



Ermengard of Narbonne and the World of the Troubadours (Conjunctions of Religion and Power in the Medieval Past)

Fredric L. Cheyette

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Before France became France its territories included Occitania, roughly the present-day province of Languedoc. The city of Narbonne was a center of Occitanian commerce and culture during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. For most of the second half of the twelfth century, that city and its environs were ruled by a remarkable woman, Ermengard, who negotiated her city's way through a maze of everchanging dynastic alliances.

Fredric L. Cheyette's masterful and beautifully illustrated book is a biography of an extraordinary warrior woman and of a unique, vulnerable, doomed society. Throughout her long reign, viscountess Ermengard roamed Occitania receiving oaths of fidelity, negotiating treaties, settling disputes among the lords of her lands, and camping with her armies before the walls of besieged cities. She was born into a world of politics and warfare, but from the Mediterranean to the North Sea her name echoed in songs that treated the arts of love.

The land between the Rhone and the Pyrenees was a delicately balanced world in which honor, dispute, and the fragile communities of loyalty and family held a "stateless" society together. In Cheyette's prose there rises before us a world we had not imagined, in which women were powerful lords, moving back and forth across what we now call Spain, France, and Italy to play the harsh political games essential to the preservation of their realms. But the region was also fertile ground for religious practices deemed heretical by the Church. The attempt to eradicate them would spawn the Albigensian Crusade, which destroyed the cosmopolitan world of Ermengard and the troubadours?the world that lives again in this book.

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