Liberty and Power of Women in Medieval Feudalism: the cases of Theodelinda and Female Monasticism

Maria Angela Ielo*

Considering Middle Ages, the term "woman" seems to embody a whole series of negative connotations: in a fundamentally male-dominated society, with men having not only political power but also the right to education, women looked like a biological substitute for men, an almost necessary evil for the propagation of human species. Besides that, young girls were useful for the establishment of dynastic relations through royal matchmakings, organized by their parents at a very early age, so they were following a particular education for the purpose of motherhood and home management. Considered to be weak creatures needing protection, they were legally subjected at first to their father and brothers and afterwards to their husband. The daughters of slaves had to take care of their families and were also obliged to serve the noble families of the fief they belonged. Free women that did not belong to the lower classes could contribute economically to their households working for others: care of animals, even large ones, agricultural work, shepherding, and milking, were considered unqualified, and thus underpaid, labor. Some jobs, such as spinning and weaving of flax and

* Maria Angela Ielo is a member of the Teaching and Research Staff of the Department of Italian Language and Literature at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.

wool, clothmaking and brewing, were done at home. Moreover, some women had practical knowledge of midwifery practiced in an empirical and informal manner.[1] A married woman, almost always, was helping her husband in his activity, that usually was not very far from their place of residence; thus, after her wedding she could become a farmer or a baker, sell food or fish, make items from wood or leather. By the 13th century, with the re-emergence of the towns, a woman could also be an assistant blacksmith, glassmaker, mason, or stonemason.[2]

Even though Charlemagne's *capitulares* provided for free education, available to anyone with the skills, only a few girls learned to read and even fewer knew how to write. Those who were regulars in the convents were more educated and knew Latin quite well, a necessary skill for the performance of religious rites. Whoever wanted his daughter to learn writing and arithmetic, mainly for practical reasons, usually paid a tutor to teach the girl at home.[3] Family chronicles, designed to preserve for the descendants the memory of their origin, emphasized the educational progress of male children, while almost never contained any hint of female education.[4] However, princesses had to learn reading and writing, since it was possible that they might eventually be crowned and reign. The daughters of the Lombard kings were educated; King Desiderius' daughter Adelperga, who lived in the 7th century and married Arechis II, Duke of Benevento, had been taught philosophy and the classics in her youth in Pavia by the historian Paul the Deacon; and, Charlemagne's daughters had studied liberal arts, which were the basis of the formal

1. B. A. Hamawalt, "Medieval English women in rural and urban domestic space", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 52 (1988) 19-26; M. Schaus, *Women and gender in medieval Europe*, New York: Routledge 2006, pp. 13 and 561.
2. M. P. Zamboni, "Donne al lavoro nell'edilizia medioevale", *Archivio storico italiano* 172, 1, (2014) 109-132; P. Bernardi, "Pour une étude du rôle des femmes dans le bâtiment au Moyen Age", *Provence Historique* 173 (1993) 268-277.
3. D. Balestracci, *Cilastro che sapeva leggere. Alfabetizzazione e istruzione nelle campagne toscane alla fine del medioevo (XIV-XVI secolo)*, Ospedaletto: Pacini Editore 2004, pp. 45-46.
4. *Ibid*., p. 43.

education of that period.[5] The situation gradually changed since 1300 when, due to the development of towns and the relevant demographic growth, the literacy of male citizens expanded so much as to include part of female population.

In the Early Middle Ages, education was exclusively for a male audience, at least until the re-emergence of the towns and the 12th century non-religious schools, and it was conducted by ecclesiastical men who, in order to keep their celibacy vows, had to physically and psychologically distance themselves from women, thus observing properly the precepts of Christianity. For this reason, woman, a temptation by nature and already theologically characterized by the fact that she offered Adam the forbidden fruit, had to remain almost on the margins of medieval society, subjected to strict codes of conduct, functioning as a means of control exercised over them by her mother and the males of the family. The principles of chastity and sexual temperance regulated her existence according to the spiritual and sensible precepts of the time, which had now undermined the commands of physical pleasures; these pleasures were allowed only to men, as in ancient times, but the Church recommended even to them a kind of moderate behaviour, at least in the relations with their wife.

So, we can divide the women of the Middle Ages into four categories: the virgins, who completely deprived of physical pleasures; the wives, who were integrated into a family and reproductive environment as mothers of legitimate children; the divorced, who retired to a convent, if they did not remarry; and the widows. The latter, usually after their husband's death (who often died at war), if they were rich enough, devoted themselves to raising their children, however it was not uncommon for them to later turn to the monastic life, helping and supporting the sacred institutions that accepted them. Among all those

5. G. Salvioli, *L'Istruzione pubblica in Italia nei sec. VIII, IX e X*, Firenze: Sansoni 1898, p. 45. Adelperga was Adelchis' sister, who became famous in European Romanticism thanks to Alessandro Manzoni's eponymous tragedy (between 1820 and 1822) and its adaptation into an opera by Giuseppe Apolloni.

female figures, who were deliberately wiped out by the written sources of the time, there were, however, some who possessed wealth, power, and freedom of action.

In almost every aristocratic family there was often a girl destined from her infancy to become a future abbess of a convent. This meant that, in addition to becoming the bride of Christ, she had to be able to guide and run a religious community quite structured and possibly as large and rich as a fief. In the Early Middle Ages, historians and chronographers almost never described women for their actions, unlike men, but portrayed them in their writings only in reference to their social status as daughters, wives, mothers, and nuns.[6]

Queens, princesses, and daughters of the feudal nobility of the period could choose between marriage and monastic life. According to Lombard Laws, a woman, unlike her husband, had no civil rights. Nevertheless, her husband could not exercise unlimited power over her. Furthermore, after the consummation of the marriage, a woman had the right to formally receive the "mongergabio", that is, one quarter of her husband's property, which, although she did not manage it directly, belonged to her in practice and could not be sold or given without her consent.[7] Until the 12th century, this little treasure stood for a source of financial security for many women, even the less wealthy, who could have direct access to this money to support themselves and their children, in case of

6. I. Mortimer, *The time traveler's guide to medieval England*, London: Vintage 2009, p. 53.
7. The *mongergabio* or *premium virginatis* was the so-called "morning gift", i.e., the gift given to the wife by her husband after the wedding night. This tradition of germanic origin came from Lombardy and is mentioned in the *Edictum Rothari* (issued by the king himself in the palace at Pavia in 643). If a wife denied it, her family guarded it, and in case of widowhood or divorce they could add it to the woman's dowry, if she got married again (*Rothari Edictus*, cap. 82). This gift is best defined in Liutprand's *Leges*, who determined its amount to one quarter (Liutprando, *Leges*, cap. 7), which the woman could keep and include in her entire heritance. The tradition survived in southern Italy during the Normandic period. Cf. G. L. Barni, *I Longobardi in Italia*, Novara: Istituto Geografico de Agostini 1987; C. Azzara - S. Gasparri, *Le leggi dei Longobardi, storia, memoria e diritto di un popolo germanico*, Roma: Viella 2005, and P. Delogu, *Storia d' Italia. Longobardi e Bizantini*, Torino: Utet 1980.

their husbands' death.[8] Also, the mother was able to pass on her social status to her children, as evidenced by some articles from the *Edictum Rothari*, where we read clearly that a woman could influence the social status of her descendants.[9] Royal women were therefore able to claim for their children even the right to the throne, regardless of their father's origin or social status. But all this often created some confusion and above all family conflicts, even bloody ones, so an attempt was made to somehow regulate and control the princesses' matchmakings, through their marriages with princes and nobles, with whom the family decided to establish kinship for political or economic reasons. If the girl or the lady refused the marriage or for some reason the promise was not kept by either party, the gates of the convent opened for her, where she took her vows and became a nun; or again, if she was not very young, she could retain her secular status, devote herself to charity and deny, in any case, carnal pleasures. Endogamic marriages, that is marriages between members of the nobility in a state, were intended to strengthen relations between the various feuds, so that they should support each other in the case of external threats. On the contrary, marriages between kingdoms and empires were of international character and aimed at forging new relations with other European rulers, in order to establish good relations between them. All this contributed to the expansion of the borders of the feud and to the strengthening of political power.[10]

8. M. Fumagalli Beonio Brocchieri, in J. Le Goff (ed.) *L'uomo medievale*, Bari: Laterza 2006, p. 326.

9. Cap. 219 of the *Edictum Rothari* states that if a semi-free man marries his slave or the slave of another man, the children she will give birth to, will be slaves of the slaveowner of their mother: "Si aldius ancillam suam aut alterius tulerit ad uxorem, filii, qui ex ea nascunt". If again the woman is liberated from the status of a slave and becomes a legal wife, her children will also be free and legal heirs of their father as cap. 2 repeats: "De ancilla matrimonii gratia. Si quis ancillam suam propriam matrimoniare voluerit sibi ad uxorem, sit ei licentiam; tamen debeat eam libera thingare, sic libera, quod est wirdibora, et legerimam facere per gairethinx. Tunc intellegatur libera et legetima uxor, et filii, qui ex ea nati fuerint, legetimi heredes patri efficiantur". The term *gairethinx* denoted the assembly of free and armed men, while the term *wirdibora* the status of a free woman.

10. L. Cannizzaro, "Il potere femminile nell'Alto Medioevo", *Bollettino della Società*

The case of Queen Theodelinda (died between 616 and 626) is of special importance regarding women's liberty and power. Her biographer Paul the Deacon reserves for her a prominent position in his famous work *Historia Langobardorum*, written about two centuries later.[11] Undoubtedly, the queen had acted with great intelligence, inaugurating wonderful relations between her people and the papacy. She was a great admirer of Pope Gregory the Great and even managed, with the support of her husband, to encourage the conversion of the Lombards to Catholicism.[12] The Roman Catholic Church was also grateful for the basilica of St. John the Baptist (today, the cathedral of the city) built by her in Monza, where the royal couple had their summer residence. The building holds a prominent position in *Historia Langobardorum*, since Paul the Deacon, referring to the military campaign launched by Emperor Constans II to expel the Lombards from Italy, records the prophecy of a hermit, who said that as long as St. John the Baptist's basilica remains in worthy hands, the Lombards will be in power.

It was determined by fate, after all, that Theodelinda would have a glorious future: on her mother's side, she descended from the legendary Lethingian dynasty, predecessor of the Lombard dynasty. This kinship proved of grave importance, since it could validate the legitimacy of the Lombard monarchy.[13] Born a German princess to duke Garibald I of Bavaria, she was married in 589 to Authari, king of the Lombards, by whom she had a daughter.[14] When she was widowed, she voluntarily

Friulana di Archeologia, 2, XIX, (2015) and in *Archeomedia*, Rivista di Archeologia on line, 2018, p. 4.

11. Paolo Diacono, *Storia dei Longobardi*, transl. in Italian by L. Capo, Milano 1992.

12. H. Taviani Carozzi, "Vivre en paix dans la société lombarde: Paul Diacre et Grégoire le Grand", in C. Carozzi - D. Le Blevec - H. Taviani Carozzi (eds), *Vivre in société au Moyen Age. Occident chrétien, VI-XV siècle*, Aix-en-Provence 2008, pp. 27-38.

13. Paolo Diacono, *op.cit.*, pp. 256-260; G. Maroni, "Teodolinda: immagine e metamorfosi di una regina tra Medioevo ed Età Moderna", *Aevum* 90, 2 (2016) 293-332 (here: p. 295).

14. Gundeberga, daughter of Theodelinda and Authari, was married first to Arioald, duke of Turin (who later became king of the Lombards) and after his death to Rothari (famous for his laws included in his *Edictum*) who had in the meantime become king

chose to marry Agilulf, the new duke of Turin and Athari's brother-in-law; according to Paul the Deacon, she showed her preference by offering him a cup of wine from which she had drunk first.[15] After the death of her second husband in 616, Theodelinda ruled as a regent for her son Adaloald, and was loved dearly by her people, who after her death (627) kept her relics in the basilica established by her, and honoured her with a popular cult, considering her almost a saint. Paul the Deacon himself seems fascinated by this woman's brilliant personality when in his *Historia* represents her as the one who, having embraced Christianity, acted for the Church as a mediator of divine will to the people and the clergy.

Certainly, Theodelinda was a woman of great merit and many talents, but to rule alone and totally independent for ten years was neither easy nor insignificant, especially in a period that women had but minimum liberty. According to Paul the Deacon, for ten years she was regent for her son, still a boy, who at the age of two, had been crowned in Milan before his father, to secure the future of the dynasty. Mother and son (who was baptized a Catholic) restored many churches and made significant donations to several sacred places.[16] *Historia Langobardorum* emphasizes the value of the queen's achievements, while tends to pass quickly and

of this people.

15. Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* III,35. The event is depicted in a magnificent fresco in the chapel of the above-mentioned cathedral in Monza, in one of many scenes from the queen's life, painted in her memory by the artists of Zavattari family in the 15th century, commissioned by duke Filippo Maria Visconti. The whole story of the Lombard queen is deployed in forty-five frescoes through various scenes of her life, from her marriage to Atharis, who became the monarch of the whole of Italy (he gained the power throughout the country, when he put under his control the town of Reggio in Calabria, located at the furthest point of the peninsula), to her second marriage to Agilulf in Lomello, near Pavia, and to her dream of a dove, a sign foreshadowing the founding of the basilica in Monza. The dove represents the queen's Christian faith, firmly attested by the starting of the construction of the church and the subsequent destruction of pagan idols, from the material of which new liturgical items were made. The rest of the scenes represent the donation of a treasure to the basilica, Agilulf's death, the sending of gifts by Pope Gregory the Great, and queen's death.

16. Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* IV, 41.

without explanation unpleasant incidents occurred in the court during her rule – e.g., because of the young king's capricious nature, his own loyal feudal lords eventually dethroned him, proclaiming king his brother-in-law Arioald.[17] But, for ten years before those unfortunate events, the queen had managed to claim the kingdom for herself and enjoy an unhindered rule after the death of her second husband. However, under Lombard law, as a widow she was not allowed to rule alone, as she may have sought. Theodelinda thus found herself before three alternatives: she could get married for the third time, or enthrone her son-in-law Arioald, Gundeberga's husband, or again to give the rule to her son, who had reached the age of thirteen and was no longer a kid. Theodelinda chose none of them and managed to rule on behalf of her son for another ten years. She definitely had friends and enemies and lived in a complicated political environment with various courtly intrigues, that eventually caused Adaloald's death in 626, who passed away probably poisoned by his brother-in-law Arioald. Unfortunately, the life of a queen, who enjoyed such liberty, could not possibly be untouched by shadows: the Frankish historian Fredegar, who expresses his great detest for her and her son in his *Chronicle*,[18] claimed that the queen ordered the murder of her own brother Gundoald in 612. Indeed, Theodelinda could have ordered such a crime, for which no culprit was ever found, as noted by the same Frankish chronographer.[19] But it really seemed impossible that a woman in those times would be so free and ruthless as to kill a first-degree relative, so historians generally preferred to imply and indirectly suggest that the crime was committed by her husband Agilulf. However, the king was already ill at that time –he died three years later– and he probably would not have been strong enough to order assassinations and devise dark conspiracies. On the other hand, in terms of dynasty, Gundoald could in fact overstep the priority of succession of the hereditary prince, who was still very young and under

17. *Ibid*.
18. *Cronaca di Fredegario* IV, 49.
19. *Ibid*. IV, 40.

the legal guardianship of a woman, which is why modern historians consider it plausible that the queen wanted at all costs to safeguard the interests of her son and, above all, her own. Fredegar further accused Adaloald that he wanted to leave his kingdom in the hands of the Byzantines, deceived by the bad advice of a Greek ambassador. Although Paul the Deacon briefly pointed out the king's psychological problems, he tried to conceal this serious episode, ascribing Adaloald's thoughtless actions and his deception to his mental state. In an environment where the king had problems such as these and the princes and barons hardly tolerated his bad decisions, Theodelinda shined all alone: the only woman of her time destined to become a living legend; thanks to her actions, as Paul the Deacon describes, the Byzantines of Constantine III were prevented from wresting Italy from the rule of the Lombard King Grimoald.[20] According to the Lombard historian, it seems that a prophecy had warned the Byzantine emperor that the queen of Italy had placed her country under the protection of St. John of Monza, whose great basilica had been built by order of Theodelinda. Thanks to divine will the day had not yet come when the church and the whole kingdom would be ruled by corrupt and greedy hands: only then would the basilica surrender and the Lombards would lose everything.[21]

The case of Theodelinda seems truly unique: first of all, she manages, through her illustrious and legendary house, to further refine the Lombard people. At a very young age she marries a powerful king and then persuades him to establish significant relations with the Church, for which the queen proved to be a well-loved person, despite the disagreement of some prelates. After Authari's death, she chooses a new husband by herself, always a Lombard and always a king, and after his death she rules officially with her son, but actually alone for ten whole years. She may have been the only woman of her time to have so much liberty and power. We must reach the mid-12th century, to find another great queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, who managed to have the freedom

20. C. La Rocca, *Donne al potere, le regine nell'Alto Medioevo*, Firenze 1998.
21. Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* V, 6.

to exercise similar power and to conduct, through two royal marriages, that delicate political game in which the superpowers of France, Spain, and England participated.

There were also some chatelaines who, unlike other women, did not always live so badly. At that time, a woman's position was determined exclusively by her wealth, that is, her real estate. Women could inherit even vast areas of land and if their husbands were at war or were long absent on diplomatic missions or for various political reasons, or died decimated by battles and diseases, they could administer them, waiting until their orphan children, growing up under the guardianship of a pope or an emperor, a king, or a bishop, come of age. Some girls were sent by their own family to a convent as early as the age of seven or eight, so that they could easily get used to and accept the monastic habit, for which they were destined from their birth, for property, dynastic, and mainly religious reasons. Besides them, there were also noble ladies, widows or divorced largely for political reasons (the Church had forbidden divorce, but if a high-ranking nobleman wanted to annul his marriage, he could use the pretext of a marriage between cousins or blood relatives that took place in his ignorance), who did not want to marry again. Some noble ladies, but also peasant women, chose the monastic habit because of their religious inclination or as a refuge from the violence of their own husbands, as well as to avoid so many pregnancies and constant childbirths, which recorded the highest mortality rates for the females. To be able to analyze correctly today the heterogeneous and always silenced faces of medieval femininity, we should initially place them in the context of the various periods that constituted them and, above all, understand them in the social context in which women were living: the family, the castle, the court, and the convent. The latter, in a surprising way, enclosed within its walls all the male and female typology of the time, since it welcomed men and women of any social class. Women who became nuns may have come from noble, court, or peasant families. Regardless their social origin, all of them came from a geographical reality, with which the local monasteries had relations of systematic

interaction. In the figure of the nun of that time we can capture a number of characteristics about the life of women, because most of them, before taking the monastic vows, had already been daughters and sometimes wives, mothers, and widows. Detailed study of the documents found in these convents and in various local dioceses discloses the life of these women, who do not seem to have remained on the margins of their society.[22] Indeed, within the monastic world remarkable personalities developed (Queen Theodelinda herself chose to retire during the last years of her life to the abbey of Saint-Maurice d'Agaune in Valais near present-day Switzerland), who were distinguished for their passionate religious inclination, such as Saint Scholastica[23] (St. Benedict's of Nursia twin sister), or for spiritual reasons, such as the renown Bavarian abbess Hildegard of Bingen, a writer, poetess, composer, mystic, and theologian, canonized in 2012 by Pope Benedict XVI[24].

22. V. M. Talò, "Per una fenomenologia del monachesimo femminile nel Medioevo", *s*, *Rivista Internazionale di Teologia e Cultura "Communio"*, 198 (2004) 44-52.

23. Saint Scholastica was born c. 480 in Nursia. Her father Eutropius Anicius descended from an ancient Roman family of senators and was a Roman governor general in the province of Nursia. Her mother Claudia Abondantia Reguardati died giving birth to her and her twin brother (St. Benedict of Nursia, future founder of the famous Abbey of Monte Cassino). Disturbed by the dissolute life in Rome, where the twins went to study at an early age, Benedict abandoned his worldly life, disclaiming his great inheritance for the benefit of his sister. So, Scholastica inherited a respectable family fortune and was therefore a sought-after bride, but she asked her father's permission to dedicate herself to religious life. It was with a sore heart that Eutropius Anicius gave Scholastica the permission to devote herself to God, remembering a vow he had made after his wife's death, namely, to dedicate his daughter to the Lord. She first joined her brother at the Abbey of Monte Cassino and then established a convent at Piumarola, 7 km south of the Abbey, following the Rule of St. Benedict with her sisters. She is traditionally regarded as the founder of the Benedictine Nuns. For more information on St. Scholastica, see *I Dialoghi di San Gregorio Magno*, Libro II, cap. 33, edited by B. Calati - A. Stendardi, Città Nuova 2001; P. Guérin, *Vies des Saints des Petits Bollandistes*, vol. II, Paris: Bloud et Barral 1876, pp. 416-420; C. Calino, *S. Scolastica Vergine, riflessi storici e morali sopra alcuni Santi dell' Ordine di San Benedetto*, Venezia: Recurti 1725, pp. 233-251.

24. Hildegard of Bingen was a multi-talented personality and polymath active as a writer, poetess, medical writer and practitioner, philosopher, composer, linguist, and political counsellor. Born in Rhineland (1098-1179) into a large noble family, she was sent to the Benedictine convent at Disibodenberg, due to her frail health, where she was educated

The convent was an ideal place not only for nuns but also for widowed queens, late-born princesses, and even ladies considered by their families to be an "obstacle" to the interests of the dynasty or because a scandal had to be covered up or avoided or for other reasons. It also represented a shelter for women who had followed the path of immorality, for victims of abuse or exploitation, for afflicted women living in misery, for all the destitute women.

As to the nobility, monasteries were effective mechanisms for creating saints, whom the various houses competed to bring into the line of their kinsmen, but also abbesses of strong character, who, though driven by genuine Christian feelings, continued to work for their house while promoting religious art and education. Sometimes, certain highly competent and educated abbesses became a great political and diplomatic tool, succeeding in resolving complex political issues connected with their powerful house or the Church, that could harm the peace and prosperity of entire kingdoms. And if the German Hildegard of Bingen, in a letter to St. Bernard of Clairvaux in 1146, introduces herself as a poor and simple-minded woman whose spirit is guided solely by the divine will, predetermined to endow her with so many virtues that she could converse with the mighty of the earth[25], some years later the French

by abbess Jutta of Sponheim, a cultured noblewoman retired to the convent. After Jutta's death, Hildegard inherited her title. From the age of four, she was experiencing visions and divine signs that she never communicated. Followed by a number of novice nuns, she founded a new convent in her hometown and dedicated it to St. Rupert and then established a new religious community at Eibingen, on the opposite side of the Rhine, which is still in operation today. Hildegard often came into conflict with the traditional clergy and managed to change the monastic perceptions of her time, proposing open preaching even outside the walls of the monastery. Although she always maintained her humility, she was interested in the reform of the Church and the morality of the clergy and debated with doctors and theologians of her time, sometimes disagreeing with them. But in general, her ideas were successful, to the extent that Pope Eugene III read some of her writings at the Council of Trier in 1147. For more information on Hildegard see Cl. Fiocchi, "Profezia, filosofia e razionalità nel mondo di Ildegarda di Bingen", *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia* 61, 1 (2006) 93-107; L. Grisci, *La mistica scienziata. "La Physica" di Ildegarda da Bingen*, Tesi di Laurea, Università di Tor Vergata, 2018.

25. Hildegard of Bingen, *PL*, 197, 189C.

Héloïse, abbess of the Benedictine convent of Paraclete near Troyes, will establish a Rule for women, asking the celebrated philosopher Abelard, already her husband, who had also retired to a monastery, to draw up regulations, which, although inspired by the Benedictines, would not be so strict, so they could be applied by those women who wanted to serve God but were physically weaker than men.[26] For this request, Héloïse uses part of the liberty she is entitled to as an abbess, provided by her duties and obligations to her sisters, but she also takes the liberty for a privileged communication with her famous former lover, even if she struggles to speak with him under the guise of a sister in Christ. The Rule of St. Benedict for Women, finally composed by Abelard, was widely disseminated, since it was preceded by only a few and vague rules dictated by St. Augustine, who had tried to address this problem in *Epistula CCXI ad Sanctimoniales*, and by Caesarius of Arles in *Regula ad Virgines*. In her correspondence with her lover, Héloïse will finally understand, albeit painfully, that spiritual love can offer infinite freedom, without the torments of the oppressive bonds of the flesh and social rules that had forced her separation from her lover.[27]

26. In her letter to Abelard the abbess explains: "It is a fact that those who drew up the rules for monks said nothing about nuns and even ordained duties they knew were utterly unsuitable for them. By so doing, they plainly implied that "the necks of the bullock and the heifer were not to be weighed by the same yoke" of a rule. It is not fitting that those whom nature made unequal in strength should be made equal in work", concluding: "While you are still alive, my lord, it is incumbent upon you to provide rules for us to follow for all time. You are, after God, the founder of this place; through God you established our community; together with God you should be the director of our religious life". *Epistolario*, II, 6. Antonio Paciello, *Epistolario di Abelardo e di Eloisa*, Torino: Utet 2013 (digital publication).

27. The famous love story between Abelard and Héloïse began when the French theologian and philosopher was already 37 years old and at the height of his fame in Paris. Héloïse was an educated and intelligent seventeen-year-old girl. Orphaned since her childhood, she was educated by her uncle, the Canon Fulbert, first at the convent of Argenteuil and then at home. Fulbert asked Abelard to teach philosophy to his intelligent niece, which proved to be a fatal decision, since those two fell in love. When Fulbert found out, furious at the scandal, Héloïse and Abelard ran away together; she was already pregnant, without having married her lover. At some point they attempted to make their story known and return to Paris to get married. Everything seemed to

By encouraging their daughters to enter a convent, the royal houses strengthened their power, gave it a sacred character, but also perpetuated it by remembering what works were due to saints and abbesses descended from their own house. Indeed, it was important that a family in power owned, along with the places where these noble ladies lived and acted, a reliquary with their relics to be worshipped, becoming eventually a popular legend due to the miracles attributed to it by the people.[28]

The convents acquired land property of various sizes, given by the families as a dowry to the girls who took the veil. Further income came from the widows who entered the convent, and also from local authorities, benefactors and devoted believers. As far as the bequests and donations of the nobility were concerned, the motive for this generosity was not so much the pursuit of financial interest on the part of the donors as their effort to create patronage for the protection and strengthening of their fief or community. Abbesses and nuns from wealthy families enjoyed greater liberty and, if they were not in a convent with strict rules, they could go out and join their families in Sunday meals and in various religious events, such as Christenings, weddings, feasts, and mourning. When a girl of noble birth entered a convent, she was usually destined to become the future abbess, although not necessarily in the convent where she had been trained.

Through the governance of the monastic community headed by the abbesses, other prestigious missions arose: those women had the task of consolidating the interests of their house of origin, which, by dedicating one of its precious daughters to God, expressed the desire to elevate

be settled, but Héloïse's uncle could not bear the scandal and decided to take savage revenge. He hired professional killers to sneak into the philosopher's house at night, surprise and castrate him. Fulbert spread the news and Abelard, devastated by his new physical condition that humiliated him as a man, decided to become a monk. However, he continued his studies, and his philosophical theories on Aristotelianism brought him great success but also hatred, and violent debates with other intellectuals of the time. Héloïse, not even twenty years old, took the veil at the convent in Argenteuil and later became an abbess in the convent of Paraclete, designed and built especially for her by Abelard. Cf. Abelard, *Historia calamitatum mearum*, trans. by A. Crocco, Napoli 1969.

28. G. Duby, *Il cavaliere, la donna, il prete*, Roma/Bari: Laterza 2003, pp. 110-124.

itself to spiritual honours, which far exceeded earthly possessions. The renunciation of marriage, family and all worldly pleasures glorified the virginity of these daughters, while the choice of lifelong residence in the convent represented the bond between secular and spiritual authority, causing the dichotomy that drastically affected the family from which the new bride of Christ descended. Having the Church on one's side was probably much more important than a simple alliance with another feud, and the superficial reluctance shown sometimes by parents, as to their daughter's decision to become a nun, was, on the contrary, covertly useful to demonstrate before everyone the unlimited power of the divine will, which impelled the young and beautiful daughter to become the bride of Jesus, while around her the now happy family wept with emotion, because she had been conquered by this pious and imperative desire. The young nun was full of benign feelings, love and charity for her neighbour; yet she already knew that once she became abbess, she would have to exercise a governmental type of authority in a convent probably as vast as a fief. In this way, family roles ended up being reversed: the daughter assumed the role of the leader, while the father and the men of the family were the defenders of the community she represented.

Religious women were able to organize and run important convents, including those that practiced the rule of reclusion. These institutions, often confronted with the culture and the powerful of their time, were frequently involved in political and social events and may have been linked to the kingdom or even to the survival of the great empires of Europe. Whoever ruled them had to be able to create alliances and good relations with other rulers. Hildegard of Bingen often travelled to Europe to meet the powerful. Having an excellent education, she could even rise to the level of a counsellor to popes and kings and thus actively participated in the political games of the time.

Therefore, staying in the monastery did not deprive the noble ladies of their liberty, but was the means to acquire even more. In addition to frequent contacts with the powerful, good administration also required

the exercise of public administration with local secular authorities. Before the emergence of the great cathedrals of the cities between the 11th and 12th centuries[29], monasteries also functioned as schools and communes, as in the case of the convent run by Gisela, abbess of Chelles (757-810), the daughter of Pepin the Short and the sister of Charlemagne.[30] This princess-abbess oversaw one of the most prolific nuns' scriptorium and had befriended the famous scholar Alcuin of York, abbot of Marmoutier Abbey (732-804), one of the most important intellectual architects of the Carolingian Renaissance; through their regular correspondence, they collaborated and exchanged advice on various readings and on finding new texts to copy and preserve. As we can see, these were discussions and intellectual communication of a very high level and not just simple teachings to a young girl in a convent school.[31] For reasons mentioned above, the abbesses travelled frequently, to the extent that the Council of Aachen in 816 attempted to put some limits on all this liberty, proposing stricter rules and justifications for their activities; however, this decision ultimately did not affect seriously the movements of these women, who continued to travel freely.[32]

There were also double monasteries, consisting of monks and nuns, under the administration of an abbess. The legitimacy of an abbess in this position was due not only to the power of the family from which she descended, but also to the veneration of Mary in the Catholic Church during the Early Middle Ages. The Benedictine fraternity of Fontevraud, founded by Robert of Arbrissel in 1099, consisted of two communities, one of monks and one of nuns, headed with the abbess. As a representative of Virgin Mary, she could hold all the highest

29. G. Duby, *L' arte e la società medioevale*, Bari: Laterza 1999, pp. 15-90.
30. Eginardo, *Vitae Karoli Magni*, capp. XVIII-XIX, in *Vida de Carlomagno*, ed. by P. J. Castiella, Zaragoza: Castellano 2016.
31. Cf. A. Rapetti, "Il monachesimo femminile in Italia nei secoli VIII-XI: famiglia, potere, memoria", *Reti Medievali* 20, 1 (2019) 567-578, add Edith Ennen, *Le donne nel Medioevo*, Bari: Laterza 1990, pp. 65-67.
32. J. Le Goff, "La donna nascosta nel Medioevo, la voce della storia", *Archeologia viva* 94 (2004) 77.

powers prescribed, such as the selection of novice monks and nuns, the organization of the hierarchy of the monastery, the presentation of religious events, the regulation of visits and travel permissions, the supervision of food stores. Even the monastery of the Holy Saviour, founded in the region of Avellino in Italy by the hermit Guglielmo da Vercelli, was a double monastery, headed by an abbess.[33] These double monasteries fulfilled a dual need: a nunnery was an easy prey to external attacks and violent incidents, especially when there were no men in the family to protect the daughter-abbess. The power and liberty of each abbess was limited by one thing only: the survival of the men in her family. On the other hand, the nuns also needed one or more priests to administer the sacraments and it was not always possible for them to come from other places, often quite far away.

As we have seen, in the Early Middle Ages, there were certain categories of women, mainly among the wealthier classes, who, exercising power, achieved a large share of liberty for themselves. Our information on the subject comes at most from sources and chronicles recounting historical and family events of the prominent houses; on the contrary, we have little reports about women belonging to the less wealthy social classes. Queens and abbesses of noble birth have been able to gain liberty to a great extent, integrated into their administrative duties. However, they did not remain an isolated phenomenon, as their example paved the way for other less privileged women, who many times tried to somehow free themselves from a life of despair, violence, and deprivation, to claim certain types of liberty, precisely by participating in the institutions administered by those privileged women. The 12th and 13th centuries, with the re-emergence of towns, the flourishing of trade, and the spread of secular schools, increased women's desire to become educated and more involved in community life.

Nevertheless, in order to have a valid and true woman emancipation we have had to wait for the 21st century and live through many periods

33. A. Valerio, *Il potere delle donne nella Chiesa, Giuditta, Chiara e le altre*, Bari/Roma: Laterza 2016.

full of struggles and difficulties for all women. These struggles are not over yet; they are revived amid the harshness of social inequality between peoples, and sometimes religious fanaticism. But the way has been paved: even in periods of light and darkness, women have always pursued their path to freedom of action, freedom to love, social liberty, and freedom of thought and spirit.