

## Oxford DNB: June 2021

Welcome to the seventy-sixth update of the *Oxford DNB*, which adds 10 new articles and 1 new likeness, focussed on the lives of medieval women ranging from Æthelflæd of Damerham (d. 975x991), queen of England and wife of Edmund I, to the welsh poet Gwerful Mechain (fl. 1460–1502).

From July 2021, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (*Oxford DNB*) offers biographies of 64, 129 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 61,797 articles. 11,803 biographies include a portrait image of the subject – researched in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, London.

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## July 2021: summary of newly-added content

The lives in this month's update focus upon medieval women from queens, princesses, and noblewomen, to a financier and a poet. The earliest royal subject included in this group is **Athelflæd [Æthelflæd of Damerham] (d. 975x991)**, queen of England, daughter of Ælfgar, ealdorman of Essex and second wife of Edmund I. Following the death of her husband Edmund, Æthelflæd remained a widow, and maintained a large, powerful, and wealthy household as one of the key aristocratic figures of early medieval East Anglia. With a lifelong interest in religion she was also a key figure in supporting the institutions of the English church. **Eleanor [Leonor, Alienor] of England (1161–1214)**, queen of Castile was the daughter of Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine. Eleanor's marriage to King Alfonso VIII of Castile, reflected her father's eminent status among contemporary European royalty and cemented his international alliances. Her extensive marriage settlement provided significant resources which she used actively for political patronage and to build her power base – forming an effective partnership with her new husband. In a decades long rule Eleanor played an active role in international politics, religious patronage, and may have brought some of courtly culture of the Angevin world to Iberia. **Isabella Bruce [Brus] (c.1272–1358)**, queen of Norway, was the sister of Robert Bruce, the future Robert I king of Scotland. Her marriage to Eric Magnusson, king of Norway, may have been the result of Eric's need for Scottish allies to acquire the dowry from his first marriage to Margaret daughter of king Alexander III of Scotland, but also suited

the upwardly mobile Bruce family. Following Eric's death Isabella remained in Norway as queen dowager and continued to participate in court life as well as interceding for the bishopric and people of Bergen. It is likely she also acted as a liaison between her brother and brother-in-law King Håkon of Norway.

This release includes three daughters of Edward I and his first wife Eleanor of Castile whose lives and marriages were inevitably embroiled in the high politics of the period. The earliest of these three is **Eleanor [Eleanor of England] (1269–1298)**, countess of Bar and princess. Although she was married by proxy to Alfonso, the eldest son of Pedro of Aragon and the future Pedro III in 1282, Eleanor remained in England this marriage was never consummated. Eleanor never met Alfonso who died in 1291. She subsequently married Henri III, count of Bar, the son of Thibaut II of Bar. The marriage of **Margaret [Margaret of England] (b. 1275, d. in or after 1333)**, duchess of Brabant, Lorraine, and Limburg, and princess, was arranged early in life to strengthen her father's continental alliances against the French. Margaret and John of Brabant were married at Westminster Abbey in 1290, and Margaret subsequently acted as a key intermediary between her husband's court and England, and was an authoritative figure in the Duchy of Brabant. Like her sisters **Elizabeth, countess of Holland and Hereford (1282–1316)**, princess, was intended for a diplomatic marriage to strengthen England's relationships with strategic allies. Indeed, Elizabeth's two marriages reflect distinct phases of her father's political strategy: the first, to John I, count of Holland, secured continental allies; the second, to

Humphrey de Bohun, fourth earl of Hereford and ninth earl of Essex, sought to reward and ensure the support of key English magnates.

Elizabeth's intimacy with the royal household continued in her brother's reign, despite her husband Humphrey's involvement in baronial opposition to his rule.

Beyond royalty aristocratic medieval women could wield significant power, particularly at a local level. **Roesia de Verdon [Verdun] (c. 1204–1247)**, noblewoman, was the daughter of Nicholas de Verdun and granddaughter of Bertram de Verdun [Verdun], a settler who was granted substantial lands in county Louth after the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in 1169. Roesia was born in England and was the heiress to her family's extensive lands scattered across both Ireland and England. These estates were of such value that the king requested that she marry Theobald fitz Walter (le Botiller; Butler) (*d.* 1230), heir to the Ormond lands in Munster. Following Theobald's death Roesia administered her lands and erected a castle, at Castleroché in co. Louth, to defend her lands against Irish raiders. Castleroché became the focus of an extraordinary body of folklore in Ireland, reflecting Roesia's achievements as well as the fear and opprobrium directed towards her as a powerful woman. **Isabella Douglas, countess of Mar and Garioch (d. before 1408)**, magnate, was the daughter of William Douglas, first earl of Douglas and earl of Mar, and his wife Margaret. Following the death of her brother James Isabella inherited the ancient earldom of Mar. Her first husband to Malcolm Drummond, lord of Concraig was murdered in 1402 - likely at the hands of Robert Stewart, duke of Albany. Isabella's subsequent

marriage to Alexander Stewart, illegitimate son of Alexander Stewart, lord of Badenoch, ended Albany's hopes of controlling Isabella's earldom, and may reflect the similar tactics deployed by Isabella's mother, following the death of earl William.

**Licoricia of Winchester (d. 1277)**, was the most prominent female Jewish financier in medieval England. She married and survived two of the wealthiest Jewish moneylenders in England, Abraham, son of Isaac, of Kent and Winchester, and then David of Oxford. Following David's death Licoricia was imprisoned in the Tower and forced to pay 5,000 marks to repurchase the debt's owed to her husband – she was also forced to donate a further 2,500 marks to the construction of a chapel at Westminster. In 1277 Licoricia was murdered. Her life exemplifies the increasingly challenging position of the Anglo-Jewish community prior to the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290. Finally, **Gwerful Mechain (fl. 1460–1502)** is the earliest female Welsh poet for whom we have a surviving oeuvre. From the county of Powys and of an aristocratic background she was a contemporary of the poets Dafydd Llwyd and Llywelyn ap Gutyn. Engaging with her male peers, with whom she exchanged poems (and using the same forms, metres, tropes, and vocabulary), her writing often speaks with a female voice and point of view and ranges from works of serious devotion to riotous indecency.