MEDIEVAL MONARCHS, FEMALE ILLEGITIMACY AND MODERN GENEALOGICAL MATTERS: PART I: SYBILLA, QUEEN OF SCOTLAND, C.1090-1122

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ABSTRACT

The second in a series of proposed articles, this paper explores the origins of an atypical medieval practice in which some royals exploited their female illegitimate children for political gain. As Henry I led the way in this respect, it is fitting to introduce the topic by evaluating the circumstances pertaining to his daughter, Sybilla, which were influenced by the political agendas of the kings of both England and Scotland. Medieval attitudes towards royal concubinage and gender roles are two important factors that help explain why female bastards were allowed to be players in high politics and why they should continue to be worthy of consideration by modern genealogists specialising in the history of royal families.

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Henry I and his power base

The rule of Henry I was characterised by the expedient centralization of power. He acted decisively by advancing a small number of his relatives, together with members of the lower aristocracy, to a more prominent status. Support for this theory is provided by the recent works of Hollister (1986, pp.251-252), who states that binding allies through vassalage and/or marriage also played a key role[2]. By 1120, Henry had many alliances with some of the strongest neighbouring royal families of Europe, both across the channel and in Scotland. Although an independent kingdom, Scotland was already under strong Anglo-Norman influence by the turn of the twelfth-century[3]. A tradition of maintaining direct links between Scottish and Anglo-Norman rulers had previously been established and these were further strengthened when, in 1100, Henry himself married Matilda (c.1079-1118), daughter of Malcolm III and St. Margaret. Through this marriage, Henry sought to legitimise and reinforce his tenuous kingship by marrying into both the older Saxon aristocracy and the Scottish royal house. In 1107, in order to ensure the continuance of Anglo-Norman and Scottish blood ties, Henry negotiated the marriage of his illegitimate daughter Sybilla to his brother-in-law, the new Scottish king, Alexander I (c.1078-1124). In a society where illegitimate women and their descendants had no

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2 "*These numerous alliances disclose a single underlying policy. Henry arranged marriages for his kindred with an eye toward strengthening alliances with neighbouring princes*".

3 Malcolm Canmore (c.1031-1093) was a Saxon sympathiser who consolidated a Scottish-Saxon alliance through his marriage to Margaret (d.1093), sister of Edgar the Atheling (c.1052-c.1125), the Saxon heir. In 1072 he was forced to submit to William the Conqueror and recognise him as his overlord (Treaty of Abernathy).

apparent legal claims concerning patrimony, it is not immediately apparent why Henry and Alexander, as well as their peers, deemed this acceptable. The reasons for the two kings making use of a marriage to an illegitimate female to cement an extremely valuable alliance seem to have been two-fold; for political worth and for kinship.

Political Worth

Enhancement of political worth was Henry's primary objective. Henry was the first of the Norman kings who was far-sighted enough to recognise the intrinsic political value of his female bastard children and to accept them formally into his family and into the political arena. It is clear that Henry pursued the marriage of his natural daughters for political reasons since at least ten of them married into the upper-echelons of the Norman-French nobility[4]. In a recent book on Henry I, Hollister (2001, p.42) states that the king was calculative in his acknowledgement that his daughters "*offered a uniquely effective means of sealing valuable alliances*", and that they were "*significant political assets*". In Henry's case it was more than opportune for him to accept his bastard daughters into his *familia Regis*. It was more of a vital *modus operandi* for, while he had only three legitimate heirs, he had twenty-five illegitimate children. One of the only ways for him to extend fully his authority and influence was to promote the marriages of his issue, regardless of their legitimate status[5].

Kinship

Alexander's acceptance of Sybilla as his bride offered him the change to extend his ties with England. During his reign, Alexander sought to amalgamate the older Scottish traditions with the customs and ways of the newer Anglo-Norman supremacy, which he felt would provide a basis of success for himself and his heirs. He was aware that his hold on the Scottish throne would be further improved if he had the backing of the English king as a father-in-law as well as a brother-in law. Henry's acknowledgement of Sybilla publicly legitimised her position as a royal princess. Alexander, himself, understood the meaning of this public declaration and appreciated the power and security that her paternal lineage offered him and any of their future descendants. Both the kings of England and Scotland believed Sybilla's status as the king's natural daughter to be an asset rather than a hindrance. Yet, how far was Sybilla's acceptance as an illegitimate child determined by the societal, cultural and legal mores of medieval Britain at this time?

Concubinage and Marriage

To answer this question it is vital to consider the relevant beliefs regarding attitudes towards royal concubinage, as this is of particular importance to genealogists. Early on, medieval canon law defined reasonably acceptable terms of concubinage. Because of the stability and exclusivity associated with concubinage, the practice was often sanctioned as a second-class marriage; the legal differences between concubine and prostitute being more clear than those between a concubine and wife as is examined by Brundage (1975, p.2). Gratian defined concubinage as a valid, yet informal marriage that lacked the

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[4] The Complete Peerage (Cokayne, 1949) lists twenty-one names; twelve daughters and nine sons. *The Royal Bastards of Medieval England* (Given-Wilson and Curteis, 1984) is a great source for specific individuals.

[5] His two legitimate sons perished in the White Ship disaster in 1120. His remaining legitimate child was his daughter, the Empress Matilda (1102-1167). She was not seriously considered as heir to the English throne until it was accepted that Henry had no legal alternative.

prescribed legal consequences of a marital union (Brundage, 1975, pp.3-4). It is known that Henry had numerous mistresses throughout his life, many of whom where high-born, such as Nest, daughter of Rys ap Tewdewr and Isabel de Beaumont, daughter of the Earl of Leicester, both of whom are credited to be mothers of some of his other illegitimate children.

Although it is not completely certain, it is highly likely that Sybilla's mother was Sybil Corbet of Alcester (c.1070-c.1157), the most historically celebrated of Henry's long-term mistresses. In one of his articles on royal illegitimate children, Sheppard (1965, p.95) states that "*it has been asserted that Henry married Sibyl Corbet and later set her aside to marry Margaret of Scotland, thus uniting the Saxon and Norman claims to the throne. Evidence to prove this statement is lacking, but if it is true, the five children of Sybil Corbet would not be true bastards*". Obviously, if Sybil Corbet was married to Henry I, then Sybilla was wholly legitimate and it makes sense that some contemporary chroniclers called her *filia Henrici Regis Anglie.* But this assumption cannot be made since contemporary sources do not substantiate such a marriage[6].

So, if we accept that Sybil was never married to Henry I, we must continue to look for evidence to explain the acceptance of their concubinage. One factor that was crucial to the acceptance of concubinous relationships in medieval canon law, and one could possibly argue in medieval culture, was the existence of what has been termed "marital affection". If circumstantial evidence was provided for marital affection, beyond the legalities of contracted ceremonies attended by witnesses, then a concubinous union was accepted as a type of marriage. Relationships without marital affection were deemed illicit unions (Brundage, 1975, p.6).

The liaison between Henry and Sybil Corbet was long-term and was accepted as such at the time. More research needs to be done on the significance of their relationship with respect to contemporary attitudes towards the illegitimacy of their children, but I propose that the longevity and obvious contemporary public acceptance of their relationship directly affected the way in which their offspring were regarded by their peers.

Gender Issues

Sybil is also reputed to be the mother of Robert of Gloucester (c.1090-1147) who, although illegitimate, was one of the most respected, powerful and leading magnates in the Anglo-Norman dominion - and Henry's favourite. However, accusations of bastardy had a profound effect on all of Henry's male children, not least of all Robert. Though one of the most influential men in the realm, the label of "bastard" directly reduced his chances as claimant to the crown. Charges of illegitimacy called into question the legitimacy of his father's rule, Robert's potential to rule and the supremacy of his future heirs and descendants. In contrast, women of status were rather less badly affected by the label of bastardy than their male counterparts, possibly because a woman was not expected to rule on her own or use her authority as a means to her own ends.

In general, the underlying success of female illegitimates appears to be commensurate with the medieval assignment of gendered roles. In the past thirty years, feminist scholarship has suggested that the power relationships associated with high politics

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[6] In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Orderic Vitalis (Chibnall, 1973, pp.274-275) mentions the marriage between Sybilla and Alexander. He does not name her. Instead, he calls her "*filiam Henrici regis Anglorum ex concubine*".

presents as a gendered concept[7]. What does this mean? In essence, political history can ultimately be defined as "*anything in a society having to do with power relationships*" (Weisner, 1993, p.239). In the medieval period, Europe was dominated by a patriarchal belief system and there was a clear distinction between legitimate power (held by a male) and imitation power (held by a female). Many at the time considered the power wielded by women as synthetic, which may or may not have been the case depending on the individual. At any rate, it is clear that this oppressive system of beliefs actually provided some royal women, legitimate and illegitimate alike, with an element of power in their own right, albeit often left unrecognised. For Sybilla, the interest in her marriageability status, particularly as an illegitimate woman, appears to have stemmed from both Henry's and Alexander's greater needs to demonstrate strength via the bonds of kinship. This need to construct familial networks to cement political loyalties and her father's resolute determination to obtain the upper hand in the game of high politics strengthened Sybilla's status perceptibly.

Was Sybilla's marriage to Alexander an exceptional act under exceptional circumstances? I think the answer is definitely no. Henry was an astute ruler who fashioned a failsafe model in contemporary politics that was later developed by various future leaders. It is reasonable to conclude that Sybilla's legal status as bastard, a *filia notha,* was of less importance than her reputation as the king's daughter. Her status reflects the privileges that twelfth-century English and Scottish society bestowed upon a member of the highest social class, regardless of sex or legitimacy. She fulfilled her gendered role based on her economic and social status as princess. Sybilla was publicly recognised by her father as his natural child, one who held immense worth, primarily because she was female. At least publicly, her illegitimate background was overshadowed by the facts that her father was the king of England and that she was the queen of Scotland[8]. Sybilla's family loyalties were used to secure an alliance between England and Scotland and she was immediately recognised by her peers as legitimate because of her high-ranking marriage.

Modern Genealogical Matters

It would be useful to carry out further research on the issues addressed because of their explicit impact on both genealogical matters and, in a wider perspective, because of what they can tell us of the political history of medieval Europe. There is a growing trend to move beyond famous past personalities and home in on 'everyday' people but, since not much has been done in the way of tracking illegitimate children, it remains easier to focus on royal families as a starting point because more documentation is likely to exist.

It is a common mistake to assume that the stigma attached to illegitimacy led to bastards being completely marginalised and to conclude that illegitimate offspring are not worth studying. By focusing on attitudes that reflect the values of a society, historians and genealogists can assess the wider impact that illegitimate children had on the descent of a family. Bastards need to be viewed as important subjects of change in the way political, social and cultural history is perceived. It is sometimes difficult to deduce how a historical figure was perceived by her or his contemporaries and it is clearly more

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[7] See *Feminism and History* (Scott, 1996) for a range of gender issues and historical thinking. Also, Wisner's (1993) *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* is a good source for understanding how gender effected different aspects of women's lives.

[8] Comparatively, in his *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, William of Malmesbury remarks upon the marriage between Sybilla and Alexander. His commentary is surprisingly critical of Sybilla, remarking that "*de qua ille viva nec sobolem, quod sciam, tulit, nec ante se mortuam multum suspiravit, defuerat enim foeminae, ut fertur, quod desideraretur, vel in morum modestia, vel in corporis elegantia*" (p. 725). One can only hypothesise why William's remarks are so unfavourable.

difficult with a twelfth-century woman. When the woman happens to have been a bastard of royal blood, the odds of being able to construct what obstacles she faced because of her illegitimacy are not stacked in the historian's favour. However, it is obvious that Sybilla was publicly recognised as having intrinsic worth in the high-politics of Anglo-Norman England and Scotland. Illegitimate women who were of royal blood remain important historical figures as agents of change, either because of circumstance, as in Sybilla's case, or by their actions[9]. It is becoming clear that illegitimate children played a more prominent role than they have previously been given credit for, especially women. In future research, it would be interesting to map out the changes in attitudes along the centuries and compare and contrast the differences and similarities between the ways female and male bastards were regarded.

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[9] This will be explored in a forthcoming paper on Joan of England (c.1190-1236).