

Tuscan Countess: The Life and Extraordinary Times of Matilda of Canossa (Mark Magowan Books)

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Matilda of Canossa, renowned for her relationship with Pope Gregory VII, remains one of the most influential female figures in history and whose life would alter the face of Europe, a life chronicled in an accessible, journalistic style.

Michele K. Spike is a lawyer and historian who has lived in Florence since 1989. She has collaborated with her husband, John Spike, on numerous books on Italian painters, including Mattia Preti and Caravaggio. The dramatic life of Matilda of Canossa (1046-1115) could easily be the plot of a Pirandello play: there are papal intrigues, warring medieval factions and even an ill-fated marriage to a hunchback that ends in murder. Spike's marvelous biography of the countess takes on all of these events, and also explains how Matilda became an ardent defender of the lands in the Po Valley, which she considered her birthright. Spike deftly conjures the world of pre-Renaissance Italy, where a woman "passed through her life from father to brother, to husband, to son, as each in his turn acted for her welfare." Many of the men in Matilda's life, however, failed to act in her best interests, and under such conditions, the remarkable young woman flouted the traditions of her male-dominated world and managed to defend her small portion of Italy from Henry IV. Using a staggering amount of new research, Spike peels back layer upon layer of previous myth to render a startling new portrait of the countess. (The author also displays a novelist's talent for detail, exploring the unusual alliance between Matilda and Pope Gregory VII, her ally and lover.) Spike's first-person account of her exhaustive research is one of the book's unexpected pleasures; the modern-day characters she encountered during her hunt provide this engrossing historical chronicle with a richly personal subtext. While the occasionally academic tone may put off some readers, Spike's absorbing work should appeal to highbrow Italo-philes and those interested in papal history. 40 b/w illus.

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Tuscan Countess. This is a fast-paced and colorful exploration of the life of Matilda of Canossa (c. 1046-1115), the woman who loved a pope and was loved by him, successfully defied the Holy Roman Emperor, and changed the map of Europe. A new kind of history, this biography also carries the flavor of present-day Italy. Matilda of Canossa, the Great Countess

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