

Women Knights in the Middle Ages

Were there women knights in the Middle Ages? Initially I thought not, but further research yielded surprising answers. There were two ways anyone could be a knight: by holding land under a knight's fee, or by being made a knight or inducted into an order of knighthood. There are examples of both cases for women.

Female Orders of Knighthood

The Order of the Hatchet

There is a case of a clearly military order of knighthood for women. It is the order of the Hatchet (**orden de la Hacha**) in Catalonia. It was founded in 1149 by Raymond Berenger, count of Barcelona, to honor the women who fought for the defense of the town of Tortosa against a Moor attack. The dames admitted to the order received many privileges, including exemption from all taxes, and took precedence over men in public assemblies. I presume the order died out with the original members.

Here is a [description](#) taken from Ashmole, *The Institution, Laws, and Ceremony of the Most Noble Order of the Garter* (1672), Ch. 3, sect. 3:

"The example is of the Noble Women of Tortosa in Aragon, and recorded by Josef Micheli Marquez, who plainly calls them Cavalleros or Knights, or may I not rather say Cavalleras, seeing I observe the words Equitissae and Militissae (formed from the Latin Equites and Milites) heretofore applied to Women, and sometimes used to express Madams or Ladies, though now these Titles are not known.

"Don Raymond, last Earl of Barcellona (who by intermarriage with Petronilla, only Daughter and Heir of King Ramiro the Monk, united that principality to the Kingdom of Aragon) having in the year 1149, gained the City of Tortosa from the Moors, they on the 31 of December following, laid a new Siege to that place, for the recovery of it out of the Earls hands. The Inhabitants being a length reduced to great streights, desired relief of the Earl, but he, being not in a condition to give them any, they entertained some thoughts of making a surrender. Which the Women hearing of, to prevent the disaster threatning their City, themselves, and Children, put on mens Clothes, and by a resolute sally, forced the Moors to raise the Siege.

"The Earl, finding himself obliged, by the gallantry of the action, thought fit to make his acknowledgements thereof, by granting them several Privileges and Immunities, and to perpetuate the memory of so signal an attempt, instituted an Order, somewhat like a Military Order, into which were admitted only those Brave Women, deriving the honor to their Descendants, and assigned them for a Dadge, a thing like a Fryars Capouche, sharp at the top, after the form of a Torch, and of a crimson colour, to be worn upon their Head-clothes. He also ordained, that at all publick meetings, the women should have precedence of the Men. That they should be exempted from all Taxes, and that all the Apparel and Jewels, though of never so great value, left by their dead Husbands, should be their own.

"These Women (saith our Author) having thus aquired this Honor by their personal Valour, carried themselves after the Military Knights of those days." Jeanne Hachette, who fought to repel a Burgundian assault on the town of Beauvais in 1472. The King exempted her from taxes, and ordered that, in an annual procession to commemorate the event, women would have precedence over men. This story seems to be a carbon copy of the Order of the Hatchet story...

In Italy, the **Order of the glorious Saint Mary**, founded by Loderigo d'Andalo, a nobleman of Bologna in 1233, and approved by pope Alexander IV in 1261, was the first religious order of knighthood to grant the rank of *militissa* to women. This order was suppressed by Sixtus V in 1558.

In the Low Countries, at the initiative of Catherine Baw in 1441, and 10 years later of Elizabeth, Mary and Isabella of the house of Hornes, orders were founded which were open exclusively to women of noble birth, who received the French title of *chevalière* or the Latin title of *equitissa*. In his *Glossarium* (s.v. *militissa*), Du Cange notes that still in his day (17th c.), the female canons of the canonical monastery of St. Gertrude in Nivelles (Brabant), after a probation of 3 years, are made knights (*militissae*) at the altar, by a (male) knight called in for that purpose, who gives them the accolade with a sword and pronounces the usual words.

In England, ladies were appointed to the Garter almost from the start. In all, 68 ladies were appointed between 1358 and 1488, including all consorts. Though many were women of royal blood, or wives of knights of the Garter, some women were neither. They wore the garter on the left arm, and some are shown on their tombstones with this arrangement. After 1488, no other appointments are known, although it is said that the Garter was granted to a Neapolitan poetess, Laura Bacio Terricina, by Edward VI. In 1638, a proposal was made to revive the use of robes for the wives of knights in ceremonies, but it came to nought. (See Edmund Fellowes, *Knights of the Garter*, 1939; and Beltz: *Memorials of the Order of the Garter*).

Unless otherwise noted, all the above is from the book by H. E. Cardinale, *Orders of Knighthood, Awards and the Holy See*, 1983. The info on the order of the Hatchet is reproduced elsewhere as well, e.g., a Spanish encyclopedia. I have seen the order of glorious Saint Mary discussed elsewhere, but without mention of women. I have yet to identify the orders of the Hornes family.

Women in the Military Orders

Several established military orders had women who were associated with them, beyond the simple provision of aid. The Teutonic order accepted *consorores* who assumed the habit of the order and lived under its rule; they undertook menial and hospitaller functions. Later, in the late 12th century, one sees convents dependent on military orders are formed. In the case of the [Order of Saint-John](#) (later Malta), they were *soeurs hospitalières*, and they were the counterparts of the *frères prêtres* or priest brothers, a quite distinct class from the knights. In England, Buckland was the site of a house of Hospitaller sisters from Henry II's reign to 1540. In Aragon, there were Hospitaller convents in Sigena, San Salvador de Isot, Grisén, Alguaire, headed each by a *commendatrix*. In France they are found in Beaulieu (near Cahors), Martel and Fieux. The only other military order to have convents by 1300 was the order of Santiago, which had admitted married members since its foundation in 1175. and soon women were admitted and organized into convents of the order (late 12th, early 13th c.). The convents were headed by a *commendatrix* (in Spanish: *commendadora*) or prioress. There were a total of six in the late 13th century: Santa Eufenia de Cozuelos in northern Castile, San Spiritu de Salamanca, Santos-o-Vello in Portugal, Destriana near Astorga, San Pedro de la Piedra near Lérida, San Vincente de Junqueres. The order of Calatrava also had a convent in San Felices de los Barrios.

and thirteenth centuries,' *Studia Monastica* 1987 (vol. 29).

Women Knights

Medieval French had two words, *chevaleresse* and *chevalière*, which were used in two ways: one was

for the wife of a knight, and this usage goes back to the 14th c. The other was as female knight, or so it seems. Here is a quote from Menestrier, a 17th c. writer on chivalry: "It was not always necessary to be the wife of a knight in order to take this title. Sometimes, when some male fiefs were conceded by special privilege to women, they took the rank of *chevaleresse*, as one sees plainly in Hemricourt where women who were not wives of knights are called *chevaleresses*."

I could find no trace of any title bestowed on [Jeanne d'Arc](#). Her family was made noble, with nobility transmissible through women, which was quite unusual. She did ride a horse and dress up in armor, but she did not wield a sword and never killed anyone, but rather grasped her banner pretty tightly.

See also [the Nine Worthy Women \(les neuf preuses\)](#).

Female Grand-Cross in the ORder of Saint John

In 1645, when a Turkish fleet threatened the island of Malta, a French nobleman, Louis d'Arpajon (1601-79), called his vassals, raised an army of 2000 men, found ships and provisions and sailed for Malta. On 27 July 1645, a grateful Grand Master granted to him and his eldest son the right to wear and to bear in his arms a cross of Malta, and to one of his younger sons the right to be admitted as a minor in the order and to be promoted grand cross at the age of 18; furthermore this privilege was to be transmitted to his successors as head of his house, and in case of extinction of the male line it would pass to females. (See [his arms](#)).

This privilege was The male line became extinct with his grandson Louis d'Arpajon, knight of the Golden Fleece, who died in 1736. He left a daughter Anne-Claude-Louise d'Arpajon (1729-94) who married Philippe de Noailles, comte de Noailles, baron de Mouchy (1715-94). She was received Grand-Cross on 13 Dec 1745 in Paris by the ambassador of the Order, and her husband was received 17 Nov 1750 (he was also knight of the St Esprit 1767, knight of the Golden Fleece 1746, and maréchal de France 1775, grandee of Spain 1st class 1741, styled duc de Mouchy 1747. (source: La Chesnaye-Desbois; the président Hénault, maternal uncle of the countess of Noailles, witnessed her reception and mentions it in his *Mémoires*, p. 146.).

Their younger son Louis-Marie, vicomte de Noailles (1756-1804) was called to the privilege. He married his cousin the daughter of the duc d'Ayen and had among others a younger son Alfred-Louis-Dominique (1784-1812), baron of the French Empire, whose only daughter by his cousin Charlotte de Noailles de Mouchy was Anne-Charlotte-Cécile (d. 1858). She married Charles-Philippe-Henri de Noailles, duc de Mouchy, and their son Antonin-Just-Léon-Marie (1841-1909) was grand-cross of St. John. The *Gotha Français* also names his grandson and successor Henry, duc de Mouchy (1890-1947) as grand-cross, but does not say if the privilege continued.

Hénault adds that (in his time, c. 1750), there were only three other female grand-crosses: the "princesse de Rochette in Italy", the princess of Thurn and Taxis (Maria Ludovika von Lobkowitz, 1683-1750), and her daughter Maria Augusta von Thurn und Taxis, duchess of Wurttemberg ((1706-56).

Modern Women Knights

Modern French orders include women, of course, in particular the [Légion d'Honneur](#) (Legion of Honor) since the mid-19th c., but they are always called *chevaliers*. The first documented case is that of Marie-Angélique Duchemin (1772-1859), who fought in the Revolutionary Wars, received a military

disability pension in 1798, the rank of 2nd lieutenant in 1822, and the Legion of Honor in 1852.

Traditionally, French women on whom the Légion d'Honneur or other order is conferred use the title "chevalier." However, a recipient of the Ordre National du Mérite recently requested from the order's Chancery the permission to call herself "chevalière" and the request was granted (AFP dispatch, Jan 28, 2000).

The first woman to be granted a knighthood in modern Britain seems to have been H.H. Nawab Sikandar Begum Sahiba, Nawab Begum of Bhopal, who became a Knight Grand Commander of the Order of the Star of India (GCSI) in 1861, at the foundation of the order. Her daughter received the same honour in 1872, and granddaughter in 1910. The order was open to "princes and chiefs" without distinction of gender. (Thanks to Christopher Buyers for this item).

The first European woman to have been granted an order of knighthood was Queen Mary, when she was made a Knight Grand Commander of the same order, by special statute, in celebration of the Delhi Durbar of 1911. She was also granted a knighthood in 1917, when the Order of the British Empire was created (the first order explicitly open to women). The Royal Victorian Order was opened to women in 1936, the Order of Bath and Saint Michael and Saint George in 1965 and 1971 respectively. Queen consorts have been made Ladies of the Garter since 1901 (Queens Alexandra in 1901, Mary in 1910, Elizabeth in 1937). The first non-Royal woman to be made *Lady Companion of the Garter* was Lavinia, duchess of Norfolk in 1990 (†1995), the second was Baroness Thatcher in 1995 (post-nominal: LG). On Nov. 30, 1996, Marion Ann Forbes, Lady Fraser was made *Lady of the Thistle*, the first non-Royal woman (post-nominal: LT).