

Miriam Shadis. *Berenguela of Castile (1180–1246) and Political Women in the High Middle Ages.* The New Middle Ages. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Pp. xviii + 253; maps, figures, tables. ISBN: 9780312234737.

Granddaughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Berenguela of Castile ruled as queen of both León and Castile in the thirteenth century. While Berenguela is the “headliner” in this study, Shadis provides more than a single life. Indeed, as the subtitle indicates, Berenguela’s life experience is placed in the wider context of “political women,” meaning essentially her royal kinswomen. As a result, Shadis is able to show that the power Berenguela enjoyed was not exceptional, but that many elite women were influential.

The book starts out with an introductory chapter that contains the expected triad of historical context, discussion of primary sources, and the plan of the book. The rest of the book unfolds along a chronological trajectory. Chapter one provides the foreground for Berenguela’s rule. Here Shadis argues that Berenguela’s assumptions concerning her role as a co-ruler with her husband, and later her son, were developed by observing her mother’s place with her husband as co-ruler of Castile. Chapter two follows Berenguela into adulthood by examining the arrangement of her marriages and dowry/dower settlements. Although Berenguela’s first betrothal did not result in marriage, the dowry arrangements did provide the opportunity to establish her status as heir to the throne. In 1197 she married her cousin King Alfonso IX of León and was granted strategically important lordships, over which she would have control, as her marriage portion.

The next three chapters represent the heart of the book as they trace Berenguela’s experience as queen and queen-mother. Chapter three explores Berenguela as queen of León between 1197 and 1203, where she patronized important religious houses and demonstrated a remarkable fecundity by giving birth to five children in six years. When the marriage was dissolved due to consanguinity, Berenguela returned to Castile and upon her brother’s death in 1214, assumed the regency for her younger brother. Unfortunately, Berenguela’s rule was challenged by a faction of noblemen and a few months later she was forced to step down. Berenguela’s next experience as co-ruler was far more successful. Shadis contends that “the ancient practice of corulership in Castile and León between kings and their consorts or sons, and Berenguela’s acute attention to her place and the place of her son within her lineage, coupled with authority as a legitimate heir to the throne” (98) allowed Berenguela to rule successfully

with her son until her death in 1246. Chapter four analyzes Berenguela in this role in detail and demonstrates the influence she had not only over her son, but also her realm. A unique aspect of Berenguela's experience as queen was the crucial support that she provided to her son in his crusade against the Muslims of al-Andalus. Shadis argues in Chapter five that Fernando III would not have been able to prosecute these protracted wars without the assistance and political acumen of his mother. The examination of Berenguela's life comes to an end by considering not only the death of this queen, but also the role that political women played in grieving, burying, and memorializing the dead. The chapter both provides a fitting conclusion to the life of Berenguela and highlights the power and place that women enjoyed in the medieval aristocracy.

Shadis provides an engaging and well-supported analysis of Berenguela's life. One of the book's strengths is Shadis's ability to place Berenguela in a larger context of political women and thus explore the circumstances in which they could exercise power. Berenguela's role as regent for her minor brother and minor son also provide an ideal test case to gauge the powers that royal women were able to command. Her regency for her brother ended when she was forced from office by a cohort of Spanish noblemen. In contrast, Berenguela enjoyed a long and successful career as co-ruler with her son, exerting her influence even after he came of age. Key to Berenguela's success, Shadis posits, was her role as a mother. Even though she had a right to rule for her brother as a recognized heir to the throne, she did not enjoy the same authority as a sister as she did as a mother.

Pivotal to understanding Berenguela's political role is the issue of her "abdication" in favor of her son. Previous generations of scholars have interpreted this moment in her life as indicative of her unwillingness to rule and a sign that she retreated from political life. Shadis provides a new reading and asserts "we should step back from Juan of Osma's blunt narration of events and seek a more nuanced understanding of Berenguela's actions at this key moment" (99). Contrary to an inability to live up to the "labors of ruling" as described by contemporary chroniclers, Shadis's analysis makes it clear that Berenguela continued to be very much a player in the politics of the realm. Under Shadis's deft analysis, a whole new view of Berenguela emerges; one who was not the victim of political events, but rather the architect of them.

Although a solid contribution to the scholarship on medieval women, this book is not without some weaknesses. The author's choice to set the book up along "themes" instead of offering a clear central thesis about Berenguela is unfortunate. Providing a statement that focused specifically on the lives

of the women discussed in this study, particularly Berenguela, would have made Shadis's book more powerful. The themes of marriage, motherhood, co-rulership, patronage, and intercession are common to the study of medieval women which makes it difficult to discern what was unique about Berenguela's imprint on these "themes."

Although Shadis demonstrates that women were invested in both their natal and affinal lineages, she uses "lineage" in the singular throughout the book. This usage seems at odds with much of what Shadis has to say about women and their relationships with their birth and affinal families. Furthermore, given Shadis's emphasis on the importance of family in the lives of these women and her assertion that royal/aristocratic families were collaterally configured, it is disappointing that the genealogy accompanying this study is so bare-bones. Indeed, it does not even provide the birth and death dates of the individuals on the chart, including the subject of this study. At the very least the genealogy does not help the reader to understand the dynamic interplay between individual and family, so key to the lives of the political elite, but more problematically this deficient genealogy undercuts the very points about family that the author seeks to make.

Berenguela of Castile (1180–1246) and Political Women in the High Middle Ages provides a thorough and thoughtful investigation not only of the life of this medieval queen, but also of her kinswomen and peers. The Berenguela who emerges from these pages was a force to be reckoned with. Shadis's analysis of the texts also demonstrates how useful previously mined sources can be when viewed through the lens of women's agency rather than oppression. This book has much to offer and will be of interest and use to all who study the lives of aristocratic and royal women.

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