

A personal selection of Wessex, British Isles and world history.

“By God, if wommen hadde writen stories... They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse / Than al the mark of Adam may redresse”
Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales

This month J&T 184 looks at what women get up to (historically) once men stop interfering; a region of France that has always felt rich with tradition, independence and a taste for luxury; and an historian who chronicled the siege of Masada and the crucifixion of Jesus, among other things too.

IT’S AN ILL WIND¹

The bubonic plague, known colloquially as the Black Death (1348 - 1353), wiped out half the population of 5 million. There is a theory floated, that farmland with no-one to work it, soon returned to forest and this caused the climate to cool, later creating the Little Ice Age. Many women at the end of the pestilence saw this as an opportunity, moving into areas from which they had been excluded and getting paid the same as their male counterparts. Most of the guilds were practical in allowing women to join although some restricted the intake to those who were related to guildsmen. This meant that they also took on apprentices.

A large number of women had become widows, and it was accepted that they could take over their husband’s business, even if it involved heavy work like a foundry for forging ploughshares or making bells. Such women took time to remarry and many remained single. A woman who took over her deceased husband’s business and married another guildsman could ramp up a small fortune; and on occasion such a woman outlived three husbands, making her extremely wealthy. A fact that is usually hidden from view is that women were even asked to take over the position of ordained priests if there was not an alternative. Otherwise, people would die without confessing their sins.

Olivia Cranmer of Walsham le Willows in Suffolk was the daughter of a serf. 119 people died in her village including her relatives. She thus inherited a ~~land~~ which she farmed and made a profit. She rented and bought more land (then at a low price) and took on a tenant of her own. The tenant’s rent paid for her old age, she lived into her seventies, a farmer, business woman and entrepreneur.

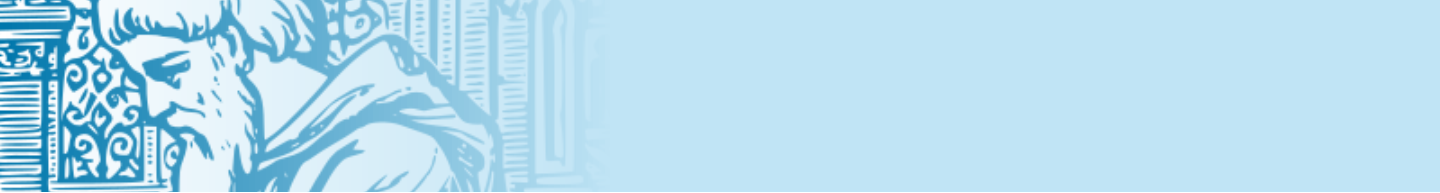


The rising level of wages drew women from home work to employment and in some towns, they actually outnumbered men. *Agnes Ramsey inherited her father’s London design and building business in 1349. She became a leading architect and was contracted by Queen Isabella to design her £100 tomb in Greyfriars Church.* Upper class women were left to run large estates although this was often no great change as husbands were often away fighting. In fact, when choosing a spouse, they usually looked for competence in this area.

Of course this situation was too good to last, and when the Black Death was forgotten and the population returned to its pre-plague level, men reasserted their position. The extremes to which they went showed how much they feared their rival sex, even using the law to class unmarried women in the same status as prostitutes.

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BURGUNDY²

We probably first think of wine or maybe of a colour, but Burgundy was an important independent Duchy for many years. We are used to the population of Wales, Scotland and Ireland being different to the English but the same applies equally in Europe and Burgundians are a ‘race apart’.

The map on the right shows Burgundy in the 9th - 10th centuries. The Burgundians were originally of Scandinavian stock from the Baltic, where the island of Bornholm was originally *Burgundarholm*. Under pressure from the East, they migrated south where, serving as *foederati* (auxiliaries), they were absorbed into the Roman Empire. With the decline of Rome the Burgundians expanded their territory to Savoy and then down the Rhône - Saône valley. Their lawgiver and Christian king Gundobad reigned from 474 to 516 AD. The previous occupants were of Gallic Celtic stock, part of the Roman Empire, since Julius Caesar’s victory at Alesia in 52BC.

In turn, the Burgundians were defeated by the Germanic Franks under Clovis in 534AD. The kingdom was given to members of the Merovingian dynasty until Charles Martel, the grandfather of Charlemagne, who made it part of Austrasia, the north-eastern segment of the Frankish empire in the 8th century. We are lucky in being an island as boundaries in Europe were rarely fixed for any length of time. Boso, leader of the Viennois was proclaimed king of Burgundy in 879 but the French Carolingians soon recovered the Jurane (Upper Burgundy). The union of the two Burgundys took place in 1032 under the German king/emperor Conrad II when it became known as the kingdom of Arles. The name Burgundy was reserved for Cisjurane Burgundy and the duchy of Burgundy.



The Duchy remained part of the French kingdom although it became smaller and stronger. Dijon developed as an important town and the monasteries of Vezeley, Cluny and Citeaux became a dominant force in the Church with many daughter establishments in England. Citeaux produced the Cistercians, a new and dynamic religious order. The various parts of Burgundy continued to coalesce and break up under various kings and dukes. The Valois dukes ruled a vast territory that came to rival France - it took England’s side in the Hundred Years War. However the line died out in 1477 with the title passing to the Habsburgs who ruled until the time of Napoleon. Over its history it has been ravaged many times by armies and the factions of Catholic-Protestant rivalry. The monasteries though remained the most stable institutions.

Burgundy was a great centre of culture. In 1443 Nicolas Rolin the Chancellor to the Duke of Burgundy and his wife Guigone de Salins founded the Hôtel-Dieu in Beaune, modelled on the Flemish hospitals.



Their aim was to provide care for the poor and disadvantaged. The Hospice de Beaune (below) with its polychrome roof tiles is now one of Europe's iconic buildings and was ahead of its time with good hygiene and care. Rollin persuaded local magnates to donate their best vineyards to the Hospice. The wine from these estates was auctioned off every November with the proceeds funding the whole operation. The system was inflation proof and is still working today, giving free healthcare to the townsfolk.

Today, Burgundy is most noted for its wonderful wines; the Dukes unified planting mainly with Pinot Noir for the reds and Chardonnay for the whites. But their sauce-based cuisine is also to die for. Outside the wine areas there is some lovely countryside which with its limestone soil is somewhat reminiscent of Somerset.

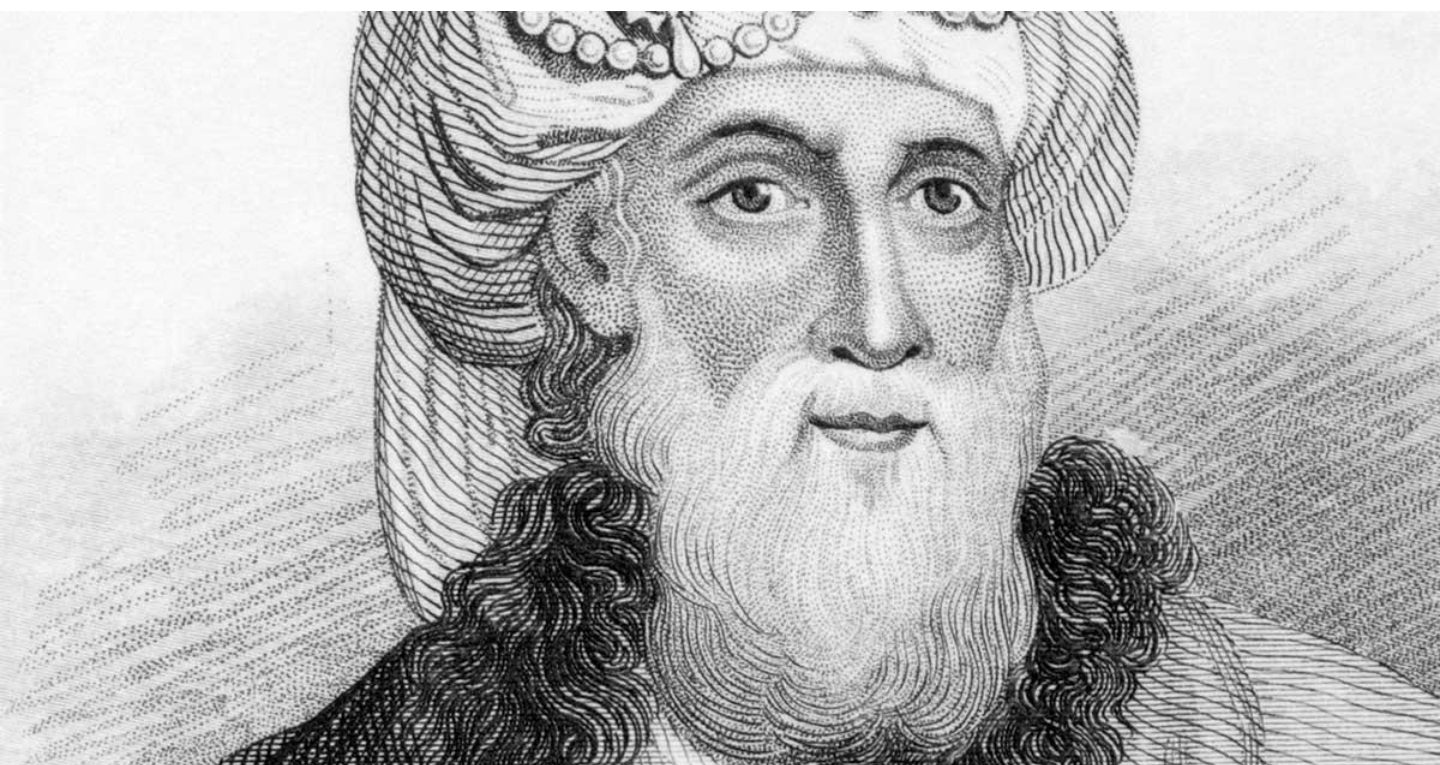


OUR ROME CORRESPONDENT³

In an attempt to 'get at the truth', historians (even amateur ones) try to use primary sources. Throughout history we have been served by rare remarkable writers who can open a window on their times. One such is Josephus who lived from around 37AD to around 100AD. Born Yosef ben Matityahu into a priestly Jerusalem family he was recognised as an intellect with an insatiable thirst for knowledge. During the Jewish War (revolt), in which the Jewish factions fought each other as well as the Romans, he was a commander but was captured by General Vespasian (Titus Flavius Vespasianus). When he prophesied that Vespasian would become emperor, and this proved correct, he was taken into the Flavian household in Rome. In thanks he took the name Titus Flavius.



He could not have lived at a more critical time. The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by Vespasian's son Titus gave Josephus the aim of keeping alive the Jewish tradition through his writings. One of the scenes he describes is the last stand at Masada. The Jewish extremists known as Zealots were lead by Eleazar ben Ya'ir. He retreated to the stronghold of Masada protected by its great cliffs and containing great stores of food and water where they held out for some years. However, in 73AD the Roman governor Flavius Silva brought in the 10th Legion and thousands of prisoners of war who he used to build a massive ramp which can still be seen. When the Romans breached the walls they were faced with silence. The 960 men women and children had committed suicide rather than be taken into slavery. Josephus described this *not as a Roman victory but a monument to conscience, when the soul of a people refuses to be broken, even in death.*



As his birth was shortly after the Crucifixion he talks about Jesus and many of the key Biblical characters of the time. Although he is speaking from a Jewish and Roman viewpoint he does not seem to show any bias, describing Jesus as *a wise man, a doer of wonderful works, a teacher who drew both Jews and Gentiles. He was called the Christ by some and condemned by others. His death was a political act as much as a religious one - executed as a warning to others. Yet his memory did not die. His influence outlived his accusers.*

I am indebted to *Josephus, the complete works, a remastered summary* by Elias Revert (published independently in 2025). As Elias points out, *To read Josephus is to stand at the crossroads of religion, empire, and identity - and to hear the voice of one who saw it all.*

1. Taken from *Normal Women, 900 years of making history* by Phillippa Gregory (William Collins 2024). *Women in the workshop* courtesy of Lost Art Press.
2. From multiple sources but largely *Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.). 9-10th century map and 1467 map courtesy of Wikipedia (Marco Zanoli, Creative Commons). Hospice de Beaune courtesy of Bourgogne Tourisme.
3. Josephus portrait courtesy of Logos Bible Software.