

Matilda of Ringelheim

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Saint Matilda (German: *Mathilde von Ringelheim*; c. 894/97 – 14 March 968) was Duchess of Saxony from 912 and German queen (Queen of the Franks) from 919 by her marriage with Henry the Fowler, the first king of the Ottonian dynasty. Upon her husband's death in 936, she founded Quedlinburg Abbey to commemorate the late king. Matilda lived to see Western Imperial rule restored when her eldest son Otto was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 962. Her surname refers to Ringelheim, where her comital Immedinger relatives established a nunnery about 940.

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Biography

The details of St. Matilda's life come primarily from brief mentions in the *Res gestae saxonicae* by the monastic historian Widukind of Corvey (c. 925 – after 973), and from two hagiographies: the *Vita antiquior*, written about 974, and *Vita posterior*, circa 1003.

Matilda was born in Enger near Herford, in the Westphalian part of the German stem duchy of Saxony. She was the daughter of the local count Dietrich and his wife Reinhild,^[1] a noblewoman of Danish and Frisian descent.^[2] Matilda's biographers traced her ancestry back to the legendary Saxon leader Widukind (c. 730 – 807), who presumably was buried in the Enger church. Her sister Frederuna married Count Wichmann the Elder, a member of the Billung dynasty.

As a young girl she was sent to Herford Abbey,^[3] where her grandmother Matilda was abbess and where her reputation for beauty and virtue –and possibly also her extensive Westphalian dowry– is said to have attracted the attention of the Saxon duke Otto the Illustrious, who betrothed her to his son and heir, Henry, about 20 years her senior. By the conjugal union, the Ottonian dynasty (Liudolfings) considerably enlarged their possessions in the western parts of Saxony. Henry's previous marriage with Hatheburg of Merseburg was annulled.^[4] They were married at the *Pfalz* of Wallhausen in 909 (or 913).^[5]

As the eldest surviving son, Henry succeeded his father as Duke of Saxony in 912 and upon the death of King Conrad I was elected King of East Francia (later Germany) in 919. He and Matilda had three sons and two daughters:

- Hedwig (c. 910 – 965), who married the West Frankish duke Hugh the Great and became the mother of Hugh Capet, the first King of the Franks of the House of Capet
- Otto (912 – 973), who succeeded his father as Duke of Saxony and King of Germany from 936, crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 962
- Gerberga (913 – 984), married (1) Duke Giselbert of Lorraine and (2) King Louis IV of France
- Henry (919/21 – 955), appointed Duke of Bavaria from 948
- Bruno (925 – 965), later Saint, became Archbishop of Cologne in 953 and Duke of Lorraine in 954.

In 929 Matilda received the estates of Quedlinburg, Pöhlde, Nordhausen in Thuringia, Grona (near Göttingen), and Duderstadt as her *wittum*. After her husband died in 936 at Memleben, Matilda and her son, now King Otto I of East Francia, established Quedlinburg Abbey^[3] near Halberstadt in Saxony (present-day Saxony-Anhalt, Germany) in Henry's memory. The abbey was a convent of noble canonesses, where her granddaughter, also named Matilda, became abbess in 966. At first the Queen Mother remained at the court of her son. During quarrels between the new king and his rebellious brother Henry, Matilda seemed to have favoured her younger son, as he was born after his father's accession to the throne. In turn, a cabal of royal advisors is reported to have accused her of decreasing the royal treasury in order to pay for her charitable activities. After a brief exile at her Westphalian estates in Enger, where she established a college of canons in 947, Matilda was brought back to court at the urging of King Otto's first wife, the Anglo-Saxon princess Edith of Wessex.

Matilda died after long illness on 14 March 968 in Quedlinburg Abbey,^[6] outliving her husband by 32 years, and having seen the restoration of the Holy Roman Empire. Her and Henry's mortal remains are buried in the crypt of St. Servatius Church in Quedlinburg.

Veneration

Medieval chroniclers like Liutprand of Cremona and Thietmar of Merseburg celebrated Matilda for her devotion to prayer and almsgiving. Her first biographer depicted her (in a passage attributed to the sixth-century *vita* of the Frankish queen Radegund by Venantius Fortunatus) leaving her husband's side in the middle of the night and sneaking off to church to pray. St. Matilda founded many religious institutions, including the canony of Quedlinburg, which became a center of ecclesiastical and secular life in Germany under the rule of the Ottonian dynasty. She also founded the convents of St. Wigbert in Quedlinburg, in Pöhlde, Enger, and Nordhausen, likely the source of at least one of her *vitae*.

She was later canonized, with her cult largely confined to Saxony and Bavaria. St. Matilda's feast day according to the regional German calendar of saints is 14 March. In 1856–58 the Neo-Gothic St. Matilda's Church was erected in Quedlinburg, according to plans designed by the Austrian architect Friedrich Schmidt. Another St. Matilda's Church was consecrated in Laatzen, Lower Saxony in 1938. The Melkite Greek Catholic community of Aleppo built a church dedicated to Saint Matilda in 1964. There is a stained glass window dedicated to Saint Matilda in the parish church (built 1838–41) of Coole, Ireland.

Sources

Saint Matilda



King Henry and Matilda, detail from the *Chronica sancti Pantaleonis*, 12th century

German queen

Born	c. 894/97 <div>Enger, Saxony, East Francia</div>
Died	14 March 968 <div>Quedlinburg, Saxony, Holy Roman Empire</div>
Venerated in	Eastern Orthodox Church Roman Catholic Church
Canonized	(Possibly by acclamation)
Major shrine	Quedlinburg Abbey, Saxony-Anhalt, Germany
Feast	14 March



Statue of St. Matilda in Quedlinburg

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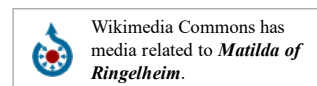
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Matilda of Ringelheim		
Born: c. 894/97 Died: 968		
Preceded by Hedwiga of Franconia	Duchess consort of Saxony 912–936	Succeeded by Edith of Wessex
Preceded by Cunigunde of Swabia	German Queen 919–936	

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