



***Radegund: The Trials and Triumphs of
a Merovingian Queen***

By Erin T. Dailey

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riting the biography of an early medieval queen is a task that only very few have dared to undertake. This might be less due to the subject matter and more due to the scarcity of our sources, in which women are often underrepresented. Working with these sources therefore requires a very careful approach, and in some cases a strong tolerance for frustration, because all too often we do not get sufficient answers to the specific questions we have asked.

Therefore, it is certainly not an easy task that the author of the volume under review has set himself. It is further complicated by the fact that Dailey wants to address at the same time a specialist audience, students, and an interested lay audience as well. He does not want to forego academic discussions completely, but also explains that he does not want to deal with them in depth. He therefore also avoided extensive footnotes. At the same time, he wanted the book to be understandable and comprehensible for the readers, but also entertaining. Such a challenging project was only possible because Radegund herself was such a fascinating personality, as Dailey states in his introductory notes.

The volume is published on the occasion of the 1500th birthday of Radegund—though we do not know when exactly she was born. Dailey himself refers to these “inaccuracies” in the chronology here and elsewhere. He also describes the narrow source base on which a book on Radegund has to be written: the works of three authors who deal directly with her have come down to us. Almost all three of them knew her personally, very or quite well, which is rather exceptional for the early Middle Ages: the Italian poet and later bishop of Poitiers Venantius Fortunatus, Gregory, bishop of Tours and author of, among other works, the famous *Libri historiarum decem*, and finally Baudonivia, nun in the monastery of Sainte-Croix founded by Radegund, whom she probably met at a very young age.

Dealing with these sources in a way which is at some points very unconventional, Dailey tries to portray Radegund not only as a saint, but also as a woman and a status-conscious queen by examining her life against the background of her time, its political and religious-cultural conditions. Furthermore, he traces the eventful history of the monastery she founded up to the second half of the twentieth century. Dailey starts by looking at Radegund’s early years, which were cast in a very dark shadow by many events including the conquest of Thuringia by the Franks. By this time Radegund, a Thuringian king’s

daughter, had already lost both of her parents, her father certainly due to power struggles within Thuringia. After the Franks' victory over the Thuringians, Radegund became a prey of war; her future husband Chlothar is said to have fought with his half-brother Theuderich over who was going to have her. Both might have hoped that the marriage would give them a certain claim to parts of Thuringia; the marriage to the king's daughter was very probably associated with a gain in prestige. Chlothar, the winner, had Radegund, who was still at a very young age at this time, brought to a royal estate and had her educated there. Dailey compares her stay to imprisonment, which is not entirely implausible. He goes into great detail about the queen's inner life at several points, about her fears and repeatedly postulates a trauma that she suffered through the conquest and loss of her homeland and almost her entire family, later especially by the murder of her brother by her own husband. This is certainly not unlikely, but the author postulates it rather than proves it analytically. Some thoughts are very speculative as the author mostly admits, as for example that Radegund suffered badly from an unfulfilled desire to have children, not only because of her insecure status as a queen but also because of having lost so much in her early years. Furthermore, Dailey's observations about Chlothar's and Radegund's sexual marital life are not very convincing either, because they remain very often speculative, as Dailey from time to time admits as well. An exception may be Radegund's nightly escapes from her marital bed, as described by Fortunatus: she threw herself on the cold floor wearing only a hair robe and lay there praying until the cold had permeated her entire body. However, the author's interpretation that Fortunatus had penitential rites in mind and therefore describes an act out of guilt of sexual pollution lacks proof.

Radegund challenged Chlothar at least twice, as Dailey tries to show: for the first time, when she was probably trying to gain a solid status as a recognized queen, she fled Athies with a few companions shortly before her marriage. She managed to withdraw the wedding ceremony from the relative seclusion of the royal estate at Athies to a more prestigious location, Soissons, as Dailey convincingly argues. The second time, she went much further by having herself ordained a deaconess, very probably against his will. Dailey's comparisons with other Merovingian queens, who fought to achieve and maintain a queenly status are often worth considering and fit research results. His reflections on the occurrence of sexual acts of violence during the rebellion of Chlothar's son Chramn in Poitiers and the nuns' revolt in Poitiers, which are treated in great detail in a separate chapter, deserve attention as well. Surprisingly, this particular aspect has received little

attention in research on the violence of the Merovingian period, which is so often emphasized.

The second time Radegund put everything on one card was the moment when she broke with her husband for good and, more or less, forced a bishop to ordain her as a deaconess. Chlothar tried to bring her back at least once but was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, he gave her his support when she founded a spiritual convent in Poitiers. She refers to that support in a letter that she probably wrote shortly before her death; Dailey gives a complete translation of this very important document. Radegund was afraid that her monastery would be in dire need of support after her death, not least because of the experiences she had during the years in which Poitiers came under the changing rule of her stepsons whose interests, most of the time, did not coincide with hers. Dailey's reflections on the reasons for the convent's difficulties shortly after the queen's death are essentially comprehensive: Sainte-Croix was the founding of a very special Merovingian queen who was in the end irreplaceable.

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