

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

Week 2: further reading suggestions.. Andean weaving: see Week 1 reading list – *Art of the Andes*; **Early med weaving:** *Cloth and clothing in Early Anglo-Saxon England 450-700*, by Penelope Walton Rogers, 2006: CBA Res rep; **Bayeux:** The Lady Ælfgyva in the Bayeux Tapestry, by JB McNulty, *Speculum* 55, no.4, 1980, 659-668; **Lubna of Cordoba:** <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03vd5xt>; **Women's work in Med Europe:** *Opera Muliebria: Women and Work in Medieval Europe*, by David Herlihy, Temple University Press 1980 – five stars for this one!

Week 3. Widows and wills: how women have used longevity, wealth and power

Emerging from the research for the book I get a very strong sense that – among both free and unfree women – the emotional and socio-economic blow of losing a husband could lead to destitution and isolation. But Early Medieval law was surprisingly sensitive to the issue of widowhood, and its provisions meant that in many cases women who lost their husbands – sometimes serially – could end up with considerable assets of their own with which to maintain their security, patronise favoured clients and influence the fortunes of their legatees.

Wynflæd's will (c. 950) The Anglo-Saxon noblewoman called Wynflæd is known from two Old English documents dating to the tenth century. In one, she appears as a witness to a charter granted by her grandson, King Eadgar (reigned 959-975). In the other, her will is preserved, as vivid an insight into the resources and influence of Early Medieval women of power and wealth as it is possible to conceive. It is absolutely packed with interest:

Wynflæd declares how she wishes to dispose of what she possesses, after her death. She bequeaths to the church [...] the better of her offering-cloths, and her cross; and to the refectory two silver cups for the community; and as a gift for the good of her soul a mancus of gold to every servant of God, and besides that one mancus to Ceolthryth and Othelbriht and Elsa [...]; and one pound to the community at Wilton and one mancus to Fugel.

Anglo-Saxon noblewomen were Christian by culture, faith and protocol. In Wynflæd's time they were expected to render a tithe on their land, to look after the poor, and endow individual churches and minsters with lavish gifts befitting their wealth and status.

.. And she bequeaths to her daughter Æthelflæd her engraved bracelet and her brooch, and the estate at Ebbesborne and the title-deed as a perpetual inheritance to dispose of as she pleases; and she grants to her the men and the stock and all that is on the estate except what shall be given from it both in men and stock for the sake of her soul.

Wynflæd's daughter is her principal beneficiary. The crucial clause here is 'perpetual inheritance to dispose of as she pleases': this is freehold land, independently owned by her regardless of any future marriage, and its possessions include the unfree labourers of farm, hall and bedchamber.

... And to Eadmær [she grants] the estates at Coleshill and Inglesham (?), and she grants to him also the estate at Faccombe, which was her marriage-gift, for his lifetime, and then after his death, if Æthelflæd survive him, she is to succeed to the estate at Faccombe, and after her death it is to revert to Eadwold's possession... And Wulfwaru is to be freed, and she is to serve whom she pleases... And Wulflæd is to be freed on condition that she serve Æthelflæd and Eadgifu [Wynflæd's daughters]. And she bequeaths to Eadgifu a woman-weaver and a seamstress, the one called Eadgifu, the other called Æthelgifu. And at Coleshill Æthelgyth and Bica's wife and Æffa and Beda and Gurhann's wife are to be freed; and Wulfwaru's sister, Brihtsiges wife, and [.....] the wright, and Wulfgyth, Ælfswith's daughter are to be freed. And if there be any penally enslaved man besides these whom she has enslaved, she trusts to her children that they will release him for her soul's sake.

If Wynflæd was generous in her bequests, she was also careful. Some bonded servants are to be freed, but her seamstress (semestre) and weaving mistress (crencestre), both of them unfree women of paradoxically high status because of their mastery of needle and loom, are to be inherited by her daughter. ... *And [she grants] to Ælfwold her two buffalo-horns and a horse and her red tent.* I am particularly taken with the tent – we know so little about how people travelled. A red tent must

have been a special possession, its covering presumably made from felted wool expensively dyed. We have some idea of a tent's shape from two frameworks retrieved from the Oseberg ship burial (see below): an A-frame of light, strong ash wood standing at either end with a connecting ridgepole; the whole stiffened with ground poles, held together with peg and tenon joints. Royal or noble courts on the move must have looked like mini-festivals, the clustered encampments of individual households picked out by their flags or banners. The two buffalo horns would have held ale or mead. The key feature of the Anglo-Saxon drinking horn is that it could not be put down without spilling all its contents: once raised it must be passed, or drained and then re-filled.

... *And she bequeaths to Æthelflæd, daughter of Ealhelm, Ælfhere's younger daughter, her double badger-skin (?) gown, and another of linen or else some linen cloth.* The double badger-skin gown is intriguing – it sounds wonderfully exotic and precious. The trouble is that the word Wynflæd uses to describe this garment, a cyrtel of twilibrocenan, is open to more than one interpretation, as Gale Owen revealed in a fascinating study of Wynflæd's wardrobe in a 1979 article for the journal *Anglo-Saxon England*. That broc can stem from the Old English word for badger is reasonable. But twilibrocenan sounds remarkably like the sophisticated 'broken twill' weaving technique of later centuries. If so, it provides evidence of a high level of craftswomanship and luxury.

And to Eadgifu two chests and in them her best bed-curtain and a linen covering and all the bed-clothing which goes with it [.....] and her best dun tunic, and the better of her cloaks, and her two wooden cups ornamented with dots, and her old filigree brooch which is worth six mancuses. And let there be given to her [.....] a long hall-tapestry and a short one and three seat coverings. And she grants to Ceolthryth whichever she prefers of her black tunics and her best holy veil and her best headband; and to Æthelflæd the White her [.....] gown and cap and headband, and afterwards Æthelflæd is to supply from her nun's vestments the best she can for Wulfflæd and Æthelgifu... And there are two large chests and a clothes' chest, and a little spinning box and two old chests.

Ceolthryth and Æthelflæd are, we understand from the context, in holy orders. They may have been collateral members of her family, foster-children or protégés in her favoured nunnery. The unspecified contents of the spinning box must have included a range of whorls and spindles, pin-beaters, needles and perhaps swatches.

Then she makes a gift to Æthelflæd of everything which is unbequeathed, books and such small things, and she trusts that she will be mindful of her soul. And there are also tapestries, one which is suitable for her, and the smallest she can give to her women. And she bequeaths to Cynelufu her share of the untamed horses which are with Eadmær's. And to Æthelflæd she grants [.....] the utensils and all the useful things that are inside, and also the homestead if the king grant it to her as King Edward granted it to Brihtwyn her mother. And Eadwold and his sister are to have her tame horses in common...

I think it by no means impossible that some, at least, of Wynflæd's personal wealth was generated from the profits of running a successful weaving workshop or atelier. That women in Anglo-Saxon England could and did own large estates and the slaves that came with them carries its own ironies. Most of the women whose names and lives have made it into the pages of this book belonged to a literate, Christian élite. Wealthy women lived more privileged lives than poor men. Poor women – free or unfree – are almost invisible to us. Their experiences are only ever witnessed by their mortal remains and possessions, recovered by archaeologists; or by inference.

An outstanding feature of the Early Medieval period, and beyond, is that violence and warfare, either professional or by chance, accounted for the early deaths of men whose property and influence in many cases passed to their widows. There is, therefore, a distinct class of affluent women with extensive powers of patronage who, like Wynflæd, were able to distribute favours and possessions and exercise moral, intellectual and creative power in an otherwise testosterone-driven world of martial glory and political intrigue. Peasant woman, such as those liberated by Wynflæd – the Æthelgyths and Wulfgyths – are by no means so easy to liberate from the bonds of obscurity.