

Topic: Women

Notes for parents and teachers

The image shows a Viking Age woman in characteristically Scandinavian dress. Women fulfilled many roles in Viking Age England, which were not just restricted to motherhood, food-preparation and keeping the home tidy. It was a society where power was most often wielded by men, as might be expected for a society where power was based on ability to wage war. Nevertheless, women in Viking Age England seem to have had a range of rights and privileges that more modern women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries lacked.

As well as childbearing and childrearing, women were recognised as holding essential economic roles in Viking Age society. Women were involved in farm-work and craft activities. Spinning, weaving, bread-making and brewing were seen as gendered activities. Wills and charters show that women were able to acquire and dispose of land and other goods independently, so that they might be involved in local trade and exchange. Women could also be powerful landowners who might employ agents and servants. As laws of primogeniture were not yet in place we often see daughters inheriting land alongside sons. Place-names sometimes include the names of women landholders, although male names are much more common. Wills represent land-holding classes and a quarter of those that have survived relate to women. Among items bequeathed by women are land, slaves, livestock, household furnishings, clothes, gold, jewels and books. Women were often held to be under the protection of male relatives, but in unusual circumstances a woman might take on a role of military leadership, as did Aethelflaed, lady of Mercia (d. 918).

Women were personally accountable under the law, they could defend themselves in law suits but they could also be punished for crimes. Assaults against women of any rank in society were heavily penalised. Women also appear as grantees, and witnesses of charters. In a tenth century land dispute between Leofwine and Wynflaed, the latter, a women, was able to prove her title to the land with an oath supported by male and female friends and associates. That such an act could take place indicates that society was accepting of female landholders and that women had a degree of legal autonomy.

Some women also had access to a literate education, in general this might be reserved for girls who were earmarked for a career in the church, however from the tenth and eleventh centuries there are examples of literate secular women. Aethelflaed of Mercia appears to have been brought up able to read and write like her siblings.