



*The Books and Life of Judith of  
Flanders,*  
Mary Dockray-Miller  
(Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

Review by: Jitske Jasperse

*The Books and Life of Judith of Flanders*. By Mary Dockray-Miller. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015. ISBN 978-1-4094-6835-6. xiii +146pp. £54 (website price).

**D**ockray-Miller brings Judith of Flanders (c.1032-1094), the sister of Count Baldwin V of Flanders and wife of Earl Totsig of Northumbria and Count Welf IV of Bavaria, to life through the four known Gospel books she once possessed, two of them containing her ‘portraits’. The analysis of the content of the Gospel books in chapter 2 is certainly of great interest to those working on medieval manuscripts. Through the analysis of Totsig’s political situation the author comes up with an alternative original location of the medieval scriptorium, not in York but in Totsig’s most important southern landholdings, in the vicinity of Peterborough (32-33). She also compares zoo-anthropomorphic motifs in the Monte Cassino manuscript with an Anglo-Saxon reliquary cross, originally probably belonging to Westminster Abbey, demonstrating connections between the two media, the abbeys and their patrons, as well as contemporary familiarity with the cross (43).

In addition, Dockray-Miller has translated and analysed several written sources related to Judith: two chapters from the *Vita Oswini*, the grants made to Weingarten Abbey, and three texts related to the Weingarten relic of the Holy Blood, Judith’s most substantial gift to the abbey according to two of the last-mentioned sources. These texts not only inform us about Judith and her patronage, but also about gendered roles, and, interestingly, about the re-writing of the history of the Holy Blood relic “to accentuate the relic’s aristocratic, masculine, and powerful devotees . . ., presenting Judith primarily as a plausible link who transferred the relic between two aristocratic men, Baldwin V and Welf IV” (92). The latter happened around 1200 and made me wonder why the monks at Weingarten felt the need to diminish Judith’s link to the Holy Blood relic more than 100 years after her death. Comparisons to other examples in which men entered the story at the expense of women – and vice versa – could have added to our understanding of why these changes occurred. Did this happen to secure Weingarten’s position around 1200, or were there other forces at work, and what were the effects of the re-writing of history?

Dockray-Miller’s goal was to write a “‘patronage biography’, a semi-narrative version of Judith’s life largely told through analysis of the works of art she commissioned and the historical documents describing those works” (2). Like many other women, Judith consciously and successfully used the creation of artworks as tools on the political stage, positioning both herself and her family in the aristocratic hierarchy of northern Europe. The merit of this book lies in the study of material objects, especially books, to study Judith’s patronage and its strategic employment at various places and

times. An example is Judith's donation of one of her deluxe English Gospel books to Dowager Empress Agnes, who in 1072 donated it to Monte Cassino (now Monte Cassino MS 437). The author argues that this gift was part of a diplomatic strategy which "publicly affirmed a political and spiritual bond between the Welfs and the Empress" (77). While this seems highly plausible, because Judith appears to have been a book collector with sufficient foresight, it raises the question whether Judith's contemporaries, such as Empress Agnes, Queen Emma, Adele of France, Countess of Flanders, and Matilda of Flanders, employed similar strategies. What do we know about their books and the precious objects they owned or donated? Were these artefacts employed strategically and can this be considered 'typically' female? Drawing some in-depth parallels to other women, might have added to the argument that Judith needed these mobile objects to emphasize her status and power due to the lack of immobile property. Without wanting to make all women driving forces behind art merely to underscore their status or power, it is relevant to consider Empress Agnes's involvement in the Speyer Gospel Book (now in the Escorial at Madrid) instead of solely connecting it to its alleged donor Henry III, as Dockray-Miller seems to do. Henry is regarded as donor because he presents the manuscript to the Virgin, while his wife is not depicted as active participant. But Agnes's presence and the way the Virgin interacts with her, perhaps even more actively than with Henry, involves the empress in the donation and indicates a special relation to the saint.

In spite of these remarks, the book shows that limited written source material, such as charters, and the absence of landowning do not necessarily mean there is no story to tell about women's involvement in politics; on the contrary, it shows that visual culture can add to our understanding of women's (and men's) role in society. Even though "the particulars of Judith's biography are shrouded in the past" (102), Dockray-Miller's analysis of Judith has provided much food for thought concerning women's relations to moveable objects, gift-giving, and the ties between books and power in particular.

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