

MARY DOCKRAY-MILLER



THE BOOKS
AND THE LIFE OF
JUDITH OF FLANDERS



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*To Michael,
as we share our books and our lives*

The Books and the Life of Judith of Flanders

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List of Abbreviations

- ASC* *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, eds David Dumville and Simon Keynes (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1983–). Electronic edition also available open access at <http://asc.jebbo.co.uk>
- dMGH The digital version of *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* open access at <http://www.dmgh.de>
- MGH *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, now largely superseded by dMGH
- PL *Patrologia Latina*, available by subscription through <http://pld.chadwyck.com>

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Introduction

Before Northumbria

On the Friday after the Feast of the Ascension, the Abbey and community in Weingarten, Germany, celebrate the *Blutritt*, a ceremony dedicated to Weingarten's relic of the Holy Blood of Christ. Thousands of people line the streets to watch and then join a procession on horseback led by the *der heilige Blutritter*, who carries the relic in front of him on a route through the city and the surrounding countryside. Now, of course, those not in Weingarten can see the procession on YouTube.¹

Weingarten tradition states that the Weingarten relic of the Holy Blood was given to the abbey in 1094 as part of a bequest from Judith of Flanders and her husband, Welf IV, a German lord whose main residence was three miles from the abbey he had founded in 1056. Since the bequest dates to the year of her death (he lived until 1101), and since she is said to have brought the relic into Bavaria when she married Welf in 1070, the relic is much more strongly associated with Judith than with Welf, and she is given equal or more attention than her husband in most accounts of the abbey's acquisition of the relic. Every summer, a local teenage girl dresses as Judith to lead the parade during Weingarten's *Welfenfest*; a side street in downtown Weingarten is the *Judithaweg*; Judith even features briefly in an amateurish video game wherein the initial goal is to save a prince from the Welf dungeon.²

Despite these modern re-enactments in parades and online gaming, Judith of Flanders (c.1032–1094) was in some ways an unremarkable eleventh-century female European aristocrat. Her two marriages were political alliances intended to advance the interests of her family. While her first marriage was childless (or at least produced no children noted in the historical record), the two sons from her second marriage inherited their share of their patrimony and enjoyed wealth and status at least equal to their father's.

Not so typically, however, Judith is discussed in historiography and commemorated in modern culture primarily as a patron of art, literature, and the church rather than as an aristocratic wife and mother.³ During her marriage to Tostig Godwinson, Earl of Northumbria, she commissioned at least four magnificent Gospel Books that are still extant;⁴ sources describe numerous other treasures and objects that she gave to English churches as part of her devotional practices. Her religious patronage continued after her second marriage, to Welf of Bavaria in 1070. Documents from the archives of Weingarten Abbey list multiple treasures she donated over the course of her life; those documents also credit her for the posthumous gift of the relic of the Holy Blood in 1094.

Two of the most tumultuous political events of the eleventh century helped shape Judith's adult life: the Norman Conquest and the Investiture Controversy. Through her marriages, she had deeply invested interests in both conflicts. In both, she seems to have ended on the losing side, but her literary and artistic patronage allowed her to overcome any implications of defeat. Even at her politically lowest point—as an exile and then a widow in the late 1060s—Judith used what little wealth she had left to exercise the power of patronage and proclaim status. As patron, she successfully defined herself as pious, wealthy, sophisticated, and educated—largely the way she is remembered today both in religious and community practices at Weingarten and in historical scholarship.

Some of her books and art objects survive; we have descriptions of others. Analysis of these works provides insight into Judith's life. Further information comes from the unusually high number of contemporary or near-contemporary English and continental documents that include reference to her. A glance at her family tree reveals that she was related by blood and/or marriage to the major figures in northern European politics during the period (see Figure I.1). All of this material provides the basis for this "patronage biography," a semi-narrative version of Judith's life told largely through analysis of the works of art she commissioned and the historical documents describing those works. That analysis ultimately shows that Judith consciously and successfully deployed artistic patronage as a cultural strategy in her political and marital maneuvers in the eleventh-century European political theater.

For aspiring biographers of medieval women, Charlotte Newman Goldy and Amy Livingston have most recently discussed issues around lack of sources, especially those that might provide some access to the interior life of the biographical subject.⁵ As do biographers Kimberly LoPrete and Lois Huneycutt, Goldy and Livingston acknowledge the inherent problematics of constructing biography of only "exceptional" women, those who managed to exert agency and wield power in an overwhelmingly patriarchal society. These "exceptional" subjects tend to include queens or abbesses like Eleanor of Aquitaine or Hildegard of Bingen, medieval women whose names still resonate, if only barely, in mainstream contemporary culture. Judith of Flanders has left a much fainter trace in the historical record than these exceptional subjects—or even than LoPrete's Adela of Blois or Huneycutt's Matilda,⁶ but she is worthy of historiographical interest because of her status as a middling but ambitious aristocrat.⁷ Much of the biographical work done on medieval women has focused, by necessity, on women who operated at the highest levels of society. Queens, abbesses, countesses, and duchesses who controlled vast amounts of land and other wealth left clearly identifiable marks in the historical record. While Judith probably aspired to such status—each of her husbands had at least a slight chance to become a king—she never achieved it. The narrative of her life thus informs our understanding of the ways that female middle-tier aristocrats could work to raise their own status and that of their husbands and children.