

Sketches of women, from the dusk of the Roman Empire to the dawn of the Enlightenment

Week 1 further reading suggestions.. St Brigit of Kildare – *St Brigid of Kildare: Life, legend and cult* by Noel Kissane, Open Air 2017; and much online material; *Cogitosus's "Life of St Brigit": Content and Value* by Sean Connolly and JM Picard, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol. 117 (1987), pp. 5-27 – I have a PDF if anyone is especially interested. **Christina of Makyate** – *The Life of Christina of Markyate* edited by CH Talbot and Samuel Fanous, Oxford World Classics 2009; *Medieval Women's writing* by Diane Watt, Polity 2007; *Women's lives in Medieval Europe: A sourcebook* by Emily Amt, Routledge 1993. **Gudrid Thorbjarnadottir** – *The Far Traveller: voyages of a Viking woman* by Nancy Marie Brown, Harcourt 2007; *The Vinland Sagas* trans by Keneva Kunz, Penguin Classics 1997. **La Senora de Cao and the Moche stirrup vessel** – *Art of the Andes from Chavin to Inca* by Rebecca R. Stone; and much online material, images etc. **Béatrice de Planisole** – *Montaillou*, by Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie, Penguin 1978; and I have a PDF of the trial transcript by Nancy P Stork if anyone is interested. Also worth reading *The Perfect heresy: the life and death of the Cathars* by Stephen O'Shea, Profile books 2001 for more appreciation of Béatrice. **Trota** – *The Trotula: a medieval compendium of women's medicine* by Monica Green, University of Pennsylvania press 2001

Week 2: Weavers.. and Peaceweavers: textiles, politics and women's narratives

The weavers of West Stow – All the historical and archaeological sources available to us show that women processed, dyed, spun, wove, embroidered and finished cloth, both during the Roman Empire and throughout the Early Medieval period. Women were buried with spindles and spindle whorls, beating pins and needle cases; they are often depicted with shears, for shearing fleeces and for cutting cloth. They operated looms, designed new and complex weaves, shaped their own and their families' identities through colour, pattern and design. In legends women wove their own stories into tapestries and it would be surprising if grandmother did not pass on her own unique methods and designs to daughter and granddaughter. If we wish to look for a tangible sense of female authorship in an era when most women's lives, if noticed at all, were described by celibate men living in segregated communities, then it is to the textiles that we must turn.

Cloth production was a vital social and economic domestic industry in the tribal societies of Europe, as it seems to have been globally. Cloth was made from a variety of yarns: principally wool and flax (for linen) but also hemp and very occasionally imported silk. Each type of yarn required specialist treatment to prepare it for spinning and weaving. Flax preparation, in particular, is a messy, dirty, physically demanding and long-drawn out process. Yarns were spun using a spindle and whorl: a very early form of rotating axle and flywheel whose pedal-powered medieval equivalents survive as domestic machinery around the world. The weight and shape of the spindle and its flywheel determined the speed and twist of the yarn, and therefore its fineness or coarseness. A female head of a large household might have possessed a large set of them to cover the variety of yarns that she might wish to produce. Dyes were prepared from plants like woad or madder and occasionally in a most precious red-purple colour by processing the mucus of the Atlantic dog-whelk.

The standard loom of the Early Medieval period was a warp-weighted upright wooden frame (like that described in the story of St Brigit) which was leant against a wall. Warps were hung from a bar at the top of the frame and weighted with clay, stone or bone weights shaped like doughnuts attached beneath the lower cross bar. The weave was controlled by the position of horizontal rods or 'heddles', as the skein holding the weft was passed to and fro. The yarn of the weft was beaten upwards onto existing cloth with a weaving batten or sword, and the warps were plucked with a pin beater to keep them straight and true.

A very few examples of Early Medieval cloth remain intact, having survived in preserving burial environments: the coffin of St Cuthbert, for example, produced several astonishing ecclesiastical textiles, which can still be seen in the Durham Cathedral museum; the clothing of the women in the Oseberg ship burial, and the desiccating environments of deserts in North Africa and South America. But hundreds more samples of weaving patterns survive because men and women of the Early

Anglo-Saxon period were often buried in their clothes, with key possessions (spindles and whorls, for example with women; swords and spears with men). Where metal decorative fittings – brooches, pins, belt buckles, scabbard mounts – survive, the imprint of the cloth to which it was attached has often been fossilised in its corrosion products: a small miracle of preservation.

Penelope Walton Rogers, a specialist in analysing the tantalising fragments of cloth recovered from archaeological excavations, has produced an outstanding survey, *Cloth and Clothing in Early Anglo-Saxon England*, in which she draws out the impressive range and technical expertise of women weavers. The standard weave was the tabby (a word deriving from the name of a specialist silk-weaving quarter in Islamic Baghdad, Al - 'Attabiya): each single warp and weft crosses alternately to produce a conventional flat cloth. Much more sophisticated twills, broken twills, diamond twills and variations that depended on the direction of spin of the yarn allowed women to produce a rich variety of cloths: warm and cool, waterproof, lightweight, heavyweight and ceremonial. The addition of tablet-woven (using perforated wooden cards that could be rotated to cross weft over warp and back again) cuffs, collars, braids and bands in distinctive patterns allowed women to dress themselves, and their men, in ways that reflected their status, lineage and artistic and technical skills. Garments, trims, panels, braids and tapestries were gifts of love, patronage or attachment, by commission or sale. Walton Rogers has also been able to show regional fashions in technique and design – these, strikingly, seem to reinforce legendary patterns of tribal immigration into Eastern Britain recounted in the works of Bede. The humble loom weight, ironically, is the best clue to the social space that weaving occupied in settlements. Easily made but fragile and prone to breakage, loom weights were often discarded; and when the weaving sheds in which they stood burned down, or were abandoned, lines of loom weights were often left behind. Sometimes, the presence of more than one set shows that different weights were required to weave different sorts of cloth.

At West Stow, on the north bank of the River Lark a few miles north-west of Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk, visitors can see something of the life of Anglo-Saxon women in a series of reconstructions largely based on excavations here in the 1960s and 1970s by the archaeologist Stanley West. The settlement – a small village of perhaps four households and a cemetery, was first occupied during the 5th century – the so-called Migration period, and lasted into the 7th century when its timber halls reached their most sophisticated form. Each hall was associated with a number of more modest buildings, many of them with the sunken bases so diagnostic of Early Anglo-Saxon settlement. These seem to have been used to store grain and perhaps wool and many examples have yielded tell-tale rows of loom weights.

Penelope Walton Rogers' analysis of the artefacts associated with cloth production at West Stow is highly revealing. Spindles and spindle whorls were found in and around many structures of all periods: women spun yarn as they went about their everyday chores, minded children and tended sheep or cattle. Loom weights, on the other hand, are associated with many fewer buildings: generally, in the early period, the larger sunken-floored buildings, and probably only one per household. In the later period only the largest and most complex hall showed clear evidence for weaving – in two adjacent buildings. It is as if production of textiles has become concentrated at the site of the largest and latest hall. This process of consolidation might reflect increased investment by the whole community in producing cloth, not just for domestic consumption but for trade – a notable feature of the 7th-century economy. If this is the case, then we might suspect, as Walton Rogers intimates, the emergence of females in a supervisory role above the other women involved in production. From a position not unlike the lady of a medieval manor house, the mistress of a textile atelier exercised artistic and technical authority over a hierarchy of weavers, yarn spinners, dyers and combers, right down to the humblest drudge retting or scutching flax.

An equally fascinating study by the historian David Herlihy, called *Opera Muliebricia: Women and work in Medieval Europe*, records many laws and commentaries referring to women's role in cloth production; and it is from these complex, technically demanding crafts, that women's own narratives, unfiltered by male authors, are beginning to emerge.