
WOMEN IN EARLY
MEDIEVAL EUROPE,
400—1100

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CONTENTS

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>List of maps</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xiv
Introduction	I
1 Gender and landscapes	13
2 Invasions, migrations, and barbarian queens	46
3 The theory and practice of religion	95
4 Survival by kinship, marriage, and motherhood	154
5 The take-off: mobility and economic opportunity	200
6 Conclusion: Concerning famous women before and after 1100	266
<i>Bibliography</i>	297
<i>Index</i>	324

ILLUSTRATIONS

•

- Ende, Beatus of Gerona, *c.* 975, “The whore of Babylon.” Archivo Capitulare de Girona, MS 7
(photo © Josep Maria Oliveras) *Frontispiece*
- 1 Buildings in Wahrendorf, seventh/eighth centuries.
Adapted from a figure in Jean Chapelot and Robert Fossier, *Le Village et la maison au Moyen Age*
(Paris, 1980) *page 28*
- 2 *Matronae* with fruit: Bonn, Rheinisches Landesmuseum 37
- 3 Radegund and Chlotar. Bibliothèque Municipale,
Poitiers, MS 250, f. 22v. Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale,
Paris 85
- 4 Ende, Beatus of Gerona, *c.* 975, “Woman and dragon.”
Archivo Capitulare de Girona, MS 7, f. 171–72
(photo © Josep Maria Oliveras) 138
- 5 Processional cross of the Abbess Mathilda and her
brother, Duke Otto of Swabia and Bavaria, *c.* 973–80.
Bildarchiv Foto Marburg 152
- 6 Serpent with the face of Eve in the Garden of Eden.
British Library, London, Add. MS 21926, f. 150v, by
permission of the Trustees 195
- 7 Adam and Eve at labor. British Library, London, Add.
MS 105466 (Moutiers–Grandval Bible), f. 5v (detail) 206
- 8 Men with scythes and a woman (Virgo?) gathering.
From “August” in the Liège Book of Hours, MS Add.
A. 46, f. 4v, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. 209

- | | | |
|----|---|-----|
| 9 | Marble <i>stele</i> showing a lady of Palmyra with her spinning, third century. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri (Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mallon) 48–13 | 215 |
| 10 | An illustration of Isaiah 38 from the ninth-century Utrecht Psalter, including spinners and a weaver. Universiteitsbibliotheek Utrecht, MS 484, f. 84r | 218 |
| 11 | Knut and Emma, <i>Liber Vitae</i> . British Library, London, Stowe MS 944, f. 6 | 225 |
| 12 | Psalter map, c. 1250. British Library, London, Add. MS 28681, f. 9, by permission of the Trustees | 227 |
| 13 | Hugo and Anna of Vaudémont (?) or “The return from the crusades,” from the cloister of Belval, c. 1150. Musée Lorrain, Nancy (photo © Pierre Mignot) | 252 |
| 14 | Sacramentary of Ivrea, woman mourning. Biblioteca Capitolare d’Ivrea, MS 86, f. 191r (photo by courtesy of Priuli & Verlucca Editori, Ivrea) | 273 |
| 15 | Woman and son in a burning house, from the Bayeux tapestry, eleventh century. © Tapisserie de Bayeux, Bayeux, France | 274 |
| 16 | Matilda of Tuscany. Vatican Library, Vat. Lat. 4922, f. 49r. © Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana | 280 |
| 17 | <i>Encomium Emmae</i> , frontispiece. British library, London, Add MS 33241, f. 1v, by permission of the Trustees | 284 |
| 18 | Hidegard’s vision, from <i>Liber Scivias</i> , lost manuscript composed c. 1165, formerly at the Hessische Landesbibliothek, Wiesbaden, now in facsimile | 287 |

MAPS

- | | | |
|---|--|-----|
| 1 | Europe c. 400, showing Frankish and other tribes. Adapted from Jack Goody, <i>The Development of Family and Marriage in Europe</i> (Cambridge, 1983) | 2 |
| 2 | Europe c. 1200, showing Iberian and other kingdoms. Adapted from Jack Goody, <i>The Development of Family and Marriage in Europe</i> (Cambridge, 1983) | 201 |

I

GENDER AND LANDSCAPES

.

The physical world of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries was the same, with minor climatic variation, for all the inhabitants of Europe. The same rains fell upon Germans, Celts, Huns, and Romans, pagans and Christians, men and women. They were frozen by the same icy winds and warmed by the very same sunshine. In the fourth century, when the prevailing weather patterns in Europe changed for the worse, people of the south may have noticed the increasing aridity of the land, while up north they suffered more rains and snowier winters. Indeed, some archeologists believe that the bad weather was largely responsible for initiating population decline at the start of the Middle Ages.¹ Either way, suffering the dusty winds of southern Gaul or the endless wet of the British midlands, men and women dwelt together in houses on the same land, working to make it feed them. Women looked out of their doors at the same woods and fields in which their men toiled.

LANDSCAPES AND POPULATIONS AT THE END OF ANTIQUITY

Europe at the beginning of the Middle Ages was composed of landscapes far different from those of modern Europe with its metropolises and many millions of people. There were fewer people in the sixth century than there are now. There were also far fewer

¹ H. Lamb, "Climate from 1000 B.C. to 1000 A.D.," in *The Environment of Man*, ed. J. Jones and G. Dimbleby (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1981), 53–65.

souls than there had been in the second or third century. In 200 CE, the population of the continent was probably around 35 million. By 500 it had sunk to 27.5 million. In 650, after a devastating pandemic of bubonic plague, along with other disasters, it plummeted to 18 million.² The third-century imperial city of Rome, heart of the known world, had a population of about half a million, an enormous metropolis by pre-modern standards. Rebuilt and walled by Emperor Aurelian in 271, it enclosed more than 3000 acres. Even in the fifth century, the city still may have contained close to 400,000 women, men, and children.³ By 700 or so, neither Rome nor Paris nor any other population center in western Europe had more than 20,000 people in it, and those numbers were rare.⁴

The causes of Rome's fall concern us here as little as they probably bothered most women in the early fifth century. Political fractures within the ruling class, withdrawal of western legions to eastern frontiers, decadence among the senatorial nobility, economic disaster, the emasculating effects of pacifist Christians, lead poisoning, bad weather, malaria – none of this mattered much to a woman living from day to day in Aix or Trier or Colchester. But in rural reaches of the old empire, people must have remembered earlier times of bustle and plenty while anxiously eyeing the spread of empty estates and bemoaning the decline of neighborhoods. By 400, a sixth to a third of land cultivated at height of empire was lost to young trees and desert fields.⁵ People may not actually have disappeared in significant numbers, but simply shifted locally. They abandoned houses but not the fields that had been worked for generations. What sensible farmer would leave the best arable, handed down in his or her family since before anyone could remember? Population groups constantly moved within their own agricultural regions, but did not suddenly

² Josiah Cox Russell, *Medieval Demography: Essays* (New York: AMS Press, 1987), 99–111; idem, “Population in Europe,” in *The Fontana Economic History of Europe: The Emergence of Industrial Societies* (London: Collins, 1973), 25–41.

³ David Whitehouse, “Rome and Naples: Survival and Revival in Central and Southern Italy,” in *The Rebirth of Towns in the West A.D. 700–1050*, ed. Richard Hodges and Brian Hobley (London: Council for British Archeology, 1988), 23–81.

⁴ David Herlihy, “Ecological Conditions and Demographic Change,” in *One Thousand Years: Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard DeMolen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 4.

⁵ N. J. G. Pounds, *An Historical Geography of Europe: 450 B.C. – A.D. 1330* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), 84–89; Herlihy, “Ecological Conditions,” 5.

leave an area or drastically dwindle in total numbers, until the arrival of plagues, great climactic changes, or groups of immigrants.

The empire lasted longest in Italy and was even briefly reimposed by the emperors between Ostrogothic and Lombard invasions, yet even there the number of known settlements declined moderately. Most of the peninsula remained organized into villages throughout the subsequent period of barbarian invasions. In the northern plains of the Po, about three-quarters of the imperial *municipia* survived to 1000 – even if only as hut clusters – and still do (thirty-five out of fifty provincial capitals in the area were Roman cities.)⁶ In some areas, peasants simply moved house, not arable. They put their homes on defensible hilltops but went out each day to farm the same fields in the same valleys.⁷ Yet the Italians had always had uninhabited patches of forest and mountain between their cities; writers of Antiquity had simply failed to mention them because they rarely visited the arcadia they praised in poetry and essay.⁸ In the Piedmont region of Italy, south of the Po but north of Rome, neither Hunnish raids nor epidemics increased the wilderness or reduced the population; it simply could not sustain the intense colonization of the late imperial period. The cities of Augustus and his second-century successors dwindled to ruins while the shrinking farm families relocated their small settlements to more practical places.⁹ By comparison, in Britain, the total arable hardly diminished, but people left the marginal lands along hillsides and in the fens that they had used for non-agricultural purposes at the height of Roman prosperity. They also moved out of cities back to farms, although most of the Roman cities were never completely lost as recognizable sites.¹⁰

Even if the effects of depopulation were regionally determined, though, they were everywhere: swamps and forests grew, marshes spread, people frequented safer highlands or more cultivable lowlands, and ports once on the coast are today miles from the sea because

⁶ Chris Wickham, *Early Medieval Italy: Central Power and Local Society, 400–1000* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 80–99, esp. 80, 98.

⁷ J. Ward-Perkins, “Etruscan Towns, Roman Roads and Medieval Villages: The Historical Geography of Southern Etruria,” *Geographical Journal* 128 (1952), 389–405.

⁸ Wickham, *Early Medieval Italy*, 9–10.

⁹ Christina La Rocca, “Using the Roman Past: Abandoned Towns and Local Power in Eleventh-Century Piemonte,” *Early Medieval Europe* 5 (1996), 45–69.

¹⁰ Nicholas Higham, *Rome, Britain, and the Anglo-Saxons* (London: Seaby, 1992), 70–79.

marshes silted up the estuaries in the late antique and very early medieval period.¹¹ As the number of people decreased, they realized that the wilderness, which had always divided areas of settlement, had become a growing hindrance to long-distance travel. Devout Christians of the late antique period, such as the former soldier Martin (later patron saint of Tours), could flee civilization to live alone in monastic caves only because the bush flourished so near the dwindling towns of the empire. The last emperors had tried to halt the deterioration of the human landscape by ordering soldiers to settle on abandoned acreage, or decreeing that semi-free farmers were bound by law to remain on farms.¹² But nothing worked. No one could repeople the cities, rebuild the population, or force peasants to permanently move their homes and fields. The desert seemed to spread across the land and minds of Europe's peoples.

Cities of the Roman north dwindled, along with their urban markets, the economic exchange between city and countryside, urban industries, and specifically urban professional classes of men – lawyers, teachers, the great thinkers of Antiquity.¹³ With its cities losing strength, the empire's military and political influence was diverted and waned, and so the empire's greatest accomplishment – its roads – lay untended. Travel became dangerous, money rare. Economies throughout the continent became subsistence ventures marked by sporadic local trade. The woman who had made her living by running a laundry or a wineshop no longer had products, customers, or even a venue in which to do business. Prostitution, defined as sex for cash in a brothel, became practically unknown in Europe. If a woman wished to trade upon her sex, she had to accept other commodities besides cash in exchange and carry out her transactions, as the early Irish laws put it literally, “in the bush.”

Pockets of imperial living continued to dot the European landscape on the eve of the Middle Ages. Not every city north of Tuscany crumbled and blew away on the new winds of the medieval climate. In the fifth century, in sizeable population centers throughout the old empire, citizens still lived in architecturally complex spaces composed of government buildings, basilicas, baths, theatres, racecourses,

¹¹ Herlihy, “Ecological Conditions,” 5.

¹² *Cod. Theo.* v.17.1; vii.20.3; see also A. H. M. Jones, ed., *A History of Rome through the Fifth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 312–15.

¹³ M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (rev. edn. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 123–76; Herlihy, “Ecological Conditions,” 5–6.

and arenas. Vestiges of *romanitas* lingered along the Po Valley, in Ravenna, in Rome itself. In southern France and Italy, noblewomen and men continued to occupy villas into the sixth century, hiding out, dining elegantly, and writing elaborate poetry or maybe gathering like-minded Christians to make a monastic life among the fountains and courtyards. The cities of Gaul hosted Roman imperial courts in the fourth and fifth centuries, along with all their hangers-on: poets, visiting foreign officials, provincial noblewomen and men, military leaders, churchmen. Increasingly during the fifth century, cultivated nobles with enough wealth withdrew to their country estates where they survived by the labor of slaves as long as they could, deluding themselves about the endurance of Roman culture and dreaming of philosophical and poetic glories. Yet even when the Gothic wars of the sixth century brought destruction and famine to Rome and when rebellions and shifts in leadership plagued northern Gaul, provincial landowners continued to journey regularly to towns for Christian rituals, markets, judicial matters. Those *civitates* and *municipia*, which had once been thriving market towns and administrative centers, lingered inside their patched walls.

In northern Gaul, at the edges of Germany, in Spain, and in Britain, people began a less Roman way of life, not always forsaking the old towns and forts, but redefining them for new uses. The baths and forum of Paris continued in use, along with its new churches, at least until the time of St. Genovefa, its fifth-century patron. Merovingian invaders occupied these Roman buildings in the sixth century, turning the town into the capital of a new, Christianizing tribal kingdom. By the sixth century, when Gregory of Tours was writing, the cities of northern Gaul presented an “anarchic juxtaposition of ancient stone edifices and thatch-covered mud huts,” according to one archeologist.¹⁴ Gregory saw ancient basilicas and baptistries, paved avenues and public spaces. His Frankish neighbors concentrated on the courts where they displayed their Roman-style authority, the new funerary chapels where they buried their royal dead, and the fields of battle where they proved their rights to rule.

Out in the countryside of Gaul, occupants of a villa might leave the house but continue planting the cleared fields attached to it, a pattern observable throughout northern, once-Romanized Europe. Some

¹⁴ Nancy Gauthier, “Le paysage urbain en Gaule au Ve siècle,” in *Grégoire de Tours et l'espace gaulois*, ed. N. Gauthier and H. Galinié (Tours: Revue Archéologique du Centre de la France, 1997), 55.

fancied themselves Roman citizens and kept houses in the cities while maintaining villas, or at least houses with identifiable Roman-style features, in the country. Approximately one-quarter of all settlements in late antique Gaul had been such villas, but most of these existed south of the Loire where a senatorial class lingered. But housebuilders of the late antique period did not obligingly abide by the duality of native-versus-Roman, tending instead to adapt some architectural suggestions from merchants, soldiers, and government officials of the Mediterranean region. Some Gaulish landowners chose to decorate their walls with paintings or to use hypocausts (hot air ducts) to heat their feet and prove their good taste. Even in *Belgica Secunda*, up north where Roman rule had never been secure, farmers had imitated villa architecture in wood.¹⁵ Not only the architecture but the spatial organization of houses and farmyards changed with the new politics of the fifth and sixth centuries, giving way to other principles besides Roman divisions of space. When countryfolk rebuilt dilapidated villas in more traditional native styles, or used the stones of villas to fix barns instead of hypocausts, or switched to the Germanic housing style of post-built houses, they were practicing a form of architectural conversion to the new Germanic regime, just as previous generations had selected the signifiers of their Romanization.¹⁶

Instead of the self-sufficient villa idealized by rural Romans, with its ties to urban centers elsewhere, the farmyards and hamlets of the very early Middle Ages merged into population islands distinct from cities. The roadside villages of late Antiquity became ritual centers with a single sacral focal point, such as a church or cemetery, which allowed residents from surrounding farms to consider themselves a single community. Nonetheless, the settlement system that Romans had encouraged during their tenure of Gaul continued, along with the traditional system that had preceded invasion. *Villae* sat on open agricultural plains amidst organized fields of cereals, whereas typical Celtic or Germanic settlement tended toward hillsides, pastures, and forest edges. Throughout the political changes of the period, settlement remained stable and farms continued producing regularly. The total number of inhabited sites dipped in the third century but

¹⁵ Nico Roymans, *From the Sword to the Plough: Three Studies on the Earliest Romanisation of Northern Gaul* (Amsterdam University Press, 1996), 52–55.

¹⁶ Guy Halsall, “Social Identities,” in *Leadership and Community*, ed. Raymond Van Dam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 147–49.

revived in the fourth.¹⁷ Similarly woodland, which had decreased slightly when the Romans arrived in the first century with their quarries and limekilns for building, declined a little more after the fourth century, but not enough to suggest a major resurgence of forest or drastic depopulation.¹⁸ Markets continued to exist locally and regionally; hagiographers of the period mentioned the quays of Paris where merchants came and went with goods from the countryside – someone had to feed the towns. For Christian writers, only proper cities (*civitates*) remained meaningful points of lasting Romanization whereas markers of *romanitas* began to vanish from the countryside.

Further from the heart of old empires and Frankish capitals, in Verulamium in England, *romanitas* had always been more superficial upon the landscape, so its markers disappeared even more speedily when government control and investment lapsed. A public building brand-new in 380 had become a barn within fifty years; its public function no longer necessary, it housed corn-drying kilns for preserving the harvest from damp winters. Elsewhere on the same island, locals carted stones from useless public edifices to make their own barns and houses. In Wroxeter, for instance, farmers busted up the roads that once led into town to use in crude, mortar-less buildings. Unlike Gaul, where new rulers of former Roman provinces were eager to take up Christianity and its buildings, no Christian basilicas survived the departure of the Romans from England. Native Britons retreated to their farms, ignoring the decaying villas that once served as houses of their lords, and reused the hillforts of their ancestors as tribal and sacral centers. The cities of the old empire later became the markets and cemeteries of Anglo-Saxon invaders.¹⁹ Even farther from Rome, in Ireland and Scandinavia, change was less architecturally obvious: no aqueducts, towns, roads, or Latin language had ever infiltrated the local culture. But the basic conditions of life, and

¹⁷ Patrick Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 108–09; Georges Duby, *Early Growth of the European Economy: Warriors and Peasants from the Seventh to the Twelfth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 17–30.

¹⁸ Willy Groenman-Van Waateringe, “Wasteland: Buffer in the Medieval Economy,” in M. Colardelle, ed., *L’Homme et la nature au Moyen Age: paléoenvironnement des sociétés occidentales : actes du Ve Congrès international d’archéologie médiévale tenu à Grenoble (France), 6–9 octobre 1992 (Société d’archéologie médiévale)* (Paris: Editions Errance, 1996), 113–17.

¹⁹ Higham, *Rome, Britain and the Anglo-Saxons*, 82–104.

the facts of a dwindling population in an untrustworthy landscape, were the same everywhere, no matter what the linguistic or architectural trimmings.

Especially in the more distant ends of empire, then, men and women in villages or on farmsteads slowly came to depend upon themselves and the occasional traveler for all kinds of sustenance, material, intellectual, and spiritual. Increasingly, settlement consisted primarily of small thatched huts of mud and wood, often hidden by wooden palisades and facing fearfully inward. Such huts had always existed and even formed the majority of built structures, but now they were almost the only structures littering the landscape. Domestic animals such as lambs or calves lived in pens within the farmyard and even shared people's houses. Mature animals roamed the pastureland; pigs rooted in the forest's edge. Men tramped out to the fields dragging their light ploughs, scraping and scraping again to make a living out of the soil. Women minded the animals, grew vegetables – although not the exotic garden varieties of Roman taste – and took the sheep's wool to spin and weave into clothing for the whole household.

Women and men clustered in related, enclosed farmsteads or in small villages, separated from other islands of life by unpeopled land. The nature of these population islands and their inter-relations varied by region. The Celts of Gaul, Britain, and Ireland preferred small hamlets and isolated, fortified homesteads sheltering five to, at most, fifty people. In Spain, natives lived in large, walled villages of up to several hundred occupants.²⁰ Everywhere in the north, within these rural fortresses, the population pushed to its boundaries. People never spread themselves over the landscape because they could not – or feared that they could not – survive. As late as about 800, during the reign of the Frankish emperor Charlemagne, the monastery of St-Germain des Près in what is now Paris drew up a list of servile holdings and workers on its twenty nearby estates. The lists show that about 10,000 souls lived there, with a relatively high density of 26 to 29 people per square kilometer (modern Paris, by comparison, has a density of over 20,000 per square kilometer.)²¹

But not all the countryside was so thickly settled. Throughout the early Middle Ages, until the great reordering of the environment in the tenth and later centuries, only certain spots on the otherwise disorderly landscape were organized and peopled. In between

²⁰ Russell, "Population in Europe," 30. ²¹ Herlihy, "Ecological Conditions," 14.

settlements, the land was not only untidy and inhospitable, home to beasts and invaders, but also the source of fears that bound people to their cultivated islands. Everyone dreaded what was out in the woods, as both medieval romances and modern fairy-tales remind us, with their trolls and witches and giants. The earliest medieval poets and hagiographers imagined the dangers as pagans, devils, rushing rivers, and impenetrable woods where a wandering saint could get lost forever. Once, ladies of the north had traveled the roads with their husbands to visit Rome or even more distant lights of the empire, such as Constantinople and Jerusalem; they had brought back the latest hairstyles, poems composed by monks, robes and perfumes and wines. Now it took a saint armed with powers of Genovefa of Paris to move safely over the grassy tracks. A less holy but wise person needed to join a larger party to range the landscape without the protection once provided by an imperial army. When, in the 580s, the Merovingian princess Rigunth marched off to marry a Visigoth, accompanied by fifty cartloads of gold and silver and a horde of at least four thousand Frankish soldiers, she barely got out of Paris before her own escort plundered her dowry. She never made it to Spain, but was fetched home by her mother's men.²²

Over the last centuries of the Roman empire, local officials of the imperial government transformed themselves into, or were replaced by, men whose authority derived from wealth, local lineage, and religious office. St. Genovefa was unusual, according to her sixth-century *vita*, when she imitated male bishops in Gaulish territory, but she was even more exotic for playing the tribune and tax-collecting landlord. Once in time of famine, her hagiographer wrote, the saint aided the starving of Paris by boating up the river to Arcis to collect dues on behalf of her city.²³ More often, it was men of standing in the neighborhood, such as Genovefa's father, who filled such jobs after the Roman officials left.²⁴ After the imperial retreat, the functions of government fell to whatever local man had the most authority or

²² Gregory of Tours, *Historia*, ed. Wilhelm Arndt and Bruno Krusch, *MGH SSRM 2* (1884), vi.45, vii.39; trans. Lewis Thorpe as *History of the Franks* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

²³ Jo Ann McNamara and John E. Halborg with E. Gordon Whatley, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 30–31; *Vita Genovefae Virginis Parisiensis*, in *Passiones Vitaeque Sanctorum Aevi Merovingici*, ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison, *MGH SSRM 3* (1902), 204–38.

²⁴ Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450–751* (London: Longman, 1994), 61–63.

most armed men at his command. In Britain and Germany, he was the father-figure of the most influential kin-group in the region, ruler of the local chieftdom; in Gaul he might be a bishop or the descendant of a Romanized family, like Genovefa, or a Frank. Women were normally excluded from such business and the public places where it occurred, and left to exploit their influence in different ways, as we shall see.

Both women and men stayed close to home, no matter how many crammed into their huts to sleep at night. Only for important purposes – such as war, migration, missionary work, revenue-collecting, or pilgrimage, almost all of which were men's activities – did anyone venture beyond the pastures of the village. Occasionally, the men of several hut-clusters gathered to fight off a common enemy, such as the Huns who threatened Genovefa's Paris; although it was the saint herself who turned the invaders back, merely by praying with the matrons of the old city.²⁵ When men met to discuss such political and legal matters, they debated feuds, hammered out lawsuits, or complained about taxes together in the public clearing of their village, or in the chief's large house. Maybe one of the landowners from a good family counted himself a local official, still using a Roman title, and tried to collect taxes or rents as Saint Genovefa did in Arcis.

Even while emperors still claimed to rule Europe, communications across the continent became increasingly sporadic and unreliable. Not only was travel completely different for men and women in the early Middle Ages from what it had been earlier, or would be later, but it took unimaginably long. Even in the sixteenth century, a hard-riding messenger spent weeks racing from southern to northern Europe, and was probably better off going by boat, if possible.²⁶ In the very early Middle Ages, with few good roads and dangerous rivers as their routes, people found things much worse. Christian saints were forever using miracles to calm the seas and clear the roadways. It took most mobs and armies of Germanic immigrants and invaders several centuries to drift through the continent and England. Christian leaders sprinkled across the continent spent decades or even longer resolving theological disputes, just because it was so hard to find out what everyone from Constantinople to Canterbury actually believed.

²⁵ McNamara, *Sainted Women*, 23.

²⁶ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip the Second*, trans. Sian Reynolds, 2 vols. (London: Collins, 1972), vol. 1, 355–74.

Very few long-distance pilgrims were women, only the occasional adventurous, high-status, wealthy, Romanized matron like Paula of Rome or Egeria of Iberia. Foreign messengers and local entertainers were welcomed everywhere and protected by custom because their product was so rare and valuable.

Commodities moved only when they were too temptingly profitable to resist. When folks first became Christian, they needed liturgical items such as wine, which could not be produced in the north; salt and iron also had to go from one place to another. Sometimes people relied on middlemen who could move easily from kingdom to kingdom, and from barbarian territory to the eastern empire. Gregory of Tours, the sixth-century bishop-historian, mentioned Priscus the Jew who had “acted as agent for some of the purchases” of the Frankish King Chilperic.²⁷ Christian relics also moved from one end of the known world to the other, although more frequently after about 800 CE. In the sixth century, St. Radegund corresponded with kings and emperors, and sent plenty of shrewd emissaries across the continent to bargain as part of her relic-collecting endeavors.²⁸ Trade never really stopped, but bulky commodities such as grain did not travel far until much later in the Middle Ages. After the great age of the Roman grainfleet to Africa ended, people went hungry when the harvest failed because they could neither move nor store ordinary, necessary supplies. They were unable to bring food over non-existent roads, via non-existent merchants, from distant territories that people no longer visited. No one had money enough to spare as a medium of regular exchange. In Britain and elsewhere, specie was so precious that people started using it for jewelry. When Genovefa was a girl, the missionary St. Germanus visited her village on his way to clear up some heresy in England. When he met the girl at an inn, he plucked up a Roman coin fortuitously fallen to the dust and instructed her to wear it around her neck always, to remind herself of the vanity of carnal life and the uselessness of wealth.²⁹ But Genovefa was not the only girl to pierce a useless Roman coin for a necklace. Women and men of Nanterre and other communities tried to be self-sufficient, meeting needs through local production and exchange. They grew

²⁷ Gregory of Tours, *Historia*, vi.5.

²⁸ McNamara, *Sainted Women*, “Life of Radegund,” 96–98; *MGH SSRM* 2, 364–77; Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 1978), esp. 49–50.

²⁹ McNamara, *Sainted Women*, 21.

their own food, raised animals, and got their fuel, building material, and extra rations in the woods, and caught fish in their waters. Less lucky or resourceful people starved and died.

WOMEN'S LIVES AT THE EDGE OF ROMANITAS

Genovefa's life-story hints at what life was like for women in one of these little outposts in the fifth and early sixth centuries, and suggests the demographic trends of the period. Although she and her parents were landowners, women in her family were farmwives, drawing their own water from the well. When famine struck her territory, it afflicted owners and workers alike.³⁰ Gender, more than aristocratic birth, Roman culture, or wealth, determined the contours of Genovefa's daily life, in particular affecting her life expectancy in the context of the declining empire and its economy. Although men and women shared their farmsteads, their leaders, their weather, even their starvation, they faced natural and demographic environments under different circumstances. This was the case throughout the Middle Ages. At birth, the sex ratio of every human population is normally 105 boys to 100 girls (105:100). Scanty cemetery evidence from the sixth century demonstrates a worrisomely high ratio in some parts of Europe of 120–130:100 (total cemetery population, not at birth.)³¹ Historians have argued over whether these data reflect inept census techniques, local immigration patterns which altered the ratio, the effects of slavery by capture and breeding, or female neglect and infanticide.³² Even if medieval people did not intentionally sacrifice their female children, the sex ratio of early Europe seems to have remained

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

³¹ Josiah Cox Russell, *The Control of Late Ancient and Medieval Population* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1985), 139–76; *idem*, "Medieval Cemetery Patterns," in *Medieval Demography: Essays* (New York: AMS Press, 1987), 150; but see Emily R. Coleman, "Medieval Marriage Characteristics: A Neglected Factor in the History of Medieval Serfdom," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1971), 205–21; also Charlotte Roberts and Keith Manchester, *The Archeology of Disease* (2nd edn., Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 20–29.

³² David Herlihy, "Life Expectancies for Women in Medieval Society," in *The Role of Woman in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. T. Morewedge (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 1–22; Carol Clover, "The Politics of Scarcity: Notes on the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia," in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra H. Olsen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 100–34; Richard Ring, "Early Medieval Peasant Households in Central Italy," *Journal of Family History* 4 (1979), 2–25; Jean-Pierre Devroey, "Men and

skewed. For the population aged 18 to 42 the ratio rose even higher, with more men surviving the crucial adolescent and early adult years than women. Pregnancy and childbirth were killers of mothers and babies alike. Complications from delivery may have claimed ten to fifteen per cent of women.³³ When disease or violence added to their troubles, women were eating less, thus becoming malnourished, and dying earlier from both pregnancies and other complications. They also shrank in average height by a greater percentage than men during tough times, a sign of chronic malnourishment.³⁴ No matter whether a prospective mother was queen or migrant peasant, she was in danger.

Men died early, too, but from different causes – accidents in the field, the violence of warfare – along with the some of the same illnesses that afflicted women. Life expectancy for those of both sexes who survived birth averaged about 30–35 years. However, if a Gaulish boy made it past age 20, he might expect to live twenty-five more years while a woman at age 20 could normally expect about seventeen years. And anyone who survived till 40 had a good chance at another fifteen to twenty years.³⁵ These were the parameters of longevity throughout the early Middle Ages.³⁶ Hence, although people may not have moved as easily away from home to new communities on the perilous landscapes of early Europe, they still disappeared easily, regularly.

As a result, families constantly changed in size and number. Family presents a complicated problem for historians because it meant so many things at once to medieval peoples. As we shall see in later chapters, kinship remained the basic organizing principle of early European societies until at least the end of the Middle Ages. The Romans had reckoned both mother's and father's families as part of a large social, political, and legal group they called the *cognatio*, which stretched to seven degrees of kinship.³⁷ That did not even

Women in Early Medieval Serfdom: The Ninth-Century North Frankish Evidence," *Past and Present* 166 (2000), 3–30, esp. 19–23.

³³ Russell, *Control of Late Ancient and Medieval Population*, 153, tab. 38.

³⁴ Joel Blondiaux, "La femme et son corps au haut moyen-âge vus par l'anthropologue et le paléopathologiste," in *La Femme au Moyen-âge*, ed. Michele Rouche and Jean Heuclin (Maubeuge, France: Ville de Maubeuge, 1990), 115–38.

³⁵ Russell, *Control of Late Ancient and Medieval Population*, 168; André Pelletier, *La femme dans la société gallo-romaine* (Paris: Picard, 1984), 33–37.

³⁶ Herlihy, "Life Expectancies for Women," 1–22.

³⁷ David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 6–7.

include in-laws (affines) or pseudo-family such as adopted children or foster-relations, which Romans had in plenty. Among the other peoples of Europe, cognatic kinship also offered an organizational framework for government and society. When Goths moved across the south of Europe to colonize Spain, they at least believed they did so in units related theoretically by blood; when the Celts of Ireland, the Saxons of England, and the Franks of Gaul formed kingdoms, they built them of confederations of supposed family groups headed by men. In reality, native and incoming populations amalgamated while Roman ideas blended with native concepts to form the families of the Middle Ages. When Genovefa's parents took Roman names – Gerontia and Severus – it did not necessarily mean that they were of Gallo-Roman stock but that they had absorbed some idea of Roman family organization. In both Roman and barbarian societies, actual kinsfolk supplied important legal, social, and political support to individuals; they also offered distinct kinds of support to men and women.

Hence, a woman's household was not identical to her family, and her family was not the same as that of her husband or mate. Among Romanized aristocrats of third- or fourth-century southern Gaul, whose houses were large and many-roomed, people had space for large families, servants, and slaves on their property. But in the wood or wattle huts of most of Europe, ordinary people shared space with four or five others, usually blood relations, sometimes a servant or another familiar person. We have no reliable censuses or other documents describing the exact nature of households in Genovefa's time, but the ruins of houses tell us that a woman and her cohabitants might have dwelt in one or two rooms with a hearth in the middle. In northern Gaul their houses were often rectangular, in Ireland round, but they were small throughout Europe.

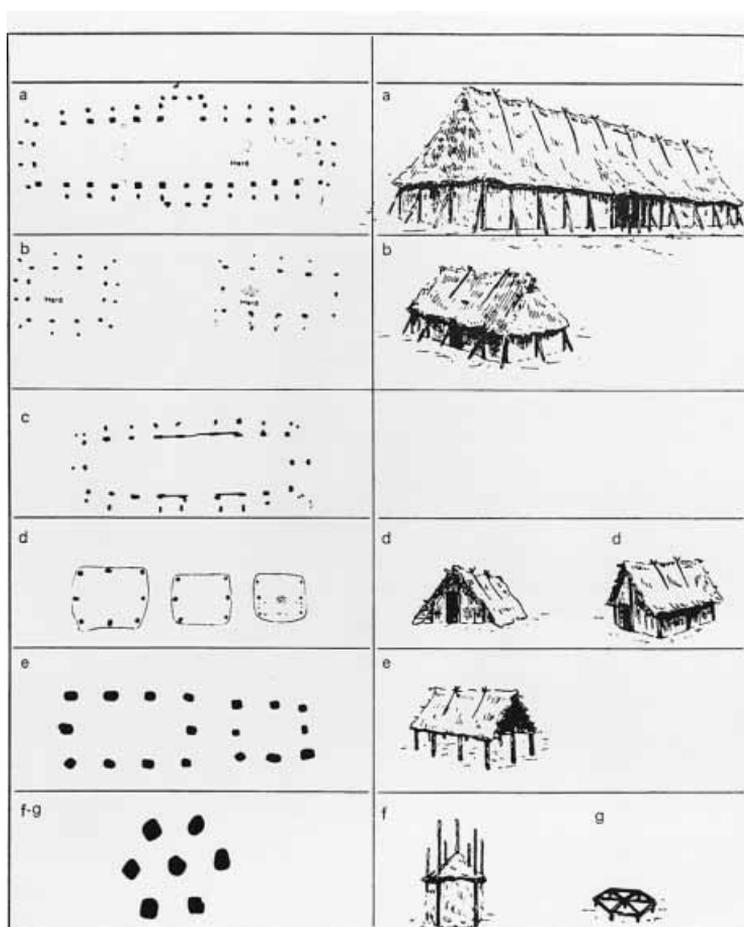
A woman and her husband might live with their children in a comfy, dark, smelly house, or with the offspring of his or her previous marriage. There might be an aunt, a pair of aging parents, a servant, or a foster-relation, and maybe a distant kinsman or woman occupying the same small space. In some regions, a woman's house and another small hut might be adjacent or within the same farmstead, increasing the number of familiar faces she encountered every day. The seventh- or eighth-century farm dug up at Warendorf in Germany had separate buildings for its residents, its servants, its provisions, its kitchen, and other activities. Inhabitants of the site moved among the buildings

during a day's work, going from sleeping place to work site to the security of hearth at night. A woman who lived in such a place was probably just as well acquainted with the goats or lambs or dogs she kept as with her human colleagues. All of these comprised her daily companions and labor mates, since women spent most of their hours at home. And yet any member of this group of familiars was liable to leave the household abruptly and be replaced; her children or spouse might die, her slave be sold, her lambs move out to pasture as mature sheep.

Left behind on the days when men went to work or market or war, a woman saw a limited number of neighbors and strangers. She gathered with other women, or sometimes with folk of both sexes, for entertainment at one house or another. Women convened with the entire community for major festivals or to hear an itinerant preacher. They may not have understood a foreigner mouthing the word of God if he did not speak the local Germanic or Celtic dialect; in parts of Gaul, perhaps a Latin speaker would have made himself clear, but fewer in the village learned their Latin once it was no longer the tongue of trade or government, and only noblewomen and men, military leaders, and missionaries were normally multilingual. The arrival of bishops in a small village, as when Germanus and his friend Lupus came to Genovefa's Nanterre, was a cause for assembly and celebration, although Nanterre may have been unusual, in that it held enough Christians for a crowd to gather at short notice to hear the men preach. Visitors passing by, especially the rare female, depended upon locals for hospitality. A famous man in a sophisticated village like Nanterre lodged, as Germanus did, at an inn but few, if any, women could avail themselves of such opportunities. Genovefa, when she traveled from one community of believers to another, stayed with other kind Christian women. Most likely when ordinary women escaped the security of their homes for extraordinary ventures, such as the trip to a saint's shrine, they looked to distant relations or friends of friends for a place to stay.

More often women left their houses for the village green, enclosure, or *platea* for specific reasons. A mother went to a well for water, or sent her daughter for it. Lots of medieval saints' lives refer to women gathering at a spring or river to do the wash, get a pail-full, or bathe; there they could socialize with other women. They also went to church. This meant that they lived close enough to the village center to walk to it (although not necessarily weekly; neither women nor

men attended Christian rituals on a regular basis). Women in remote areas had to be content with visiting a sacred space for occasional ceremonies, such as baptisms and funerals. In the few surviving big towns or in the settled tribal capitals of barbarian Europe, women may have had more opportunities for going into public and thus constructing larger circles of acquaintances and allies. Saints' festivals and translations of holy relics, for instance, attracted a mixed-sex crowd, as did the ritual entree of kings or bishops. Genovefa herself knew the matrons of Paris, probably meaning women of influence,



1 Buildings in Wahrendorf, seventh/eighth centuries, showing the variety of shapes and layouts for dwellings and outbuildings; chart indicates diverse names and uses for buildings.

whom she summoned to prayer when the Huns attacked. The saint also lived with other Christian women under vows and attracted girls from other villages to her house in the big city. Genovefa had contacts in a wide-reaching ecclesiastical network, which even touched St. Simeon the Stylite in Syria. Perched on his lofty pillar, the famous ascetic demanded news of the Gaulish virgin.³⁸ Genovefa was not unusual among noble and royal medieval nuns, who often maintained networks criss-crossing the churches of Europe, but as a member of

Legal codes

Alemans	Bavarians	Salian Franks	Riparian Franks	Saxons	Anglo-Saxons
- domus lib. - casa - sala	- domus lib. - casa dom. - seli, casa, hus	- domus lib. - casa - salina	- domus - hus - casa	- domus - casa	- hus - aern - healle - seli
- scuria lib. u.a. - armenta equarum et vaccarum - granicia - cellaria - domus servi	- scuria lib. conclusa parietibus et pessulis cum clave munita - domus servi	- scuria cum animalibus - sutes cum porcis - cellarium	- sotes paricus	- stabulum - horreum	- scipena - bern (horreum) - styllan = stallbauen - fald - lochyrdl = Hürdebauen
- genicia - stuba spicaria - servi, ovile pocaricia	- coquina - balnearius - pistoria - mita - mita minoria = scopar	- genicium - screona	- ovile - appearius	- screona (alvearium)	- cylvne
- spicaria dom. - scuria servi	- scuria absque parietibus = scof	- spicarium aut horreum cum tecto		- spyker	
—	- granarium = parc - fenile	- machalum = horreum sine tecto fenile		- granarium	- hreac = machalum

2 (cont.)

³⁸ McNamara, *Sainted Women*, 28.

the religious elite she was nonetheless unusual among women. Only exceptional women of influence, such as saints and queens, encountered many different people from exotic places.

Ultimately, a woman's social contacts and her household both depended not only on her background and wealth, but also on her chosen occupation, the identity of her sexual partner (if she had one), the location of her home, and the landscape of her life. The average woman was no Latinized aristocrat, Frankish queen, or educated nun. If she had not been called by God or recognized by Germanus of Auxerre, Genovefa might never have left her mother's house and saved Paris. She would have remained one of those lost to history, who eked out a few years on lands just barely under human management, fearing death by childbirth, totting up the babies that succumbed, and nurturing the ones who survived, hoping each day that her mate would return home safely that night. Normally, the walls of a woman's home and farmstead, and the boundaries of her family and community, surrounded her all the days of her brief life.

SACRED PLACES

When a woman of Genovefa's time looked out from her doorway to her village and the woods beyond, she saw several landscapes simultaneously. One was the map of her daily labors, focused squarely upon the house where she stood, and extending past the farmyard to the well at the end of the settlement and the edge of the forest. She might remember the road through the woods to another town, where she once trudged overnight to a shrine or a major festival. Then there was her social landscape of housemates, neighbors, servants, and friends, their houses, and the spaces where she met them. Third was the political landscape that she shared with this smaller group of allies and other such groups. She was simultaneously part of a tribal kingdom, a sub-Roman local government, a diocese, a monastic territory, or even a migratory group of families on their way to a better life. Her map might include the sites of all these political structures and more. The varied geographies of women's lives fill the following chapters of this book.

But, in addition, a woman watched the land and sky for clues to a fourth landscape infused by the sacred. She knew that certain places were inherently holy and alive with the numinous. Specific clues

marked entries to otherworlds below, above, or within the physical world she saw everyday. No matter who she was, she was aware of a cosmos that enveloped all her landscapes, her visible world, and herself. From southern Gaul to Scandinavia, the land inhabited by women was dynamic with complex powers, which it was best to propitiate, venerate, or avoid.

For classical thinkers, the edges of the earth itself melted into Ocean, the great foggy stream that surrounded the entire land surface, whose waters contained all manner of monsters and spirits. More locally, citizens of the Roman empire were animist, finding gods and goddesses in bits of the landscape – trees, rocks, springs, households – just as their abstracted manifestations were resident in classical mythology.³⁹ In written myth, Jupiter frolicked with his divine family atop a Cretan mountain that everyone knew to be Olympus. Aeneas, like the Greeks before him, found and entered the underworld via a particular cave and a river. Ordinary folk met the gods at wells and shrines along the road. When Roman beliefs went north and westward into barbarian territory, they settled atop existing landscapes of the sacred like dust over a tabletop. No soldier or merchant in foreign parts was ready to dispute with the natives about this or that grove and its spirits. Although Romans may not have appreciated the ways of barbarian worship, or may have feared them as an impetus to rebellion, they were usually ready to rename and venerate any place with a resident spirit.

Only the Christians among them were finicky about the exclusiveness of their holy sites, although they, too, perceived a landscape alive with supernatural powers. As fierce monotheists, they rejected the idea that gods and goddesses dwelt in particular places. But they had their sacred spots, nonetheless: basilicas, where they worshiped; geographies of Jesus and his disciples, focused on the omphalos of the world, Jerusalem, and later on Rome; and, especially, resting places of the most holy dead.⁴⁰ Both Roman and Jewish traditions had prepared Christians to venerate places where dead saints lay, which Christians perceived as gateways to a more spiritual realm. The shrines of saints drew pilgrims who came for a glimpse up into heaven. Such places also attracted demons, angels, and all sorts of

³⁹ Alice K. Turner, *The History of Hell* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 35.

⁴⁰ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago University Press, 1981), esp. 86–105.

unearthly creatures. Wherever Christianity spread, it created saints, and wherever the saints expired and were entombed, they enhanced the spiritual landscape. Not coincidentally, Christian landscapes also overlapped with Roman and native maps of the numinous. Roman temples were converted to Christian usage. Saints tore down sacred groves to build churches, which they enhanced with bits and pieces of long-gone holy men and women. Even when avoiding old sacred places, such as the graveyards beyond the walls of old Roman towns, to build churches and dig cemeteries elsewhere, Christians remained respectful of these sites.⁴¹

Each barbarian people had its own local vision of an intimate landscape which, by the time Genovefa roamed Gaul, was a mix of traditional Germanic, Celtic, Latinized, and Christian-colored geographies. Yet all these traditions supported the mutual permeability of physical and invisible landscapes. The natives of northern Europe found the otherworld of spirits and the dead in dreams, in waking visions, and by accidentally wandering out on the wrong night.⁴² Celtic tales told of heroes who foolishly left the house at Samain (our Hallowe'en and the Catholic feast of All Saints), the autumn festival, and found themselves in the otherworld where hanged men spoke and fairy-troops attacked the living. In other stories, men hopped in boats headed for adventure on the seas, only to end up on paradisaical islands inhabited by sexually willing beauties. Scandinavian and Germanic legends told a darker version of similar accidents, where heroes like Beowulf could dive into a pool and find a monster's hall dry as a bone, or creep into a cave and discover an immortal dragon puffing smoke atop a pile of gold.

As in Roman and Mediterranean Christian cultures, legends of the spiritual map coincided with people's vision of the natural landscape. Germanic and Celtic peoples of northern Europe carved the land into territories sacred to particular deities, which were decorated with places dedicated to them. For instance, in ancient Germany, Gaul, Britain, and Ireland, devotees marked a place sacred to the local spirit with trees. Tacitus, Lucan, and Dio Cassius complained about druids

⁴¹ Bailey K. Young, "The Myth of the Pagan Cemetery," in *Spaces of the Living and the Dead: An Archaeological Dialogue*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov et al., American Early Medieval Studies 3 (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1999), 61–86.

⁴² Lisa M. Bitel, "In Visu Noctis: Dreams in Early Medieval Hagiography and Histories, 500–900," *History of Religions* 31 (1991), 39–59.