

Matilda of Flanders, Queen of England, Duchess of Normandy



Nineteenth-century statue of Matilda of Flanders
in Luxembourg Garden, Paris

(source: [Wikimedia](#), photo by Son of Groucho
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Bio/Context

Born: c. 1030

Parents: Baldwin V, count of Flanders (d. 1067) and Adela of France (d. 1076)

Siblings: Baldwin VI, count of Flanders (d. 1070) and Robert the Frisian, count of Flanders (d. 1093)

Married: William the 'Conqueror', duke of Normandy and king of England (married sometime between 1050–53)

Ruled: Duchess of Normandy (1050/53–83); Queen of England (1066–83)

Children:

Four sons:

- Robert 'Curthose', duke of Normandy (d. 1134)
- Richard (d. c.1070)
- William 'Rufus', king of England (d. 1100)
- Henry I, king of England (d. 1135)

Four (possibly five) daughters:

- Adelida, who became a nun at St L  ger, Pr  aux d. before 1113
- Cecilia, abbess of Sainte-Trinit   Abbey at Caen d. 1126
- Constance, duchess of Brittany d. 1090
- Adela, countess of Blois d. 1137
- Agatha/Matilda who is referred to in the Domesday Book¹

Died: 2 November 1083

Timeline of Key Events

- October 1049 – Matilda’s marriage plans with William, duke of Normandy, were interrupted by Pope Leo IX who forbade the marriage at the Council of Rheims on unknown grounds, possibly on the grounds of consanguinity (that they were related in a forbidden degree: Matilda’s step-grandmother was William’s aunt).
- 1050–53 – Matilda and William married at some point between these dates, possibly in contravention of the papal ban set in 1049.² This ban would be overturned in 1059 on condition that each founded a monastery: Matilda founded Sainte-Trinit   Abbey (Holy Trinity), a Benedictine nunnery, in Caen (dedicated in June 1066).
- 1066 – Ahead of his conquest, Matilda gifted William a ship, *Mora*, to lead the expedition. During William’s absence in England, she acted as regent in Normandy.
- June 1066 – Matilda dedicates her new foundation of Sainte Trinit   Abbey for nuns and gives her daughter Cecilia as a child oblate.
- 11 May 1068 – During her first visit to England, Matilda was crowned queen.
- 1077–78 – Rebellion of eldest son Robert Curthose in Normandy, possibly with Matilda’s support
- Easter 1080 – William and Robert reconciled publicly at F  camp with Matilda arranging a truce between the two.
- 1081–82 – While William was absent on campaign, Matilda acted as regent in England where she likely presided over several legal cases, including one concerning the abbot of Abingdon and a reeve (see source extract) and one over a land dispute in Warwickshire.
- 2 November 1083 – Matilda died and was buried in the choir at Sainte-Trinit   Abbey.

Biography

Matilda of Flanders was the duchess and queen consort of William, duke of Normandy and after the conquest became Queen of England. Matilda was instrumental to the success of the Norman Conquest: she provided finance and arms, gifting him the ship,

¹ Laura L. Gathagan, *The Queenship of Mathilda of Flanders, c. 1031-1083: Embodying Conquest* (Boydell Press, 2025), 148.

² The dates typically given for their marriage is ‘1050-1’, but David Bates argued for the later date of 1053 on the basis that the earliest mention of Matilda as countess/duchess of the Normans is in a charter dated to 1053. David Bates, *William the Conqueror* (Yale University Press, 2016), 104.

the *Mora*, which took him to England. She managed Normandy in William's absence during the campaign in England in 1066, and ensured neutrality from neighbouring powers through the support of her father, Baldwin V, who in 1066 was the guardian of Philip I, the young king of France.

After the conquest, Matilda was essential to the dual rule of England and Normandy, managing Normandy while William pursued military campaigns and suppressed English revolts. Later she acted as regent in England for an extended period in 1081–82. During this time she was involved in the administration of royal justice with two cases brought to her (see source extracts). When she was not acting as queen-lieutenant on William's behalf in his absence, she often accompanied William as he moved between England and Normandy and frequently appeared alongside him in many charters.

The alliance between William and Matilda was not always smooth sailing. In 1077, their eldest son Robert Curthose rebelled against his father in Normandy after William refused to give him more power. Matilda may have supported Robert financially and William was furious to find one of Matilda's messengers had been contacting Robert. After his brief revolt failed in 1078 Robert fled to his mother's family in Flanders, and Matilda finally brokered peace between the two in 1080.

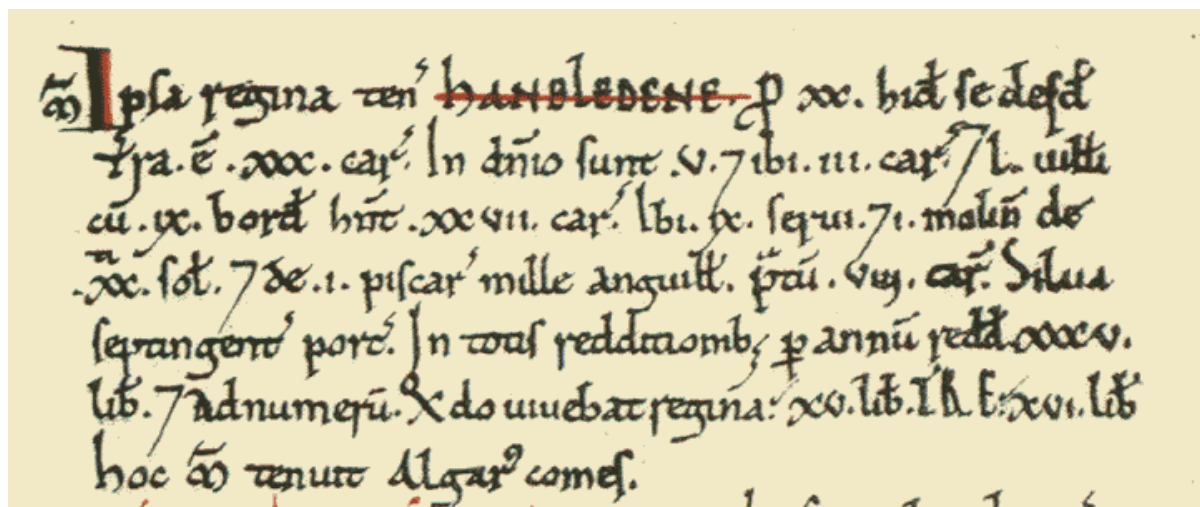
As a result of the Conquest, Matilda became a major landowner in England and she used this wealth to enrich various religious institutions, both in England and on the Continent. Her flagship patronage project was the Sainte-Trinité Abbey, a Benedictine nunnery in Caen, was built and dedicated before the Conquest, and she would eventually be buried there under an engraved tombstone which praised her achievements and lineage.

Primary source extracts

Written sources

1. *Matilda in Domesday*

It is uncertain what lands Matilda owned in England as she died shortly before the Domesday survey was made, but she is referred to in the records of two places in Buckinghamshire: Hambleden and Little Marlow.



Entry for Hambleden in Domesday (source: [OpenDomesday.org](https://www.opendomesday.org))

'M. The queen herself held [Hambleden]. It is assessed at 20 hides. There is land for 30 ploughs. In the demesne are 5 (hides), and on it are 3 ploughs; and 50 villeins with 9 bordars have 27 ploughs. There are 9 serfs, and 1 mill worth 20 shillings, and from a fishery 1,000 eels; meadow is there (sufficient) for 8 plough (teams), woodland (to feed) 700 swine. In all it pays yearly 35 pounds; and by tale when the queen was living (it paid) 15 pounds; [in the time of King Edward] 16 pounds. This manor Earl Algar held.'

2. Matilda and the administration of justice

There are several records including Domesday which contain references to Matilda administering justice, possibly during the extended period when she acted as regent in England in 1081–82.

[a] 'Meanwhile, protected by a band of peasants, a certain reeve, called Ælfsige, of the royal village of Sutton neighbouring this church, frequently and barbarously infringed the church's ancient rights in fields and woods. ... The abbot then punished his audacity so firmly that no one thereafter has ever followed the reeve's practice ... to [the reeve's] dishonour he was hit was a staff that the abbot happened to be holding. ... But the man who had been struck brought before the queen a complaint about the injury done him. She was then at Windsor and was doing justice concerning pressing matters, in place of the king who was in Normandy. The abbot did not delay, but forestalled a royal trial concerning this affair, paying compensation for what had been done to the king's official. But he shook off forever the tyrannical oppression of reeves, for in that royal assembly, by reasoned pleading and the testimony of many wise men it

³ A History of the County of Buckingham: Volume 1, ed. William Page (London, 1905), 273.

was concluded that the church of Abingdon ought never suffer this type of exaction, but rather enjoy perpetual liberty.⁴

[b] 'Beorhtwine [in the time of King Edward] held 7 hides in Alveston [Warwickshire]. ... His sons Leofwine, Eadmaer, and 4 others testify to this, but they do not know from whom he held this land, whether from the church, or from Earl Leofric, whom he served. ... Bishop Wulfstan says that he made good his claim to this land before Queen Matilda in the presence of 4 shire courts, and thereof he has the writs of King William and the testimony of the shire of Warwick.'⁵

Connected objects or additional images (if applicable)

1. The Mora

The Mora was the flagship of William's navy when he set sail to conquer England. The ship was built for and gifted to him by Matilda.



Part of the Mora as depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry
(source: Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux⁶)

⁴ *Historia Ecclesie Abendonensis: The History of the Church of Abingdon*, ed. and trans. John Hudson (Clarendon Press, 2008), 2:14–17.

⁵ Ann Williams and G. H. Martin (eds), *Domesday Book: A Complete Translation* (Penguin, 2003), 652.

⁶ Details of the Official Digital representation of the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th century; City of Bayeux, DRAC Normandie, University of Caen Normandie, CNRS, Ensicaen, Photos: 2017 – La Fabrique de patrimoines en Normandie

After the Conquest, a list of ships was compiled with the construction of William's ship being described:

In honour of the duke, Matilda, later queen, had a ship built called the Mora with which the duke crossed the sea. On the prow she had fitted a golden child who pointed with his right hand to England and who with his left hand pressed an ivory horn against his lips. For this reason the duke gave the county of Kent to Matilda.⁷

The writer of the ship list was not entirely correct in this instance; William granted the county of Kent to his brother, Odo of Bayeux.⁸ Matilda was instead granted lands elsewhere, such as the two manors in Buckinghamshire described above.

2. Sainte-Trinité Abbey, Caen

As penance for breaking a papal ban by getting married, Matilda and William were ordered to both establish a monastery each. Matilda founded a Benedictine nunnery, Sainte-Trinité Abbey (also known as Abbaye aux Dames) in Caen which was dedicated in June 1066. Though the abbey has long been regarded as an act of penance for Matilda's marriage, **Laura L. Gathagan** in her recent study of Matilda's queenship argued that Matilda deliberately refashioned the abbey into a monument which celebrated the Norman Conquest and her royal lineage and new status as queen.⁹ She pointed to how Matilda timed the dedication of the new abbey to just before the Norman army set sail for England, perhaps seeking divine favour for the mission. On the same day as the abbey's dedication, Matilda's young daughter Cecilia was given as a nun to the abbey. She would later become one of the abbey's first abbesses and Matilda was later buried in the abbey's choir. The abbey is still standing although it has been substantially rebuilt since the eleventh century.

⁷ Quoted from Elisabeth van Houts, 'The Echo of the Conquest in the Latin Sources: Duchess Mathilda, her Daughters and the Enigma of the Golden Child', in *The Bayeux Tapestry: Embroidering the Facts of History*, ed. Pierre Bouet, Brian Levy, and François Neveux (Presses Universitaires de Caen, 2004), 149.

⁸ Elisabeth van Houts, 'The Ship List of William the Conqueror', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 10 (1987): 173.

⁹ Gathagan, *The Queenship of Mathilda*, 41–44.



Sainte-Trinité Abbey at Caen
(source: [Wikimedia](#), shared by Pradigue
under a CC BY-SA 3.0 license)

3. Matilda's tombstone

At her death in 1083, historian and monk Orderic Vitalis told how William struggled against constant storms which rose up against him until his death in 1087, and [described her splendid funeral](#) at Sainte-Trinité Abbey attended by important bishops, abbots and monks as well as hosts of the poor. Her tomb monument had an epitaph worked in gold which lauded her achievements and lineage:



Tombstone of Matilda of Flanders at Sainte-Trinité Abbey
(source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

[a] Her epitaph (translated from the original Latin):

‘The lofty structure of this splendid tomb
Hides great Matilda, sprung from royal stem;
Child of a Flemish duke; her mother was
Adela, daughter of a king of France,
Sister of Henry, Robert’s royal son.
Married to William, most illustrious king,
She gave this site and raised this noble house,
With many lands and many goods endowed,
Given by her, or by her toil procured;
Comforter of the needy, duty’s friend;
Her wealth enriched the poor, left her in need.
At daybreak on November’s second day
She won her share of everlasting joy.’¹⁰

Interpretations

Historians have increasingly come to recognise the importance of Matilda co-rule with William, looking beyond narrative chronicle sources to demonstrate her key role in government. Matilda signed, issued or was evoked in 137 charters during her rule as duchess and then queen, making her the most frequently referenced person in Anglo-Norman legal documents after William the Conqueror himself.¹¹

Sharon Bennett Connolly describes Matilda and William having a 'partnership', symbolised by her commissioning the ship that he sailed on to invade England:

¹⁰ *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford University Press, 1973), 4:44-47.

¹¹ Gathagan, *Queenship of Mathilda*, 6.

William trusted Matilda to act as a regent in Normandy during his many absences on campaign or in England. Their relationship was more of a partnership than most medieval marriages. As duchess and later queen, Matilda was witness to 39 pre-Conquest and 61 post-Conquest charters. Matilda supported her husband's proposed invasion of England and promised a great ship for William's personal use. Called the *Mora*, the ship had a mast topped with a cross ... while the figure it had on the prow was a statue of a small boy, whose right hand pointed to England and left hand held a horn to his lips. It also flew the pope's flag as a sign that the expedition had the blessing of God and the Papacy. According to Elisabeth van Houts the ship's name derives from *morini*, the name of the ancient people of Flanders and was a reminder of Matilda's origins.¹²

Studies of medieval English queenship, such as **Lois Huneycutt's** examination of Matilda of Scotland, have identified new shifts in the role and authority of queens before and after the Conquest. Huneycutt calls this 'administrative queenship' which developed in this period partly as a consequence of the need to rule both England and Normandy, but she also sees it also as a form of queenship consciously shaped by Matilda of Flanders.

The innovative nature of Anglo-Norman queenship is evident from its beginning. From the time of their marriage, Duke William of Normandy and Duchess Matilda of Flanders often appeared together in both ceremonial roles and judicial proceedings. Matilda's name appears on 39 of William's surviving pre-conquest charters as either signator or co-issuer. A burst of these charters were issued just before William invaded England. William and Matilda were aware that should he succeed in becoming England's king, both Matilda and their Norman subjects would have to get used to the new queen as the head of the Norman administration while William was in England. ... Domesday Book reveals that Matilda became a major landholder in England, and that, in her role as duchess and queen, she presided over judicial proceedings in both Normandy and England while William was elsewhere occupied. Her personal resources were such that she was able to summon her own troops to aid her husband, and later her son. David Bates has pointed out that even though Matilda spent most of her time in Normandy, she witnessed all the surviving English royal diplomas issued between 1066 and her death in 1083. In one instance, there is evidence that the issuance of a royal confirmation of a grant to Worcester Cathedral was delayed until the queen could be present. In all cases, the queen's status was indicated by having her sign the documents immediately following the king, a practice repeated in subsequent reigns.¹³

¹² Sharon Bennett Connolly, *Silk and the Sword: The Women of the Norman Conquest* (Amberley Publishing, 2018), 204.

¹³ Lois Huneycutt, 'The Rise of Administrative Queenship in the Anglo-Norman Realm?', in *How Medieval Europe Was Ruled*, ed. Christian Raffensperger (Routledge, 2024), 29–30.

In her study on Matilda of Flanders' queenship, **Laura L. Gathagan** considered the various ways Matilda deliberately 'embodied' power through actions and objects (such as her coronation), so that her presence was felt even when she was absent.

Thus Mathilda's creations, those things commissioned, donated, proffered by her, had the force of her own presence, her own body. This tactic would have been well understood by the court who were her audience, entangled in Eucharistic debates. ... this book also reflects Mathilda as a consummate practitioner of representation through embodiment, a talent repeatedly demonstrated through the choices she made. She created opportunities to extend herself; to appear even when absent. She founded a monastery, which in itself is not unusual for an aristocratic woman, but she linked it to the conquest of England, fashioning it into a monument to military victory. She used objects to transmit her presence – a cloth of gold, a liturgical chalice, a warship – to intentionally step in to places she could not be herself, claiming a place through the signifiers she created. The moveable goods she commissioned might seem disparate – a naval vessel versus the liturgical clothing of a priest – until they are viewed in situ. In each case, their materiality bore her essence, just as the incarnation was understood to have done.¹⁴

Gathagan also argued that Matilda drew on Flemish and Norman practices to innovate English queenship, comparing Matilda's use of judicial power during her regency in 1081-82 to the limited authority of earlier pre-Conquest English queens, such as Emma of Normandy, Edith of Wessex and Ælfthryth (wife of King Edgar, crowned in 973).

The Norman conquest resulted in a new cross-Channel kingdom that demanded joint rule. Mathilda, the innovator, responded and carved out a new kind of queenship: sacral, lordly, and juridical. She was the head of government in Normandy during the invasion of England and afterward cooperated in the dispensation of royal justice, either with William or without him. Furthermore, Mathilda's approach to justice, I contend, was shaped by Norman legal processes. As queen, her assumption of judicial authority over court proceedings, both secular and sacred, can be seen as a natural outgrowth of Norman practice. Her experience of women as head of their own courts was a distinctly abbatial one, and was familiar to early English Benedictine communities, too. There were abbatial courts in England and all over the continent that dispensed justice to their tenants and the religious in their care. When Ælfthryth took on the role of abbess for the whole of England, she was closer to sitting in justice than either Emma or Edith ever did as a queen. But even Ælfthryth did not embody royal justice. She was a conduit to it but did not

¹⁴ Gathagan, *Queenship of Mathilda*, 2.

hand down sentences herself. Before Mathilda, English royal women did not direct justice. In her queenship, England saw something wholly new.¹⁵

Using the resource pack

Topics linked to at KS3, GCSE, A-Level

KS3:

- National Curriculum, The Norman Conquest.

GCSE:

- Pearson Edexcel: Anglo-Saxon and Norman England, c.1060–88
- AQA Norman England, c.1066–c.1100
- OCR The Norman Conquest, 1065–1087

A-Level:

- OCR Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest, 1035–1107
 - Pearson Edexcel Anglo-Saxon England and the Anglo-Norman Kingdom, c.1053–1106
-

Links to existing TMW resources

[Women of the Norman Conquest pack](#)

[Women and the Bayeux Tapestry](#)

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¹⁵ L. L. Gathagan, 'Mathilda of Flanders: Innovator', in *Norman to Early Plantagenet Consorts: Queenship and Power*, ed. A. Norrie, C. Harris, J. Laynesmith, D. R. Messer, E. Woodacre (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 64–65.

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Royal Historic Palaces Podcast, ‘Matilda of Flanders, Queen of the Conqueror’, <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/matilda-of-flanders-queen-of-the-conqueror/id1065848261?i=1000700998417>

Videos

British History. ‘Clip from interview with Tracy Borman’. YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/HNbea9Rqspg>.

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