

# **Women's Roles in the Middle Ages**

*Sandy Bardsley*

**Greenwood Press**

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# **WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE MIDDLE AGES**

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Women's Roles through History



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*For Marianne, who was there throughout, and Cai,  
who arrived halfway through.*



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## Series Foreword

Women's history is still being reclaimed. The geographical and chronological scope of the Women's Roles through History series contributes to our understanding of the many facets of women's lives. Indeed, with this series, a content-rich survey of women's lives through history and around the world is available for the first time for high school students to the general public.

The impetus for the series came from the success of Greenwood's 1999 reference *Women's Roles in Ancient Civilizations*, edited by Bella Vivante. Librarians noted the need for new treatments of women's history, and women's roles are an important part of the history curriculum in every era. Thus, this series intensely covers women's roles in Europe and the United States, with volumes by the century or by era, and one volume each is devoted to the major populated areas of the globe—Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Each volume provides essay chapters on major topics such as

- Family Life
- Marriage and Childbearing
- Religion
- Public Life
- Lives of Ordinary Women
- Women and the Economy
- Political Status
- Legal Status
- Arts

Country and regional differences are discussed as necessary.

Other elements include

- Introduction, providing historical context
- chronology
- glossary
- bibliography
- period illustrations

The volumes, written by historians, offer sound scholarship in an accessible manner. A wealth of disparate material is conveniently synthesized in one source. As well, the insight provided into daily life, which readers find intriguing, further helps to bring knowledge of women's struggles, duties, contributions, pleasures, and more to a wide audience.

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# Chronology

- c. 30** Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth
- 313** The Roman Emperor Constantine issues the Edict of Toleration, meaning that it is no longer illegal to be a Christian within the Roman Empire
- 327** Death of Helena, mother of Constantine and patron of religious houses
- c. 340** Birth of the influential Christian writer Jerome in Dalmatia
- c. 347** Birth of Paula, a Roman ascetic, pilgrim, and founder of religious communities for women and men in Bethlehem
- c. 354** Birth of the influential Christian writer Augustine in North Africa
- 370s** Melania the Elder travels from Rome to Egypt to found a monastery and convent
- c. 390** Birth of Galla Placidia, daughter, sister, half-sister, mother, and regent of various Roman Emperors
- 391** Christianity becomes the official religion of the Roman Empire
- 410** Visigoths sack the city of Rome
- 412** Christians murder the famous pagan philosopher Hypatia in Alexandria, Egypt
- 438** Eudocia, a Byzantine Empress and poet, makes a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and returns with the relics of St. Stephen
- 470** Birth of Clotild (Clotilda, Chrotilda), who becomes Queen of the Franks and converts her husband, Clovis, to Christianity

- 476** Last Roman Emperor in Western Europe is deposed
- c. 480** Birth of St. Scholastica, sister of St. Benedict, who heads a nunnery in central Italy
- c. 497** Birth of Theodora I, Byzantine Empress
- early sixth century** Caesarius of Arles establishes a convent for his sister, Caesaria
- c. 518** Birth of St. Radegund, runaway wife of the Frankish king Clothar and founder of an important convent at Poitiers (France)
- 526** Amalasantha becomes regent of Ostrogothic Italy for eight years on behalf of her son
- c. 530** Birth of Sophia, Byzantine Empress
- c. 595** Prophet Muhammad marries Khadija, his first wife
- c. 610** Baudonivia, a nun, writes the first female-authored saint's life, a biography of St. Radegund
- 613** Death of Brunhild, queen of the Franks and important political figure
- 626** Birth of St. Gertrude of Nivelles, Frankish princess, founder of a double monastery, abbess, and ascetic
- c. 639** Birth of St. Aldegund, Frankish abbess and autobiographer
- 664** Abbess Hild (Hilda) oversees the Synod of Whitby, at which differences between Roman and Irish forms of Christianity are resolved
- 673** St. Æthelthryth founds an important double monastery at Ely in the English kingdom of East Anglia
- c. 700** Burginda, a Frankish nun, copies manuscripts and writes commentaries
- 748** Leoba, an Anglo-Saxon nun, arrives in Germany to assist the monk Boniface in converting Pagans to Christianity
- 793** Viking invasions begin
- 797** Irene, the Byzantine Empress, blinds her son, deposes him, and rules alone
- 800** Charlemagne, King of the Franks, is crowned "Holy Roman Emperor" by Pope Leo III
- c. 801** Death of Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya, an Islamic Sufi and poet of Basra (modern Iraq)
- 820s–40s** Kassia, a Byzantine nun, composes chants and hymns

- 841–43** Dhuoda, a Frankish noblewoman, writes *Liber Manualis* for her son William
- 847** The Council of Mainz condemns and punishes Theoda, a German prophet, for preaching that the end of the world is about to come
- 870** Vikings burn the convent of Barking (England)
- 870** Vikings attack Coldingham (Scotland); the nuns of Coldingham cut off their noses and upper lips to try to prevent sexual assault
- 871** Vikings attack the English convent of Ely
- 910** Æthelflæd becomes effective ruler of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia after her husband is incapacitated
- c. 910** Jórunn Skáldmær composes poetry in Norway
- 914** Zoe Karbounopsina becomes regent of the Byzantine Empire
- c. 935** Birth of abbess, dramatist, and author Hrotswita of Gandersheim
- 994** Birth of Wallāda, poet, sponsor of poets, and daughter of Caliph al-Mustakfi of Cordoba
- c. 999** Steinunn Refsdóttir composes poetry in Iceland
- late tenth century** Birth of Aasta of Norway, future mother and advisor to King Oláf
- c. 1047** Birth of St. Margaret of Scotland, queen, and patron and reformer of the church
- 1052** Death of Queen Emma of England, wife to both an Anglo-Saxon king and a Viking king of England
- c. 1056** Bertha of Vilich, a German nun, begins writing the biography of St. Adelheid
- 1066** The Normans conquer England
- c. 1067** Death of the real Lady Godiva (Godgifu), a generous patron of the church (but probably not a naked horse rider) in England
- c. 1067** Birth of Adela of Blois, strong ruler of areas of central France in her husband's absence and important literary patron
- 1077** Emperor Henry IV seeks the forgiveness of Pope Gregory VII at the castle of Matilda of Tuscany at Canossa
- 1095** Pope Urban II calls for the first crusade



- 1096** Crusaders en route to the Holy Land attack Jews in Europe; women like Rachel, wife of Rabbi Judah of Mainz, sacrifice their children to prevent them being converted to Christianity
- c. 1096** Birth of Christina of Markyate (England), recluse and steadfast virgin
- 1098** Birth of the German abbess, author, and composer Hildegard of Bingen
- 1100** Matilda of Scotland marries Henry I of England, enabling her to become patron of English musicians, scholars, poets, and the church
- c. 1101** Birth of Heloise, lover of Peter Abelard, abbess of the Paraclete, and author of passionate letters
- 1112** The Blessed Jutta of Disibodenberg is enclosed within an anchorhold, along with her pupil Hildegard of Bingen
- 1115** Petronilla of Chemillé becomes the first abbess of Fontevraud, an important abbey, and its daughter houses
- 1117** Queen Urraca of Léon-Castile conquers the Northern Spanish cities of Sigüenza, Atienza, and Medinaceli from the Muslims
- 1118** Anna Comnena, daughter of a Byzantine Empress, conspires unsuccessfully to have her husband succeed the throne in place of her brother; she then withdraws to a convent and writes the *Alexiad*, a history of her father's reign
- 1122** Birth of Eleanor of Aquitaine, sponsor of poets, queen of France, queen of England, and a force to be reckoned with
- c. 1127** Death of the recluse Frau Ava, the first woman known by name to have composed in German
- 1129** Birth of St. Elisabeth of Schönau, a German mystic, visionary, and author
- c. 1130** Death of Diemud (Diemoth) of Wessobrun, a German nun, who spent much of her life copying by hand more than 40 manuscripts
- 1134** Ermengarde of Narbonne, future patron of troubadours, succeeds her father to become viscountess of Narbonne
- 1135** King Henry I of England dies; barons in England elect Stephen, his nephew, over Matilda, his daughter, thus prompting nearly twenty years of civil war
- 1145** Queen Melisende of Jerusalem, regent of the Kingdom of Jerusalem on behalf of her son, refuses to cede power to him once he comes of age and rules alone for another seven years
- 1145** Birth of Marie de Champagne, daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine and sponsor of troubadours

- 1150** Birth of Christina Mirabilis (Christina the Astonishing), a Flemish mystic known for miracles, extreme visions, and levitation
- 1158** Birth of Yvette of Huy, a Dutch anchoress who has herself bricked into an enclosure attached to the wall of a leper colony
- 1159** Herrad of Hohenburg (Herrad of Landsberg) begins work on compiling her *Hortus deliciarum* (*Garden of Delights*), a collection of the theological and secular texts
- c. 1165** Birth of Gualdarada de' Ravignani, a Florentine noblewoman renowned for political activity
- 1177** Birth of Marie d' Oignies, a foundational figure in the Beguine movement
- 1193** Ingeborg of Denmark is married to Philip Augustus of France; after Philip rejects her a few days later, Ingeborg begins a long campaign of letter writing to popes to enlist their support in making Philip stand by the marriage
- c. 1193** Birth of St. Clare of Assisi, friend of St. Francis and founder of the "Poor Clares"
- 1196** Death of Dulce of Worms, teacher and leader of prayers among Jewish women
- late twelfth century** Marie de France, the best-known female troubadour, composes her lyrics  
Trota of Salerno, a southern Italian healer, records some of her remedies and medical advice
- 1200** Birth of Agnes of Prague (St. Agnes of Bohemia), a princess of Bohemia, who refuses marriage to the German Emperor Frederick II in favor of her religious vocation
- 1201** On her husband's death, Blanche of Navarre assumes the regency of the county of Champagne for the next 21 years
- 1202** Hedwig, wife of Duke Henry I of Silesia, persuades her husband to found a convent at Trebnitz
- c. 1207** Birth of Mechthild of Magdeburg, German mystic, Beguine, and visionary
- 1214** Berenguela of Castile begins serving as regent for her brother, Henry I of Castile
- 1215** The 4th Lateran Council meets in Rome and passes new rules about marriage and clerical celibacy

- 1215** The English barons force King John to sign Magna Carta
- c. 1225** Composition of the English *Ancrene Riwe* (or *Ancrene Wisse*), a guide for anchoresses (women who enclose themselves in buildings or parts of buildings in order to live holy lives)
- 1226** Blanche of Castile becomes regent of France
- 1230s** Guillaume de Lorris composes the original *Roman de la Rose*, a poem of about 4,000 lines
- 1231** Death of Elisabeth of Hungary, mystic and servant of the poor; within four years of her death she is made a saint
- c. 1240** Douceline of Digne, a rich townswoman and mystic, founds a beguinage
- 1247** Birth of Margaret of Cortona, who becomes the mistress of an Italian nobleman; she later regrets her ways and becomes a Franciscan tertiary, visionary, and caretaker of the sick
- c. 1248** Birth of Angela of Foligno, Italian mystic
- 1260** Death of Hadewijch, Belgian mystic and Beguine
- 1261** Gertrude of Helfta (Gertrude the Great) is sent to a convent at the age of five; she will become a renowned mystic and author
- 1260s–70s** Jean de Meun adds 17,000 lines to Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*, giving the poem a misogynist spin
- 1268** Death of Beatrice of Nazareth, nun and mystic
- 1272** Nicole of Rubercy, a laundress in Paris, suffers a stroke and is taken by her friends to the tomb of St. Louis at St.-Denis in hope of a miracle
- 1290** Death of Eleanor of Castile, Queen of England; her husband King Edward I is so distraught that he orders crosses to be erected at each place her body rests overnight on its journey to London
- c. 1295** Birth of Cecilia Penifader, a peasant woman, on the English manor of Brigstock
- late thirteenth century** Na Bieris de Roman, a female troubadour, composes her lyrics

- 1310** Marguerite Porete is burned at the stake for the heretical ideas in her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*
- 1317** Worst year of the Great Famine; many starve to death
- 1324** Alice Kyteler is accused and convicted of witchcraft in Ireland as part of a property dispute
- 1325** Na Prous Bonetta, French Beguine and religious freethinker, confesses to heretical beliefs and is burned at the stake
- 1326** Isabella of France, wife of the English King Edward II, conspires with her lover Roger Mortimer to overthrow her husband
- 1342** Birth of Julian of Norwich, important English mystic and author
- 1346** St. Brigid (Birgitta) of Sweden, renowned mystic and visionary, founds the Brigittine order of nuns
- 1347** Birth of St. Catherine of Siena, a Dominican tertiary, mystic, author, and servant of the poor
- 1347** The Black Death enters Europe
- 1347** The besieged French city of Calais surrenders to Edward III of England; according to stories, Queen Philippa persuades her husband Edward to spare the lives of its burghers
- 1353** Bourgot, a female illuminator, is employed by Yolande of Flanders, countess of Bar
- 1353** Birth of Margaret of Denmark, Queen of Norway and effective ruler of all of Scandinavia
- 1355** Inés de Castro is assassinated by her father-in-law, Alfonso IV of Portugal, who considers her an unfit match for his son
- 1358** Rebellion of the Jacquerie (peasants) in France
- 1360** Death of Elizabeth de Burgh of Clare, wealthy widow and patron of culture, education, and the church
- c. 1362** Giovanni Boccaccio begins his *De claris mulieribus* (*Famous Women*), a companion to his volume on famous men
- c. 1373** Birth of Margery Kempe, pilgrim and author of the first autobiography in English
- 1375** A tournament is held in honor of Alice Perrers, mistress of Edward III of England; in parliament the following year, English nobles officially protest her prominent position
- 1381** The English Peasants' Revolt
- 1382** Mary of Hungary becomes the Hungarian queen
- 1384** Jadwiga of Hungary, sister of Mary of Hungary, becomes queen of Poland

- 1385** Death of Joan of Kent, princess of Wales, mother of the English king Richard II, and protector of the heretical scholar John Wycliffe
- c. 1386** Anne of Bohemia, wife of Richard II of England, encourages Geoffrey Chaucer to write his *Legend of Good Women*
- 1389** Christine de Pisan, newly widowed, begins her literary career
- 1394** John Rykener, a cross-dressing prostitute going by the name “Eleanor,” is arrested in London
- 1394** Death of Dorothea of Montau, German mystic and recluse
- c. 1412** Leonor López of Córdoba begins her *Memorias*, a memoir of her family and its political misfortunes
- 1418** Birth of Isotta Nogarola, scholar of Latin and Greek, translator, and poet
- 1425** Birth of Lucrezia Tornabuoni de’Medici, political advisor to her husband Piero de’Medici (ruler of Florence), composer of religious hymns, and patron of art and literature
- 1426** Margery del Mulne, a brewster and baker from the town of Middlewich, England, is fined 12 pence for “scolding” a neighbor
- c. 1426** Birth of Margaret Paston, prolific letter writer and member of the English gentry
- 1431** Joan of Arc is burned at the stake
- 1436** Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi of Florence becomes a widow; for the next 35 years she runs the family estates and communicates by letter with her exiled sons
- 1440** Johannes Gutenberg invents the printing press with movable type; the first bibles are printed in 1455
- 1446** Birth of Margaret of York, duchess of Burgundy, political figure, and patron of the printer William Caxton
- c. 1451** Alijt Bake, prioress of a Dutch Augustinian convent, writes her autobiography
- 1453** Constantinople is captured by the Turks
- c. 1453–60** Teresa de Cartagena, a Spanish nun deaf since childhood, writes treatises on physical infirmities and spiritual growth
- 1455** Margaret Beaufort, at the age of thirteen, gives birth to the future Henry VII of England
- 1463** Birth of Caterina Sforza, countess of Forli, regent for her son, and participant in Italian political intrigues and battles

- 1469** Isabella of Castile marries Ferdinand of Aragon, uniting their two countries and providing the foundation for the modern Spanish state
- c. 1469** The English gentlewoman Margery Paston horrifies her family by marrying their bailiff, Richard Calle, rather than someone of higher social status
- 1486** Publication of *Malleus maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*), a virulently anti-female treatise, by the German friars Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger
- 1490** St. Catherine of Genoa, pious noblewoman and visionary, becomes director of Genoa's Pammatone hospital for the poor
- c. 1495** Death of Margery Brews Paston, English letter-writer
- 1499** Isabella d'Este, marquessa of Mantua and patron of authors and artists, persuades Leonardo da Vinci to sketch her



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## Introduction: Medieval Women

Discussing medieval women as a group implies that they saw they had something in common. Yet chances were that a medieval noblewoman or a queen saw little, if any, connection between herself and a peasant woman, and that a Christian woman and a Jewish woman regarded themselves as having little in common. Medieval women were divided from one another in many ways: by their social class, their religion, their age, their marital status, and by the place and the period in which they lived. Yet, as historians look back at the experiences of medieval women, they cannot help but see common patterns that transcend barriers of class, religion, age, time, and place. Two patterns in particular emerge in this study of medieval women. First, women as a group were virtually always viewed as inferior to men as a group. In other words, medieval societies—like those that preceded and followed them—were patriarchal. Second, individual women could sometimes overcome this inferior status and break the rules assigned to their sex. The fact that some women were able to break these rules did not, however, mean that all women were able to do so.

How did medieval women differ from one another? When a medieval person thought about his or her identity, class status may often have been more important than gender. The life of a medieval noblewoman was certainly different from that of a nobleman in terms of work, responsibilities, and behavioral expectations, but it was arguably less different than the gap between a noblewoman and a peasant woman. Class changed over time and place, too: in some regions of Europe in the early Middle Ages, class distinctions were less entrenched. In later periods, people became acutely



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