



**Sean Gilsdorf.** *Queenship and Sanctity: The Lives of Mathilda and the Epitaph of Adelheid.* Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2004. 211 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8132-1374-3.



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**Published on** H-German (September, 2006)

## Royal Saints' Lives as a Development in the Tradition of Sacred Biography

This volume is a welcome addition to the slim body of English-language translations of primary texts from the Ottonian period. As Gilsdorf points out in his preface, despite increasing numbers of texts of the early Middle Ages, the post-Carolingian age, from approximately the late ninth to the early eleventh century, is still largely inaccessible to readers without medieval Latin. The author hopes his work will expose audiences to under-recognized texts and increase the use of such texts in the classroom (p. ix). In the three sacred lives (*vitae*) presented in this book, monastic authors describe the lives of two women, Mathilda (895-968) and Adelheid (931-999). Mathilda was the wife of Heinrich I of Saxony and mother of Emperor Otto I, and the first two texts or lives concern her. The first was most likely written after her death as praise by the monastic community and to highlight Mathilda's patronage and rulership; the second was written some time later, near the turn of the millennium, to justify the position of King Heinrich II as the descendant of Mathilda's younger son and thus a legitimate heir of Heinrich I. Adelheid was the empress of Otto I and her "Epitaph" was written shortly after 1002 by Odilo, abbot of Cluny, to mobilize her sanctity in support of

the Church and monastery. The texts, as "sacred biographies," differ from other texts in the genre of saints' lives in that their subjects are also queens. Thus these works emphasize the secular lives of the two saints. Saintry descriptions of the two women are appropriated by the texts' authors to secure the interests of their communities and those of the secular line of rulers of which these women were a part.

Printed before the introduction are three maps (pp. xiii-xv) showing Saxony and Burgundy and the location of relevant monasteries and cities, as well as two genealogical tables for the saintly queens (pp. xvi-xvii). These materials prove useful and readers will consult them often. Gilsdorf's intention in the introduction to the volume is to examine more closely the lives themselves and surviving texts about them. He provides a brief treatment of their era and role as queens within it (pp. 2-15), as well as a discussion of the texts themselves and the monasteries where they were written (pp. 15-60). The promised innovation of this work is to examine how these texts build on and diverge from existing contemporary traditions. Thus, in this section of the introduction,

Gilsdorf raises questions about how the works reflected the views and aims of author and society in terms of their production, reception and distribution. The final consideration of the introduction is stylistic features and translation (pp. 60-67). Following the introduction are the texts: *The "Older Life" of Queen Matilda (Vita Mathildis antiquior*, abbreviated as VMA, pp. 71-87), *The "Younger Life" of Queen Matilda (Vita Mathildis posterior*, abbreviated as VMP, pp. 88-127), and *Odilo of Cluny, The Epitaph of Adelheid (Epitaphium Adelheide*, abbreviated as EA, pp. 128-143). Two appendices expand the reader's awareness of textual context with other contemporary texts on these saints. "Widukind of Corvey on Queen Mathilda" (pp. 145-146) is a historical account and "Mathilda and the stirps Widukindi" surveys her supposed lineage (pp. 147-153). A final appendix, "Vestigia deosculari: St. Efreim, Bavaria, and the *Vita Mathildis posterior*" (pp. 154-157) is a very brief discussion of one scene in the "Younger Life" and its possible implications. Endnotes to the volume provide perhaps the best resource for scholars and students who hope to find relevant information on different points raised in the introduction and texts.

Gilsdorf's intention is to present this text for classroom use and as a means to the humanistic end of exposing students to otherwise inaccessible texts. Although instructors of medieval history and literature will be delighted to see these translations and scholars will benefit from the straightforward introduction, Gilsdorf's analysis may be too brief and presented at too high and complex a level for those unacquainted with the time period. The design of the introduction is too difficult for the average undergraduate's independent use and will require significant preparation from any instructor. Most students not specifically studying this period or such texts will not be familiar even in name with Mathilda or Adelheid, so a simpler introduction to the texts for students might have been useful. Nonetheless, he provides a valuable description of the Saxon queen's role in society and useful comparative examples of other queens and their influence on their societies (pp. 10-11), a discussion potentially useful not only to students but also scholars looking for an introduction that will facilitate comparative work. In this section, Gilsdorf shows the importance of women as rulers who often outlived their husbands, noting that these texts depict their importance to the lineage of their royal house.

The second section of the introduction, which examines the texts within the hagiographic tradition, alerts readers to the contexts of a new type of text considering royal sanctity and also examines the texts as testaments

to the women's royal lines. This approach is laudable, but its brevity limits its effectiveness. Gilsdorf sides with scholars who believe that the VMA may have been written by a woman, addressing interests in medieval female authorship. The argument as Gilsdorf presents it here, however, is too brief to address this issue convincingly and he concedes that available information is not conclusive (p. 19). In contrast, an excellent explanation of hagiography is provided as well as a description of Gilsdorf's use of the term "sacred biography." He also treats the source material for these texts very well. While extensive quotations of his own translation in the introduction seem excessive, his discussion of sources (p. 34) and examination of borrowed text (p. 38) are useful. The uniqueness of these texts lies in their change in focus toward the women's secular activities. Their lives are inseparable from those of their families and thus legitimize the power and rulership of their descendants. A more detailed comparison to details of secular women's lives found in other genres (including the theme of bridal quest, which is found in these works) would have been an appreciated addition. After acknowledging the difficulties of translation, the introduction treats briefly the literary heritage of the works and deals with a broader contemporary cultural aesthetic.

One of the aesthetic features of the text that emerges only with difficulty in a translation is the early medieval preference for alliteration. Gilsdorf effectively addresses this dilemma. Although it is questionable whether such alliteration must necessarily be maintained, in the translation itself Gilsdorf maintains a good balance between preserving the alliteration and letting it go for the sake of the audience's comprehension. The translations read very well and retain the engagement that the texts must have had for their original audience. This is an accomplishment for which Gilsdorf should be praised. Students will benefit from the smoothness and energy of the text he provides.

Due to the lack of a discussion of manuscript history or any discussion of theory of translation, however, it is hard to evaluate the translation completely from a scholarly codicological perspective. While the bibliography provides resources on this point, even a brief discussion of manuscript transmission would have added to the authority of the translation as an edition, as well as providing useful information with regard to the discussions of female authorship and transmission and comparisons to similar historical figures and other texts within the genre. The translation of names into English is also somewhat questionable. Gilsdorf also leaves many Latin terms un-

translated, both in the translations and in the introduction; this decision threatens to undo his effort to make these texts accessible to readers without medieval Latin. Also, within the translation, it would have been helpful for reasons of clarity to have added Roman numerals to the names of kings and emperors.

To sum up: this volume will be helpful—in conjunction with extensive instructor preparation—in rescuing the history of early medieval German kings and emperors from oblivion in Anglophone undergraduate classrooms,

as well as serving as a potential text for courses on medieval women's and gender history. It may also be useful as an addition to graduate-level survey classes considering Latin texts or texts written in Germany during this period. It provides a compact set of resources for the examination of history, hagiography and sanctity and the role of early medieval queens. Moreover, it may be a useful reference for scholars wishing to explore the issues raised in Gilsdorf's introduction and specific points within his translations.

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**Citation:** Andrew Ganaway. Review of Gilsdorf, Sean, *Queenship and Sanctity: The Lives of Mathilda and the Epitaph of Adelheid*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12286>

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