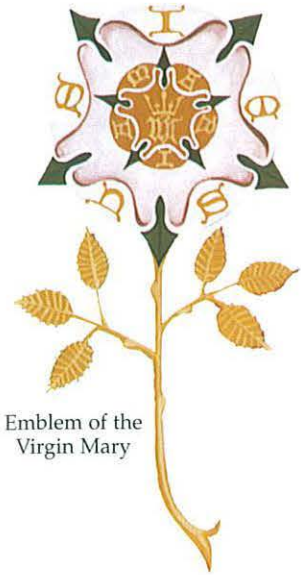


Eyewitness MEDIEVAL LIFE

Written by
ANDREW LANGLEY

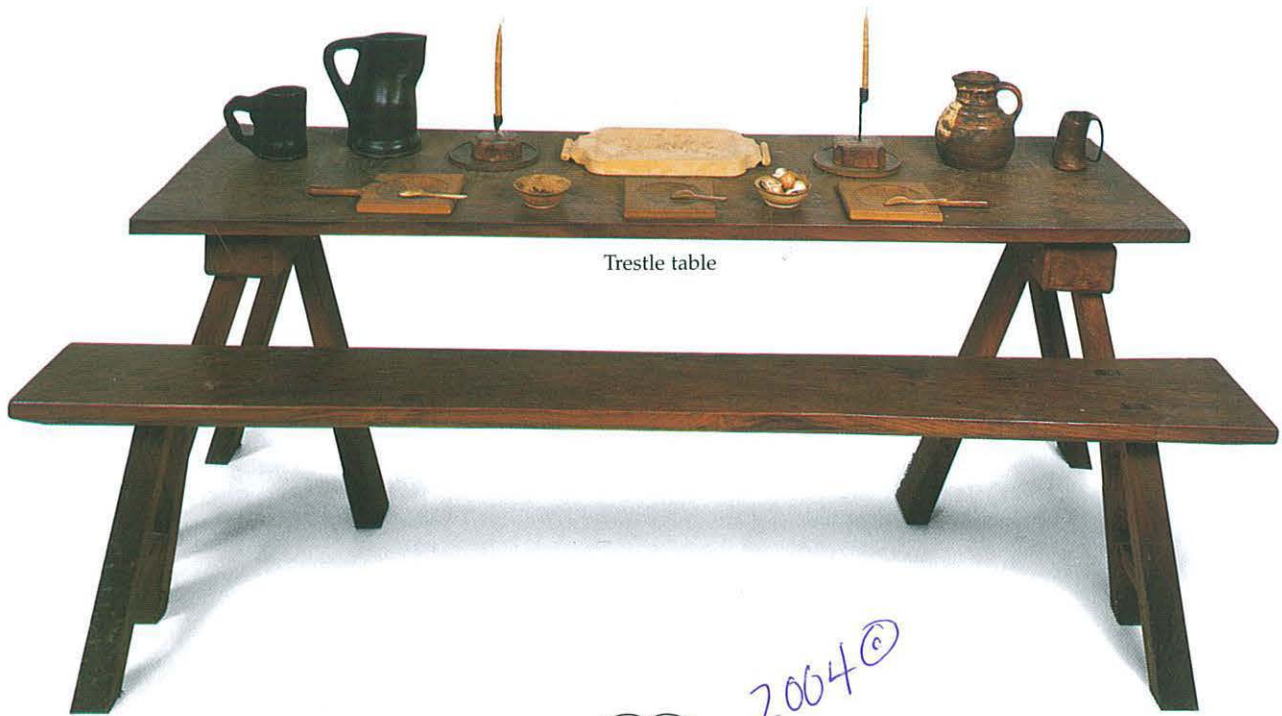
Photographed by
GEOFF BRIGHTLING & GEOFF DANN



Emblem of the
Virgin Mary



Medieval badge
of Christ



Trestle table

2004 ©



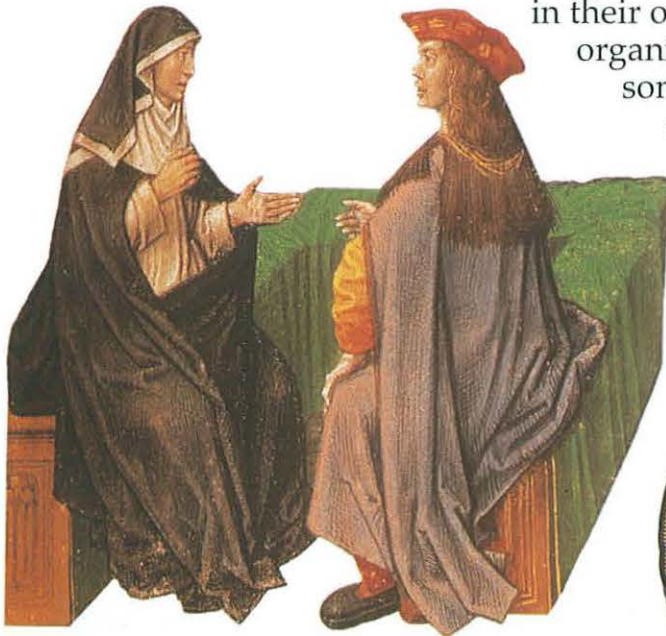
DK Publishing, Inc.



Medieval women

“IT IS CLEAR,” wrote a French priest in 1386, “that man is much nobler than woman, and of greater virtue.” The medieval Church looked on women as inferior to men and taught that they should be meek and obedient to their fathers and husbands. But the real lives of women in the Middle Ages were rather different. Not all of them stayed quietly at home; most had to work for a living. Peasant women toiled alongside their husbands in the fields as well as having to feed and clothe their families. The wives and daughters of craftsmen were often employed in the workshop and frequently operated as tradeswomen in their own right. Wealthy ladies organized large households and sometimes ran their husbands’ affairs. However, only a few powerful abbesses, noblewomen, and queens had any influence on national events.

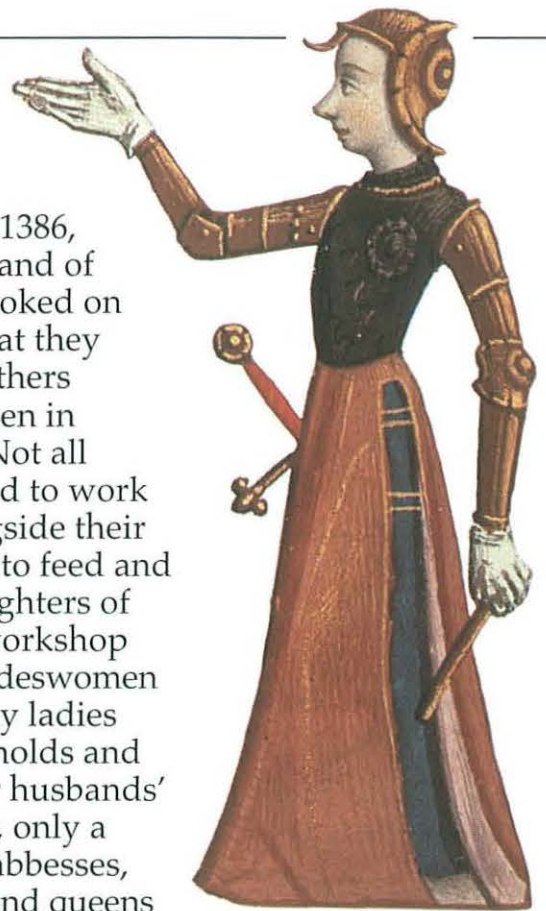
KEEP IT COVERED
Although young single women often wore their hair loose, married women were expected to keep their hair covered in a linen “wimple” as a sign of modesty.



GET THEE TO A NUNNERY
Many unmarried gentlewomen entered convents and nunneries, where they lived lives similar to those of monks (pp. 36–39). Nunneries offered women the opportunity to lead a devout life and also to obtain an education and take on responsibilities denied them in the outside world. As local landowners and employers, many abbesses were important figures in the community (above).



HOLDING THE FORT
This noblewoman has collapsed on hearing of her husband’s death. Many women took on the responsibility of running large estates when their husbands died in battle or were away at court or on a crusade (p. 28). They settled local disputes, managed the farms, and handled finances. Some women even fought battles, defending their castles when they were under siege.



THE MAID OF ORLEANS
St. Joan (1412–1431) was a French peasant’s daughter who, at the age of 13, heard voices telling her to drive the invading English army out of France. Dressed in armor, she led the French troops to a great victory at the besieged town of Orleans. However, Joan was later betrayed and sold to the English, who burned her as a witch.



WOMEN OF WEALTH
Landowners, male or female, were powerful figures in medieval society, and an unmarried woman of property had equal legal rights with men. She could make a will, and sign documents with her own seal – this 13th-century seal belonged to a French noblewoman called Elizabeth of Sevorc. However, when a woman married, she forfeited her land and rights to her husband. On his death she was entitled to a third of his land with which to support herself.



SPINSTERS
Spinning was done almost entirely by women using hand-held spindles like this one (the spinning wheel was introduced from India in the 13th century). Many single women earned a living in this way, hence the term "spinster" for an unmarried woman.

Wool twists into thread as the spindle twirls



AN EARLY FEMINIST
Christine de Pisan (1364–1429) was one of the few medieval women to earn a living by writing. She wrote poetry and books protesting the way women were both glorified and insulted by male authors.

WRAP-UP
Most women covered their hair with white linen headwraps, but the wealthy wore gold nets over their coiled braids. The well-known pointed hat called the hennin was only popular for a short time in the late 15th century.



Linen head-wrap keeps hair clean as well as hidden



Decorated hairpins



Pin-on sleeves worn on Sundays and special occasions

THE TOWNSWOMAN
A middle-class townswoman might have worn these clothes in the 15th century. In the towns, women worked in a variety of occupations. They might be shopkeepers, spinners, bakers, or "alewives," who brewed ale. Both married and unmarried women worked for a living. Because they were paid less than men, women often had two or more jobs.

Leather purse serves as a pocket

Linen shift

Prayer beads

Woolen "kirtle" fits close around the upper body



Leather garters hold up stockings

Woolen over-the-knee stockings



Wooden "pattens" worn over shoes when muddy



Buckled leather shoes with thin soles