

# **Vital Roles in a Gendered World: The Role of Women on Crusade**

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It is oft thought that women in the middle ages were chattel: traded and bred, rightless and meek. Perhaps this is the image conjured and perpetuated by Hollywood, or due to the masculine perspective found in many historic texts. From Aquinas and Boccaccio to Dante we seem to have an overwhelming view of history through the eyes of masculine sources, merely punctuated by few noted women authors such as Pizan and Mechthild of Magdeburg. Due to the time period being dominated by male writers, many of those ecclesiastical writers, much of the history is written through both a patriarchal and Christian lens. (Hodgson, 2017) It would be remiss however to think that women were, as a whole, nameless and kept under lock and key. This false narrative can perhaps best be seen in historic accountings of holy wars, where the most common reference to women points to them mourning as their husbands made ready for war. In an excerpt written by First Crusade chronicler Fulcher of Chartres one sees how women were often portrayed.

“Then husband told wife the time he expected to return, assuring her that if, by Gods grace, he survived he would come home to her. He commended her to the Lord, kissed her lingeringly, and promised as she wept that he would return. She though, fearing that she would never see him again, could not stand but swooned to the ground, mourning her loved one whom she was losing in this life as if he were already dead.” (Lambert, 2002 p.8)

In spite of the narrative of the day, women did play a vital role during the crusading period but it is the language of historic and modern narratives that minimize their efforts.

Though women were not given nearly the same rights and opportunities in the middle ages as were men, women without doubt played vital roles during the crusades both in military campaigns and on the homestead. (Edgington, 2002) It is a misconception seen in all too many sources that the only women present during crusades were prostitutes and washerwomen. Women did fill the aforementioned roles, but they were not the only roles or occupations played

by the women who made the journey to the Holy Land. Crusades were just one type of pilgrimage that women participated in. Even when not at war women who were moved to make a pilgrimage were met with serious discouragement and told that they would be considered to be of loose morals if they decided to travel. Etienne de Fougères, bishop of Rennes, even published a book of manners on the subject, pointing out that a woman may play sick, in order to go on pilgrimage, with the intent to meet up with a lover. (Buuck 2005)

According to author Leigh Ann Craig, women moved by their devotion to god chose to make pilgrimages anyway.

In my study of such women, I found that they adapted other sorts of feminine social traits (such as meekness and patience) and normative social roles (such as caregiving) to justify, and even sanctify, their sacred travel. Further, a woman who wished to undertake pilgrimage might also find that she had powerful allies. Husbands and sermon-writers and givers of social advice might have thought it safer for women to remain at home, but others – specifically, the keepers and promoters of saints’ shrines, the destination of most European pilgrims — had ample reason to encourage women to undertake sacred travel.” (Craig, 2010 p. 1)

In many accountings, women who are part of a crusading pilgrimage are mentioned in terms of being either wanton women and or the passive victims of serious crimes. Most often womankind choosing to make the journey were reminded they were weak and physically unable to make the crusading pilgrimage. (Runciman, 2016) Despite the tone of the day, just like in non-warring times, women chose to go.

Though consistently described as the gentler sex we see examples of women engaged in violent tasks and upheld as heroes consistently. Throughout the period of the crusades, for example, many manuscripts depict the biblical story of Judith.

In the tale, Judith goes in to the tent of the leader who has forcefully besieged her lands and promptly cuts off his head. One can imagine women, already enthusiastic for crusade inspired by this biblical telling of a mere woman ending a



Figure 1

tyrant's rule. (USCCB, 2018) This kind of female participation in both the "gentler" and "rougher" sides of war is more common than some sources would have us believe.

Women not in active war zones played an important role in the continuations of the crusades, by not only encouraging male relatives to take up the cross and go forth to crusade, but also taking on the responsibility of running and overseeing homes and estates in their absence. In a letter to his wife, Stephen, Count of Blois and Chartres, makes very clear the importance of his wife's role. "These which I write to you, are only a few things, dearest, of many which we have done, and because I am not able to tell you, dearest, what is in my mind, I charge you to do right, to carefully watch over your land, to do your duty as you ought to your children and your vassals." (Munro, 1970 p.5) The Count acknowledges his wife's ownership of land and responsibility to vassals, and the import of that which had been tasked to her. It must have been a great responsibility for any wife whose husbands and sons left for years to crusade. Some exceptional women made the choice to leave the homestead, taking on the crusading duties of their husbands.

There are several accounts of women following their husbands on crusades, despite the tone of discouragement they encountered. Notable figures such as Eleanor of Aquitaine, Berengaria of Navarre, and Marguerite of Provence all went to the Holy Land during military campaign and all played determining roles. Marguerite negotiated the ransom of her husband and took over making decisions and arrangements until she left the Holy Land. (Lambert, 2002) Likewise, Margaret of Provence, "commanded the crusaders' defense from her childbed," when her husband could not. (Nicholson, 2017 p.7) Noble women, of course, held a certain amount of inherent grandeur and were captured by period historians more often than women of lower

status. They were also much more likely to have been educated and had the ability to correspond through writing, hence producing more preserved accounts of their exploits during the crusades. Noble women, however, were not the only women to have journeyed to the Holy Land. Women of all classes marched to crusade and worked in differing capacities, taking on roles of nurses, laundresses and water bearers. In an account from 1097 during the battle of Dorylaeum, we see women acting in the important role of supporting soldiers during a crusade battle. “Our women, also, were on that day of greatest support to us. They brought drinking water to our fighters, and, ever comforted those who were fighting and defending them.” (Krey, 2012 p.114) There are several other accountings of women performing this vital role, allowing for the continuation of battle. A Fifth Crusade accounting, describes women in the capacity of water bearers who “carried fresh water for the infantry to drink.” (Nicholson, 2008 p.8) Though the role of giving water to a soldier may seem simplistic or small compared to that of the warrior, considering how often the need for water is mentioned in crusade narratives and chronicles, the task was of vital importance. Author Helen Nicholson points to two eye witness stories during the Third Crusade of women fulfilling other integral support roles. One in which, during the siege of Acre, a woman was filling in a “defensive ditch around the city, but was struck by a missile, and asked her husband to bury her body in the ditch so that she could continue helping the siege even after her death.” (Nicholson, 2008 p.8) That is not the statement of a woman who feels she is there simply to be of help to her husband, but an active agent caught up in the fight against infidels. The second account tells of women whose job was “picking fleas and lice off the male soldiers.” (Nicholson, 2008 p.8) Women were present and they were important to the success and continuation of battles. (Marshall, 2005) Women were given responsibilities and were vital during the crusades, despite the discouragement and rhetoric minimizing their roles.

The fact is, women were an integral part of the crusades, and not just in support roles from home. It takes close reading of chronicles and narratives to look for the clues of their hidden, but very important presence, but their roles during combat cannot, and should not, be disputed or made lesser by the modern author or reader. Looking at an instance in *The Chronicle of Prussia*, a collection of narratives from the historian of the Teutonic knights, we see a prime example of women doing a great deal more than supporting the fighters.

“Lord Swantepolcus the leader of Pomeranie, become aware that his brothers and their people at Elbing had gone away. When the enemy of god heard this he assembled a powerful army and marched on Elbing. Because there was noone there he hoped to capture the city and the fortress without encountering any resistance. When the women of Elbing realized the danger of an attack. They all took off their womens garments and clothed themselves in the weapons and courage of men. They went out on the battlements and conducted the defense so bravely that none of these pure women gave any sign of cowardice. When the army saw this they could all but have sworn that the brothers had returned with the men of the town. So the women manfully drove away Swantepolcus, who retreated shamefully. This happened many more times in the country; when the men were away many castles would have been lost to the enemy if they had not been defended by brave women in the guise of warrior.” (Fischer, 2010 p. 82)

Here is a firsthand account of women taking up the sword and heading to battle. It is clear that, like Judith, they were prepared to defend themselves and their homes.

One must critically analyze, historic narratives to find information regarding women and the importance of their roles. This is due to the masculine filter in which most crusade narratives are written. For example, in the story of the Siege of Elbing, one should note of the last sentence, which tells us two things about the importance of the role of women on crusade. The first, is that these were “pure women,” not camp followers. This language implies these were most likely married women of at least moderate social standing. We can see in the narrative of women donning swords at Elbing that even in a tale about women doing something profound, there is still a clear tone of masculinity. The language used is a means to send a message, whether it was the purpose of the writer or not. The women in the story were noted to have become manlike. “They rid themselves of the attire of a women, and put on the courage of a man.” There is

implication in this passage that the successes of these women were due to taking on the characteristics of manhood and temporarily shedding their weakness or femininity. A story about women defending their homes becomes another tale of masculine power winning the day. Another important insight is that this passage also tells us this behavior was not an anomaly, but happened many times in places where there was danger.

In crusade chronicle, the *Itinerarium Peregrinorum Et Gesta*, one sees another instance when women behaved in a manner more associated with battle, this time during the Third Crusade. Here, women are taking up arms as violent accomplices.

“Our women pulled the Turks along by the hair, treated them dishonorably, humiliatingly cutting their throats; and finally beheading them. The women's physical weakness prolonged the pain of death, because they cut their heads off with knives instead of swords.” (Nicholson, 2017 p.89)

In this passage the use of gendered language highlights the dissonance that the audience must have felt, hearing of women in battle. Women wield knives instead of swords and their physical weakness adds to the atrocity of the act. Their choice of implement harkens to a woman in her kitchen rather than a woman as a warrior. Again, reinforcing the masculine sphere in which battle existed in the middle ages.

It can be instructive to broaden our lens and see the actions of Christian women from the perspective of those on the other side of the battle. For instance, from Imād al-Dīn's eyewitness account, “There was a woman on one of the points of the defense holding a bow of wood, firing well and drawing blood; she did not stop fighting until she was killed.” (Nicholson, 2008 p.12) In another account, Bahā' al-Dīn in his recordings speaks of a woman at the battle of Acre in 1191, Bahā' al-Dīn informs us that “a knight, fourteen Franks and a woman,” (Nicholson, 2008 p. 13) were in fact seen, captured and killed on Saladin's command. In yet another accounting we look to the chronicle of Ibn Al-Athir, here the historian notes, “most of the dead were Frankish

Knights, for the infantry had not caught up with them. Among the prisoners were three Frankish women, who had been fighting on horseback. After they had been captured and their armor thrown off, it was discovered that they were women.” (Richards, 2010 p.14) These accountings by the Muslim authors do not have the same dismissive tone that the Christian authors do, focusing on the weakness of the participants. There is some debate about whether these Muslim reports should be taken as accurate or as hyperbole designed to humiliate their opponents, who would let their women fight. On the whole, however, there is enough evidence to draw the conclusion, that women were amongst those on crusade and they played many roles. They were caretakers, laundresses, and defenders, they were women from differing social strata and they were integral in their capacities on the home front as well as on the front lines.

Why then are their stories minimized? In non-crusade historical writings, women generally are not accounted for at all and often remain nameless. It is the belief of author Susan Edgington that in many writings, as well as papal speeches and works by crusading preachers, language was specifically gendered in order to maintain the societal structure that had been established in feudal society. There is definite power in words and words can be used to make a point or provide symbolism without directly speaking to an issue. In the case of women taking on vital roles during the crusades, the argument can be made that very specific verbiage was used in order to discourage women from taking part in the pilgrimage to save the Holy Land from infidels, while at the same time encouraging women to support their menfolk in taking up the cross.

“The enthusiasm for the new pilgrimage was such that already it was not a question of who had received the cross but of who had not yet done so. A great many men sent each other wool and distaff, implying that if they exempted themselves from this expedition they would only be fit for women`s work. Brides urged their husbands and mothers incited their sons to go, their only sorrow being that they were not able to set out with them because of the weakness of their sex.”(Nicholson, 2017, p.6)



Furthermore, women were told that unspeakable and bad happenings, such as rolling over on to their infants, would occur if they tried to dissuade their husbands, brothers and male kin from going on crusade. (Nicholson, 2008)

Gendered language was used to manipulate, pointing to femininity as weakness and used to purposefully make women see the honor and pride of going on crusade, while simultaneously convincing them they were unable to do so. In an inspirational speech delivered by Pope Urban, one can see the crusades were being marketed to men.

"Whoever wishes to save his soul should not hesitate humbly to take up the way of the Lord, and if he lacks sufficient money, divine mercy will give him enough. Brethren, we ought to endure much suffering for the name of Christ - misery, poverty, nakedness, persecution, want, illness, hunger, thirst, and other (ills) of this kind, just as the Lord saith to His disciples: 'Ye must suffer much in My name,' and 'Be not ashamed to confess Me before the faces of men; verily I will give you mouth and wisdom,' and finally, 'Great is your reward in Heaven.'" (Krey, 20012 p.28 )

The language here is directly masculine and plays in to the societal role of the male as warrior and disciple. This was not to be a place for women, even though women were not expressly forbidden from going. This language was certainly adopted as a manipulative tactic because it was not actually illegal or against the law for women to take up the cross and make a pilgrimage. In a speech recorded by the monk Robert, Pope Urban who was calling for the faithful to crusade was met with eagerness by both women and men and the language he first used was inclusive, addressing "the People of France," (Rousseau, 2002) He then quickly retracted, "when the entire crowd, both men and women, responded very enthusiastically, the pope clarified that neither the elderly, nor infirm, nor those unsuitable for bearing arms should go on crusade." (Rousseau, 2002, p.33).

Language in speeches can certainly imply meaning as too can written and illuminated works. If one looks at depictions in manuscripts during the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries, we can

get a snapshot of the daily life of a woman, of course those images are created according to the wants of illustrator, author or patron paying for the publication. Considering that authors and those who commissioned books were generally male and connected to the church, it would make sense that their views would be reflected in their creations. Up until the 12th century almost all scribes were monks and so it could be argued that their beliefs systems could have been reflected on the pages of their works, (Yu, 2006) just as the viewpoints of men on crusade were shaped by the patriarchal norms of the day. Therefore, when one views depictions, or reads sources, they will be viewing the message intended by the creator, which may not encompass the total picture of womanhood. Women, during the time of the crusades are often depicted performing the chores necessary to managing the livelihoods of the family but, as evidenced in many an accounting, one must conclude that women during the time of the crusades fulfilled many more roles and vital tasks than what is traditionally thought and represented.

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## **Figures**

Figure 1 Bible. France or England, ca. 1260-1270. MS M.138 fol. 154v