



ÉOWYN UNDER SIEGE: FEMALE WARRIORS DURING THE MIDDLE AGES

ART BY SARA KIPIN

BY STEFAN INGSTRAND
6 April 2009

We all know that female warriors are one of the things that fantasy writers use to spice up their quasi-medieval settings, and not a part of real Middle Ages history. Interestingly enough, we are wrong. Medieval European sources mention a surprising number of martially inclined women during the tenth, eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, more than sources from earlier or later eras do.

This isn't to say that female warriors were ever common, or that they were anything like their counterparts in much of today's fantasy art. (A brass bikini is rarely a good choice for battle.) Also, quite a few women may have fought only briefly during a time of crisis, standing in for absent men and returning to their normal lives as soon as possible. Still, we find women such



15th century French illustrations of **Joan of Arc** (above), and **Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons** (below).



as Ethelfleda, daughter of Alfred the Great, who in the early tenth century commanded troops against Scandinavian forces that had conquered part of England, and Matilda of Tuscany, who defended the papacy nearly two hundred years later. Another Matilda, the daughter and legitimate heir of Henry I of England, led troops against the usurping King Stephen during the twelfth century. Dame Nicola de la Haye was Sheriff of Lincoln, and played an important part during the siege of that city in 1217. Countess Blanche of Champagne fought a long campaign to defend her son's interests around the same time, while the widow of Arnoul II of Guînes fought against her son to defend her widow's portion.

These warlike women, and several others whom I have excluded for the sake of brevity, all belong to royal or noble families. Were there no female warriors from the lower classes? It's difficult to be sure one way or the other, since medieval writers rarely concerned themselves with common people. There are a few examples,



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difficult to be sure one way or the other, since medieval writers rarely concerned themselves with common people. There are a few examples, however, of what seem to be female, non-noble soldiers. When Charles VI of France marched into Flanders in 1382 (admittedly after the golden age of female warriors discussed here), the Flemings had a woman carrying their banner. She died in the following battle.

Another question is whether warring noblewomen actually fought themselves, or whether they were content to order their troops into battle. This is another area where the sources are less than forthcoming, but as historian Megan McLaughlin has pointed out, the same question can be asked regarding warring noblemen. We are told that they went to war, but seldom whether or not they led the charge, and the chroniclers still call them warriors. Also, the Flemish woman mentioned above isn't the only case of a woman who clearly seems to have entered battle. In 1190, during the Third Crusade, Christian forces attacked the Muslim camp where the chronicler Imad ad-Din al-Isfahani was stationed. He mentions how he rode out to inspect the battlefield after the attack had been repelled, and was shocked to find two women among the dead Christian warriors.



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