Gregory VII's help in winning back his wife, in return offering military support against Henry IV. Gregory wanted the much-needed additional troops, despite knowing that he would be forcing Matilda under the control of her husband, and agreed to the proposal.<sup>11</sup> When asked by Gregory VII to reconcile with Godfrey IV, Matilda refused, a well calculated decision, since she knew that Gregory VII needed her and would have to submit to her decision.<sup>12</sup> Gregory VII knew this as well, and had assured her of his continued support, no matter what the outcome, in an earlier letter.<sup>13</sup> Even though Gregory VII's and Matilda's connection cooled off after Beatrice's death, Matilda continued to help Gregory VII, and the church in general, out in times of need.<sup>14</sup> In 1082, when Rome was under threat of attack by Henry IV's troops, Matilda ordered the melting-down of the church treasure of St. Apollonio to provide monetary support for the city's defense.<sup>15</sup>

When Godfrey IV eventually died Matilda became free to marry again. This was a welcome opportunity for the newly-elected Pope Urban II, who had maintained close ties to this foremost asset against the imperial threat. Urban II wanted Matilda to marry Welf of Bavaria, a strategic choice aimed at combining both Matilda's and Welf's material resources and control over the route over the Alps, through upper Italy, to Rome.<sup>16</sup> Matilda only consented knowing she had no other choice, as her estate was under threat of seizure by Henry IV.<sup>17</sup> Knowing that Welf was only 17 at the time, she did not see him as a danger to her independence.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Cowdrey, 298.

<sup>10</sup>Cowdrey, 298.

<sup>11</sup>Cowdrey, 130.

<sup>12</sup>Skinner, 137.

<sup>13</sup>Gregory VII, *Register*, 180.

<sup>14</sup>Gregory VII, 306.

<sup>15</sup>Cowdrey, 301.

<sup>16</sup> Blumenthal, *Investiture Controversy*, 123.

<sup>17</sup>Skinner, 138.

<sup>18</sup>Skinner, 138.

While it might appear as if Matilda only used the church for her own personal gain, she also acted as a patron. During her reign, Matilda founded several monasteries, which was not only a display of religious fervor but also meant as financial support for the church, as Matilda made sure these monasteries were located in strategic places that pilgrims would visit and make donations at, as Matilda had also initiated the transfer of relics to them.<sup>19</sup> Matilda also “provided liturgical books” to monasteries in her estates, and “sacred vessels” used in liturgical celebrations.<sup>20</sup> She ordered the distribution of “giant bibles” to facilitate access to the complete works, and “commissioned biblical studies.”<sup>21</sup> Throughout her life Matilda continued to give donations and gifts to the church.<sup>22</sup> Matilda sought not only to use the church when necessary, but also to give back when she could. She may have grown up in the world of political power struggles and alliances, but her patronage speaks to the human, and religious, side of Matilda.

Matilda proved to be as able and cunning as the men who faced her. She managed to keep her independence, as seen in the case of her dealings with both of her husbands and the Holy Roman Emperors. Under the guidance of her mother, who groomed her to be resilient, smart, and independent, she learned to be a successful ruler, establish her dominance, and form powerful alliances to secure her position in the long run. In doing so, she quickly turned into one of the church’s greatest assets, and consequently into one of the Holy Roman Empire’s greatest adversaries. While it may initially appear as if Matilda solemnly fought out of religious fervour for the independence of the church from imperial control, and the reformation of the church by pope Gregory VII, it becomes clear that she did so in return for her autonomy from any external forces, and did so quite successfully, being one of the few female rulers to do so. However they tried to restrain or control Matilda, she managed to find a way out, or around her opponents. Every time it appeared as if Matilda had to give in to the other party, she always managed to gain an advantage for herself in the process, as can be seen with her final submission to Henry V. While this might appear as a concession to failure, Matilda was in return crowned Imperial Vicar and Vice-Queen of Italy by Henry V in 1111, a last hoorah for Matilda before her death in 1115.

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<sup>19</sup>Cowdrey, 297; Skinner, 139.

<sup>20</sup>Cowdrey, 302.

<sup>21</sup>Cowdrey, 302.

<sup>22</sup>Skinner, 139.

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