

Female Succession in the Kingdom of Jerusalem in the Twelfth Century

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Abstract

This paper explores the question of queenship in the Crusader States, specifically the Kingdom of Jerusalem in the twelfth century. It seeks to understand how women were able to gain and wield power in a time when they were viewed solely as diplomatic links between dynasties and transmitters of royal blood. Research was done through a close reading of primary and secondary sources concerning the history of the Crusader States, medieval queenship, and other ancillary topics, as well as through case studies of important female rulers from the Holy Land and Western Europe. From this research I argue that internal and external political stability was required for women to effectively rule, but if those conditions were met, a queen could be influential.

While many people are familiar with the idea of "crusading" and the Crusades, most people cannot explain what the Crusades were about or when they happened. Further, most are unaware that the First Crusade was successful and led to the establishment of the Crusader States, Latin Christian territories in the heart of the Near East. These states were the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the Principality of Antioch, the County of Edessa, and the County of Tripoli¹ (fig. 1). They lasted from 1097 with the conquest of Edessa, to 1291 with the fall of Acre.² The Crusader States were especially interesting because of the frequent occurrences of female succession to the throne of Jerusalem and smaller territories. Why were there so many female rulers in Jerusalem and under what conditions did they thrive? This question, though important, is understudied and there are many misconceptions about it. Royal women in the Crusader States often became the focus of political, legal, and dynastic power due to the lack of male heirs. Unlike their contemporaries in Western Europe, the queens of Jerusalem were able to wield political power contingent on internal and external stability in the region; if there was not stability it became increasingly difficult for queens to reign effectively.



Figure 1. The Crusader States.³

The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem was abnormal for the Middle Ages in its quantity of female leadership and the legal rights women possessed.⁴ Female leadership took place in aristocratic households and was characterized by success and failure. There were five queens regnant who ruled in their own right on the basis of inheritance in the twelfth century: Melisende, Sibylla, Isabella I, Maria, and Isabella II. How did these women wield power? What external and internal issues were important to a successful reign? How did they deal with the more masculine aspects of their leadership?

A large body of work exists on various aspects of these issues. However, nothing specifically addresses how the queens of Jerusalem, especially Melisende and Sibylla, exercised power.⁵ The "Studies in the History of Queen Melisende of Jerusalem" by Hans E. Mayer is the premier work on the political life of Melisende. It is based on legal documents and historical chronicles, the most important of which is *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea* by William, Archbishop of Tyre, written in the latter half of the twelfth century. This is the main chronicle for the Kingdom of Jerusalem and covers the important political figures and events of the twelfth century.⁶ While Mayer never explicitly states so, Melisende, and other women to a lesser extent, used four methods to exercise power: a wide kin network with the nobility, mutually beneficial support of the church, the issuing of charters, and the filling of government positions with trusted allies. This paper will specifically address Melisende's methods of power.

To understand this topic within the broader context of medieval rulership and the crusades, I also examined typical roles of a medieval king. What were their

duties and powers in contrast to the roles of a medieval queen? For a general idea of kingship, Thomas Watkin discusses the role of the *Dominus Rex* (Lord King) who was “consecrated and crown,” a medieval king but also the lord of his realm. Watkin argues that the *Dominus Rex* was the new definition of kingship in the twelfth century, reflecting an increased respect for the royal office.⁷ In terms of the kings of Jerusalem, Bernard Hamilton argues the kings consort (kings by marriage) who were recruited from Western Europe due to a lack of suitable royal males, upset the balance of power when they politically favored their Western entourages.⁸ The current scholarship on medieval queenship focuses largely on sexuality, power, and the perception of women by their contemporaries.⁹ Royal power in the Crusader States was established and maintained differently than in Western Europe.¹⁰ Historians have characterized the Crusader States as a frontier society (on the fringe of Christendom). This differentiation between European society and the Crusader States is one of the main reasons historians believe women in the Crusader States gained positions of power.¹¹

Hamilton’s “Women in the Crusader States: The Queens of Jerusalem (1100–1191)” provides an excellent modern interpretation of the experiences of the queens of Jerusalem, including biographical detail and a general timeline.¹² Hamilton not only considers both queens regnant and queens consort (queens by marriage) but also women, such as Agnes of Courtnay, who were never queens but had power over the throne. However, Hamilton overlooks Queen Sibylla’s agency, preferring instead to focus on the influence of her husband, Guy of Lusignan, and her mother, Agnes of Courtnay.¹³ This paper addresses the issue of Sibylla’s agency by presenting her as a political actor. Lois L. Huneycutt’s “Female Succession and the Language of Power in the Writings of Twelfth Century Churchmen” provides insight on how clergy reacted to strong female leaders, but does not comment specifically on how those women ruled. Lambert’s “Queen or Consort: Rulership and Politics in the Latin East, 1118–1228” is a detailed analysis of the role each queen regnant of Jerusalem played during her reign.¹⁴ While Lambert discusses how these queens were perceived and treated by their nobles, she does not spend much time discussing what political tools they used to maintain power. Therefore, this paper will focus on methods of preserving power.

To contrast the experiences of the queens of Jerusalem, I examined the experiences of aristocratic women from other Crusader States. Agnes of Courtnay, though never queen, was the mother of two monarchs, and, it is argued, was especially influential during the reign of her son, Baldwin IV.¹⁵ Further, Alice of Antioch provides a contemporary contrast to Queen Melisende, as she was less successful in her endeavors to rule.¹⁶ Finally, I also researched contemporary powerful queens from Western Europe, such as Empress Matilda and Blanche of Castile. Queens regnant from the twelfth century were rare—this highlights how exceptional the occurrences of queenship in the Kingdom of Jerusalem were.

When discussing the different circumstances in the Kingdom of Jerusalem one must examine how medieval king- and queenship worked, both in theory and practice. Kingship is the easiest to discuss because it was the norm of medieval Europe. Around the twelfth century, the idea of kingship was evolving. The early medieval king was a political leader who commanded armies, was a unifying force for his kingdom, and was anointed and crowned. At the time Queen Melisende was establishing her power base in Jerusalem, King Henry II of England was developing the Common Law system and the idea that a king dispensed justice to all of his subjects by insisting on, according to Watkin, “universal lordship of the king within kingdom.”¹⁷ That is, every subject from peasant to high lord owed personal allegiance to the king, not just to their feudal overlord. If the king’s power was in the public sphere, then the queen’s role was in the private sphere.

The three types of medieval queens, from most common to rarest, are queens consort, queens regent, and queens regnant. A queen consort was the wife of a king: she had little political power, except in terms of private influence as an intercessor in public affairs.¹⁸ Her main function was to transmit dynastic blood, provide a link between her family and her husband's, and produce heirs as shown by the "obsessive attention focused on the birth of heirs . . . and the apprehensions aroused by barren queens," according to Carmi-Parsons.¹⁹ The second form of queenship, queen regent, originated from a queen's perceived natural affinity for motherhood. A queen regent was a queen who ruled in the place of an incapacitated monarch, often a son who was too young to rule. According to Andre Poulet, in a regency "the queen emerge[d] as her husband's legal replacement," but was less threatening than a king because she was not crowned and consecrated, and therefore not bound to authority in the same way.²⁰

One of the most powerful women in medieval history, Blanche of Castile, was a queen regent. Louis IX of France was 12 years old when he became king in 1226. His mother, Blanche of Castile, immediately took power and "legislated, dealt with foreign powers, waged war, arranged marriages—in short, imposed herself as sovereign of the realm," according to Poulet.²¹ She was so effective that after Louis IX came of majority, he deferred to her judgment and named her his regent when he went on crusade. One of Blanche's most effective methods of rulership was that from the legal documentary evidence it was impossible to tell that she was ruling. She did everything in the name of her son, making her non-threatening to the nobility. However, she was limited by her "weakness of coercive powers," according to Poulet.²² The problem of coercive power is a recurring theme in medieval queenship. One crucial component to kingship was the ability to lead an army, which a medieval woman could not do. Queens regent and queens regnant had to rely on trusted men, usually relatives, to lead their forces for them. That is not to say a woman never led an army or otherwise participated in battle. There are some rare examples of medieval women functioning in a military capacity, but no famous or powerful queens did.²³

A queen regnant was a woman who ruled in her own right, on the basis of birth. The best example of a queen regnant in medieval history, besides the queens of Jerusalem, is Empress Matilda. Also known as Maud, Matilda was the daughter of Henry I of England and lived in the first half of the twelfth century. She married the German emperor at a young age, but after his death and the death of her brother, her father named her his heir. Henry required his vassals to swear an oath recognizing her right to succession in 1127.²⁴ After Henry's death, her cousin, Stephen of Blois, challenged her claim to the throne and civil war ensued. Matilda was the first woman in English history "to claim the throne in her own right and not merely to act for a son," according to Stafford.²⁵ This distinguishes her in both theory and practice from a queen regent, who exercised power in the name of others. Matilda was never able to capture the throne from Stephen, though she was successful in a number of battles and had her son, Henry, named heir to the English throne.²⁶ Matilda failed in part because of how she was perceived by contemporaries. The *Gesta Stephani*, though written by someone hostile to her cause, says she was accused of "abuses of power in general and the abuses of power particularly expected from a woman . . . she is haughty, overbearing, with an imperious voice and harsh and insulting language."²⁷ In other words, she acted too much like a man.

Though they differed from kingdoms in Western Europe, the Crusader States were still influenced by them. After the conquest of Jerusalem and the success of the First Crusade in 1099, Godfrey of Bouillon was proclaimed Defender of the Holy Sepulcher and took possession of Jerusalem, effectively becoming king. After his death in 1100, his brother, Baldwin of Bouillon Count of Edessa, became king, establishing

a hereditary monarchy.²⁸ The Kingdom of Jerusalem was on its way to becoming like twelfth century France or England. However, due to the nature of the frontier-like society, there were complications. A shortage of men to hold elite positions led to noblewomen taking roles their male relatives would have held in Western Europe. Women held elevated status in the Crusader States for three reasons. First, girls survived infancy and childhood more often than boys and consequently inherited their father's fiefs more often. Second, short male lifespan meant more young heiresses or widows were ruling in their own right or for their children. Third, constant warfare and death meant the women had to take up traditional male roles.²⁹ As a result, women became heiresses of the royal dynasty and conferred regal rights onto their husbands. Men, including some kings of Jerusalem and princes of Antioch, were often brought from Western Europe to marry these women. This practice placed the man in the traditionally feminine role of leaving one's homeland to marry. These men may have been more eager to exert their authority and establish masculine identities, leading to competition and resentment between their entourages and the already established nobility. While most settlers in the Holy Land were from Western Europe and therefore the main influence on the Crusader States, the Byzantine Empire's proximity and connection to the King of Jerusalem must also be considered.

The Byzantine Empire, the eastern half of the old Roman Empire, was the most powerful Christian polity in the Near East and was therefore an ally to the Crusader States. Intermarriage between the ruling house of Jerusalem and the imperial family was common: Baldwin III wed Theodora Comnena, and Amalric I married Maria Comnena, the niece and great-grandniece of Emperor Manuel Comnenus, respectively.³⁰ The cultural exchange between Byzantium and the Crusader States may also have affected inheritance patterns. The Byzantine Empire followed the pattern of porphyrogeniture, which meant only a child born in the purple room of the Imperial Palace or to the Emperor after his ascension to the throne was considered heir.³¹ With porphyrogeniture, an heir's suitability was based on his or her relation to the emperor and was not necessarily gender specific.³² This contrasts with primogeniture, in which the firstborn son inherited everything, which was the dominant inheritance pattern in Western Europe at the time. In fact, royal women in the Byzantine Empire could play a significant role in politics. In her *Alexiad*, Anna Comnena discusses the level of influence her grandmother, Anna Dalassena, had over her son the Emperor, stating that "without her brains and good judgment the Empire would not survive."³³ In the latter half of the twelfth century, the distinction between porphyrogeniture and primogeniture became important in the Kingdom of Jerusalem when Baldwin IV died; his sister, Sibylla, was firstborn, but their half sister, Isabella, was related to the Emperor.

The story of female power in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem started in the early part of the twelfth century. King Baldwin II only had daughters; therefore, he decided that Melisende, the eldest daughter, would succeed him upon his death. Mayer argues that this switch from an agnatic (succession through the male line) to a cognatic (succession through either the male or female line) inheritance pattern was necessary for Baldwin II if he wanted to strengthen a hereditary tradition of inheritance rather than have a free election between the clergy and baronage.³⁴ Melisende's reign (1131–1161) was recounted by the chronicler William, Archbishop of Tyre. Melisende's political career can be broken into two time frames—first, her joint rulership with her husband, Fulk of Anjou; and second, her joint reign and struggle for power with her son, Baldwin III. The pinnacle of her power lasted from after the revolt of Hugh of Jaffa in 1134 until her son's majority approximately 10 years later. How did Melisende maintain and exercise power in an age when royal women were seen as mere transmitters of royal blood?³⁵ Melisende successfully employed four methods

for exercising and maintaining power: a close, mutually beneficial relationship with the church, an extensive kinship network built up within the nobility of the Crusader States, an ability to fill important governmental offices with her supporters, and a monopoly on issuing charters.

The impetus to Melisende's rise to power was Hugh of Jaffa's rebellion against Fulk. Before this rebellion, her husband, Fulk of Anjou, was the dominant monarch. For example, in one of the charters issued early in his reign, Fulk claimed that he had the right to rule the kingdom because he was sole heir to the throne. However, it was his marriage to Melisende that gave him legal justification. Despite Baldwin II's will, which made Fulk and Melisende joint rulers of Jerusalem, Mayer concludes that Fulk was attempting to push his wife out of direct government.³⁶ Mayer's conclusion is supported by William of Tyre's description of Fulk's character. William describes Fulk's administration of his native Anjou, where he was count before he was recruited to become the king of Jerusalem, as very hands on: "He lived on terms of intimate friendship with all the barons . . . he was administering his affairs with wisdom and energy."³⁷ In a time when France was fairly unstable, Fulk's intimate friendships with his barons can be understood as he paid attention to their dealings and tolerated no unruliness from them. Because he was accustomed to governing Anjou personally, he was not eager to share power with his wife. However, Melisende was able to shift the balance of power and establish herself politically. William of Tyre states that the origin of this shift was the rebellion of Hugh, Count of Jaffa in 1134.

Hugh of Jaffa was Queen Melisende's first cousin, but that did not stop the rumors that Hugh was Melisende's lover.³⁸ This type of accusation was common in the Middle Ages, as one of the best ways to undermine the queen was to question her matrimonial loyalty. If a queen took lovers, it jeopardized the continuation of the dynasty and reflected badly on the king. Eleanor of Aquitaine was similarly accused, a few decades later during the Second Crusade, of being too intimate with Raymond of Poitier, the Prince of Antioch and her uncle.³⁹ It is more likely that Hugh was defending his kinswoman's right to power, as there was a legitimate fear among the nobility that Fulk was attempting to deprive Melisende of her right to her father's throne.⁴⁰ In any case, Hugh was declared guilty of high treason in 1134.⁴¹ While waiting to leave the kingdom for his sentence of exile, Hugh was murdered by a man hoping to gain the king's favor. Public opinion then turned against Fulk, and Melisende gained the upper hand. William of Tyre states that the king and his supporters felt they were not safe in the queen's presence or among her allies because of her terrible wrath over the matter. Fulk, "from that day forward, became so uxorious that, whereas he had formerly aroused her wrath, he now calmed it, and not even in unimportant cases did he take any measures without her knowledge and assistance."⁴² In this instance the traditional gender roles of king and queen were reversed in Melisende and Fulk's relationship, and she was able to establish lasting political power.

One traditional role of a medieval queen was that of private intercessor into public affairs.⁴³ In the political aftermath of Hugh's rebellion, William of Tyre recounts to his readers that "the king, finally, after persistent efforts succeeded in gaining a pardon for the other objects of [Melisende's] wrath—at least to such an extent that they could be introduced into her presence."⁴⁴ Here the king was petitioning the queen to allow his allies back into the public sphere of court, which was the opposite of a typical medieval household. By supplicating himself to Melisende's power and consulting her in every matter, Fulk enabled his queen to establish public power. This was not too difficult for Melisende, and given the initial support Hugh of Jaffa had in his rebellion, there must have been considerable favor for the queen among the baronage.⁴⁵

The fact that the barons of Jerusalem would support Melisende over Fulk makes sense: he was a foreign ruler and she was the link to Baldwin II's line. Furthermore, Fulk's preference for his Angevin knights made the native nobility less willing to support him.⁴⁶ Medieval societies seem fearful of foreigners, especially when they were attached to power, as the typical distrust of queens consort shows.⁴⁷ The barons probably felt threatened by Fulk and his Angevin knights. The kingdom still needed Fulk as a military commander given the ever-present threat of its Muslim neighbors, but it seems the barons were not willing to sacrifice their royal house to gain security. This internal instability built up against her husband allowed Melisende to cement her power; after this period, all of Fulk's charters from the Jerusalem chancery, which was the administrative office of the government, were jointly issued by him and Melisende.

Fulk died late in 1143, leaving behind Melisende and their two sons, Baldwin and Amalric, ages thirteen and seven, respectively. According to William of Tyre, "Royal power passed to the Lady Melisend [sic], a queen beloved of God, to whom it belonged by hereditary right."⁴⁸ From this quotation it is clear that William of Tyre supported the queen. This is not surprising, given that the church usually supported Melisende in political matters. She often gave lavish land grants and other forms of patronage. These gifts were dual in nature: they improved both the church's and the royal family's standing.⁴⁹ For example, Melisende founded a convent at Bethany so her sister, Yveta, could be abbess.⁵⁰ This relationship with the church was the first of four ways Melisende built up her power base and enforced her hereditary right to rule after her eldest son, Baldwin III, had come of age. Her only true disadvantage, which Baldwin exploited to eventually oust her from power, was her inability to lead an army.

The second way that Melisende maintained power was through extensive kin networks with the nobility throughout the Crusader States. Her ties to the nobility outside the Kingdom of Jerusalem stemmed from marriage—two of her sisters married into the reigning houses of Tripoli and Antioch. By 1153, when trouble was brewing between Melisende and Baldwin III, her niece, Constance, was the Princess Regent of Antioch and her sister, Hodierna, was the Countess of Tripoli.⁵¹ Further, her familial ties to the baronage in her own kingdom were demonstrated in 1144 when the County of Edessa fell. Melisende dispatched a military detachment headed by the Constable of the Realm, Manasses of Hierges; Philip of Nablus, the only other adult male in the kingdom who had a serious claim to the throne; and Elinard of Tiberias, Prince of Galilee, holder of the largest crown fief in the kingdom.⁵² She clearly trusted these men to keep her interests in mind while on their mission, and their high feudal positions indicate that Melisende had a large network of noble support on which she could count. This network of secular support, coupled with her ecclesiastical support, gave the queen a large pool of allies.

Filling governmental positions with trusted personnel was the third way Melisende exercised her power. One of the main posts of a medieval kingdom was the constable of the realm. Mayer explains that the constable was "the chief military officer of the kingdom . . . [who] presided over the Haute Cour, the land's highest assembly, whenever the king was absent. He was second in command of the army."⁵³ Melisende was able to fill the post of constable with her kinsman, Manasses. Another important official was the chancellor. He ran the royal chancery and ensured the government functioned properly. Mayer states that "[the chancellors] were engaged in establishing the guidelines of the policy together with the ruler, went on diplomatic missions, and strictly speaking were more cabinet ministers than chancery clerks."⁵⁴ A good indicator of Melisende's grip on power was the degree to which she controlled this office. For example, after Fulk's death, Melisende appointed a new chancellor. However, in 1150

she did not have the political clout to install another chancellor, though she was able to remove the old one.⁵⁵ This inability to fill the position not only demonstrates the weakness in her standing as her son became older, but also is intrinsically linked to the final way Melisende maintained power—issuing charters.

The ability to issue legal charters indicated authority in the realm and was the fourth way Melisende exercised power. Charters were written and notarized in a scriptorium, a “writing room,” and then approved by the monarch before being published by the chancery. By controlling how, where, and by whom charters were issued, Melisende exercised substantial power in opposition to her son, especially during the early phase of their struggles. For example, in response to Baldwin’s failed military campaign in 1147, Melisende issued a charter that named Baldwin and his younger brother Amalric as joint issuers. This made Amalric a shareholder in the government. Not only would Baldwin theoretically have to share power with his mother and brother, but, to add insult to injury, Amalric remained loyal to Melisende throughout her struggles with Baldwin. After 1150, Melisende issued charters through her own scriptorium. By creating a scriptorium distinct from the chancery, she bypassed any oversight Baldwin would have had over her charters. This was radical and a precursor to civil war.⁵⁶

The hostilities between Baldwin and Melisende had escalated by 1153. William of Tyre relates the civil war and its outcome, starting with Baldwin’s demand that he be crowned without his mother on Easter Sunday. He did not get his way, but mother and son made an agreement to formally split the kingdom: the king took possession of Tyre and Acre, and the queen took Jerusalem and Nablus. While it may seem dangerous to split such a small kingdom, it was better than outright warfare. Baldwin, despite his ability to command an army, could not be confident that he would win a war with his mother. She still had extensive allies in her region of the kingdom and close connections to the other Crusader States. Further, as evidenced from the patriarch of Jerusalem refusing Baldwin’s coronation request, the church was his mother’s ally. Baldwin later regretted his capitulation and the peace did not hold. It probably did not help his ego that Melisende held Jerusalem and, with it, all the prestige and symbolic power of a capital city.⁵⁷ William tells his readers that “the king began to make trouble for his mother.”⁵⁸ A peace deal was mediated wherein Melisende agreed to surrender Jerusalem while retaining Nablus. Her strong personality and ability to rule are evidenced in her ability to retain the city, where she ruled until her death in 1161. Like other queens of Jerusalem, instability ultimately removed her from power. A woman could rule in her own right in the Middle Ages as long as the internal and external political situation was peaceful. Alice of Antioch, Melisende’s sister, demonstrates this link between instability and female rule.

William of Tyre did not like Alice of Antioch. He called her a “malicious and wily woman” prone to causing trouble with wicked plans.⁵⁹ This dislike of a woman in power is interesting, given William’s support of Melisende in similar circumstances. Thomas Asbridge takes a more sympathetic view of Alice, concluding that “the most basic cause of the principality’s vulnerability was not Alice’s ambition, which in a man we would probably see as nothing more than a natural impulse. Instead, two vagaries of fate crippled Antioch: the birth of a female . . . heir to Bohemond II and Alice; and the sudden death of that same young prince in battle in 1130.”⁶⁰ Like her sister, Alice was widowed when her child was underage. She also started her own scriptorium and employed her own chancellor to facilitate ruling. However, she was unable to cement her power as her sister did. Alice’s main problem was that Antioch, unlike Jerusalem, had recently been plagued with instability, leading to interference from the kings of Jerusalem in the principality’s affairs. Additionally, she lacked a strong relationship with the church.⁶¹

Succession in Antioch was fraught with chaos in the early twelfth century. After Prince Bohemond I returned to the West and his successor died in battle, the principality was left without a clear heir until Bohemond II arrived in 1126 from Italy, where he had been raised. However, his death a few years later plunged the principality into further uncertainty. William of Tyre gives his readers a sense of this dread: "The misfortune utterly overwhelmed the people of Antioch . . . again they renewed their lamentations, complaining that without the help of a prince they were in danger of falling a prey to the enemy."⁶² In this instability and uncertainty the chances of a woman establishing her power over Antioch were slim because the need for a strong military ruler was overwhelming. Instead of accepting Alice's regency after the death of Bohemond II, some of the nobles called on the king of Jerusalem to lead them. Both Baldwin II and Fulk exercised this royal prerogative during Alice's lifetime.⁶³

Bringing a foreign power into Antioch to rule was problematic for Alice and one of the main reasons she was unable to establish power. She attempted to cement her rule for six years, during which time she went through periods of limited success, interference from the kings of Jerusalem, and finally exclusion from power. She must have had some measure of support in the principality, as evidenced by how long it took her to be ousted from power. However, her legitimacy to rule was tenuous because she was a royal bride, described by Carmi-Parsons as an "interloper and potential adulteress who inspired distrust and suspicion," whereas her father and brother-in-law were legitimate royal authorities who had over-lordship of Antioch.⁶⁴ According to William of Tyre, Baldwin II traveled to the principality at the behest of the "great men of Antioch."⁶⁵ Yet Asbridge is skeptical as to the precise position Baldwin's supporters held in society. He states, "They were, to the best of our knowledge, not 'great men' of Antioch, but rather . . . an otherwise unknown monk of Saint Paul and a burgess of the city."⁶⁶ This discrepancy should cause scholars to question William's account of Alice, and, because of his ecclesiastical position, shows Alice's third problem in establishing power: her lack of a relationship with the church.

There were similarities in the ways Alice attempted to establish her power and the ways her sister, Melisende, wielded power. Both women issued charters and created scriptoria to facilitate ruling. While Alice may have attempted to replicate Melisende in other ways, she was unsuccessful in terms of a relationship with the church. Alice did, however, have her own scriptorium and chancellery, so it is not appropriate to say Alice of Antioch had no supporters in the church.⁶⁷ If Alice had her own bureaucratic structure, she must have had clergy members to run it—the laity at the time would not have had access to the necessary education. These men would have owed Alice their support because they depended on her for their livelihood. However, she did not have allies among the high clergy of the Crusader States. William of Tyre's attitude toward her, written a generation after her death, is probably typical of churchmen at the time. As Huneycutt declares, while "it is clear that medieval thinkers were not able or even willing to exclude women from sharing in public authority, it is not so clear that their tolerance extended to accepting a female ruler in her own right."⁶⁸ Melisende's success hinged in large part on the mutual support between her and the church; however, it seems Alice did not cultivate similar relationships.

These sisters offer a good contrast of female succession in the twelfth century. Clearly it was possible for a woman to rule well, as demonstrated by Melisende's success. William of Tyre proclaimed:

Melisende . . . was a woman of great wisdom who had much experience in all kinds of secular matters . . . it was her ambition to emulate the magnificence of the greatest and noblest princes and to show herself in no wise [sic] inferior to them . . . she ruled the

kingdom and administered the government with such skillful care that she may be said truly to have equaled her ancestors in that respect.⁶⁹

However, it was also possible for an otherwise strong female ruler to be ineffectual, especially in times of political instability, as Alice of Antioch demonstrated. These dual outcomes come together in Queen Sibylla of Jerusalem.

Sibylla was Melisende's granddaughter by her second son, Amalric, and his first wife, Agnes of Courtnay. Early in Sibylla's reign, she exercised considerable power but failed to protect the realm from the Muslim warlord Saladin, ultimately leading to the fall of Jerusalem and the beginning of the Third Crusade. Thus, Sibylla's reign was short, and much of the scholarship devoted to this period focuses on the actions of her second husband, Guy of Lusignan. Guy's prominence in the scholarship is due to his polarizing effect on the politics of royal court during the reigns of Sibylla and her predecessor and brother, Baldwin IV. However, it is a mistake to focus solely on Guy. Sibylla was not the passive transmitter of dynastic blood that later queens of Jerusalem would become. She acted with agency, as demonstrated by her choice of husband. This ability to express power must be reconciled with her inability to act, which led to the fall of Jerusalem. In more peaceful times, and with a more competent husband, Sibylla would have been an effective ruler.

William of Tyre died in 1186 while writing about the end of Baldwin IV's reign. Consequently, he is silent on Sibylla's rule, though he did chronicle Guy of Lusignan's regency for Baldwin IV. The main source for Queen Sibylla's reign is "The Old French Continuation of William of Tyre, 1184–97," written by Ernoul, a squire to the Christian nobleman Balian of Ibelin.⁷⁰ At the time of the Third Crusade, Balian was married to Sibylla's stepmother, Maria Comnena, and was the Lord of Nablus. William of Tyre indicated Balian's importance by listing him among the lords who urged Baldwin IV to put aside Guy of Lusignan as regent and to co-crown his young nephew, also named Baldwin.⁷¹ Ernoul's connection to Balian is important to remember as Ernoul favored Balian's opinions and actions. Consequently, Guy of Lusignan is not portrayed in a sympathetic light because of the animosity between the two noblemen. The other account for Sibylla's reign was written by Roger of Wendover, a thirteenth-century monk from St. Albans in England who wrote a history of the world from creation to the year 1235.⁷² This source is more favorable to the queen and her king-consort, and reveals Sibylla's strong will.

Due to his leprosy and the cultural stigma attached to it, Baldwin IV, Sibylla's brother, was not married and had no children to succeed him.⁷³ Sibylla did not immediately follow her brother to the throne. Instead, her young son from her first marriage, Baldwin V, was king for a short time. After her son's death in 1186, Roger of Wendover relates that the council of nobles decided that Sibylla, "as heiress of the kingdom, should be crowned queen and repudiate Guy, as unequal to the government."⁷⁴ It is an important point in terms of inheritance patterns that rather than Sibylla assuming the throne automatically, a council of nobles had to decide that the heiress to the kingdom should be crowned. Sibylla agreed to put Guy aside on the condition that she would be able to choose her next husband. She was subsequently crowned queen. When Sibylla was asked to name her new husband, she named Guy of Lusignan, whom her nobles were bound by oath to accept. Roger of Wendover tells historians that "all were astonished at her words, and wondered that so simple a woman had baffled so many wise councilors. Her conduct was in fact worthy of great praise . . . for she saved the crown for her husband and her husband for herself."⁷⁵

Sibylla was clearly willing to displease her vassals if she thought she was in the right, and the fact that no one suspected her decision to crown Guy suggests she was

politically astute. By publicly choosing Guy as her king-consort, Sibylla limited the influence her barons and family could exert over her. Realistically, either her mother or the nobility would have forced their own choice of husband on her if she had not decided swiftly. Fear of this imposition seemed to be the reason Baldwin IV married his sister to Guy of Lusignan in the first place. William of Tyre was not impressed by Guy. He snidely stated that Guy was noble enough, but that Baldwin “might have found in the kingdom nobles of far greater importance, wisdom, and even wealth . . . an alliance with any one of whom would have been of much greater advantage to the kingdom.”⁷⁶ While William’s words are true enough, Guy’s low standing might have been the reason he was so appealing to Baldwin IV and Sibylla.

Sibylla’s coronation story highlights the nobility’s increase in power over the half century between Melisende and her granddaughter. When Baldwin II invited Fulk of Anjou to Jerusalem to marry Melisende, there were no serious negotiations over whether or not she had the right to inherit or transmit the crown to her husband.⁷⁷ With Sibylla, the nobles of the kingdom convened a council to decide whether she or her half sister, Isabella, should inherit the throne, though Sibylla was the elder of the two.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the realization of Sibylla’s hereditary rights was contingent on her repudiation of Guy. The barons were attempting to claim the right of election, which would weaken the power of the monarchy by subverting succession. It allowed the barons to limit the actions of a king or queen by placing constraints upon monarchical power in order to inherit the throne. This struggle later became a major issue in Jerusalem’s political history.⁷⁹ Sibylla’s coronation illustrates this struggle between the monarchy and the nobility over hereditary rights versus the right of election.

Noble discretion over a monarch’s choice of consort was also imposed on Sibylla’s father, Amalric I, in order to succeed his brother, Baldwin III. This is the genesis of the nobility’s assertion of their right to election. Amalric agreed to the barons’ demands and set aside Agnes of Courtnay to marry Maria Comnena, a niece of the Byzantine emperor, though his children by Agnes were made legitimate by papal dispensation. The parallels between Guy and Agnes are clear: neither was important, politically speaking. Agnes was the sister of the dispossessed Count of Edessa, so while she was related to one of the ruling houses of the Crusader States, she was landless, poor, and without many connections.⁸⁰ Guy, at the time of his coronation, had lived in Jerusalem for six years, meaning that he had only been in the kingdom for a year when he married Sibylla.⁸¹ Both married their spouses when they had little chance of inheriting the throne—probably why the barons did not at first oppose the marriages. Amalric’s brother, Baldwin III, was married to Theodora Comnena, and they could have produced an heir if he had not died in 1163 at age 33.⁸² Sibylla’s brother, Baldwin IV, was not allowed to have children, so the throne should have passed to his eldest sister. However, Sibylla had a young son from her first marriage to William of Montferrat to whom many hoped she would transmit the throne. Yet there is a marked difference in how the nobility exercised power over the choice of a king consort versus that of a queen consort. Regardless of legal status, a king consort was more powerful than a queen consort because he commanded the army.

Sibylla needed to choose a husband to fulfill one of the duties of medieval kingship: leading an army. Without Guy, she would be vulnerable not only to her Muslim neighbors, but also to her nobles. Agnes’ primary function to produce an heir had already been met and secured by the papal dispensation. She was more replaceable, whereas Guy was necessary to defend the kingdom. Indeed, Guy had stepped in to lead the army as regent for Baldwin IV when leprosy weakened him.⁸³ If Sibylla had put aside Guy as the barons wished, there would have been no natural leader of the army while she negotiated a new husband. This would have been dangerous. Sibylla’s and

her brother's reigns coincided with the rise of al-Malik al-Nasir Salah ed-Din Yusuf, better known in Christian sources as Saladin, who united the Muslim world when he became the overlord of Egypt and Damascus in 1176.⁸⁴

The turning point for the Christians was the Battle of Hattin, which was a disaster. Guy was marching with his army toward the besieged city of Tiberias, when Saladin attacked the army. A letter to the master of Hospitallers in Italy tells scholars that "the Christians were defeated. The king was captured."⁸⁵ Furthermore, the Templars were almost all killed. In all, only about "two hundred of the knights or footsoldiers escaped," including Balian of Ibelin.⁸⁶ Not only was the Battle of Hattin a psychological blow to the Kingdom of Jerusalem, it also militarily crippled the kingdom. The Templars and the other military orders were the backbone of the Christian army. With their ranks decimated, there were not enough troops to defend the capital, and with the capture of the king, the army lacked a commander.

When Saladin swept south to Jerusalem, the city fell within weeks, and Sibylla, for all her political savvy, was powerless to stop it. The queen's loss of power at this point is indicated by her lack of appearance in the source material. She completely disappears from "The Old French Continuation of William of Tyre, 1184–97" even though she was in the city during the siege; instead, the defense of the city and negotiations with Saladin are left to Balian of Ibelin. This is not surprising, given the author's political leanings and Balian's social standing. Balian was one of the few men to escape Hattin and was probably the only person left in the city capable of leading the military defense.⁸⁷

After Saladin swept through the Crusader States, only the cities of Tripoli, Antioch, and Tyre remained in Christian hands. Guy, having been released from captivity, traveled to Acre and took back the city. Unfortunately, Sibylla and her two daughters died at Acre soon after, plunging the remaining Christians into chaos. With Sibylla and her heiresses dead, Guy's claim to the throne disappeared. The crown was still hereditary at this point despite the overwhelming need for a strong military leader. Fortunately, Isabella, Sibylla and Baldwin IV's half sister and now rightful queen, had recently wed Conrad of Montferrat who, according to Edbury, was "renowned across the Mediterranean for his skill and bravery."⁸⁸ From this point on, a queen's association with a suitable consort became a major facet in the succession of monarchs.⁸⁹

After Sibylla, there was a series of queens—Isabella I, Maria, and Isabella II—who were each less powerful than the last. Sibylla was the last queen with any political agency, and later queens were, as Lambert states, "gradually excluded from all political choice and became merely the figure-head for the dynasty, someone to whom the barons could attach their choice of king."⁹⁰ The struggle between the queens' assertion of dynastic rights and the barons' desire for right to election was at the crux of the matter. The barons were eventually successful in establishing this right. Isabella I's marriage to Henry of Champagne is an excellent example of this struggle. After Isabella's second husband, Conrad of Montferrat, died, the barons asked Henry of Champagne to be their king. Lambert points out that Henry was "only urged to marry [Isabella]"⁹¹ after he became king, and that her status as heiress lent his rule more stability. Because the kingdom needed strong male leadership to survive, the nobility was more concerned with securing male leadership than with ensuring that the throne was hereditary. Furthermore, after Henry's death, Isabella was married to Aimery of Lusignan, King of Cyprus. Only after she was firmly tied to a suitable king was she crowned queen.⁹²

Today, the Crusades are of great cultural interest. Every few years there is a film or video game based on these events, and politicians use crusading language in their rhetoric. However, many of these references are steeped in factual error, which is a pity

because the real history of the Crusades is rich in complex people, events, and stories. This article was an effort to bring some of those engaging stories to light and show their interconnections. In the end, studying queenship in the Crusader States shows it was possible for women to maintain power in a time when conventional gender norms cast them as weak and politically passive. Though Melisende was the most powerful queen regnant, internal strife between her and her son weakened the kingdom so that it fell to Saladin two generations later during the reign of her granddaughter, Queen Sibylla.

Notes

1. Thomas F. Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades: Updated Student Edition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 36.
2. *Ibid.*, 26, 189.
3. Andrew Jotischky, *Crusading and the Crusader States*, 1st ed., Recovering the Past (Harlow, England: Pearson/Longman, 2004), 49.
4. Peter Edbury, "Women and the Customs of the High Court of Jerusalem According to John of Ibelin," in *Chemins d'Outre-Mer: Études d'Histoire sur la Méditerranée Médiévale Offertes à Michel Balard*, ed. Damien Coulon, Catherine Otten-Froux, Paule Pagès, and Dominique Valérian (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2004), 292.
5. For example: H. E. Mayer, "Studies in the History of Queen Melisende of Jerusalem," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 26 (1972): 93–183; Lois L. Huneycutt, "Female Succession and the Language of Power in the Writings of Twelfth Century Churchmen," in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi-Parsons (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 189–202; and Bernard Hamilton, "Women in the Crusader States: The Queens of Jerusalem (1100–1190)," in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 1981), 143–74.
6. William of Tyre, vol. 2 of *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, ed. Austin P. Evans (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943).
7. Thomas Glyn Watkin, "The Political Philosophy of the Lord King," in *Communities and Courts in Britain 1150–1900*, ed. Christopher Brooks and Michael Lobban (London: Hambledon Press, 1997), 1–12.
8. Bernard Hamilton, "King Consorts of Jerusalem and Their Entourages from the West from 1186–1250," in *Die Kreuzfahrerstaaten Als Multikulturelle Gesellschaft: Einwanderer und Minderheiten im 12 und 13 Jahrhundert*, ed. H. E. Mayer (Munich, Germany: Oldenbourg, 1997), 13–24.
9. For example: John Carmi-Parsons, "Introduction: Family, Sex, and Power; The Rhythms of Medieval Queenship," in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi-Parsons (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 1–11; Pauline Stafford, "The Portrayal of Royal Women in England, Mid-Tenth to Mid-Twelfth Centuries," in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi-Parsons (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 143–68.
10. Madden, *The New Concise History*, 37–40.
11. Sylvia Schein, "Women in Medieval Colonial Society: The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem in the Twelfth Century," in *Gendering the Crusades*, ed. Susan B. Edgington and Sarah Lambert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 140–53; Graham McLennan, "The Lady of Caesarea: A Colonist of Outremer," in *Our Medieval Heritage: Essays in Honour of John Tillotson for his 60th Birthday*, ed. Linda Rasmussen, Valerie Spear, and Diane Tillotson (Cardiff: Meron Priory Press, 2002), 172–84.
12. Hamilton, "Women in the Crusader States," 143–74.
13. For example: Peter Edbury, "Propaganda and Faction in the Kingdom of Jerusalem: The Background to Hattin," in *Kingdoms of the Crusaders: From Jerusalem to Cyprus*, ed. Peter Edbury (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 1999), 173–89.
14. Huneycutt, "Female Succession and the Language of Power," 189–202; Sarah Lambert, "Queen or Consort: Rulership and Politics in the Latin East, 1118–1228," in *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe: Proceedings of a Conference Held at King's College London*, April 1995, ed. Anne Duggan (Woodbridge, England: Boydell Press, 1997), 153–90.

15. Bernard Hamilton, "The Titular Nobility of the Latin East: The Case of Agnes of Courtney," in *Crusaders, Cathars, and the Holy Places*, ed. Bernard Hamilton (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 1999), 197–203.
16. Thomas Asbridge, "Alice of Antioch: A Case Study of Female Power in the Twelfth Century," in *The Experience of Crusading: Western Approaches*, ed. Marcus Bull and Norman Housley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 129–47.
17. Watkin, "The Lord King," 2.
18. Stafford, "Royal Women in England," 145.
19. Carmi-Parsons, "Family, Sex, and Power," 4.
20. Andre Poulet, "Capetian Women and the Regency: The Genesis of a Vocation," in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi-Parsons (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 104–05.
21. *Ibid.*, 110.
22. *Ibid.* Not all regents were women. Baldwin IV of Jerusalem appointed Raymond of Tripoli and Guy of Lusignan when his leprosy made it impossible for him to rule.
23. For example: Margaret of Beverley. See: Christoph T. Maier, "The Roles of Women in the Crusade Movement: A Survey," *Journal of Medieval History* 30, no. 1 (2004): 61–82. For further reading on the experience of women in medieval warfare see: Yvonne Friedman, "Captivity and Ransom: The Experience of Women," in *Gendering the Crusades*, ed. Susan B. Edgington and Sarah Lambert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 121–39.
24. Watkin, "The Lord King," 2–3.
25. Stafford, "Royal Women in England," 160.
26. Huneycutt, "Female Succession and the Language of Power," 192. Matilda's son, Henry II of England, was from her second marriage to Geoffrey V, Count of Anjou. Geoffrey was the son of Fulk V, Count of Anjou, who married Melisende of Jerusalem. Fulk's decision to marry Melisende allowed Matilda and Geoffrey to pursue her claim on the English throne.
27. Stafford, "Royal Women in England," 159.
28. Madden, *The New Concise History*, 38–39.
29. Schein, "Women in Medieval Colonial Society," 141.
30. Hamilton, "Women in the Crusader States," 157, 161.
31. OED Online, s.v. "porphyrogenite," last modified December 2006, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/148064?redirectedFrom=Porphyrogenitus>.
32. For example, Anna Comnena was considered the heir to her father, Emperor Alexius Comnenus, long after the birth of her brother, John, though he did ultimately become emperor instead of her.
33. Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), 116.
34. Mayer, "Queen Melisende of Jerusalem," 111.
35. Stafford, "Royal Women in England," 198.
36. Mayer, "Queen Melisende of Jerusalem," 110: "bonae memoriae rex Balduinius, qui me Ierosolimitani regni fecit heredem."
37. William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds*, 50.
38. *Ibid.*, 71, 76.
39. Poulet, "Capetian Women," 103.
40. Mayer, "Queen Melisende of Jerusalem," 101–02. Mayer says the basis for this fear was that Fulk's own father was notorious for changing "his wives more frequently than his coat-of-mail."
41. William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds*, 72.
42. *Ibid.*, 76.
43. Carmi-Parsons, "Family, Sex, and Power," 9.
44. William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds*, 76.
45. Mayer, "Queen Melisende of Jerusalem," 102.
46. Hamilton, "King Consorts of Jerusalem," 24.
47. Carmi-Parsons, "Family, Sex, and Power," 6.
48. William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds*, 134–35.
49. Mayer, "Queen Melisende of Jerusalem," 98.
50. Hamilton, "Women in the Crusader States," 151.

51. Ibid., 154. Melisende also had connections to the House of Courtnay, the rulers of Edessa, through the marriage of her younger son, Amalric, to Agnes of Courtnay in 1157. However, the County of Edessa had been lost to Zangi and Nur al-Din in the late 1140s, thus this marriage was not politically advantageous, and too late to be helpful in the early 1150s.
52. Mayer, "Queen Melisende of Jerusalem," 118.
53. Ibid., 161.
54. Ibid., 121.
55. Ibid., 116, 135.
56. Ibid., 124, 136.
57. William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds*, 205.
58. Ibid., 207.
59. Ibid., 53.
60. Asbridge, "Alice of Antioch," 40.
61. Ibid., 47.
62. Ibid., 32.
63. Ibid., 44. Baldwin II was regent in Antioch before the marriage of Alice and Bohemond II, so this was precedent.
64. Carmi-Parsons, "Family, Sex, and Power," 6.
65. Asbridge, "Alice of Antioch," 33.
66. Ibid., 33–34.
67. Ibid., 40.
68. Stafford, "Royal Women in England," 201.
69. William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds*, 139–41.
70. Peter Edbury, ed., *The Conquest of Jerusalem and the Third Crusade: Sources in Translation* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 1998), 5.
71. William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds*, 425, 501.
72. *Oxford Reference Online*, s.v. "Roger of Wendover," May 2013, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100426554>; S. J. Allen and Emilie Amt, eds., *The Crusades: A Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 159.
73. William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds*, 398.
74. Roger of Wendover, "Sibylla Is Crowned Queen of Jerusalem," in *The Crusades: A Reader*, ed. S. J. Allen and Emilie Amt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 159.
75. Roger of Wendover, "Sibylla Is Crowned," 159.
76. William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds*, 446. The sudden decision of the Prince of Antioch and the Count of Tripoli to visit the Kingdom of Jerusalem with an armed escort prompted the hasty nuptials.
77. Ibid., 38.
78. Roger of Wendover, "Sibylla Is Crowned," 159.
79. Lambert, "Queen or Consort," 168.
80. Hamilton, "Agnes of Courtnay," 198. He points out that Agnes' good birth was her only advantage.
81. Hamilton, "King Consorts of Jerusalem," 13.
82. William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds*, 274, 193.
83. Madden, *The New Concise History*, 72.
84. Ibid., 69.
85. Peter Edbury, "The Battle of Hattin (4 July 1187) and Its Aftermath: 4b," in *The Conquest of Jerusalem and the Third Crusade: Sources in Translation* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 1998), 160–61.
86. Ibid.
87. Ernoul, "The Old French Continuation of William of Tyre, 1184–97," in *The Conquest of Jerusalem and the Third Crusade: Sources in Translation*, ed. Peter Edbury (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 1998), 55–65, 59–61.
88. Edbury, "The Battle of Hattin (4 July 1187) and Its Aftermath: 4b," 161.
89. Madden, *The New Concise History*, 78, 83.
90. Lambert, "Queen or Consort," 162.

91. Ibid., 164.

92. Ibid.

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