WOMEN IN THE EUROPEAN EARLY MIDDLE AGES

The early Middle Ages is usually given the dates 500-1000 a.d. or c.e. Within these years, many changes came about for women in Europe. While this time period has often been referred to as the Dark Ages, it really is only dark inasmuch as there is a dearth of primary sources to reconstruct the history of this time. From the 4-5th centuries, the Roman Empire in the west, centered at Rome, was going through a series of significant changes, including invasions from the barbarian tribes of the Germans and the Huns, horrendous financial deficits due to a doubling of the military expenditures, political unrest, falling birth rates, and the disruptions caused by Christians, Parthians, etc. In the early 4th century, the emperor Constantine established a new Roman capitol at Constantinople (present day Istanbul), and eventually a new Eastern Roman Empire will evolve into what historians call the Byzantine Empire.

What emerges in Europe is a new dynamic culture composed of four different political and religious groups: Roman, Christian, Celtic, and Germanic. Over the coming centuries, new nations and kingdoms will form into what will be called Europe. Four specific societies will be highlighted in this discussion of the Early Middle Ages. While they are all indigenously German, historians distinguish between them. These four are the Generic German, Carolingian, Anglo-Saxon, and Viking. The following categories concerning women from the peasant and aristocratic classes will be discussed: marriage, divorce, birth control, economic conditions of women, religious activities, and political & military contributions.

Sources for reconstructing the lives of Germanic women in the early Middle Ages are mainly law codes and political records (chronicles and capitularies) of the Merovingian, Carolingian, and Anglo-Saxon rulers, and church records consisting of councils, penitentials and hagiographical works. All of the above records were written by men, and may therefore be prescriptive in content and not descriptive.

In the earliest centuries there were tribes not united kingdoms, These monarchs would surface later. The structure of the tribe was pyramidal with birth and wealth determining nobility. War and hunting were reserved for the noble men, while farming was generally left to the women, old men,
serfs and slaves. The war band or comitatus and their warring were celebrated in such epics as Beowulf, akin to Homer’s Iliad. Out of this glorious occupation of war, will come the nobility ranks of counts, earls, margraves & dukes. Kinship or descent was bilineal, traced usually through both the father and mother, but at times just matrilineal. In the Frankish tribes brothers and sisters maintained close relationships throughout their lives. In a story told in Gregory of Tours book the History of the Franks, fascinating fables or stories illustrate this. King Childebert I (who ruled 511-58) journeyed to Spain to rescue his sister Clotild, who had sent to her brother a towel stained with her own blood. Apparently her husband, Amalric, who was an Arian Christian, struck her because of her Catholic faith.

Women participated in public assemblies during the 250 years that the Merovingians’ ruled in Europe. Apparently this occurred so frequently that at a church council in 660 strictures were evoked to outlaw them from attendance, claiming the women acted “shamelessly and impudently against divine and human laws. Women also appeared as advocates in lawsuits.

Germanic law codes utilized the system of “wergeld” to reckon compensation and punishment for wrongdoing, and to prevent blood feuds. The highest wergeld was for a young man of fighting status, and next was a young woman of child-bearing age. Many stories abound about these infamous events including women as the chief protagonist.

Germanic marriages were as male-dominated as the ancient Romans, but with some differences. The betrothal was arranged by male relatives of the bride, whose consent was not required. After the signing of the betrothal contract, there was a feast, where gifts were exchanged. Payment of the brideprice was the main endowment, indicating that the Germanic groom paid for his wife, significantly different than Roman practice. Scholars feel that this bride purchase illustrates there was a shortage of women. This supposition is strengthened by the prevalence of marriages by abduction. Repeatedly, according to Gregory of Tours, the historian of late 6th century, the conquering king would espouse himself to the widow or daughter of his defeated foe. Many brides were captured by the enemy also as a way to emasculate the losing males. This also could have been done to circumvent getting the parents’ consent, which was mandatory. A special marriage formula

1besides the Frankish law codes, also extant are the Burgundian and Visigothic ones.
was written for rapists and abductors. (I have a copy of this) Next was the wedding celebration. The morning after the wedding, the Germanic wife received a gift of land or some other tangible gift, indicating the surrendering of her virginity and her husband’s acquisition of his sexual rights. This custom was called morgengabe or morgengifu or morning gift, and is still practiced by the Scandinavians today, where new wives are given morning rings. When the Germanic tribes became converted to Christianity, the church added a fourth part to the marriage festivities, sexual consummation. This was done to circumvent child betrothals especially common for the aristocracy. Children were often times betrothed in their cradle. The church established seven as the earliest age for betrothal, and then consummation and valid marriage ages were set at twelve for girls and fourteen for boys.

The Christian Church had many other customs that conflicted with the Germans. Exogamy and incest taboo were especially troublesome for the Christians. As the church was against marriages with affines or inlaws, they labeled these incestuous. Unfortunately, such marriages were often highly convenient for the Germanic aristocracy because of property and power. Legislation was enacted by the church in the late 6th century outlawing this practice, but it took the church centuries for this to be fully recognized by the laity. Another closely connected custom was consanguinity, the prohibition of marrying a relative closer than five degrees. Later on the church will extend this to seven degrees, an impossible position for the people to follow.

Polygamy was another area of disagreement between the church and the Germans. As monogamy was the church’s only acceptable marriage pattern, and polygamy was regularly practiced by the Germans, continual infighting ensued. St. Augustine, the foremost church father, whose ideas on many areas became accepted theological tenets for the Catholic Church, in his early 6th century writings on polygamy excused the prophets in the Old Testament for practicing polygamy as he said that they were not solely motivated by lust or concupiscence, but because of the need for the Jewish community to propagate. Augustine stated that the world was now amply stocked, the day of judgement was coming, therefore multiple wives were no longer needed. Kings and nobles in the early medieval sixth and seventh centuries, however kept concubines and multiple wives, and repudiated one wife to take another with no more formality than a word and a gesture.
practice and Germanic practice both held that every young man before a formal marriage needed to have a concubine. Naturally, the church’s stance was for concubines to be dismissed or married providing that they were of the right status. Charibert, a sixth century Merovingian king fell in love with a pair of sisters that served in his wife’s retinue. He repudiated his wife and then married the sisters sequentially along with another wife in between. Even though the church excommunicated him, he did not relinquish his many female companions. Another ruler, Dagobert, in the seventh century, after repudiating his lawful wife, married three other women simultaneously, while maintaining so many concubines that a chronicler stated he did not have enough space on the parchment to name them all. By the eighth century polygamy was loosing ground and basically the monogamous marriage pattern was accepted.

Unlike the Romans and Germans, the Christian church had a single sexual standard whereas adultery was not acceptable for the husband or the wife. In practice, however, the church seems to have accepted the traditional bias that it was acceptable for the husband but not the wife. In some regions of Europe, a man was an adulterer only if he had sex with a married woman. If he had sexual relations with a single woman then it was deemed fornication, a lesser sin. A wife was accused of adultery whether she had sex with a bachelor or a married man. Because of the personal act of adultery, each Germanic tribe had his own laws for adultery. Since the wife was so harshly punished, adultery was rare for wives. One tribe allowed the husband to immediately punish his wife by cutting off her hair, stripping her naked, and turning her out of the house while flogging her as she fled the village, never to return. In another tribe the husband had the right to kill his adulterous wife, plus the option of killing her lover or demanding a large compensation from him. For the Lombards, the accused lover could appeal for a trial by combat. In Anglo-Saxon England, the wife’s nose and ears were cut off. Cases are also noted in the records that adulteresses could risk being strangled, burnt alive or subject to the ordeal by water. It will not be until the thirteenth century in England that husbands will be similarly punished by being castrated for committing adultery. Basically, women alone suffered for the crime of adultery, and this was even true until recent years.

Whether divorce can be obtained by a wife is usually a good indication of her status in a society. In the early medieval years, only the Anglo-Saxons allowed a wife to divorce her husband,
and then be compensated for herself and her children.

All Germanic tribes allowed husbands to divorce their wives. Resolving to make divorce hard to obtain, the Catholic Church associated degradation of the Roman nobility with their common practice of divorce and remarriage. Again, Augustine developed the church’s theology on divorce as unacceptable. This perhaps was the hardest marital custom to get the Germans to agree to. By the last half of the eighth century the church decided to meet the people halfway. If divorce could not be completely outlawed then the church could at least set the reasons for dissolving the union. Six ways were allowed: adultery, servile ancestry of the wife, leprosy, lack of consent, husband’s impotency, and if the spouse left to become a monk or a nun. Burgundians could send back a wife for adultery, use of herbs to abort a fetus or if the wife was raped.

The position of power women held in the family was most evident in the case of Germanic queens. Public and private sphere lines were blurred as the royal residences were also the center of the kingdom. While also taking care of the myriad of domestic duties, wives also participated in administering the realms, particularly in the sixth and seventh centuries when the political organization was at its loosest. Often the queens were the royal treasurers and chief diplomatic officers. Their power in many cases commensurated with their wealth. Queens also served as power brokers during endless struggles over royal successions. Since kings did not easily set aside divorce, polygamy and concubinage, they usually had many sons who aspired to succeed their father. Rules of primogeniture were not established until the 11th century, so until then younger sons and even bastards could share in the division of the kingdom when the monarch died. Intense rivalries led to bloodshed and violence. If a queen had a forceful personality, she was in a position to determine the outcome of clan wars for the crown.

Some examples of famous Germanic women are colorful and enlightening. King Clovis of the Merovingian Dynasty was married to Clotild of Burgundy (ca. 475-545) and was responsible for his conversion to Roman Catholicism, a momentous long-range consequence, for it brought about the cooperation between popes and Frankish kings so fundamental to the course of European History. All the other Germanic tribes with the exception of the Merovingian and Carolingians had converted to the form of Christianity known as Arianism, where Jesus was not co-equal and divine with God.
Gregory of Tours had this to say about Clotild: “...she revealed herself of such a noble and pious nature that she won the respect of all. She was never weary in almsgiving or in prayer through the night watches; in chastity and in all virtue she showed herself without stain, to the churches, the monasteries and other sacred places she give the lands needful for their welfare.” Obviously Clotild had great wealth at her command.

No all Merovingian queens were saints. History of the late sixth century is dominated by a fierce rivalry between two of them: Fredegund d. 597 and Brunhilda, ca 534-613. After Clovis’ death, the Merovingian kingdom fragmented and was divided into three major powers. Fredegund came to power in the western part known as Neustria and Brunhilda in the eastern section, Austrasia. Neither ruled in her own right, but through their husband as consort, regent or as queen mother. The feud began when Brunhilda’s sister, Galswitha, was murdered by her husband Childperic of Neustria. Fredegund was the royal concubine of Childperic, and reputedly instigated the murder for she married Childperic immediately after Galswitha’s death. In revenge Brunhilda set out to destroy Fredegund. For nearly half a century war and intrigue reigned, and even Richard Wagner has immortalized this in an opera. Brunhilda, the more educated and sophisticated of the two women, suffered a denigrative demise that has continued today to paint her negatively. At the age of eighty she was dragged to death by a wild horse at the order of her enemies. Remember though, then as now, sensational stories were remembered and chronicled.

Later on Queen Fredegund found herself in another blood feud. When she ordered the people involved to stop the frey, she was ignored. Then she decided to deal with it personally. She invited the principle survivors from both sides to a dinner party, ostensibly to negotiate a peaceful resolution. She wined and dined them until all were drunk and drowsy. Then she signaled her own men, “who swung their weapons and decapitated them”, thus clearly signaling the end of this blood bath.

Engelberga was the wife of Charlemagne’s grandson, Louis II. She presided over her husband’s court at Ravenna on the Italian peninsula (d. 891), and even went on military campaigns with him. Adelaid of Burgundy’s (931-000) marriage to Otto I, Holy Roman Emperor, changed the fate of Germany and the Holy Roman Empire. She inherited large estates in Lombardy after the
death of her first husband. With her marriage to Otto began the connection between Italy and Germany that lasted until the nineteenth century. Her son, Otto II, included Adelaide in his decree, arriving at decisions “with the advice of my pious mistress and dearest mother.”

Theophano (d. 991), who was married to Otto II, assumed the title “Imperator Augustus” when her husband died in 983. She defended her son’s title from both dukes and princes eager to support another claimant. A chronicler said: “she was a woman of discreet and firm character...with truly masculine strength she preserved the empire for her son.

Marozia ruled Rome with her father and mother for several decades in the early tenth century. Marozia had Pope John X who was reportedly her mother’s ex-lover, thrown into prison where he died, and perhaps she had him murdered. She replaced him with John XI, who was rumored to be her son by her lover, Pope Sergius III. Twice widowed, Marozia then married the King of Italy, Hugh of Provence. Through this marriage she nearly succeeded in uniting the whole peninsula under her influence until thwarted by one of her sons.

If women came from an aristocratic or wealthy family, they had the opportunity to become educated in a nunnery and ultimately rise to important political and religious positions as abbesses. Scholars have determined that aristocratic women in the early and high middle ages were more educated than men in the same social group.

Matilda, the sister of the Emperor Otto II, ruled Germany in his name when he was gone to Italy. She even presided over church councils, and her biographer used the word, Metropolitan or Overseer of Bishops, to describe her authority. She founded one of the chief literary and scholastic centers in western Europe at Quedlinburg. Successive abbesses continued to be from the royal family for political power.

Hroswitha of Gandersheim (born 932) was a tenth century nun and writer, who received her classical education at Gandersheim. She became the first European dramatist in nearly five centuries, imitating the Roman dramatist, Terence. She wrote a series of original works, comedies based on the legends of saints. Her most famous drama is entitled Dulcetius.

Another famous nun was Hygeburg, who was educated and lived at the Heidenheim Nunnery. She was born in England, and later on wrote the earliest extant book of travel by an English person.
Hygeburg was chastized for this as churchmen did not like women going on pilgrimages. Boniface, the great converter of the pagan Germans, wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury to request women not to be allowed to undertake pilgrimages stating: “There were very few cities on the roads to Rome in which there is not an adulteress or harlot of the English race, which is a scandal and shame to your whole church.”

While the beginnings of the Anglo-Saxon period of English History are obscure (circa 500-1066), the political names were established during this time. Celtic and Roman Britain became known as angle land, i.e. England. Seven kingdoms were established and later become counties: Wessex, Sussex, Essex, East Anglia, Mercia, Northumbria and Kent. Wessex, Sussex, and Essex derived from the West Saxons, South Saxons and East Saxons. Anglo kingdoms of East Anglia or East Angles and the North Folk and South Folk became Norfolk and Suffolk. Northumbria was the area north of the Humber River. Three kingdoms took turns being supreme: Northumbria in the 7th century, Mercia in the 8th century and Wessex in the 9-10th centuries. For our knowledge of women during this time, Mercia and Wessex are the most informative. Information, though, is primarily for the aristocratic women.

Running households was the primary responsibility of noble women. Duties would include: directing servants, preserving food items, supervising baking, brewing, spinning, and weaving. Clearly Anglo-Saxon women took to heart the proverb “a woman’s place is at her embroidery.”

Evidence is available to attest that Anglo-Saxon women were land owners and able to will their land to whomever they wanted. Place names substantiate this. The City of Wolverhampton came from Wulfrun, a wealthy Staffordshire lady. Lady Godiva, the wife of the Earl of Mercia, was riding around her vast estates, not naked as told in folk tales. In Hereford Cathedral there are records outlining a son’s claim against his mother when she dispossessed him in front of witnesses.

In Old English the word woman also means weaver of peace. Daughters of royal houses were married for political reasons to heal enmity between peoples or to coalesce friendships. The natural role for aristocratic women was also to rule if the husband was ill, absent or deceased.

In tandem with the peaceweaver role, was the religious role model advocated by the church. On one occasion the Pope wrote to Aethelburh, who was married to a pagan, King Edwin of
Northumbria. Enclosed with the letter asking her to use her influence to bring her husband into the church, was a silver mirror and an ivory and gold comb, thus indicative that wives were known to influence their husbands.

Below are some small vignettes to personalize the Anglo-Saxon historical period for women. King Offa (757-96) was married to Cynethryth. Cynethryth has the distinction of having the earliest portrait of an Englishwoman. This was found on a coin struck in her name. Unfortunately, we known about Cynethryth through her unsavory reputation as tyrant. No queen consort for many centuries thereafter was ever allowed to issue coins in her own name. Her daughter, Eadburg, had an even more disreputable character, undoubtedly advanced by the clerical writings at the time. Eadburg, who was the wife of the King of Wessex, was forced to flee England, when she mistakenly poisoned her husband, having intended the drink for another. The vast treasury went with her according to the reports. Thereafter, the king’s wife was denied the title of queen until about two hundred years later. “Lady” was the form of address used. An example of womanly power that needed to be thwarted.

It is with the Kingdom of Wessex and the time of Alfred the Great’s reign 871-99 that we have more substantiated records of women. Alfred, who is known as the Winston Churchill or George Washington of Anglo-Saxon England, was a major subduer of the Vikings. However, he did not act alone in accomplishing this. Alfred’s eldest child was a girl, Aethelflaed. She married Aethelred, ruler of the Mercian house. After her husband’s death in 911, she “held dominion with lawful authority” for seven years. As he had been ill and incapacitated for some time, she probably ruled for much longer. Aethelflaed was as vigorous and efficient in resisting the Vikings as her father was. For a time there was a separate Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that recorded her actions and her brother’s, Edward, King of Wessex, upon her father’s death. She reinforced forts and cities in her domain, even directing battles. For a time even the people of York recognized her authority. She is considered one of the few English women who have permanently influenced the course of history. Her fame spread beyond England. In Ulster Annals she is called “the very famous Queen of the Saxons.”

Thus, it seems conclusive that in Anglo-Saxon England men and women lived on nearly equal terms with each other. It is now known that the Anglo-Saxons did not quickly conquer the Celts in
Britain. Could this near equality resonate from the high status of women in Celtic society?

No contemporary sources give us precise and detailed knowledge of Viking society in the early Middle Ages. Our earliest extant written records are the Icelandic Sagas, which date to the 12-13 the centuries. Mythology of the Vikings is most colorful, but is primarily composed of male warriors. Women and by extension goddesses are generally decorative and on the peripheral.

Viking society was pyramidal with the same construct as the other Germanic tribes. Based on the burials we have uncovered, great social and economic differences existed. The freemen were the backbone of society. They had the right to express their views at their public assembly, “The Thing.” There are no indications that women were involved in The Thing. Agriculture, trade, and plunder were the mainstays of the Viking economy. Land conferred status, but historians are not sure if women were allowed to own land. While the menfolk were gone trading and raiding, the women were in charge of the farm and household. As the men could be gone for a long time, this perhaps enhanced women’s status. Many funerary stones found throughout Viking territory were put up in honor of women. These memorialized women were praised for their good housekeeping and other traditional feminine characteristics. One found in Sweden states “There will not come to Hassmyra a better mistress who holds sway over the farm.” Monuments in memory of their queens were raised by kings, and sons memorialized their parents and specifically their mothers also.

Not much is known on their marriage and family customs. It is thought that Viking women had the right to divorce. Two laws are most favorable to women. In Denmark, men were punished by death for adultery, and it was a capital crime for the rape of a virgin.

The most magnificently furnished of all Viking age graves are those of aristocratic women, demonstrating that these women had great wealth and standing in their community. Apparently royal descent on the mother’s side was sufficient to establish a legitimate claim to the throne. The famous Oseberg burial is an example of this magnificence. Included in the burial were twelve horses, furniture and furnishings, jewellery, and lapdogs.

When the Vikings attacked England and the Continent, the church and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles recorded in alarming rhetoric the consequences. While scholars are still debating the reasons for the Viking raids from overpopulation to technological advancements, devastation was
especially rampant on the nunneries and monasteries, who were neither trained nor equipped to protect themselves. In England alone at least forty-one nunneries were destroyed by the Vikings, and by the time of the Norman Conquest when a survey was made, only nine out of seventy-six houses in England survived these murderous machinations. At Barking Abbey in 870 all the nuns were burned alive. The nuns at Coldingham attempted to protect themselves from sexual assault by cutting off their noses and lips, but were burned alive anyway.

It is now known that Viking women sometimes accompanied their menfolk in the exploration of Greenland, Iceland and North America. So along with Eric the Red, there must have been Erica the Pink. Women also accompanied the men on trading and raiding voyages to the more densely populated areas of Europe. As the Vikings established towns from Ireland to the tip of Italy, women would have been necessary to establish these cities. Women also accompanied the Viking traders known as Rus down through Russia to Constantinople. An integral part of Viking trading and raiding were the capture and selling of slaves. Women made up a large part of this population of enslaved peoples.

The Vikings were polytheistic. In the 19th century, Richard Wagner immortalized these deities in his operas. While Thor and Odin were the chief male gods, two goddesses, Freya and Frigga were important too. Frigga or Frigg was Odin’s wife and foremost of the goddesses. Her role in the mythology of the Vikings details her role as the mother of Baldr, whose death marks the beginning of the end of the world. Baldr dreamed that he would die. His mother Frigga travelled the entire earth getting promises from fire, water, etc. that they would not be the cause of her son’s death. However, Frigga omitted mistletoe, thinking it was too young to make such a promise. Baldr’s brother was tricked into throwing some mistletoe at him and he died instantly. As the most colorful goddess, Freyja or Freya was the goddess of love. Her beauty and desirability were the cause of the trouble for all the other gods. She lived in a large and beautiful hall, driving around in a chariot drawn by two large cats. Her major duty was to ensure that the reproductive urge never died. Goddess of battle and death were two of her other attributes. Our word Friday is named for her. The Valkyries, were semi-divine or entirely divine and they had a most important role to perform for the Vikings. Odin sent them into every battle, and the Valkyries choose who was to die and who was to
live. Those that succumbed in battle went to Valhalla, the warrior heaven, to be served by the Valkyries, whose queen was Freya.