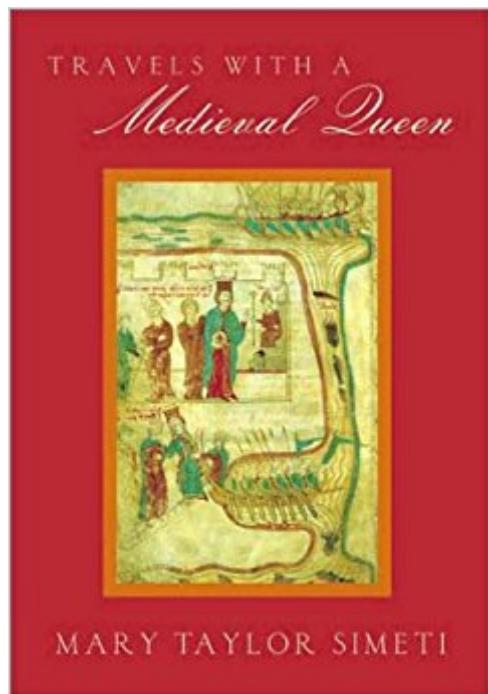


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# Travels With A Medieval Queen



## Synopsis

Two Women Set Out Across Europe in Search of a Dead Queen The medieval queen in question is Constance of Hauteville, daughter of the Norman King Roger II of Sicily, wife of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI, and mother to the Emperor Frederick II. In 1194, at the age of forty, Constance journeyed from Germany south to reconquer her father's throne. On the way she discovered that she was pregnant for the first time. She decided to give birth in public so that the world would know the child was truly hers. These intriguing facts, and very few others, are all we know directly of Constance's life. Seventeen years ago, Mary Taylor Simeti promised in *On Persephone's Island*--her now-classic memoir of an American in Sicily--that she would someday tell the story of Constance (who was, like her, an expatriate and the mother of a bicultural family). In *Travels with a Medieval Queen*, Simeti keeps her promise: retracing Constance's route from Germany to Sicily, contrasting the exotic setting of Constance's childhood in Palermo with that of her married life in the north, and drawing on reading in contiguous fields to flesh out a spare legacy of historical facts. This is the beautifully illustrated chronicle of Simeti's twentieth-century travels, first in books, then on the road, as she searches the landscapes and the monuments that survive from the twelfth century for clues to the inner life of a mother who was also a monarch.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Simeti offers a delightful, reflective reconstruction of a journey undertaken in 1194-1195 by the Sicilian princess Constance from the dark forests of Germany back to her ancestral island in the company of her cold, conquering husband, the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI. Simeti, who has

lived in Sicily for 40 years and written about the island in *Pomp and Sustenance* and *On Persephone's Island*, retraces Constance's itinerary in the relative comfort of her car, creating a pleasant exchange between the two journeys. She empathizes intensely with the princess's more grueling travails, from the horseback ride across the Alps, to the dangerous experience of childbirth (which, with her first child, Constance chose to undergo in public to prove that the child was hers). Throughout the book's 12 chapters corresponding to the months of Constance's trip, Simeti renders her sense of connection with her subject: they are both expatriates caught between two cultures, maneuvering for space in a male world. As Simeti is aware, much of the reconstruction is a projection of her own experience, since few documents speak directly to Constance's life. The author senses and evokes possibilities, introducing invented characters like the princess's Arab nurse or fictitious relationships such as her wooing by the courtly poet Frederick von Hausen. She dips into medieval scholarship, rather than immersing herself fully, though her friendship with Columbia University professor Caroline Walker Bynum bears fruit in the discussion of individualism in the Middle Ages. Like another 12th-century traveler, Gerald of Wales, Simeti is fond of engrossing intellectual side trips (astrology, chess, medicine, etc.). 144 b&w and 10 color photos. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Constance of Hauteville, the medieval queen featured here, was the daughter of Sicily's king and the wife of Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI. Few details about her life exist, but it is known that she had her only son at the age of 40 while returning to Sicily in 1194 to help her husband claim the Sicilian throne. Constance is buried in Sicily, which is where Simeti, an American who has lived there for almost 40 years, first learned about her and became fascinated by the mystery surrounding her life. Retracing Constance's return trip to Sicily, Simeti (*On Persephone's Island*) combines historical facts with her own speculations. The historical information, which fortunately makes up the bulk of the text, is well researched and quite interesting. The travelog sections, on the other hand, are flat. The reader often feels cheated by the author's contrived imaginings, which are neither fact nor fiction. In the end, it seems that the blending of genres simply doesn't work. Still, so little is available on Constance that this book fills an obvious gap. For libraries with medieval collections. Kathleen Shanahan, Kensington, MD Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This "review" is in the form of a letter to the author. I can't find her email address. Dear Ms. Simeti, I just read and enjoyed your book "Travels with a Medieval Queen". There's an interesting error in the family tree and in the text on page 280. Frederick II died in 1250, not 1260. Do you have any

research to the contrary? Was the date adjusted to fit the prediction of Joachim or does that contain a ten year error? My other query is about bottom of page 218. The double usage of "queens regnant" is confusing. Is the point that Constance was one of four, or is there more? I appreciated your ability to put a personality on Constance who heretofore has been just an item in a family tree. Also enjoyed the research about Richard I and payment of his ransom. The different meaning of colors is interesting and new to me. Also the relation to Chaucer, so I found a lot of interest. I would be interested in reading your other historical work, but I don't have much appreciation for culinary.

It's a daunting task to attempt to write a biography of someone when few primary sources exist. Constance, the last child of the Norman King Roger II of Sicily was an intriguing woman whose personal story teased, eluded and captivated author Mary Taylor Simeti for years, as she states in the pages of this biography-cum-travelogue-cum-personal memoir, but with whom she felt a strange kinship. Both were strangers in a strange land---Constance in her 10-year exile from her Sicilian homeland when she married Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI---Simeti when she married a Sicilian, settled there, and raised her children far from America. Simeti happily found a home in Sicily (and this is her 4th book dealing with Sicilian subjects); Constance finally returned, in triumph, to the land of her forebears, having borne a child along the way (a first child, at the age of forty!), the infant who would become Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor and Sicilian King. Simeti flatly states that she did not know if she had enough material to write a biography. She then takes the daring chance of fleshing out her thin material by musing about a fictitious (though likely) Arab nursemaid, a possible (though unlikely) relationship with a German courtier, and a close friendship (most plausible) with an Italian abbess, and sets out to reconstruct Constance's final trip home to Palermo, using logic, old documents, and intuition, to guess the actual route of the journey south. Simeti takes the further leap of relating to Constance as a woman and mother whose hopes, fears, and ambitions for her child were not so different from those of any other mother, despite the yawning chasm of centuries and cultures. Not a traditional biography, or history, by any means, and some points are surely controversial, but this is a compelling narrative that makes this little-known queen come alive as a personage in her own right. Simeti freely admits that although she was a history major, she is not an historian, but she shows great powers of empathy with Constance. Moreover, living in Sicily for 40 years has made her quite knowledgeable about and sensitive to the people, the land, and its ancient history. (I wish only that Simeti had taken more time in her journey to visit more sites and take more photographs!) The story of the Norman conquest of Sicily, when the House of Hauteville wrested control of this rich kingdom from Arab control, and what happened when Teutons from the

North stepped in two centuries later at the death of Constance's young nephew, William II, after the throne was claimed by an illegitimate grandson of Roger II, isn't well-known, but it is highly dramatic, replete with colorful characters, intrigues, and adventure. I look forward to more explorations of Sicilian history from this talented writer, someone who loves what she does and has the ability to make otherwise dusty history come alive for her readers. A final note---Simeti talks about her own life and experiences in this unusual book but never in a jarring manner---which makes one wonder at the disturbing *ad hominem* remarks addressed to the author in the previous reviews---rather, the contemporary travelogue-cum-memoir has its own charm and nicely brackets the trip and experiences of Queen Constance, who becomes ever more human to us as she makes her crucial life's passage from the cold, monochromatic German castle of Trifels to the warmth and beauty of the colorful Mediterranean island her heart never really left. And there is never any question of where Simeti's heart is.

The book was a quick read (so I don't regret having read it) but it is rather an odd mix. The story of the "medieval queen" in question (Constance of Sicily, mother of Frederick II, the HRE) is based on very little historical information (since none exists and the author doesn't appear to be a particularly strong scholar) and for some unfathomable reason she feels the need to "make up" imaginary characters to accompany the queen on her journey. The queen does nothing on this particular trip except travel very slowly from point A to point B, giving birth along the way. She is not an active power and indeed, like nearly any royal woman of the period, was little more than a slave to her husband and her "duty." Nevertheless, the author tries to make a case for her undergoing some kind of "empowerment" through giving birth and returning to her native land as Queen. There isn't any evidence to support this assertion, and the amateur psychology (based on the author's own experience of being a mother) is not attractive. At the same time as she tells the queen's story, the author and a friend are retracing the queen's route (based on sheer guesswork). One doesn't know whether to applaud that some buildings still exist 900 years later or bemoan the fact that so much of the medieval legacy was bombed to hell in WWII. Then, to fill in for all the nonexistent information, we are treated to a wide range of facts about various royal houses, medieval life, etc. For me, the best part of the book was learning something about the Norman Sicilian monarchy, and its relationship to the royal houses of Germany and England. As a light, quick read you may enjoy it, but this book really did not need to be written and there are many other, better books on women in the Middle Ages. Also, the jacket copy on this book is particularly misleading. The visuals (art/photos) in the book are well chosen.

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