

How important were nunneries to the status of women in Medieval Europe?

Examine the documents below. Then consider the question above.

Source A: Ancient History Encyclopedia

Monasteries were an ever-present feature of the Medieval landscape and perhaps more than half were devoted solely to women. The rules and lifestyle within a nunnery were very similar to those in a male monastery. Nuns took vows of chastity, renounced worldly goods and devoted themselves to prayer, religious studies and helping society's most needy. Many nuns produced religious literature and music, the most famous amongst these authors being the 12th century CE abbess Hildegard of Bingen.

[Nuns] attested to from the 4th century CE if not earlier, just as far back as Christian men who led such a life in the remote parts of Egypt and Syria. Indeed, some of the most famous ascetics of that period were women, including the reformed prostitute Saint Mary of Egypt (c. 344-c. 421 CE) who famously spent 17 years in the desert.

The monastic idea spread to Europe in the 5th century CE... According to legend... Saint Scholastica... founded monasteries for women. Such nunneries were often built some distance from monks' monasteries as abbots were concerned that their members might be distracted by any proximity to the opposite sex. Monasteries such as Cluny Abbey in French Burgundy, for example, prohibited the establishment of a nunnery within four miles of its grounds. Nevertheless, such separation was not always the case and there were even mixed-sex monasteries, especially in northern Europe with Whitby Abbey in North Yorkshire, England and Interlaken in Switzerland being famous examples. It is perhaps important to remember that, in any case, the medieval monastic life for men and women was remarkably similar, as the historian

...Women joined a nunnery primarily because of piety and a desire to live a life which brought them closer to God but there were sometimes more practical considerations, especially concerning aristocratic women, who were the principal source of recruits (much more so than aristocratic men were a source for monks). A woman from the aristocracy, at least in most cases, really had only two options in life: marry a man who could support her or join a nunnery. For this reason, nunneries were never short of recruits and by the 12th century CE they were just as numerous as male monasteries.

Young girls were sent by their parents to nunneries in order to gain an education – the best one available to girls in the medieval world – or simply because the family had such a number of daughters that marrying them all off was an unlikely possibility. Such a girl, known as an oblate, could become a novice (trainee nun) sometime in her mid-teens and, after a period of a year or so, take vows to become a full nun. A novice might also be an aged person looking to settle down to a contemplative and secure retirement or wanting to enroll simply to prepare themselves for the next life before time ran out. As with male monasteries, there were also lay women in nunneries who lived a slightly less austere life than full nuns and performed essential labour duties. There might also be hired female and even male labourers for essential daily tasks.

...The nuns were led by an abbess who had absolute authority and who was often a widow with some experience of managing her deceased husband's estate before she joined the nunnery. The abbess was assisted by a prioress and a number of senior nuns (obedientaries) who were given specific duties. Unlike monks, a nun (or any woman for that matter) could not become a priest and for this reason services in a nunnery required the regular visit of a male priest.

Virginity was an integral requirement for a nun in the very early medieval period because physical purity was considered the only starting point from which to reach spiritual



purity. However, by the 7th century CE, and with the production of such treatises as Aldhelm's *On Virginit*y (c. 680 CE), it was recognised that married women and widows could also play an important role in monastic life and that having the spiritual fortitude to live an ascetic life was the most important requirement of vowed women.

A nun was expected to wear simple clothing as a symbol of her shunning of worldly goods and distractions. The long tunic was typical attire, with a veil to cover all but the face as a symbol of her role as a 'Bride of Christ'. The veil hid the nun's hair which had to be kept cut short. Nuns could not leave their nunnery and contact with outside visitors, especially men, was kept to an absolute minimum. Even so, there were cases of scandal, such as in the mid-12th century CE at the Gilbertine Watton Abbey in England where a lay brother had a sexual relationship with a nun and, on discovery of the sin, was castrated (a common punishment of the period for rape, although in this case the relationship seems to have been consensual).

... Generally, the power of a nun's prayer was regarded as equally efficient in protecting one's soul as a monk's prayer was. Nuns also spent a lot of time reading, writing and illustrating, especially small devotional books, compendiums of prayers, guides for religious contemplation, treatises on the meaning and relevance of visions experienced by some nuns, and musical chants. Consequently, many nunneries built up impressive libraries and manuscripts were not just for internal readers as many were circulated amongst priests and monks and even lent to lay people in the local community. One of the most prodigious such authors was the German Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179 CE)

Unlike monks, nuns performed tasks of needlework such as embroidering robes and textiles for use in church services. The art was no trifle as at least one medieval nun was made a saint because of her efforts with a needle. Nuns gave back to the community through charitable work, especially distributing clothes and food to the poor on a daily basis and giving out larger quantities on special anniversaries. Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire, England (founded in 1232 CE by Ela, Countess of Salisbury), for example, gave out bread and herrings to 100 peasants on each anniversary of the founder's death. Besides giving out alms, nuns often acted as tutors to children, they looked after the sick, helped women in distress and provided hospice services for the dying. Nunneries thus tended to be more closely related to their local communities than male monasteries were and nunneries were often actually part of urban settings and less physically remote places. Consequently, nuns were perhaps much more visible to the secular world than their male counterparts.

Cartwright, Mark. "The Daily Life of Medieval Nuns." Ancient History Encyclopedia. Last modified December 19, 2018. <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1298/>.

Source B: A Woman's History of the World

With the emergence from the dark ages, the concept of power itself was changing from the older power games of Bashan grab. Now knowledge became the highroad to control, and for women in the pen had one major advantage over the sword; it fit neatly into a female fist of any size, age, creed or country in the world. Following the imposition of monotheism, the principle escape for women in to the wider world of learning like paradoxically behind a locked doors of an enclosed community. Most familiar to us now are the well - documented notaries of Western Europe, but it is noteworthy that Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam all had their own religious sisterhood's in early modern times... in many cultures, the early learned women and their work were much admired; Egypt had a cast of scribe priestesses under says shot, goddess of the alphabet and mistress of the House of books, while Indian Vita contains a prayer for a scholarly daughter. Ancient Vedic text, indeed, contain many admiring references to female scholars,



poets and Sears, and these learned women were permitted to display their knowledge and skills of disquisition in public on occasions. Later in Greece the genius of certain women scholars and philosophers was freely acknowledged by their contemporaries, though not at all by history; Pythagoras, for instance him every school boy knows, was taught by one woman (Arostocela), married to another, Theano, a leading mathematician and teacher of philosophy when he met her, and influenced by a third, his daughter Dano, Who also concerned herself with the question of women's education (128-129)...

Covenants of Europe have been seen as naked manifestations of patriarchal Tierney. But for some women, they provided the only sanctioned avenue of escape from the Tierney of enforced marriage and it's inescapable infliction of motherhood. As to dying, the virgin recluse living a life of quiet contemplation and scholarship had every chance of living for two, three or even four times longer than her married sister; covenant record show that nuns very often survive to the age of eighty, ninety, even 100, while the reality of contemporary childbirth is clearly indicated in the words of Psalm 116, directed for the use of women in labor: 'the snares of death compassed around me: and the pains of hell got hold on me oh Lord I beseech thee deliver my soul' (130)...

Within a covenant, however, a woman could preserve both her soul and her body, and it is a striking illustration of women's power to convert a disability into a source of strength is so many of them use their conventual retreat as a platform for which they could... 'spring into freedom.' The origin and base of the covenant life may have been the harsh patriarchal discussed with women's bodies which dictated that they had best be covered, denied, shut away, and as such it is close to kindred restrictive practices and Islam like bailing and seclusion. But as a logical consequence, the women who rose above they're filthy bodies with the transcend an act of 'virgin sacrificed' one high esteem from contemporary mail to naturally assumed that for swearing heterosexual activity was the greatest sacrifice in the world. By finally demonstrating that sex was not on their agenda, religious women's left off the odium attached to sexually active women, and gained an almost mystical power from their inviolate status - a card that was still being played with confidence and success by Elizabeth I centuries later.

In refusing marriage nuns were also rejecting its associated rules of mother and housekeeper (130-131)... The picture of European covenant life during its thousand year history is a complex one, and not without its dark and desperate moments... Sister Benedetta Carlini... convicted at thirty-three of forcing lesbian acts on one of the younger sisters through her impersonation of a male angel... spent the last forty years of her life in solitary confinement in a prison cell within the abbey, fed only bread and water 'several times a week', and only allowed out to hear Mass or to be whipped (132).

Achievements of women did little to improve the intellectual prospects of the rest of their sex. For the crippling low opinion of women's intelligence entertain but even the dullest mail of every culture should go sign of a beating the passage of time. On the contrary, as the widespread sexual terror of women began to abate it fed and fostered another damaging with myth, that women's brains were as weak as their bodies were believed to be (133).

Miles, Rosalind. The Women's History of the World. London, UK: Harper Collins Publishers, 1988, p.128-133.

Source C: Hildegard de Bingen

Hildegard of Bingen (also known as Hildegarde von Bingen, l. 1098-1179 CE) was a Christian mystic, Benedictine abbess, and polymath proficient in philosophy, musical composition, herbology, medieval literature, cosmology, medicine, biology, theology, and



natural history. She refused to be defined by the patriarchal hierarchy of the church and, although she abided by its strictures, pushed the established boundaries for women almost past their limits...

Hildegard came from an upper-class German family, the youngest of ten children. She was often ill as a child, afflicted with headaches which accompanied her visions, from around the age of three. Whether her parents consulted physicians about her health issues is unknown, but at the age of seven, they sent her to be enrolled as a novice in the convent of Disibodenberg.

Hildegard was placed under the care of Abbess Jutta von Sponheim (l. 1091-1136 CE), head of the order, an aristocrat and daughter of a count who had chosen the monastic life for herself. Jutta was only six years older than Hildegard in 1105 CE when the latter entered the convent and the two would become close friends. Jutta taught Hildegard to read and write, how to recite the prayers, and introduced her to music by teaching her to play the psaltery (a stringed instrument like a zither). Jutta may also have instructed the younger girl in Latin (though this claim has been challenged) and encouraged her to read widely...

Hildegard and Jutta were typical of the nuns at this time in that they came from upper-class, aristocratic families who could afford to pay the Church to take their daughters. Although it was officially forbidden to accept money from parents, nunneries required a substantial 'dowry' for a girl to be accepted, claiming it would go to her upkeep. These dowries took the form of deeds to lands, cash, expensive clothing, and similar valuables. Daughters of poor families could not afford the dowry and, if they wanted to participate in convent life, it was as maids or cooks. Scholars Frances and Joseph Gies comment on the attraction of the convent for young women in the Middle Ages:

For upper-class women, the convent filled several basic needs. It provided an alternative to marriage by receiving girls whose families were unable to find them husbands. It provided an outlet for nonconformists, women who did not wish to marry because they felt a religious vocation, because marriage was repugnant, or because they saw in the convent a mode of life in which they could perform and perhaps distinguish themselves. The nunnery was a refuge of female intellectuals. (64)

Hildegard certainly fit this paradigm of the female intellectual, distinguishing herself by her vast learning, devotion to God, and service to others. When Jutta died in 1136 CE, Hildegard, then 38 years old, was unanimously chosen to succeed her.

From the time she was young, Hildegard had feared and resisted her visions but was supported and encouraged to accept them by Volmar. A few years after becoming abbess, she began receiving the visions more vividly than before and with such frequency that she became bed-ridden. She had confessed her visions to the Abbot Kuno, who presided over her order, and he encouraged her to write about them, but she refused.

The visions themselves then became insistent that she write them down and interpret them for an audience. Hildegard resisted until she fell into delirium in which the visions, constantly recurring, demanded she express them in writing...

Encouraged by Volmar and Abbot Kuno and inspired by the visions themselves, Hildegard began to write her best-known work, the *Scivias*... By this time, she was a well-established visionary, renowned for her wisdom, and much sought after for counsel. Pope Eugenius (served 1145-1153 CE) read parts of the *Scivias*, approved the visions as authentic revelations, and encouraged Hildegard to continue the work. People would visit Disibodenberg to seek her out and, afterwards, would have been gently reminded by Abbot Kuno to leave a donation before they departed.

In 1147 CE, Hildegard requested leave to found her own convent in Rupertsberg, 65 miles (105 km) to the south-east. Her request sparked a dispute with Abbot Kuno who denied



her permission and suggested she accept the position of Prioress at Disibodenberg and place herself under his authority. His reasons for refusal are never recorded but most likely he was reluctant to lose so great an asset as Hildegard who not only brought in significant revenue but managed to keep the convent running efficiently and conduct correspondence with important figures who might be inclined to donate further.

Hildegard refused to accept Kuno's decision, repeated her request, and when Kuno denied her a second time, she took the matter to the Archbishop of Mainz who approved it. Kuno still would not release her or the nuns until Hildegard, bed-ridden (possibly due to her visions), informed him that God himself was punishing her for not following his will in moving the nuns to Rupertsberg. Hildegard was stricken with a paralysis so severe that no one could move her arms or legs and, after witnessing this, Kuno relented and allowed the nuns to leave. Hildegard established the convent at Rupertsberg c. 1150 CE with 18 nuns and her friend the monk Volmar as their confessor.

Hildegard's vision is all-encompassing in scope, far transcending the common vision of the medieval Church while still remaining within the bounds of orthodoxy. She claimed the Divine was as female in spirit as male and that both these elements were essential for wholeness. Her concept of *Viriditas* elevated the natural world from the Church's view of a fallen realm of Satan to an expression and extension of the Divine. God was revealed in nature, and the grass, flowers, trees, and animals bore witness to the Divine simply by their existence.

Her first major work, the *Scivias*, relates 26 of her visions in three sections – six visions in the first, seven in the second, thirteen in the third – along with her interpretation and commentary on the nature of the Divine and the role of the Church as an intermediary between God and humanity. She depicts God as a cosmic egg, both male and female, pulsing with love; the male aspect of the Divine is transcendent while the female is immanent. It is this immanence which invites rapport with the Divine...

While composing her written works and musical scores (still popular and performed in the present day), Hildegard also kept up a correspondence with kings, queens, ecclesiastical authorities, and many others. She exchanged letters, still extant, with such medieval luminaries as Bernard of Clairvaux (l. 1090-1153 CE), Thomas Becket (l. 1118-1170 CE), Henry II (l. 1133-1189 CE), Eleanor of Aquitaine (l. c. 1122-1204 CE), Holy Roman Emperor and King of Germany Frederick Barbarossa (l. 1122-1190 CE), and many others. She was never afraid of controversy or criticism and never failed to stand up to patriarchal ecclesiastical or secular authority for what she believed was right.

She went on four speaking tours which included stops in Cologne, Trier, Wurzburg, Frankfurt, and Rothenburg as well as trips into Flanders. These tours were expressly to deliver sermons to predominantly male audiences in spite of St. Paul's injunction against women speaking in the presence of men, having authority over men, or teaching men (I Timothy 2:12-14, I Corinthians 11:3, I Corinthians 14:34) and a central focus of her sermons was the corruption of the church and the need for immediate and drastic reform.

Even in her early eighties, Hildegard refused to be bullied or cowed by male authority figures. The Archbishop of Mainz ordered her to exhume the body of a young man, buried in holy ground at Rupertsberg, who had died excommunicated. Hildegard refused, claiming that the man had sought absolution and received grace and it was only the Archbishop's personal stubbornness and pride which prevented him from recognizing this. She traveled twice to Mainz to plead her case but was denied, and her convent was placed under interdict. Only when the Archbishop died was the interdict lifted and Hildegard and her nuns regarded as having been returned to a state of grace in the Church.



In spite of her accomplishments and fame, the Church continued to regard women not only as second-class citizens but dangerous temptations and obstacles to virtue. The highly influential Bernard of Clairvaux claimed that a man could not associate with a woman without desiring sex with her and the canonical order of the Premonstratensians banned women from their order claiming to have recognized "that the wickedness of women is greater than all the other wickedness in the world" (Gies, 87). It was precisely this kind of misogynistic mindset that Hildegard struggled against not only within the Church but in medieval society at large.

Even so, the significance of her work was recognized by the Church and she was singled out as a woman of note. Four attempts to canonize her were mounted and, although she is often referred to as Saint Hildegard of Bingen, none succeeded. She was only beatified, not canonized, in 2012 CE, although regarded by many as fitting the criterion of a saint. Her famous visions are today interpreted as symptoms of a migraine sufferer but this has in no way detracted from her reputation.

*Mark, Joshua J. "Hildegard of Bingen." Ancient History Encyclopedia. Last modified May 30, 2019.
https://www.ancient.eu/Hildegard_of_Bingen/.*

Questions for Analysis

- 1. Using evidence from the documents, were women treated better or worse than their counterparts?**

