

Section: Family, Land, and the Home

Lesson: Women, Work, and Status in Early Ireland

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In ancient Ireland, there was a distinction between the status of men and women. In normal household and social life, the status of the wife was generally dependent upon that of her husband.

However, women were not excluded from working, and they could be found of high rank within all professions. There were women druids, women doctors, women brehons, women poets, and in earlier times, there were even women warriors who fought alongside their men.

Basically, except in relation to the chieftainship, women were not discriminated against or distinguished by their gender. Like the men, they were distinguished by their merit.

A woman who undertook a course of study, whether in the arts, academics, or trades, had her status based on her level of studies and the grade she had reached within her profession.

If she happened to be a wife, her honour was judged to be her own when she reached a grade higher than that of her husband.

Once her professional grade entitled her to a higher honour price than she would through her marriage, she acted upon her own honour price in society, not her husband's.

Now, please bear in mind that we're taking a general view of a fairly wide time frame here, and just like now, social attitudes changed with the times.

A shift in the status of women is particularly noticeable between the pre-Christian and Christian eras.

Although the manuscripts we have were written during the Christian period, those that speak of an earlier time, the legends and the sagas, always showed women to be strong leaders and powerful goddesses.

As time went on, the status of women changed along the lines of the Judeo-Christian doctrines.