Political Power and Sanctity in the Life of Radegund of Poitiers

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Early Middle Ages

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Throughout the early Middle Ages, even the wealthiest European women were condemned to short lives, truncated by the stress of bearing as many children as possible. Aristocratic girls and women were traded between families and kingdoms as tokens of alliance through marriage and were routinely kidnapped as spoils of war. Convents offered a haven of safety outside of the confines of marriage—a way to live communally with other women, educated and protected from violence by the authority of the Church. Radegund of Poitiers is one notable example of a woman who gained a measure of independence from men by dedicating herself to God. She used her political and ecclesiastical clout to protect the women of her convent, expressing her sanctity through her motherliness. Throughout her lifetime and after her death, Radegund served as a model for female sanctity, removing herself from marriage and choosing to live piously as an advocate for other women.

Radegund, the daughter of the Thuringian king Bertelach, was captured in battle along with her brother by the Frankish king Clothar and raised in the Frankish court. Radegund was raised as a Christian, but Clothar himself was not pious. From early childhood, Radegund resisted Clothar’s plans to marry her once she came of age. She yearned for an alternative to marriage, where her worth would be measured by her religious devotion rather than her ability to bear sons. Radegund’s play with other children focused on pretending to be martyred, which is surprisingly morbid—but as a captured enemy princess, she endured hostile treatment from her caregivers, and she longed to escape the court of her family’s ancestral enemy. Radegund’s desire to be a martyr was serious enough that she told other children she wished for opportunities

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4 Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 54.
to die for God; she ran away from court as a teenager upon learning that her marriage to Clothar was soon forthcoming, perhaps hoping that he would become angry and kill her.\(^5\) Despite her disobedience, Radegund was brought back to the court and compelled to marry Clothar anyway—without being martyred for her resistance.

Radegund’s married life was as unhappy as her childhood, and she lived as ascetically as possible, spending hours in prayer and avoiding the indulgences of food and sex. Her first hagiographer, Venantius Fortunatus, explained that “she avoided the trappings of royalty, so she would not grow great in the world but in Him to Whom she was devoted and she remained unchanged in earthly glory.”\(^6\) She was publicly unenthusiastic about her husband, spending much of her time alone in her chapel, arriving late to court functions, and refusing to eat rich foods at feasts.\(^7\) Her public refusal to put on a happy front with Clothar sprang in part from her continued grief for her slaughtered family. Decades after her capture by the Franks, she still mourned her family, writing to a distant surviving cousin: “Anguish is private and public both to me. Fate was kind to those whom the enemy struck down. I, the sole survivor, must weep for them all.”\(^8\)

Radegund and Clothar had no children. Her resistance to his advances may have been spurred on by the fact that he maintained multiple other wives.\(^9\) Clothar’s polygyny must have horrified Radegund—not only was she forced to marry an ancestral enemy, but she was forced to share the sacrament of marriage with another woman. Rather than spend time in bed with Clothar, Radegund habitually left their room in the middle of the night to pray in the relative

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\(^5\) Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 19.
\(^8\) McNamara and Halborg, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 66.
privacy of the privy, remaining “so long that the cold pierced her through and through and only her spirit was warm.”

One positive aspect of Radegund’s marriage to Clothar was her new access to his wealth and assets. As an aristocratic woman, Radegund directed many of the domestic concerns of the royal household, and she liberally donated much of the material wealth within her reach to the Church. According to Fortunatus, when Radegund was still queen, she personally traveled to monasteries bearing donations—a convenient excuse to spend even more time away from Clothar. A respite from her husband wasn’t the only opportunity afforded by travel: Radegund once stopped her retinue mid-journey to burn a pagan shrine, despite the protests of the Franks who witnessed its destruction.

After several years of constant prayer, asceticism, and almsgiving, Radegund decided to escape the Frankish court for good. Her loathing of Clothar reached new heights when he had her brother murdered and prevented Radegund from attending her brother’s funeral—a cruelty she bitterly resented, lamenting, “I lost him and could not even close his pious eyes nor lie across the corpse in final farewell.” In a bold move, Radegund renounced her marriage, commanded a bishop to consecrate her as a deaconess, and fled to one of Clothar’s villas near Poitiers. When Clothar protested, Radegund declared that “she was determined to end her life before she, who had been joined in the embrace of the heavenly King, would be united again to an earthly king”—she was willing to risk the damnation of suicide rather than resume her position as Queen of the Franks. Her friends Saint Medard and Saint Germain intervened with Clothar on

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12 Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 68.
14 Ibid., 69.
Radegund’s behalf, and Clothar ultimately allowed Radegund to establish a new life away from court, agreeing to support her financially and as give her the villa as a residence. This settlement helped to persuade Church leaders to let Radegund build her own convent—since she could bring both liquid wealth and land to the Church. It must have been a relief to Clothar to have his recalcitrant queen far away, on a fixed allowance, rather than close at hand and donating piles of royal goods to the poor whenever his back was turned. Though Radegund was nominally in exile, Clothar funded her convent until his death, and his successors continued payments to her.

Though the Bishop Pentius of Poitiers had been friendly with Radegund, his successor Maroveus disliked Radegund’s imperiousness and extended that dislike to her convent. Radegund circumvented his disapproval in a canny political move that leveraged her power in Poitiers while reinforcing her convent’s sanctity. Radegund chose her foster-daughter Agnes to lead as abbess, with the approval of other nuns; Agnes’s joyful consecration was described by Fortunatus as “eagerly awaited like the harvest.” Rather than wait for Maroveus’s blessing, Radegund took Agnes to a neighboring bishop to be consecrated, and wrote a letter to seven other Gallic bishops urging them to protect the convent’s nuns and property from physical and spiritual harm. She repeatedly invoked the power of the Virgin for whom the convent was named, claiming that any man who bothered the convent before or after her death would “incur the judgment of God and of the Holy Cross and of the blessed Mary.” Radegund’s letter to the bishops asserted that the Virgin Mary herself was the convent’s special protector; by drawing

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18 Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 82.
19 Ibid., 68-69.
21 Ibid., 87.
22 Ibid., 75.
parallels between her womanhood and the Virgin’s, Radegund treated her gender as a spiritual strength rather than a weakness.\textsuperscript{24} Thereafter, Maroveus could not openly campaign against Radegund or her convent, for fear of besmirching the Virgin Mary as well. Though Gaul had relatively few convents at this time, compared to Rome or Byzantium, Radegund fought to succeed in the Church because of, not in spite of, her womanhood.\textsuperscript{25} This early period demonstrated Radegund’s deft manipulation of politics within the Church as well as her focus on specifically female sanctity.

Radegund did not only concern herself with local Church matters; though she had cloistered herself far from Frankish court, she still kept abreast of developments in the larger world. She carefully developed both her ecclesiastical and her political power and used any means necessary to protect herself and her convent. After Clothar’s death, his sons Sigebert and Chilperic fought over the inheritance of his lands—which included Poitiers—but Radegund urged them to settle their dispute peacefully.\textsuperscript{26} Orchestrating peace for the region would directly benefit Radegund’s convent as well as demonstrate the power of her personal persuasion. Additionally, she still vividly remembered the horrors of war that devastated her family for generations and led to her capture by the Franks in early childhood.\textsuperscript{27} Radegund particularly wanted to protect women and girls from the horrors of war.

In addition to directly urging Sigebert and Chilperic towards peaceful negotiation, Radegund focused on acquiring relics as a means to promote peace. She began her collection before construction on the convent was complete, aspiring to collect a relic from every single saint; she used her political connections to request numerous relics from traveling priests and

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Brennan, “Deathless Marriage and Spiritual Fecundity,” 78.}
\footnote{Ibid., 74.}
\footnote{Schulenburg, \textit{Forgetful of Their Sex}, 74.}
\footnote{McNamara and Halborg, \textit{Sainted Women of the Dark Ages}, 60.}
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monks. After the convent was complete, the acquisition of relics took on a new importance—to shore up the convent’s prestige as protection against Maroveus and other enemies within the Church. Radegund’s sanctity was promoted not only by the possession of these relics but by the implication of saintly approval that accompanied the successful transfer of a relic. The patriarch of Jerusalem, after being petitioned by an envoy of Radegund’s to give her convent a relic of Mamas of Caesaria, was able to gently break off Mamas’ little finger, a sign that the saint approved of Radegund and wished to give her that relic. Approval from saints solidified Radegund’s reputation as a holy woman and demonstrated the vast extent of her connections in the Church—a reach from Poitiers to Jerusalem.

The most significant acquisition was a splinter of the True Cross, sent to Radegund from the Byzantine court at Constantinople. Radegund’s political and familial connections to Sigibert, and to a few Thuringian aristocrats who had escaped to Constantinople after the war, helped her acquire the relic. Radegund hoped that the influence of the splinter of the True Cross, one of the most important relics of all, could bring about peace. Radegund’s second hagiographer Baudonivia noted that Maroveus, who “should have wished to welcome it devoutly with all the people,” refused to approve of the splinter and questioned its veracity—but Sigebert intervened on her behalf and the convent successfully received the Cross. Since Maroveus retreated to his country estate rather than witness the installation of the Cross, Eufronius (the bishop of Tours) deposited the relic “with much chanting of psalms, with pomp of gleaming tapers and incense.”

After receiving the True Cross, the monastery attracted more pilgrims and changed its name to

28 Schulenburg, Forgetful of Their Sex, 86.
29 Brennan, “Deathless Marriage and Spiritual Fecundity,” 76.
30 Schulenburg, Forgetful of Their Sex, 87.
31 Thiébaux, The Writings of Medieval Women, 90.
32 Schulenburg, Forgetful of Their Sex, 74.
33 McNamara and Halborg, Sainted Women of the Dark Ages, 97.
34 Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, 2:414.
Ste-Croix in the relic’s honor.³⁵ Thereafter, the splinter of the True Cross was celebrated by a dedicated feast day marking its arrival at Ste-Croix.³⁶ This single relic bolstered Radegund’s reputation further, helping her to further circumvent Maroveus’s antipathy.

Radegund’s acts of asceticism also expressed her personal sanctity. Though she was not martyred as she had imagined in her childhood, life in a convent allowed her to experience living martyrdom via extreme asceticism.³⁷ She took extreme joy in the drudgery of cleaning and caring for the sick, and “punished herself if anyone else did a good deed before she did.”³⁸ She abstained from alcohol, meat, and rich foods: “even in illness, she ate nothing but legumes and green vegetables: not fruit nor fish nor eggs.”³⁹ Baudonivia attested that Radegund routinely denied herself sleep in order to read and pray through the night, reflecting Ste-Croix’s reputation as a center of female learning.⁴⁰ Fortunatus’s vita focused particularly on Radegund’s self-mortification, which was unusual for a Merovingian female saint.⁴¹ Once during Lent, she branded herself with a chi rho to express her devotion to Christ.⁴² In other years she observed Lent by binding herself with chains and burning herself with hot coals.⁴³ The explicit and graphic descriptions of physical mortification in Radegund’s vitae helped her stand out among the other holy women of Gaul.

Various miracles are attributed to Radegund, often miracles performed on behalf of women. One grievously ill nun in Ste-Croix was healed when Radegund personally bathed her and gently touched her limbs; the nun was miraculously able to walk again after six months of

³⁵ Schulenburg, Forgetful of Their Sex, 87.
³⁷ Ibid., 426.
³⁸ McNamara and Halborg, Sainted Women of the Dark Ages, 80.
³⁹ Ibid., 76.
⁴⁰ Schulenburg, Forgetful of Their Sex, 97.
⁴² Schulenburg, Forgetful of Their Sex, 394.
⁴³ McNamara and Halborg, Sainted Women of the Dark Ages, 81.
fever and paralysis. Radegund also cured another woman of blindness and drove Satan out of the bodies of several other women—in one case literally, when a worm (which Radegund promptly stomped) crawled out of the skin of the healed woman. Additionally, a small jar of wine for visitors never emptied no matter how often Radegund poured it, which Baudonivia compared to the Biblical parable of the loaves and fishes.

Radegund’s friendships helped maintain a wide network of contacts within the Church as well as fortifying her ecclesiastical knowledge. She wrote many letters to men, including bishops, abbots, and hermit ascetics. Fortunatus humorously claimed, “There was no hermit who could hide from her munificence.” Though Ste-Croix followed Caesaria’s Rule, which frowned on mixed-gender socializing, Radegund regularly received male visitors at the convent. These cross-gender spiritual friendships were justified by the writings of previous Church authorities. According to both Jerome and Ambrose, nuns like Radegund could “beget deathless spiritual children” by befriending and counseling men, so she did not hesitate to correspond with men in the role of a spiritual sister or mother. She used her connections to further her own sanctity, appropriating new ideas for day to day service to the convent. Baudonivia wrote that Radegund would quiz visitors about their methods of asceticism, and “if she learned anything new from him which she was not used to doing, she would immediately impose it first on herself and then she would teach her congregation with words what she had already shown them by her example.”

44 Schulenburg, Forgetful of Their Sex, 101.
45 McNamara and Halborg, Sainted Women of the Dark Ages, 82.
47 Schulenburg, Forgetful of Their Sex, 325.
48 McNamara and Halborg, Sainted Women of the Dark Ages, 72.
51 McNamara and Halborg, Sainted Women of the Dark Ages, 91.
Within Ste-Croix, Radegund was seen as mother to all the resident nuns, and she maintained a particularly close mother-daughter relationship with the abbess Agnes. Radegund’s *vita* show her as particularly mindful of women’s welfare; about three quarters of the miracles attributed to her were on behalf of women.\(^\text{52}\) Fortunatus, who lived closely with both Radegund and Agnes, described her as his spiritual mother as well, and claimed that he was glad to serve her by distributing alms and managing her letters.\(^\text{53}\) Fortunatus was affectionate towards both Radegund and Agnes in his writings. These individual women may have influenced Fortunatus to write about women’s lives sympathetically. His *vita* of Radegund begins with the declaration that God “wins mighty victories through the female sex and, despite their frail physique, He confers glory and greatness on women through strength of mind.”\(^\text{54}\) He wrote that women could protect themselves from the pain of a husband’s or child’s death by dedicating their lives to Christ, as Radegund had after the destruction of her family.\(^\text{55}\)

Due to her asceticism and performance of miracles, Radegund was well-respected by local laypeople and visiting pilgrims alike. The veneration of the local people led Radegund to be treated as a saint even long before her formal canonization.\(^\text{56}\) This contributed to the vigorousness of Ste-Croix, which housed over two hundred nuns by the time Radegund died in 587 in her mid-sixties.\(^\text{57}\)

Despite the power and prestige of both Radegund and her convent, religious women in Gaul were marginalized; women were banned from becoming deaconesses, and at the third Council of Macon, in 585, one participating bishop advanced the notion that women did not have

\[\text{\textsuperscript{52}}\text{Schulenburg,}\text{}\text{Forgetful of Their Sex, 406.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{53}}\text{Ibid., 324.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{54}}\text{McNamara and Halborg,}\text{}\text{Sainted Women of the Dark Ages., 70.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{55}}\text{Wemple,}\text{}\text{Women in Frankish Society,151.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{56}}\text{Schulenburg,}\text{}\text{Forgetful of Their Sex, 4.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{57}}\text{Ibid., 20.}\]
souls. Misogyny in Frankish society continued unabated. As Ste-Croix grew, increasing numbers of aristocratic women were placed in the convent not out of genuine religious feeling, but because they were inconvenient or troublesome to their wealthy families. Supporters of Ste-Croix worried that these reluctant nuns might try to leave the convent for marriage—an ironic reversal of Radegund’s youth, when she fled marriage for the convent.

The reputation of Ste-Croix took a hard blow after Radegund’s death. In 589, a few dozen aristocratic nuns left the convent en masse, alleging that the new abbess was lax and promoted sexually promiscuous and indulgent behavior. Gregory of Tours believed that these charges were fabricated by a single disgruntled nun who admitted to spreading malicious lies about the abbess, but the convent quickly split into two factions, those for and those against the abbess. Considering that Fortunatus’s biography of Radegund was written immediately after her death, his assertions of the “superiority of virginity over marriage must also have taken on a new urgency after the notorious walk-out of the well-born nuns.” Gregory of Tours recounted that this controversy was a heavy blow for the monastery. With the onset of a particularly harsh winter, most of the nuns left the convent, either for secular married lives or for convents less disrupted by rumor.

Baudonivia’s *vita*, written about 20 years after Radegund’s death, attempted to rehabilitate Ste-Croix’s reputation by linking it to the saint’s holy memory. The biography, written in a formal style and full of references to important texts of the past, showed that Ste-
Croix continued to be a center of learnedness for women even after Radegund’s death. By the writing of Baudonivia’s vita, Radegund was the subject of a local cult, and the church nearby had come to be known as the basilica dominae Radegundis. In the eleventh century, this cult was revived by Abbess Beliardis of Ste-Croix with a special focus on the convent, in an effort to one-up the rival canons of the church of Ste-Radegund in which Radegund was buried.

Radegund’s life and legacy illustrated that in Merovingian Gaul, religious women “transcended their biological and sexual roles in religious communities, [but] did not reject the attitudes associated with these roles. On the contrary, they elevated feminine psychological traits to a spiritual plane.” Both Fortunatus and Baudonivia emphasized Radegund’s holiness through accounts of her domestic work and concern for fellow women. Though Radegund birthed no children, she was spiritual foster-mother to Agnes and Fortunatus, as well as to all of the nuns who lived in her convent. A reluctant queen of the Franks, she gave up her royal position to affiliate herself with the Queen of Heaven.

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66 Thiébaux, *The Writings of Medieval Women*, 93.
68 Ibid., 416.
Bibliography


