

WOMEN

Women from the medieval era appear much less than men in the sources and so we know very little about them. There are two main reasons for this:

- 1) Traditional roles in society (to fight, to pray, or to govern) were nearly always given to men.
- 2) Only a very small proportion of the population received a formal education (men from rich families who became churchmen) so most women could not write down their thoughts and experiences.

Both of these factors meant that women were viewed differently from men and so did not have the same opportunities or experiences as men. This makes their lives very interesting for us to explore. Here are some key aspects of a medieval woman's life.

Marriage

The church was responsible for marrying men and women. A marriage was only **legitimate** (valid in the eyes of all society) if it was done in a church according to Church laws. Church laws (called **canon law**) said that people could not marry anyone in their family (called the forbidden degrees of consanguinity), people could only have one husband or wife (monogamy), divorce was only allowed in certain circumstances, and church-men and -women could not marry at all.

Before these laws were written in the 12th and 13th centuries, people did do all of these things. If someone disobeyed these laws, their marriage and any children they had in that marriage were seen as **illegitimate**. Illegitimate children were not allowed to inherit any of their family's titles or property, so marriages outside of canon law were a bad thing for your family.

When a woman got married, often some kind of property was given to the bride so that she could provide for herself and her children if the husband should die. This was called her **dowry** (or 'tocher' in Scotland).

Children

Because a woman did not usually have a job which earned her money, her duty was to raise a family which could take on the family property or job after the parents had died. **Mortality** (the death rate) was very high in the medieval period because medicine was very limited. This meant that mothers often died while giving birth to their babies. It also meant that children often died because of diseases, and so women often had many babies throughout their lives.

It was important to have a son because if there were no sons the property might be split between daughters or be passed to the family of the daughter's husband.

Royal and Noble Women

Women who were born into royal or noble families often got married very young. Marriage was a very good way of making allies with other families or even countries because it brought two families together. For example, King Alexander III of Scotland married Margaret, the eldest daughter of King Henry III of England. Marrying across the border helped bring peace to both countries and friendly relations between the two kings. Margaret was 11 years old when she married Alexander.

A noblewoman could inherit her father's title if she had no brothers. Usually when this happened, her family made sure that she married a nobleman who would run her lands and business for her. Because these noblemen would then have lots of power through their wives, the king usually had a say in who a noblewoman married.

During the War of Independence some noblewomen had to run their lands and castles while their husbands were in prison in England. Some of the most prominent were **countesses** (the wives of earls) such as the countess of Ross, countess of Fife, countess of Buchan and the countess of Dunbar.

Nuns

Though women were not allowed to be priests or bishops, women could be part of a religious community called a **nunnery** or **convent**. Like a monastery for male monks, women could live in a convent in order to devote their whole life to worshipping God. These women were called nuns.

Women who chose to be nuns had to leave their family, never get married, and have little contact with the world outside of the community of nuns for the rest of their life. This lifestyle was deemed to be the best way to worship God and live a holy life.

Law

Despite the fact that women had fewer opportunities than men outside the household, they did have some rights. For example, there is evidence from medieval Scotland of women accusing people of crimes in a court room.

There are also sources which show that women did inherit land from their parents, if there were no sons. Sometimes women could then sell this land if they had to.

MARRIAGE

Rieti (Italy): 10 June 1289

The Pope commands the churchmen of Aberdeen to write a document (a 'dispensation') which makes the marriage of a knight (Robert Fleming) and a noblewoman (Affrica) legal in the eyes of the church. The couple had married without knowing that they were within the fourth degree of kindred (probably first cousins).

Pope Nicholas IV to the archdeacon and treasurer of Aberdeen: greeting.

I commanding you to grant a dispensation to Robert called Fleming, knight, and Affrica, daughter of the nobleman Reginald called 'Lichen', who intermarried without knowing that they were in the fourth degree of kindred, and have had several sons since. This dispensation should allow them to remain in the marriage as contracted, and declare their offspring legitimate.

Birgham (Borders): Friday 17 March 1290

The Guardians of Scotland write to Eric, king of Norway, to tell him that the Pope has granted an approval (a 'dispensation') over the marriage of his daughter Margaret, Queen of Scotland, and Edward, the king of England's son.

William and Robert, bishops of St Andrews and Glasgow, John Comyn and James

Stewart of Scotland, Guardians of the kingdom, and the community of the same kingdom, to lord Erik, king of Norway: greeting.

We note that the pope has granted a dispensation that the son and heir of the king of England may take your daughter, our lady, in marriage. We have agreed with this and request that you make arrangements for her to come to England with haste in order that she arrives by 1 November.

Newcastle: 5 January 1293

Edward I commands King John Balliol to cancel his agreement with Isabella that allowed John to decide who Isabella married.

King Edward of England to John, king of Scotland: greeting.

I have approved the marriage of Isabella Comyn, widow of William Comyn, to my faithful subject Edmund of Hastings. The marriage happened while I held the kingdom of Scotland as overlord. I command you to absolve Isabella from an oath you took from her not to marry without your permission.

Paris: 23 October 1295

Part of the text from a treaty between France and Scotland in which Philip, king of France, agrees to a marriage between the king of Scots' son and heir (Edward Balliol) and his niece Jeanne. The treaty lays out the arrangements for her dowry.

We [king Philip] promise that we and our successors will give 25,000 *petits livres Tournois* [French coins] towards the marriage with Jeanne. Likewise the king of Scots must give Jeanne £1,500 a year as her dowry [about £800,000 today]. £1,000 of this should be yearly revenue in the following lands: Bailleul, Dampierre, Helicourt and Hornoil in the kingdom of France, and Lanark, Cadzow [Hamilton], Mauldslie, Cunningham, Haddington and Dundee Castle in the kingdom of Scotland. However, if the revenue from all of these places exceeds £1,000 a year, the excess money should be given to the king of Scots. And if there is a shortfall in the revenue, the king will be responsible for making up the total from his other revenues. Or, he can assign two times a year when the £1,500 will be given to her. And he will give her a guarantee for this dowry. And if in the course of time the king wishes to pass to a second marriage, he will have to ask our permission on the matter of the dowry ...

PROPERTY

Sometime between 28 August 1296 and 16 February 1314

The monks of Dunfermline Abbey give two pieces of land in the burgh of Dunfermline to a woman named Marjory as a reward for her service to them.

We, Abbot Hugh of Dunfermline and the convent of Dunfermline, have given to Marjory, daughter and heir of Richard the Cook, late burgess of Dunfermline, that half of Pitbauchlie [in Dunfermline, Fife] which Richard, her father, formerly held from us, for her homage and faithful service.

Additionally, we give Marjory a parcel of land which is called 'the meadow' in the burgh of Dunfermline.

Aberdeen: 22 March 1311

A woman named Alicia Chaplain (daughter of a burghess of Aberdeen) sells her land to the chancellor of Aberdeen Cathedral because she is in great need of money. It is a small patch of land in the burgh of Aberdeen which she had been given by her mother after her father (Adam) and brother (Roger) had died.

Alicia Chaplain, daughter of the late Adam Chaplain, burghess of Aberdeen, has sold to Sir Henry Martin, chancellor of Aberdeen, half of the croft which is called 'the Spittal Hills' lying within the burgh of Aberdeen, out of poverty and need.

The land formerly belonged to Roger son of Adam, and belongs to Alicia because of her mother, Helen.

Alicia has sold this land for a certain sum of money which Sir Henry has paid her in her great need.

SIEGES AND WAR

September 1296

After his conquest of Scotland, Edward I gives bits of land to some noblewomen as a reward for supporting him.

I, the lord king Edward, announce that it is my pleasure that my cousin, Lady Joanna, wife of Sir John Comyn the son, should have 200 marks worth of land [about £72,000 today] in Tynedale for her sustenance, to hold at my pleasure until I have ordered otherwise.

Also, I order that the countess of Ross shall have £100 worth of land [about £54,000 today] for her support, outside the earldom of Ross. And if the lands outside are not sufficient, she should receive the extra from the Exchequer of Scotland in money.

Also, I order that the countess of Atholl shall have £100 worth of land outside the earldom of Atholl for her sustenance. And if the lands outside are not sufficient, she should receive the extra from the Exchequer of Scotland in money.

July 1304

A woman called Evota petitions Edward I asking him to help her get her lands back which she lost during the siege of Stirling for helping the English army.

Evota of Stirling to King Edward of England.

I inform you that, during the siege of Stirling castle, I helped your garrison by obtaining provisions for them from the surrounding countryside. On account of my actions I was denounced by the Scots, who threw me into prison for ten weeks, and at the end of that term in prison they made me renounce the country and banished me. All of this can be witnessed by the garrison men who are now your archers.

I ask you for a letter to the chancellor of Scotland, putting me back in possession of my property in the town of Stirling, which I held at the time of the siege and which was taken from me because of my service to you and your garrison, and also that my fellow countrymen should not harass me.

Before 9 February 1304

Letter from the countess of Lennox to King Edward, asking him to help the people in her lands who have sworn loyalty to him because John Comyn has sent an army to destroy them.

Margaret, countess of Lennox, to Sir Edward, king of England, lord of Ireland and duke of Aquitaine: greetings.

My liege, I note that Sir John Comyn has sent part of his army across the Forth into Lennox to destroy and ruin those people who have come into your peace. I pray that you send your counsel with aid for the rescue, governance and support of those who have come to your peace. It is said that the army has come with a hundred mounted men and a thousand foot soldiers, and they reached Drymen in Lennox on the Sunday after Michaelmas [29 September].

CRIMES

5 July 1296

The king's lawmen hear about a crime that took place in Perth.

Theft and Murder: Maurice Brown was to answer Marjory of Leeds on a plea of felony. Marjory complains that on the Monday after the feast of St John the Baptist in the 24th year of the reign of King Edward [25 June 1296] Maurice came to her house in Perth and took and led away a white mare. Richard of Leeds, her husband, pursued the mare and Maurice killed him. Marjory therefore accuses Maurice of the death of her husband. Maurice comes and denies the charge, and says that he is not guilty of the death of Richard or of the robbery of the mare. He submits himself to a jury, as does Marjory. The jurors say that Maurice is not guilty and is therefore acquitted. Marjory is condemned to prison. Later the fine is pardoned because she is a pauper.

November 1296

The king's lawmen hear about a crime that took place in Perth.

Theft: Matthew of York was to answer Christiana of Perth on a plea of robbery. Christiana complains that on the Thursday before the feast of St Botolph in 1296 [14 June 1296] Matthew came to Perth in the company of a thief named William Wallace and took and furtively carried off against her wishes goods and chattels (possessions) which he found in her house, namely beer, value 3s., to Christiana's damage and against the peace. She brings suit on this matter. Matthew says that he is not bound to answer Christiana because he is a clerk. Therefore an inquest is taken. The jurors say that Matthew came to the town in the company of William and that he carried off Christiana's goods as she charged him. Therefore he is condemned to penance.

Between October and November 1302

Records from a court case in Linlithgow about Christina of Edinburgh and Adam of Glasham.

22 October 1302: Christina of Edinburgh came to court to present her proof against Adam of Glasham in respect of her unjust detention of a quantity of lead. She came and performed sufficiently. Thus, it was the decision of the court that Christina should recover her lead and Adam and his pledges should be fined. Pledge: Richard of Torphichen.

22 October 1302: Christina of Edinburgh, made a charge of trespass against Adam of Glasham, saying that, in Linlithgow Castle on 11 October 1302, Adam injured her and beat her and badly dragged her, and caused her damages of half a mark.

5 November 1302: Adam of Glasham, the defendant, had a date for hearing his judgement in the case brought against him by Christina of Edinburgh on a charge of trespass; but he did not come. He is therefore to be compelled by the seizure of his goods to attend the next court.

TRAVEL

Edinburgh: 5 June 1289

The Guardians of Scotland tell the chamberlain to pay a woman's travelling fees.

The Guardians of Scotland to the chamberlain: We command you to pay Ela of Garioch, wife of the late Andrew of Garioch, £10 [about £5,000 today] for her expenses in travelling from beyond the Mounth [the mountains between Aberdeenshire and Angus and the Mearns] to Stirling and back.

EUPHEMIA, COUNTESS OF ROSS

Inverness: 24 July 1297

Important men in the North East of Scotland write to Edward I telling him about a rebellion which is happening around Moray, led by Sir Andrew Murray and others. They also tell the king that the countess of Ross has been very helpful and that she is loyal to him.

Henry bishop of Aberdeen, John Comyn earl of Buchan, and Gartnait son of Gartnait of Mar, to our lord, Edward, king of England: greeting.

We write to tell you how an insurrection has recently come about in Moray and other neighbouring lands under Andrew, son of Sir Andrew Murray, and others. We are letting you know that we are determined to promote peace and to put down the insurrection, and maintain these areas. And we consider yours and our own forces to be adequate for this task.

We have advanced beyond the Mounth of Scotland, and have inspected it in

every place and sought out the evil-doers by means which Sir Andrew of Rait, the messenger of this letter, will very soon explain to you in more detail.

When we arrived at the town of Inverness, we sent a message to the countess of Ross asking her to come and provide us with her own advice, power, and assistance for keeping the peace, in order to set royal justice in order so that she might gain your favour and thanks in the future.

She readily agreed to our request and placed herself in our charge. And since she was faithful and friendly, we bear true witness to her good standing and her efforts and devotion towards you. We believe she has true faithfulness towards you, which she can draw out or ask from her neighbours – the great, the middling, and the lowliest of people. We therefore recommend her as a most faithful person in all matters. This is proved by the true profession of respect and affection which she showed towards you at Inverness.

25 July 1297

The keeper of Urquhart Castle writes to Edward I telling him that Andrew Murray and his men had besieged his castle. He praises the countess of Ross for her help in relieving him.

The keeper of Urquhart Castle to my lord, King Edward: greeting.

When some evil-minded people joined Andrew Murray and Alexander Pilchys at the castle of Avoch in Ross, the knight Sir Reginald le Cheyne wrote asking me to meet him at Inverness on the king's business on the Sunday after Ascension Day [29 May].

As I was returning to Urquhart after the day's business, Andrew Murray and Alexander Pilchys with their accomplices wounded and took me prisoner. Then on the Monday morning, Andrew and Alexander besieged Urquhart castle. The countess of Ross sent a squire to me to say this was not her doing, offering her assistance to my castle but also advising me to surrender, which I refused to do. The squire then departed, leaving Andrew and his army, which included the burgesses of Inverness. I then saw the countess's army, which she had sent to my aid under her son's command. I met and dismissed a messenger from the besiegers, and received help from the countess's son in provisioning my castle.

Sadly, during a night assault, William Puer, Sir Alan and Richard, my son, were all killed. The besiegers drew away and went to the castles of Avoch and Balvenie and the woods there.

I praise the countess highly for her assistance, and I beg that you will release her husband from imprisonment. Her son joins me in this request.

July 1297

Euphemia, countess of Ross, sends two messengers to Edward I with news of her recent difficulties.

Euphemia, countess of Ross, to my lord Edward, king of England, lord of Ireland and duke of Aquitaine: greeting.

I write to ask you to trust Sir Andrew of Rait, knight, and Bernard de Mowat, my clerk, who have come to tell you my great and arduous business.

Between 1297 and 1298

Alexander Comyn writes to Edward I asking him to help Alexander regain his property and goods which he lost because he was in prison. Alexander assures the king that if he helps Alexander, Euphemia, countess of Ross, will not fight against Edward because her husband is in English hands, and the earl of Sutherland will not fight against him because he is on Edward's side.

Alexander Comyn to my lord, King Edward: greeting.

I write to tell you that I have suffered the dishonour of imprisonment and great loss of my goods, and am daily likely to suffer more if you do not provide aid and remedy.

The countess of Ross and her son are bound not to rise against you for the sake of their lord, the earl of Ross, whom you have in your keeping. The earl of Sutherland and Lachlan MacRuairidh are loyal to you, according to their power.

I ask you, my lord, to believe the shameful things of which my loyal man will inform you, and to give me your commands since I have always been faithful to you and am your loyal man in all things.

I ask you to consider the mischief I have suffered, and may suffer still, in remaining as faithful to you as I would to King Alexander [III] if he were still alive.

JOANNA, COUNTESS OF FIFE

Berwick: 6 June 1292

Joanna de Clare countess of Fife, widow of Duncan earl of Fife (one of the Guardians, who had been killed in 1289) guarantees to pay the huge sum of money that she has promised to Edward I for permission to marry anyone she chooses.

Joanna de Clare, countess of Fife, wife of the late Duncan, earl of Fife, to all of Christ's faithful people: greeting.

It is known that I am bound to pay to the most serene lord Edward, king of England and overlord of the kingdom of Scotland, the sum of 1000 marks of silver [about £340,000 today] in exchange for his right to determine my marriage, and for the license that he has therefore granted me to be able to marry whoever I wish. I bind myself and all my goods for that payment.

Westminster: 22 April 1299

Edward I commands an inquiry into the capture of Joanna de Clare, countess of Fife.

King Edward I to my loyal men, Patrick, earl of Dunbar, and John of Kingston, keeper of Edinburgh Castle: greeting.

I command you to inquire by a jury of men from Berwick, Roxburgh and Edinburgh into charges brought by Joanna de Clare, countess of Fife, against Herbert de Morham of Scotland.

The countess claims that while she and her servants were on their way to England, Herbert waited for them between Stirling and Edinburgh, and took her by force to his brother Thomas's house where he imprisoned her. He did this as she would not agree to marry him, because she had sworn an oath to me not to marry without my approval.

Herbert seized her jewels, horses, robes and goods, to the value of £2,000 [about £1,000,000 today], to her great loss and scandal.

You should make the inquiry in presence of the accused people. Herbert should be brought safely from Edinburgh Castle to the trial, and taken back at its close.

Westminster: 25 October 1299

Joanna de Clare, countess of Fife, gives lots of her lands to Sir John of Hastings because she owes him a large debt which she cannot repay.

I, Joanna de Clare, countess of Fife, announce that I am unable to pay my debt to Sir John of Hastings, lord of Abergavenny, of 960 marks [about £330,000 today], because of the war in Scotland and of the devastation of Sir Herbert de Morham, who has taken my belongings. As a result of this, I have made the following agreement with Sir John:

Joanna of Clare, countess of Fife, has given to Sir John of Hastings, lord of Abergavenny, the following lands so as to be free of the debt she owes him: her manor of Glapthorn (in the county of Northampton); her manor of Carlton (in the county of Lincoln); and all of her lands in Scotland, namely Strathord, 'Kimile' and 'Loygiastre' in Perth, and Coull and Lumphanan in Aberdeen. Sir John shall pay Joanna £80 a year for the lands.

NUNS

1297

The prioress (the head of the nuns) and the nuns of Coldstream ask Edward I to help them collect their rents.

The prioress of Coldstream and her nuns to their lord, King Edward, and his council: greeting.

We pray that you might give us a letter written by your sheriff of Northumberland which would allow us to regain ownership of our rents which we have been deprived of on account of the war.

Near Southampton: 12 March 1297

Edward I tells the treasurer of Scotland to postpone the taxes that the nuns of Coldstream owe.

King Edward to Hugh of Cressingham, my treasurer of Scotland: greeting.

I write to tell you that the eleven pounds which my beloved paupers, the prioress and nuns of Coldstream, owed you from tax should be dropped until the next feast of Pentecost [8 June].

Between 1299 and 1303

The keeper of Lochmaben castle asks Edward I to fulfil his promise to Robert that he would pay for Robert's daughter to become a nun in Shaftesbury Abbey (England).

Robert de Cantelou sends a petition to Edward I, telling him to perform the promises which he made when he gave Robert the title of constable of Lochmaben Castle. That is: to give Robert 100 marks to pay his debts in the war in Gascony [France] and to make Robert's daughter a nun in Shaftesbury Abbey [in Dorset] at the king's expense.