

# 1911 Encyclopædia Britannica, Volume 1 — Abess



Exported from Wikisource on December 1, 2024

**ABBESS** (Lat. *abbatissa*, fem. form of *abbas*, abbot), the female superior of an abbey or convent of nuns. The mode of election, position, rights and authority of an abbess correspond generally with those of an [abbot](#) (q.v.). The office is elective, the choice being by the secret votes of the sisters from their own body. The abbess is solemnly admitted to her office by episcopal benediction, together with the conferring of a staff and pectoral cross, and holds for life, though liable to be deprived for misconduct. The council of Trent fixed the qualifying age at forty, with eight years of profession. Abbesses have a right to demand absolute obedience of their nuns, over whom they exercise discipline, extending even to the power of expulsion, subject, however, to the bishop. As a female an abbess is incapable of performing the spiritual functions of the priesthood belonging to an abbot. She cannot ordain, confer the veil, nor excommunicate. In England abbesses attended ecclesiastical councils, *e.g.* that of Becanfield in 694, where they signed before the presbyters.

By Celtic usage abbesses presided over joint-houses of monks and nuns. This custom accompanied Celtic monastic missions to France and Spain, and even to Rome itself. At a later period, A.D. 1115, Robert, the founder of Fontevraud, committed the government of the whole order, men as well as women, to a female superior.

In the German Evangelical church the title of abbess (*Aebtissin*) has in some cases—*e.g.* Itzehoe—survived to designate the heads of abbeys which since the Reformation have continued as *Stifte*, *i.e.* collegiate foundations, which provide a home and an income for unmarried ladies, generally of noble birth, called canonesses (*Kanonissinen*) or more usually *Stiftsdamen*. This office of abbess is of considerable social dignity, and is sometimes filled by princesses of the reigning houses.



# About this digital edition

This e-book comes from the online library [Wikisource](#). This multilingual digital library, built by volunteers, is committed to developing a free accessible collection of publications of every kind: novels, poems, magazines, letters...

We distribute our books for free, starting from works not copyrighted or published under a free license. You are free to use our e-books for any purpose (including commercial exploitation), under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 Unported](#) license or, at your choice, those of the [GNU FDL](#).

Wikisource is constantly looking for new members. During the transcription and proofreading of this book, it's possible that we made some errors. You can report them at [this page](#).

The following users contributed to this book:

- DivermanAU
- Digipoke
- Pathosbot
- Robert Horning
- Pathoschild
- DavidBrooks
- Zhaladshar

- Psychless
- Clarice Reis
- Legofan94
- Animalparty
- Beleg Tâl
- GhostOrchid35