

Archives from Houses of Cistercian Nuns and Their Evidence for Powerful Thirteenth-Century Secular Women

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DOCUMENT COLLECTIONS from later medieval monastic communities, including those of thirteenth-century foundations for Cistercian nuns provide considerable evidence for powerful secular women, feudal “Lady/Lords” of northern France.¹ In fact, the first half of the thirteenth century saw a major surge in foundations for Cistercian nuns, although their story is only now beginning to be told.² The existence of such Cistercian women’s documents had been neglected in part because traditional monastic histories had long asserted that there were no Cistercian nuns, or at least very few.³ The story of those new foundations for religious women is intimately tied to that of the power and authority of thirteenth-century secular women, who were often the founders and patrons of medieval women’s religious communities.

From among the many thirteenth-century Lady/Lords uncovered in my work on Cistercian nuns, I examine here the careers of five women, who were all named Matilda. Although all of these Matildas had access

1. This essay was first presented as “Women’s Power and Patronage of Nuns in Northern France” in a session on “The Institution and the Individual: Monasticism and Religious Reform in the High Middle Ages” at the nineteenth biennial conference on Medieval and Renaissance Studies at New College, Sarasota, Florida, March 6-8 2014; parts were summarized in the “Beyond Medieval Women and Power” session at the 49th medieval studies conference at Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 2014.

2. See Constance H. Berman, *The White Nuns: Cistercian Abbeys for Women and Their Property in Medieval Europe*, forthcoming.

3. Neglected archives include those in Paris, collections of documents for houses of nuns moved into the city in the early modern period; see *Le chartrier de l’Abbaye-aux-Bois (1202-1341): Étude et édition*, ed. Brigitte Pipon, Mémoires et documents de l’École des chartes; 46 (Paris: Ecole des chartes, 1996), introduction.

to funds to found or support houses of Cistercian women, their ability to do so derived from varied legal situations. Sometimes they were heiresses in their own right, inheriting their position because of the failure of male heirs in their family line; these heiresses are seen both acting on their own or jointly with husbands. Other women founders and patrons acted as wives or mothers, as widowed regents and then dowagers, who acquired their honors and titles following the departure or deaths of brothers, husbands, sons, fathers, or nephews on Crusade.

The examination of these five Lady/Lords and their powerful female relatives suggest that their rule often originally stemmed from the “fatal attraction” of Crusading in its various forms (to the Levant, Iberia, or against the Albigensians in the south of France). The mortality of “entire generations” of men who left home on such Crusades not only was an important factor in the appearance of Lady/Lords ruling castles and counties, but also their competence in doing so must have made it easier for men to depart on such ventures.

Matilda of Brunswick (1172–1209/10), Crusader’s Wife

Perhaps the highest in elite status of these Matildas was Matilda of Brunswick, half-cousin of the Queen of France, Blanche of Castile. She was the daughter of Matilda, Duchess of Saxony, and granddaughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine and King Henry II of England. Matilda was living at the English court when her parents both died in 1189. She soon married Geoffrey III, count of the Perche, a region of northern France just west of Chartres. They had a son named Thomas who would inherit the county.⁴

This Matilda’s brief appearance as a founder of a house of Cistercian nuns at Les Clairets in the Perche followed the death of her husband Geoffrey, who had set off on Crusade in 1202, fallen ill, and returned home to die, asking that in remission of his unfulfilled Crusader vow,

4. Kathleen Thompson, “Matilda, Countess of the Perche (1171-1210): The Expression of Authority in Name, Style and Seal,” *Tabularia: Sources écrites de la Normandie médiévale; Études*, no. 3 (2003): 69-88, <http://www.unicaen.fr/mrsh/craham/revue/tabularia/print.php?dossier=dossier3&file=01thompson.xml>, accessed December 2015.

his widow, Matilda, found a religious house of whatever order and gender she chose. Matilda obtained a papal bull from Innocent III in 1203 confirming her intention to found an abbey of Cistercian nuns in fulfillment of her late husband's wishes. A foundation charter for the Cistercian abbey of nuns at Les Clairets near Nogent-le-Rotrou was issued by this Matilda in July 1204. She gave the new abbey the rights over two working farms within the monastic boundaries, the *métairies* of Boveria and Pont, two arpents of meadow at Tilium, half a mill at Saint-Victoire, ten marks in annual rent from her manor of Hagenet in England, the right to have an agent in Nogent-le-Rotrou to care for the nuns' business there, and usage rights in all her woodlands (except those of Le Perchet) for building materials, firewood, and pasture for the nuns' animals, including pigs.⁵

This Matilda likely had died by May 1213 when her son, the knight Thomas, Count of the Perche, confirmed these gifts to Les Clairets and continued by making his own.⁶ Thomas died in 1217, the sole fatality of the assault on the walls of Lincoln led by the young Prince Louis of France, the future Louis VIII. Thomas was succeeded as count of the Perche by his father Geoffrey's younger brother, William, bishop of Châlons, who appears to have resigned his bishopric to take up the county after Thomas died.⁷

Matilda's actions as the founder of the Cistercian abbey of nuns at Les Clairets for the soul of her husband Geoffrey were soon seen almost entirely through the lens provided by her brother-in-law William, formerly bishop of Châlons. His pancarte-like performative act of "foundation" or "refoundation" dated 1221 confirmed the earlier acts of his nephew Thomas and of his brother Geoffrey, but totally occluded Matilda of Brunswick's role.⁸ Indeed only the bull from Innocent III

5. *Abbaye Royale de Notre-Dame des Clairets: Histoire et Cartulaire*, ed. Vicomte de Souancé (Nogent-le-Rotrou, 1894), nos. 3 (1203) and 4 (1204).

6. *Cartulaire des Clairets*, nos. 5 (1213) and 7 (1215).

7. *Cartulaire des Clairets*, nos. 9 (1216) and 10 (1217). William bishop of Châlons, arranged to have Thomas's excommunication for that assault lifted.

8. Bishop William confirmed acts of Thomas and Geoffrey, but did not mention Matilda; see *Cartulaire des Clairets*, nos. 16 and 17 (1221). I use the term performative to suggest that William was indeed rewriting an earlier history; see Geoffrey Koziol,

may have saved the abbey for the Cistercians, given that William appears to have preferred the Tironists. Indeed, William made a gift to the nearby house of Tironist monks at Val d'Arcisses in 1226 and retired there sometime before his death in 1233, when the county reverted to the crown.⁹

Two Widows of Crusaders: Matilda of Garlande (d. 1223/24) and Matilda of Châteaufort (d. 1260)

We next examine a pair of Matildas involved in the foundation of the house of Cistercian nuns at Port-Royal near Paris. Upon his departure for the Fourth Crusade, Matthew of Marly instructed his wife Matilda of Garlande that if he died before fulfilling his Crusading vow, she was to use a specific fifteen pounds' worth of rents for his soul. Following these instructions, the widowed Matilda of Garlande founded Port-Royal in 1204. At first a priory subject to the monks of Les Vaux de Cernay, Port-Royal was elevated to independent abbey status by the bishop of Paris circa 1210. Matilda of Garlande and her sons and daughter continued their support right up to and beyond Matilda's death in 1223.

In fact, however, there was a second Matilda, Lady of Marly. This was Matilda of Châteaufort, who had married Matilda of Garlande's eldest son, Bouchard of Marly. The younger Matilda too was soon a widow as a result of Crusade; her husband, Bouchard, died in 1226 during the siege of Avignon. It was Matilda of Châteaufort who transformed her late husband into the founder of Port-Royal; it was presumably she, sometime before her death in 1260, who persuaded the nuns of Port-Royal that it was her husband's gifts that should open the book of charters they were

The Politics of Memory and Identity in Carolingian Royal Diplomas: The West Frankish Kingdom (840-987) (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), which treats those royal diplomata in that way.

9. *Cartulaire de l'abbaye de la Sainte-Trinité de Tiron*, ed. Lucien Merlet (Chartres: Garnier, 1883), no. 358 (1225); *Les Capétiens: Histoire et dictionnaire*, ed. François Menant et al. (Paris: Laffont, 1999); Kathleen Thompson, *The Monks of Tiron. A Monastic Community and Religious Reform in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

making circa 1260.¹⁰ Thus, the Port-Royal cartulary opens with the act from 1209 in which Bouchard of Marly, acting with his wife Matilda of Châteaufort, gave the nuns of Port-Royal thirty-six arpents of woods at Moleretz in perpetuity.¹¹

For both Matildas, it was the property that they controlled as dower after the death of each husband on different Crusades that appears to have been the source of their patronage of the Cistercian abbey. One after the other, Matilda of Garlande and then Matilda of Châteaufort supported Port-Royal as regents over the lordship of Marly for more than half a century. As in the case of Matilda of Brunswick, they acted not as heiresses but as widows.¹² In contrast, the last two Matildas in this account acted as heiresses, inheritors of their properties, after a failure of male heirs.

Matilda of Amboise, Inherited Power (d. 1256)

Matilda of Amboise inherited her rights to the county of Chartres from her mother, Isabelle of Chartres. Matilda, Lady of Amboise, eventually countess of Chartres, came to the latter office following her mother Isabelle's inheritance from a nephew of the county of Chartres and associated territories in 1218, at the same time that Isabelle's sister, Marguerite of Blois, inherited the county of Blois.¹³ Matilda of Amboise, however, was born considerably before her mother became countess of Chartres (fig. 1).

10. *Cartulaire de l'abbaye de Porrois, au diocèse de Paris plus connue sous son nom mystique Port-Royal*, ed. A. De Dion (Paris: Picard, 1903), nos. 1 (before 1204), 2 (1204), 4 (1206) and 183 (should read 1223/24, as no. 2 in the medieval cartulary); Matilda of Garlande, herself from a prominent knightly family, died circa 1223/24; see no. 68 (1223/24).

11. *Cartulaire de Port-Royal*, no. 14 (1209).

12. *Cartulaire de Port-Royal*, no. 91 (1226).

13. These two sisters' inheritances of their respective counties had been orchestrated by King Philip Augustus, who collected large fines from their respective husbands, successfully dividing a powerful vassal's block of territory into two parts. Only after Isabelle's daughter, Matilda of Amboise, died in 1256 were the two counties of Blois and Chartres reunited. See John W. Baldwin, *The Government of Philip Augustus: Foundations of French Royal Power in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

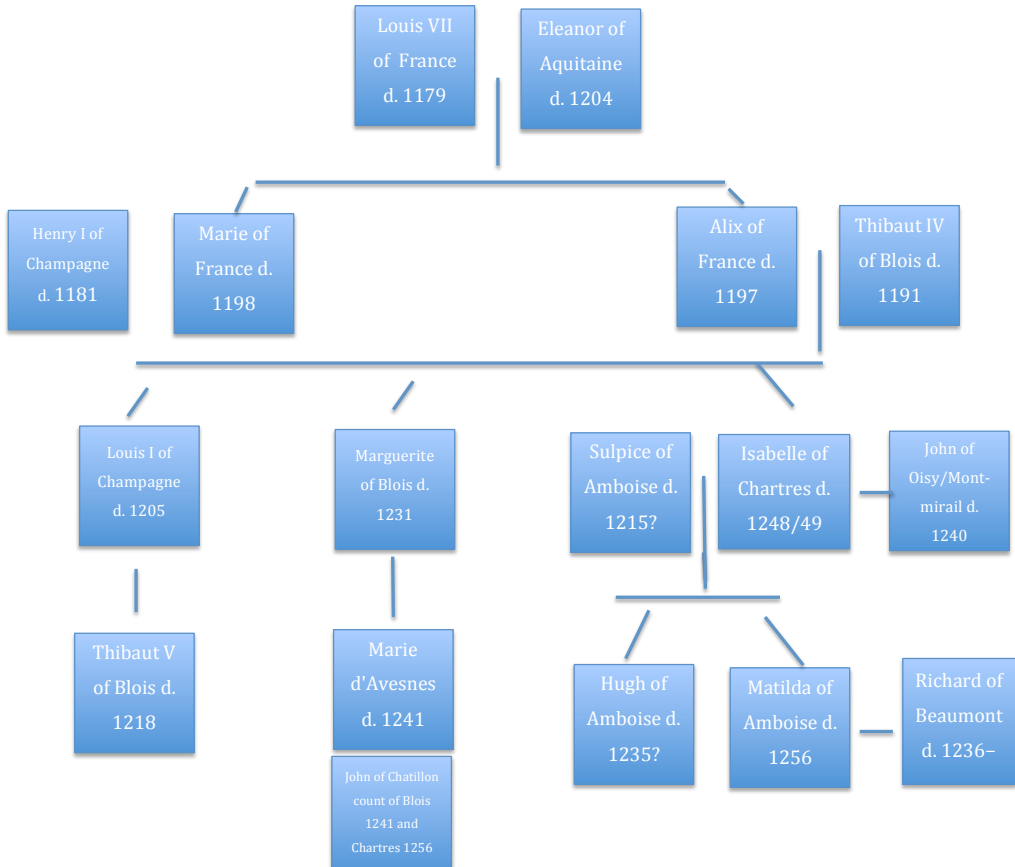


Figure 1. Daughters of Louis VII and Eleanore of Aquitaine

Matilda was probably the second of six children born to Isabelle and her first husband, Sulpice, Lord of Amboise. What little we know about their children comes from two documents for the priory of Cistercian nuns at Moncey, which had been founded by Isabelle and Sulpice circa 1209. An act from 1214 records that Sulpice granted rights at l'Île-Barbe to the Cistercian nuns of Moncey with the assent of his wife Isabelle, their son Hugh, and daughter Matilda as well as younger children, John, William, A., and Dionysia.¹⁴ The younger children then disappeared from all records, and Sulpice had died before Isabelle became countess in 1218, for she had a second husband, John of Oisy, when she was granted the county of Chartres. After Sulpice's death, his son Hugh, Matilda's brother, became Lord of Amboise; Matilda inherited after his death circa 1235. As Lady of Amboise, Matilda ruled there, first with her husband, Richard of Beaumont, until his death circa 1240, and then alone until her own death in 1256. Upon the death of her mother Isabelle of Chartres in 1248 or 1249, Matilda became countess of Chartres as well as Lady of Amboise.

The generosity of Matilda of Amboise and her mother Isabelle to houses of Cistercian nuns is particularly striking.¹⁵ Isabelle had founded two houses of Cistercian nuns early in her reign as countess.¹⁶ Already in 1232, Matilda and her husband, Richard of Beaumont, had granted the nuns of Lieu-Notre-Dame up to one hundred arpents of uncultivated land in the forest of Calmont near Romorantin, land to be brought under

14. On Moncey, see Anne Bondéelle-Souchier, «Les moniales cisterciennes et leurs livres manuscrits dans la France d'ancien régime,» *Cîteaux* 45 (1994): 193-336, 306-07. The foundation in 1209 is usually credited to Isabelle's first husband, Sulpice of Amboise. By 1214, Sulpice was dead, and Isabelle, his widow and before her remarriage, made a large gift of income to endow a priest at the church of Moncey to say daily mass for Sulpice's soul. Archives départementales Indres-et-Loire, Tours, H799 and H800.

15. *Cartulaire de l'abbaye de Notre-Dame-de-l'Eau*, ed. Charles Métails (Chartres, 1908), nos. 50 (1256), 51 (1256), 56 (1257), 60 (1257), 60 bis (1280), and pp. 76-77; *Cartulaire de l'abbaye royale du Lieu-Notre-Dame-lèz-Romorantin*, ed. Ernest Prat (Romorantin, 1892), nos. 8 (1259), 9 (1268) and 35 (1261).

16. *Cartulaire de Lieu*, no. 33 (1222); *Cartulaire de l'Eau*, nos. 3-7 (1226), are the foundation documents.

cultivation and held free of rent.¹⁷ In 1249, the new countess Matilda, in one of her first charters after her mother's death, granted to the nuns of Lieu-Notre-Dame, for the souls of her father, Sulpice of Amboise, and her mother, Isabelle of Chartres, and her husband Richard of Beaumont, and for herself, new expanses of wooded property near the grange of Hagueville, which the nuns could "guard, sell, give, uproot and reduce to agriculture."¹⁸ In another she confirmed to those nuns of Lieu-Notre-Dame their rights in the woods near the abbey, its great pond and ditches to keep it drained, rabbit warrens, and rights to hunt small animals to provide food for the sick.¹⁹ When Matilda died, the county reverted to a cousin who had earlier inherited the county of Blois.

The fact that they had no direct heirs and that the King did not limit their almsgiving, placed Matilda of Amboise and her mother Isabelle in a unusual situation in regard to their support of Cistercian nuns.²⁰ By the time they had become widows circa 1240, they were both beyond childbearing age and knew that Matilda would have no direct heirs. These facts meant that Matilda of Amboise and her mother Isabelle could be exceedingly generous in their support of their favored Cistercian nuns, not only at Eau-lez-Chartres and Lieu-Notre-Dame, but also at the priory of Moncy and at a new foundation at Perray near Angers.²¹ Without direct heirs, Matilda and Isabelle had no limits on their abilities as heiresses to give generously to the Church. This is in contrast to our next Matilda, Matilda of Courtenay, who at the time of her death had two great-granddaughters who would inherit her counties.

17. *Cartulaire de Lieu*, no. 24 (1232).

18. *Cartulaire de Lieu*, no. 36 (1249).

19. *Cartulaire de Lieu*, no. 37 (1249).

20. On limits to almsgiving by women associated with crown lands, see Constance H. Berman, "Two Medieval Women's Control of Property and Religious Benefactions: Eleanor of Vermandois and Blanche of Castile," *Viator* 41, no. 2 (2010): 151-82, doi: 10.1484/J.VIATOR.1.100796.

21. In 1249 Matilda of Amboise was also involved in the foundation of Perray-aux-Nonnains; see Joseph Avril, "Les fondations, l'organisation et l'évolution des établissements de moniales dans le diocèse d'Angers," in *Les Religieuses en France au XIII^e siècle*, ed. Michel Parisse (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1985), 27-67, esp. 35-37, and Bondéelle-Souchier, "Les moniales cisterciennes," 281, which mistakenly identifies Matilda whose husband was Richard of Beaumont as from Blois rather than from Amboise.

Matilda of Courtenay, Countess of Nevers, Auxerre, Tonnerre (Inherited Power) ca. 1185-1257

Matilda of Courtenay, also called Matilda the Great, became countess of Nevers, Auxerre, and Tonnerre, southeast of Paris.²² She inherited power from her mother, Agnes of Nevers, and from her grandmother, another Matilda. Agnes was a great heiress, for she had inherited the counties of Auxerre and Nevers from her brother William V, who had died without direct issue in 1181. It appears that Agnes and Peter of Courtenay had purchased the county of Tonnerre in anticipation of their eventual inheritance from Agnes's mother, Matilda, in 1192 when the latter entered Fontévrault as a nun.²³ Matilda's name, de Courtenay, came from her father, Peter of Courtenay, first cousin of King Philip Augustus, who had married Agnes (Matilda of Courtenay's mother) in 1184 (fig. 2).

In 1199 Matilda of Courtenay was married to Hervy IV of Donzy. Her later religious bequests for his soul suggest that the marriage had been a happy one. Yet Matilda of Courtenay had been a prize of war after a local skirmish in which Hervy of Donzy had defeated and taken prisoner Matilda's father, Peter of Courtenay. The price of Peter's release was Matilda's hand in marriage along with her immediate inheritance of the county of Nevers. Only after Peter's death in 1216/1217 in Latin Constantinople, where he had ruled as Emperor, were Matilda and Hervy vested with the counties of Auxerre and Tonnerre. Their rights to the counties were secured further in 1220 when Pope Honorius III

22. This section draws on an honors' thesis written at the University of Iowa by Susan Cray Hagen. She based her study primarily on René de Lespinasse, *Le Nivernais et Les Comtes de Nevers* (Paris: H. Champion, 1909); *Chronique ou histoire abrégée des évêques et des comtes de Nevers écrite en Latin au seizième siècle et publiée pour la première fois par René de Lespinasse* (Paris, 1870), and Ernest Petit, *Histoire des ducs de Bourgogne de la race Capétienne: Avec des documents inédits et des pièces justificatives* (Paris, 1835-1918). My sincere thanks to Ms Hagen, for her eager and enthusiastic work on this project.

23. Constance B. Bouchard, *Sword, Miter, and Cloister: Nobility and the Church in Burgundy, 980-1198* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 340-51, citing the Chronicle of Vezelay for Agnes's mother, Matilda.

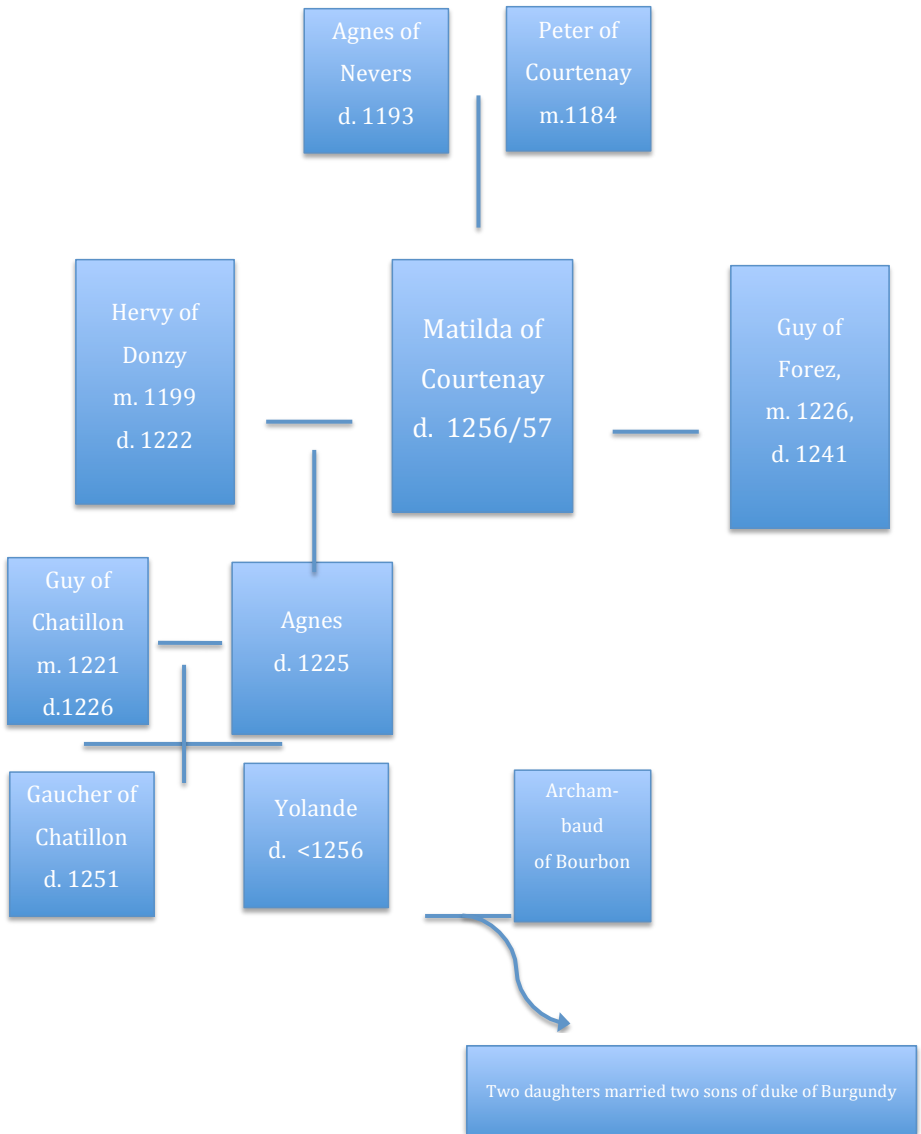


Figure 2. Family Tree of Matilda of Nevers.

declared Matilda and Hervy of Donzy's marriage legal.²⁴ They had one living child, a daughter named Agnes, who married Guy of Saint-Pol and Châtillon-sur-Marne in 1221.²⁵ This union was fruitful and the couple produced a son, Gaucher, and a daughter, Yolande.

A series of disasters soon struck, beginning with the death in 1222 of Hervy of Donzy, Matilda's first husband, at the castle of Saint-Aignan in Berry, said to have been poisoned by supporters of the Albigensians. He was buried at the house of Cistercian monks at Pontigny. Then in 1225 the daughter Agnes died (perhaps of complications from a third childbirth), and her bereft husband, Guy of Châtillon, began to found a chapel or church in her honor at Pont-aux-Dames near Meaux in spring 1226; it would become a house of Cistercian nuns. He also prepared to depart that summer with King Louis VIII on a Crusade against the Albigensians.

The campaign was a disaster for French knights. Guy of Châtillon died at the siege of Avignon in late summer 1226, as did Bouchard of Marly (discussed above). Guy's younger brother, Hugh of Châtillon took over the foundation of Pont-aux-Dames with his new wife, Marie of Avesnes, daughter of Marguerite of Blois.²⁶ Additionally, King Louis VIII would die in November 1226 during his return to the north. His foreign-born widow, Queen Blanche of Castile, prepared a coronation

24. Among claimants to Auxerre was Peter of Courtenay's younger brother Robert of Courtenay, whose wife, Lady of Mehun-sur-Yevre, was also called Matilda of Courtenay; she founded houses of Cistercian nuns at Beauvoir in 1223 and at les Bussières in 1234 in the diocese of Bourges.

25. The daughter, Agnes's, betrothal in 1218 to the infant Philip (1214-1218), first son of Blanche of Castile and the future Louis VIII, was probably not followed by a marriage. The young prince died in his fifth year, probably before any marriage had taken place; Agnes must have been nearly a decade his senior.

26. See *L'abbaye du Pont-aux-Dames, assise en la paroisse de Couilly (1226-1790)*, ed. A. Berthaut (Meaux, 1887), from Paris, AN Latin 10944, *Cartularium Pontis Dominarum*. Eventually gifts to that abbey of Pont-aux-Dames would also come from the son, Gaucher, *Pont-aux-Dames*, nos. 66, 67 (1239/40), 68, 71, 73 (1240), and 83, 84 and 85 (1248), in which he gave the nuns of Pont-aux-Dames twenty-three livres' worth of income for his own soul.

for the young Louis IX and began to build an abbey of Cistercian monks at Royaumont for Louis VIII's soul.²⁷

Guy and Agnes's young children, Gaucher and Yolande, were taken into the care of their grandmother, Matilda of Courtenay, who, in late 1226, bereft not only of husband, daughter and son-in-law, and in need of protection for her young grandchildren, remarried without even waiting for royal permission. This second marriage, to Guy, count of Forez, appears to have been a marriage of convenience. It lasted about fifteen years, but produced no children. (Indeed Matilda would have been in her forties.) Each retained control of his/her own property, and his heir from an earlier marriage had no claim on her counties.

Matilda's religious patronage dates particularly from this period. In the late 1220s, just after the deaths of her husband Hervy, her daughter Agnes, and her son-in-law, Guy of Châtillon, Matilda founded or refounded three houses of Cistercian nuns in her realm: at La Charité-lès-Lézennes, Les-Isles, and the latter's "daughter-house" at Réconfort or Marcilly, where she would be buried.²⁸ Such religious benefactions seem not to have occurred when her second husband, Guy of Forez, died in the Holy Land in 1241.

By then, in 1241, Matilda's grandson, Gaucher of Châtillon, was old enough to serve as Matilda's proxy knight, allowing her to rule her three counties in her own right, while she made her homage to Louis IX. But he too died young, caught up in Crusading fever. Gaucher of Châtillon died gloriously in battle on Louis IX's first Crusade in 1251. He would have been about thirty years old, but appears never to have married and was without heirs. Matilda of Courtenay, his grandmother, however, could turn to other, female, heirs, because her granddaughter, Gaucher's sister, Yolande de Châtillon, had been married to Archambaud IX of Bourbon, and they had two daughters, Matilda and Agnes, who married two brothers, sons of the duke of Burgundy. After Matilda the Great died in 1257, the succession becomes very confused, however; the elder daughter would eventually be Matilda of Courtenay's heir, when her great grandmother died.

27. Élie M. Berger, *Histoire de Blanche de Castille, Reine de France* (Paris: Thorin, 1895).

28. Bondéelle-Souchier, "Les moniales cisterciennes," 236, 282 and 294, 380.

Matilda the Great, countess since 1199, was a good and strong ruler in her own right. She lived to about seventy years of age, making her last testament just before her death in 1257. She had been a wise ruler of her towns, issuing them charters and encouraging their commerce and industry. Indeed, I first encountered Matilda of Courtenay, on a feudal coin, issued under her own name: “*Matilda Comitisse, Nivernensis*,” which from the hoard evidence appears to have come from the 1240s; such coinage in her own name is evidence of her strong rulership.²⁹ Her story, however, was far from unique in the history of thirteenth-century women’s rule, except insofar as being an exaggerated case of the continued failure of male heirs in her family that had begun long before she was born.³⁰

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29. Such feudal coins were never dated, but these may be assigned to the 1240s by their hoard context. That Matilda successfully issued them in her own name suggests her power; see Constance H. Berman, “A Thirteenth-century Coin Hoard in the Collection of American Numismatic Society and a Penny from the Cluniac Priory of Souvigny,” *Trésors monétaires* 8 (1986): 115-27, pl. 41. My thanks to Alan Stahl who had found the hoard in the collections and suggested it as a research project. I intend to pursue further the issues of castles, fairs, town charters, and women’s use of written records in a study on medieval women’s work.

30. When I first traced Matilda’s history, I wondered at the familial tendency to have so many successive daughters inheriting and ruling. Was this statistically possible or was this evidence of some male-transmitted genetic disorder? Probably instead this was the result of familial ideals of masculinity and Christian chivalry shared by many in the central Middle Ages.