

Countess Ermessenda of Carcassonne (†1057)- The mysterious “seal” of the missing altar front of Girona

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Girona in 1809 during the Spanish War of Independence (1808-1814): In the sacristy of the city's cathedral, the golden panelling of the altar front of the main altar is removed and melted down to be able to finance the military operations. Its history is very well researched and can be easily reconstructed due to a detailed description in the altar's inventory from 1511. According to this, the front of the altar was divided into 32 individual relief panels chased in gold, distributed evenly to the right and left of a representation of Mary with the Son of God. The depictions showed scenes from the life of Jesus. In the centre of the altar front, a mandorla enclosed Mary and Jesus. Beneath the mandorla was an enamel work depicting a female figure who, based on the inscription GUISLA/COMITISSA/ME FIERI/IUSSIT, could be identified as Guisla de Lluça (†1076), second wife of Count Berenguer Ramón I of Barcelona (†1035).¹ From the surviving accounts of those who were able to see the altar front before it was melted down in 1809, it appears that the front was decorated with many (semi-)precious stones. In 1678, the Spanish scholar Juan Gaspar ROIG I GALPI (†1691) described the great variety of (semi-)precious stones he had counted on the altar front. Among them was a chalcedony into which the letters ERMESI(N)DIS had been carved in Latin and Arabic letters.² The report of the monk Jaume VILLANEUVA I ASTENGO also refers to the completion of the altar by Guisla de Lluça (†1076) and mentions and describes the gem seal of the Ermessenda.³

Ermessenda of Carcassonne was one of the most influential women of the Catalan Middle Ages, shaping the region with her politics during the first half of the 11th century. She was born in 975, the daughter of Count Roger I of Carcassonne. At the age of 18, she was married to Ramón Borell, Count of the powerful House of Barcelona. From this time on Ermessenda is also mentioned in the documents as *gratia Dei comitissa*. Her husband died very young and Ermessenda took over the guardianship of her son, who was only five years old, and thus the rule over the counties of Barcelona, Girona and Vic. During her marriage, Ermessenda had gained political influence and experience and was able to have her brother Pere Roger appointed Bishop of Girona. Thus the first foundation stone for her close relationship with Girona and the cathedral was established. In 1023, the countess then also received the grant

¹ If it was Guisla, she as daughters-in-law would have been the one caring for the completion of altar front after Ermessenda's death. Interesting to note is that at the time of Ermessenda's death, Guisla was living in Barcelona as vice countess. The term “comitissa” could hint at the fact that Guisla and Ermessenda gave the order to complete the altar front before the latter's death together.

² ROIG I GALPI, Juan Gaspar, Resumen historial de las grandezas y antigüedades de la ciudad de Gerona, y cosas memorables suyas Eclesiásticas y Seculares, allí de nuestros tiempos, como de los passados, Barcelona 1678, gedruckt von Jacinto Adreu, S. 206-210.

³ VILLANEUVA I ASTENGO, Jaume, Viatge literario á las iglesias de España (12), Valencia 1806, S. 180f.

for the county of Girona.⁴ In Girona, Ermessenda was involved in the restoration of the cathedral together with her episcopal brother. The document of the subsequent consecration of the cathedral from 1038 makes her position in the direct environment of the bishop of Girona just as clear as the great relevance of the cathedral for the countess. In this document, she is portrayed as a pious and generous patron of the cathedral and her role in the restoration of the church is highlighted alongside that of her brother. The following is recorded about Ermessenda in the signum line: *Signum ERMESSINDIS comitisse, que eadem die ad honorem Dei et matris ecclesie trecentas auri contulit uncias ad auream construendam tabulam.* / Ermessenda has donated 300 gold ounces to the cathedral to be used for the construction of an altar front.⁵

But how did the chalcedony get into this altar front and was it really a seal? Since such works of art usually remained works in progress, they were repeatedly restored and embellished with further precious stones.⁶ During such a process, the stone could have been inserted into the altar front. Assuming that the making of the front took place during the Countess's lifetime, there is the possibility that the stone was used as a sign of the authenticity of the endowment by the powerful Countess or as a sign of authority. The questions concerning the use of the stone during the Countess's lifetime are many and cannot be answered unequivocally. Although the stone is commonly referred to as a "seal", its use as such seems rather unlikely. Previous research on seals or women's seals also rules out a use in this sense. The Latin and Arabic letters merely mention the countess's name. Since the countess is said to have accompanied her husband on a military campaign against the Muslim-ruled Cordoba, one could also assume that it was a diplomatic gift in the style of Arabic common seals. The small drilled holes suggest that it could have been used as a pendant for a necklace or as a setting for a ring. Even if we cannot conclusively clarify what function the chalcedony may have had, it is the only material evidence that has come down to us of the life and work of the countess, her participation in the consecration of the restored cathedral building in 1038 and her arrangement of the construction of the altar front that adorned the main altar of Girona Cathedral for around 750 years.

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⁴ This grant was the result of a conflict between the countess and her son count Berenguer Ramón I. (†1035).

⁵ ORDEIG I MATA, Ramon: *Les dotalies de les esglésies de Catalunya (segles IX - XII)* (Estudis històrics Diplomàtics 2-I), Vic 1996, S. 81f.

⁶ ABENZA SORIA, Verónica Carla, ¿Patronazgo en cuestión o cuestión de patronazgo? Ermessenda de Carcassone y el desaparecido frontal de altar de la catedral de Girona: el enigma de su piedra sigilar, in: *Locus Amoenus*, 2020, S. 14.

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