The Role of Medieval Women as Monastic Patrons

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Studies of the medieval world reveal a deeply hierarchical society in which wealth, freedom, and piety were among the marks of an individual’s status. An analysis of the ways in which people expressed their piety and used their material wealth reveals an age in which spiritual and worldly matters were closely intertwined. In addition, it sheds light on medieval ideas of class and gender, which were significant in determining an individual’s opportunities for the possession and disposal of wealth. For example, those with the resources to do so often ensured their salvation through the patronage of religious institutions. While both men and women became patrons, the role of women as patrons must be considered separately because of the social and legal restrictions placed upon them. Despite the often-limited sphere in which they operated and the challenges of carrying out a benefaction, many women were devoted to the support of religious institutions and emerged as important patrons of monastic activity. Afforded by social standing, motivated by religious devotion, and brought to fruit through careful planning, a woman’s role as a monastic patron provided her with an active, influential, and
accepted position in church and society.

Women were active as patrons throughout the medieval period, but their benefactions varied with shifting patterns of wealth and belief. Early patrons were queens or women among the highest nobility, so patronage was limited to the very few with the appropriate station and resources.¹ In the twelfth century, supporting monastic houses was considered highly fashionable, and evidence suggests that women began to make more new foundations at this time.² Stimulated by the dissipation of wealth to lesser nobles, charters of the thirteenth century show an especially high amount of patronage, typified by a large number of women of the nobility and gentry devoted to the benefaction of nunneries.³ By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, evidence shows that patronage of monastic institutions was still common, although the dedication to new houses and nunneries had dropped in favour of devotional foundations such as chantries.⁴ It is important to note that changing patterns of patronage were linked to current theological concerns as well as fashion. For example, the fifteenth-century commitment to funding prayer can be traced to an increased emphasis on the doctrine of purgatory.⁵ In short, various types of institutions benefited from women’s patronage, and the types of benefactions they made depended on both fashion and finance.

Throughout the Middle Ages, patronage was an upper-class pursuit. However, even a woman of noble standing could face many obstacles to monastic patronage. Given the social constraints placed on medieval women, the prevalence of their patronage is surprising.⁶ Upper-class men also had the opportunity to support monastic houses, and evidence suggests that men and women were similar in their benefactions.⁷ Because of the added obstacles women faced, the circumstances surrounding their grants merit
detailed consideration. In addition, these circumstances defined which women had the opportunity for patronage and often dictated how that patronage could be carried out.

Although women were particularly active as patrons of prayers and religious books, which required comparatively small amounts of money, many were also active as building patrons and donators of land. This is especially notable because “religious foundations were the most expensive and prestigious form of patronage” and thus required large amounts of resources and planning. Monastic houses needed a site for facilities and grants of land to provide perpetual income, and a donation of this kind usually required the removal of property from the family estate. Such large benefactions could only occur under limited circumstances.

The opportunities for expensive forms of patronage such as building and land grants consequently depended on a woman’s access to resources. Because marriage was the course followed by the majority of medieval women, one must first consider wives’ opportunities for patronage. A married woman needed her husband’s permission to alienate land; therefore, the number of foundations made by married woman acting as sole founders is extremely low. For married women of the lower nobility, joint benefaction with their husbands was more common, especially in the fourteenth century. Furthermore, some charters list the wife as the founder of a new house, while her husband actually provided the financial resources. For example, rather than granting away some of the property that provided the lady with her income, her husband would acquire new land and give it to her so that she could in turn endow the monastic foundation. This form of patronage presents problems to the historian because it is often difficult to tell what role a wife actually played in such a donation. Providing for
patronage after death was also common, and therefore wives often planned for it in their wills. However, a wife needed her husband’s permission in order to make a will. Although husbands usually consented, women often had limited resources at their disposal while they were married, so their bequests were less substantial.\textsuperscript{14}

As a result, the largest benefactions occurred during widowhood, when women had less-restricted access to the resources they needed.\textsuperscript{15} The widow who had married several times, had an inheritance through her own family, or left no heir was most likely to be a monastic founder or building patron because her estate was large enough to support both her household and her patronage.\textsuperscript{16} She also had to resist the pressure to remarry in order to maintain autonomy over her land and wealth.\textsuperscript{17} Despite the possible problems, though, widows with large estates under their own control had the ability to make large and important monastic foundations.

Three examples illustrate the possibilities for female benefactors with the resources to support their activities. A charter from 1229 shows that Ela, Countess of Salisbury, founded an Augustinian house at Lacock with her son’s approval.\textsuperscript{18} In 1236, she made a further gift of the manors of Lacock, Hatherop, Bishopstrow, and half of Heddington with no service due to the lord or king for possession of these lands.\textsuperscript{19} Another woman, Devorgild of Galloway, one of Ela’s contemporaries, was a widow and sole heiress, inheriting her sister’s portion of the family estate as well as her own. Her donations from her wealth made her one of the most active patrons of her time, and she founded multiple houses between 1275 and her death in 1290.\textsuperscript{20} Finally, a powerful fourteenth-century widow, Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare, held her portion of lands from three marriages and had total control of her estates.\textsuperscript{21} Because of her desirable
holdings, her position as an autonomous widow was not secure until she supported the accession of Edward III and gained his favor. Her monastic patronage is evident both during her life and in her will, especially in her foundations at Ballinrobe and her Franciscan house at Walsingham. Elizabeth gave large sums to the Augustinian friars at her native Clare, for whom she provided supplies and built a dormitory, chapter house, and refectory. She also made smaller donations to existing houses including Ely and Walsingham and was responsible for the rebuilding of Anglesey Abbey. These works made her a highly active and influential patron, and she exemplifies the activities of women in control of vast fortunes.

Clearly, women such as Ela of Lacock, Devorgild of Galloway, and Elizabeth of Clare were active patrons with the resources required for benefactions. Their ability to make such large donations was afforded by their social position, which thus shaped their role as patrons. However, money and independence were not enough to initiate a foundation. Although smaller donations to support services could be accomplished with relative ease, the foundation of a new house required strategic political planning, which often involved agreements with the king, bishop, and pope. Sometimes, patronage even involved negotiations with the religious themselves, as illustrated by the situation encountered by Elizabeth de Burgh. When she began work on a Franciscan house at Walsingham, the neighboring priory, which she also supported, balked at the presence of a second order. However, with persistence and careful attention, she maintained an amicable relationship with both, and each carried on as a successful foundation. In short, a patron needed a measure of patience and political tenacity in order to bring about a successful foundation. She needed to operate in the most public spheres or to delegate
wisely those who would act on her behalf.

For a new foundation, women also had to turn their attention to practical concerns. Traditionally, founders and building patrons were responsible for choosing designers and craftsmen and could dictate aspects of architecture, style, and imagery to these artisans. Evidence of the attention a founder paid to the building itself can be seen in the detailed personal images and crests in stained glass and the modeling of architectural styles on royal churches such as Westminster Abbey. All of these choices needed to be carefully considered in order to ensure the success of the venture. In short, such an extensive and costly project would require a keen sense for business, finance, management, and style.

Clearly, a woman’s role as a patron was largely defined by external controls and also depended on personal traits. Major works of monastic patronage required a particular financial and social position as well as the personality and drive to carry out the foundation. Even under the best of circumstances, founding a new religious house was a time-consuming and complicated process. Therefore, what prompted women to dedicate so much of their time and resources to such extensive projects? A consideration of their motives provides insight into the religious and secular lives of medieval women as well as the genesis of their benefactions.

In the medieval era, patronage was counted among the good works required for salvation. In *The Book of the Three Virtues*, Christine de Pisan sheds light on the importance of such efforts:

In God’s eyes life in a religious community is the highest level of life there is.

Anyone who founds a religious order so that those who wish to live in
contemplation can be separated from the world in the service of God without any
other cares pleases not only those people, but also God, who would be pleased
indeed that each one said his offices there.\textsuperscript{29}

An examination of the motives for benefaction reveals that monastic patronage on any
scale usually couched a plea for salvation as well as varying degrees of social display.

The foundation of a monastic institution or smaller donations on behalf of
departed souls provided evidence of piety to God and society.\textsuperscript{30} Furthermore, a woman
responsible for the foundation of a house could rely on the benefit of its constant prayers.
Women who had not supported new foundations or building projects were also active in
smaller bequests in support of prayer. Such piety was clearly popular among medieval
women both during their lives and in their wills. For example, the will of Mary, Lady
Roos left £24 to the monastery at Rievaulx for prayers for her own soul, as well as for her
husband and parents.\textsuperscript{31} Similarly, Joan Beauchamp gave three hundred marks to the
Dominicans at Hereford for masses in perpetuity.\textsuperscript{32} Such donations served a purpose for
the benefactress. Because they were believed to shorten the time spent in purgatory, the
funding of prayers was a way of acting on a religious concern for oneself and for loved
ones. In addition, many women supported prayers “for all Christian souls,” allowing
them to show concern for society as a whole.\textsuperscript{33} These benefactions, while not as
extravagant as large building projects, also required careful planning, especially in the
selection of recipients.

Finally, founders and major benefactors had the right to be buried in the monastic
houses they supported.\textsuperscript{34} This represented a last act of piety on the part of the deceased
patron and left a memorial of the lady and her activities among the holiest and most
prestigious of places. Thus the need and desire to provide for prayers and a final resting place often stimulated and defined a woman’s role as a patron.

Religious devotion was so important to the role of the medieval lady that patronage was often an activity expected of those of high social standing. However, this social importance also meant that patronage and the public piety associated with it evolved into a form of aristocratic display. Because expensive foundations were generally restricted to noblewomen who possessed the means, monastic patronage was also a way of displaying wealth and endowing benefactors and their successors with a degree of power and prestige within their circles. Therefore, it must be noted that in addition to piety, such secular concerns motivated women to become monastic patrons.

Thus women’s patronage in its various forms gave them an important place in the monastic movement and in medieval religious life in general. Scholars have often considered women’s religious life “... in its passive sense, through the construction of socially sanctioned roles for religious women.” While maintaining its place as one of these socially accepted activities, patronage gave women a role beyond that of the bystander and engaged them in the construction of these roles.

While many donations were motivated by varying degrees of piety and social display, some patrons also made donations in order to have more direct involvement with the Church, whether or not they planned to join a religious order themselves. This is especially evident in the case of nunneries, which some women founded or supported in order to provide a place for their own retirement. For example, Ela of Salisbury eventually joined the house she founded at Lacock and became its abbess, and some of her female relatives later took vows there. The dual position of founder and abbess was
not uncommon, and as they became leaders in their houses, these women gained additional status in religious life.

Furthermore, through their special attention to convents, an additional contribution of female monastic patrons was the provision of places for increasing numbers of religious women. The foundation of new nunnery offered opportunities for those seeking refuge, retirement, or religious vocation, although it must be conceded that these houses drew from a relatively narrow pool of upper-class women. In other words, women’s patronage not only involved them more directly with the Church, but it also provided a niche for others as well. Patronage also allowed women to be active and influential in religious spheres that were usually closed to them, such as male monasteries.

Finally, patronage gave women a position alongside men in the definition of medieval religious practice. The funding of prayers on such a massive scale fuelled the doctrine of purgatory and by the time of the Reformation, religious houses held one-third of English lands. This represents an enormous amount of land transfer, much of which was carried out through monastic patronage. The economic ramifications of these benefactions changed the tax base and led to the intervention of the crown with limitations on land donations. Henry VIII eventually abolished the doctrine of purgatory, but its importance as a tenet of medieval belief is clear. While patronage grew out of such doctrines, it also encouraged them in its turn. Thus through their patronage, women had an important role in the acceptance and spread of doctrine and its sacred and secular effects.

Although the study of this role often focuses on the restrictions under which
women operated, they were clearly active sponsors with important positions in religious life. A consideration of women as monastic patrons reveals much about the activities of the privileged and the priorities of the wealthy. The fact that they managed to give so much in a society that afforded them limited control of their wealth and opportunity defies assumptions about the invisibility of medieval women. Thus a picture of deeply pious, opportunistic, and determined women emerges when one considers their contributions as monastic patrons. An understanding of their role is essential to the study of medieval social structure, expressions of piety, and the nature of religious belief.

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3 Gee, 127.
6 Gee, 3-4.
7 Ibid., 7.
8 Ibid., 73.
9 Frank Woodman, Class Lecture, University of Cambridge, 8 July 2004.
11 Gee, 135.
12 Ibid., 127.
13 15 July Lecture.
14 Labarge, 34-5.
16 Gee, 13.
18 Gee, 73.
20 Gee, 16-17.
23 Labarge, 91.
26 Underhill, 279.
27 Gee, 93.
28 Ibid., 107-8.
30 Ward, *English Noblewomen in the Later Middle Ages*, 143.
33 Ibid., 152.
34 Frank Woodman, Class Lecture, University of Cambridge, 9 July 2004.
36 Coss, 61.
38 Roberta Gilchrist, “‘Blessed Art Thou Among Women’: The Archaeology of Female Piety,” in *Women in Medieval English Society*, ed. PJP Goldberg (Bridgend: Sutton, 1997), 212.
39 Oliva, 160.
40 Labarge, 108.
44 15 July Lecture. Woodman suggests that a desire to protect the treasury was partially responsible for Henry VIII’s decision.
45 Ibid.