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que il ne soit par nule ma
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¶ **F**orce que il ne soit par
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qui font la meson seure et
fort. ¶ **P**rudence la guar
nist deuers orient p pour
ueane contre les peruz.
¶ **A**ttirpance deuers
medi contre les mauue
les chaleurs. ¶ **F**orce de
uers galerne contre les

mauueles froidurs. ¶ **N**
o
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les mauueles pluies.
¶ **D**e la uertu de
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uertuz. ¶ **A**ttirpance
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¶ **N**e mens il ne ueit fire
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uet uige. ¶ **G**ranz sires

Medieval Women in Western Europe, c. 1000-1350 CE

By Ane Lintvedt

The female half of the population in Medieval Western Europe experienced oppression driven by religious and secular laws. However, women found and created opportunities, as well.

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Introduction

As people built their societies in the post-classical world, they often looked to traditions, religions, and laws to bring some order to their communities. We've seen mostly male rulers use religion to bolster their claims to political power. Now we'll look at how this intersection of religion and *secular* (non-religious) laws shaped women's lives in Western Europe in the mid to late middle ages (c. 1000 – c. 1350).

Social structures

In medieval Europe, laws and cultural practices generally considered women to be the property of their nearest male relative. In practice, their actual social status depended on the status of their father or their husband. Elite women, such as nobles and aristocrats, lived on big rural estates. They had some access to education, provided by private tutors. As wives, their principal tasks were to run a household of servants and family members and to have many children, preferably sons.

Women in families who owned shops or small businesses were considered middle class. They may have had some education if they worked in the family business, especially math and basic writing skills for bills and receipts. Like noblewomen, these middle-class women were also responsible for running the household and producing and raising children. In the countryside, a woman was considered middle class if her family owned a prosperous farm. There was little need or opportunity for formal education. They had similar domestic duties to other middle-class women.



*Medieval peasant women harvesting grain alongside a man, from the Luttrell Psalter, c. 1325-1340.
© Heritage Images / Getty Images.*

However, relatively few women in the medieval Western European world were wealthy or middle class. The vast majority were peasants or members of the working classes—and they worked a lot. They still had all the tasks related to homemaking and child-raising, but also had to produce or provide food in some way, often by working outside the home to provide additional income. In the cities, they might take work as servants or employees of some sort, and in the countryside, many were paid as farm workers. In the early Middle Ages, many of these rural women and their families were serfs: farm workers whose only pay was a place to live.

Religious traditions about women

The main religion of medieval Western European kingdoms was Roman Catholic Christianity. Judaism was also practiced, primarily in medieval cities. Islam had established itself on the Iberian peninsula (modern-day Portugal and Spain). These three Abrahamic religions had a lot in common when it came to teachings about women. They often told the story of Adam and Eve. Religious leaders often blamed Eve for getting humans thrown out of Paradise. They promoted the idea that all women were, at some level, inherently disobedient and therefore had to be controlled by men.¹ At the same time, all three religions featured some powerful women in their religious traditions.

Christian women and religion

Christian women in medieval Western Europe had different ways to interact with the religion depending on their social status. An elite woman could join one of the region's many convents, especially in the early middle ages (c. 600-c. 1000). These church properties could be vast estates that employed hundreds of people. She might even become the Abbess, the top nun who ran the place.² But the Catholic Church became more powerful, wealthy, and centralized with the pope's authority in Rome. By the 1300s, a succession of popes ordered that men (priests) should run the convents. Women (nuns) in the convents were now cloistered. This meant they were forbidden to leave the convent grounds. In spite of having limited authority in their own spaces, many women still got a lot out of convents. These institutions often ran schools for girls, provided health care, and employed women from the community. Nuns were appreciated as valuable and honored members of society, and this occupation was one of the few ways a woman could get an education.

To join a convent, a substantial fee had to be paid to cover the nun's living expenses for the rest of her life. For this reason, these women tended to come from very wealthy families. Some women who could not afford to join a convent came together in communal, women-only houses known as beguines. There, women studied and lived religious lives while they worked in the community. Convents meant different things to different women. For example, a wealthy widow choosing to live her life in peace in convent might have viewed it as an escape from a worse life at home. Then again, an illegitimate daughter being hidden by her wealthy family to avoid social scandal might have experienced it as a prison.



The German Abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179 CE), born to the nobility and later leader of a convent, sketching on a wax tablet while receiving a vision. From Scivias, a book of illustrations composed by Hildegard von Bingen and completed c. 1151-1152 CE. Public domain.

¹ Indeed, the Greek philosopher Aristotle, whose writings from the fourth century BCE were some of the only Greek writings known in medieval Europe, also considered women to be intellectually, morally, physically and emotionally inferior copies of men.

² A convent is a community of women (nuns) who devote their lives to religious study and work under the supervision of an abbess or a member of the Christian church hierarchy.

Christian women attended church on Sundays and holy days but were little more than audience members. Women were not allowed to participate in religious ceremonies. Women and men sat on different sides of the church, in keeping with the social structures. That meant the elite women sat in the front, the middle-class women in the middle range of seats, and the lower classes sat in the back or stood. Men sat together on the right-hand side of the church, and women sat together on the left-hand side. This was no coincidence, as the Latin word for left means “sinister,” or evil, and the story of Eve continued to dictate women’s status, even where they sat.

Jewish women in medieval Europe

Christian kingdoms passed laws forbidding Jewish people to own land because owning large farms and estates gave one significant social status. Such laws were passed explicitly to prevent that. Therefore, in Western medieval Europe, Jews lived in urban areas. Many lived in their own Jewish neighborhoods. There, they could be near the synagogue, speak Hebrew, and go to shops that sold kosher foods. And frankly, some lived in these neighborhoods as a buffer against antisemitism.³ Elsewhere, Jews lived alongside Christian neighbors in mixed neighborhoods. They spoke the local language, as well as Hebrew, and shared practices of daily life with their Christian neighbors.

Like Christian women, Jewish women were generally excluded from public religious life. They rarely learned Hebrew and did not receive training in Jewish law. There was no tradition similar to the Christian convent where Jewish women could leave their families and study their religions. Within the Jewish religious traditional texts, women were also seen as morally inferior to men. However, men were directed to love and praise their faithful and obedient wives.

Some Jews prospered in trade and money lending in medieval Western Europe. Subsequently, Jewish women benefited from a more prosperous family economy. These newly-wealthy families accumulated large dowries for their daughters. Transfers of such wealth helped the new wife obtain status in her marriage and with her new family.⁴ Because it was considered virtuous for men to spend time studying the holy texts such as the Torah, Jewish women often took on much of the work of running the family business. And as they worked in the family’s business, these middle-class women developed business skills and learned to manage money. Other improvements in Jewish women’s positions in society came when there was a revision in Jewish law, around the year 1000. It banned *polygyny* (men having more than one wife). It also forbade a man from divorcing his wife against her will.

In eastern medieval Europe, such as the kingdoms of Poland and Russia, Jewish families could own land, but not a lot of it. The lives of rural Christian and Jewish women were similar, working on farms and taking care of the family and household.

Note: Because of the region being discussed, this article did not cover Muslim women. Most Muslim women in western Europe at this time lived in the Islamic kingdom of Al-Andalus, which was closely connected to Islamic North African states. Today, this peninsula is occupied by Spain and Portugal.

³ Antisemitism: the hatred of Jews. When there were unexplained disasters in medieval society, sometimes Jews were used as scapegoats or easily-blamed villains.

⁴ A dowry could be money, land, goods given from the bride’s family to the groom’s family at her wedding.

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Medieval peasant women harvesting grain alongside a man, from the Luttrell Psalter, c. 1325-1340. © Heritage Images / Getty Images.

The German Abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179 CE), born to the nobility and later leader of a convent, sketching on a wax tablet while receiving a vision. From *Scivias*, a book of illustrations composed by Hildegard von Bingen and completed c. 1151-1152 CE. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hildegard_von_Bingen.jpg



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