

Merovingian Queens: Status, Religion, and Regency

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Honors Thesis Submitted to the
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May 4, 2020

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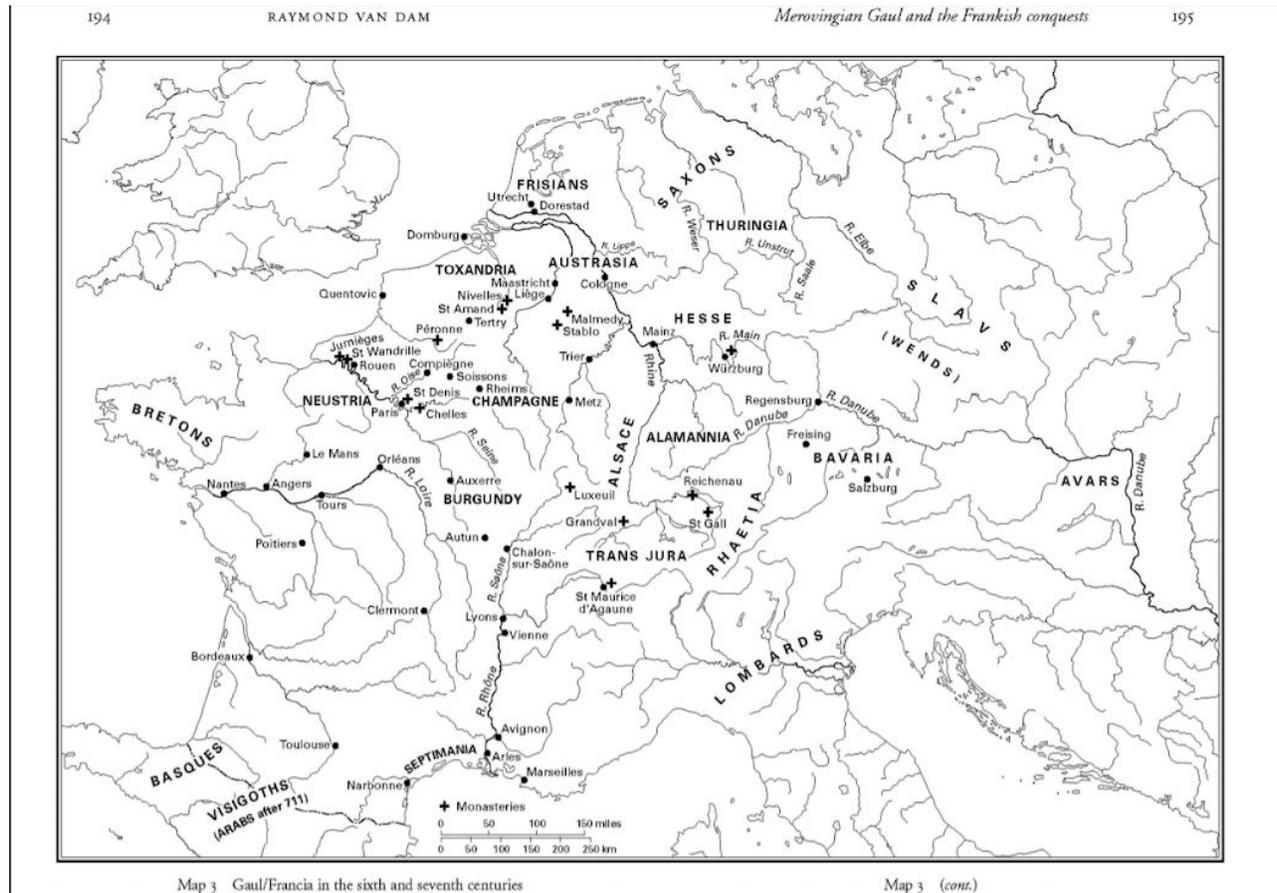
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Moran Cruz for all her guidance and advice; you have helped me become a better scholar and writer. I also want to thank Professor Games for your constant enthusiasm and for creating a respectful and fun atmosphere for our seminar. Your guidance over these past two semesters have been invaluable. I am also so grateful for my classmates, who always gave me honest and constructive feedback; I have enjoyed seeing where your projects take you.

Most of all, I would like to thank my family and friends for listening to me talk nonstop about a random, crazy, dysfunctional family from the sixth century. I am incredibly thankful for my parents, sister, and friends for their constant support. Thank you mom for listening to a podcast on the Merovingians so you could better understand what I am studying. You have always inspired me to work hard and I probably wouldn't have written a thesis without you as my inspiration. I also want to thank my dad, who always supported my studies and pretended to know more about a topic than he actually did. I wish you could have read my thesis. I want to thank my sister and my friends, especially Daria, Lahy, and Angela, for patiently listening to me talk about my thesis and always supporting me. Finally, I want to thank Dr. Cimino at University of St. Andrews for introducing me to the Merovingians.

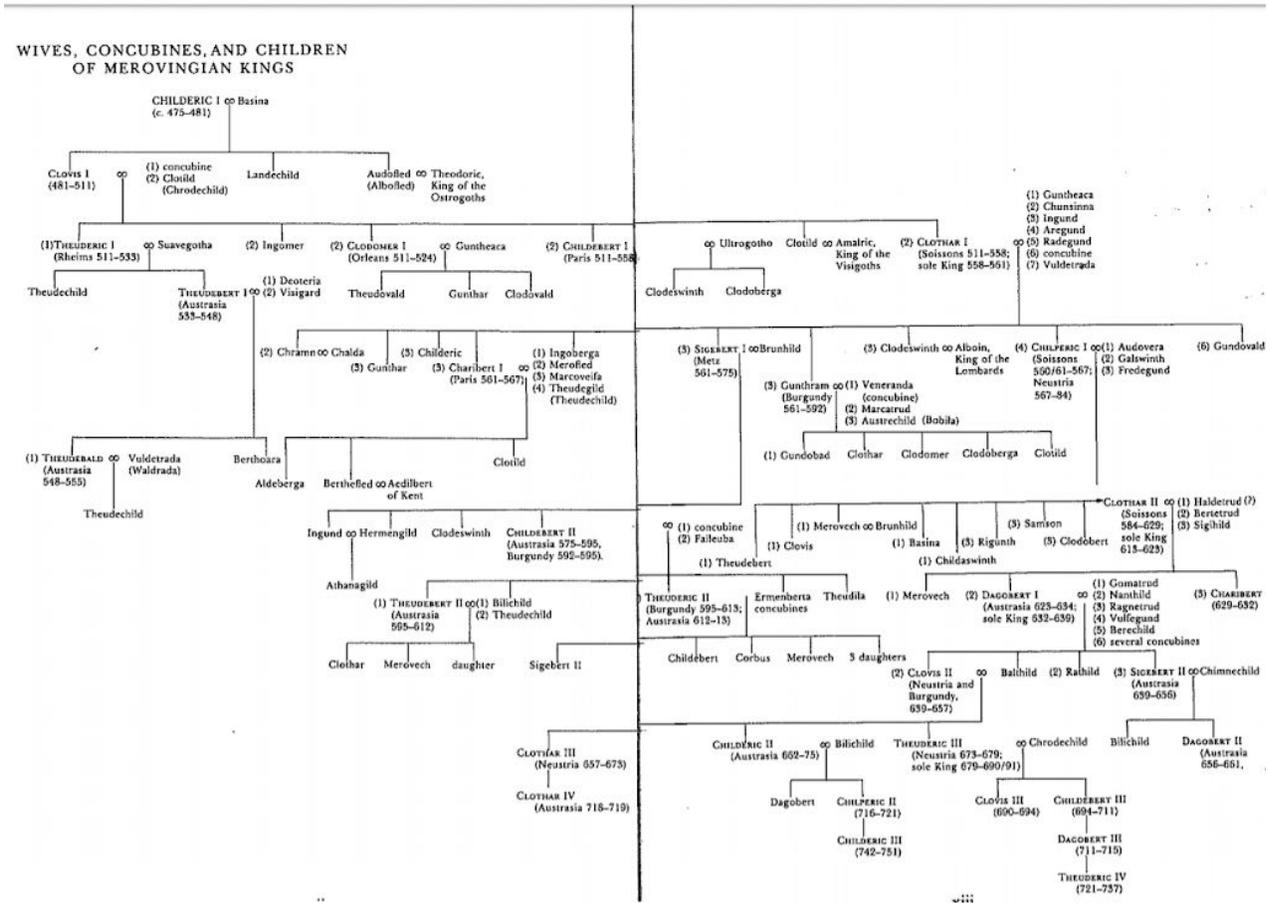
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Map of Merovingian Kingdoms:



Paul Fouracre, ed. "Map 3 Gaul/Francia in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries" plates, in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, Vol. 1, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Genealogy:



Suzanne Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister 500 to 900*,

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1981) xii-xiii.

Glossary: Key People

Balthild (c. 626-680)	Came to Neustria as an Anglo-Saxon slave, but married King Clovis II and served as regent for her son, Clothar until she was forced into retirement. After her death at Chelles, she became venerated as a saint.
Brunhild (c. 543-613)	Visigothic princess who married Sigibert of Austrasia in 567. After his murder in 575, she briefly married her step-nephew Merovech before becoming regent for her son Childebert. After Childebert's death in 595, she became regent for her two grandsons, Theudebert and Theuderic. Brunhild was murdered in 613 by Clothar.
Childebert (c. 570-595)	Son of Sigibert and Brunhild who became king of Austrasia after the murder of his father. Became the heir of his uncle, Guntram's kingdom of Burgundy. After his early death, his two sons, Theudebert and Theuderic divided his kingdoms of Burgundy and Austrasia.
Chilperic (c. 539-584)	Son of Clothar and Aregund. Ruled Neustria from 561-584. Married Audovera, then the Visigothic princess Galswinth until he murdered her in 568. Married and stayed loyal to his former concubine Fredegund until his death.
Clothar (c. 497-561)	Son of Clovis and Clothild. Became king of all the Franks in 558. Sired seven children with three different women. Infamous for his cruelty and multiple marriages. He had four surviving sons divide his kingdom after his death.
Clothar (584-629)	Son of Fredegund and Chilperic. Fredegund ruled as his regent until he came of age. Became ruler of the entire Merovingian kingdom in 613. Murdered Brunhild.

Clothild (c. 474-545)	Burgundian princess who married Clovis in 493 and converted him to Christianity. Had three sons with Clovis who would divide the kingdom: Childebert, Chlodomer, and Clothar. After Clothild died in 545, she was celebrated as a saint.
Clovis (c. 466-511)	The first Christian Merovingian king, converted by his wife Clothild. Expanded the Merovingian kingdom.
Fredegund (545-597)	Former concubine of Chilperic who became his wife and queen in 568. Only had one son, Clothar, live to adulthood. In 584, after the death of her husband, she became regent for her son Clothar under her death.
Galswinth (540-568)	Visigothic princess who after marrying Chilperic, the king of Neustria, was murdered in 568.
Gregory of Tours (c. 538-594)	Wrote <i>The History of the Franks</i> , which is the main source on the Merovingians. He knew many of the figures he wrote about, which influenced his opinion.
Radegund (c. 520-587)	Thurgurian princess whose kingdom was destroyed by Clothar. Taken as war booty and married to Clothar in 540. Left her marriage to take religious vows. After her death in 587, she was venerated as a saint. destroyed by Clothar. Taken as war booty and married to Clothar in 540. Left her marriage to take religious vows. After her death in 587, she was venerated as a saint.
Sigibert (c. 535-575)	Son of Clothar and Ingund. Ruled Austrasia from 561-575. Married the Visigothic princess Brunhild in 567 and sired Childebert. Died during a war against his brother Chilperic.

Introduction

In 613, Brunhild (c. 543-613), former queen of Austrasia, had her limbs tied to wild horses and was subsequently torn apart.¹ Her death, at the age of seventy, was a violent end to a long political career as queen and regent. Brunhild's nephew, Clothar, ordered her death after becoming king of the entire Merovingian kingdom. Because Brunhild had dominated politics for decades, Clothar believed he had to execute her to signal a shift in leadership.² While many other Merovingian queens faded into the background after the death of their husbands or sons, Brunhild had continued to amass authority and influence. Brunhild was just one example of how powerful a Merovingian queen could become and her violent death demonstrated the brutality of this era.

The Merovingian dynasty ruled from the mid-fifth century to 751. Named after their ancestor Merovech, the Merovingian kings came to dominate Gaul towards the end of the Western Roman Empire. Their laws and customs were dictated by both Roman and Germanic practices and evolved into something completely new over the course of their rule.³ Their borders fluctuated, but there were three main kingdoms—Neustria, Austrasia, and Burgundy—and a handful of tributary states. Each kingdom was usually ruled by a different, but related king. This unique system was the source of near constant warfare between brothers, fathers, sons, and uncles. However, there were cases when a single king would govern the three kingdoms, usually

¹ *Liber Historiae Francorum*, translated by Bernard S. Bachrach (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1973) 96.

² Clothar may have also ordered the death of Brunhild because she and his mother, Fredegund, were supposedly great enemies.

³ Suzanne Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister 500 to 900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981) 1-8. The Merovingian kings are referred to as the “long haired kings” based on references in Gregory of Tours. The long hair was a remnant of Germanic customs.

after the death of his male relatives, as was the case with Clothar, son of Fredegund and Chilperic, who had become king of the whole territory in 613. Unlike later European monarchs, the Merovingian kings did not enforce the practice of primogeniture; if the Merovingian territory was ruled by one king, it would shortly be divided amongst his sons upon his death. Since all male relatives (not only sons) could have a claim to a part of the Merovingian kingdom, family squabbles often evolved into war. Based on the importance of military might due to their succession practices, Merovingian kings maintained the loyalty of their nobles through the distribution of treasure and gained the support of ecclesiastical powers through patronage and appointments. The fates of religious authorities and secular kings were closely intertwined during this period. Another big player in the kingdoms were the mayors of the palace. The office emerged in the sixth century and its primary duty was to maintain the household of the king. However, the position evolved to become one of the most powerful in the kingdom, with the mayor of the palace becoming an important adviser to the king.⁴ Another potentially important figure at court was the queen, but the power of the queen was determined by the woman herself. The queen's authority would be based entirely on her charisma, political skills, and choices.

Many aspects of Merovingian history remain understudied, but the most glaring gap is a comprehensive look at Merovingian queens. The women who comprised the groupings of wives, concubines, and queens were diverse, ranging from lowborn servants to foreign princesses. Unfortunately, many of their names and lives are lost to history, with only the extraordinary

⁴ Mayors of the palace were highly influential and often ruled alongside the regent and her young son. It behooved the queen to be on good terms with the mayor of the palace. In the mid-seventh century, the mayor of the palace in Austrasia, Grimold, placed his own son on the throne after tonsuring the heir and sending him to Ireland. While his coup did not last long, the episode demonstrated the power of the mayor of the palace. In 751, the Merovingian dynasty was overthrown by their mayor of the palace, Pippin, who established his own dynasty, the Carolingians.

women preserved in the historical record. My thesis therefore focuses on a few remarkable women within the small group of Merovingian queens. Some queens were briefly mentioned in primary sources, but beyond passing references, not enough information is available to be useful in my thesis.⁵ Therefore, Clothild (c. 474-545), Radegund (c. 520-587), Brunhild (c. 543-613), Fredegund (c. 545-597), and Balthild (c. 626-680) are the stars of my thesis. From a close analysis of their marriages and relationships, I am able to extrapolate a pattern of queenship unique to the Merovingians. Unlike later queens, Merovingian queens were not consecrated or coronated.⁶ The king's wife had the potential to be easily set aside for another woman and because queens were not coronated, they could easily be replaced. However, this precarious position also came with the potential to be one of the most powerful agents in the kingdom. Because the position of queen was not clearly defined, there were no real limits. Each woman who became queen had the potential to make the position her own, with no formal laws or customs regulating her position. The stabilization of her position was usually achieved by forming alliances with important noblemen and religious authorities, so the queen would have a strong support system, which could lead to regency. My thesis aims to explore the position of queen by looking at how a woman became queen, the opportunities for great authority in the religious sector, and the possibility of regency. Merovingian queens had the greater potential for power compared to later medieval European queens; when the Carolingians started creating a

⁵ Queen Nantechild is a good example of this phenomena. Her marriage to Dagobert in the mid-seventh century is preserved in the *Liber Historiae Francorum* and Fredgar's *Chronicles*, but I decided to omit her in my discussion of queens because little besides her marriage is recorded. See Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1983) for a more comprehensive discussion of Nantechild.

⁶ Kings were crowned and consecrated, but Merovingian queens did not have any ceremonies parallel to that of the king's.

more formal, consecrated role for the queen, the position lost the opportunities inherent in Merovingian queenship.

While some historians have looked closely at Merovingian queens, it remains an understudied subsection of an already understudied part of history. However, Merovingian historiography has a long history. Their successors, the Carolingians, were dismissive of their achievements and formulated a negative interpretation of the Merovingians that went unchallenged for hundreds of years. For centuries, there were no real investigations into the customs and unique aspects of Merovingian culture, just comparisons to the Carolingians, which found the Merovingians lacking. For most of the twentieth century, German and French scholars dominated scholarship on the Merovingians, but their writings were more often than not filled with biases: the French in favor of the Carolingians and the Germans for the Merovingians.⁷ It was not until pioneers, like Ian Wood, Patrick Geary, Paul Fouracre, and Richard Gerberding that the anglophone study of Merovingian history emerged in the 1980s. What interested these historians was the desire to create a narrative political history of the Merovingians, a tall order due to the lack of surviving sources, and to move away from the overtly politicized writings of the early twentieth century. Wood and Geary specifically were interested in how the Merovingians marked a transition from Roman antiquity to the medieval era. These authors laid the groundwork that recent scholarship has continued to build on. But in their attempts to create a history of the dynasty, they neglected a large portion of the population: women.

Alongside these early works of Merovingian political history, a few scholars in the 1980s began considering Merovingian women: their role and status in the royal family, the institutions

⁷ I unfortunately cannot read German or French so my understanding of early Merovingian scholarship is indebted to Patrick Geary and Ian Wood.

of marriage and concubinage, and the contemporary or near contemporary perceptions of royal women. The scholarship on Merovingian women encompasses a variety of topics and asks different research questions, with little overlap and few works dedicated solely to the study of Merovingian queens. Pauline Stafford places Merovingian queens in a larger narrative of royal women in the early Middle Ages, while Susanne Wemple writes about both Merovingian and Carolingian royal and cloistered women.⁸ Both are invaluable resources and touch on Merovingian queens, but neither Stafford or Wemple's dedicated focus is Merovingian queens. Janet Nelson, a prolific writer on women in the early Middle Ages, wrote about two Merovingian queens, Brunhild and Balthild, in a groundbreaking work. Still widely quoted in modern scholarship, the importance of Nelson's disentanglement of the careers of Brunhild and Balthild in her chapter, "Queens as Jezebels: Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian History" can not be understated.⁹ Only two queens are explored in Nelson's work, however, and her other writings, like Stafford, encompass a range of queens in the early Middle Ages. While Merovingian scholarship is indebted to Wemple, Stafford, and Nelson, there is still an opening for a comprehensive look at Merovingian queenship.

Scholarship on Merovingian women is diverse in topic, but it converges on discussions of polygyny.¹⁰ Many historians have looked at polygyny, which has obvious implications for the study of women and family structure, but is especially important when looking at queenship. There is a consensus among scholars that Merovingian kings practiced polygyny. The discussion

⁸ Stafford and Suzanne Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister 500 to 900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981).

⁹ Janet Nelson, "Queens as Jezebels: Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian History," in *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London: Hambledon Press, 1986).

¹⁰ Polygyny is when one man has multiple wives.

of polygyny is important in the context of queenship because it raises questions regarding the difference between wives and queens and the role wives would play in the household. Historians' acceptance of polygyny is due to the most important primary source on the Merovingians, *The History of the Franks*, written by the contemporaneous bishop Gregory of Tours (c. 538-594). Gregory of Tours often alluded to kings having multiple wives at once, which has led many scholars to assert that the Merovingian kings practiced polygyny. Scholars like Wemple and Stafford write that polygyny was practiced by Merovingian kings¹¹ This line of thinking went unchallenged for decades until Erin Dailey argued a different interpretation in her 2015 book, *Consorts, Concubines: Gregory of Tours and Women of the Merovingian Elite*. Dailey asserts that Gregory of Tours purposely was ambiguous when describing the marriage policies of the kings. She persuasively argues that Clothar, a king Gregory accused of practicing polygyny, was maligned elsewhere in Gregory's writing, thus the accusation of polygyny against a Christian king could have just been slander.¹² While Dailey's logic is sound, it is difficult to definitively know whether or not the kings practiced polygyny. There were definitely multiple women surrounding the king, but whether or not they were all considered wives or just concubines is difficult to determine. Regardless of the women's official titles, the fact that there were multiple candidates around the king to be his favored wife and queen speaks to a level of intense competition at court. While the discussion of whether or not Merovingian kings practiced polygyny is an interesting and important one, the main takeaway is that there were always

¹¹ Wemple 38 and Stafford 74.

¹² Erin T. Dailey, *Consorts, Concubines: Gregory of Tours and Women of the Merovingian Elite* (Boston: Brill, 2015) 105-107.

multiple women at court competing for the attention of the king and one woman had to rise above her competition to be proclaimed queen.¹³

Within a larger discussion of foreign relations, scholars have also paid attention to the status and role of a foreign bride. Foreign in this context normally means a bride from Visigothic Spain or Thuringia, territories adjacent to the Merovingian kingdoms that were not wildly different culturally, only slower to adopt Christianity, or in the context of Spain, Catholicism. Historians assert that Brunhild and Galswinth, two Visigothic princesses who married Merovingian kings, were the fulcrums between the two states and part of a larger diplomatic policy.¹⁴ However, in his dissertation on foreign brides, Ryan Crisp disagrees with the idea that foreign brides were chosen to form an alliance and argues instead that there was an emphasis on royal blood and wealth.¹⁵ While Crisp does well to focus on reasons for choosing a foreign bride, wealth being an important factor, he does not address domestic, lowborn women as the other option for brides. Also because scholarship on foreign brides is usually in a context of a larger discussion of diplomacy, there is little attention given to how a foreign bride is treated in her new state and the acclimation process. More importantly, there is little discussion of how a foreign bride might differ as a queen compared to a former domestic servant.

¹³ It is not entirely clear in the sources how a woman would become queen because there was no formal ceremony to mark her ascension. However, the wives who were marked as queen were the ones who had the most supporters at court and the best power base, be it nobles or churchmen.

¹⁴ See Yaniv Fox, "The Language of Sixth-century Frankish Diplomacy," in *The Merovingian Kingdoms and the Mediterranean World: Revisiting the Sources*, edited by Stefan Esders, Yitzhak Hen, Pia Lucas, and Tamar Rotman (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) 73 and Anna Gehler-Rachůnek, "East and West from a Visigothic Perspective: How and Why Were Frankish Brides Negotiated in the Late Sixth Century?" in *The Merovingian Kingdoms and the Mediterranean World: Revisiting the Sources*, edited by Stefan Esders, Yitzhak Hen, Pia Lucas, and Tamar Rotman (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) 33.

¹⁵ Ryan Crisp, "Marriage and Alliance in the Merovingian Kingdom, 481-639" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2003), iii.

Another focus of scholarship is hagiographies, where the study of medieval women and the Merovingians converge, but is again somewhat tangential to the study of Merovingian queens. There was an interesting phenomenon of certain Merovingian queens becoming revered as saints and having their own *vitae*. Scholarship on hagiographies often focuses on female saints in the Middle Age more generally, with the treatment of Merovingian queen saints included in a wider narrative. The study of hagiographies is interesting on its own, but especially the differences between male and female saints' *vitae*. Often, there is a "softening" of religious female authority, which is achieved through a language focused on domesticity.¹⁶ While there is a marked difference between the *vitae* of male and female saints, hagiographies of queen saints is another separate category. The effort to soften a queen's image was apparent in the *vitae* of Clothild, Radegund, and Balthild and the task of balancing their worldly affairs as queen with the usual formula and tropes of female saints' *vitae* posed a challenge to their hagiographers. Balthild especially was an active queen and regent, who dabbled in church appointments. Lynda Coon in her article, "Civilizing Merovingian Gaul: The Lives of Monegund, Radegund, and Balthild" writes that Balthild's hagiography tackled her controversial political career by "subordinating [her] worldly authority to her domestic piety."¹⁷ The study of female *vitae* is interesting in its own right, but Merovingian queens' *vitae* show a certain path queens could take to substantiate their precarious position; thus it is important to focus on hagiographies of queens as a distinctive genre. One possible sector in which queens could wield great influence was religion, with patronage and ecclesiastical appointments. Studies of Merovingian queen saints

¹⁶ Lynda Coon, "Civilizing Merovingian Gaul: The Lives of Monegund, Radegund, and Balthild," in *Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) 141.

¹⁷ Coon, 136.

help create a fuller picture of the authority they could wield, over religious matters specifically, and their *vitae* help answer questions about a queen's daily life and role at court.

Anglophone scholarship on the Merovingians is fairly new, only having started in the 1980s. The group of scholars is rather small and the lack of primary sources means many unanswered questions. However, there have been sufficient strides now in scholarship to create a complete narrative history of the Merovingians and to study them out of the shadow of their successors, the Carolingians. While scholarship has dealt with Merovingian women to different extents, but what is still missing is a comprehensive study of queens and this thesis aims to fill this gap. Although no new sources have been discovered, I will be focussing on different aspects of the surviving sources, mainly the life and career of the queen. The main primary sources I use are Gregory of Tours' *The History of the Franks*, Fredegar's *Chronicle*, the anonymous *Liber Historiae Francorum*, hagiographies, and various letters. Each source comes with its own challenges and biases, which will be addressed in the individual chapters. This thesis will use these primary sources to trace the careers of a few, extraordinary queens. Not every queen was successful in creating a sphere of influence, and I have chosen to discuss the queens who are the most well preserved in the primary sources and whose careers show the great potential for power inherent in Merovingian queenship.

I develop this analysis over the course of three chapters. The first chapter will examine how a woman became the queen. The choice of queen was at the discretion of the king. However, he could just as easily choose to marry a servant as a foreign princess. Status at birth did not predict how powerful a consort could be, with a foreign princess, Brunhild, and a former concubine, Fredegund, both able to reach the same level of influence and support from nobles

and churchmen. After being made queen, it was entirely up to the woman to maintain her position as there were usually other women lurking on the sidelines. The chapter will also closely examine the terms wife, concubine, and queen in Gregory of Tours' writing and how his usage of each term reflected his opinion of the woman. Finally, the first chapter will discuss how a queen could maintain her position, specifically through the control of treasure.

My second chapter analyzes queens and religion. There were three Merovingian queens who became saints, Clothild, Radegund, and Balthild. I argue that there is a direct line of continuity between the queen saints and I demonstrate this progression by examining important similarities in their careers. All three women relied on treasure and the help of religious authorities. Not every Merovingian queen became celebrated as a saint, although even those who did not become a saint, like Brunhild, also formed close alliances with the clergy. The second chapter, overall, will examine the close relationship between queens and the Church.

My third and final chapter will examine the possibility of regency. Queens could only become regents if their husband died before them and their son was underage. No source closely outlined the path to become regent, but it was clearly important to have the support of noblemen and a good relationship with the mayor of the palace. While there were a few examples of regents, the two who best exemplify the powers of the regent were Brunhild and Fredegund. Regency was not a possibility for every Merovingian queen, but the position of regent had the potential for the greatest power because she was in effect ruling the state with the assistance of the mayor of the palace, noblemen, and churchmen.

This thesis will closely chart the careers of important Merovingian queens and demonstrate the ways in which they solidified their position at court. The position of queen was

not secure, so the queen could be easily replaced. However, because the position was not formalized or even clearly defined, there were no limits on what a queen could or could not do. There were no strict standards that a queen had to follow, so she could shape the position however she was able. Once a queen established a strong base, with access to treasure and alliances with nobles and religious authorities, she could become one of the most powerful players at court by influencing ecclesiastical appointments, signing treaties, and deciding the fate of the kingdoms. Unfortunately, this age of great freedom for a queen would come to an end when the Carolingians succeeded the Merovingians. The influence and power the Merovingian queens could wield was unrivaled by later dynasties.

Chapter 1: The Makings of a Merovingian Queen: Slave, Concubine, or Princess

Merovingian queens came from a variety of social backgrounds. Former slaves, concubines, and princesses all went on to become Merovingian queens and their success in the position was not automatically determined by their status at birth. It is somewhat difficult to define a clear and coherent royal Merovingian marital policy because who the king married was entirely up to him. There were benefits both for marrying a wealthy princess and a lowborn woman. For the former, she would bring wealth, connections, and perhaps even a claim to her natal land. Marrying a lowborn woman, conversely, served as a statement that the king did not need the benefits of a foreign bride and his reign was stable enough to not need outside help. One thing that linked the foreign princess and the lowborn consort was that they both were at the mercy of the king, at least initially. Even though the foreign princess had powerful relatives, they were outside of the Merovingian kingdom and the lowborn wife would have no powerful relatives at all. Becoming a Merovingian queen was entirely dependent on the whim of the king. The king chose who to marry and elevate to queen, selecting either a foreign princess or a lowborn woman based on his political needs. The woman's status only mattered in so far as which political statement the king wanted to make. The choice of queen was entirely at the discretion of the king, but it was up to the woman herself to stay queen and to make the position her own.

Compared to later medieval European royal marriage practices, the Merovingians were in a league of their own. In addition to Merovingian kings marrying lowborn women, some practiced polygyny (supposedly) and had concubines. Both practices contradicted their Christian

beliefs, which propelled Gregory of Tours to write quite negatively about some Merovingian kings. This chapter will consider the practice of polygyny and concubinage and outline the Merovingian king's marriage options. I will also examine Gregory of Tours' use of the terms, wife, concubine, and queen. Even though Merovingian queens came from every strata of society, their social status did not predict how powerful they could be as queens. What determined their success were the relationships they formed and the opportunities they took advantage of. Because there was no special ceremony for the queen, there was no clear, formal difference between the wife and the queen. There was also no clear cut line between concubine and wife. The latter would be married to the king, but it is not always explicit in the sources who was formally a wife and who was just a concubine. What is clear was that there were always multiple women around the king, wives or concubines, but the queen was elevated above the role of just a common wife. The women the sources referred to as queens—like Clothild, Fredegund, Brunhild, and Balthild—were wives of the king who separated themselves from other women at court through a calculated use of treasure and the formation of close alliances.

The main source on the Merovingians is Gregory of Tours' *The History of the Franks*. Over the course of ten books, Bishop Gregory of Tours (c. 538-594) covered important historical events starting with Creation and ending in 591. While he wrote about a great number of topics, such court intrigues, miracles, and wars between the Merovingian kings, nowhere in his writings did he clearly outline what royal marriage ceremonies entailed or what marriage really looked like; instead, he gave his opinion on many contemporary royal couples and demonstrated the ways some Merovingian kings did not adhere to Christian marriage customs. Gregory of Tours was a bishop and had a clear vision on what Christian marriage should look like, which included

monogamy. A slew of Merovingian kings struggled with the concept of monogamy, but whether or not the kings had multiple wives, and were therefore polygynists, or just happened to have multiple concubines is debated amongst scholars.¹⁸ When describing the king's consorts, Gregory clearly preferred the queens who were princesses and slighted the lowborn women. The status of the queen mattered morally to Gregory, even if it did not to the king. Historian E.T. Dailey writes that Gregory tried to link the poor, in his opinion, marital policy practiced by the kings with the civil unrest during the late 500s.¹⁹ To put it another way, according to Dailey, Gregory of Tours cited the kings' marriages to lowborn women as the reason for the near constant wars between the Merovingian kings.²⁰ Gregory of Tours also had political motivations when writing. Austrasia and Neustria were rivals, and Gregory favored the Austrasian rulers, Sigibert (c. 535-575) and Brunhild (c. 543-613) because Sigibert had approved Gregory's election to the Tours bishopric. In many ways, Gregory's commentary on the king's wife served as a critique of the king himself. While Gregory also openly criticized the kings directly, commenting on their choice of bride added a second layer of critique. The manner in which Gregory described royal marriages demonstrated a clear agenda and reflected Church values.

Merovingian marriage customs were influenced by both Germanic traditions and Roman civil law. When Clovis (c. 466-511) fashioned the Merovingian kingdom in the late fifth century, he began a process of assimilating some Roman and Germanic customs, which created

¹⁸ There is a difference between polygamy and polygyny. The latter is when one man has multiple wives and the former is not gendered and just refers to the practice of having more than one spouse.

¹⁹ Erin T. Dailey, *Consorts, Concubines: Gregory of Tours and Women of the Merovingian Elite* (Boston: Brill, 2015) 87.

²⁰ This was not entirely true. Sigibert married a foreign princess with the support of Gregory of Tours, yet Sigibert was actively engaged in war with his brothers.

something entirely new.²¹ Before the Merovingians, there were three types of Germanic marriages: capture (*Raubehe*), purchase (*Kaufehe*), and mutual consent (*Friedelehe*).²² However, these practices evolved, with marriage by capture eventually being outlawed by King Childebert (c. 570-595) at the end of the sixth century.²³ The Romans had two marital practices, *sine manu* and *cum manu*. The former was when, even after a Roman woman married, she still remained under the influence of her family, while the latter marked a transfer of authority from father to husband. *Sine manu* marriages were not recognized under the Visigoths or the Burgundians.²⁴ In theory marriage by mutual consent and the custom of *cum manu* were practiced by the Merovingians.²⁵

The king and the aristocracy had different marital practices, including the age at which they married and their choice of spouse. Noblemen's daughters were usually married by fifteen, after being betrothed for a couple of years. Unlike the Romans, aristocratic Merovingian men also married in their mid-teens.²⁶ Merovingian princes, however, usually did not marry until they became kings, amusing themselves with concubines in the meantime.²⁷ It was all together possible though for the prince to eventually marry his concubine once he became king, especially

²¹ Suzanne Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister 500 to 900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981) 9.

²² Wemple, 12.

²³ Wemple, 34.

²⁴ Wemple, 31.

²⁵ The practice of polygamy may have been influenced by Roman customs. Pauline Stafford writes, "in Merovingian Frankia the riches provided for the ruling dynasty by booty, and the vestiges of Rome may have fostered polygamous practices" Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1983) 72.

²⁶ Wemple, 32.

²⁷ However, a Merovingian prince may have chosen to marry when his father was still alive in order to make a play for the crown. If he did this, he would need to choose a wealthy and well connected wife. One example is Merovech, son of King Chilperic, who decided to marry his widowed aunt, Brunhild, to try to make a play for the Austrasian throne. Stafford, 35.

if she bore him a son. Merovingian kings often broke with the traditions that constrained their noblemen, marriage being one of them. While the aristocracy usually married within their own class, kings were not bound by the same considerations and would just as easily marry their inferior as their equal. Another striking difference between the aristocrats and the king is that the latter may have practiced polygyny.

Early Merovingian scholarship accepted that the Merovingian kings were polygynous, but that line of thinking is now being challenged. In Gregory of Tours' writing, he often alluded to kings having multiple wives at once, like both Clothar and Chilperic, two great villains in his work. Although, given Gregory of Tours's view on the superiority of traditional Christian monogamous marriages, he may have been trying to vilify the kings. It is clear that both Clothar and Chilperic had multiple wives, but Gregory accused both of polygyny, when in fact, they may have had a wife, repudiated her, and then remarried. Due to the imprecise nature of Gregory of Tours' use of wife and concubine, many scholars debate over the possibility of polygyny. Susanne Wemple, in the 1980s, argued that "as long as there were no strict requirements for the legalization of unions and legitimization of children, polygyny continued unabated in the [Merovingian] royal family."²⁸ Two years later, another female historian, Pauline Stafford, came to the conclusion that the kings may have had multiple wives and just favored one at a time, and this practice should still be considered polygyny.²⁹ In direct contrast to years of scholarship before her, E.T. Daily asserts that Merovingian kings had a careful marriage and succession policy where highborn women tended to be the wife and queen, while lowborn women were more often the concubines. Using Clothar as an example, Dailey argues that he took each wife in

²⁸ Wemple, 38.

²⁹ Stafford, 74.

succession and that Gregory of Tours used imprecise terminology to make Clothar appear as a king only driven by greed and lust.³⁰ Dailey is correct in pointing out that Gregory of Tours cannot be wholly relied upon to correctly and honestly distinguish between wife and concubine. Based on Gregory's evidence we cannot know whether the accusation of polygyny against some Merovingian kings was pure slander, but I think I agree with Stafford that perhaps one wife was favored at a time, while the others were either dismissed, to come back again, or gone indefinitely. However, there is no way to know definitively whether the Merovingian kings were polygynists or not. As Wemple discussed, there were "no strict requirements for the legalization of marriages" and similar to queenship itself, marriage remained rather undefined, easily dissolvable, and flexible. The most important takeaway from the discussion of polygyny is that there were multiple women fighting for the attention of the king and the queen would have had to emerge victorious from the infighting. But now, a look at the different types of women the king would marry and why.

A Merovingian king could choose a foreign bride in order to lay a legitimate claim to rule her kingdom. One of the better documented Merovingian kings was Clothar (497-561), which was perhaps due to the surprising length of his life, quite unusual for the pugnacious Merovingian kings. However, his many appearances in sources may have also been due to his supposed brutality and his marital practices. He married four women and he single-handedly fathered the next generation of Merovingian kings.³¹ One of his wives, Radegund (520-587), was a Thuringian princess, who would go on to become venerated as a saint; she was the only wife of

³⁰ Dailey, 105-107.

³¹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, translated by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1974) 197.

Clothar that Gregory of Tours approved of (his other wives were all lowborn). When Radegund was a young child, Clothar and his brothers invaded Thuringia after her uncle reneged on a deal with the Merovingian kings. Clothar took the young Radegund as his war booty to marry her when she came of age. Radegund was an interesting case in that she was technically a foreign princess, but she was taken as a war captive and served as a symbol of Clothar's triumph over Thuringia. According to Gregory of Tours, "when their victory was complete the Franks took over the country and subjected it to their own rule."³² So perhaps marriage, or even in this case, ownership, of Radegund operated in the same way as marriage to any foreign princess. Clothar's marriage to Radegund may have legitimated his rule over Thuringia. The marriage did not seem entirely necessary for this purpose, but it could explain why he chose to marry her, not have her killed or even have her become a concubine.

The king's choice of a foreign princess for a bride could also have been fueled by a need or desire for treasure. When in need of a foreign bride, the Merovingian kings would often look to Visigothic Spain.³³ Two sisters, Brunhild and Galswinth, married Sigibert of Austrasia and Chilperic of Neustria respectively. In his *History of the Franks*, Gregory described why Sigibert chose to marry Brunhild: "King Sigibert observed that his brothers were taking wives who were completely unworthy of them and were so far degrading themselves as to marry their own servants. He therefore sent messengers loaded with gifts to Spain and asked for the hand of Brunhild, the daughter of King Athanagild."³⁴ A couple of aspects of royal marriages can be gleaned from Gregory's account. One of which is that it was common for kings to marry

³² Gregory of Tours, 168.

³³ Janet Nelson, "Queens as Jezebels: Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian History," in *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London: Hambledon Press, 1986) 5.

³⁴ Gregory of Tours, 221.

lowborn women and servants. In fact, all the Merovingian kings ruling during Gregory's lifetime (the four surviving sons of Clothar) were all the sons of lowborn women. Because of its commonality, it would not be seen as "degrading" for a king to marry a servant and Gregory of Tours was clearly projecting his own opinions onto the reasoning and actions of Sigibert, although it was probably an opinion shared by other churchmen. While Sigibert may have chosen to marry Brunhild to distinguish himself from his brothers, he had other reasons. One obvious reason to marry a foreign bride would be to cement an alliance without the annoyance and creation of domestic aristocratic factions. Sigibert and his three brothers were jockeying for power in the Merovingian kingdoms and he may have chosen to marry Brunhild to form an alliance with the Visigoths.³⁵ While his wife would have connections that the king could take advantage of, she could only use her natal family to bolster her position at court to a certain extent. Another reason Sigibert chose to marry Brunhild, instead of a woman from within his kingdom, was the wealth she would bring. Gregory noted the size of her dowry in his account, the importance of which can not be understated.³⁶ Sigibert and his brothers were almost constantly engaged in war with each other, so an influx of treasure was needed. Much of the Merovingian king's authority rested on his amount and control of treasure, so the dowry of a foreign princess would look quite attractive.

The other Visigothic princess and Brunhild's sister, Galswinth, married Chilperic.

Gregory of Tours again narrated the scene:

³⁵ Anna Gehler-Rachunek, "East and West from a Visigothic Perspective: How and Why Were Frankish Brides Negotiated in the Late Sixth Century?" in *The Merovingian Kingdoms and the Mediterranean World: Revisiting the Sources*, edited by Stefan Esders, Yitzhak Hen, Pia Lucas, and Tamar Rotman (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) 33.

³⁶ Gregory of Tours, 221.

When he saw [Sigibert's marriage], King Chilperic sent to ask for the hand of Galswinth, the sister of Brunhild, although he already had a number of wives. He told the messengers to say that he promised to dismiss all the others, if only he were considered worthy of marrying a King's daughter of a rank equal to his own. Galswinth's father believed what he said and sent his daughter to him with a large dowry.³⁷

Gregory of Tours again did not flesh out all the motivations behind this marital match, focussing only on the competition between brothers and issues of rank and status. To Gregory, status was one of the most important considerations in selecting a bride. Unlike his description of the marriage of Sigibert, Gregory made clear the importance of the dowry in a marriage: “[Chilperic] loved [Galswinth] very dearly, for she had brought a large dowry with her.”³⁸ Gregory's comment was most likely meant to be insulting towards Chilperic, implying that he only loved his wife because of her treasure. Because a large dowry from a foreign princess was so attractive to a king, it begs the question of why a Merovingian king would not always marry a princess. There were clearly other considerations when selecting a bride. As E.T. Dailey wrote, “to select a bride without regard for her wealth or lineage was to signal one's own power and security.”³⁹ Sigibert made a statement when he married Visigothic Brunhild, and other kings made a statement when they married lowborn women. Chilperic's marriage to Galswinth and her eventual murder perfectly demonstrate the different motivations that were considered when selecting a bride.

Chilperic's marriages show the range of potential brides. As mentioned above, when Chilperic asked for Galswinth's hand in marriage, he promised to give up his other wives

³⁷ Gregory of Tours, 222. Historians cite this passage as evidence that the Merovingian kings were polygynists.

³⁸ Gregory of Tours, 222.

³⁹ Dailey, 100.

because polygyny was not condoned in Visigothic Spain.⁴⁰ Gregory of Tours wrote “wives,” but again, it might have just been slander. Chilperic was definitely married to Audovera and had four sons with her. The other “wife” would have been Fredegund, but elsewhere, Gregory of Tours described her as a lowborn concubine, so whether or not she was Chilperic’s wife prior to his marriage to Galswinth is unclear. Her role in Galswinth’s death, however, was quite straightforward. Even though Galswinth was a foreign princess, this status did little to afford her protection from the dangers of court. She was murdered quite soon into her reign as queen but only after her father had died.⁴¹ Gregory described her time as queen and death:

[Galswinth] never stopped complaining to the King about the insults which she had to endure. [...] she begged that she might be permitted to go back home, even if it meant leaving behind all the treasure which she had brought with her. Chilperic did his best to pacify her with smooth excuses [...]. In the end he had her garrotted by one of his servants and so found her dead in bed.⁴²

Gregory gave no explanation as to why Chilperic would have Galswinth killed and he used this episode to show the king’s cruelty. The fact that Chilperic easily set Audovera aside to marry Galswinth and that Galswinth asked to leave, demonstrated the easy dissolvability of Merovingian marriages. After the murder of Galswinth, Chilperic made his former concubine, Fredegund, his new wife and queen. Chilperic married a woman of unknown status, but probably not highborn (Audovera), a foreign princess (Galswinth), and a former concubine (Fredegund); he alone showed the great range of brides.

Merovingian kings could also look much closer to home when choosing a bride and marry their concubines. Fredegund was the best documented example of a concubine turned

⁴⁰ Wemple, 39.

⁴¹ Gehler-Rachůnek 33.

⁴² Gregory of Tours, 222.

queen, but many hung about the king but were never elevated to queen. Several concubines have been forgotten by history. Gregory of Tours wrote that Clovis (466-511) had a son, Theuderic, with one of his concubines, but failed to mention her name.⁴³ A later king, Childebert (570-595), had two sons, Theudebert (with a concubine) and Theuderic (with his queen). The latter actually never married, which was highly unusual, before he died at age twenty-six; he only sired children with his concubines, who again remained unnamed.⁴⁴ While concubines were around unmarried and married kings, it was difficult for one to satisfy the king enough for her to become queen. Fredegund was the great exception in terms of the longevity and success of her career. Chilperic's concubine through two of his marriages, Fredegund was eventually able to maneuver into becoming his sole wife and queen until his murder in 584. Seemingly an exception to the rule, Fredegund was not only a concubine who became queen, which was rare, but she also had not yet borne Chilperic a son, usually a prerequisite. Fredegund's former concubine status plagued her in the writings of Gregory of Tours.

Even though I am separating concubine and servant/slave, which is the third category of queen, it may be an artificial distinction. When Gregory of Tours described Fredegund, he often referred to her status as a former concubine and stressed her low birth. To him, her humble origins perfectly coincided with her immorality and poor character and he often compared her to Brunhild, the foreign princess, who was good, smart, and beautiful. So, Gregory of Tours perhaps used the word "concubine" to degrade Fredegund and used servant or slave (*ancilla*) to describe women who were also concubines, but the readers were not supposed to judge morally.

⁴³ Gregory of Tours, 141.

⁴⁴ Theuderic may never have married because his grandmother, Brunhild, was such a large influence at court and she did not want to share power with another woman.

Clear in his writing, Gregory was an elitist and came from a family of wealthy Gallo-Roman gentry.⁴⁵ His preference for highborn women was a reflection of his own upbringing and he held the kings' lowborn consorts in disdain. Gregory disparaged the former concubine Fredegund, however, more so than any other former servant who became queen, so to him, there was a moral difference between concubine and servant.

Servants and slaves were the most common social group Merovingian kings seemed to pull their brides from. Servants not only had the opportunity to be queen, but they, and their sons, were often a great threat to the king's wife. An infamous story in Gregory of Tours' writing was when Clothar (c. 497-561) married two sisters. Clothar married Ingund first, who called herself a former "handmaiden." Ingund then asked Clothar to find her sister, Aregund, a wealthy husband and Clothar "too much given to woman-chasing to be able to resist" married Aregund himself. When Ingund found out, Gregory, narrating the story, noted no large reaction from her, only had her say to Clothar, "all I ask is that I may retain your good favour."⁴⁶ Clothar married not one, but two servants and Gregory perfectly encapsulated aspects of Merovingian royal marriage and queenship in one story. Clothar easily married Aregund, without any objections about her status or any objections from his wife (and now sister-in-law). Neither marriage was politically driven, but instead, Clothar wanted to have as many heirs as possible. Ingund's sad request of asking to remain in his favor, demonstrated the vulnerability of being the king's wife. Because Ingund was a servant and had no powerful family relations, her livelihood was completely dependent on her husband and when he married another woman, she could not protest. Decades later, Theudebert of Austrasia married his grandmother's former slave,

⁴⁵ Gregory of Tours, 7.

⁴⁶ Gregory of Tours, 198.

Bilichild. Unfortunately, she was not able to produce a son and was eventually murdered in 611.

⁴⁷ Bilichild was perhaps an extreme example of how vulnerable a queen could be, especially one who was a former slave or servant. She had not built a support system, had no influential family members, and had no real protection against the whim of a powerful husband.

Not all former slaves turned queens struggled however. One of the most influential Merovingian queens was Balthild (626-680). An Anglo-Saxon slave who married Clovis, king of Burgundy and Austrasia (633-657), Balthild went on to become regent for her son and venerated as a saint. Despite, or maybe because of, her status as a former slave, Balthild forged strong connections with certain factions in the nobility as well as with ecclesiastical authorities, which protected her from being replaced as queen. Her career will be explored more in depth in the next chapter, but, like Fredegund, Balthild demonstrated the great possibilities in queenship. Both women were lowborn, but were able to become two of the most influential agents in their time, regardless of gender.

This brief foray into the different statuses of Merovingian queens shows the diverse pool queens came from and the degree to which their status did not matter. The role of Merovingian queens was precarious regardless of the woman's status at birth. Both the Visigothic princess, Galswinth, and the former slave, Bilichild, were murdered. And both the Visigothic princess, Brunhild, and the former concubine, Fredegund, were able to establish themselves as great forces in politics during and after their husbands' lives. Because of the easy nature of replacing the queen and her lack of a formal role, it was up to the woman to carve out her own sphere of influence and assert herself. There was often competition among the concubines and the queen

⁴⁷ Nelson, 15.

for the king's favor and the supremacy of their sons. The most successful queens were the ones who eliminated the competition. Some kings, like Sigibert, only had one wife, who was his queen, and no concubines, but most kings did not follow his example. Merovingian kings had multiple women around them and royal marriage was flexible, so it is sometimes difficult to parse through who was a wife, a concubine, or the queen. Gregory's account that was intentional in the use of these terms complicates the matter further.

Gregory of Tours's use of the word queen was careful and calculated. Even though there was no formal consecration or ceremony to mark the queen, the role was separate from concubine and just any old wife. In both of Radegund's *vitae*, her hagiographers stressed her role as the queen and the only queen, despite the possibility of other wives being at court.⁴⁸ In some cases, Gregory bestowed the word queen as a token of honor. Queen Clothild—who was originally from Burgundy, converted King Clovis to Christianity, and was venerated as a saint—was almost always referred to as the queen by Gregory. When describing Galswinth's murder Gregory referred to her as “the Queen” and Audovera, the wife Chilperic left for Galswinth, as the former wife or consort.⁴⁹ It would make sense that if Gregory used the term concubine as an insult, he would use queen as a great signal of honor, and wife perhaps more neutrally. The episode of Galswinth's murder perfectly showed how Gregory used each term—wife, queen, and concubine—deliberately to separate the women: Audovera was referred to as an “earlier consort,” Galswinth “the Queen,” and Fredegund was reduced to the status of

⁴⁸ See Venantius Fortunatus, *Life of St. Radegund*. In *A Short Reader of Medieval Saints*, translated by Mary-Ann Stouck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009) and *The Life of St. Radegund*. In *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology*, translated by Marcelle Thiebaut, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994). *Vita* is a stylized piece of writing that documented a saint's life. Radegund will be more closely examined in the next chapter.

⁴⁹ Gregory of Tours, 223.

concubine who shortly after the murder of Galswinth, was asked by Chilperic “to sleep with him again.”⁵⁰ However, later in his *History of the Franks*, Gregory did finally refer to Fredegund as queen, because perhaps at that point, her influence was too large to ignore. Nonetheless, he did often put the word evil or evil adjacent to the title. Gregory’s use of the words concubine, wife, and queen have caused quite a bit of confusion and disagreement amongst scholars. He was intentional in his pointed use of the word concubine and he was always deliberate when using the term queen. Gregory’s use of the terms concubine, wife, and queen were loaded. He never fleshed out the difference between a wife and a queen, but he referred to the most powerful consorts as queens. Gregory automatically called the foreign princesses “queens,” but women like Fredegund, earned the title. The women he called queen, like Clothild, Fredegund, and Brunhild, were powerful because of their control of treasure and the strong support networks they formed.

While the role of queen was quite precarious, there were ways she could establish a foothold in politics and bolster her position. One important resource for queens was the control and use of treasure. Women were given a bridegift when they married the king, and this wealth could be used to their advantage. Radegund, when wanting to escape her marriage to king Clothar, retreated to a villa that was given to her by her husband. While the treasure was usually given to the queen by the king, which could cause some complications, she could potentially use the wealth as she saw fit. Balthild used the treasure given to her by her husband Clovis to open monasteries and convents, which won her ecclesiastical support. Even though Balthild was a former slave and brought no impressive dowry to her marriage, the position of queen gave her

⁵⁰ Gregory of Tours, 223.

control of extensive resources. Janet Nelson wrote that queens had access to and were associated with treasure “first as a gold-bringer or gold-receiver, then as a guardian of the royal hoard in a primitive ‘capital’ during the king’s absence at war, [and] a queen could personally control sufficient treasure to support political activities on her own account.”⁵¹ Gregory of Tours referred throughout his writing to Fredegund’s access to treasure and how she paid assassins to kill her enemies. But he also detailed a less nefarious use of her wealth. Chilperic and Fredegund’s daughter, Ringuth, was engaged to the Visigothic king and Gregory recounted her departure: “[Chilperic] handed [Ringuth] over to the Visigothic envoys, providing her with a tremendous dowry. Her mother added a vast weight of gold and silver, and many fine clothes. When he saw this, King Chilperic thought that he had nothing left at all.”⁵² When questioned about the amount she was giving her daughter, Fredegund stated, “everything you see belongs to me. Your most illustrious king has been quite generous to me, and I have put aside quite a bit from my own resources, from the manors granted to me, and from revenue and taxes. [...] none of it has been taken from the public treasury.”⁵³ Fredegund’s wealth was built up from gifts she received from her husband, but she was able to take that wealth and generate her own resources. Fredegund was able to give her daughter an impressive dowry, when she herself never had one. In addition to manors, much of Merovingian treasure was movable wealth, jewelry for example, which was easy to gift and gave the women who controlled it more freedom to spend it how they wanted. Having access to treasure and using it wisely was one way a queen could find allies, establish a foothold, and prevent getting replaced. The importance of wealth and allies can not be

⁵¹ Nelson, 6.

⁵² Gregory of Tours, 378.

⁵³ Gregory of Tours, 378.

underestimated; a queen separated herself from the other wives or concubines by having resources and forging strong relationships.

This chapter explored the extent to which the woman's status did not matter and perhaps even the ruler's preference for low born wives. After trying to distinguish between Gregory of Tours' use of the terms concubine, wife and queen, the queen's control over treasure was cited as one concrete example of how a queen differed from a wife or concubine. Through these discussions, it becomes clear how precarious the position of queen could be. It was up to each queen individually to use the resources given to her, like access to treasure, to establish herself and gain allies in both the aristocracy and the Church, which would help to prevent her being replaced. The most obvious requirement is that the queen remained on good terms with her husband, since he was the one to give her access to treasure and her authority rested on their continuing good relationship and on having his sons. Queens who were the most successful were the ones able to carve out their own areas of influence, religion being an important option.

Chapter 2: Religious Authority of Queens: Intercessors and Saints

Running away from her husband King Clothar of Neustria, after he killed her brother in 550, Radegund (c. 520-587) came to Noyon where she asked Bishop Médard to consecrate her as a nun. After being put in a difficult position, because how can one consecrate a woman still married to the king, Médard decided to make her a deaconess.⁵⁴ Her consecration ended Radegund's formal time as queen, but even as a deaconess and eventual nun, during her time in her convent at Poitiers, she was still involved in Merovingian family politics. Eventually, she gained a cult following and was canonized, having followed in the footsteps of Saint Clothild (c. 474-545); she would be followed by Saint Balthild (c. 526-680). All three women were Merovingian queens who after their deaths, were celebrated as saints. As these extraordinary examples suggest, one way queens could consolidate their precarious power was through close relationships with important churchmen and through the demonstration of great religious fervor. The relationship between women and Christianity, best exemplified by queens turned saints, was one important way kings' wives could solidify their status as queen. Even when a queen did not become a saint, or a saint was no longer a queen (as in Radegund's case), her close relationship with the Church was important because it gave her access to new kinds of power and established a sphere of influence.

Clothild, Radegund, and Balthild were the only Merovingian queens to be later consecrated as saints, but before that, each gained a local cult following and had their own hagiography or *vita*. A highly stylized piece of writing that details a saint's life, a *vita* can be

⁵⁴ Jo Ann McNamara, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 75. A deaconess did not have to be chaste and celibate, thus most likely explaining Medard's choice of deaconess, rather than nun.

written before a holy person becomes an official saint and can be thought of as an application to sainthood. Because the *vita* is a concerted effort to prove a candidate worthy of sainthood, it contains certain tropes; as a result a saint's actual, historic life can become distorted in an effort to make him/her seem holy. There was also a marked difference between the *vitae* of male and female saints and they employed different tropes because they had different ideal models. Often a female saint's *vita* contained language of domesticity, emphasized chastity, and portrayed a softened image of religious authority.⁵⁵ The hagiographers of Clothild, Radegund, and Balthild had the additional challenge of "softening" the image of three politically active queens who were not always chaste and were involved in worldly affairs.

I use hagiographies throughout this chapter as my main source for the careers of the three queen saints, but these sources demand caution. Each queen's hagiographer had a clear agenda and added tropes, like a desire for martyrdom (in Radegund's case) or a profession of chastity (in Balthild's case), and was attempting to promote the queen for sainthood. However, each woman's political career and the way they formed relationships with religious men to further their particular agendas can be gleaned through a close reading of their *vitae*. Their *vitae* also reveal each woman's role at court and the relationships they formed. Both Radegund's and Balthild's access to treasure was emphasized in their *vitae* and it was because of this access to movable wealth that they were able to build relationships with churchmen, either through bribes, patronage, or the building of monasteries. Radegund was able to use her wealth and relationship

⁵⁵ Lynda Coon, "Civilizing Merovingian Gaul: The Lives of Monegund, Radegund, and Balthild," in *Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity*, 120-141, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) 141.

with religious men to escape an unhappy marriage, and Balthild's supporters in the Church prevented her getting replaced as queen.

Hagiographies as a source are particularly useful in showing what the ideal queen saint looked like as well as how the ideal was formulated and developed over a century from Clothild to Balthild. This chapter will trace the development of the queen saint from Clothild to Balthild and show how the three queens used religion to carve their own sphere of influence. Clothild used her ties to the Church to convert her husband Clovis and solidify her position as an important religious figure and an ally to the Church. Her hagiography is formulaic, but emphasizes her position as queen in converting the king. Even though it was entirely possible to be a queen and a saint, as evidenced by Clothild's example, because Radegund chose not to be a queen a decade into her marriage, her hagiographers had to make the role of queen and saint seem incompatible. Radegund used her access to wealth and the relationships she formed from her time as queen to leave her marriage and start a religious life at a convent. Lastly, Balthild's hagiographer presented her as the ultimate queen saint. Her use of treasure, the formation of strong bonds with nobles and the clergy enabled her to successfully be chosen as regent for her young son and rule her territory. However, these women were the minority as not every Merovingian queen gained a cult following, although other queens also formed alliances with the clergy. Brunhild formed a strong base with churchmen which improved her position at court and even Fredegund, who was deeply despised by Bishop Gregory of Tours, still found allies in the clergy.

The Merovingians' road to Catholicism was paved largely by the efforts of women. Under the late Roman Empire, Gallo-Roman women would marry Germanic men and convert

them to Christianity.⁵⁶ Thus one way Christianity spread through the Germanic people was through marriage. However, by the late fifth century, the Merovingian kings still were not Christian and following a pattern now centuries old, the Frankish king was converted by his wife.⁵⁷

The first Merovingian king to convert to Catholicism was Clovis (c. 466-511). He married Clothild, niece of the Burgundian king Gundobad.⁵⁸ Despite her declaration that she, a Christian woman, would not marry a pagan, Clovis and Clothild were married at Soissons.⁵⁹ She did however try to convert him, with little success at first, with the sources giving different occasions for the attempt.⁶⁰ However, even before Clovis became a Catholic, Clothild baptized all her children, which may point to the primacy of the wife's supervision of children including their religious affiliation. Her pleas for Clovis to convert went unanswered, in part because her baptized children died, until Clovis engaged in battle against the Alamans and his trusted adviser told him to proclaim his queen's God in order to win. Sure enough, Clovis won the battle and was then eager to join his wife's religion after reaping the rewards. While Clothild brought Christianity to Clovis, it was not until the guidance of a male adviser and the opportunity for glory in battle, that Clovis considered conversion.

⁵⁶ Suzanne Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister 500 to 900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981) 52.

⁵⁷ There is some debate about Clothild being the one to convert Clovis or whether Clovis may have dabbled in Arianism before becoming a Catholic see Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms* (New York: Longman, 1994), 43-45.

⁵⁸ Gundobad was Arian and had previously murdered Clothild's parents and then raised her in his household, similar to Radegund half a century later.

⁵⁹ *Liber Historiae Francorum*, translated by Bernard S. Bachrach (Lawrence, Kansas: Colorado Press, 1973) 39.

⁶⁰ The LHF placed this plea before the pair got married and also combined it with a plea from Clothild for Clovis to avenge her parents' murder. Clothild's *Vita*, which was actually composed under the Carolingians in the ninth or tenth century cited her attempt to convert Clovis after they became intimate. And Gregory of Tours conceived this conversation to occur after the death of her first son.

Even though in the early years of the rise of Christianity there was a tradition of women converting men, Clothild could not convert her husband without the help of men. Clovis' adviser gave the final push for him to adopt the new faith. Clothild also asked for the assistance of Bishop Remigius of Rheims to help Clovis find the path to salvation, i.e. get baptized.⁶¹ It is important that she was the one to ask the bishop for his help, not the king himself. Clothild has been remembered by history for converting Clovis and as a model queen saint, but she needed the help of men.

After the death of her husband in 511, Clothild enjoyed a long widowhood and played an active part in politics by encouraging a war against Burgundy (her original homeland); she also helped raise her grandsons.⁶² Before her retirement, she endowed multiple churches and monasteries and gave land to a priest named Anastasius.⁶³ It is unclear what Clothild's relationship was with Anastasius, but it is an example of her patronage and of how Clothild used her wealth, in this case land, to support the Church and the clergy. Clothild's claim to sainthood was made through her conversion of Clovis to Christianity and her many good deeds, like giving alms and building monasteries. She became a model for later queen saints, but her successors would go beyond the model her hagiographer created. Radegund (c. 520- 587), who was the wife of Clothild's son, also became a saint and used religious men to accomplish her goals.

Radegund's road to queenship and sainthood was fraught with tragedy. Born around 520, her life is well documented, compared to her contemporaries, in two *vitae* and Gregory of Tours'

⁶¹ *The Life of Saint Chrothildis in Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* translated by Jo Ann McNamara (Durham: Duke University Publishing, 1992) 44.

⁶² Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, translated by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1974) 166-167.

⁶³ Gregory of Tours, 204.

writing. A Thurgurian princess, she and her brother lived with their uncle after he killed their father, yet she remembered these years fondly.⁶⁴ In 531, however, Clothar and his brother Theuderic attacked Thuringia, leading to the devastation of the population. Radegund's uncle and cousins were killed, or fled, and she herself was won by Clothar by lot.⁶⁵ Taken in childhood, Radegund was raised by and then married her captor, which made for an unhappy marriage. Because she soon gave up the position of queen to be a nun, both her hagiographers attempted to demonstrate that her personal piety was incompatible with the role of a queen. They explained the duties of a queen by showing how Radegund dismissed them. However, a close reading of her *vitae* reveals the close relationship between religious and secular authority.

Both of Radegund's hagiographers had a vested interest in explaining why Radegund was better suited to a life in a convent rather than at court, but they had different goals in writing her *vita*. The earlier *vita* was written by her friend Venantius Fortunatus shortly after her death in 587 and focused mostly on her time as queen. Fortunatus attempted to prove, through discussions of miracles, personal physical suffering, and her desire for martyrdom, that Radegund deserved to be a saint. Her second *vita* was written probably around twenty years after her death by a nun named Baudonivia, from Radegund's convent in Poitiers. She also alluded to knowing Radegund, being reared by her as a household attendant and servant, but since Baudonivia knew the former queen only in the context of the convent, her focus was skewed to the later years of Radegund's life. Since Baudonivia wrote the *vita* twenty years or so after her death, her purpose was also much different. At that point, Radegund already had a local cult following. In the

⁶⁴ Radegund, "The Fall of Thuringia." In *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology*, translated by Marcelle Thiebaut, 95-100 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994).

⁶⁵ LHF, 60 and Venantius Fortunatus, *Life of St. Radegund*. In *A Short Reader of Medieval Saints*, translated by Mary-Ann Stouck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009) 71.

intervening years from her death however, her convent at Poitiers experienced a great scandal. A couple of nuns revolted by accusing their abbess of sharing the bathroom with men and servants, playing backgammon, and other supposed unpardonable offenses. Interestingly enough, the nun who led this “revolt” was a daughter of Chilperic.⁶⁶ The abbess was eventually pardoned, and life at Poitiers returned to normal. So, Baudonivia’s purpose was perhaps more about remembering the convent at its height when Radegund was alive. She may have been attempting to bolster the community’s image, greatly damaged by the scandal. Together, Fortunatus and Baudonivia’s *vitae* help form an image of a woman supposedly not suited to queenship due to her intense religious fervor, but also show what a queen should have been doing and the formation of a close alliance between queens and churchmen.

Fortunatus devoted greater attention to Radegund’s early life. Both *vitae* gloss over the trauma a young Radegund must have experienced when being forced to leave her home as war booty of an invading king.⁶⁷ Both *vitae* do however stress her noble birth and royal origins: she was “from the highest earthly rank” (Fortunatus) and “she was a noble sprout sprung from royal stock” (Baudonivia).⁶⁸ Her hagiographers both emphasized her royal blood and eventual marriage to a king in order to present a dichotomy in her life. According to her *vitae*, even though Radegund had royal blood and was meant to be a queen, she was called to Christ and church life instead. The nobility of her blood was simultaneously enhanced yet subdued by her fervent religious beliefs: the blood of kings should have destined her to be queen, yet queenship was not what she wanted or what God eventually chose for her. But, it was because of her noble

⁶⁶ McNamara, 64. Chilperic was a son of Clothar, thus stepson of Radegund.

⁶⁷ Fortunatus, 71

⁶⁸ Fortunatus, 70 and *The Life of St. Radegund*. In *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology*, translated by Marcelle Thiebaux, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994) 87.

blood that she was able to achieve such spiritual greatness. Interestingly enough, and in contrast to Clothild, Clothar converted Radegund to Christianity. Because she was not born a Christian, Fortunatus wrote that Radegund wanted to become a martyr when she was a child, supposedly soon after her conversion.⁶⁹ She did not actually become a martyr, so Fortunatus included her wish as a child as well as her later physical mortifications as evidence in a campaign for her sanctification. However, it also served as another example of her religion superseding her intended role as queen. Queens were supposed to be religious, yes, but they should not die, especially if their one main role was to provide male heirs. Fortunatus' and Baundivia's treatment of Radegund as a child furthered the idea that Radegund was meant to go into the Church and that she was not destined to be queen.

Despite the constant tension between Radegund's role as a queen and a wife and her desire to be Christ's wife described in the *vitae*, both her *vitae* emphasized the fact that she was a queen and, more critically, the only queen. Clothar had many wives, although scholars debate whether he had them at the same time or in succession. He even famously married two sisters, after the first one, Ingund, asked him to find a good husband for her sister.⁷⁰ These women were likely before Radegund, seeing as Clothar was probably in his forties, with grown sons, and Radegund in her late teens when they married around 540. There is no reason to assume that he left his other wives for Radegund, yet both her *vitae* emphasize her sole role as queen. Fortunatus wrote, "when [Clothar] settled with her that she should be his queen at Soissons, she avoided the trappings of royalty, so she would not grow great in the world but in Him to Whom she was

⁶⁹ Fortunatus, 71

⁷⁰ Gregory of Tours, *The Merovingians* translated by Alexander Murray (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006) 47.

devoted and she remained unchanged by earthly glory.”⁷¹ Fortunatus asserted that Radegund was Clothar’s sole queen perhaps to make her rejection of the position all the more dramatic and perhaps to place her within the larger queen saint tradition. Clothar’s other wives were lowborn, while Radegund was a noblewoman, and Fortunatus, by presenting Radegund as the only queen, meant to differentiate her from the other wives. This evidence supports the conclusion that it was possible for a Merovingian king to have multiple wives and concubines but the position of queen was special. There was some wiggle room in that queens could be swapped out because there was no kind of coronation or consecration of the queen, but the role was only held by one woman at a time. And Clothar chose Radegund to be his queen. The motivation behind his choice may have been fueled by a desire to claim what was left of Thuringia. Whatever his reasoning, Clothar and Radegund were married; it was not, however, a happy marriage: “people said that the King had yoked himself to a [nun] rather than a queen.”⁷²

Radegund’s *vitae* portrayed her as a failure of a queen in order to promote her sanctity and explain why she left the position. Of course her shortcomings as queen may have been overplayed in her *vitae* in order to emphasize her natural disposition to be part of a religious community rather than a queen, but these *vitae* are still helpful in what they reveal about what queens were supposed to do. One role of the queen was control of the treasury, but whenever Radegund “received part of the tribute, she gave away a tithe of all that came to her before accepting any for herself.”⁷³ Generosity with money aligned with Christian ideals of almsgiving and charity, but not with the role of a queen. Kings methodically distributed treasure to secure

⁷¹ Fortunatus, 72

⁷² Fortunatus, 73

⁷³ Fortunatus, 72

the loyalty of the nobility, and Fortunatus made it appear that Radegund was being too generous and not purposeful, and thereby possibly undermining the whole system. While all the Merovingian queens were Christian and charity and the giving of alms was expected, Radegund was too generous by these standards.

Another important role of the queen, revealed by Radegund's *vitae*, was being hostess and presiding over banquets. However, here again she fell short. At royal banquets, Radeugnd would not eat the rich food but insisted on following her abstemious diet and supping on beans and lentils.⁷⁴ While her diet was not a great offense on its own, Radegund either left banquets early or did not come at all. For example, if the singing of the liturgy began while everyone was still banqueting, she would excuse herself from the king and all their guests. And “when the king asked after her at table during the late hours, he was told that she was delayed, busy about God’s affairs.”⁷⁵ She would even relegate the running of the household, again a role of the queen, to her trusted companions so she could go be in the presence of visiting holy men. Her actions greatly angered the king, as Fortunatus wrote that “the prince compensated her with gifts for the wrong he did her with his tongue”⁷⁶ after one of these many incidents. Her *vita* repeatedly depicted Radegund bucking her duties as queen—management of money, attendance at banquets, and the running of the household—in order to engage in religious activities.

While her hagiographers presented her shirking of her queenly duties as evidence of Radegund’s inability to be a queen, it could also be interpreted as going beyond religious motivations. Sometimes women went to convents to escape the control of their male relatives

⁷⁴ Fortunatus, 73

⁷⁵ Fortunatus, 74

⁷⁶ Fortunatus, 74

and the oppressive nature of their obligations during the Middle Ages. Radegund may have been no different. Her religiosity was one way to rebel against her husband, the man who had wiped out her family. Failing in her duties as queen may have been an attempt to revolt against her husband.

While overall, Radegund's hagiographers portrayed her as a failure of a queen, she was shown to succeed in one aspect of queenship. The image of the Merovingian king was one of a brutal warrior, who maintained loyalty through the distribution of treasure and the defence of his lands. However, there was some kind of unspoken agreement that the wife, or queen, could provide a balancing softness to her king and act as an intercessor.⁷⁷ Radegund acted in this role:

And if the king according to custom, condemned a guilty criminal to death, wasn't the most holy queen near dead with torment lest the culprit perish by sword? How she would rush about among his trusty men, ministers and nobles, whose blandishments might soothe the prince's temper until the king's anger ceased and the voice of salvation flowed where the sentence of death had issued before.⁷⁸

Radegund was rather dramatic as is shown here⁷⁹ It is interesting that the intercession was via Clothar's advisors and not directly with the king, which would become the later pattern. The theme of men doing Radegund's bidding, whether religiously or politically motivated, was present in her *vitae*. Even though Radegund succeeded in one aspect of queenship, her time as queen came to an end.

⁷⁷ An earlier example of a woman acting as an intercessor is St. Genovefa. She interceded on the behalf of a few criminals about to be executed. See Life of Saint Genovefa in McNamara's *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*. Also the Virgin Mary is known as an intercessor, so perhaps later queens imitated her model.

⁷⁸ Fortunatus, 74

⁷⁹ For examples of Radegund's flair for the dramatic see "The Fall of Thuringia," which is about the destruction of her homeland in a letter to her cousin in an attempt to get him to write to her more. She also wrote another letter in the form of a poem to the Byzantine emperor and empress to thank them for sending her a piece of the True Cross.

Following her brother's murder, Radegund left her marriage, with the assistance of a bishop. About ten years into their marriage, Clothar killed Radegund's brother. Neither *vitae* expressed his murder directly. About the death of her brother and the end of her marriage, Fortunatus wrote, "if divinity fosters it, misfortune often leads to salvation. Thus her innocent brother was killed so she might come to live in religion."⁸⁰ Baudonivia wrote, "through the workings of divine influence, she left the earthly king."⁸¹ Fortunatus at least mentioned the murder of her brother, but wrote it in passive voice with no accusation against Clothar; Baudonivia completely skated past it, chalking it up to God as to why Radegund left her husband. Regardless of the reason for Radegund leaving Clothar, she was not able to do it alone but had to ask the help of religious men. She came to Bishop Médard of Noyon so he could consecrate her as a nun, but Médard was threatened by nobles "to keep him from veiling the king's spouse lest the priest imagine he could take away the king's official queen as though she were only a prostitute."⁸² Fortunatus again emphasized the status of Radegund as the sole queen which makes this episode all the more dramatic, but he also made it clear that Radegund could not escape her marriage without the help of Médard. In Fortunatus' version, Radegund won him over with a theological argument, and despite the threats from nobles, Médard consecrated her deaconess. There was, however, more to this transaction than just an argument of theology. Right after Médard consecrated her, Radegund left her expensive clothing and jewels on the altar and gave her gold girdle to help the poor.⁸³ The way Radegund may have secured Médard's help was

⁸⁰ Fortunatus, 75.

⁸¹ Baudonivia, 109.

⁸² Fortunatus, 75.

⁸³ Fortunatus, 75.

through the donation of her expensive, worldly possessions. And the exchange of wealth for protection became a pattern for Radegund.

After successfully leaving Clothar, Radegund had to again secure the help of religious men with gifts and entreaties in order to maintain her independence. After being consecrated deaconess, Radegund, who was probably in her late twenties, retreated to Saix, one of her dower properties.⁸⁴ Her wealth and the help of Médard enabled her to live independently. But the peace was interrupted twice by Clothar attempting to get her back and in both instances, Radegund had to enlist the help of religious men. The first instance was when she was living at Saix and Baudonivia wrote, “if the king insisted on having her back, she would rather end her life than have to return to be joined again to this earthly king.”⁸⁵ So instead, Radegund sent a rich cloak encrusted with jewels to John, a recluse in Chinon castle. In exchange, she asked John to pray for her and send a hairshirt.⁸⁶ Baudonivia alleged that John’s prayer saved Radegund, and with a change of heart, Clothar let Radegund build a convent at Poitiers. However, Clothar later returned with his son Sigibert, hoping to get Radegund back. Again, Radegund enlisted the help of a religious man. This time it was Germanus the bishop of Paris. She sent a letter begging Germanus to intercede and to stop Clothar from getting her back, and she included a gift. On Radegund’s behalf, Germanus implored the king to leave her be and Clothar “reconsidered the advice of his evil counselors” and realized he did not “deserve such a queen.”⁸⁷ Clothar then asked for her forgiveness and as he was nearly towards the end of his life, he finally let Radegund be. In the three instances in which Radegund attempted to get and stay away from

⁸⁴ McNamara, 62.

⁸⁵ Baudonivia, 110.

⁸⁶ Baudonivia, 110.

⁸⁷ Baudonivia, 112.

Clothar, she had to enlist the help of religious men. She secured their help through her wealth, which is revealed by a close reading of her *vitae*. It is unclear if she had met any of the men she got assistance from at court, but her former position as queen granted her not only access to these men but to her dower funds to secure their help. Through the help of her religious allies, Radegund was able to retire to Poitiers.

Even when Radegund was enjoying the life of a nun at Poitiers, she, and her whole convent for that matter, were still heavily involved in politics. Neither of her *vitae* mentioned the burning and looting of Poitiers during the wars between Clothar's sons.⁸⁸ But, Baudonivia referred to Radegund's good relationship with her stepson Sigibert and his wife Brunhild and that since "[Radegund] wanted in no way to act without consultation as long as she was living in this world, she sent a letter to the most excellent lord King Sigibert" asking his assistance in obtaining a piece of the True Cross from the Byzantines.⁸⁹ Radegund wrote a poem to the Byzantine emperor and empress thanking them for a piece of the True Cross. Her poem was delivered alongside Sigibert's own letter.⁹⁰ Even after shutting herself in a convent, Radegund, and her whole convent, were involved and heavily impacted by the antics of Merovingian kings. Whether the kings were looting the convent or were needed for diplomatic relations, the ecclesiastical orders and the Merovingian kings were linked. Radegund used religious men to end her time as queen and to keep her independence but also used a secular king for a religious purpose. Unlike Clothild before her, and Balthild after her, Radegund used her resources as queen, specifically treasure and contacts, to withdraw from politics. Radegund needed the help of

⁸⁸ McNamara, 63

⁸⁹ Baudonivia, 117.

⁹⁰ Radegund Letter to Emperor Justin II and Empress Sophia, 568-69. Medieval Women's Latin Letters, <https://epistolae.columbia.edu/letter/916.html>.

religious men to end her marriage, while the next saint queen, Balthild, used religious men and her allies at court to maintain her position of queen.

Unlike the two foreign princesses Clothild and Radegund, Balthild (c. 626-680) began her career as an Anglo-Saxon slave. It was not unusual for a queen to have been a former slave and in some cases, a low status woman was preferred because then the queen's position was based entirely on her relationship with her husband, with no powerful family members to support her. However, Balthild was able to build her own base, starting with her previous owner, Erchinoald, the mayor of the palace in Neustria and Burgundy.⁹¹

Balthild's *vita*, written by an anonymous author in the seventh century and the main source for her life, discussed Balthild's origins and rise to the position of queen. Containing many tropes common in hagiographies, her *vita* cited divine providence as the reason Balthild ended up a slave in the Merovingian kingdoms: she "who came here as God's most precious and lofty pearl, was sold at a cheap price."⁹² In addition to the humble origins that her hagiographer wanted to emphasize, Balthild's *vita* also demonstrated her chastity. Balthild was a queen, which required marriage, so her hagiographer worked in chastity in another way. According to Balthild's *vita*, her master Erchinoald wanted to marry her, but she fled and hid under rags and divine providence allowed her to escape marriage.⁹³ Because it was God's will, Balthild married Clovis II of Neustria and Burgundy in the mid-seventh century "by virtue of her humility."⁹⁴ In

⁹¹ McNamara, 264. The mayor of the palace was an incredibly important and powerful role. Balthild probably was only able to marry the king because her former master was the mayor of the palace. Queens often needed to have a good relationship with the mayor of the palace to be successful in carving a place at court.

⁹² *The Life of Blessed Queen Balthild in Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* translated by Jo Ann McNamara (Durham: Duke University Publishing, 1992) 268.

⁹³ Janet Nelson, "Queens as Jezebels: Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian History" In *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe*, (London: Hambledon Press, 1986) 17.

⁹⁴ Life of Lady Balthild, 270.

her *vita*, Balthild's rise to queen was of course colored with instances of her piety, humility, and compliant nature because it was a text attempting to promote her cult after her death.

Balthild's *vita* in many ways portrayed her as the perfect queen. The discussion of her time as queen was brief compared to Fortunatus' *vita* of Radegund, but it packed a punch:

[Balthild] upon whom God conferred the grace of prudence obeyed the King with vigilant care as her lord, acted as mother to the princes, as a daughter to priests, and as a most pious nurse to children and adolescents. And she was amiable to all, loving priests as fathers, monks as brothers, a pious nurse to the poor. And she distributed generous alms to every one. She guarded the princes' honor by keeping their intimate counsels secret. She always exhorted the young to strive for religious achievement and humbly and assiduously suggested things to the king for the benefit of the church and the poor. For, desiring to serve Christ in the secular habit at that time, she frequented daily prayers commending herself with tears to Christ, the King of Heaven.

Balthild achieved, at least according to her hagiography, the ideal relationship with each figure in her life, whether it be churchmen, her husband, or men and children at court. In addition, she was not only able to be a queen while still upholding her religious duties, but she could be more successful at distributing alms because she was queen. Separate from religion but just as important for her power base, Balthild formed platonic relationships with young men at court and 'kept their intimate counsels secret' and these, in addition to ones formed with holy men, helped her during her time as queen and later regent.⁹⁵ Like the women before her, Balthild acted almost as a religious adviser to her husband. The Merovingian kings had been Christian for over a century by the mid-seventh century, but women were still acting as guides and advisors in religious matters. And most importantly, Balthild and her *vita* accomplished something Radegund was not able to do: she 'serve[d] Christ in the secular habit at that time.' Balthild was

⁹⁵ Nelson, 19.

able to find a balance that Radegund, according to her *vita*, was not able to and she employed the ideal of royal sanctity started by Clothild.

Like Clothild and Radegund, Balthild, in her time as queen, formed relationships with important churchmen. Clovis appointed Abbot Genesisus as Balthild's helper and spiritual adviser and their close partnership extended past Clovis' death in 657. Through Genesisus, Balthild helped the needy, distributed alms, and gave money to convents and monasteries.⁹⁶ Early in her career, her relationship with religious men was still controlled by her husband, as he was the one who introduced them to her. However, Balthild was soon able to make her own ecclesiastical connections and gain allies. Because her political backing was so impressive and complete, her husband, who had numerous relationships with other women, was never able to endanger Balthild's position as queen by raising another woman to the office.⁹⁷ When her husband died in 657, Balthild was able to use her connections to men like Genesisus and her former master Erchinoald to secure the regency for herself. Balthild had three sons, Clothar, Childeric, and Theuderic, with the oldest, Clothar, succeeding his father. Because he was not the age of majority, which was fifteen, Balthild was chosen regent with the assistance of Chrodebert, bishop of Paris, Lord Ouen, and Ebroin, mayor of the palace of Neustria.⁹⁸ These men would become part of Balthild's close circle that would support her regency, along with Genesisus and Erchinoald. This support enabled her to prohibit simony and infanticide as well as stop the sale of Christian slaves.⁹⁹ Most importantly, she redistributed wealth between monasteries, which was

⁹⁶ Life of Lady Balthild, 270. In another interesting comparison with Radegund, Balthild's charity is distributed via an abbot, which is acceptable, while Radegund did it herself.

⁹⁷ Nelson, 19.

⁹⁸ Life of Lady Balthild, 270.

⁹⁹ Life of Lady Bathild, 271-273.

a traditional job of the queen. Her *vita* stressed all her victories and cited divine providence as the reason she was able to achieve her aims; it was God working through Balthild that enabled her to meddle in politics and church appointments. Her close ties with churchmen and her ability to make church appointments was explained by Balthild's saintly character, but other contemporaries saw Balthild as a Jezebel, especially in light of an incident involving Aunemundus.

Balthild's close connection to ecclesiastical power structures and appointments to bishoprics from her own circle engendered a negative contemporary view in her home country of Anglo-Saxon England. One such church appointment succeeded a violent death. After placing her favorites in seats in Toulouse and Autun, Balthild attempted to elevate Genesisius to the bishopric of Lyons. Prior to this appointment, Aunemundus held the seat but he and his brother were accused of treason against Balthild and her son and when Aunemundus did not appear for trial, Balthild sent armed guards after him; he was murdered on his way to trial.¹⁰⁰ It is not entirely clear whether Balthild was the one who initiated the murder or whether Aunemundus was even treasonous, but because of this fiasco, Balthild was able to appoint Genesisius to the vacant seat where he was in a position to support Balthild and her policies. The *Vita Wilifridi*, a *vita* about an Anglo-Saxon saint, typed Balthild as a Jezebel and in addition to the murder of Aunemundus, charged her with the murder of eight other bishops¹⁰¹ Because this view was only present in England, and possibly Lyon, it did not seem to have affected Balthild's regency or

¹⁰⁰ Nelson, 34-35.

¹⁰¹ Nelson, 36. Wilfrid was a Northumbrian noble who became an English saint and this event is mentioned in his *vita* because he had stayed in Lyon for a few years and had a close relationship with Aunemundus.

relationship with other bishops or magnates on the continent. This incident showed, however, how Balthild could be critiqued on how closely her career aligned with the Church.

The end of Balthild's career coincided with the coming of age of her son and her placement in a convent. During her time as queen and regent, Balthild gave money to many religious communities and founded Chelles, where powerful nobles would eventually force her to retire.¹⁰² Her *vita*'s author characterized her retirement as her choice: she wanted to retire earlier, "but the Franks delayed much for love of her and would not have permitted this to happen except that there was a commotion made by the wretched Bishop Sigobrand, whose pride among the Franks earned him his mortal ruin."¹⁰³ Finally, according to her *vita*, she was allowed to retire because the Franks wanted to kill Sigobrand, but she would not have let them.¹⁰⁴ Historically, her retirement may have happened differently. Sigobrand was most likely Balthild's appointee to the see of Paris, but it was an unpopular choice and one that was used by the mayor of the palace and other magnates to push Balthild out of office, especially now that her son was of age.¹⁰⁵ While her *vita* framed her retirement as one of choice, there is a hint that Balthild still wanted to come back: Balthild consulted with the abbess of Chelles in how they may call on kings, queens, and nobles with gifts.¹⁰⁶ This episode showed the close ties of the cloistered communities to that of secular politics but also illustrated Balthild's attempts to return to court even in a small way by visiting with gifts. Her forced retirement also demonstrated the vulnerability of queenship and deriving power from relationships. While she did utilize close

¹⁰² McNamara, 264.

¹⁰³ Life of Lady Balthild, 273.

¹⁰⁴ Life of Lady Balthild, 273.

¹⁰⁵ Nelson, 41.

¹⁰⁶ Life of Lady Balthild, 275.

relationships with religious men in order to secure her policies and claim the regency, her mistake in appointing Sigobrand was what most likely triggered her retirement.

Balthild's hagiographer did a good job portraying a queen saint and placing her in a long tradition. Towards the end of her hagiography, the writer considered the achievements of Clothild and Radegund, not only placing Balthild on par with them, but having her supersede them in terms of holiness.¹⁰⁷ Presented as the culmination of queen saints, Balthild's *vita* showed her success at blurring the lines between secular and religious authority and how, through her relationships with churchmen, she was able to enact her policies. Going farther than Clothild and Radegund, Balthild meddled in church appointments, which served as proof of her sanctity. While Radegund was a saint who happened to be queen at one point, both Clothild and Balthild, Balthild more so, were queen saints.

Christianity and women are tied in inextricable ways, and how this connection manifested in the careers of Merovingian queens is interesting. Clothild was the one who started it all, by aiding the conversion of the Merovingian king Clovis. Before her, there was a tradition of Gallo-Roman women converting Frankish men to Christianity and this trend continued after her reign. While Clothild was able to synthesize religion and queenship, Radegund struggled to achieve the balance. Perhaps she really just wanted to get out of her marriage, but Radegund cited her religion as the reason to end her stint as queen. More than half a century later, Balthild seemingly achieved the pinnacle of a queen saint. By using her position as queen for religious ends, Balthild maintained an effective relationship with religious men, acted as an advisor for her husband to benefit monasteries and convents, and used her position as queen to appoint her

¹⁰⁷ Life of Lady Balthild, 277.

ecclesiastical party to higher positions, setting the stage for her regency. All three queens utilized ecclesiastical men to meet their ends. For Clothild, the end was the conversion of her husband and for Radegund, the end of a marriage. For Balthild, she used her relationships with churchmen to maintain her position as queen, secure her regency, and to create a power base that spanned the entire length of her career. However, because Balthild was the one who utilized this system most effectively, it was in part the cause of her forced retirement.

Clothild, Balthild, and Radegund were extraordinary manifestations of the close relationship that was possible between queenly power and religion, but not all Merovingian queens became saints. Even ‘normal’ Merovingian queens also had the opportunity to forge close alliances with religious leaders and were sometimes used as the middleman between a churchman and her husband. An example of this trend is Brunhild. In 575, for example, Germanus, the bishop of Paris, reached out to Brunhild for help. He asked Brunhild to appeal to her husband, King Sigibert, to end the fighting between him and his brother Chilperic. He reminded her of the biblical Queen Esther and how by stopping the wars and fraternal strife, she would be demonstrating her faith.¹⁰⁸ Between 596 to 602, Brunhild also received quite a few letters from Pope Gregory I. In many of his correspondences, Pope Gregory commended her religiosity or even asked her a favor, like protecting and offering safe passage for Augustine, who was traveling to convert the Angles.¹⁰⁹ In yet another letter, Pope Gregory asked Brunhild to establish a synod led by Abbot Cyriac to prohibit the practice of simony.¹¹⁰ The pope did not

¹⁰⁸ Germanus of Paris, Letter to Brunhild, 575, *Medieval Women’s Latin Letters*, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/325.html>.

¹⁰⁹ Pope Gregory I, Letter to Brunhild, 596, *Medieval Women’s Latin Letters*, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/328.html>. This was Augustine of Canterbury, who was the first archbishop of Canterbury and known as the founder of the English Church.

¹¹⁰ Pope Gregory I, Letter to Brunhild, 599, *Medieval Women’s Latin Letters*, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/331.html>.

write to just anyone and his letters all showed a great level of respect and trust for Brunhild. The fact that he wrote to Brunhild, not her husband Sigibert, demonstrated his belief that she had influence. Contemporaries identified Brunhild as not only a powerful political player but also as a close ally of Christianity. Even though she was never venerated as a saint like some other queens, Brunhild, similarly, forged relationships with important churchmen, and their letters reveal a close alliance between the queen and the Church.

During the reign of the Merovingians, secular and religious authorities were closely linked, which is most obvious in the formulation of the queen saint.¹¹¹ Clothild was the first Merovingian queen saint and espoused the ideal of royal sanctity, rejected by Radegund and embraced to its fullest by Balthild. The lives and careers of these women demonstrate the close relationship between women and the Christian Church and show how queens could use their religious authority and close relations to churchmen for various purposes, be it to convert a husband, to end a marriage, or to stay in power. While Balthild's hagiographer drew a clear trajectory from Clothild to Radegund to Balthild, Radegund's hagiographers attempted to assert Radegund was more of a saint than a queen. Because Radegund historically chose to step down as queen, her *vitae* had to explain what made Radegund different from Clothild. The phenomena of the queen saint is extraordinarily interesting and a way to look at the importance of the Merovingian queen's relationships with churchmen. Only one Merovingian king, Guntram (532-592) was considered to perform miracles, so Merovingian royal sainthood was almost a

¹¹¹ While kings and queens were involved in ecclesiastic appointments and intrigues, Merovingian kings often did not follow the Christian ideal of marriage.

uniquely female phenomenon.¹¹² These queens, saints or not, all used their relationships with churchmen to establish a sphere of influence. Overall, Merovingian queens used their connections with powerful men to stabilize their precarious position. Beyond allies in the clergy, alliances with noblemen were also incredibly important during her time as queen, and both supporters in the clergy and the nobility were necessary if the queen wanted to become regent for her son.

¹¹² Gregory of Tours probably thought most highly of King Guntram out of all of Clothar's sons. He even attributed a miracle to Guntram, his cloak having cured a sick boy. Gregory of Tours, 510. Guntram would later be venerated as a saint.

Chapter 3: Queens as Regents: Scheming Stepmothers and Murdering

Mothers-in-law

Not only during the rule of the Merovingians but for most of the Middle Ages, the most pressing matter for a queen was to bear a son.¹¹³ As discussed in the earlier chapters, because Merovingian queenship was not a formal institution, the queen was not consecrated, did not have a coronation ceremony or even a clear, specified role, bearing a son became even more important because it helped solidify her tenuous position.¹¹⁴ While bearing a male heir was clearly imperative when the king was alive, the death of the king and subsequent widowhood for the queen was made easier by a good relationship with her son. This chapter will examine first how a queen could become a regent and then will explore the regencies of Brunhild and Fredegund. Their regencies demonstrated the height of female authority possible during the Merovingians' reign, as has already been seen with Balthild. As regents, the queens signed treaties, ended feuds, and made contributions to military efforts, all of which were part of the male ruler domain, thus normally not open to women.

In order for a queen to become a regent, there were certain conditions that needed to be met. The most simple, and obvious, of which was to have a son and outlive the king. Beyond these simple requirements, a queen needed to have a strong base of supporters. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Brunhild was able to form a close relationship with some religious elites

¹¹³ There are of course Medieval European queens who did not have sons and it caused issues of dynastic succession and undermined the role and importance of the queen. One example from the Merovingian era is Bilichild, wife of Theudebert, who lacked aristocratic connections and did not conceive a son, so she was murdered in 611 and her husband remarried.

¹¹⁴ Consecration of queens and formal coronations became more commonplace for European queens centuries after the Merovingians. There is evidence that some Carolingian queens may have been consecrated.

which helped solidify her position as queen and created a solid base from which she could campaign for regency. Beyond a good relationship with religious authorities, Brunhild, and other female regents, also needed allies amongst the nobles. This strong base was important in more ways than one. In some cases, a king had multiple children with different women, so a queen had to compete with other women at court for the supremacy of her son before and after the death of the king. A queen who had the backing of the nobles was most likely to succeed in her bid for regency.¹¹⁵ She would have needed to garner support from important allies, be they family members, nobles, or churchmen to be made regent. Although no primary sources clearly outlined the process of becoming a regent, it is possible to piece together the key ingredients that enabled some queens to become regents. The pattern of regency showed that the queen had to be influential in her time as the king's wife; she had to have a son under the age of majority; and she had to have the backing of the magnates along with the mayor of the palace. If a Merovingian queen was able to meet these conditions, the second half of her political life, and arguably the more important half, really began with regency. As regent, she would have the full authority of the king, but would sometimes share power with the mayor of the palace until her son came of age.

In total, the Merovingians produced five female regents. While this chapter is devoted to the careers of Brunhild and Fredegund because they are documented most fully, they were not the only female regents. Besides Balthild (c. 626-680) mentioned in the previous chapter, there were at least two other women who served as regents for their male relatives. The widow of Dagobert, Nantechild (610-642), served as regent for her son Clovis until her death. During her

¹¹⁵ Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1983) 155.

regency, she appointed the mayor of the palace, was included in her son's charters, and called royal councils. Himnechild served as regent on behalf of her son-in-law Childeric II during the mid-seventh century and was only appointed regent due to the support of the Austrasian nobility.

Contemporaries of each other, Brunhild (543-613) and Fredegund (d. 597) were immortalized in Gregory of Tours' *The History of the Franks* and depicted as great enemies since the murder of Brunhild's sister at the behest of Fredegund.¹¹⁶ *The History of the Franks*, written during their lifetime, set up a great dichotomy between the two women. According to Gregory, Fredegund represented all that is wicked, as a former concubine who schemed her way to being queen and employed murderous tactics to keep the position; she was a direct contrast to Gregory's depiction of Brunhild who was described as not only beautiful, but also noble and devout. The two women were sisters-in-law and outlived their husbands to become regents for their respective sons. While both Fredegund and Brunhild were active as queens, it is when they became regents that they were truly able to assert themselves and employ powerful changes.

The main source for the lives of Fredegund and Brunhild is Gregory of Tours' *The History of the Franks*. Gregory was elected the bishop of Tours in 573 and stayed in his position until his death in 594.¹¹⁷ However, Gregory was not the only source writing about the Merovingians and Fredegund and Brunhild specifically. Two later sources opposed Gregory's specific view of the queens, even though both heavily borrowed from Gregory's work. The first is the anonymous *Liber Historiae Francorum* which detailed the history of the Franks up until

¹¹⁶ Whether or not Fredegund and Brunhild were actually enemies is debated amongst scholars. Ian Wood rejects this idea of a blood feud between the queens, yet Janet Nelson states their rivalry as fact. See Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450-751* (New York: Longman 1994) 127 and Janet Nelson, "Queens as Jezebels: Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian History," in *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London: Hambledon Press, 1986) 10.

¹¹⁷ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, translated by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1974) 9.

the seventh century, so beyond where Gregory stopped writing in 591.¹¹⁸ Written during the seventh century in Neustria, where Fredegund had been queen, the text gave a more nuanced view of Fredegund but conversely was more critical of Brunhild. There was a great rivalry between Neustria and Austrasia for much of the Merovingians' history, thus the *LHF* was biased against Austrasia, which is clear in its depiction of Brunhild. Composed sometime in the seventh century, the third source that documented Merovingian history is *The Chronicle* of Fredegar. As with the *Liber Historiae Francorum*, there is debate about the authorship, with the name Fredegar only being attributed as the author centuries later. *The Chronicle* detailed Frankish history but ends around the mid-seventh century. Fredegund did not feature heavily in the *Chronicle*, but Brunhild was an important character and her gruesome death at the hands of Fredegund's son was detailed in the text. Using Gregory's *History of the Franks*, the *Liber Historiae Francorum*, and Fredegar's *Chronicle*, and putting them in conversation with each other, illuminates the rich political careers of Brunhild and Fredegund—not only how the pair were able to become regents but also how they stayed in that position and the greater freedom inherent in regency.

While both the *Liber Historiae Francorum* and Fredegar's *Chronicle* are useful in balancing Gregory's account, this chapter will still favor the usage of Gregory because he was a contemporary of Brunhild and Fredegund. Gregory wrote *The History of the Franks*, which detailed, in the last seven books, the contemporary politics of his time. Whether it was great portents and ecclesiastical appointments or the murderous schemes and great tempers of the Merovingian kings, Gregory of Tours documented it all. While his writing is undoubtedly one of

¹¹⁸ While the author is unknown, some historians posit that he may have been living and writing at the monastery of St. Denis around 727.

the best sources on the Merovingians, it must be utilized in a wise manner. Because Gregory of Tours knew these kings, queens, dukes, and bishops, he would of course have personal opinions on their character, which bled into his writing. *The History of the Franks* made harsh judgements on the Merovingians kings and a character assassination of Queen Fredegund.¹¹⁹ Another important point is that Gregory of Tours was a bishop. Thus, his ideas of what a good Christian was affected his presentation of some Merovingian kings. One example is that Gregory of Tours presented a rather positive image of both King Sigibert and Queen Brunhild of Austrasia. Sigibert and Brunhild, a Visigothic princess, were monogamous which aligned with Gregory's view on marriage. Sigibert was just as likely to go to war and attempt to kill family members as his brother Chilperic, but while Chilperic was the "Nero and Herrod of [his] time"¹²⁰ nothing overtly negative was written about Sigibert. The most likely reason for his good image is that King Sigibert had approved Gregory's election to the bishopry and the two seemed to be on good terms before Sigibert's murder in 575.¹²¹ Gregory's fondness for the Austrasian king continued with his wife, Brunhild. It was not until later writers that Brunhild began being presented in a more negative or arguably more nuanced way. The sources focused on both the women more as regents, but to understand the regency of Brunhild and Fredegund, their time as queen must be examined.

Fredegund and Brunhild had quite different rises to power. The former was first a concubine before becoming the sole queen of Neustria with her husband Chilperic; the latter was a Visigothic princess, who was married to King Sigibert of Austrasia. What is similar in their

¹¹⁹ Some scholars have written that Gregory of Tours was too harsh on the Merovingians by emphasizing and maybe dramatizing their brutality.

¹²⁰ Gregory of Tours, 379.

¹²¹ Gregory of Tours, 16.

experiences was that they were both the sole queen and did not have competition from other women, which was not every Merovingian queen's experience.¹²² However, unlike Brunhild, by virtue of Fredegund being a second (or third) wife of Chilperic, she had to contend with Chilperic's offspring with his first queen, Audovera. Not much is known about Audovera, except that both she and Fredegund were cast aside when Chilperic married a Visigothic princess, Galswinth, sister of Brunhild, in the mid sixth century. Galswinth was later murdered and Chilperic married Fredegund.¹²³ While Brunhild became queen through a marriage alliance between the Franks and the Visigoths, Fredegund was first a concubine who only became queen after the murder of her future husband's wife, which she may or may not have been part of.¹²⁴

The descriptions in the sources of both Brunhild and Fredegund as queens were short in comparison to their time as regent, but those periods were long enough for each woman to develop political support that helped her become regent. Brunhild was only queen for about eight years before her husband was murdered, so her time as queen in the sources was succinct or relatively nonexistent. What is known is that she accompanied Sigibert on his campaigns and formed close relationships with religious authorities after converting from Arianism.¹²⁵ However, it can be extrapolated that she gained allies at court because her bid for regency for her young

¹²² Balthild was the wife and queen of King Clovis, but he had many other women in his life. However, one way she was able to maintain her sole queenship and wifedom was due to her strong connection to various noblemen and churchmen. Her husband, if he had wanted to, could not have left her for another woman due to her strong allies. Another earlier king, Clothar, the father of both Chilperic and Sigibert, was notorious for his philandering and multiple wives, even having married sisters.

¹²³ *Liber Historiae Francorum*, translated by Bernard S. Bachrach (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1973) 78 and Gregory of Tours, 222. One of the stipulations of Chilperic's marriage to Galswinth was that he had to give up his other wives and concubines.

¹²⁴ Anna Gehler-Rachůnek, "East and West from a Visigothic Perspective: How and Why Were Frankish Brides Negotiated in the Late Sixth Century?" in *The Merovingian Kingdoms and the Mediterranean World: Revisiting the Sources*, edited by Stefan Esders, Yitzhak Hen, Pia Lucas, and Tamar Rotman (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) 33.

¹²⁵ Nelson, 10.

son was successful. Conversely, Fredegund was queen for almost two decades before she was widowed. The antics she employed during her time as queen would continue as regent but would be on an even larger scale. During her time as queen, according to Gregory of Tours, Fredegund sent two men to kill Sigibert and fretted over providing an heir.¹²⁶ When describing the time period of Fredegund's queenship, Gregory focused more on the actions of her husband Chilperic, but inserted anecdotes every so often of Fredegund trying to murder someone. During her time as regent, she got more attention in Gregory's writing, although her struggle to conceive was well documented in the *History of the Franks*.

Bearing sons was a necessary step for the eventual possibility of becoming regent, but was also important in maintaining a queen's position. Both Fredegund and Brunhild only had one son who made it to adulthood. Brunhild's son was Childebert (570-595) who would rule Austrasia after the murder of his father. Fredegund only had one son live to adulthood, Clothar (584-629), and he was her youngest. Before Clothar, she bore four other sons, Samson, Dagobert, Chlodobert, and Theuderic, all of whom died when they were young. Fredegund's anxiety over her children was quite apparent in Gregory of Tours' writing. Often the alleged impetus for her rather murderous actions was an attempt to promote or protect her sons and their interests. The only admirable action of Fredegund recorded by Gregory was in service of her sick sons. Worried that God was punishing them by making their sons ill, Fredegund advised Chilperic to burn all tax demands and asked him to repent his sins because while they kept amassing more wealth, they "[were] losing the most beautiful of [their] possessions" meaning their sons.¹²⁷ The use of the word "possession" made sense because Fredegund was speaking

¹²⁶ Gregory, 248.

¹²⁷ Gregory of Tours, 297.

about their wealth and their treasure and wanted to link the worthlessness of their worldly possessions with the pricelessness of their son. However, the word “possession” may also speak to the fact that sons were often used as instruments of their parents. Regardless, the speech that Gregory placed in Fredegund’s mouth showed the deep and lasting dedication she had to her family as well as her love of treasure. While Gregory did not condone a majority of Fredegund’s actions, he allowed the interpretation of her actions to be driven by her concern for her offspring.¹²⁸ Gregory’s presentation of their deaths speaks to the importance of sons for queens and the deep grief that Fredegund experienced after the death of each of her sons. Her grief, seemingly overdramatized by Gregory, seemed genuine as their death was not only personal but also a loss of control over her state’s future. Fredegund’s abiding and all consuming grief after her sons’ deaths may also be better understood in the context of her stepchildren.

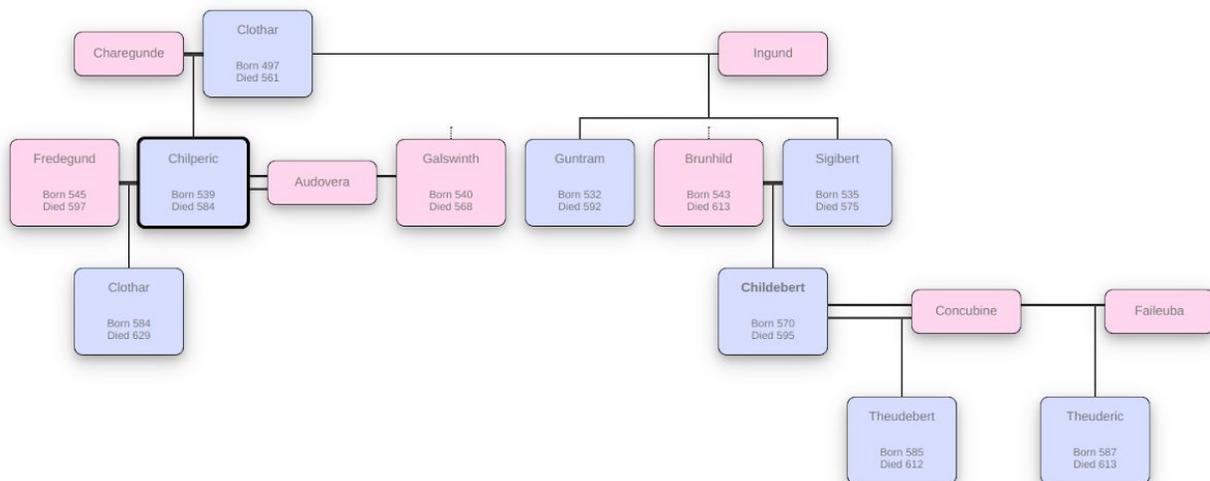
Merovingians kings did not practice the rule of primogeniture, which placed all kinds of stress on not only the sons, but also their mothers. If a Merovingian king had multiple liaisons with different women, whether a wife or a concubine, the son could have a claim to a portion of his father’s kingdom. A prime example of a Merovingian king having different children with a few different women is Clothar (497-561). (See genealogy) Clothar “had by various women seven children”: two of the women were sisters and the third wife was his brother’s widow.¹²⁹ Allegations of incest aside, Clothar lived a remarkably long life, in which only four of his sons outlived him.¹³⁰ His four sons, Guntram, Charibert, Sigibert, and Chilperic, were all considered his heirs and divided their father’s expansive kingdom amongst themselves in 561. Even decades

¹²⁸ Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450-751* (New York: Longman 1994) 123.

¹²⁹ *LHF* 59, 69.

¹³⁰ Clothar actually killed one of his sons, Chramn, and his wife and children when the son allied with his uncle against Clothar (*LHF* 71-72).

later, a man named Gundovald stepped forward claiming to be the son of Clothar and demanded “a portion of Clothar’s kingdom which is his due.”¹³¹ Instead of being awarded land, Gundovald was later stabbed by a count and his body desecrated by a mob, but this instance demonstrates aspects of Merovingian succession rights. By claiming, probably falsely, to be the son of a previous king by a concubine, Gundovald expected to be given a portion of his land. Any son could petition for an inheritance, no matter who his mother was, concubine or queen.¹³² While a king would want to have many sons so there was at least a chance that one may survive to be his successor, the rules of succession also created an atmosphere of great competition between sons, which bled into a competition amongst mothers.



Genealogy, created by the author

Brunhild had no stepchildren, but Fredegund had to contend with three stepsons. After marrying Fredegund, Chilperic sent Audovera, his first wife and queen, to a nunnery and she was later murdered by Fredegund’s men.¹³³ While the woman herself was no longer a threat to

¹³¹ Gregory of Tours, 415.

¹³² Stafford, 152.

¹³³ Gregory of Tours, 305.

Fredegund, her children continued to be. Chilperic had had three sons with Audovera: Theudebert, Merovech, and Clovis, all of whom would be significantly older than Fredegund's children, especially since Fredegund's surviving son was born in 584.¹³⁴ If Chilperic had died before Fredegund had any sons, his sons with Audovera would have divided his kingdom, leaving Fredegund with nothing. Fredegund was quite aware of this fact and actively campaigned against her stepsons. Fortunately for her, Theuderbert died and Merovech moved against his father and was punished, so Clovis was the only real threat to Fredegund. After two of her sons died, Fredegund and Chilperic spent a month mourning; she then suggested that Chilperic send his son Clovis to Berny where the epidemic that killed her sons was still raging. Fredegund hoped he would catch the same sickness, but unfortunately for her, he survived. However, Gregory documented Clovis' mistakes and eventual murder:

While Clovis was staying with his father on the estate at Chelles, he began to boast in a childish way. "Now that my brothers are dead," he kept saying, "the entire kingdom comes to me." [...] He also made some unforgivable remarks about his stepmother, Queen Fredegund. She came to hear of it and was terrified. Not long afterwards someone approached the Queen and said, "It is through Clovis' treacherous behavior that you sit there deprived of your sons. He has fallen in love with the daughter of one of your women-servants, and it is through the mother's magic arts that he has encompassed their death. I warn you, you can expect no better fate yourself, now that you have lost the hope through which you were to have reigned."¹³⁵

In the end, Fredegund convinced Chilperic to jail his own son, who was later stabbed. It was around the time of his death that Audovera, his mother, was killed and Fredegund received their treasure and property.

¹³⁴ Historians aren't exactly sure when Chilperic's first three sons were born, but the oldest Theudebert died in battle in 575, more than ten years before Clothar was born.

¹³⁵ Gregory of Tours 303.

What this episode illustrates was the paranoia at court when there were multiple sons from different women. Fredegund lashing out at Clovis was almost understandable given that two of her young sons had just died and her stepson was seemingly happy about it. There was also a sense of fear that Fredegund would become irrelevant “now that [she] lost the hope through which [she] were to have reigned” but also fear that perhaps Clovis would kill her. However, while Clovis was certainly killed while imprisoned, the culpability for the murder was in question. Beyond whoever actually stabbed Clovis, Gregory perfectly captured the fear, paranoia, anger, and grief that Fredegund would feel after her stepson was happy about the deaths of her sons. After the death of Clovis, Chilperic had no heirs, so while Fredegund got rid of possible competition for her son, she still needed to bear another one. It was not until 584 that Clothar was born, only months before the murder of his father, Chilperic. Both Brunhild and Fredegund would become widows of murdered kings, though about a decade apart.

Widowhood, while a time of enormous uncertainty, also held the greatest potential for a Merovingian queen. If a Merovingian queen did not have a son, she could easily fade into history. Due to the near constant warfare between the different kingdoms and amongst male family members, there was a high chance that kings and their sons could die young, thus queens would often step in to serve as regent for their young sons. In Merovingian law, a woman had the right to assume guardianship of her children if their father died and this law was used by queens to justify acting as regent on their son’s behalf.¹³⁶ The choice of the boy’s mother is important. Had a nobleman or a male relative been chosen, he could have made a play for the throne, but since a woman could not rule on her own, she was a good and safe choice. However, because an

¹³⁶ Suzanne Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister 500 to 900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981) 61.

uncle had just as much as a right to inherit as a son, kings who were “minorities were established only with struggle, and much depended on the infant king’s mother and her support.”¹³⁷ As often was the case in Merovingian queenship, her role as regent depended on her choices and the support she was able to garner. Pauline Stafford writes, “female regency emerged as a protection against the tensions within the royal family itself. It is associated with minorities and thus normally with dynasties strongly enough established and secure enough from external pressures to tolerate the accession of infants and to prefer them over adult uncles.”¹³⁸ Even though the queen mother was a smart, and in some cases obvious, choice for regent of a young son, she still needed support from nobles, not to mention a good relationship with her son.

Brunhild’s and Fredegund’s initial years of widowhood demonstrated the vulnerability of a queen without a husband. Brunhild was widowed less than a decade into her marriage with Sigibert, king of Austrasia. According to Gregory of Tours and the *LHF*, which took its cues from Gregory, Sigibert was murdered by men sent by Fredegund.¹³⁹ The murder took place while he was on his way to attack Chilperic, Fredegund’s husband, so her supposed role in it was in defense of her family. Widowed in 575, Brunhild’s five year old son, Childebert, was crowned king of Austrasia, with a significant backing of noblemen. Duke Gundovald, who took Childebert without the knowledge of his mother, arranged the coronation.¹⁴⁰ Childebert was crowned king of Austrasia on Christmas Day when he was only five years old. According to Gregory, Childebert’s regency was at first controlled by the nobles and Brunhild was pushed out. Brunhild struggled in the first few months of her son’s reign. Chilperic came to Paris, where

¹³⁷ Stafford 154.

¹³⁸ Stafford 156.

¹³⁹ Gregory of Tours, 248. *LHF*, 82.

¹⁴⁰ Gregory of Tours, 254.

Brunhild was holed up, and banished her in addition to taking all her treasure.¹⁴¹ Widowed and separated from her son, Brunhild had lost her links to the crown. In a bold move, she married Chilperic's son Merovech, who was also technically her nephew. Gregory of Tours described the marriage as against custom and canonical law and to the great anger of Chilperic.¹⁴² In her vulnerable position Brunhild probably married Merovech for protection. And Merovech may have wanted to be named king of Austrasia, but the nobles preferred Brunhild's infant son. Needless to say, their marriage did not last long when Chilperic eventually caught up to his son. He was later found murdered, perhaps by Fredegund according to Gregory of Tours.¹⁴³ Brunhild at this point was now twice widowed, but in the coming years she was able to actively establish herself as her son's guardian and regent.

Fredegund was widowed in 584, shortly after the birth of her son Clothar, and like Brunhild, she endeavored to get a man's protection. Chilperic's death was depicted in conflicting ways in Gregory of Tours' work and the *Liber Historiae Francorum*. In the former, Chilperic was murdered by an unknown assassin when hunting. Fredegund then fled to Paris with only part of her treasure, and the objects she left behind were given to Childebert, whose mother's (Brunhild) treasure had been taken away by Chilperic. Fredegund's supporters then urged her to write a letter to her brother-in-law Guntram (c. 532-592), ruler of Burgundy, asking for protection, which was granted.¹⁴⁴ In a quite different account, the *LHF* attributed Chilperic's murder to Fredegund. Fredegund "was beautiful and very clever and also an adultress."¹⁴⁵ When

¹⁴¹ As seen in the previous chapter with Radegund, the queen's control of treasure was very important and enabled her to make allies or in Fredegund's case, hire assassins.

¹⁴² Gregory of Tours, 255.

¹⁴³ Gregory of Tours, 282.

¹⁴⁴ Gregory of Tours, 379, 390-391.

¹⁴⁵ *LHF*, 87.

her husband found out that she was having an affair with the mayor of the palace, Landeric, Fredegund decided to murder him so she could rule as regent for her son Clothar with the mayor of the palace at her side.¹⁴⁶ The two different versions on the murder of Chilperic are quite interesting: not only for once was Gregory not accusing Fredegund of murder, but the *LHF* borrowed heavily from Gregory and it is a mystery why he diverged from Gregory's account. Gregory demonstrated the fear and uncertainty common at the start of widowhood and the necessity of a male protector for Fredegund, at least temporarily.¹⁴⁷ Written a century later in Neustria, where Fredegund had ruled, the *LHF* gave Fredegund more agency and emphasized that her transition into widowhood was voluntary and was actually a bid for more power. However, Gregory's account is more believable. Because a lot of the queen's authority rested on her relationship with the king, it was unlikely that she would kill him, especially when she had such a young son. Despite their flaws, Chilperic and Fredegund were very dedicated to each other and their family, so it seems unlikely that Fredegund would risk her position and have an affair or that she would kill her husband, who she not only cared for, but whose position she derived her authority from. Fredegund's flight to Paris and her search for a protector in the form of her brother-in-law aligned more with other widowed queens' experiences. Both Brunhild and Fredegund had a difficult start to widowhood, but soon were able to establish themselves.

While powerful not only during her husband's reign, but also as a regent for her son, it was actually when Childebert grew older that Brunhild really exercised authority as an equal to

¹⁴⁶ *LHF*, 88.

¹⁴⁷ Fredegund's possible infidelity was mentioned in Gregory's account when the parentage of Clothar was called into question by his uncle Guntram. However, the issue was easily assuaged with many of Chilperic's leading men and a few bishops swore an oath that Clothar was Chilperic's son (Gregory 440). Queens throughout the Middle Ages were accused of infidelity, it was an easy way to call into question the parentage, thus the legitimacy of her son.

her son. Brunhild, after her relationship with Merovech ended, took charge of her son alongside Gogo, a nobleman who was her son's protector until he reached the age of majority in 585.¹⁴⁸ Her influence over her son and their good relationship was the base of Brunhild's power. When Childebert's tutor died, Brunhild, instead of appointing a new one, took over his education herself.¹⁴⁹ Brunhild's influence over her son was so complete that Fredegund sent an assassin to kill Childebert or Brunhild with the directions,

‘Take these two poignards and make your way with all speed to King Childebert, pretending that you are mendicants. As soon as you have cast yourselves at his feet, as if you have come to beg for alms, stab him on both sides, so that at long last Brunhild, whose arrogant behavior is encouraged by the support which he gives to her, may fall as he falls and so cease to be my rival.’¹⁵⁰

The attempted murder was a failure. This speech was written by Gregory, so of course there is no way to know what Fredegund's actual instructions were or if this event even occurred, but this passage speaks to the authority associated with Brunhild. The murder, if attempted, would have been probably when Childebert had already reached the age of majority. Because of his close alliance with his mother, they could both act with greater independence from the nobles. According to Pauline Stafford, “with Childebert beside her, of age but still susceptible to her influence, Brunhild entered into an almost equal partnership in power, pursuing her old feud against Fredegund, controlling church appointments, protecting and fostering those allies on whom both she and Childebert depended on.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Stafford, 146.

¹⁴⁹ Gregory of Tours 454.

¹⁵⁰ Gregory of Tours, 457.

¹⁵¹ Stafford, 146.

Even though both Brunhild and Childebert had support from powerful nobles, which was necessary during his minority, there was also a group of nobles who wanted to increase aristocratic power, thus limiting the authority of the king. According to Gregory, before her supporters came to blows with this opposition, Brunhild stopped the battle, but not before some insults were thrown her way. Her great nobleman rival was Ursio and he shouted at her that “it should have been enough that you held regal power when your husband was alive. Now your son is on the throne, and his kingdom is under our control, not yours.”¹⁵² Ursio was wrong of course because Brunhild continued to be a powerful force in the kingdom beyond the death of her son. However, this passage demonstrates that not everyone in Austrasia was comfortable with Brunhild ruling with her son, perhaps suggesting a fear of female power. Like Brunhild, Fredegund’s authority as regent was originally derived from her relationship with her son as well as from strong noble backing.

When Fredegund became regent, she was still seemingly as independent, if not more so, than when she was queen. After seeking the protection of Guntram, Fredegund eventually felt secure enough in her relationship with the nobles of Neustria and her son to send assassins after Guntram.¹⁵³ It is unclear why Fredegund would try to assassinate Guntram. Gregory may have used this episode to show how ungrateful Fredegund was or perhaps Fredegund wanted to kill Guntram because he was occasionally allied with Childebert. While Brunhild stopped a battle, Fredegund involved herself in military matters. First she advised a group of Saxon pirates how to defeat the Bretons and then supposedly acted as a great military commander against the

¹⁵² Gregory of Tours, 329.

¹⁵³ Gregory of Tours, 507.

combined Austrasian and Burgundian forces under Childebert.¹⁵⁴ According to the *LHF*, “[Fredegund] set fire to Champagne and devastated it. Then she returned home with much booty and many spoils.”¹⁵⁵ Fredegar’s *The Chronicle* portrayed Fredegund as an equal with her son, Clothar, in terms of military command: “[Fredegund] dispatched a force which reached a place called Laffaus.”¹⁵⁶ Each of these sources described a different instance and a different battle. While wars of the era were generally associated with men, Fredegund’s many poisoning attempts and the hiring of assassins detailed in Gregory’s *The History of the Franks* were more associated with women. Her involvement in military engagements only started after her husband died and her time as regent began. Even if she did not actually engage in battles, these scenes emphasize her authority in a traditionally male dominated area. Fredegund’s time as regent was when she was at her most influential in church appointments and deciding the future of Neustria.¹⁵⁷ Despite all the violence she dealt in her lifetime, Fredegund died peacefully, “old and full of days” in 597.¹⁵⁸ After her death, her son Clothar took up the mantle in the battle against Brunhild.

Brunhild continued to amass power in the years after Fredegund’s death, but her position came to be challenged by her son’s wife. A female regent’s power often ended in her death or when her son reached the age of majority.¹⁵⁹ Brunhild seemed to be an exception to this pattern. Maintaining her influence with her son after he reached the age of majority, Brunhild’s next obstacle emerged when her son married. At first, Brunhild forestalled the marriage of her son, so Childebert’s first son, Theudebert, was with a concubine. However, eventually Childebert

¹⁵⁴ Gregory of Tours, 556.

¹⁵⁵ *LHF*, 91

¹⁵⁶ Fredegar, 12.

¹⁵⁷ Gregory of Tours, 473.

¹⁵⁸ *LHF* 92.

¹⁵⁹ Nantechild’s regency ended when she died in 642 and Balthild was sent to a nunnery a few years into her regency when her son was old enough to rule on his own.

married and made Faileuba his queen, and they had Theuderic together in the late 580s.¹⁶⁰

Brunhild had previously blocked an engagement between her son and a princess from Lombard, only perhaps permitting the marriage between her son and Faileuba because the girl being of low birth had no powerful aristocratic connections.¹⁶¹ At this point in her career, Bruhild was no longer regent and no longer a queen, but a dowager. But her authority had not diminished. In a treaty between Childebert and his uncle Guntram, the full text of which Gregory included in his work, Brunhild was included: “the most noble lords, King Guntram and King Childebert, and the most renowned lady, Queen Brunhild, met at Andelot to reaffirm their friendship.”¹⁶² Brunhild is presented as an equal with Guntram and Childebert in the treaty. There is even evidence that Brunhild was quite involved in her son’s marriage. Childebert, Faileuba, and Brunhild all went on vacation together and there was even a conspiracy against both Brunhild and the queen: “Septimina, nurse to the royal children, was to persuade the King to banish his mother, desert his wife and marry another woman. In this way, the conspirators hoped to do with the King what they wished and to obtain from him what they asked.”¹⁶³ Because the conspiracy included his wife and his mother, it implies that Childebert was heavily influenced by both women, but especially Brunhild because she had to be banished, not just set aside. Only with her removal would he be open to new counselors. Despite no longer being regent and having to share power and influence with her daughter-in-law, Brunhild was still a powerful force at court and continued to be after her son’s death.

¹⁶⁰ Gregory of Tours, 470, 482.

¹⁶¹ Janet Nelson, “Queens as Jezebels: Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian History,” in *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London: Hambledon Press, 1986) 15.

¹⁶² Gregory of Tours, 503.

¹⁶³ Gregory of Tours, 523-524.

In quite a departure from patterns of female regency, Brunhild became regent for her grandsons. King Guntram died in 592 and because he had no living sons and he had outlived all his brothers, he gave his kingdom of Burgundy to his nephew Childebert. Gregory of Tours had stopped writing in 591, so the later years of Brunhild's life and the death of Childebert in 595, were only recorded in the *Liber Historiae Francorum* and Fredegar's *Chronicle*. However, another source in which Brunhild appeared briefly was Jonas' *Life of Columbanus*. Similar to Gregory's *The History of the Franks*, this *vita* espoused certain Christian beliefs and one was about the sanctity of marriage and the legitimacy of children. When Childebert died in the late sixth century, he was only in his early twenties but had two sons and two kingdoms, thus the division of kingdoms was straightforward: Theuderic got Burgundy and Theudebert received Austrasia.¹⁶⁴ Brunhild acted as regent for both her underaged grandsons and entered into the "most active phase of her career."¹⁶⁵ However her control over one grandson was more complete. The elder grandson, Theudebert—himself the son of a concubine—married one of Brunhild's former slaves, named Bilichild. Because of the queen's lowly status as her former slave, Brunhild was not friendly to her new granddaughter and Brunhild eventually left Austrasia to seek protection with her other grandson, Theuderic in 600.¹⁶⁶ It was at Theuderic's court that Brunhild possessed the most authority in the entirety of her career but garnered the most critics.

Brunhild held unswaying authority in Theuderic's court. According to the *LHF*, Brunhild was a negative influence on her grandson Theuderic: "Brunhild, moreover, daily supplied Theuderic with evil counsel:" "why do you neglect and why do you not demand your father's

¹⁶⁴ *LHF* 92.

¹⁶⁵ Nelson, 14.

¹⁶⁶ Nelson, 15.

treasure and his kingdom from the hand of Theudebert since you know that he is not your brother because he was conceived in adultery with a concubine with your father.”¹⁶⁷ Theuderic then attacked his brother, kidnapped and killed his nephews, he even “dashed out the brains of the youngest, who was still in the white of baptism.”¹⁶⁸ Brunhild may have encouraged family strife amongst her grandsons by delegitimizing Theudebert’s claim due to his mother being a concubine. However, the *LHF* was a Neustrian text and thus wanted to negatively present the rulers of its rival state, Austrasia. Because of Brunhild’s control and influence over Theuderic, he never married and only sired children with concubines, never elevating one of them to queen. Jonas in the *Life of Columbanus* wrote that the traveling Irish monk, Columbanus, came to Theuderic’s court and began advising the young king. Columbanus chastised Theuderic for not being married and fornicating with concubines instead. However:

When the king agreed to comply with the man of God’s command and said that he would put an end to all his irregular relationships, the ancient serpent entered the mind of his grandmother, Brunhild—a second Jezebel—and aroused her by the sting of the pride against the man of God [...] She dreaded that her own authority and standing would be destroyed if the king got rid of his concubines and a queen ruled at court.¹⁶⁹

Quite a departure from Gregory’s glowing depiction of Brunhild, Jonas portrayed her as a power hungry woman who did not want to share authority. This portrayal is probably accurate. Brunhild had had to share power with Childebert’s wife, even though Brunhild overshadowed her, and was then pushed out of office in Austrasia by Theudbert’s wife, so she may not have wanted to

¹⁶⁷ *LHF*, 93.

¹⁶⁸ *LHF*, 94.

¹⁶⁹ Jonas of Bobbio, *Life of Columbanus, Life of John of Réomé, and Life of Vedast*, translated by Alexander O’Hara and Ian Wood (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017) 134.

make the same mistake again. According to Jonas, Brunhild eventually turned her grandson away from the teachings and influence of Columbus and had him banished. Because Columbanus was exiled from Theuderic's court, Jonas most likely overemphasized Brunhild's negative influence on her grandson. Jonas was writing a *vita* and it was convenient to compare the overbearing queen to the Biblical model of Jezebel.

The height of Brunhild's career transpired when she acted as an advisor to her grandson, Theuderic. However, eventually her relationship with Theuderic fell apart. According to the *LHF*, Theuderic wanted to marry his niece, which Brunhild forbade, so before Theuderic could attempt to kill her, Brunhild poisoned him and then killed his young sons.¹⁷⁰ However, it seems unlikely that Brunhild would kill her grandson. Again, the *LHF* biases are clear. Not only did the Neustrian *LHF* author accuse Brunhild's family of incest, but also murder. Brunhild would not kill her grandsons or her great grandsons because she derived her power through her relationship to them. If she killed them, she would have no claim to the throne. Historically, Theuderic died suddenly after defeating his brother in 612 and Brunhild tried to pick one successor out of Theuderic's sons. Unfortunately, she overestimated the support she would receive from the Burgundian and Austrasian aristocracy in her choice.¹⁷¹ During this interregnum in Burgundy and Austrasia, Clothar, King of Neustria and son of Fredegund, made peace with the two states. He then captured the now elderly Brunhild and tied her to four horses to be dragged and torn apart. Then, her body was burned.¹⁷² Clothar, Fredegund's only surviving son, then became the king of Neustria, Burgundy, and Austrasia. Brunhild's horrific death was the end of an active

¹⁷⁰ *LHF*, 95.

¹⁷¹ Nelson, 16.

¹⁷² *LHF*, 96 and Fredegar, 35.

political career that spanned decades. She had outlived her husband, children, two grandsons, and her rival Fredegund.

Widowhood for a queen was a time of great change, great opportunity, and great peril. Both Fredegund and Brunhild adapted well to becoming widows and became two of the most powerful and influential regents, which is why they were chosen as case studies for this chapter. There had been other female regents during Merovingian rule, but they are not only not as well documented as Fredegund and Brunhild, but these two queens amassed the most authority and influence during their stints as regents compared to other Merovingian regents. Both these queens demonstrated what female Merovingian regents could look like; many other regents did not reach Fredegund and Brunhild's level of influence. The role of Merovingian queen was undefined and manifested differently based on the personality and choices of the queen and the role of regent was no different. Not every Merovingian queen got the chance to become a regent for her son, but if she did, she had the greatest potential for power.

Conclusion

In 751, the mayor of the palace, Pippin, overthrew the last Merovingian king and established his own dynasty, the Carolingians. The Carolingians' most famous ruler, Charlemagne became the Roman Emperor in 800, crowned by the pope. As the ceremony would suggest, the Carolingians closely aligned themselves with the Church. As a result, the Church started having more influence on the marital practices of the kings. While Charlemagne had six wives, they were all in succession, with no overlap. He also kept a number of concubines, but few of their children were ever considered legitimate, which signals a definite shift from the Merovingians. Another change was that the Carolingian kings started marrying women from influential noble families, not lowborn women or even foreign brides.¹⁷³ It also became more difficult to repudiate a wife, as seen by Lothar's failed attempt at divorcing his wife Theutberga in 863. The restrictions of marriage and the ascent of monogamy undermined the role of the queen. Judith, the second wife of Louis the Pious, was the first Carolingian queen crowned in the early ninth century; queens started to be anointed as well after in the mid-ninth century, although this did not become widely common until the tenth century.¹⁷⁴ However as marriage became stricter and because the rulers aligned themselves more closely with the Church, women's choices shrank and the role of queen became formalized and restrictive. As historian Simon MacLean writes, "Although their position was anything but clearly defined, Merovingian queens look considerably more autonomous and powerful (albeit precariously so) than their Carolingian successors" and he asserts that Carolingian kings were significantly more fearful of female

¹⁷³ Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1983) 47, 60-61

¹⁷⁴ Stafford, 130.

power.¹⁷⁵ The ascension of the Carolingians marks a cultural shift away from the Merovingians, including away from their ideas of queenship and royal marriage.

This thesis started and ended with the death of Queen Brunhild at age seventy because her long career illustrates how influential a queen could be and the social, political, familial, and religious context that shaped that influence. Brunhild served as one of the best examples of how powerful a queen could become. Her extraordinary career deserves even closer attention than its presentation in this thesis. Brunhild was murdered in an extraordinarily brutal way, but she was not the only queen to have been murdered. Some queens ended their career in a convent, like Clothild and Balthild, while others died peacefully, like Fredegund. Unfortunately, there are many more queens whose lives and deaths are lost to history. While this thesis is devoted to Merovingian queens, I only focused on a few. This thesis shows how the insecure and unregulated position of queen gave charismatic, resourceful, and plucky women the opportunity to become some of the most powerful figures in the kingdoms. A queen's power was based entirely on her relationships and her access to treasure. Her status at birth did not predict her success as queen, with lowborn women having as much power as foreign princesses. Under the Carolingians and later dynasties, concubines and lowborn women did not have the same opportunities as under the Merovingians. Through the use of religion and close relationships with nobles and churchmen, queens were able to carve out a sphere of influence, which would be all the more helpful if regency became possible. Because there were no real standards a queen had to meet, she could shape the position herself. Understudied and sometimes ignored in larger treatments of early medieval queens, these Merovingian queens led extraordinary lives and made

¹⁷⁵ Simon MacLean, "Queens and Dynasties in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries" in *Ottoman Queenship*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 13.

their way through a violent and tumultuous time. The examination of their careers gives us a peek at a time of great transition for Europe and for women.

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