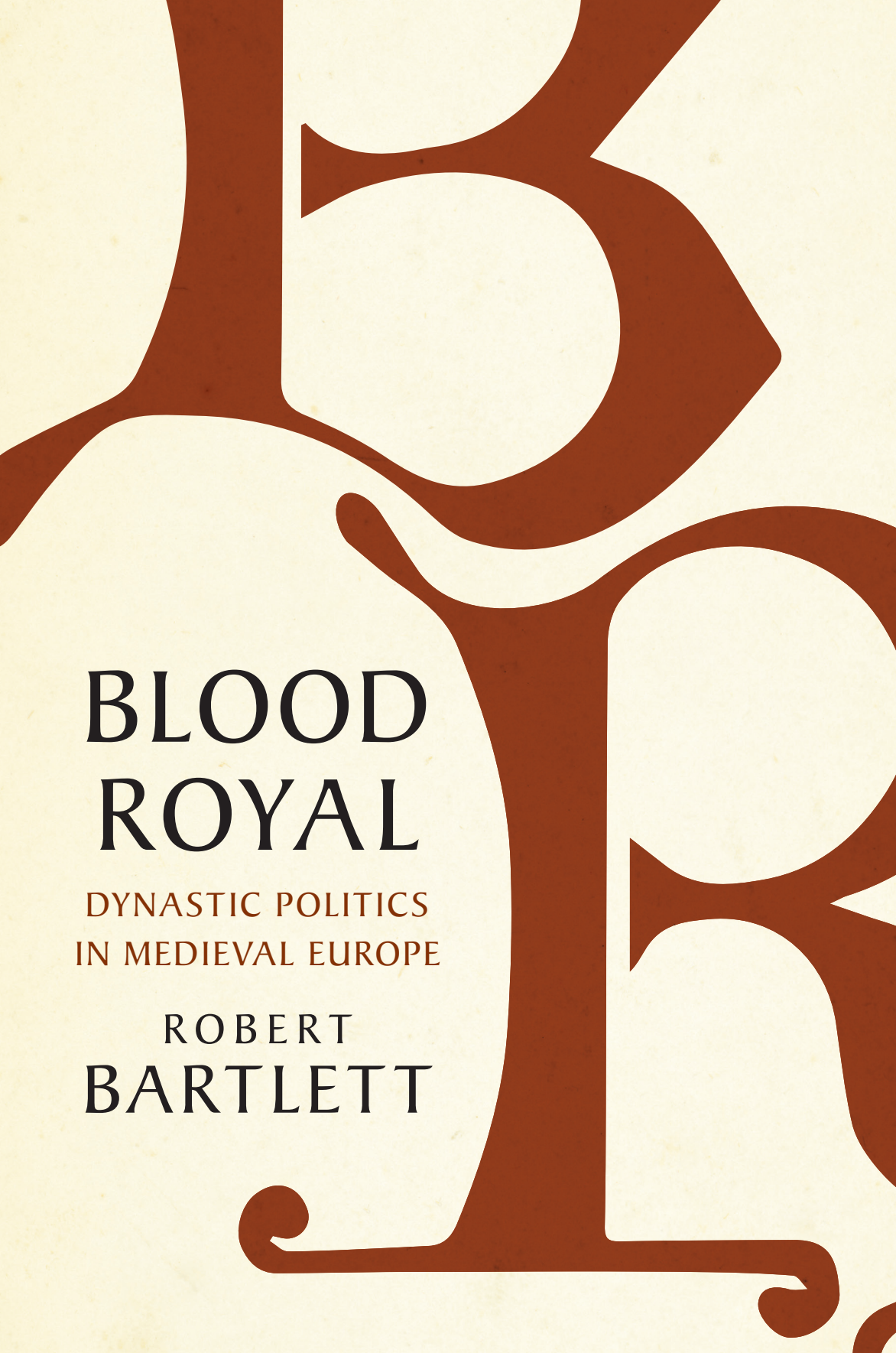


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BLOOD ROYAL

DYNASTIC POLITICS
IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

ROBERT
BARTLETT

BLOOD ROYAL

Throughout medieval Europe, for hundreds of years, monarchy was the way that politics worked in most countries. This meant that power was in the hands of a family – a dynasty; that politics was family politics; and that political life was shaped by the births, marriages and deaths of the ruling family. How did the dynastic system cope with female rule, or pretenders to the throne? How did dynasties use names, the numbering of rulers and the visual display of heraldry to express their identity? And why did some royal families survive and thrive, while others did not?

Drawing on a rich and memorable body of sources, this engaging and original history of dynastic power in Latin Christendom and Byzantium explores the role played by family dynamics and family consciousness in the politics of the royal and imperial dynasties of Europe. From royal marriages and the birth of sons, to female sovereigns, mistresses and wicked uncles, Robert Bartlett makes enthralling sense of the complex web of internal rivalries and loyalties of the ruling dynasties and casts fresh light on an essential feature of the medieval world.

Robert Bartlett is the author of many acclaimed history books, including *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1350* (1993), which won the Wolfson Literary Prize for History in 1994, and *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?* (2015). He is Professor Emeritus at the University of St Andrews and is well-known as the writer and presenter of several BBC documentary series, including *Inside the Medieval Mind* (2008), *The Normans* (2010) and *The Plantagenets* (2014).

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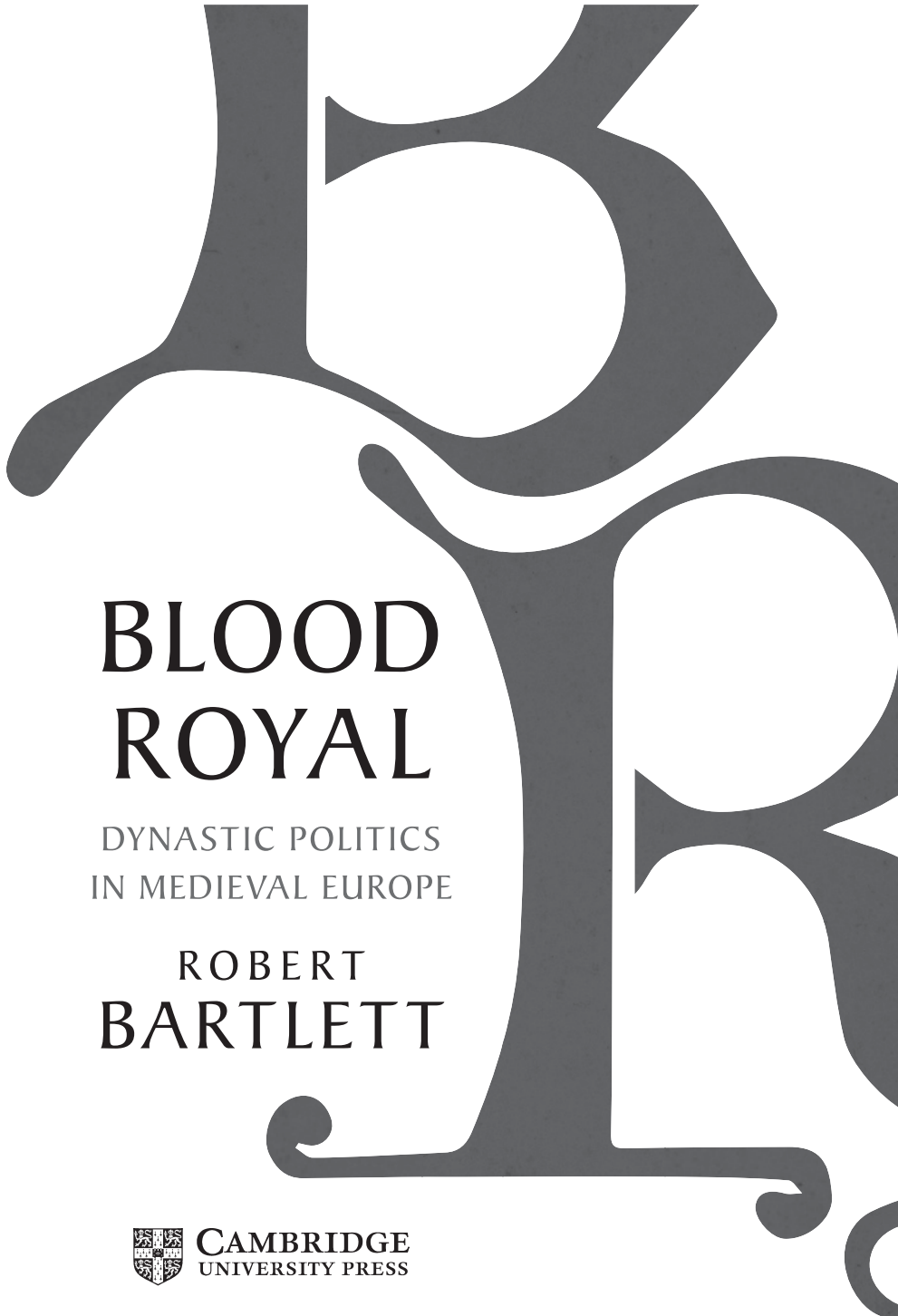
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For Ros and Len and all their descendants

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xiv
Introduction: Royal Families	1
PART I: THE LIFE CYCLE	
1 Choosing a Bride	9
Marriage with Local Aristocrats	11
Foreign Queens	15
Homesick Queens	26
Foreign Ways	29
Inspection of the Bride	32
Marriage to the Royal Widow	34
Prohibited Degrees	43
The Case of Joan of Woodstock	48
2 Waiting for Sons to be Born	52
Death in Childbirth	55
The Uncertainties of Pregnancy	57
Celebration	59
Childlessness	62
Unmarried Kings and Kings Who Married Late	84
3 Fathers and Sons	89
Securing the Succession	89
Waiting for Fathers to Die	109
Minorities	114

CONTENTS

4	Female Sovereigns	124
	The First Female Sovereigns in Medieval Europe	124
	The Later Middle Ages	143
	The Exclusion of Women from Rule	146
5	Mistresses and Bastards	155
	Concubines	155
	Noble Mistresses of the High Middle Ages	159
	Mistresses Drawn from the Queen's Ladies-in-Waiting	162
	Bastards	165
	Bastard Kings	168
	Bastard Culture	175
	Legitimization	180
6	Family Dynamics	187
	The Shape of the Dynasty	187
	Brothers	191
	Wicked Uncles	210
	Killing Cousins	220
	Queens, Sons and Lovers	226
7	Royal Mortality	240
	Death	240
	Burial	251

PART II: A SENSE OF DYNASTY

8	Names and Numbering	283
	Terminology	283
	Names of Dynasties	285
	Naming Patterns within Dynasties	289
	Numbering of Monarchs	301
9	Saints, Images, Heraldry, Family Trees	311
	Dynastic Saints	311
	Public Images	315
	Heraldry	321
	Family Trees	326

CONTENTS

10 Responses to Dynastic Uncertainty: Prophecy and Astrology	340
Astrology	341
Prophecy	347
11 Pretenders and Returners: Dynastic Imposters in the Middle Ages	360
Recognition	373
12 New Families and New Kingdoms	379
Foundation Legends and Founding Figures	381
Healing the Dynastic Rent	384
Excluded Dynasts	388
New Kingdoms	393
13 Dynasties and the Non-Dynastic World	397
Elective Monarchy	397
Dynasties and the Church	403
Republics	413
Dynasties and Cities	416
Dynasty and the Kingdom	419
Conclusion	429
<i>Appendix A: Main Dynasties</i>	435
<i>Appendix B: Minorities</i>	444
<i>Appendix C: Female Sovereigns</i>	447
<i>Appendix D: Family Trees</i>	448
<i>Notes</i>	450
<i>Bibliography of Works Cited</i>	561
<i>Index</i>	607

Figures

1	Map depicting marriage alliances of the kings of Aragon, Denmark, England, France and Hungary, 1200–1500.	<i>page</i> 16
2	Anne, Duchess of Brittany (1488–1514).	41
3	The Byzantine empresses regnant, the sisters Zoe and Theodora, on a gold coin (<i>histamenon</i>) in 1042, the year of their joint rule.	128
4	Urraca, queen of Leon-Castile (1109–26).	132
5	Melisende, queen of Jerusalem (1131–52/61), and her husband Fulk of Anjou.	137
6	The Battle of Aljubarrota, 1385.	173
7	The Dunois Hours showing the count of Dunois (d. 1468).	179
8	The murder of John the Fearless, duke of Burgundy.	223
9	The tomb of the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II (d. 1250).	266
10	The image of the ‘anti-king’ Rudolf of Rheinfelden (d. 1080).	268
11	Tomb effigies of Henry II of England (d. 1189) and his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine (d. 1204).	270
12	The tomb of Richard II of England (d. 1400) and his wife Anne of Bohemia (d. 1394).	272
13	The tomb of Peter I of Portugal (d. 1367).	273
14	The tomb of Ines de Castro (d. 1355).	274
15	The entrails tombs of Charles IV of France (d. 1328) and his wife Joan of Evreux (d. 1371).	278
16	St Louis of Toulouse (d. 1297).	314
17	Wall paintings from Karlštejn Castle: Charles IV.	319
18	Wall paintings from Karlštejn Castle: Charles’ wife Blanche (d. 1348).	320

LIST OF FIGURES

19	Coins of the Byzantine rulers Constantine VI and Irene from 780–92.	322
20	A twelfth-century depiction of the Carolingian dynasty.	329
21	Bernard Gui's <i>The Tree of the Lineage of the Kings of the French</i> .	336
22	An English royal genealogical roll.	387

Preface and Acknowledgements

The subject of this book is the family politics of royal and imperial dynasties in Latin Christendom and Byzantium in the period 500–1500. Family politics means competition and cooperation within the ruling family, shaped at every point by the human life cycle of birth, marriage and death, and also by ideas of what a dynasty was. Hence the two parts of the book, the life cycle and a sense of dynasty. The main dynasties are listed in Appendix A. A full bibliography on this subject would fill a library but references have been given for all direct quotations and for facts other than those easily accessible. A few directly relevant titles have also been cited.

The book grew out of an invitation to deliver the Lydon lectures at Trinity College Dublin, a series of four lectures named in honour of the distinguished Trinity historian James Lydon, who was Lecky Professor of History at the College from 1980 to 1993 and died in 2013. The lectures were delivered in April 2017. Warm thanks are due to my hosts, Peter Crooks, David Ditchburn and Seán Duffy, and to the distinguished invited commentators on that occasion, Stewart Airlie, Sverre Bagge, Ana Rodríguez, Katharine Simms and Nicholas Vincent. Discussions at that time helped shape the further development of the book. Warm thanks for help of various sorts are due to Rory Cox, Michael Foster, Tim Greenwood and the late Ruth Macrides. Chris Given-Wilson, John Hudson and Simon MacLean had the great kindness to read through the whole text. I have incorporated their corrections and (most of) their suggestions and am extremely grateful to them for this act of collegiality and friendship.

Abbreviations

AN	Archives nationales, Paris
BAV	Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana
BHL	<i>Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina</i> (cited by item number)
BL	British Library, London
BnF	Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
CCCC	Corpus Christi College, Cambridge
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum, continuatio medievalis (Turnhout)
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, series latina (Turnhout)
JL	Jaffé (rev. Löwenfeld), <i>Regesta pontificum Romanorum</i> (cited by item number)
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae historica
AA	Auctores antiquissimi
DD	Diplomata
SRG	Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum
SS	Scriptores
ODNB	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> (60 vols., 2004)
OMT	Oxford Medieval Texts
PL	Patrologia Latina, ed. J.-P. Migne (221 vols., Paris, 1844–65)
Po.	Potthast, <i>Regesta pontificum Romanorum</i> (cited by item number)
Reg. Vat.	Registra Vaticana, Archivum Secretum Vaticanum
RHF	Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France (24 vols., Paris)
RS	Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores ('Rolls Series') (251 vols., London)
SHF	Société de l'histoire de France
TNA	The National Archives, Kew, London

INTRODUCTION

Royal Families

MONARCHIES ARE NOW RARE IN THE WORLD, NUMBERING around twenty in a system of almost two hundred independent states, but for hundreds of years monarchy was the way that politics worked in most countries. And monarchy meant power was in the hands of a family – a dynasty – and hence politics was family politics. It was not elections or referenda that shaped political life, but the births, marriages and deaths of the ruling family. This added further unpredictability to the unpredictable business of ruling. Even in modern Western democracies there have been political dynasties producing recurrent presidents, such as George Bush (1989–93) and George W. Bush (2001–9) in the USA, although this is rare. And the crucial thing about these democracies is that while George W. Bush could legitimately inherit personal property from his father, he could not inherit office. It was this separation of property, which could legitimately be distributed on family lines, from office, which could not, that marked the definitive step away from dynastic politics.

In this earlier, dynastic, world where office, including the highest, was family property, biology was a bigger determinant of political life than it is today. Biology does not determine all of human life but it determines a lot of it. Humans are born weaker and need more nurture than other mammals. They become sexually fertile in their teens. The number of children that a woman can bear is limited, the number that a man can father less so, although paternity is notoriously more difficult to establish than maternity. Old age advances on all humans, sometimes bringing with it a weakening of physical and mental powers. In the Middle Ages the absence of contraception meant that fertile women might have

numerous children, and poor sanitary conditions and rudimentary health care meant that many of them died before their first birthday. Average life span was low by modern Western standards. Even those who made it to the age of twenty were unlikely to live far beyond fifty. All these things shaped life for everyone, but their impact at the top of society, among the rulers, could have major political consequences. Sometimes those consequences were disastrous.

The main features of the life cycle of an individual can be sketched out easily: birth, childhood, relationships with parents and, probably, siblings, sexual maturity, sexual activity (usually), sexual partner or partners, the birth of children, relationships with children, aging, death. But, of course, this cycle takes place in a world where everyone else is also going through his or her own life cycle, and at a different pace and with innumerable variations. One can make generalizations about certain overall constraints to the human pattern, but that pattern is only truly discoverable in reality as a multitude of individual themes. The best model when analysing dynastic history may well not be the theorems of social science but a piece of baroque counterpoint.

In addition to these biological determinants, family life in the Middle Ages was shaped by assumptions about proper social roles. Medieval Europe was a patriarchal society, ruled, for the most part, by kings, who wished to hand on power after their deaths to their sons. This patriarchal concept of rulership is doubtless linked to the fact that kings were expected to be war-leaders. And the business of war was ‘man’s business’. An account of the upbringing of Godfrey de Bouillon, a hero of the First Crusade, puts it very succinctly: ‘for training in war, there is his father; for the veneration of God, there is his mother!’¹ When recruitment was taking place for the Third Crusade in the late 1180s, men who failed to answer the call to arms were sent wool and distaffs – a parallel to the white feathers of the First World War handed by women to men who had not enlisted but one with a specifically sexual meaning: if you aren’t going off to war, you might as well be a woman!² A French scholar of the later Middle Ages, explaining the purpose of the exclusion of women from succession to the throne of France, put it simply: ‘to the end that the commonwealth might be better and more powerfully defended by men than by women’.³ Conversely, the long-lived fascination with stories of

Amazons, always located in distant lands or distant times or both, must indicate that imagining a society of female warriors was an enthralling violation of ordinary norms and assumptions.

The power-structures of medieval Europe, however, were not shaped by Amazons but by the urge towards male-line succession. Even in the case of monarchies that were in theory elective, fathers were usually expected to be succeeded by sons. Some dynasties were extremely successful in achieving this. The Capetians, who became kings of France in 987, managed to pass the throne from father to son until 1316, an amazing 329 years later. Even when this direct transmission from father to son was interrupted, the French Crown nevertheless continued to pass exclusively through male lines of the dynasty, down to the deposition of the last king of France in 1848. If other kingdoms attained nothing like this kind of continuity, it was still customarily the goal to secure male-line descent. The Plantagenet kings of England could not match the Capetians in terms of father-son succession, but still managed to keep the throne in the hands of the male line for 331 years, from 1154 to 1485. Likewise, the Arpad kings of Hungary, however often they were at each other's throats, passed their title in the male line for 255 years, from 1046 to 1301. All the kings of Aragon from 1162 to 1410, a period of 248 years, were related in the male line.

So, as measured either by father-son transmission or by the looser yardstick of transmission in the male line, there were dynasties that endured for centuries. But not all medieval ruling families attained such dynastic continuity. A striking example is provided by Byzantium, especially in the long period before the fall of Constantinople to the Fourth Crusade in 1204. There are some complex decisions to make when counting Byzantine emperors and their succession, since co-emperorship was common, but a credible approximation is that, of about sixty-five imperial successions between 476, the date of the abdication of the last western Roman emperor, and 1204, only eighteen or so were simple father-son transfers of power, that is, not much more than one in four. All the others involved transmission by marriage, collateral inheritance or, very frequently, usurpation.⁴ Only two dynasties in the whole history of Byzantium in this period, the Heraclians and Macedonians, produced emperors in five successive generations. In this

respect succession in the Byzantine empire resembled that in the state from which it had grown, the Roman empire, which also had very few long-term dynasties. Foreigners noticed this distinctive pattern. 'Why', asked an envoy from the Khazars of the Asiatic steppes, 'do you follow the evil custom of replacing one emperor with another of different lineage?'⁵ The eleventh-century Armenian writer, Aristakès of Lastivert, also recognized this trait, contrasting Byzantine practice with that of other peoples, among whom the ruler's son succeeds him. Patrilineal succession is like iron, he says, the Byzantine custom of intrusion by outsiders is like mere brick.⁶

At the other end of Europe, it is also evident that in the Celtic and early Scandinavian worlds the nature of a ruling dynasty was different from that of, say, the Capetians or Plantagenets. Irish royal succession is a subject which non-specialists approach at their peril, but it may be possible for an outsider to sketch the general outline.⁷ It seems that in Ireland, as in Wales and in early Scandinavia, it was assumed that the new king would be an adult male, that hereditary right would be only one of the grounds he would put forward to justify his claim to succeed, and that this hereditary right could look different from the hereditary rights asserted by royal claimants in other parts of western Europe. In particular, there was a much larger pool of candidates for kingship, because of concubinage or frequent divorce and remarriage, the recognition of the long-term rights of collateral branches of the dynasty, and hence a smaller role for primogeniture.

The distinctive features of the family structures of the ruling classes of Ireland, Wales and early Scandinavia were noted, usually disapprovingly, by their neighbours. Adam of Bremen, a German observer of things Scandinavian, remarked that when King Canute died in 1035, he left three sons, two of whom 'were born of a concubine, and who, as is the custom among barbarians, shared an equal part of the inheritance as Canute's children'.⁸ He also described the polygamy practised by the Swedish chieftains: 'in coupling with women they know no measure; each has two or three or more at the same time, according to his means; rich men and rulers have them without number; the sons born from such unions are deemed legitimate'.⁹ Anglo-Norman and English ecclesiastics of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries reiterated complaints

about Irish and Welsh practices: incest, that is, cousin marriage; the dissolubility of marriages; the equal standing of legitimate and illegitimate children.¹⁰ It is clear that if one combines recurrent divorce and remarriage, or the public recognition of women other than the wife, with acceptance of the rights of the children of several, or even all, sexual partners, the chances of a ruler leaving sons will be greater than in a system of indissoluble monogamy and rights only for the legitimate, which was the rule, at least in principle, in many other parts of Christendom. This is why Irish royal dynasties did not face the issues of female succession or succession by minors, since there would always be adult male claimants when a king died.

If we turn to look at the workings of the dynastic system prevalent in most parts of Europe, we find its underlying and basic principle expressed very cogently in the following statement by Margaret of Burgundy, the sister of Edward IV and Richard III of England, writing in 1495: 'In this kingdom, as is well known, a king is constituted not by the wishes of the people or by election or by the right of war but by the propagation of blood.'¹¹ 'Propagation of blood' means sex and child-birth, and hence the human life cycle. One could begin one's analysis at any phase of that cycle, but the search for a bride is a reasonable starting point.

PART I

THE LIFE CYCLE

CHAPTER 1

Choosing a Bride

FOR A DYNASTY TO SURVIVE, IT HAS TO REPRODUCE. BY THE eleventh century, in most parts of western Europe, for the ruling families, reproduction meant marriage as defined by the Church. A king was expected to have one wife at a time, marriage could be ended only by death or in very precise circumstances laid down by the Church, and only offspring of these sanctified monogamous marriages were legitimate. Earlier, more casual, arrangements had been replaced or marginalized. So, for these ruling families, formal marriages were an essential part of their strategy and hence a never-ending subject of debate, discussion and disagreement. Sometimes this even involved babies being committed to future brides or bridegrooms. The first step, logically, was for a wife to be found for the king or future king. Indeed, from the point of view of the ruling dynasty and its advisers, one of the most important political decisions to be made was which bride to choose for kings or princes. *Car feme prendre est molt grans cose* – ‘to take a wife is a very big thing’.¹ Marriage could even be classed, along with warfare, as one of the two things necessary for the state: ‘those things and activities without which the earthly commonwealth cannot be sustained, namely, marriage and the use of weapons’.²

The bride’s status was important. In the early Middle Ages, the Merovingian kings of the Franks sometimes took wives of very low social status, including slaves. Charibert (561–7) married the daughter of a wool worker, who had been a servant of his previous wife, and later took as another of his queens the daughter of a shepherd.³ Bilichilde, queen of Theudebert II (d. 612), was a slave who had been purchased from some merchants by his grandmother.⁴ Nantechildis, queen of

Dagobert I, was chosen by the king from among his servant girls.⁵ The great historian of the Merovingian dynasty, J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, saw this practice as a reflection of the eminence of the royal kindred: it was 'a family of such rank that its blood could not be ennobled by any match, however advantageous, nor degraded by the blood of slaves'.⁶ But this pattern, akin to the practices of the Ottoman sultans of Early Modern times, was unusual. Sexual unions with slaves or commoners were not characteristic of the ruling dynasties of Christian Europe later in the Middle Ages. A royal bride had to be high-born. One of the objections raised by his enemies against Charles of Lorraine, the last Carolingian claimant to the throne of France, was his marriage to a woman below him in status: 'He has married a wife who was not his equal, from the knightly class.' How, they asked, could a great duke of France allow such a woman 'to be made queen and rule him'?⁷

But, granted that a royal bride should be high-born, this still left a vital decision: was she to be from a local aristocratic family or a high-born foreign bride? It was a subject on which there were strong opinions. Erasmus, for example, thought it would be 'by far the most advantageous to the state if the marriage alliances of rulers were confined within the borders of the kingdom'.⁸ But both strategies had their advantages and their drawbacks. Indeed, in a fictional dialogue composed in Russia in 1776, the protagonist of the view that the tsar should marry a foreign princess claimed, 'I can give you forty reasons to show the advantage' of that policy; his opponent, however, was not impressed: 'And I could lay before you 400 reasons to prove the advantage of marriages with their own subjects.'⁹

When discussing the advantages and disadvantages of each policy, the crucial point is that marriage not only created a new married couple but also created in-laws, relatives by marriage. Ruling dynasties relied on powerful noble families for support, and a marriage alliance with one of these powerful kindreds could cement and symbolize internal alliances of this kind. On the other hand, a miscalculation might upset the balance of aristocratic power. The impulsive and imprudent marriage of Edward IV of England to Elizabeth Woodville, one of his 'own subjects', had this effect: the speedy advancement of the new queen's relatives seems to have irritated the established aristocracy and undermined

support for Edward's regime.¹⁰ Foreign brides, on the other hand, brought links with other ruling dynasties, which could be useful, and they were free, at least initially, of any alignment with local aristocratic factions. This could be attractive. After he seized the throne in 1078, the Byzantine emperor Nicephorus Botaniates was advised to marry the Georgian princess Maria of Alania, the wife of his predecessor, 'because she was a foreigner and there was no crowd of relatives attached to her to pester the emperor'.¹¹ Maria of Alania may have been exceptional in this respect, however. Many foreign brides did bring crowds of relatives with them, who provoked distrust and envy.

Marriage with Local Aristocrats

Some ruling families concentrated their marriage strategy upon creating ties within the kingdom rather than beyond it. An example is the Carolingians.¹² They had long been the most powerful aristocratic family in the Frankish realm before they seized the throne in 751 and they then expanded Frankish power throughout western Europe, ruling territory that covered all or part of nine or ten modern European states (some historians assess the Carolingian empire at a million square kilometres or more).¹³ Charlemagne was crowned not just king but emperor in 800. Yet, despite the huge territories they ruled and their ascent to the imperial title, the Carolingians tended to marry among the daughters of their own Frankish aristocracy. Charlemagne's son and successor, Louis the Pious, married, first, Ermengard, daughter of the Frankish duke (or count) Ingram, and then Judith, daughter of the Frankish duke (or count) Welf.¹⁴ Louis actually forbade his sons from marrying foreign wives. When he issued his ordinance of 817 regulating the succession, he urged the younger brothers, if they were to marry after his death, to do so with the advice and agreement of their oldest brother, adding, 'however, in order to avoid disagreements and to remove any pretext for anything harmful, we decree that none of them should presume to take a wife from foreign peoples.'¹⁵ Louis' sons, Lothar, Louis the German and Charles the Bald, followed this advice. Louis the German actually followed his father's example quite closely, marrying Hemma, Welf's daughter and hence the sister of his own stepmother. And Louis the

German's three sons, each of whom was granted a sub-kingdom, married women from the Frankish aristocracy of Bavaria, Saxony and Alsace, the areas where their power was initially based.¹⁶

This pattern was general in the dynasty. Of Charlemagne's descendants in the male line, twenty-six bore the title of king or emperor. The last of these died in 987. It is not always possible to name their wives or say much about their origins, but there are twenty-three cases where this can be done.¹⁷ Of these twenty-three royal wives, twenty came from the Frankish aristocracy in the kingdoms where their husbands ruled. The pattern only begins to change slightly in the tenth century, when there are three generations of West Frankish kings of Carolingian descent who sought royal brides outside their kingdom. Around the year 919 Charles the Simple, king of the West Franks, married Eadgifu, daughter of Edward the Elder, king of Wessex, the first time a royal descendant of Charlemagne had married into a foreign royal family. The son of Charles and Eadgifu, Louis IV, who eventually succeeded to his father's throne, married Gerberga, daughter of Henry I of the East Franks. By the time they wed, the kingdom of the West Franks and the kingdom of the East Franks had been separate for fifty-two years (887–939), so the union between Louis and the non-Carolingian Gerberga can be regarded as a marriage between members of two separate royal families, although, for Louis, what was doubtless of greater political importance was that Gerberga was the widow of the duke of Lotharingia, a vast duchy much disputed between the kings of the West Franks and the kings of the East Franks. Finally, Louis and Gerberga's son, Lothar, who ruled the kingdom of the West Franks from 954 to 986, took as his bride Emma, daughter of Lothar, king of Italy, and Adelheid of Burgundy. By the time of this marriage Lothar of Italy was long dead and Adelheid had remarried Otto, king of the East Franks, so the bond was in reality again with the East Frankish kingdom. But these cases are exceptional when placed in the context of the Carolingian dynasty as a whole.

Kings of the house of Wessex, who became kings of England from the tenth century, tended, like the Carolingians, to marry the daughters of their own great aristocrats (*ealdormen*). There were exceptions, such as Æthelwulf (839–58) who married as his second wife Judith, daughter of Charles the Bald, king of the West Franks, or Æthelred the Unready

(978–1016) who married Emma, daughter of Richard I of Normandy, but the usual pattern was to create a bond with native families. An example that shows both the advantages and disadvantages of such unions is the tie between Edward the Confessor, last of the kings of the Wessex line, and the family of Earl Godwin, whose daughter, Edith, the king married. This powerful noble family provided support for Edward's succession in 1042, and the king in return bestowed earldoms upon Godwin's sons. The marriage between Edward and Edith took place in 1045. But relations were complicated by factional divisions and, in 1051, Godwin and his sons were outlawed and Edith placed in a nunnery. However, the family had sufficient military might and support within England to return in the following year, re-establish their position and make Edward take Edith back as his queen. After the death of Godwin, his son Harold became the most powerful man in England and succeeded the childless Edward in 1066. Whether it is fair to describe Edward as a 'puppet king' of the Godwinsons is arguable,¹⁸ but they are clearly a good example of an aristocratic family whose marriage tie with the king was both consequence of and contribution to their immense political power. For Edward, this alliance was a strength and a hindrance.

The Byzantines, as the embodiment of the Roman empire, were especially conscious of the high prestige that a marriage alliance with them might bring, and even claimed that there were strict rules governing such alliances. Around the middle of the tenth century, the emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus wrote that there was a law of Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor, engraved in Hagia Sophia, 'that an emperor of the Romans shall never make a marriage alliance with a people who differ from and are alien in their customs to the Roman order . . . except with the Franks alone'.¹⁹ A generation later, when the envoy Liudprand of Cremona came to the Byzantine court seeking a marriage alliance for his lord, Otto (later Otto II), he says he was told, 'It is unheard of that a daughter born in the purple to an emperor born in the purple should be joined to a foreigner.'²⁰ This was in fact untrue, although it might have been a way of avoiding simple rejection of Otto. Anna porphyrogenita, sister of Basil II, was married to Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, not long after Liudprand's humiliating rebuttal at the Byzantine

court.²¹ She brought with her to Russia not only the glamour of an older and wealthier civilization, but also Christianity.

One function of internal marriages was to create bonds between great families. If a marriage was arranged between two warring families as part of a settlement, the bride might be described as *obses pacis*, which can be translated as ‘pledge of peace’, but also as ‘hostage for peace’. For example, when the rebellious noble Erchanger came to terms with Conrad I of Germany, ‘the king received his sister in matrimony, as a pledge of peace’. And the twelfth-century counts of Cappenberg prided themselves on descent from the lineage of both Charlemagne and his great Saxon opponent Widukind (called ‘King Widukind’ in their traditions): ‘they say that Charles gave a daughter of his sister to Widukind’s son as his wife and a pledge of peace’.²² When the chronicler William of Malmesbury described how the Frankish king Charles the Simple gave his daughter Gisela to the Viking adventurer Rollo along with the land that later was called Normandy (a purely legendary event), he calls Gisela ‘a vessel of peace and a pledge of the treaty’.²³

The marriage of a king’s daughter with a powerful local aristocrat might give that noble, or his heirs, the chance to claim the throne themselves, if the king left no surviving sons. When, in 1079, the emperor Henry IV betrothed his young daughter Agnes to Frederick, duke of Swabia, he already had one son and was to have another, but neither of those sons themselves had sons, so that when the second of them died in 1125, the male line of Henry IV’s family was extinguished. At this point the son of Agnes and Frederick, duke of Swabia, another Frederick, became a candidate for the throne. Since the empire was elective rather than hereditary, he could not claim hereditary right, but his prospects and his expectations were clearly shaped by the fact that he was the grandson of Henry IV.²⁴ As it turned out, Frederick was not able to establish himself on the throne, but his younger brother Conrad was ultimately more successful and became the first German ruler of the Hohenstaufen dynasty in 1138. A royal–aristocratic union in 1079 had thus helped to bring a new dynasty to the throne fifty-nine years later.

The ties that marriage created between a royal dynasty and local aristocrats could clearly be both useful and awkward. This may explain

why some rulers kept their daughters unmarried, removing the problem of sons-in-law entirely. Charlemagne famously kept his daughters to himself:

Remarkable to relate, because they were very beautiful and greatly loved by him, he was not willing to give any of them in marriage to anyone, his own men or foreigners, but kept them at home with him until his death, saying that he could not bear to lose their company.²⁵

Since access to these beautiful princesses was not, apparently, completely controlled, Charlemagne's policy gave him, as an indirect result, some illegitimate grandchildren, but it led to no other dynastic complications. Two generations later, in 867, when Basil I seized the Byzantine throne, he also avoided sons-in-law, but in a completely different way. He made three of his sons co-emperors, but placed all his four daughters into the family nunnery.²⁶ But such cases of rulers keeping their daughters unmarried were exceptional. Royal women were usually regarded as a valuable medium of exchange. This is most clear in the case of foreign queens.

Foreign Queens

In several kingdoms, the foreign queen was the rule not the exception. Between 1066 and 1464 no English king married an English woman.²⁷ Most English queens in this period were French, indicating the central place of France in the world of the Norman and Plantagenet kings, although, since many of the kings were more French than English, perhaps the word 'foreign' for these queens is not quite right. 'Foreign' is a relative term. Of the thirty queens of Denmark between 1000 and 1500, only three were Danish.²⁸ In the earlier part of that period, Danish kings found their brides among princesses from other Scandinavian kingdoms or from the Slavic world, including Russia, while in the late Middle Ages marital links were primarily with the princely houses of northern Germany, many of which by this time had a status and resources only slightly below royalty.

The circulation of these high-born brides was one way in which the various courts of Christian Europe maintained contact. In fact, one could

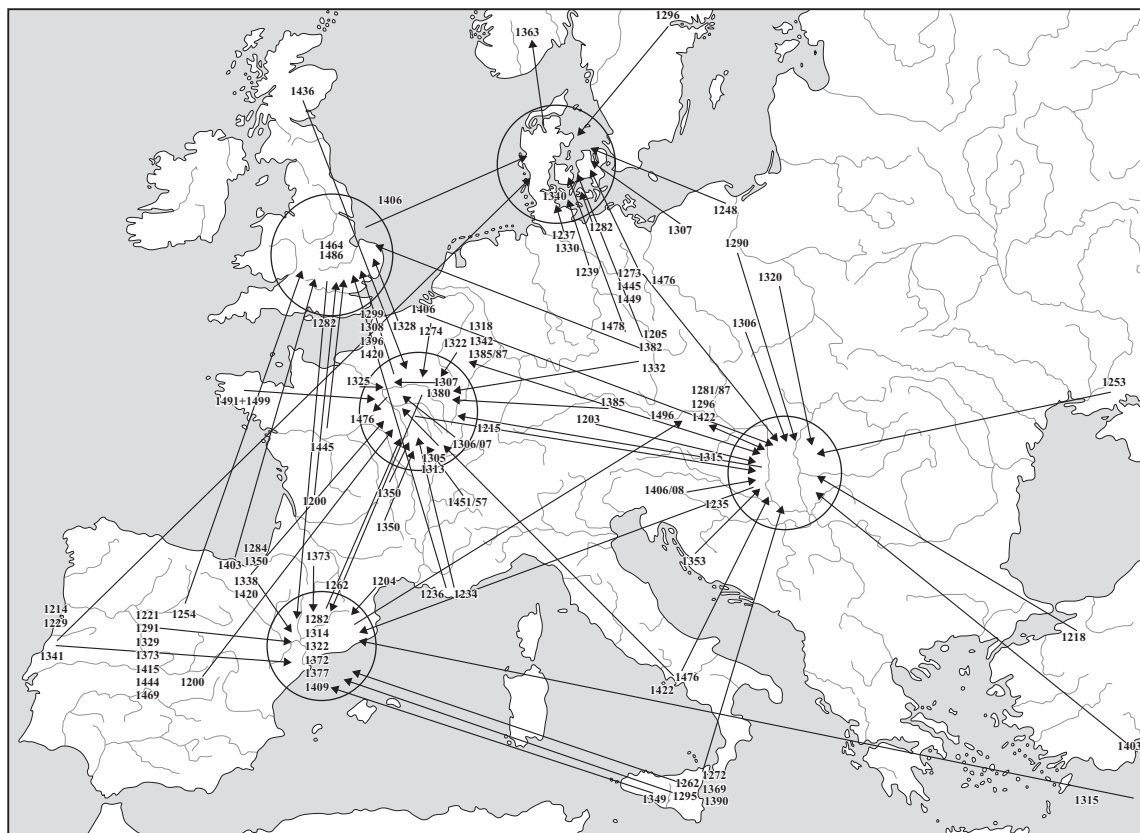


Figure 1 Map depicting marriage alliances of the kings of Aragon, Denmark, England, France and Hungary, 1200–1500. Redrawn from Karl-Heinz Spiess, 'Europa heiratet. Kommunikation und Kulturtransfer im Kontext europäischer Königsheiraten des Spätmittelalters', in *Europa im späten Mittelalter: Politik, Gesellschaft, Kultur*, ed. Rainer C. Schwinges et al. (Historische Zeitschrift, Beihefte, Neue Folge, 40 Munich, 2006), pp. 435–64, p. 464, [map 15](#).

define the culture-areas of medieval Europe by plotting which realms exchanged brides and which did not.²⁹ Although Byzantine brides were occasionally sent to western Europe, Byzantine emperors rarely married foreign brides in the early Middle Ages. There was one such marriage in the seventh century, one in the eighth (both with Khazar brides), none in the ninth, and one in the tenth.³⁰ It is true that more marriages with Westerners were negotiated than were finally concluded,³¹ but this pattern still means there was a lack of the permanent links between courts that international marriages produced. The marriage between the emperor Isaac Comnenus (1057–9) and Catherine, daughter of a Bulgarian ruler, is no exception because it took place long before anyone expected him to become emperor, and, by the time he did, Bulgaria had long ceased to be an independent state.³² After his reign, however, the pattern began to change, with marriages such as that between Michael VII Doukas and the Georgian princess Martha/Maria, while, from the time of the marriage of John Comnenus, heir to the imperial throne, and a Hungarian princess in the first decade of the twelfth century, down to the extinction of the empire in 1453, foreign brides, mainly from Latin Christendom, formed a majority of the Byzantine empresses.³³ The dramatic reorientation of the Byzantine political situation from the late eleventh century is thus reflected in imperial marriage patterns, as the large and autonomous empire of the earlier period was transformed into the much smaller state of the later Middle Ages, with its multiple connections, good and bad, with the West.

Marriages between eastern (Greek, Orthodox) and western (Latin, Catholic) Christians were originally simply marriages between partners of different cultures, but, as the theological temperature became heated and political and military relations more confrontational, culminating in the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204, such marriages might indeed be considered 'mixed marriages'. Innocent III, the pope at the time of the capture of the Byzantine capital, certainly expressed himself as if he thought so. He was considering the complicated case of Margaret, daughter of the king of Hungary, who married the Byzantine emperor Isaac II in 1185 when she was about ten. She took the Greek name Maria and was brought up following Byzantine customs. After the death of Isaac and the conquest of Constantinople, she married again, this time one of

the Latin conquerors, Boniface of Montferrat. This marriage was carried out according to Latin rites, but, according to the pope, Margaret-Maria ‘nevertheless shrank from returning to Latin ways so immediately, as a too impudent champion of Greek custom’. Eventually, under pressure from both her husband and the papal legate, she ‘accepted a Latin blessing and received the body of Christ, consecrated according to Latin traditions’. Pope Innocent wrote to congratulate her and took her under his protection.³⁴ In this case, some very palpable signs were being read as markers of identity and allegiance: the use of leavened or unleavened bread for the Eucharist, the language of ritual. Royal brides had to decide.

Although it was not a very common practice, there were dynastic marriages that crossed the boundary between the Christian and the Muslim world. These were almost entirely between Muslim male rulers and Christian princesses, for, while the Koran explicitly allowed a Muslim man to marry a Christian or Jewish woman, Muslim societies prohibited and penalized sexual relations between Muslim women and Christian or Jewish men.³⁵ An example is found in Iberia very soon after the Muslim conquest, for both Christian and Muslim sources report that ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, the Arab governor 714–16, married the widow of the last Christian king of Visigothic Spain. She encouraged his separatist ambitions, which led to his downfall.³⁶ By the later eighth century, such unions were so common that, when Pope Hadrian I (772–95) wrote a long letter to the Spanish bishops, it was specifically the practice of Christian families giving their daughters in marriage to Muslims that he condemned.³⁷

Some of these marriages represented political dealings at a high level. For instance, a Christian chronicler reporting the revolt of a Berber leader in north-east Spain in the early 730s describes a marriage alliance he had made earlier with the duke of Aquitaine: ‘A duke of the Franks named Eudo had long ago given his daughter to him in marriage, for the sake of alliance and to put off the attacks of the Arabs.’³⁸ Occasionally there were marriages between members of powerful Muslim clans and aristocratic or royal women from Christian Spain during the ninth and tenth centuries.³⁹ An Arabic source which describes the fifty-six raids undertaken by the great Muslim general al-Mansur records, of the sixteenth raid, that he forced the Christian king (probably Sancho II of

Navarre) to make an agreement and give al-Mansur his daughter in marriage.⁴⁰ Such marriages were, however, rare, and ceased completely after the eleventh century when the power balance between Christian and Muslim states in the Iberian peninsula began to tilt in favour of the former.

An exception to the pattern 'Muslim male-Christian female' is found in the case of Zaida, wife or mistress of Alfonso VI of Leon and Castile. She later became a legendary figure, but there seems no doubt that she was real, and probably to be identified as the widow of al-Fath al Ma'mun, son of the ruler of Seville. In 1091 Seville was conquered by the Almoravids, invading from Morocco, and al-Fath al-Ma'mun was killed. It was probably at this point that Zaida (the name is simply the Arabic for 'Lady') sought refuge with Alfonso and became his mistress and perhaps his wife. Zaida is reported to have converted to Christianity and borne a son, Sancho (see below, p. 69).⁴¹

Eastern Orthodox Christians had faced the pressure of the Muslim world since its creation in the seventh century, and that pressure increased as the Mongols and Turks, peoples who both eventually converted to Islam, expanded their territories in the later Middle Ages. Warfare was one reaction, but diplomacy was another, along with its tool, the dynastic marriage. The Byzantine emperor Michael VIII (1258–82) gave illegitimate daughters in marriage to the Mongol ruler of Persia (the Ilkhan) and to the khan of the Golden Horde (in southern Russia), while between 1297 and 1461 at least thirty-four Byzantine and Serbian princesses married Mongol or Turkish rulers.⁴² When the Muslim traveller Ibn Battuta visited the court of the Mongol khan Uzbeg, ruler of the Golden Horde from 1313 to 1341, he was entertained by one of the khan's wives, who turned out to be a daughter of the Byzantine emperor. She was pregnant and received permission to return to Constantinople for the birth. Ibn Battuta travelled in her entourage and remarked that, as soon as she was in Greek territory again, she abandoned Islamic religious practice and commenced drinking wine and eating pork.⁴³ Both of the rival Byzantine emperors of the mid-fourteenth century, John VI Cantacuzenus (1341–54) and John V Palaeologus (1341–91), married their daughters to Ottoman rulers, in the pursuit of Turkish military support. In 1346 Theodora, daughter of

John VI, married the Ottoman ruler Orhan, who sent thirty ships and a troop of cavalry to escort her from Greek to Turkish territory, and in the following year John entertained Theodora and Orhan's four adult sons (by other wives) on a summer visit to Byzantium.⁴⁴

Dynastic marriages between Muslim and Christian states were almost entirely of one kind, with Christian princesses coming from countries adjacent to, and often subordinate to, powerful Islamic realms, such as those of al-Andalus in the earlier Middle Ages, or those of the Mongols and the Turks in the later Middle Ages. The Muslim ruler, not bound to having only one wife and allowed by the Koran to take a Christian wife, could easily add one as an attribute of prestige and without regarding the marriage as an alliance of equals. As an early Islamic authority put it, 'Our men are above their women, but their men are not to be above our women.'⁴⁵

When a royal bride passed from the Christian to the Muslim world she would be surrounded by a different religion and culture. Passage from Latin to Greek Christian society, or vice-versa, was not so drastic a voyage but still involved adopting or adapting to unfamiliar language, religious practice and social habits. Within Latin Christendom itself, some courts exchanged brides more regularly than others, and these patterns might change over time. The political and cultural geography of medieval Europe is, in part, constituted by who gave brides to whom. For example, the position of Bohemia and Moravia between eastern and western Europe is reflected in the marriage choices of the ruling dynasty, the Premyslids: most of the wives of the male members were from German princely houses, sometimes including the highest, as in the case of the wife of Wenceslas I, who was daughter of the German Hohenstaufen king, Philip of Swabia, or the first wife of Wenceslas II, who was the daughter of Rudolf of Habsburg, another German king, but there was also considerable intermarriage with the ruling dynasties of Hungary and Poland, links which in the last days of the dynasty even led to Premyslid rule in those lands. On occasion, too, the Russian princely houses supplied wives, such as Cunigunda, second wife of Premysl Otakar II, who was the daughter of a Russian prince of the house of Chernigov and a Hungarian princess. Premysl Otakar combined the introduction of his new wife to Prague at Christmas 1261 with his regal coronation. The

archbishop of Mainz (the metropolitan of the diocese of Prague) officiated, in the presence of the two bishops of the Premyslid lands, plus the bishop of Passau and two bishops from Prussia. Secular dignities present included the margrave of Brandenburg and his family, Polish dukes and the great men of Bohemia.⁴⁶ With its Rhineland pontiff, its German, Czech and Polish princes and its half-Russian, half-Hungarian bride, this gathering is a good example of the way Bohemia and Moravia acted as a literal point of contact between west and east, epitomized in the pattern of its royal brides.

This circulation of women could produce unusual links and connections. Adela, daughter of Robert the Frisian, count of Flanders (1071–93), was married first to Canute IV (or II), king of Denmark, but, after his murder in 1086, she fled back to Flanders with her young son Charles; subsequently, in 1092, she married again to Roger Borsa, duke of Apulia and Calabria, and bore him a son, William. William succeeded his father in 1111, while, in Flanders, after the death of his cousin in 1119, Charles inherited the county. This is how it happened that in 1120 two rulers of territories a thousand miles apart, Apulia and Flanders, were half-brothers.⁴⁷

Rulers with several daughters might choose not to keep them at home, like Charlemagne, but to send them out to foreign courts, creating multiple ties and connections. Four daughters of Edward the Elder, king of Wessex (899–924), went overseas as brides in this way, the first of them, Eadgifu, between 916 and 919, to marry Charles the Simple, king of the West Franks. The policy continued after King Edward's death under his son Æthelstan, brother or half-brother of these royal women. During the early part of Æthelstan's reign daughters of King Edward married Hugh the Great, the most powerful noble in the kingdom of the West Franks and ancestor of the dynasty later called Capetian; Otto, later to be the emperor Otto I; and the brother of the king of Burgundy.⁴⁸ In the 930s, therefore, Anglo-Saxon royal sisters were prominent at royal or ducal courts in three continental kingdoms. This has been called 'the high point in cross-Channel royal links in the early middle ages as a whole'.⁴⁹

A yet wider internationalism is expressed in the marriages of the three daughters of Henry II (1154–89), first of the Angevin dynasty to rule

England. The oldest, Matilda, married Henry the Lion, duke of Saxony, at the age of eleven, while her younger sisters, Eleanor and Joanna, married the king of Castile and the king of Sicily respectively. Contemporaries were struck by these wide geographical vistas and exalted prospects. The three daughters were 'three bright beams that illuminated three different and opposite parts of Europe'.⁵⁰ The chronicler Ralph de Diceto, dean of St Paul's, showed a touching concern with the fate of these tender girls sent out to foreign parts to fulfil their dynastic duties. He considered that they could seek consolation from the example of their grandmother Matilda, Henry II's mother, who had herself been wed to a German emperor at the age of eleven.

The stony barbarity of the Saxons, the doubtful conflict of the Spaniards with the Hagarenes (i.e. the Muslims) and the wild tyranny of the Sicilians could have induced continual horror in the daughters of the king of England, dwelling among these peoples so far from England in diet, clothing, behaviour and location. But the nobility of their grandmother, the empress Matilda, and the manly heart in her female body had shown beforehand to her granddaughters the paths of endurance ... to be imitated.⁵¹

This dynastic internationalism of the Angevin world, manifested in the ties binding ruling families in different parts of the Latin West, had some long-term political consequences. As a result of the first of these marriages, between Matilda and Henry the Lion, a long-lasting alliance was established between the English royal house and Henry's family, the Welfs. When Henry the Lion was forced into exile by the emperor Frederick Barbarossa, he sought refuge with Henry II and spent long periods with him in England and France. One of his sons was born in Winchester. After the death of Henry II, his son Richard the Lionheart proved as strong an ally. Bonds with a sister's son were traditionally important in the Germanic world, and Richard favoured his young nephews, Matilda's children, especially Otto, whom he made count of Poitou and for whom he sought the succession to the Scottish Crown. Under Richard's successor, John, the alliance with Otto, now elected Holy Roman Emperor, was a cornerstone of the English king's policy. Only after the crushing defeat of Otto and his English allies at the Battle

of Bouvines in 1214 did the connection between the two families weaken.⁵²

Eleanor's marriage to Alfonso VIII of Castile also had important results. Alfonso claimed the marriage deal had been sealed with the promise of Gascony, perhaps with the proviso that the grant would only take effect when its duchess, Eleanor's mother and namesake, Eleanor of Aquitaine, died.⁵³ This happened in 1204, and Alfonso soon occupied most of Gascony. It required considerable effort to eject him.⁵⁴ The kings of Castile did not finally relinquish all claims to Gascony until 1254, claims that were described at that time, diplomatically, as arising 'by reason of the grant that the lord Henry, former king of England, made, or is said to have made'.⁵⁵ Another political consequence of this marriage arose through one of the children it produced. Blanche, daughter of Eleanor and Alfonso, married Louis, the son of Philip Augustus, king of France, and when Louis was offered the English throne by rebel barons in 1216, he used this connection to support his claim. John, king of England, he said, had forfeited his rights by his treachery against his brother, Richard the Lionheart, so that, on Richard's death,

the right to the kingdom of England devolved upon the queen of Castile and her heirs, since she was the sole survivor of his brothers and sisters, except for this John. However, she and her heirs freely granted their right in the kingdom to us and to her daughter, whom we have as wife.⁵⁶

Being married to a granddaughter of Henry II was not enough to win Louis the English Crown but it was a card worth playing.

The third of these Angevin marriages, that of Joanna and the king of Sicily, also involved continued far-flung political and military activity. Joanna's husband, King William, died in 1189 and the throne was taken by an illegitimate relative, Tancred. When, in the following year, Richard the Lionheart arrived in Sicily on his way to the crusade, he found his sister in an unhappy position. Tancred had refused to give her the widow's dower that she was owed and kept her in custody. The presence of the famous military hero as his sister's champion soon induced Tancred to release Joanna and enter into negotiations about her dower. This was settled at 20,000 ounces of gold. When Richard sailed

on to the Holy Land in the following spring, he took his sister, and the gold, with him.⁵⁷

In these, often unpredictable, ways, the ambitious marriages that Henry II had negotiated for his daughters in the 1160s and 1170s shaped the politics of Europe for generations: the claims of the kings of Castile to Gascony and the claims of the French prince Louis to the English Crown, the alliance of Plantagenet and Welf that marked the politics of England, France and Germany throughout the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, and the unexpected funding of Richard the Lionheart's crusade partly from the gold of Sicily, all were consequences of those marriages.

Sometimes the advantages that a foreign marriage brought were immediate and tangible. For instance, in 1428, when the French king, Charles VII, arranged the marriage of his son and heir with Margaret, daughter of James I of Scotland, the young fiancée crossed to France with six thousand Scottish warriors, a useful reinforcement for the French in the Hundred Years War.⁵⁸ Dowries could be sizable, either in cash or land. One of the more extensive territorial acquisitions that came as part of a marriage arrangement between two royal families was the incorporation of the islands of Orkney and Shetland into the kingdom of Scotland. The islands had been ruled by the kings of Norway since the tenth century but in 1468 Christian, king of Norway (also at this time king of Denmark), promised a dowry of 60,000 Rhenish florins with his daughter Margaret on her marriage to James III of Scotland. Of this, 10,000 was to be paid in cash, and Orkney was handed over to the king of Scots as a guarantee that the remaining 50,000 would be paid. The following year, since Christian was unable to raise the 10,000 florins, he also handed over Shetland as a guarantee for this. The dowry was never paid; the islands never returned to Norwegian rule and became an integral part of the kingdom of Scots.⁵⁹

The concrete benefits of marriage alliances with distant courts could be valuable over a long term and in sometimes unforeseen ways, as was demonstrated when the German ruler Conrad III came to Constantinople en route to the Second Crusade, and encountered a Byzantine emperor who was his brother-in-law and who treated him with especial consideration:

For there was a bond between them, since their wives were sisters, daughters of Berengar the Older, count of Sulzbach, a great and outstanding ruler, most powerful in the kingdom of the Germans: because of this he was overflowing with greater favour towards him and, especially because of the empress' requests, felt obliged to pour out more plentiful generosity for him and his men.⁶⁰

Later, after Conrad's return to Germany, he maintained the close link with the Byzantine empress, writing directly to her about the political situation and proposing further marriage alliances between the two dynasties. His young son also wrote enthusiastically to his aunt in Constantinople, boasting to her of his first victory over enemy forces.⁶¹

The advantages that foreign queens brought could include providing a safe haven in times of crisis. In the 920s, for example, Charles the Simple, king of the West Franks, suffered the indignities of dispossession and imprisonment on more than one occasion, and died in captivity in 929. His young son Louis, whose mother was the English princess Eadgifu, 'fearing to become entangled himself in the storms that had been so disastrous for his father, betook himself to the Anglo-Saxons, invited there thanks to the family connections of his mother'.⁶² Louis stayed in England until 936, when circumstances allowed him to return to France as king. His years in the safety of his mother's homeland are evoked by his nickname, 'Louis d'Outremer' – 'Louis from across the sea'.⁶³ His case is a good illustration of something said centuries later by Christine de Pisan, pointing out the advantages of such marriages: 'the marriage alliances of the beautiful ladies of the blood royal, through which are born new relatives in foreign countries and bonds with distant nations'.⁶⁴

But marriages with foreign princesses might have disadvantages too. Political circumstances might change, rendering the link with the foreign court less relevant or even awkward. And if a king wished to get rid of his wife, her powerful royal relatives might well object. As is well known, one of the reasons Henry VIII of England had such difficulty in divorcing his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, stemmed from the fact that she was the aunt of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, the most powerful ruler in Europe and one with leverage

over the pope. A similar example of a foreign sovereign championing a wronged queen (although not in this case one rejected because she had not borne children) occurred in the late twelfth century, when Philip Augustus of France repudiated his second wife, Ingeborg of Denmark (see also below, pp. 46–8). She had the backing of her royal brother, Canute IV, who could fund missions to the pope to plead her case, and himself wrote to the pope and the cardinals, urging the imposition on France of an interdict (the suspension of all ecclesiastical services). ‘It has always seemed right to us to submit our necks to the yoke of obedience to the Roman Church’, Canute wrote to Pope Celestine III in 1196, ‘and only if the Roman Church first failed us will we have any wish to separate from her’, a nicely phrased threat.⁶⁵ As soon as Celestine’s successor, Innocent III, was elected pope in 1198, Canute’s envoys were on their way to the papal court, complaining ‘about Philip, king of France, who had unjustly abandoned his wife, his (Canute’s) sister, and married another woman in her place’. Innocent sent a legate to threaten the interdict.⁶⁶ An interdict was eventually imposed upon France in 1200 and only lifted when Philip Augustus made a partial submission. After the death of Canute IV in 1202, his brother and successor, Valdemar II, continued support for their sister, until, in 1213, the French king agreed to at least a formal reconciliation with his Danish queen. Ingeborg was grateful for the help she had received from her royal brothers. When, many years later, in 1225, King Valdemar was captured and imprisoned by his north German enemies, a considerable portion of his ransom was sent from France by his sister.⁶⁷ If Ingeborg had not been a princess, perhaps Philip Augustus would have been able to get rid of her with less trouble.

Homesick Queens

Foreign brides were not only powerful vehicles of dynastic policy, they were also teenage girls sent into strange worlds, and one of the problems they faced was homesickness. In the late sixth century, as the Visigothic princess Galswintha was about to be sent north to be the bride of a Frankish king, the sympathetic poet Venantius Fortunatus pictured her reluctance, as she clung to her mother and lamented her fate:

CHOOSING A BRIDE

I am going as a stranger in those lands and I am apprehensive about what I should learn first: the people, their character, their customs, the towns, the countryside, the woodlands? Whom, I beg, shall I find, as a newcomer in foreign lands, where no fellow countryman, no friend, no relative comes to me?⁶⁸

The Flemish monk Goscelin, writing around 1080, also drew a sad picture of these young girls destined for foreign courts:

The daughters of kings and rulers are brought up in luxury from the time they are babies and know nothing except the glory and happiness of their native land, but then they are sent in marriage to other countries and foreign kingdoms and must learn barbarous customs and unfamiliar languages, and serve harsh lords and observe laws that are repugnant to nature.⁶⁹

These ‘barbarous customs and unfamiliar languages’ had to be learned, and marriage negotiations often provided for that. When a marriage was proposed between the Byzantine emperor Constantine VI and Rotrud (Erythro to the Greeks), daughter of Charlemagne, the eunuch Elissaïos, a notary, was sent ‘to teach her the letters and language of the Greeks and educate her in the customs of the empire of the Romans’.⁷⁰ Likewise, in the following century, when a marriage was envisaged between Hadwig or Hedwig, niece of Otto I, and a member of the Byzantine imperial family, eunuchs were sent to Germany to teach her Greek.⁷¹ Neither of these planned marriages in fact took place, but they illustrate the general principle that some kind of cultural training was considered necessary for high-born brides being sent into foreign courts where the language and customs were alien. Training on the job was also possible, so brides might also be sent out in the expectation that they would acquire the new tongue and new culture in their future homeland. Matilda, daughter of Henry I of England, was sent to Germany as a bride for the emperor Henry V when she was aged eight. She was betrothed at Easter 1110 and crowned queen on 25 July the same year. The archbishop of Cologne, who had presided at her coronation, then ‘commanded that the consecrated queen should be carefully brought up until a suitable time came for her marriage, and, while she was being brought up, she should learn

the language and behave according to German ways.⁷² She married the emperor in 1114, just before her twelfth birthday.

Foreign brides might not only have to learn new languages but also become reconciled to a new name. Especially when women moved from areas of one language family to another, the host court might expect them to drop their barbarous names and adopt something more familiar.⁷³ When the daughter of Hugh of Arles, king of Italy (926–47), married Romanos, son of the Byzantine emperor, she had to abandon the Germanic aristocratic name of Berta, customary among the Frankish ruling class to which she belonged, and assume that of Eudokia, a favourite name of the Byzantine imperial family.⁷⁴ Likewise, in the middle of the twelfth century, when Berta of Sulzbach, sister-in-law of King Conrad III of Germany, married Manuel Comnenus, son of the Byzantine emperor, she became Irene, another traditional imperial name.⁷⁵ However, Byzantine commentators noticed that this German noblewoman failed to adapt completely to Greek customs, remarking especially on the fact that she did not use eye-liner.⁷⁶ Similar condescension about names can be found elsewhere. Gunhilda, daughter of Canute the Great, had to adopt a more acceptable German name form when she married the heir to the German throne, Henry (later Henry III), in 1036: ‘the queen, Gunhilda by name, came to King Henry, son of the emperor, and she received the royal crown there on the feast day of the apostles (29 June) and at the blessing changed her name and was called Cunigunda.’⁷⁷ Gunhilda was an old royal name in Scandinavia, Cunigunda a prestigious name among the German aristocracy and royalty. To modern ears they might seem not dissimilar, but a contemporary at the time complained of the difficulty he had tracing Gunhilda/Cunigunda’s descent because of ‘the barbarity of Danish and Norwegian names’.⁷⁸ A similar disdainful tone can be heard at the end of the eleventh century, after the Anglo-Scottish princess Edith (Eadgyth) married the Norman king Henry I. She and the king were mocked by hostile aristocrats as ‘Godric’ and ‘Godgiva’, common English names that obviously sounded barbaric or rustic to aristocratic Norman ears. This helps explain why she adopted the common Norman name Matilda instead.⁷⁹

We sometimes get pictures of these foreign queens pining in their new homes. When the twelve-year-old Blanche of Castile arrived in Paris in 1200 to marry the heir to the French throne, she had, the chronicler Joinville says, ‘neither relatives nor friends in the whole kingdom of France’; he repeatedly refers to her as ‘a (or the) foreign woman (*femme estrange*)’.⁸⁰ Soon after her marriage, the saintly bishop of Lincoln paid her a visit, at the request of her new husband, and ‘cheered her up’ (*exhilarare* is the verb).⁸¹ Perhaps Blanche, coming from the land where the lemons grow, missed the Mediterranean fruit, as her great-niece Eleanor of Castile certainly did later in the century. In 1289, thirty-five years after her marriage to Edward I of England, Eleanor was still having pomegranates, lemons, oranges and olive oil purchased at Portsmouth from the ships coming from her native Spain.⁸²

Foreign Ways

The strange and glamorous fruits that Eleanor of Castile took pains to have delivered to her illustrate the way that foreign queens might bring foreign ways with them. Byzantine brides coming to western European courts had a reputation, at least among the more austere observers, of being pretentiously refined. For instance, the reformer Peter Damian, writing in 1059 or 1060, criticised the Byzantine wife of a doge of Venice for being so delicate as to use a fork for eating: ‘She did not touch her food with her fingers, but her meals were cut into small pieces by eunuchs, and she took these to her mouth daintily, with little golden two-pronged forks.’ But, Peter is pleased to add, God was so angry with her fancy affectations that he inflicted upon her a terrible disease that caused her to rot and stink, before finally dying.⁸³ At almost the same time that Peter Damian was writing, another monk recorded a vision of the empress Theophanu, a great Byzantine lady who had been the wife of Otto II (973–83) and regent for her son Otto III. After her death Theophanu had appeared to a nun and explained that she was suffering torments in the afterlife,

Because I was the first to bring to the provinces of Germany and France, where they were hitherto unknown, superfluous and luxurious ornaments for women, such as the Greeks wear, and, conforming to these rather than

PART I: THE LIFE CYCLE

to human nature, I went around wearing this harmful attire and led other women to sin by desiring similar things.⁸⁴

This is characteristic of foreign brides. They brought foreign culture with them and this was not always welcomed. Two other cases from the eleventh century illustrate the commotion that young foreign brides, with their foreign ways, could cause in the royal courts to which they came.

When King Robert of France married a lady from Provence in 1004 or 1005 (Provence at that time was not part of France), the Burgundian monk and chronicler Ralph Glaber responded fiercely to the southern influences she brought with her to the royal court. 'Because of her', he wrote, southerners flocked north:

empty-headed men, given over to levity, with perverted manners and costume, disordered in their weapons and their horse-trappings, with their hair shaved from the middle of their head, beardless like actors, shameful in their boots and leggings, completely lacking any bond of loyalty or peace.⁸⁵

Not all of this is clearly visualizable, but the strangeness of the newcomers' clothes and hair-styles is obviously objectionable and linked to their moral failings. Worst of all, says Ralph, these new vanities were contagious, and soon the people of northern France and Burgundy became just as bad as the immigrants from the south. He was so incensed by this 'wicked behaviour' that he burst into verse: 'This life now creates tyrants with perverted bodies, men with short clothes, improper, lacking the bond of peace. Because of a woman's counsel, the state is neglected and groans.'⁸⁶ It is ironic that this southern hair-style, beardless and with the lower part of the head shaven, is precisely that shown on the Normans in the Bayeux Tapestry. They had presumably picked up the style without any corresponding effeminacy.

In 1043, almost forty years after the marriage of Robert of France, a similar monastic uproar surrounded the proposed marriage of Henry III of Germany to a lady from Aquitaine, Agnes. The objection in the first instance was not her southern French roots but the fact that she and Henry were too closely related.⁸⁷ Abbot Siegfried of Gorze spelled out the

relationship in detail in a long letter, but then, at the close of the letter, turned to a denunciation of 'the shameful custom of French follies'. These included such novelties as shaving the beard and wearing obscenely short clothes, two fashions also denounced by Ralph Glaber. 'The honour of the kingdom', Abbot Siegfried lamented, 'which in the time of earlier emperors flourished most properly in such matters as clothing and deportment, and weapons and riding too, is neglected in our days.'⁸⁸ Like Ralph Glaber, he was particularly worried at the way these foreign customs had been adopted by his own people, and even won favour at court. He is not explicit that the disreputable French customs are linked to the French bride, but the juxtaposition suggests a thought association at the least.

In these two cases, the new bride from the south is associated with the importation of novelties, obscenities and follies that are corrupting the author's own people. Both Ralph Glaber and Siegfried of Gorze combine the gloomy moralism of the Benedictine monk with a lament for the good old days and a strong dash of hostility to foreigners. The court was always more cosmopolitan than the society around it, and the foreign marriage, with the presence of foreign queens and their followers, was one of the reasons for that disjuncture.

Ralph Glaber and Siegfried of Gorze just grumbled, but hostility to foreign queens could take a crueller form. One of the most extreme cases concerns Gertrude of Meran, the German wife of Andrew II of Hungary, a king who ascended the throne in 1205. According to one source, when the king had some difficulty in conquering an enemy castle, the queen suggested, perhaps undiplomatically, that he should raise an army from the Germans who had settled in Hungary. They, our German source says, soon captured the place, and were rewarded with gifts and honours, stirring up resentment amongst the native Hungarians, who plotted to kill the king. The queen was informed of this and encouraged her husband to flee, herself staying behind, confident that the attackers would spare her, 'being of the female sex'. But she had miscalculated. The conspirators broke into the royal camp, wounded her, pushed her down, and when she extended her hands in supplication, they cut them off. They finished the job with their lances and pikes.⁸⁹

Inspection of the Bride

Whether the bride came from abroad or not, care and attention had to be devoted to the process of selection. One of the more striking methods of finding a bride is recorded in the Byzantine empire in the late eighth and ninth centuries. This was the bride-show, where beautiful virgins were sought out from every part of the empire and one was then selected to marry the emperor or the emperor's son.⁹⁰ A particularly detailed account of one such bride-show is found in the Life of St Philaretos.⁹¹ It occurs there because Philaretos' granddaughter was the victor, if that is the right word, in this beauty contest (Philaretos was that unusual kind of saint, a married lay man). The Life tells how the empress Irene sent out emissaries to find a bride for her son Constantine VI. They carried three things: an imperial measure, to check the height of candidates, something called a *lauraton*, which has been interpreted as either an ideal portrait or a device for measuring girls' waists,⁹² and a shoe (presumably a glass slipper was not available). Coming to Philaretos' home town in Paphlagonia, on the Black Sea, they encountered his beautiful granddaughter Maria. Rather than making a decision immediately, they took her, her two sisters, and ten other girls back to Constantinople for judging, working on the principle that selection should be made from a field of candidates. Maria was then chosen as the bride of Constantine VI.

An oddity about the Byzantine bride-show, apart from the custom itself, is its chronology. Five instances are reported in the sources and all date to the century between 788, when Maria married Constantine VI, and 882, the date of the marriage of Leo VI and Theophano Martinakia. There are none before or after. No obvious explanation for this pattern springs to mind. And, making matters worse, many scholars think these accounts should be regarded more as fairy stories than accurate historical narratives. Historians are of course a dull lot and shy away from the exotic and colourful, but these sceptics may have a case, pointing to the possible influence of literary parallels from other times and places, especially the biblical story of Queen Esther, who was selected by the king in this way, after 'all the fair young virgins' had been gathered together. On the other hand, perhaps the story of Esther inspired the practice and, in any case, bride-shows are attested in reality in some societies, notably in Early

Modern Muscovy, where there are seventeen documented and five probable cases in the period 1505–1689.⁹³

But, whether the Byzantine bride-shows correspond to any reality or are simply the fruit of the heightened imagination of Greek monks, it really was necessary to think carefully about the choice of bride for a ruler or heir, and this might in fact involve a viewing. This seems to have been the case with the Frankish emperor Louis the Pious in 818, who married after ‘considering the daughters of his chief men, who were brought from far and wide’.⁹⁴ The inspection could involve a demanding physical scrutiny. In one of the Byzantine bride-shows a decision was made between three finalists after the empress, the future mother-in-law, had inspected them in the bath.⁹⁵ The envoy sent to Aragon in 1322 to examine the king’s daughter Violante, who was under consideration as a bride for Charles IV of France, was instructed ‘to see her naked breast’, since this would indicate whether she were fit to bear children, ‘which the king much desires’.⁹⁶ Her capacity as breeding stock did not apparently qualify her to be queen of France, since Charles chose instead Mary of Luxemburg, despite the report that she was cross-eyed.⁹⁷ When a later king of France, Charles VIII (1483–98), was debating whether to marry Anne, the fourteen-year-old duchess of Brittany, he sent to her a committee of two dukes, a duchess and one of his most trusted Scots Guards, the last being ‘someone employed very often in this kind of business’, who reported back that ‘they have seen her naked and indeed she limps a little’.⁹⁸ The prospect of acquiring Brittany through marriage to Anne was enough, however, to outweigh this little impediment.

Because a royal marriage was seen as a bond between families as much as a union between two individuals, it sometimes did not matter much who exactly was the bride. The English king Æthelstan sent two of his sisters to Germany so that Otto, the heir to the throne, ‘might choose for himself in marriage whichever of them pleased him’.⁹⁹ He chose Edith (Eadgyth). And this English princess was eventually buried in Magdeburg Cathedral, where, remarkably, her tomb was found and opened in 2008, and her bones and teeth were subjected to scientific analysis, showing that she had indeed grown up in the chalk downlands of Wessex.¹⁰⁰ In 1442, the twenty-year-old Henry VI of England was considering marriage with one of the three daughters of the count of Armagnac, and in a letter

to his envoys he underlined the condition ‘that we may have choice’.¹⁰¹ In 1481 an agreement was drawn up between Edward IV of England and the duke of Brittany. Edward’s son, the Prince of Wales, was to marry the infant daughter of the duke as soon as she was twelve. However, if she died before that age, he would marry her sister. Likewise, if the Prince of Wales died, his place would be taken by his younger brother.¹⁰² These kinds of replaceable siblings clearly demonstrate that marriage in this world was seen as a bond between dynasties, not individuals.

By the late Middle Ages, it was not unusual for portraits of the prospective bride to be part of the negotiations.¹⁰³ At this period they might very well be accurate likenesses. But there are much earlier references to such pictures of prospective brides. In the middle of the tenth century a ‘eunuch painter’ was sent from Constantinople to Germany in order to produce a painting of the high-born Hadwig, who was espoused to a member of the Byzantine imperial family.¹⁰⁴ And the belief that realistic likenesses were possible was certainly expressed long centuries before oil painting and perspective began to shape Western perceptions of pictorial realism (see below, p. 376).

Marriage to the Royal Widow

A very distinct type of dynastic marriage was marriage to the previous ruler’s widow. Examples from the sixth century are fairly numerous. In the Visigothic kingdom of Toledo, Goswintha was successively wife of King Athanagild (555–67) and King Leovigild (568–86).¹⁰⁵ After the death of Miro, king of the Suevi, a Germanic people ruling north-west Spain, in 583, his son succeeded but was soon deposed by his brother-in-law, Audica. Audica then married Miro’s widow – ‘he took the wife of his father-in-law and obtained the kingdom’.¹⁰⁶ During the course of his fifty-year reign, the Frankish king Clothar (Lothar) I twice seized the opportunity to unite with royal widows, who had, in both cases, been wives of his own relatives. On the death of his brother Chlodomer in 524, Clothar married his widow ‘without delay’, excluded Chlodomer’s sons and took a large share of his kingdom.¹⁰⁷ Thirty-one years later, in 555, on the death of Theudebald, great-grandson of Clovis, Clothar, his great-uncle, ‘received his kingdom and took his wife Waldrada to his bed’,

although he gave her up after the clergy complained.¹⁰⁸ Such marriages could be interpreted as declarations of intent to rule, even if they did not succeed. For example, after the assassination of King Sigebert in 575, his widow Brunhild was quickly taken in marriage by the young Frankish prince Merovech, Sigebert's nephew. Merovech's father was supposedly upset at this breach of canon law but seems also to have suspected a plot to dethrone him ('he began to have his suspicions about his son Merovech on account of this marriage with Brunhild'), and pursued Merovech mercilessly.¹⁰⁹

In the Lombard kingdom of Italy there are two cases of an interesting variation on the theme, in that the royal widows were supposedly allowed to choose their husband and hence the king. After the death of her husband, King Authari, in 590, his widow Theodolinda 'was so pleasing to the Lombards that they allowed her to keep her royal status and advised her to choose from all the Lombards the husband she wished, such a man who could rule the kingdom successfully'. She decided upon Agilulf, duke of Turin, and sent for him. When he respectfully kissed her hand, she told him he should not be kissing her hand but her mouth. They were soon married and in the following spring Agilulf was inaugurated as the new king.¹¹⁰ A similar situation occurred again under Theodolinda's daughter, Gundeberga, who had married a later Lombard king, Arioald. After his death, in 636, it was a condition of the accession of the newly chosen king, Rothari, that he should abandon his own wife and marry Gundeberga. Then 'all the Lombards raised him to the kingdom, through her (*per ipsam*)'.¹¹¹ A story told of Gundeberga recounts that she was falsely accused of plotting with Duke Tasso to kill Arioald, marry Tasso and 'raise him to the kingship'.¹¹² Even though the accusation was false, it demonstrates that among the Lombards marriage to a widowed queen was a commonly imagined pathway to becoming king.

A notable example of a conqueror marrying the widow of a defeated rival occurred in 1017 when Canute of Denmark, after conquering England, married Emma of Normandy, the widow of the vanquished King Æthelred. The author of the *Encomium Emmae*, which was commissioned by Emma after Canute's death, gives an audaciously inaccurate account of how this came about, turning the widow into a virgin:

Nothing was now lacking to the king except a noble wife, and he ordered one to be sought everywhere, so that, when she was found, he would take her in legal marriage and make her partner in his rule. So, they ran about through the kingdoms and cities, in search of a royal spouse, but it was with difficulty, after seeking far and wide, they at last found one who was worthy . . . But she said she would never be Canute's wife unless he swore to her on oath that he would never have the son of another wife rule after him, if it happened that God gave her a son by him . . . The virgin's words were acceptable to the king and, once the oath had been sworn, the king's will was acceptable to the virgin, and in this way, thanks be to God, the lady Emma, most noble of women, became the wife of that most powerful king, Canute.¹¹³

This picture of a supposedly free and unrestricted bride-search sits rather uneasily with another comment that the author of the *Encomium* makes. Writing of the violent struggle Canute had to undertake in 1016, he says, 'perhaps the war would scarcely or never have ended if he had not at last received this most noble queen in the bond of marriage'.¹¹⁴ Clearly the significance of the link with Emma is that she was the widow of Canute's predecessor, although the author never says so. The German chronicler Adam of Bremen, writing a little later, put it all more succinctly: 'Canute took Æthelred's kingdom, and his wife'.¹¹⁵

There are also examples of this practice from Byzantium. Nicephorus Phocas (963–9) married Theophano, the widow of his predecessor Romanos II. Objections were raised to this marriage, not because Nicephorus was marrying his predecessor's widow, but because he had supposedly acted as godfather to their children, hence creating a tie of spiritual kinship that would make the marriage technically incestuous.¹¹⁶ In 1183, Andronicus Comnenus, who had forced his young cousin Alexius II to accept him as co-emperor, had him murdered, and then married his widow, Agnes-Anna, the twelve-year-old daughter of the king of France. Andronicus was in his sixties, with a string of sexual partners behind him as well as a current mistress. Archbishop Eustathios of Thessalonica expressed, or imagined, the feelings of the poor young bride:

she shrank from the union. Being high-minded and having experienced a different kind of gentle loving, she loathed his roughness. Sometimes,

they say, she would imagine the young man in her dreams and would cry out ‘O Alexius!’ She alone knew what she suffered.¹¹⁷

An exceptional variation of the practice of marrying one’s predecessor’s widow was marrying one’s predecessor’s widow when she was also one’s own stepmother. This happened in the case of Æthelbald, king of Wessex (858–60), who married Judith, his father’s widow, in 858. Judith was no older than fifteen at this time, since there had been an age gap of at least thirty years between her and Æthelwulf, Æthelbald’s father. The sense of revulsion in the account of this event given by Bishop Asser, writing in the reign of Æthelbald’s youngest brother and eventual successor, King Alfred, may be political as well as moral, since Asser regarded Æthelbald as divisive and unfilial:

After King Æthelwulf died, his son Æthelbald, against God’s prohibition and the dignity of Christians, and also contrary to the custom of all pagans, climbed into his father’s bed and married Judith, daughter of Charles, king of the Franks, to the great scandal of all who heard of it.¹¹⁸

The situation was indeed ‘against God’s prohibition’, since Deuteronomy 22: 30 declares tersely, ‘a man shall not take his father’s wife (*non accipiet homo uxorem patris*)’. Asser then underlines the scandal of the marriage by claiming that even pagans do not marry their stepmother, in this following the lead of St Paul, who had described marriage with one’s stepmother as ‘such fornication as is not even found among the pagans’.¹¹⁹ But there is contrary evidence that this was a pagan practice. Eadbald, king of Kent, married his father’s widow in 616, and although Bede, commenting on this marriage, cited Paul’s words, one version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle saw it as a consequence of Eadbald’s paganism: ‘he lived according to pagan custom, so that he had his father’s widow as wife’.¹²⁰ He certainly abandoned that wife when he converted to Christianity.¹²¹ And one of the missionary questions supposedly put to Pope Gregory the Great was whether it was allowed to marry a stepmother, suggesting that it was a practice found among pagan populations.¹²² Moreover, a penitential apparently from the eighth-century Frisian mission field allowed those who married their stepmothers to remain married to them if they had done this while still

pagans.¹²³ And it seemed to be a practice that required general legislation. A law of the Frankish king Childebert II of 596, twenty years before the marriage of Eadbald and his stepmother, specified the death penalty for those who married their father's wife.¹²⁴ In her reforming mood, St Margaret, foreign-born queen of Scots in the late eleventh century, demonstrated to her subjects 'that marriage to a stepmother, and likewise marriage of a surviving brother to his dead brother's wife, such as had previously been practiced there, were totally execrable and to be avoided by the faithful like death itself'.¹²⁵ The implication is that marriage to a stepmother was customary rather than an occasional scandal.

The sixth-century historian Procopius tells a story about marriage to a stepmother which, although highly unlikely to be true, throws some light on thinking about such a match. It concerns Hermegisclus, king of a Germanic people, the Varni. Hermegisclus has married the sister of Theudebert, ruler of the Franks (a Frankish king of this name ruled 534–48); Radigis, his son by an earlier wife, is engaged to an Anglo-Saxon princess. But Hermegisclus learns that he is dying, and he gives the advice that Radigis should break off his engagement and, after his father's death, marry his widow, that is Radigis' own stepmother. This is his reasoning:

I think then, for the Varni, it will be more profitable to make a marriage alliance with the Franks than with the islanders. For the people of Britain are only able to have contact with you after a long time and with great difficulty. The Varni and the Franks have between them just the waters of the Rhine, so that as close neighbours to you, who have increased their power a great deal, they are at hand to do good to you and to harm you, at a time when they wish. They certainly will harm you, unless they are checked by this marriage alliance.¹²⁶

In fact, the Anglo-Saxon princess turns out to be a determined and bold champion of her own interests, leads a fleet of 400 ships across the Channel, captures the fiancé who has spurned her and, taking pity on him, accepts him as her husband after Theudebert's sister has been sent home.

None of this is eye-witness reportage. The story does, however, give one view of why marriage alliances with neighbouring peoples were

important: such neighbours can help you and harm you, and a marriage alliance might prevent the latter. Moreover, in these circumstances, it is a reasonable ground for marrying your predecessor's widow, even if she is your stepmother.

Marriage with a predecessor's widow was not only a feature of the early Middle Ages. In the summer of 1350, when the young king of Castile, Peter I, fell gravely ill, two parties formed around two possible claimants to the throne if he should die, and it is significant that both of these potential successors were advised to marry the queen mother, Maria, widow of Peter's father and predecessor Alfonso XI. In fact, Peter's recovery meant that such a marriage did not take place, but the common advice given to the rival candidates shows how valuable marriage to a predecessor's widow appeared.¹²⁷ After the death of Albert of Habsburg, king of Hungary and Bohemia, in 1439, the Magyar nobles offered the Hungarian Crown to the young king of Poland, Wladyslaw III, and wanted to confirm this offer by a marriage between Wladyslaw and Albert's widow, Elizabeth. As Elizabeth was the daughter of Sigismund, king of Hungary (1387–1437), she embodied legitimacy and hereditary right, and could bring those things to Wladyslaw just as she had brought them to Albert. She pretended to agree, but in fact was committed to ensuring the rights of the child she bore in her body at the time (see below, p. 58). Although this too is a case where the royal widow did *not* marry her husband's successor, the assumption of the Hungarians was that this would have been desirable and appropriate.¹²⁸ A few years later, when Christian I was elected to succeed Christopher III as king of Denmark by the Danish State Council in 1448, it was agreed that he should marry Christopher's widow, Dorothea of Brandenburg, which he did the following year. The main motive for this was financial: at her marriage to Christopher, Dorothea was given a huge dower in all three Scandinavian kingdoms; if she left the kingdoms, she was due 45,000 Rhenish guilders in compensation for this dower.¹²⁹

Later in the fifteenth century another case, a fairly complex one, arose in Hungary. The princess Beatrice of Aragon had married Matthias Corvinus, king of Hungary, and, on his death in 1490 without legitimate children, the Hungarian nobles insisted that the new claimant to the throne, Vladislav II, king of Bohemia, marry her. According to the queen

herself, the nobles supposedly said, ‘that if the devil should happen to tempt him to refuse to take our majesty as a wife’ then they would abandon him and adhere just to her.¹³⁰ Vladislav was elected king on 14 July 1490. By 8 August the gossip in the north Italian courts was that ‘the king of Bohemia has been elected king of Hungary and has taken the queen as his wife’.¹³¹ The gossip may have been premature but Beatrice claimed that she and Vladislav exchanged vows. He was very happy to take her money to pay his troops but showed a worrying reluctance about the marriage. Beatrice noticed that he did not refer to her as his wife in his letters, and he made endless excuses about having a public nuptial celebration. Eventually he told her that he acted this way ‘because of a certain secret impediment’ that he could not reveal.¹³² This impediment seems to have been the fact that he was already married. The resulting legal case dragged on, as such cases do, until the marriage of Beatrice and Vladislav was annulled in 1500. Vladislav had got Hungary, and Beatrice returned to her childhood home, where, in 1507, a year before her death, she was signing herself ‘the most unhappy queen of Hungary’.¹³³ The case shows several things: the demand of the native aristocracy that a new king would be required to marry the royal widow; the widow’s own desire to hang on to power; and the ability of the new king to worm his way out of the situation by, in the long run, disregarding both.

Another remarkable case occurred at just this time in France, where marriage with a predecessor’s widow was actually agreed years ahead of time. When Anne, duchess of Brittany, married King Charles VIII in 1491, she finally brought the semi-independent duchy to the French Crown, and Charles was determined that it would stay in royal hands. Hence, the marriage contract specified that, if he should die before Anne, and they had no children, Anne ‘shall not remarry, except to the future king’.¹³⁴ Charles did indeed die before Anne and she did indeed marry his successor, his cousin Louis XII (1498–1515), although Louis had to have his existing marriage annulled first. Brittany became a full part of France. The motives here need no discussion.

The explanations that modern historians give of the practice of marrying a predecessor’s widow range from level-headed political calculation to the extremes of cultural symbolism. On the one hand, some see it as



Figure 2 Anne, Duchess of Brittany (1488–1514), who married the king of France on condition that, if he died without children, she could remarry only his successor. This did happen, thus ensuring Brittany remained incorporated into the kingdom of France. Paris, BnF, lat. 9474 (Jean Bourdichon, *Grandes Heures d'Anne de Bretagne*), fol. 3.

‘a vehicle on which claims to the royal succession could be carried to a second husband’, or a way for the new king to strengthen his kingship.¹³⁵ It ‘served as a lever in the attainment of power’.¹³⁶ A widowed queen could be ‘a vessel of royal power’.¹³⁷ The new king would acquire the queen’s treasure and followers and, especially in the case of conquerors and usurpers, such a union might serve to legitimize the new ruler. But other historians look for illumination from a quite different source, Celtic or Germanic paganism. In early Irish mythology, sovereignty was imagined as female, and accession to kingship as a marriage between the king and this female power, in origin a goddess: ‘Sacred union with the goddess of the land was seen to initiate the fertility and prosperity of a sovereign’s reign.’¹³⁸ The legendary Irish Mebh, like the Lombard queens Theodolinda and Gundeberga, chose her own husbands, who then became kings. Germanic myth can be interpreted in the same way, as marriage between goddess and mortal king: ‘As the northern ruler had once been the husband of [the goddess] Freyja, the new king must possess the old queen who came to represent that deity.’¹³⁹

But, in addition to rational calculations, on the one hand, and echoes of the *Golden Bough*, on the other, there might also be a rougher kind of sexual appropriation involved. After Fáelán mac Murchado defeated and killed his older brother Dúnchad, king of Leinster, in 728, ‘he took the kingship of Leinster, and married Dúnchad’s wife’.¹⁴⁰ In a similar style, after Vladimir of Novgorod killed Rogvolod of Polotsk and his two sons around 978, he married Rogvolod’s daughter, and he also fathered a child on the widow of his half-brother Yaropolk after having arranged his assassination.¹⁴¹ Following up a killing by sleeping with the daughter or wife of the man you had killed could be a way of finishing the job, taking his women as well as his land. As Adam of Bremen said of Canute (above, p. 36), ‘he took Æthelred’s kingdom, and his wife’. The association of taking the royal widow and violent seizure of power also comes out very clearly in Hungary in 997, when the Hungarian ruler Duke Géza died, and his son Stephen (later St Stephen) had to face the rival claims of Duke Koppány: ‘Koppány wanted to join himself in an incestuous marriage with the mother of St Stephen the king and kill St Stephen and subject his duchy to his power’.¹⁴² The accusation that the marriage

was 'incestuous' implies that Koppány was a relative of Géza's but it is not certain how. In any event, Stephen got Koppány first and had his quartered body displayed in four cities of the kingdom.

Apart from such 'incestuous' marriages, there is some evidence that marriage to a predecessor's widow could be seen in itself as violation and pollution. In 683 a council at Toledo, summoned by the Visigothic king Ervig, issued a long and animated ruling, of which the following is a section:

It is an appalling crime and a deed of very frequent wickedness, to seek the royal bed when kings die leaving behind their wives, and to befoul it with the horrific stains of pollution. For which Christian can bear it with equanimity when the wife of a dead king is enjoyed afterwards in another union, or is subjected to the lust of the following ruler? ... No one therefore will be permitted to marry a surviving queen, nor stain her with filthy touches. This shall not be permitted to the following kings, nor to any man.¹⁴³

The tone here is not exactly rational. The belief is that, once wedded to a king, a woman should not be touched by any other man. Under Ervig's successor, Egica (d. 702), the rule was strengthened by specifying, in addition, that the king's widow must enter a nunnery.¹⁴⁴ Some men, like Fáelán mac Murchado and Vladimir of Novgorod, clearly regarded such a taboo as a challenge to be broken. Yet for others, like the Danish and Hungarian nobles of the later Middle Ages, there seems to have been no taboo to overcome. The variety of responses meant that a king or prince looking for a bride might find a royal widow prescribed or proscribed.

Prohibited Degrees

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Church settled its rules on marriage in ways that might appear paradoxical. On the one hand, it came down decisively in favour of a view of what constituted marriage: consent of the two parties. A church service was not necessary, the presence of a priest was not necessary, and neither did consent of the families or a transfer of property, however desirable or customary, have any constitutive function. What mattered was two people agreeing to

marry. This is remarkably informal. But in contrast, over the course of the early Middle Ages, the western Church established the most restrictive rules about *choice* of marriage partner that the world has ever seen. In the fully developed system, as evidenced in sources of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the prohibition on marrying a cousin was extended far beyond first cousins, to include second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth cousins.¹⁴⁵ In other words, having a common great-great-great-great-great-grandfather debarred a couple from marrying.

Rigorous churchmen would label marriages that broke these rules ‘incestuous’. A conscientious layman might consequently have to look far afield for a permissible bride. Constance Bouchard suggested that this explains such unusual marriages as that of Henry I of France with Anna of Kiev in 1051 (a taste of the exoticism that foreign queens could represent is exemplified in a charter issued by Philip I of France in 1063, in which his mother, Anna, signs her name in Cyrillic script),¹⁴⁶ and also the willingness of the great dukes and counts of eleventh-century France to take brides from outside their caste, from among knightly families.¹⁴⁷ Even if such brides were in reality the sixth cousins of the dukes and counts they married, the chances are that such a distant relationship would be unknown. The search for wives of the right status who were not technically within the prohibited degrees could thus be complex and convoluted.

The process of evolution towards this extreme situation had been gradual and long. Marriage between first cousins was not unusual in ancient Rome but had been prohibited by the Christian emperors of the fourth century. Marriage to cousins beyond this degree of relationship was accepted, as is shown by the case of the western emperor Valentinian III, who in 437 married the daughter of his first cousin. However, during the course of the early Middle Ages, in both east and west, the prohibition came to be extended to marriage between second cousins. Important milestones in this process are the council of Epaon in Burgundy in 517, and the *Ecloga* of the emperor Leo III, issued in 741.¹⁴⁸ A relationship with a second cousin was still likely to be within the boundaries of what a family might know about its members. Indeed, defining the prohibited degrees by the limits of known relationships might seem to make sense, and some ninth-century rulings from popes

and councils refrained from defining their exact extent but stipulated 'we command that no Christian is permitted to take a wife from his own relatives or kindred, as far as the relationship is recalled, known or remembered.'¹⁴⁹ This definition would usually mean that marriages between very distant cousins would be possible because there would be no memory of the kinship. It is the drastic extension of the prohibitions around the year 1000 that created a dilemma. Given the complex network of marriage alliances among western kings and aristocrats, it might have seemed to them virtually impossible to find anyone to marry, given the newly defined rules. The Church itself finally recognized that the rules about illicit marriages were extreme, and, at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, reduced the prohibited degrees from seven to four, thus only debarring marriage with one's third cousins.

Throughout the medieval period, therefore, choice of marriage partner was limited by law, both Roman and canon. Marriage of first cousins, which had been banned in the fourth century, was rare. Karl Ubl, in his comprehensive analysis of this topic, found only three cases in the Merovingian period.¹⁵⁰ Later instances do occur, like the marriage of the Welsh ruler, Owain Gwynedd, ruler of Gwynedd (d. 1170), and his first cousin Cristina, but that was highly controversial. Charles IV of France (1322–8) married his first cousin, Joan of Evreux, but required a papal dispensation to do so. Cousin marriage beyond that limit, however, was a different matter, allowed with third cousins in the Byzantine empire and in the early medieval west, and with fourth cousins in the Latin Church after 1215. The really extreme regime was thus that in the west from 1000 to 1215, and there are plenty of examples to show the difficulties, as well as the opportunities, that such a system generated. The first difficulty, of course, was knowing who your sixth cousins were. Even today, when research into family history is the second most popular use of the internet, it is not simple to establish a genealogy of this extent. The development of genealogical literature in this period and the rise of the pictorial family tree (discussed below, pp. 326–39) show how ruling and aristocratic families grappled with their deep ancestry and the complications it might bring to their choices of marriage partner.

The intrusive and sometimes combative nature of papal policy on dynastic marriages can be exemplified by the activities of Pope

Innocent III (1198–1216), recognized as one of the most energetic and influential of all medieval popes.¹⁵¹ Innocent fought vigorously against what he saw as a storm of incestuous marriages. ‘In the East’, he wrote, ‘one woman has been joined incestuously with two men, while in the West one man has dared to join himself with two women through incest.’¹⁵² In both these cases he was, of course, referring to consecutive rather than simultaneous unions. The woman was Isabella, daughter of Amalric I, king of Jerusalem, who brought royal power to her successive husbands in the 1190s. The pope’s objections were to husbands two and three, Conrad of Montferrat and Henry of Champagne. Conrad was the brother of William of Montferrat, who had been married to Isabella’s half-sister, a relationship close enough to qualify as incestuous, although whether the relationship between Isabella and Henry of Champagne was technically within the prohibited degrees is doubtful – later Innocent simply called it ‘less than legitimate, as is said’.¹⁵³ In any case, Innocent saw the hand of God in the swift and unexpected deaths of the two husbands, one of whom was assassinated in 1192, while the other fell out of a window to his death in 1197. The other case Innocent mentions (‘one man has dared to join himself with two women through incest’) was Alfonso IX of Leon, who married first Teresa of Portugal, who was his first cousin, and then Berenguela of Castile, who was the daughter of his first cousin. Both marriages were eventually annulled, but not before Alfonso had fathered eight children by these two wives. One of these children, Ferdinand III, was to inherit both Leon and Castile, reuniting those two kingdoms permanently. Although Pope Innocent had deployed all the weapons at his disposal – interdict, excommunication, declaration that Alfonso’s children were illegitimate – and although the marriage of Alfonso and Berenguela had been ended, the dynastic bond proved stronger than canonical rules: a marriage between members of two royal families (or two branches of a royal family) had produced a new (or restored) kingdom (see also pp. 183–4).

Innocent’s intransigence was also shown in the long and tangled case of Philip Augustus of France and Ingeborg of Denmark, whom the king married in 1193 and then repudiated the very next day (see also p. 26).¹⁵⁴ His grounds for this action have been much debated, and there has been speculation about some kind of pathological reaction on Philip’s part,

but, be that as it may, he immediately made determined efforts to obtain an annulment of his marriage to Ingeborg. His servants and ministers got to work producing a lengthy genealogy designed to demonstrate that Philip's first wife and Ingeborg were too closely related for Philip and Ingeborg to be married, and a tame council of bishops and nobles was assembled to swear to this.¹⁵⁵ A copy of the genealogy was even entered into the French royal registers.¹⁵⁶ When Pope Innocent took over the handling of this case after his accession to the papacy, he was not impressed: he described the sentence annulling the marriage, passed by Philip's council, as 'a ludicrous fairy tale',¹⁵⁷ and went as far as to impose an interdict on the kingdom of France in order to induce Philip to take Ingeborg back. A complication was that Philip, relying on the decision of the council of French bishops and nobles, had remarried. His new wife (as he saw her), Agnes of Meran, bore him two children, including a son, Philip's second and a welcome insurance against the possible death of the first. Innocent insisted that Philip and Agnes should separate and Ingeborg be received back:

He commanded that the intruder (Agnes) should be removed from the king's company, both physical and local, so that she should be excluded not only from the king's embraces but also from the boundaries of the kingdom, and that the queen should be solemnly received by the king and treated as befits a queen.¹⁵⁸

Philip eventually agreed to these terms, leaving open the question of whether his marriage to Ingeborg might later be annulled. Further proceedings were inconclusive, but then Agnes helpfully died. In a conciliatory gesture, Innocent legitimized her children by Philip, acknowledging the king's plea that he had acted in good faith when he married her and recognizing that Philip only had one other child and that legitimizing the two new children would serve 'the utility and needs of the kingdom of France'.¹⁵⁹ Innocent was determined, but also had to balance competing ends. He wanted Philip's political support despite being committed to a strict line on marriage. Even when he had imposed an interdict on the kingdom, suspending all religious services except baptism and absolution, he had made an exception for crusaders, who were allowed to hear mass and receive Christian burial – the crusade

remained one of the pope's highest priorities.¹⁶⁰ The case of Ingeborg and Philip dragged on over the years until eventually, in 1213, Philip 'received into his favour and conjugal affection his legitimate wife, queen Ingeborg'.¹⁶¹ The fact that he now had two adult sons, and his ability to ignore Ingeborg henceforth, had convinced Philip that this was the easier path in the face of Innocent's persistence. Innocent did not always gain complete victories in these matrimonial cases (and he had other important ones to deal with too),¹⁶² but the decrees of canon law and the attitudes of individual popes were things that the rulers of the high and late Middle Ages had to take into account when choosing a bride.

The Case of Joan of Woodstock

A case-study can illustrate many of the procedures and perils of choosing a royal bride. In 1345 envoys from the king of Castile arrived in London, seeking a wife for their master's son. 'After a careful inspection of the two daughters of the king of England, they chose Lady Joan of Woodstock, the king's younger daughter, saying that she suited her future husband better because of her age.'¹⁶³ Joan, the third child of Edward III and Queen Philippa, was eleven at this time, her older sister thirteen. The proposed husband, later notorious as Peter the Cruel, was exactly Joan's age. But, young as she was, this was not the first marriage that had been proposed for Joan.¹⁶⁴

Joan was born late in 1333 and by the summer of 1335, when she was about eighteen months old, plans were being made for her marriage. On 18 July of that year, her father, campaigning on the Scottish border, issued a letter authorizing his envoys 'to deal and make agreement with that noble and powerful man, the duke of Austria . . . about contracting a marriage between the duke's eldest son and our dear daughter Joan'.¹⁶⁵ The duke of Austria in question was Otto of Habsburg, youngest son of King Albert I. Otto's eldest son, Frederick, was six years older than Joan, so around eight years of age when these negotiations were taking place. An agreement was reached that the young princess should actually be sent to Germany to be brought up there until of marriageable age. It took several years before this happened, and, in the meantime, the outbreak of war between King Edward and his rival, Philip VI of France, gave the

alliance with the Habsburgs greater significance, since Edward was hoping to build up a coalition of Rhineland princes as a threat on France's eastern border. In the summer of 1338 the English royal family crossed to Antwerp and made their way up the Rhine for a summit meeting with the emperor Louis the Bavarian. Louis was married to Margaret of Hainault, sister of Edward's queen, Philippa of Hainault, so she was Joan's aunt. It was decided that she should take care of the young English princess, and when her parents returned north, Joan went south to Munich, the court of Louis and Margaret. Here she spent almost a year.

Her time there seems not always to have been easy, for the English royal accounts record that money had to be spent on food for her and her companions 'when they did not have sufficient food and drink from the emperor'.¹⁶⁶ Duke Otto continued to request that she be sent to Austria, and Edward appears eventually to have agreed to this, but all was put in doubt by Otto's death in February 1339. Joan was recalled in the spring of 1340 and joined her mother in Ghent, where the queen gave birth to a young brother for her, John of Gaunt (that is, 'Ghent'). By the summer, Joan, now aged six, was in her apartments in the Tower of London, along with her older sister Isabella and her loyal French nurse. The Habsburgs continued to consider the marriage as agreed, despite discouraging noises from the English side. In the summer of 1341 Edward III wrote to Albert of Habsburg, Frederick's uncle and head of the family, suggesting the marriage be postponed, especially since the emperor Louis had now gone over to the French side.¹⁶⁷ Over a year later, on 28 October 1343, the young Duke Frederick, now sixteen, wrote to Edward from Vienna, urging speedy marriage to Joan.¹⁶⁸

But by this time the Castilian marriage had already been mooted as an alternative. King Edward's cousin and friend, the earl of Derby, participated in the siege of the Muslim city of Algeciras in 1342–4, a major military undertaking of Alfonso XI of Castile, and used the contact to broach the question of a marriage alliance between Alfonso's eldest son, Peter, and one of King Edward's daughters. Alfonso responded favourably, and envoys began to cross back and forth between Spain and England (or Edward's duchy of Gascony). Edward's instructions required his ambassadors to drive as hard a bargain as they could. Their opening offer for a dowry would be £10,000; if this was not

acceptable, they could go to 20,000 marks (roughly £13,333); if this was not enough, they could offer £15,000, then £20,000. If this still did not secure the agreement, they should then consult the king again.¹⁶⁹ Negotiations were hampered by various problems. One was simply the difficulty of travel and communication. On one occasion, the king sent his envoys by land across France to Bordeaux but he was unwilling to entrust their documents and credentials to this risky journey across the territory of his enemy, so sent them by sea; unfortunately, the ship carrying them sank and duplicates had to be arranged.¹⁷⁰ Another issue was the competing offer from Philip VI of France, who also had a daughter suited for the Castilian prince and could promise a dowry more than twice as large as Edward's maximum. Alfonso XI was happy to accept Philip's offer but did not see any reason to stop negotiations with Edward. Indeed, he revealed Philip's terms to Edward and promised that he would prefer the English alliance, even with a lower dowry.¹⁷¹ The English king was assiduous in cultivating support at the Castilian court through letters and gifts, making sure that he had the backing of both Alfonso's wife, Queen Maria, and his mistress, Eleanor de Guzmán. Even the lower dowry was a problem for Edward, engaged as he was in constant warfare. One ingenious suggestion was that he could marry his eldest son, later known as the Black Prince, to a daughter of the king of Portugal and thus acquire a dowry from her that he could then use to provide one for Joan. Queen Maria, who was herself a daughter of the king of Portugal, was a supporter of this scheme.

Edward's instructions to his officials show an insistence that any son of Peter and Joan would have the right to succeed to the throne of Castile, coupled with lingering doubts: 'if they arrive at Bordeaux and have certain news that the prince of Spain has married another, the lady will return immediately to England.'¹⁷² Finally, in spring 1348, Joan set out from Plymouth to sail to Bordeaux and then to travel on to Spain. Her entourage contained knights, bishops, officials, ladies and 130 archers, as well as a minstrel of Prince Peter returning to Spain. She took with her a spectacular and enormously expensive array of clothes, textiles, jewels and furnishings. On 31 March she reached Bordeaux, where the fourteen-year-old girl was to await her Castilian prince. But the marriage was never to be consummated, for, later that year, the Black Death swept

through Europe, carrying her off on 2 September. Peter settled for a French wife five years later.

The case of Joan of Woodstock illustrates the character of medieval marriage diplomacy: plans made while the princess was just a baby, the arbitrary switch from a proposed marriage that would take her to Vienna to one that would see her in Burgos and Toledo, the seemingly interminable negotiations, the double-dealing and dissimulation, the flattery and hard bargaining, all at any moment to be punctured and dispersed by sudden death. In the words of Mary Anne Everett Green, who in the 1840s delved into the English royal records to learn about the young princess, 'How little did she imagine while contemplating her luxurious array, that it was all vainly lavished on one who was soon to be the bride of death!'¹⁷³

CHAPTER 2

Waiting for Sons to be Born

THE SEARCH FOR A BRIDE, WITH ALL ITS COMPLEXITIES, ITS political implications and its possible cultural consequences, had a simple goal: the birth of a child. This was the biological event on which the fortunes of kingdoms turned. Rulers in the patriarchal and dynastic world of medieval Europe were expected to be brave, violent, aggressive, forceful – qualities that were associated with men. But the thing on which dynastic continuity, and indeed the very existence of dynasties, relied was the female body and what it alone could do: conceive and give birth. So, once the new bride had been chosen, attention focussed on her ability to conceive children, especially sons. The natural fertility and mortality of upper-class and lower-class people were probably quite similar, but age at marriage might be different. In late medieval England, it has been calculated, women of the top level of the aristocracy married, on average, at seventeen, men at twenty-two.¹ It seems, however, that practices at the very apex of the social hierarchy, the rulers, often included much earlier marriage.

According to the canon law of the western Church, girls were permitted to marry at the age of twelve, but ecclesiastical authorities recognized the possibility of marriage before that age ‘for the sake of reconciliation and peace between rulers or great men’.² Richard II of England married Isabella of France just before her seventh birthday. Henry the Young King (as he is known), son of Henry II of England, was married at the age of five to the even younger daughter of the king of France. Contemporaries noted with some disapproval this marriage of ‘little children still wailing in the cradle’,³ but it brought Henry II the important border territory of the Vexin as the baby princess’s dowry.