

Marriage in the Middle Ages

There were two forms of marriage in medieval Scotland: **secular** and **religious**. The latter was dictated by Canon Law (the body of Church Law refined and regulated by the papacy) in which consent rather than intercourse made the marriage. Scotland was rather slow to accept Canon Law, especially in the Highlands. The older secular model of marriage prevailed in the kingdom whereby the family's rather than the couple's wishes were paramount, where the dissolution of the marriage was fairly simple and there could be a succession of spouses. In some cases polygamy was allowed.

According to Canon Law the age of consent was twelve for a female and fourteen for a male. Yet, most folk married later than this. Laws of consanguinity (blood ties) and affinity (non-blood ties) restricted the pool of eligible spouses. For example, from 1215 the church forbade marriage within four degrees which meant a couple who shared the same great-great-grandparent (or any relation closer) could not marry unless they secured special dispensation. Ties of affinity extended these rules to relatives through marriage as well as to godparents. To prevent illegitimate unions it was common to read the banns three times before the wedding day so that any illicit ties could be made known. Providing all was well the marriage went ahead.



An illustration of a medieval couple marrying from 1350.



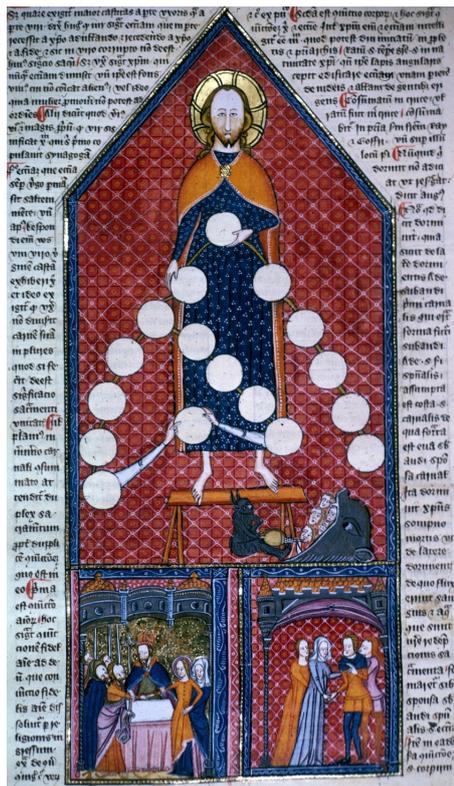
Weddings



This 14th century image shows a man placing a wedding ring on the finger of his bride.

As the church gained greater control over the marriage ceremony it became common to exchange vows in front of the church. The husband then placed a ring on the right hand of his wife, and sometimes there was a mutual exchange of rings. Mass and a blessing followed in the church and thereafter the marriage was celebrated publicly with a feast. The following morning, to mark the consummation of the marriage, the groom gave his bride a 'morning gift'.

Divorce and Separation



This illustration shows a 'table of bigamy' from the 14th century.

The term divorce in medieval documents actually refers to what we consider annulment and was only permitted if a marriage was discovered to be invalid. For instance, if one partner was already married or if a couple was too closely related the marriage could be annulled. While a woman was allowed to move away from an extremely abusive husband, the Church was reluctant to dissolve the marriage. The secular tradition was more flexible in this respect.

In the Middle Ages there was no one procedure for marriage that every couple followed. However, it was during this period that the Christian marriage, formulated by Canon Law, took hold. Its influence continues today and, as in the Middle Ages, religion is incorporated within the secular tradition. Indeed, here in Edinburgh, many couples choose to be married by the Justice of the Peace on the Royal Mile but cross the street to take wedding photos in front of St. Giles Cathedral.

Guide researched and written by Meredith Johnson and Fiona Rogan

Useful Reading

Sellar, D 2011, 'The Family' in *A History of Everyday Life in Medieval Scotland, 1000-1600*, eds E J Cowan & L Henderson, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

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