



uerne sainte yglise p les
cardonnais. ¶ **P**rudence
garde lomme que il ne
soit par nul engin dane
mi deceuz. ¶ **A**ttirpance
que il ne soit par nule ma
uele amour corrupuz
¶ **F**orce que il ne soit par
ue ou par paour ou par
doulueur uameuz. ¶ **C**es
uy. tiennent homme en
bon estat endroit soi. ¶ **J**o
stice le met en ordre et en
droit estat enuers autui
car ele rent a chascun ce q
suen est. ¶ **C**e sont les uy.
tours en quatre angles
de la meson au preudome
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
stice deuers occide contre
les mauueles pluis.
De la uirtu de
uy prudence
uetuz. ¶
Qont diuers offices et mlt
se diuersifient en leur
euires si com dit. ¶ **I**an
aen phylotoplyes qui
out a non plonns en so
luite que il fist de ces uy.
uetuz et les deuise mlt
sontuement. et dit que
prudence a uy. offices. q
p ceste uertu quanz li ho
fet et dit. et pense tout
li ordenne et mane et
ruile ala ligne de reson.
¶ **N**e mens il ne ueit feire
fors droit et reson et en
toutes ses euires il se
pouuoit que eles uoiser
selonc lordenace et lar
bitre dieu qui tout uo
uet uige. ¶ **G**ranz sires

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

By Ane Lintvedt

Women in Medieval Western Europe were treated as property. Their behavior and status were controlled by religious and secular laws. However, they found and created opportunities, as well.

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Introduction

Much of history leaves women out of the story. Here, we'll consider their role in Western Europe in the mid- to late Middle Ages (c. 1000 – c. 1350). We'll also look at how religious and *secular* (non-religious) laws shaped women's lives.

Social structures

In medieval Europe, most women were considered the property of their nearest male relative. Their social position depended on the status of their father or husband. Elite women lived in noble and aristocratic families. They usually lived on big rural estates. These women received some education from private tutors. Their principal jobs were to run the household of servants and family members. Wives were also expected to have many children, preferably sons.

Daughters of small business owners were considered middle class. These young women received some education if they worked in the family business. Like noblewomen, these middle-class women were also responsible for managing the household. In the countryside, a woman was considered middle class if her family owned a successful farm. There was little need or opportunity for a formal education there. However, she performed the same domestic duties as any other middle-class woman.



Medieval peasant women harvesting grain alongside a man, from the Luttrell Psalter, c. 1325-1340.
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However, the vast majority of women were peasants or laborers with little wealth. They had all the household and child-raising responsibilities. At the same time, they also had to provide food in some way. In the cities, they could find work as servants or employees. 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

Roman Catholic Christianity was the main religion of medieval Western European kingdoms. Judaism was also practiced. Islam had established itself on the Iberian peninsula, where Portugal and Spain are today. Regarding beliefs about women, these three religions had a lot in common. They all referred to the story of Adam and Eve. Eve was blamed for getting humans thrown out of Paradise. And in general, women were blamed for releasing evil into the world. Men promoted the idea that all women were disobedient. Therefore, had to be controlled! Still, all three religions highlighted holy women in their traditions.

Christian women and religion

Women had different ways to interact with Christianity, depending on their social status. An elite woman could join a convent. Convents could be large estates that employed hundreds of people. A woman might even become the Abbess who ran the place.² But that changed as the Catholic Church became more powerful and wealthy. By the 1300s, a series 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. Still, convents remained women's realms in many ways. Becoming a nun was one of the few ways a woman could get an education.

To join a convent, a fee had to be paid, usually by the family. The money had to cover the nun's living expenses for the rest of her life. For this reason, nuns tended to come from wealthy families. Some women who could not afford to join a convent came together in communal, women-only houses. They were known as beguines. There, women studied and lived religious lives while they worked in the community.

Christian women attended church on Sundays and holy days but were little more than audience members. The Church reflected the social and gender distinctions of general society. 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. Women were not allowed to participate in the services. They also were seated separately from men. However, the church generally believed in the idea that women's souls were equal to men's.



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

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

Jewish women in medieval Europe

Jewish women in Medieval Europe faced a different set of challenges. Christian kingdoms passed laws forbidding Jews to own land. Such laws were passed to keep Jews from having influence. As a result, they often settled in Jewish neighborhoods or quarters. There, they could be near the synagogue and be safer in their culture. Frankly, many lived in these quarters to escape antisemitism.³

Like Christian women, Jewish women were ignored in public religious life. They rarely learned Hebrew. Nor did they receive training in Jewish law. There was no tradition for Jewish women similar to the Christian convent. Within the Jewish religious texts, women were also seen as unequal to men. However, men were directed to love and praise their obedient wives.

Some Jews prospered in medieval Western Europe. They built wealth and status through trade and money lending. Parents saved up large dowries for their daughters. Such transfers of wealth helped a new wife have status in her marriage.⁴ Jewish men spent a lot of time studying holy texts, such as the Torah. So Jewish women often helped run family businesses. This helped them develop skills.

In Poland and Russia, Jewish families could own land, but not a lot of it. The lives of rural Christian and Jewish women were similar. They worked the fields alongside their husbands and children. However, they had the added responsibilities of 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 on the Iberian Peninsula. It 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 The bride's family gave a dowry to the groom's family at her wedding. It could be money, land, or goods.

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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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