

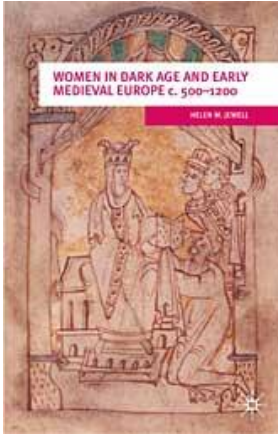
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**Women in Dark Age and Early Medieval Europe c. 500-1200, Helen
M. Jewell**

Amy Morris

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Women in Dark Age and Early Medieval Europe c. 500–1200

by Helen M. Jewell

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Book Review

Amy Morris

Helen Jewell's *Women in Dark Age and Early Medieval Europe c. 500–1200* considers the role of women from all strata of society and the reality of their lives during the medieval period. The strength of this publication is that it ties together several narrowly focused studies of women to provide a broader point of reference. In the examination of women's lives, the author does not restrict her focus to women in positions of power but rather explores how particular regions, social and economic systems, and the passage of time affected women of all classes. The author is careful to include historical information to broaden the readers' familiarity with the time period.

Chapters 1 and 2 present the reader with essential background information on the topic of the role of women during this period in history. The introduction (Chapter 1) presents the parameters of the study and examines the problematic nature of much of the evidence regarding women from this time period. Beyond considering only the period between 500 and 1200, this study focuses exclusively on Western Europe. The sections in this chapter that detail the various peoples of Western Europe and migratory patterns and consider the ethnic mingling that occurred during this period provide the reader with relevant background information. While the church served a unifying role, that Europe was a patchwork of different ethnicities and economic and political systems requires a more individualized approach to the study of women's activities in different regions. The

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author is careful to distinguish the types of sources available in the study of women (settlement archaeology, inscriptions, legal codes, canon law, charters, wills, travel accounts, chronicles, and letters) and their relative degrees of accuracy. For example she distinguishes administrative writing from constructed narrative, the latter of which was considerably more biased. The reality that most documentary sources were written by men also influences the degree of accuracy of those sources. While the author closes the chapter with the portrayal of women in contemporary literature, she cautions against viewing this literature as historically accurate. It was written by men for a male audience, making it less than certain if how the women were portrayed reflected reality. Women in literature assume a range of roles from the court hostess and bearer of children to the inciter of vengeance and, later, the famous adulteresses of legend (Guinevere and Iseult).

Chapter 2, “Contemporary Gender Theory and Society’s Expectations of Women,” explores the influence of the ancient Greek and Judeo-Christian perception of women on that of the medieval period. The Judeo-Christian tradition and, more specifically, the Bible provided a framework for how women should behave in every phase of their life. In their youth, medieval society expected women to remain virgins, and once married, they remained faithful to their husband and bore him children. Under certain circumstances, religious life was an option for some women and was even recommended as the superior option by certain theologians. The writings of Saint Paul, which characterized women as weak and inferior, strongly colored views of women. As the Church developed as a unifying force in Europe, particularly through canon law, it imposed rules on women’s rights concerning property, marriage, and sexuality. The Judeo-Christian tradition was not the only one that contributed to the suppression of women’s rights. Inheriting the Greek notion of humors, medieval society associated women with the negative humors. Also contributing to the medieval view of women were Germanic customs regarding the treatment of women.

In Chapter 3, “The Practical Situation: Women’s Function in Rural Communities,” Jewell turns to women in a rural setting, a significant endeavor considering that estimates place ninety percent of the population in rural areas. In doing so, the author takes into account that not all rural settings were identical but rather examines different settings such as arable, pastoral, and manorial and rural women in the home. Using information from the St. Germain polyptych and the Domesday Book, the author provides significant information on the

activities of arable land. At least in some instances, women kept chickens and created cloth. In pastoral economies in Iceland, women played an important role on dairy farms where they milked cows and sheep. Even more significantly, they produced homespun woolen cloth, which was a valuable commodity. While women's duties were specialized on dairy farms, more typically they had a broad array of responsibilities including managing all aspects of the household. Women's rights regarding marriage, work, and landholding on the manor often were subject to the good of the lord. Interspersed throughout the chapter are important facts about when women married and at what age and under what conditions they lived in terms of housing, household furnishings, and so on. What is certain is that women in a rural village could expect a life of hard work.

The reality of women's lives in an urban setting is the subject of Chapter 4, "The Practical Situation: Women in Urban Communities." Similar to the chapter on the role or duties of women in a rural setting, this chapter explores different aspects of urban life for women. Only in certain regions, such as Genoa, which was under Roman law, were women involved in business. Women were commonly employed as servants in households. It is clear that female servants or slaves were often in precarious situations. For example, female servants were subject to the sexual whims of the head of the household. This chapter also contains sections on women's involvement in urban trade and on the domestic and family activities of townswomen.

The extent to which women had real power insofar as they played an active role in official affairs is the subject of Chapter 5, "Women and Power: Royal and Landholding Women." While sources speak to the powers and virtues of some women during this period, it is difficult to determine the extent of their power. For example, in their praise of women, male writers emphasized qualities that reflected their own views of ideal womanhood. The author emphasizes that women did not have control of their own image. Being in a position of power was frequently dangerous. Considering that a queen's primary role was to continue or advance a king's dynasty, the failure to do so could have dire consequences. A few Ottonian queens, including Adelaide and Theophanu, exercised royal power by appearing on coins and intervening in charters, but they are the exception rather than the rule. A similar pattern existed for women in the nobility insofar as it was not always an easy position to be in, and only a few exceptional women, such as Matilda of Tuscany, yielded true power. Noble

women, like queens, were often limited by men in terms of holding land and selecting their own marriage partner.

In the period under consideration, women could opt for a life in service of religion becoming a nun, recluse, or mystic. These women are the subject of Chapter 6, "Women and Religion." This chapter also examines lay and saintly women and women of other faiths. Before examining professionally religious women, the author considers the importance of "domestic proselytization." As Europe only gradually became Christianized, women who converted their husbands to Christianity were regarded highly. To what extent they were able to achieve this goal is uncertain since pagan men may have entered into a union with Christian women for some other political motive. Nuns were the most common type of religious women. Just as the quality of women's lives waxed and waned over the period under consideration so did the success of conventual establishments. The author describes various arrangements between nunneries and monasteries and other issues that affected religious women. Entering a convent was not afforded everybody but rather was a privilege of women from noble families. As an abbess, a woman could exercise some power in a religious setting. Women were less frequently recluses and mystics since these were more unconventional situations. Mystics, in particular, could achieve a great deal of notoriety and respect, but only after first proving themselves. How did religion affect women in everyday life? Women followed the church calendar and sought saintly intercession and healing. This chapter also profiles the female saint and details what model these saints set for women through their legends. In examining women of the Jewish and Muslim faiths and from heretical sects, the author exposes not only the hardships they endured as an outsider but also what their faith stipulated concerning what was proper behavior for women.

The author states that "Medieval women have been pulled from the shadows of history in the last 30 years, and will remain in the sun" (27). Reflecting this statement, in particular, is the content of Chapter 7, "Women Who Exceeded Society's Expectations." While much of the material in the earlier chapters presented a bleak picture of the role of women and their enduring hardships (and rightly so) regardless of class or geographical location, this chapter ended the book on a high note, literally bringing to life women of extraordinary character. This chapter discusses a few identifiable women who were authors, including Dhuoda, Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, Hildegard of Bingen, Heloise, and Marie de France. One of the strengths of this chapter is

that it allows the reader to relish a few historical personages instead of attempting to comprehend the stream of facts presented in preceding chapters.

This book, while it lives up to its claim as a reference book, would be better-suited for specialists in medieval history than for the general reader. An introductory-level reader may struggle with the vast amount of historical information or topics, which are introduced in a cursory manner.

